

Cheetahs in Afghanistan

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The Asiatic cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus venaticus* (Schreber 1776) once ranged from the Arabian Peninsula to India. Today not more than 100 cheetahs seem to have survived in the deserts of Iran (Farhadinia 2004). In Afghanistan the cheetah is considered to have been extinct since the 1950s (Habibi 2003).

Although Afghanistan is situated in the centre of the former distribution range there are only a few records of cheetahs for this country. The first one dates back to the end of the 19th century; Aitchison (1889) mentions a pair of young hunting leopards, obtained by Peter Lumsden's party during their journey from Iran to Afghanistan, on the southern slopes of the mountains that separate the waters of Zuhraabad from those of the Turbat-e-Sheikh Jami river west of Herat. This locality, however, although close to the Afghan border, is still in Iran. Ognev (1935) quotes K. K. Flerov, who mentions a cheetah that was shot in the vicinity of Chehil Dukhtaran north of Herat near the border with Turkestan in 1932. During the third Danish Expedition to Central Asia in 1948/49 Paludan was able to purchase an untanned skin of a cheetah at Farah in the Helmand Basin (Hassinger 1973). The most recent record dates back to 1971, when Nogge

saw a cheetah's skin in the market in Herat (Naumann & Nogge 1973).

In 2006 Manati found the skin of a cheetah in a shop in Mazar-e-Sharif in the northern province of Balkh (Fig. 1). According to the shopkeeper this specimen originally came from the province of Samangan, the first record of this species in Afghanistan for more than 35 years and the fourth one in all. It may be possible, but seems very unlikely, that this skin was imported from Iran, where the only remaining population of Asiatic cheetahs still exists. So the conclusion is that cheetahs may have survived, although in very low numbers, in remote areas in Afghanistan until today.

References

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Fig. 1. Cheetah skin detected in a market in Mazar-e-Sharif (Photo A. R. Manati).

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