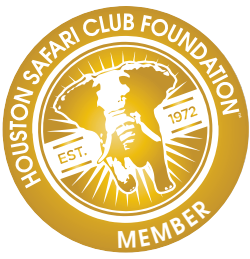


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# ASSASSIN OF THE SHADOWS

By John Wootters | Originally published in Petersen's Hunting, February 1982

Leopard maulings of sport hunters have never been particularly uncommon, but fatalities from them have never been as numerous as from the other members of the Big Five.

One reason is simply size; even a big leopard is no heavier than an ordinary man, although he is infinitely stronger. Several cases are on record of leopards, presumably weakened in some way by their wounds, having been killed in hand-to-hand combat by strong (and desperate) men. The most famous of these was Carl Akeley, the taxidermist. Although he survived, I seriously doubt that he or any of the few other men in that exclusive fraternity would recommend leopard wrestling.

Old *inbarugue* devotes much of his attention to his favorite prey, the baboon, and the mere glimpse of something with spots on it will wend a wild baboon into hysterics. The big dog-faced monkeys regard the leopard as the supreme enemy, and a fairly comprehensive definition of the word "pandemonium" can be gleaned from listening to a troop of roosted baboons during a nighttime leopard attack.

Actually, an old male baboon is a formidable beast in his own right, weighing close to 100 pounds and sporting great canine teeth at least equal to those of the leopard himself. Even the leopard will back away from a confrontation with three or four of these fighting males, and the females and young are the usual victims. However, on balance, the cat is probably beneficial to the bush natives of Africa by suppressing the baboons which incessantly raid the native little farming plots.

The leopard is so intensely identified with Africa that most of us tend to forget that, in addition to the entire African continent, his range originally included all of what we now call the Middle East, India, and most of Asia. Today, like many other species, he is gone or nearly so from the Asian and Middle Eastern ranges (the location of a small wild population of desert leopards in Israel is a well-kept secret), and scarce to nonexistent in Africa north of the Sahara in Somalia and, apparently, in some of the

West African states.

That's the bad news. The good news is that in Africa south of the Sahara there is indisputable scientific evidence that the leopard is both numerous and increasing.

Why, then, is he on the endangered species list? Don't the people who administer federal and international endangered species affairs know what they're doing? The answer, quite frankly, is *no!* Furthermore, they most devoutly desire not to be made aware of the leopard's true status, even though the news is good. Surely they have more than enough evidence before them. In 1976, Safari Club International petitioned the Washington powers that before a new policy permitting the importation of legally taken leopard trophies into the US. Accompanying that petition was a study of the leopard's status undertaken by Dr. Randall Eaton, a respected authority on the wild felines and president of the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Endangered Species. What this eminent scientist said, in part, was, "The leopard probably has a brighter future than any larger mammal in Africa. There could easily be one million leopards in Africa and population trends appear satisfactory" Except for the coyote, Dr. Eaton said, the leopard may be the most adaptable larger carnivore in the world. His conclusion was that reclassification of the leopard would be beneficial to the species.

In the same year, one Norman Myers of Nairobi, Kenya, concluded a two-year study in which he developed data to effect that even poaching had not really affected leopard populations in that nation.

Faced with this evidence, the U.S. Department of Interior was writhing and squirming, looking for an out. They finally declared Dr. Eaton's study "tainted" because Safari Club had paid for it, but Eaton's reputation forced them to commission another study, completed in 1978 by Drs. James G. Teer and Wendell G. Swank. These equally well-qualified biologists arrived at the same conclusion Dr. Eaton had: the leopard in sub-Saharan Africa is in fat city.



Wootters' record-book male leopard was collected in Mozambique in 1972. It was taken at the last gleam of twilight at 45 yards with a Ruger No. 1 in .45-70 caliber.



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Remember, the Teer and Swank study was paid for by the Office of Endangered Species, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service—with guess whose dollars. With all this and others evidence in hand, one naturally assumes that the U.S. moved swiftly to reverse a policy proven wrong and permit importation of leopard trophies, right? Wrong! There has been no change in the situation at all. You can still legally shoot a leopard in any of a dozen African nations, but you can't bring the hide home with you. So much for the intelligence and professional competence of the folks who take care of wildlife matters for you in Washington.

It is for these reasons that I do not hesitate to write about leopard hunting, even though his wondrous creature is on the endangered species list.

The actual hunting is almost invariably done by baiting. The chances of just running across a prowling leopard in broad daylight while out hunting range between not any and almost none, although a couple of friends of mine have collected leopards in that way. Leopard baiting is a subtle art, requiring a great deal of skill, knowledge, and hard work. Selection of the individual tree in which to hang the bait is important, and a hundred or more baits are probably hung for every leopard taken. When a cat feeds on a given bait for a couple of nights, a blind will be built. The hunters occupy the blind only for the last hour or so of daylight, and it can be extremely tense wait. The cat will come, if at all before dark, just at dusk, and he will usually simply appear in the tree. Rarely do you see him on the ground.

Leopard blinds are always built close to the tree, seldom more than 50 steps distant, but even so, I'm told the leopard is the most-missed animal in Africa. That's because of the charisma of the beast himself; hunters who, like me, have dreamed of that moment for a lifetime simply psych themselves into missing what should be an easy chance.

Although he is not very large or tough, a leopard is almost immune to bullet shock, like all cats of any size. That means that, in order to avoid the very sticky wounded leopard scenario in bad light and heavy bush, it's well to destroy vital tissue, lots

of it and quickly, with the first bullet. There won't be a second. Almost any caliber you'd use for whitetail deer (or up) will do the job, provided you put in where it belongs. Most leopards these days are clobbered with big guns, because those are rifles safari hunters take to Africa, and that's all right; you can't hit 150-plus pounds of dappled dynamite *too* hard! But a .270 or .30-06 or 7mm magnum will topple Old Spots off his limb just as dead as a .375 H&H Magnum. On the other hand, a .375 slug in the guts will make you wish you were back in Kansas City just as devoutly as will a .270.

For my one and only leopard, I selected a Ruger No. 1 chambered to the .45-70 Government cartridge and handloaded to junior magnum ballistics with a 400-grain Barnes soft-point. By luck, determination or whatever (the sight of that creature through the 3X scope psyched me twice as badly as most sane men), I managed to pinpoint that slug exactly in the center of the rosette of spots on the cat's shoulder that I wanted to hit, and his life exited with the bullet on the far side. It was, I'm here to tell you, quite a moment. I wanted to spend a few minutes alone with this spotted fantasy I had shot, to try to really experience him in death as I had not been allowed to while he lived. But there was a lot of whipping and hollering and back pounding and hand shaking and horn honking and singing in the by now dark forest, with flashlights swinging and bobbing, and jabbering in at least three languages, and privacy with my leopard wasn't possible.

I suppose that's the price you pay for shooting a flesh-and-blood fantast. I stood and looked down at him, almost glowing in the lights, not a whisker out of place, and thought that if I ever have a coat of arms, I will, like the kings of France, have leopards on it. ★