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Abstract: During may 1987, a legal leopard hunter killed accidentally a cheetah in the Waterberg mountains, in the North West Transvaal, South Africa, an area where it was not know that the species occurred. However, it seems like that at least five cheetahs existed in the surrounding plateau.

## CAT SPECIALIST GROUP REPORT

BY

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CHEETAH (Acinonyx jubatus)

In the Waterberg mountains North Western Transvaal

On the 15th of December 1987 I had the opportunity to discuss various matters concerning wildlife conservation in the Waterberg mountains with a fellow neighbour who recounted the following story to my ranger Clive Ravenhill and myself.

During May this year he was out hunting on his reserve when he and his trackers sighted some creature at some considerable distance from them, bouncing up and down in the grass. To the naked eye it appeared to be that of a spring hare and on closer examination through the telescope of his rifle he observed what he thought to be a leopard which was bobbing up and down in the grass looking in their direction.

The area in question is in the North Western Transvaal, a Province of South Africa, which is a mountain range which consists of private game Sanctuaries, Tribal Trust land and farming areas, mainly devoted to that of cattle and to a lesser extent agriculture mainly confined to the valleys. A major characteristic of the region are flat tablelands often well grassed, open woodland. These are often extensive in size and on our particular reserve we have a population of some 16 Roan antelope (*Hippotragus equinus*). The species occurs on adjacent farms and to the best of our knowledge has been resident here and in these mountains as far back as the records go. It has been suggested that the Roan were forced up into these mountains, but evidence would indicate from research that has been undertaken during the last two years that this is most unlikely. The conditions of these flat tablelands are infact suitable for species such as Roan and Sable Antelope. I mention this as the leopard is the major prey species in these mountains in so far as the Roan Antelope is concerned and the presence of cheetah is of further interest in this regard.

To continue the episode concerning our neighbour, he has the necessary legal permits to hunt leopard, which occur in these mountains in abundance and are finding increasing protection particularly in areas such as Lapalala, which now covers over 21 000 hectares. He fired at the creature killing it instantly and upon coming up to the animal found to his complete and utter surprise that he had shot a large cheetah with a length of 7 foot 5 inches (225cm). He was completely mistified by the occurance of this species in the Waterberg mountains and we concur with this for we have no previous knowledge of the species occuring in this area.

The habitat however certainly lends itself to the species existence as described by Dr Reay Smithers in his work, *The Mammals of the Southern African Sub-Region*.

He immediately questioned his black staff who advised him that indeed the animal did occur in the area and that they were aware of at least five that existed in the surrounding plateau.

The animal is described as a 'wit-tier' by them in Afrikaans, translated this would be white tiger, the word tier is used by many blacks to describe the leopard. In this case the word white would indicate the paler variation in the animals coat.

The next step he took was to have the animal skinned and proceeded to report the matter to the Nature Conservation authorities and laid his story before them, which they accepted as they too had had no indication of the animals existence in these mountains.

I believe the occurrence of the species here warrants further investigation and as cattle farming decrease and is replaced by game farming the presence of the cheetah from our point of view is encouraging. An interesting further comment by our neighbour was that he had noticed on previous occasions the tracks of what he took to be the brown hyena in what was clearly a pursuit situation. At the time this did confuse him as he was well aware that the brown hyena is common in our mountains. However he failed to examine the tracks more closely.

The cheetah in the Transvaal has been removed from the South African Red Data book as an endangered species.

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