

AS NIGHT FALLS
Although sometimes active by day, leopards are most comfortable roaming the wilderness at night. Wildlife photographer Greg du Toit spent a maximum of two hours with his subjects after dark.

SPOTS & FANGS

The black of night is the preferred habitat of the leopard, so wildlife photographer **Greg du Toit** undertook an ambitious three-year project to capture unusual night-time images of this shy cat.

“Leopards are for the most part invisible. Even if you live in the middle of a leopard’s territory, you would never see it unless it allowed you to. These cats define elusive!” says photographer Greg du Toit of the challenges he faced.

IF PEOPLE DON’T SEE AND APPRECIATE SOMETHING, THEN THEY DON’T CONSERVE IT!” GREG DU TOIT EXCLAIMED. “My goal for this project was to produce a fresh portfolio of one of the world’s most beautiful cats, to raise awareness of leopards and introduce them to a wider audience.” He’s certainly done that, as you can see for yourself here, and as thousands of visitors did when his photographs were exhibited in the National Geographic gallery in Singapore earlier this year.

How exactly do you go about photographing such an elusive predator? “You do not see a leopard, but a leopard allows itself to be seen,” explained Greg. An old-school photographer, he does not use bait or camera traps, but instead he learnt each leopard’s personal territory, spending more than 640 hours in the field tracking leopards.

Some of the highest leopard densities in the world exist in the Kruger National Park and the adjacent Sabi Sand Reserve, where Greg carried out his work. While these leopards live in one of Africa’s largest ecosystems, in excess of 34 000 square kilometres, in reality each leopard’s territory consists of only a few square kilometres. Male leopards have larger territories that encompass a few females, while female territories can be as small as four square kilometres.

Part of the challenge facing leopards in Africa is ignorance of their plight. Due to their nocturnal nature, they are very hard to perform a census on.

Armed with this knowledge, Greg visited the same region repeatedly. By following tracks, he was able to locate at least one of the eight leopards that inhabited his project’s area on a night. After tracking an individual down, he would then follow his subject through the bush using a Land Rover. “Leopards in this part of Africa have been formally protected for many years and because they have never been hunted from a vehicle, they did not feel threatened,” he said.

Documenting the nightly forays of these nocturnal cats was made possible by advances in digital technology, especially in ISO performance [film speed – Ed.]. Photographing leopards by day is hard enough and here was Greg, armed with nothing but a small spotlight hooked up to the car’s battery, aiming to photograph them in the black of the night!

By following eight different leopards during the project and by spending only the first two hours of darkness with any one particular leopard, he made sure each cat’s natural hunting habits were not jeopardised. “It is very important that when an animal is hunting the spotlight is switched off, so as not to interfere in any way.”

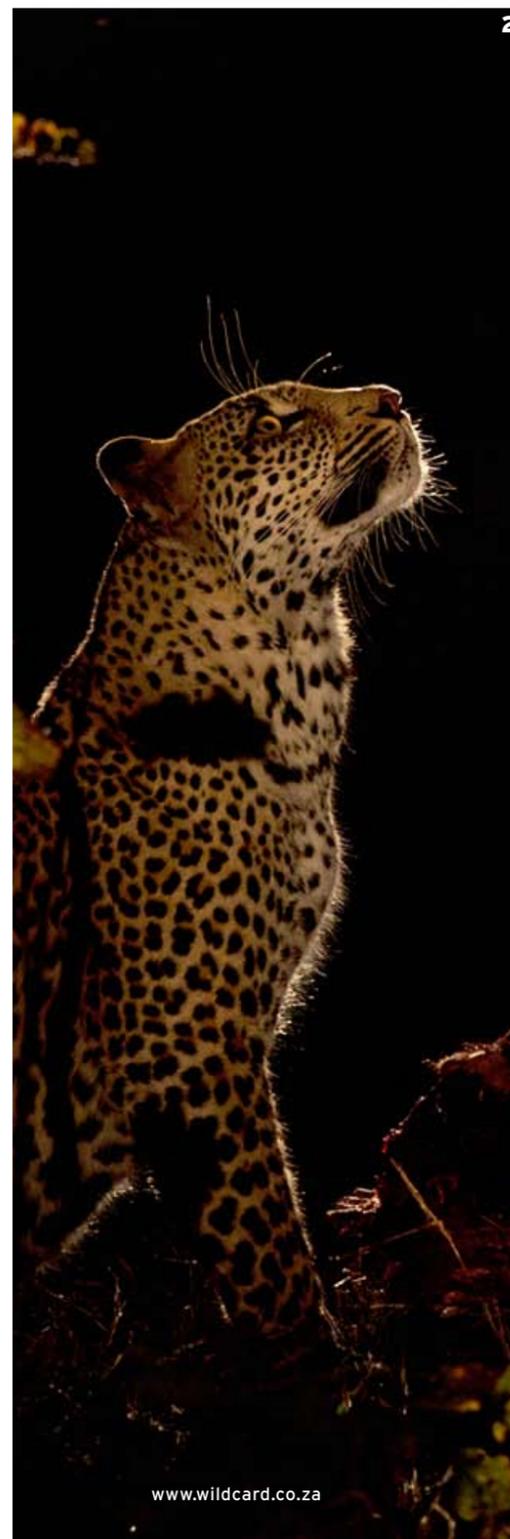
Shining the light does not affect the animal’s eyes because a leopard’s eyes are far superior to our own. “They can easily cope with the differing contrast levels created by my weak torch, in ways we are completely unable ▶

WIDE HABITAT TOLERANCE

Leopards inhabit every conceivable habitat, including deserts and rainforests, from sea level to altitudes above 5 500 metres. In the Virunga volcanoes of West Africa, they have been seen drinking thermal water with a temperature in excess of 36°C.



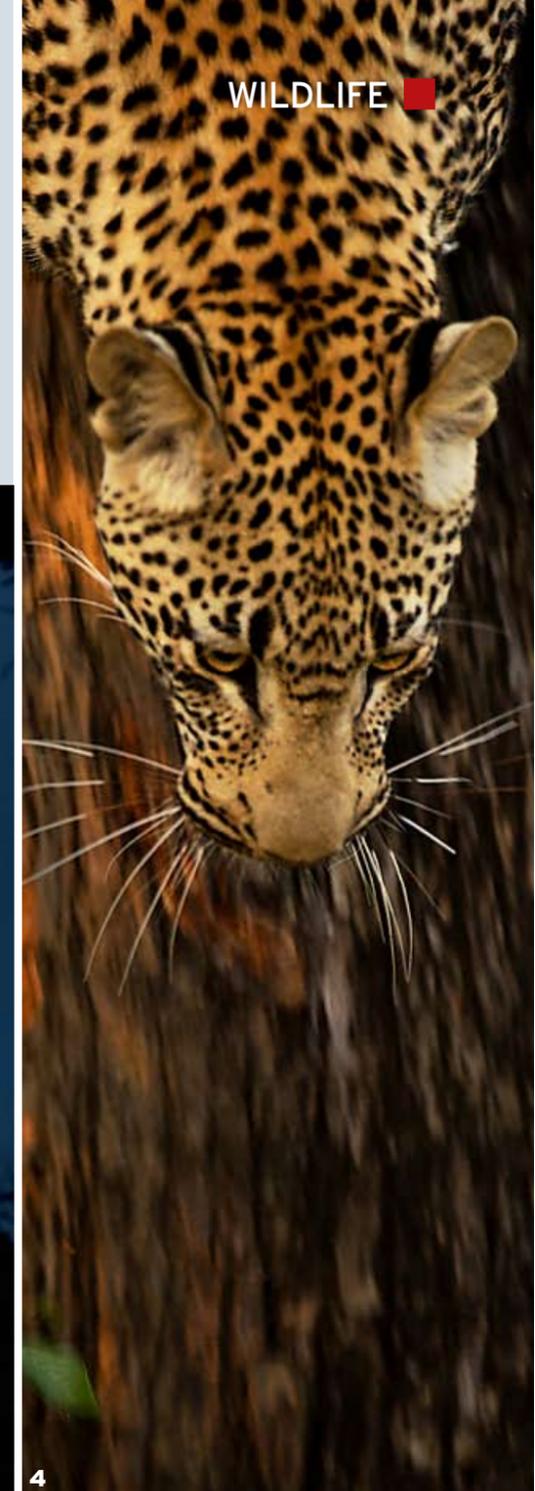
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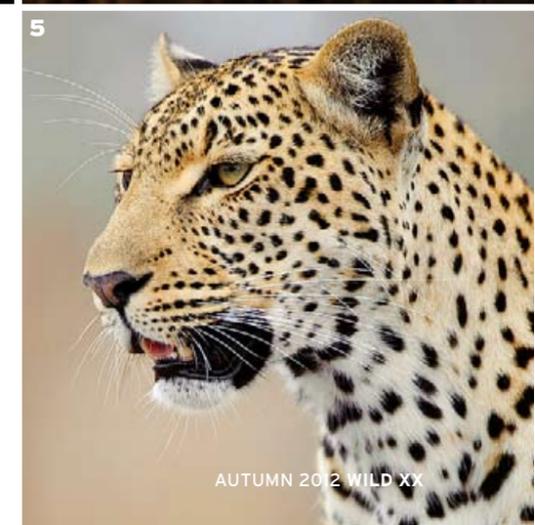
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1-2 CACHING THE PREY Leopards drag their prey up into a tree to keep their meal safe from scavenging predators. Glancing upwards, it takes them just a split second to plan their route up. These cats are able to haul more than twice their own body weight up a vertical trunk. A male leopard weighs 60–90 kg, females considerably less at 35–40 kg.

3 LONE SOUL Nocturnal loners, leopards tantalise nature lovers with their rare appearances.

4 DESCENDING ROSETTES For Greg the main challenge was trying to capture the effortless way in which leopards run down trees.

5 GAZING UP This female leopard had hoisted a kill up a tree only to have her naughty cub use it as a punching bag, knocking it free. Here the mother gazes up before having to hoist the antelope up again.



“Leopards are fiercely independent and it is rare to capture two individuals in the same frame.” – GREG DU TOIT



ON THE MOVE Being typical inquisitive cats, leopards often double back on themselves to investigate a sight, sound or smell. It is almost impossible to predict their erratic movements. While keeping up with them is difficult, capturing their speed and elegance is even harder. A slow shutter speed captures their graceful stealth.

The top image shows a mother and her cub (in the background) out on the prowl. The cub is nine months old and beginning to join its mother on hunts. The young one has just three months to learn to hunt before it will be left to fend for itself.

to fathom. The density of rod cells that they possess makes their vision not more sensitive, it makes their vision superior!”

He went on to explain: “I was a nature conservationist long before I was a photographer and it is my love for these creatures that drove this project. Not once have I seen a leopard mis-execute a leap of any kind.”

Part of the challenge facing leopards in Africa is ignorance of their plight. Due to their nocturnal nature, they are very hard to perform a census on and, like all animals, habitat loss and fragmentation due to the increasing human population lie at the heart of the problem. Another major issue is the fact that farmers believe leopards to be the chief culprits when it comes to stock theft. In reality, leopards are such efficient hunters they seldom need to kill livestock.

There’s also a problem unique to South Africa, Greg explained: “Traditionally, only the very elite of leaders in Africa adorned themselves with leopard skins, but the congregation of the Shembe church in Zululand have now all taken to wearing leopard skins.” With an estimated 4000 leopards left in South Africa and a church membership of 4000000, this is obviously a major concern.

EQUIPMENT Nikon D3s camera, 200-400mm F4 lens, bean bag, torch, flash and a Land Rover account for the sum total of the equipment used during this project.

Last year a skinner in the same province as the church was found with 150 leopard skins and was released on a technicality without conviction. As the legislation stands now, a first time ‘leopard offender’ is awarded a suspended sentence and community service. In addition to tighter legislation, Greg supports efforts to replace real skins with synthetic skins (see box on page XX).

Greg believes wildlife photographers have a critical role to play, especially in raising awareness about conservation issues that are not necessarily public knowledge. “While everyone is aware of the rhino crisis,” he pointed out, “not many people are aware that leopard numbers are dwindling. While I do not, in any way, want to downplay the tragic plight of the rhino, I hope that in some small way, my collection of leopard images helps raise awareness for leopards too.”

Wanting to end on a light note, the photographer shared this last, intriguing fact: “Leopards mark their territories regularly with their urine. This is important so that neighbouring leopards can avoid each other, because if they fight, they risk injury. But did you know that their urine smells *exactly* like lightly buttered popcorn?” 🐾

“Photographers deal in things which are continuously vanishing and when they have vanished there is nothing on earth which can make them come back again.”

– HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON

SIMPLY LEOPARD
Every individual can be identified by their unique whisker pattern as well as a series of spots along the chest, affectionately known as the ‘pearl necklace’.

