



Three Lives of Two Leopards

That may be one life too many, but it furnished me with more excitement than I'd bargained for

By GRANCEL FITZ

IT WAS TOO DARK to hunt any more. We all got into the jeep, and Hafiz drove with the windshield open and the top folded down as we headed back toward the Singaram forest rest house. I was in the front seat beside him.

We'd been riding half an hour when we noted a flick of movement in the grass on my side of the narrow jungle road. We had often seen foxes and little jungle cats when driving at night. Once we'd caught a glimpse of a hyena. For several



He whirled into a highly complicated flip-flop, and landed on his back. We mistakenly thought him dead

days I'd been getting quite a sample of the richness and variety of Hyderabad wildlife, but I sensed immediately that here was something different.

In another instant the headlights picked up a pair of big yellow eyes that blazed back at us with astonishing brilliance. Then we were close enough to see the leopard, facing us in yellow grass that didn't quite cover it. By the time the jeep came to a full stop, the leopard was something less than 20 feet away.

"Shoot. Be quick," somebody said. I was carrying the same Griffin & Howe .30/06, on a Model 30 Remington action, that I've used all over

North America, and to keep it from getting bumped around in the rough traveling, I was holding it between my knees. The magazine was loaded, and I quickly slipped a cartridge into the chamber.

Leaning out to the side, I shot at the leopard's chest, just a little too fast, then flipped the bolt to reload as fast as I could. The deadly little brute could have landed in my lap with two jumps, and I cannot claim that good shooting kept it away. Overestimating the depth of its chest in the grass, I had shot too low.

With the bullet an inch or two higher, the leopard might never have moved; an inch lower and it might

have come much too far in our direction. As things turned out, it acted as if it had been stung by the ground beneath it. Springing straight up, it came down in the same place and glided into the shadows behind some low brush. It went so slowly that we knew it was hit hard, but because of its spotted camouflage it wasn't easy to follow.

Along with our two companions in the back seat, Hafiz and I scrambled out of the jeep, and in another minute the probing beams of a couple of flashlights found those eyes again. The leopard was crouching a dozen yards from the road, broadside to us in the grass. It hadn't been able to

"A wounded leopard never gives warning like a tiger," Willie said. "He will



Willie is behind driftwood where big leopard crouched in ambush



Visitors from village of Singaram come to see leopard

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reach the heavy cover a few yards farther back.

At that moment I wasn't exactly a model of cold efficiency. One more cartridge should have ended the show. I needed two. None the less, I was delighted to collect this specimen, which turned out to be a small but full-grown female. She had given me one high-voltage minute that I wouldn't forget, and while my acquaintance with her had been too short to qualify as a major experience in the field, I knew that many sportsmen have made long trips in good leopard country without being lucky enough to bag one.

This typically unexpected encounter came soon after the tiger beat that featured my first afternoon of hunting in India (see "The Spectacular Tiger," February 1959 *OUTDOOR LIFE*). After chasing around for over 30 years for all 25 of the legal North American big-game species, I had selected the state of Hyderabad for my first Asian shooting, and was sponsored by *OUTDOOR LIFE*. I was outfitted by Shikarees, a firm that has been organized by the Nawabzada Fuzluddin Khan, and this young prince had seen to it that I was getting a wonderful all-around hunt under conditions that were extremely luxurious and far from costly. I also found the Nawabzada a fine companion in the field. But he had gone to the city for a few days,

and—as it happened—all my adventures with leopards happened before he returned.

While we waited for another tiger to kill one of the bullocks that had been put out for bait, I went into the jungle each morning and evening with our two shikaris—professional hunters. Dastagir also came along; he was the major-domo in charge of our camp staff, but he'd done enough shooting on his own to make him as keen as any of us. The two very competent pros were Hafiz, who might be properly introduced as Khairuddin Hafiz Pasha, and William Caesar, the veteran Eurasian expert who is employed by the young prince's father, the Nawab Zaheer Yar Jung.

There was certainly enough game to give us an interesting time. We found sambars, four-horned antelope, axis deer, chinkara, blackbucks, and the huge but small-horned antelope that are called nilgai, or blue bulls. However, some species were not included in my forest-block permit, and we had to drive our hunting jeep beyond the borders of the reserve to look for them where the forest-block system didn't apply.

My scheduled 15-day April trip wasn't long enough to allow really selective hunting for all of these animals, but I wanted trophies that were reasonably good. So for three days

after the first tiger beat, I shot nothing but a very decent axis deer, or chital. Those white-spotted stags are just about the most beautiful deer on earth, so it was unfortunate that we found this one so late in the evening that pictures were impossible. To save the meat, in that climate, the carcass had to be cut up at once. The fact is that you seldom run across Indian game in the hottest part of the day, when the best pictures could be taken. We usually hunted until darkness, then rode to camp for dinner. This routine had brought me the chance to shoot the female leopard beside the road. She had given me a lot to think about, including her name.

A long time ago, British sportsmen in India found at least two sizes of local leopards, so they used two names for them. The small ones—still called leopards—seem to prefer the neighborhood of villages, which they regularly invade to prey on the smaller livestock such as chickens, goats, and dogs. Sometimes they even take native children. These night raiders are often bold, but they're also stealthy and cunning. They've learned more about mankind at close quarters than any of the world's other big cats, and possibly they're more intelligent. While they rarely attack adult humans or big domestic animals, it isn't safe for an unarmed man to interfere with them

play you every dirty trick”



Hafiz (left) oversees little one's skinning



I pose with seven-foot leopard that gave me two jolts of high-voltage living

past a certain point, for even the little ones are concentrated bundles of high explosive, with tempers to match. My female specimen belonged to this small type, and our camp was full of natives who came to see her the morning after we brought her in. Before she was skinned, she measured five feet $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches from nose to tail tip.

In contrast, the much bigger jungle leopards are known in India as panthers. Some of these are so downright vicious that they've been known to tackle full-grown buffaloes, which they can hardly damage seriously. As a rule, they don't attack anything as large as a bull nilgai, or the sambar stags that are almost as big as our elk. But they prey on the young of these species as well as on the smaller kinds of deer and antelope, and they give the monkeys and peacocks a bad time. When these big leopards turn to man-eating, as they occasionally do, they're likely to be craftier and harder to deal with than man-eating tigers. Some of them have killed many natives before being wiped out.

To a naturalist, though, the name panther doesn't make much sense, for there isn't an animal on earth that can properly claim it. In Florida the name is still one of the many aliases of the puma, or mountain lion. And some fiction writers have attached the name to black leopards,

which are represented as being fiercer than the spotted kind. Actually, the black leopard is a sort of freak, just as a wild silver fox is a freak red fox, and they're extremely rare in most leopard countries. It's only in certain parts of the Malay Peninsula that black specimens are more common than spotted ones. They may look more sinister, but their dispositions are no nastier than those of their spotted brothers born in the same litter.

Leopards are found all the way across southern Asia from the Pacific to the Caucasus Mountains, and in Africa they're more widely distributed than any other large animal. As might be expected, they vary greatly in size in different parts of this enormous range, just as our whitetail deer vary in America. There are African leopards at least as big—and as small—as any in Asia. It has been claimed that Asian specimens often show fewer and larger spots. On the average, this may be true. But there is so much local and individual variation in the spots that nobody could consistently tell many Asian skins from African ones.

The "panther" label hasn't been tacked onto the large African leopards, so when there's virtually no difference between the best examples from both continents, there isn't

much point in giving them different names. That's why the big jungle specimen I was destined to meet in Hyderabad was a leopard to me, no matter what my companions called it.

The sharp claws of my little female brought another question to mind.

"What would you do if you got scratched up?" I asked Willie Caesar. The claws of all the big cats have grooves filed with the decayed flesh of their prey, and men have died of blood poisoning from scratches that weren't too serious in themselves.

Willie told me that a few years ago he shot a big leopard, had the hide cured, and gave it to his wife for a rug, never dreaming that the poison in the claws could survive the local tanning process. One morning, after the rug had been used for some time, his wife stepped on a claw and received a small puncture in the sole of her foot. By the middle of the afternoon her whole leg was dark and swollen. She had such a fever that a doctor was called. Taking Willie aside, he advised that the only way to save her life was to rush her to the hospital for an amputation. When his recommendation wasn't accepted immediately, the doctor quit the case, and Willie went to work on the puffer with pure carbolic acid. This, I knew, was a highly recommended treatment among the old-timers in Africa. (continued on page 123)

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"She fainted when the acid first touched her," Willie said. "That was just as well, for we had no anesthetic. I opened the wound to let the acid go in deeper. It was several months before she was really herself again, but she still has her leg."

Before I make another trip into big cat country, I'm going to find out what modern medical science has to offer.

Willie, by the way, speaks remarkably precise English, and his very wide knowledge of all Indian game comes from more than 30 years of observant hunting. So I was an attentive listener in our many conversations. And when talk turned to leopards, I gained a much clearer understanding of their curious place in the sporting scheme.

To the leopard's credit, from the trophy standpoint, is the fact that more than one thoroughly qualified African professional hunter has ranked him ahead of the lion, elephant, buffalo, and rhino as the most dangerous of all animals. In Asia, where they have their own wild elephants and rhinos, and where the tiger, gaur, and wild water buffalo can be dangerous enough to suit anybody, you'll also find people who rank the leopard at the top. This is especially true among the natives, who know him best.

The small size of a charging leopard makes him harder to hit than his bigger rivals. Nobody questions the aggressiveness or the hair-trigger temper he may show. His tactics tend to offset his lack of weight, which seldom reaches 150 pounds, for he tries to sink his fangs into your throat or shoulder, and tear your face off with his front claws while he does his best to rip your insides out with his hind ones. Along with these considerations, he is such a handsome brute that I've often wondered why many sportsmen have hesitated even to class him as game. Willie helped me to understand this.

The chief argument against the leopard is that he is so hard to hunt in an interesting way. He's a prowler of the dark hours, so rarely seen in daylight that you might live for years where leopards are plentiful without catching sight of one. Usually, you don't hunt him at all. He happens to you—if you're lucky. And if you kill him outright in one of these meetings, it's all over before the experience can mean much.

I asked about the possibility of driving leopards from cover, the way tigers can be beaten out. Willie explained that a leopard will go up a tree and hide until the beaters have gone past, or stay on the ground and likely slip between the beaters unseen. Willie also told me that a leopard comes down a tree head first, like a squirrel, instead of backing down like a bear.

At night, Indian leopards can be shot by watching a bait from an elevated shooting platform known as a machan. This is another method that is used

widely—and much more successfully—for tigers. The leopards are harder to bag because they're more likely to notice the machan in coming to the bait; since they do a lot of their own hunting for birds and monkeys in the trees, they're more in the habit of looking up into them. When you get a shot under these conditions, it's a sort of shooting-gallery affair. But you've earned it, in a way, because it's a chore to sit in a machan, hour after hour, trying to be motionless and silent while you wait for an animal that may not show up at all. Some men are peculiarly gifted for this sort of thing. I'm not. To me, sitting up over a bait is the world's most boring form of sport, especially at night when mosquitoes may come around.

I've heard that the white hunters of Africa in recent years have found another way to get results. They build blinds for their clients, close to trees in which small dead antelope have been securely lashed. Since leopards often take their own kills into the branches to save them from vultures, they see nothing suspicious about dead antelope hanging in trees. The spotted robbers are sometimes foused on these baits when the hunters are in the blinds, in the very early morning or late evening.

This plan has advantages over the machans in Asia, for you don't have to stay in the blinds so long, and you get more sleep. But here, again, there's not much to it when the leopard is finished with the first shot.

The danger comes when a hunter merely wounds an animal, then must follow it into cover of its own choosing. Many white hunters in Africa now strictly bar their clients from following up wounded dangerous game, preferring to take on the dirty job alone.

Thinking it all over, I decided that the best sport with leopards would be to run across a big one on the ground in daylight where he could see you. Getting a shot under those conditions was a lot to hope for, but the Hyderabad jungle—where leopards are plentiful—turned out to be a lucky place. My second leopard adventure came only four days after the first.

The day I met the big one started calmly enough. In our morning hunt we found some sambar does and a few four-horned antelope and chinkara, but no specimen that tempted me. We also saw quite a lot of feathered game. However, I don't like to disturb big-game country by banging around with a shotgun, so I let the birds go for another time.

We returned to camp by 9 a.m., and as soon as I had downed the cold lime drink my "boy" had waiting for me, I went up the ladder to my apartment in the rest house for a bath and change of clothes before breakfast. When that meal was finished, my main idea was to keep comfortable on the shaded veranda in the midday heat.

Late in the afternoon, after driving to an area where we'd spotted some nilgai, we walked through the rather open teak and hardwood forest until nearly dark without finding a shootable

head. It never occurred to me that the day wasn't over when we made our way out to one of the narrow cart tracks through the jungle, and started back.

Hafiz saw the leopard first. He and I were in the lead, with Willie and Dastagir close behind us. Coming out of the brush on our left, perhaps 40 yards ahead, the leopard started across the road. It was well out in the middle before it discovered us, then it instantly turned our way and crouched. I was looking off in another direction, and missed all of this; Hafiz told me about it afterward and showed me the pug marks in the soft red dust. So I had my first sight of this leopard as it rose and walked back the way it had come. It was a strikingly beautiful animal with the bulky look that meant it was a male, and it seemed bigger than any specimens I've seen in zoos. But while it certainly wasn't hurrying as it strolled into the cover, I hadn't time enough to raise my rifle before it disappeared.

We went ahead quietly. When we'd almost reached the place where the leopard had been, I saw it again through a thin screen of brush and tall grass. He stood motionless in a patch of open ground, less than 40 yards away, and in the twilight he showed up as a flat silhouette, much broken by the intervening grass and twigs. Although I could see his head, which I didn't want to hit, the exact position of the animal was hard for me to make out. I decided that he stood quartering toward me, facing to my left. Actually, as the men told me later, his head was farther from me than his tail.

Knowing that the big cat might go at any moment I shot into the middle of what I took to be his shoulder, and he whirled into a highly complicated flip-flop, landing on his back with all four feet in the air.

"Well done, sahib," said Dastagir.

"It is of the largest size, sir," Hafiz assured me.

I was so overjoyed with this incredible piece of luck that I raised my finger tips and blew a kiss to the sky. Hafiz seized my other hand and kissed it, which astonished me considerably.

And then, in the midst of these congratulations, the leopard jumped up. Before I could collect myself, my gorgeous trophy raced off down the hill into a dense patch of young, feathery leaved bamboo, only four or five feet high. The fast-fading light made that thicket seem as formless as a cloud of yellow-green smoke.

Only one more bullet would have finished the leopard, beyond question, while he lay apparently dead. In that moment of stunned silence, I could have kicked myself all the way to Calcutta.

There was also the sobering thought that a wounded leopard is very likely to charge. We were lucky that this one had been too punch-drunk to know what he was doing, for he'd certainly have caught us unprepared if he had streaked toward us as fast as he'd left. To make things worse, I couldn't

remember even one other time when I had so blithely taken for granted that any animal was killed outright, simply because it had fallen to my shot. I had acted like a jackass.

Walking over to where the leopard had dropped, we found blood and bits of flesh. A blood trail led into the bamboo, but nobody in his right mind would follow that bolt of fanged lightning into such cover at nightfall. There was nothing we could do before sunrise. Then we'd have to be back before any natives went into the jungle if we were to keep them from a possible mauling.

That night, after dinner, we relaxed in deck chairs in front of the rest house. The talk turned to the size of the big Asian cats, and we discussed the two ways of measuring tigers and leopards for record. Under the method that's officially recommended, the animal is rolled on its back and stretched out to get the nose and tail in a straight line, with the head pressed back onto the ground. Pegs are then driven to mark the nose and tail tip, and the length between pegs is measured. The other method, much more commonly used, is simply to lay the tape in contact with the animal as it lies on its side or stomach, and this is called 'measuring over the curves.' The peg method, of course, gives a somewhat smaller figure. Willie told me that the difference amounted to about 3½ inches on a good average tiger. He knew I had worked on the problems of recording North American big game, and he asked which system I preferred.

I told him that if the records were supposed to reflect the size of the animal for accurate comparisons, I frankly couldn't think of a more useless way than either of them. The tails of big male tigers can vary from 30 to 40 inches. I have no figures on leopards, but some leopard tails show as many as four vertebrae more than others. When one nine-foot tiger may have a body a whole foot longer and a tail a foot shorter than another tiger of the same all-over length, the total-length figure hardly tells us much, no matter how it's measured. The skull measurements used for North American cats and bears provide the only way I know to get official records that are worth keeping.

Before long I noticed some surprisingly large creatures that were swooping down like nighthawks from a grove of trees at one side, then flying back to disappear among the branches. They had a wider wing spread than a crow.

"What kind of birds are those?" I asked.

"They are not birds, sir. They are bats," Hafiz said. "Some people call them flying foxes. They live on fruit."

The flight of these giants was quite different from the erratic flitting of their familiar insect-eating cousins; they made me feel that I was far from home and didn't know many of the answers.

Willie then briefed me on what we might expect in the morning. He knew

from our first tiger experience that I'd insist on going along.

"A wounded leopard never gives you warning like a tiger, sir," Willie said. "He will play you every dirty trick. He may climb a tree and flatten himself out on a large limb, so that he can pounce down on you as you follow his pug marks. And leopards are extremely hard to see, sir. They can hide in a bit of cover that would hardly conceal a hare, and when they charge, it is from quite close. From about 10 feet, I should say, or even less. A load of heavy shot is what you need, but they are so fast that you must be very quick with a 12-bore to have any chance at all."

I went to bed with that advice in mind.

It was still dark when the tea tray was brought to my bedside, and we left camp soon after sunrise. On the way to the place where the leopard had last been seen, we detoured briefly to pick up a native tracker who looked to me like a wild man. He was dressed in a breechclout and turban, and armed with only a little hatchet that resembled a tomahawk. In any event, he certainly proved that he knew his business.

When we came to the dried blood where the leopard had taken off into the bamboo, we didn't try to follow it at once. First the tracker climbed a nearby tree. Haffz, taking my binoculars, climbed another, and they spent quite a while in a careful inspection of every limb on every tree that could be seen in the direction we would take. We wanted to be completely sure that our spotted quarry wasn't waiting for us in one of them. At the same time, we couldn't overlook that chance that he might take to a tree as we approached him. So we still kept the trees in mind as we spread out, a couple of paces apart, and began our advance.

I felt relieved when we skirted the edges of the shallow bamboo thicket and picked up the blood trail where the leopard had left it on the far side. This patch was really dense, and walking into it would have been hard on the nerves. But even that couldn't have been much worse than the comparatively open space ahead.

The leopard had traveled so fast that drops of blood were far between, and as the soft pads of those beasts don't leave many footprints you can see, the tracking was anything but easy. Our tracker seemed to know where he was going, though. With two of us on each side of him, he worked ahead slowly. And I mean slowly.

In following up a leopard, you don't step over a small log until you have thrown a lot of stones to make certain that he isn't crouching behind it. Neither do you step down a water-cut bank that is only a foot high until you have given it the same treatment. And before you get too close, you also stone every tiny clump of grass that might possibly hide him. They tell me that even this doesn't always work. When a wounded leopard knows you haven't seen him, he will sometimes let a stone

hit him without moving an eyelash, but will charge the instant he's discovered.

While all of this was old stuff to my companions, I saw that they were as keyed up as I was, and that's saying plenty. It was like going into country planted with land mines. Willie had seen to it that I was carrying a shotgun loaded with heavy English buckshot. My thumb was never off the safety as we worked down a gentle slope to the bed of a nullah, or dry watercourse. And since it had taken us a good half hour to travel 100 yards, one thing was sure. After the big cat had started on his second life by romping into the thicket, he'd furnished a whole lot more excitement than he'd given us before I shot him.

Without hesitation our tracker turned down the nullah, although I hadn't noticed anything to follow, and we closed up our ranks considerably. The stream bed was hardly more than 10 feet wide. In the long-past floods of the rainy season, some driftwood had been stranded along the edges, but none of the sticks looked more than a couple of inches thick. I paid little attention to them. Mainly I watched the cover along the banks, and we had continued our slow progress for another 50 yards when our tracker stopped. For a second or two he was as tense as a bird dog on point. Then he relaxed.

Only eight feet away from him, behind a very low pile of driftwood, the leopard lay dead against the bank. Shot through the lungs, it had managed to race that far to the place where it wanted to ambush us, and then this spectacular tomcat had run out of all of its lives, almost as soon as it crouched there in the dusk. But we had just discovered, in full daylight, that the ambush was well chosen.

In the few seconds it took me to grasp this, I also saw tracks that spelled catastrophe. At first, I didn't know what they meant; we soon found out. A pack of wild dogs had been here in the night, and had eaten a huge hole in the leopard's side.

This taught me something about mixed emotions. The follow-up was safely over, and I'm sure we all felt a surge of relief. Then, after all the tension, there was a sense of anticlimax. At the same time, we were shocked to see what had happened to that beautiful pelt. The wild dogs had left the leopard looking much thinner than I remembered him. But he was just as long, and his one good side would do for pictures. After we photographed him, we stretched him out in the approved way, and Willie measured him with my steel tape.

"Seven feet," he reported.

As I have a deep-seated suspicion of even figures, which are almost never accurate, we rechecked it and found the exception: this specimen, from nose to tail tip, was exactly seven feet. The figure doesn't mean much, as we have noted, but it does indicate a really big leopard, in any country. So we carried him to the jeep and lashed him across the hood for the drive back to camp.

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where he would be skinned. Maybe the wild dogs had left enough cape for a head mount. As Willie pointed out, the tail could make a band for my shooting hat.

We had driven only a few hundred yards along the cart track when the leopard on the hood brought us some unexpected and noisy comments. A band of langurs, or gray Hanuman monkeys, were swarming around in the treetops. They seemed to be cheering. A little farther on, some of the smaller, pink-rumped rhesus monkeys did the same thing.

"They are congratulating you because their enemy is dead," Hafiz told me. "I'm very sorry, sir, about the wild dogs."

My reply was a little slow in coming, for the thought of congratulations made me shudder.

"After I'd hunted for a good many years, I figured out why I keep on doing it," I said at last. "Aside from the fact that animals have always interested me, every once in a while some shooting trip gives me a few minutes of higher-powered living than I ordinarily get. Those minutes are the highlights of a lifetime, wherever you find them. Before we knew that this leopard was dead, he gave me quite a number of minutes like that to add to my collection. Maybe they're worth the difference between a rug and a hat band."

I still think that way.

THE END