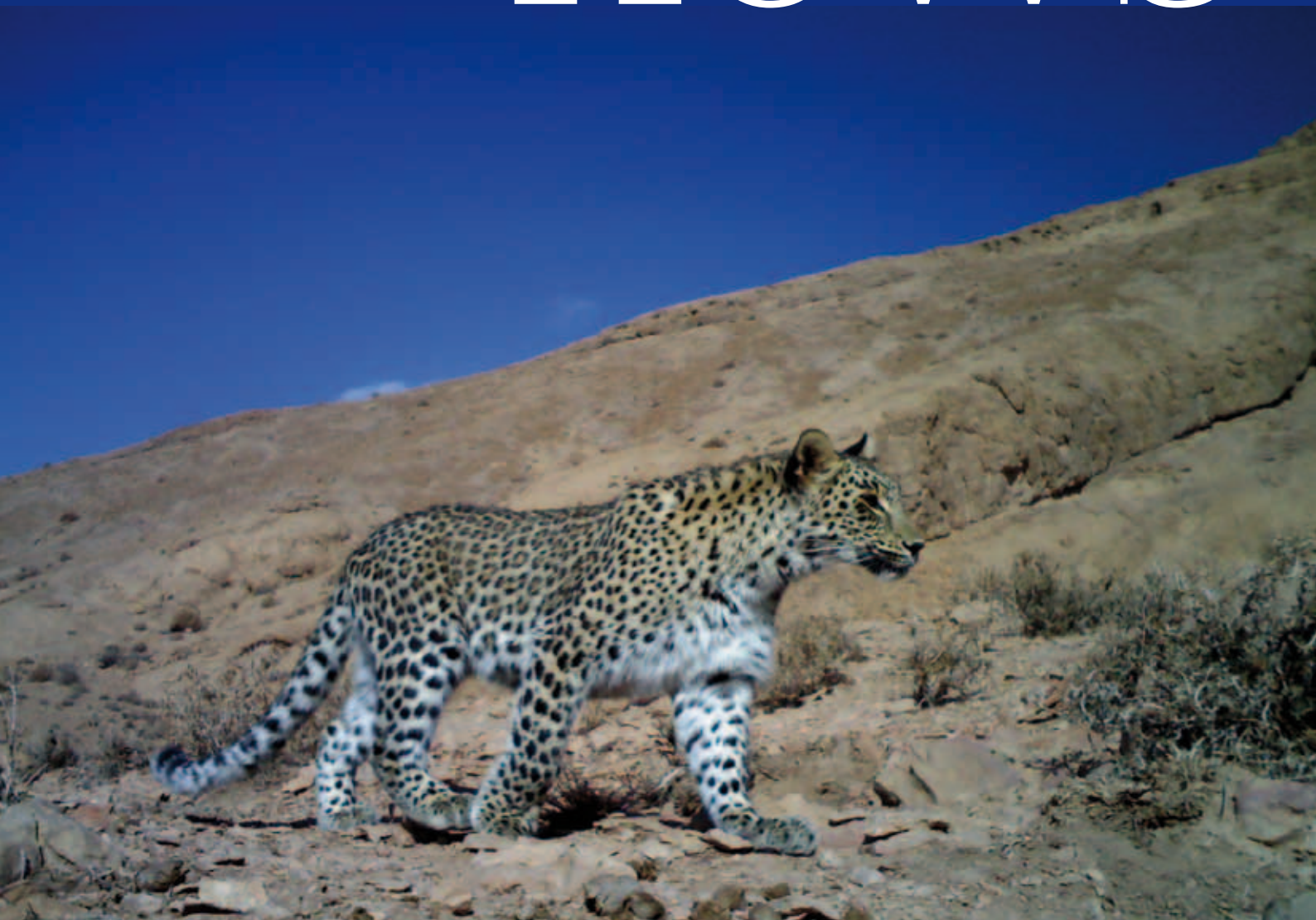


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# CAT

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# news





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Original contributions and short notes about wild cats are welcome

**Send contributions and observations to [ch.breitenmoser@kora.ch](mailto:ch.breitenmoser@kora.ch).**

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Photo DoE Iran/CACP/UNDP/  
ICS/Panthera

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# First photographic record of the Persian leopard in Kurdistan, northern Iraq

**Under a grant from the Conservation Leadership Programme (CLP), the Nature Iraq team has been researching wild goat *Capra aegagrus* in the Kurdistan region of northern Iraq. On the IUCN Red List (Weinberg et al. 2008), wild goat is listed as Vulnerable, and our research will help to enrich international understanding about the status of this animal in Iraq and conserve this species. During the CLP field surveys the team set one camera trap in a habitat where it was thought to be a suitable place for different carnivorous animals. The Persian leopard *Panthera pardus* was our main target species because our team was already working on their prey species, wild goats, and because we have seen a few incidents of the killing of leopards, which made us want to clarify their status in our study areas. Persian leopard is an Endangered species whose presence in Iraq, according to IUCN Red List (Khorozyan et al. 2008) is uncertain.**

According to Hatt (1959), leopards were few and scattered. He reported only two skins obtained from leopards in the Kurdistan Mountains; one recorded by Pocock (1930) from Rawanduz, and the other by Field (1955) from Bradost Mountain. These are very old sources and no information on the presence of this animal was documented since this time. Studies on biodiversity in this area have been undertaken by Nature Iraq for six years as part of the Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) Project undertaken in partnership with the Iraqi Ministry of Environment and with the support of the Italian Ministry of Environment, Land & Sea. Nature Iraq has only had confirmation of the species presence in Iraq through animals

that were killed. One leopard was killed by landmine in 2009 near the village of Morka east of Darbandikhan Lake. This leopard was examined by Nature Iraq staff as a mounted specimen in 2010. A second was killed in Diyala in 2008 (Nature Iraq & Iraqi Ministry of Environment 2011). No live sightings have been made in Iraq until the Nature Iraq camera trap photographed a male leopard in October 2011. This project identifies globally, regionally, and nationally important areas for biological diversity within Iraq.

## Study area

The area where the leopard was found (Fig. 1) is a key biodiversity area (KBA) and therefore

it has been proposed as a protected area by Nature Iraq. It is located within the Zagros Mountain Forest Steppe eco-region, which is critically threatened and part of a biodiversity hotspot. The specific study area is approximately 310 km<sup>2</sup> within the Qara Dagh range, which is part of the Zagros foldbelt that extends from southern Turkey through northern Iraq and down to southwest Iran (Fig. 2). The highest peak within the range is reaching 1,800 meters. This area is very important due to the richness of its flora and fauna. The habitat is mainly oak forest with vegetation coverage of about 90%. There are more than 500 species of plants, including the national or regional endemic species such as *Galium qaradaghense*, *Cousinia kopi-karadaghensis*, *Symphytum kurdicum*, *Onosma albo-roseum*, *Cephalaria syriaca*, *Astragalus spinosus*, *Cephalanthera kurdica* and *Silybum marianum* (Al-Rawi 1988). This area contains about 12% of flora species found in Iraq. Based on Nature Iraq's rapid assessments this area is home to more than 8 mammal species and over 87 bird species. Data for amphibians and reptiles are scarce.

## Methods

There have been no field studies on leopards or their prey species in this area or Iraq as a whole. This discovery was made in the course of Nature Iraq's wild goat survey, in particular thanks to a camera trap set in the same location over two survey periods: the first session of camera trapping started from 1 October to 20 October 2011, where two camera traps were set in two different mountains of Qara Dagh Area. The first camera (Stealth Cam STC-I540IR model) was left on Tasha Loos Mountain for 19 days and the second camera (Keep Guard KG 550 model) was left on Jazhna Mountain, also for 19 days and both cameras were retrieved on the same day (20 October 2011). The second session of camera trapping started from 2 January to 13 February 2012, where only one camera trap (Keep Guard KG 550 model) was set on only Jazhna Mountain and the camera was left there for a period of approximately one month and was retrieved on 13 February 2012. The cameras were not checked until they were retrieved at the end of each survey.

## Results & Discussion

During the first session of camera trapping in 6 October 2011, one picture of a male leopard was taken (Supporting Online Material, SOM Photo 1) with the Keep Guard KG 550 camera



**Fig. 1.** View of the survey site facing south (Photo Saman A. Ahmad).



on Jazhna Mountain, while the Stealth Cam STC-I540IR was unsuccessful to photograph any wildlife on Tasha Loos Mountain, and on 23 January 2012 during the second session of camera trapping on Jazhna Mountain, another picture of a leopard (possibly the same individual) was caught (Fig. 3). Besides the Persian leopard, six different species of mammals were photographed by the camera trap: wild cat *Felis silvestris* (SOM Photo 2), red fox *Vulpes vulpes*, golden jackal *Canis aureus*, Indian crested porcupine *Hystrix indica*, Persian squirrel *Sciurus anomalus*, and wild boar *Sus scrofa* (Raza et al. 2011). In addition to this finding, the team was successful in observing and photographing 49 individual wild goats, during the CLP summer and winter surveys. Although this finding is only a beginning of research on Persian leopard status in Iraq, it is a great finding. As leopards were last reported by locals (interviewed by Nature Iraq staff at different sites in the Kurdistan region in 2010 and as part of the Key Biodiversity Areas (KBA) project) in the 1980's, this could spur further research on this species and its prey species to improve our knowledge on their conservation status in Iraq. Leopards and wildlife in general are under threat from over-exploitation of their main prey species, and although the leopard is not usually hunted for its fur or other means of use but rather killed in self defense, as claimed by a local who recently killed a leopard in one of the mountains of Kurdistan, Northern Iraq. More studies are needed to understand the status of leopard in this area and all over Iraq and regulations are needed to better control the hunting pressure.

### Acknowledgement

Our thanks go to the Conservation Leadership Programme fund for helping us to initiate a project on wild goat conservation in Iraq. We would like to thank the members of the Nature Iraq team who have been dedicated for making this project a great success. We would also like to thank Amir Hussein Khaleghi of the Plan4Land Society in Iran for providing advice. Special thanks go to the forestry police, who have been very helpful in our survey trips to the area, for their efforts to control the hunting pressure in this area. We also acknowledge Anna Bachmann and James Wudel for editing.

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**Fig. 2.** Google Earth Map showing Qara Dagh Area's location within Iraq and as part of the Zagros belt.

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**Fig. 3.** Persian leopard caught on camera trap on January 2012 (Photo Nature Iraq/CLP).

