

THE WILD SIDE by Dave Gibson

LEOPARDS

Leopards are the smallest “big cat” among tigers, lions, and jaguars in the genus panthera. Most widely distributed and numerous of the four, they range from Eastern Russia, through Asia and the Indian subcontinent, to Southern Africa. Always a symbol of beauty and strength, in 1235 A.D. Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II gave three leopards to Henry III in a gesture of goodwill. Much to the detriment of all wild cats, in the early 1960s Jacqueline Kennedy made an appearance in a leopard skin coat that created a fashion trend. Around the same time actress Gina Lollobrigida was seen wearing a tiger skin coat that cost at least six adult tigers their lives. When questioned about her ethics in donning such a garment, representing so much sacrifice, she thoughtlessly exclaimed, “They were already dead when I bought the coat.”



Leopards are opportunistic hunters feeding on, to name a few, deer, antelope, monkeys, birds, fish, lizards, and insects. Strong shoulder and jaw muscles enable leopards to haul taken prey, sometimes heavier than themselves, up trees and out of reach from hungry lions and hyenas. Mainly nocturnal except where habituated, leopards rely on stealth and are more likely to enter human settlements than other big cats.

The Zanzibar leopard of Tanzania became extinct in 1996 from aggressive hunting spurred by locals’ misguided belief that the felines were kept by witches. Most abundant today in sub-Saharan Africa, leopards are thought extinct in Northern Africa. Still persecuted in illegal fur trade, clouded leopards of China and the Himalayas number around ten thousand. Snow leopard populations are reason for concern estimated at between 3 and 6 thousand. Most alarmingly of all, the Siberian Amur leopard is just hanging on with 25 to 35 individual leopards.

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