



LUKE HUNTER (2)

Tracking the Asiatic Cheetah

... ONE OF THE MOST IMPERILED CATS ON EARTH **BY LUKE HUNTER**

THE SILENCE IS SO ACUTE IT ALMOST HURTS. Layered in GoreTex and Polar-fleece to guard against the biting wind, I am perched high on a ridge, deep in Iran's arid central plateau. I strain to hear something—anything—but except for the sharp gusts of wind, it is utterly quiet. My lookout commands a view over the Bafgh Protected Area, one of a string of remote parks scattered across the plateau. Gravel plains and desolate salt flats abruptly give way to mountain chains that rise from the desert like great, serrated fins.

The sun is moments from setting, and though spring is only a few weeks away, winter grips the night. As the mercury plummets, I pull my scarf tight around my face and hunker down, my back against a rapidly cooling rock. I expect a long wait.

In the frigid silence, it would be easy to assume that nothing lives in this landscape. But in fact, this is the last stronghold on Earth for an unexpected resident: the Asiatic cheetah. This cat once occurred from Israel's Mediterranean

shores throughout the Arabian Peninsula, northward into Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and east into India. Like a dying lake, the cheetah's range withered under pressure from people and their livestock until only this single, isolated population remains. The cheetahs living here probably number no more than 100. I hope to capture one tonight.

In truth, I hope ultimately to catch eight. Despite its bleak appearance, Bafgh is relatively good cheetah country. A series of deep-walled valleys carve parallel lines through the massif and collect runoff from the meager rainfall, nurturing a comparatively rich crop of winter grasses and forbs. The productivity supports Persian ibex, a wild goat, and urial, a species of wild sheep related to the North American bighorn, which in turn sustain the cheetahs. That is, if the cats can catch them. Ibex and urial are mountain specialists, able to clamber over Bafgh's sheer cliffs as though on level ground, whereas cheetahs feel more at home on the flat valley floors. At one time, cheetahs hunted gazelles here, but very few are

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left in Bafgh, a legacy of the uncontrolled hunting that followed the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Cheetahs may be forced to hunt in the narrow windows of opportunity when urial and ibex briefly descend to graze and drink from natural springs dotting the valley floors. This is one of the questions we hope to answer by fitting eight cheetahs with Global Positioning System (GPS) collars.

It's 4:00 A.M. The temperature has dipped below freezing, and I struggle to sit up in my sleeping bag. Every hour, on the hour, my watch alarm awakens me; it is time to check the traps. In the valley below, we have set 14 "soft-catch" foot-snares, ingenious devices that catch animals by the paw without harming them. Each of the traps connects to a radio-transmitter that changes its signal when the snare is triggered. Should a cheetah step into one of our snares, we'll know immediately. But no one has ever caught Asiatic cheetahs, and we have no idea if the technique will work.

Unlike the region's other carnivorous inhabitants—Persian leopards, striped hyenas, and wolves—cheetahs do not scavenge, so we cannot draw them in with bait. Instead, we position our traps along natural game trails and choke-points along the valley, hoping that cheetahs will choose to walk there. From my elevated vantage, I use a radio receiver to quickly scan all the transmitters, even the most distant, which is many miles away. As I check the final transmitter—the closest one—my heart skips a beat. The signal is racing! The trap has been triggered.

I fight a dangerous urge to hurry down the dark, rock-strewn slope. Instead, I make my way inelegantly to camp, two little tents at the base of the ridge.

"Chaps! Wake up. Trap One has gone off!" Spilling from their tents into the freezing air, my team rapidly dons headlamps and backpacks filled with capture gear. Guy Balme, a PhD student from South Africa who specializes in leopards and is an experienced trapper, leads us into the night. He has safely captured almost 50 leopards using foot-snares, but Trap One may be holding his first cheetah. With us are Hadi Fahimi, an Iranian Masters student, and wildlife cameraman Mani Mirsadeghi. Even under the cracking pace set by Guy, we take 20 minutes to reach the trap, huffing and sweating despite the cold. But it takes just a moment to see there's nothing there.

"Misfire," murmurs Guy. Traps occasionally trigger spontaneously or, as in this case, something other than the intended quarry disturbs them. Judging by the tracks in the sand, large Indian crested porcupines snuffling around the snare set it off. Fortunately, we don't have to deal with an irate porcupine held by its front foot, but this is not much consolation. All we can do is re-set the trap and hope. It's back to the waiting game.

Cheetah habitat in Iran is among the most arid and unproductive anywhere in the species' range. Our base camp (opposite, top) sits at the head of the relatively fertile Eshkaft Valley in Bafgh Protected Area. Cheetah tracks (right) pepper the trails and dry riverbeds of the valley, indicating ideal sites to lay foot-snares. Mana (page 10), the first Asiatic cheetah ever captured for radio-collaring, sits unharmed in a snare (not visible, on his left foot). The process does not injure the cheetah.



By the time we reach camp, the sun is rising. This is my last day in the field, but with the help of veterinarians from the Wildlife Conservation Society's Field Vet Program and Austria's Research Institute of Wildlife Ecology, Guy's team will stay until spring, when the desert becomes too hot to trap cheetahs safely. A second team, headed by the director of the cheetah project in Iran, Hooshang Ziaie, and Houman Jowkar, a talented Iranian biologist who leads the field work, camps at the other end of the valley.

Five days later, at my desk in WCS's New York headquarters, I open a hasty email from Guy titled: "Yuz!" Yuz is short for *yuz palang*, the Farsi name for cheetah, but the exclamation point can mean only one thing.

"Luke. Great news—caught not one but 2 cheetahs last night! Both adult males, 2 separate traps, 1st at 17:00 at a new station I setup outside the valley and the 2nd at midnight at Trap One. Both in great condition & both cats very calm in the traps . . . darting went off without a hitch. Houman's named them Mana ("living forever" in Farsi) and Paya ("staying forever"). Got to go—losing our sat connection. More news as soon as we can charge the batteries. Very chuffed!! [In British English, you are "chuffed" when you are really pleased about something.]"

Guy

Mana and Paya are the first Asiatic cheetahs ever to be fitted with collars. I later discover that they were together the next morning, which suggests they are brothers. If they

follow the pattern of their African counterparts, they will remain together for life.

Two weeks later, the pair has left the valley, moving south on a route that will take them toward a major highway. At least one or two cheetahs are killed each year on Iran's excellent highway system. We can only hope Mana and Paya avoid the roads. The collars will allow us to identify the routes that cheetahs follow as they move between mountain ranges and to pinpoint hotspots where cheetahs are particularly vulnerable. With so few cheetahs, preventing the death of each individual is important.

But that is only one issue we want to address with the radio collars. If, as I suspect, conservation of the cheetah in Iran hinges on protecting landscapes that also attract people—to graze their livestock, to mine iron, zinc, and other minerals, or to construct the next highway—then we need to know how these activities will impact the cheetahs. Mana and Paya, and hopefully another six cheetahs next winter when we set the traps again, will help us answer those questions. In so doing, these animals will reveal a side of the Asiatic cheetah that is still only imagined.

Luke Hunter heads WCS's Great Cats Program and is the author of Cats of Africa (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006). In Iran, WCS works with the Iranian Department of Environment's CACP unit, the Zoological Society of London (which provided the GPS collars), the UNDP, and the Felidae Conservation Fund (which provided funding for the capture effort).

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