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ZIMBABWE

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Cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus*

The cheetah has a very wide distribution in Zimbabwe, although it appears to be sparsely and discontinuously distributed. There are no visual or specimen records of the species from the north-eastern parts of the country and they appear to be naturally absent from that area. This corresponds with their absence in parts of the Tete area of Mozambique and southern Malawi.

In the Zambezi Valley, above Kariba dam, the cheetah is rare and very seldom seen, although a recent sighting from near Rinma confirms that it is still present. During the building of the Kariba dam and the formation of Lake Kariba, cheetah were not recorded in the Zambezi Valley between the gorges (Child, 1968) and they appear to be absent on the Zambian side of the Zambezi River in the same general area. (Ansell, 1960).

However, the species is present in the Chizirira and Matusadona National Parks, but not in great numbers and is not often seen. Cheetahs are very widely distributed in the Hwange National Park and definitely more common in the northern sections of the park than in the southern and western areas of the Kalahari sands. Fair numbers occur around between Salt Dam and Tshowe Dam in the north (Wilson, 1975) and as they occur in a wide range of habitat types in this area, they may be more common than the records suggest.

The Research staff of the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Management working in the park estimated that in 1973 there were no more cheetah in the entire National Park, while in 1937 Povideen estimated the population to be between 100 to 150 animals.

The following figures of cheetah sightings in the National Park were presented by Mr J. Rushworth (Research Officer) for the period 1972-1976:

1972 -69 animals, 1973 -45, 1974 -51, 1975 -34 and 1976 -34, and from these he calculated that the maximum number of cheetah in the park to be about 80 animals (Wilson, 1975). Groups of up to eight cheetah were recorded but generally between two and four animals were more usual (Wilson, 1975).

D. Rushworth (pers. comm.) informed the writer of a reliable report of a female cheetah and three large cubs on an impala kill at Chingahobi Dam (10.00 a.m., 26 August 1969). While they were feeding a large adult warthog apparently drove them away and then itself returned and proceeded to feed on the impala carcass (Wilson, 1975).

A collection of freshly evacuated cheetah droppings in the Bohins area of the park were found to contain large quantities of hair which was thought to be from a cheetah (Mitchell, pers. comm.). The hair was later positively identified in the National Museum as that of cheetah.

A very recent report from a reliable observer (Dr. J. Pretorius, pers. comm.) mentioned a leopard chasing a cheetah across a stretch of grassland near Main Camp in the Hwange National Park.

In view of the above three reports, it appears as if the cheetah in the park may be under some pressure from other species and even though they are strictly protected in the area, their status is not good and there is evidence, although unconfirmed, that the population is failing to increase.

Dense human settlement in the way of African villages and then farming and ranching land occurs south of the Hwange National Park and stretches towards the city of Bulawayo. As a result cheetah are rare, or perhaps even absent, in the area.

There are several records of other animals in the Matopos Hills and on the Matopos Agricultural Research Station, but in all cases only single animals were recorded. However, there have been no records of cheetah in the area since 1982 and perhaps they are now absent or very rare. There were also no records of cheetah in the Game section of the Matopos National Park for the period 1965-1969 (Wilson, 1969), and none have been seen in the area since that time.

In the 1970's a good population, perhaps as many as 200 animals, existed in the south-west lowveld of Zimbabwe, especially on the large cattle and game ranches in the Gwanda and West Nicholson areas. Mr Donald Cowie, at one time Manager of the very large ranches of Manyoli and Doddieburn, estimated that the cheetah population on the two ranches was in the region of 50 animals (D.Cowie, pers. comm.).

From 1975-1979 cheetah were a problem in the same general area and the writer was constantly asked by the Wardens of the Department of National Park and Wildlife Management stationed at West Nicholson to help trap cheetah that were killing cattle on the ranches. A number of cheetah were shot in the area for stock killing (Cooper, pers.comm. and Howes, pers. comm.). The writer eventually helped design a trap for the Department of National Parks to be used to trap problem cheetah.

However, with three successive years of severe drought (1981-1983 inclusive) in Zimbabwe, it has been this lovely area that has been most severely affected. Cattle, as well as wild animals, have died in their thousands and the writer counted over 48 dead wildebeest, zebra, buffalo, etc, on one ranch in the area in only two days in September 1983. The owner of the ranch estimated that thousands of game animals had died on his ranch alone. The species being affected were mainly the grazers such as zebra, warthog, waterbuck, buffalo and wildebeest, but hundreds of Impala also died (Paul Ralsted, pers. comm.).

In addition to antelope and cattle deaths there have been four authentic reports of cheetah dying -with skeletons being found (Himel and Halsted, pers. comm.).

Many thousands of hectares of land in the entire south-western and south-eastern parts of Zimbabwe have been left without a single tuft of grass and consequently very little cover. It is feared that the cheetah may also have perished in large numbers in the area. Dr G. Child (pers.comm) has indicated that in the south-eastern lowveld of Zimbabwe as much as 95 % of the wild life has died.

Cheetah are occasionally seen in the eastern districts of Zimbabwe but are more plentiful on the open grasslands and brachystegia woodlands north of Masvingo and on the large cattle ranches in the Andoma and Kwekwe areas, where they are still seen. In fact, while there has been a decrease in the cheetah population in the lowveld, there has been an increase of the species in the Midlands, in some places even becoming a nuisance on ranching land.

Leopard *Panthera pardus*

Leopards are very widely distributed in Zimbabwe and occur throughout. They still persist even in areas of intense hunting and farming, and in some places, e.g. Hwange National Park (Northern sector), Matopos National Park and in the Gwanda/West Nicholson area they are common. They are also plentiful in the Zambezi and Limpopo Valleys and throughout the Eastern Districts.

The only places where leopards are not to be found will be where the habitat is unsuitable, i.e. completely open grasslands. As they occupy a very wide range of habitat types they are found in fair numbers almost everywhere else. In the Robins area of Hwange National Park, four different animals were seen one night with the aid of a spotlight over a period of two and a half hours, and at Robins Camp the species frequently wandered into the camp at night (Wilson, 1975).

Rushworth (Wilson, 1975) estimated the population of leopards in the Hwange National Park to be at least 300 animals, while Richard Smith (in Wilson, 1981) felt that the leopard population in the Matopos Hills was in excess of 100 animals.

In the south-west lowveld of Zimbabwe, where game was plentiful before the three years of drought (1981-1983), leopard was plentiful. Yet, in spite of the drought, leopard still persist in the rocky ridges and outcrops in areas that are now barren and devoid of grass and other cover. However, hill and rocky outcrops still support pockets of grass and bushes and the leopard has easily managed to survive, indeed thrive, in those areas.

In August/September 1983 the writer visited several places in the drought area and remains of leopard kills were found on the slopes of the rocky areas on three occasions - duiker, impala and klipspringer being preyed on.

While the cheetah perished in the same area, under the same conditions, the leopard, with its extremely varied diet ranging from rodents and snakes to sable antelope, survived. The species could always find something to eat as long as good cover was available. Grobler and Wilson (1972) clearly showed that in the Matopos Hills dassies (*Procavia capensis*) formed the major part of leopard diet.

Therefore, in Zimbabwe as a whole, and with the exception of areas with dense human settlements, and areas of open grassland with no cover, the leopard is still present.

Without a thorough and detailed study being carried out it would be difficult to estimate the numbers of leopard present in Zimbabwe, but their status is good and there are places where the species is plentiful. Their numbers must surely be in excess of 2,000 animals.

Lion *Panthera leo*

The lion is today generally absent from the plateau area of Zimbabwe stretching across the country from Plumtree/Bulawayo to Harare and to Mutare and the Eastern Districts. However, lion are known to be great wanderers and vagrants occur even close to the large cities from time to time.

The distribution of the lion in Zimbabwe today is limited to the border areas, especially in the Hwange National Park and along the Zambezi River. They also occur in the Limpopo Valley and the north-east to the Sabi/Dundi area and to the southern parts of the Eastern Districts. Odd animals or small prides are recorded very occasionally near Harare, Geaur and Bulawayo but they disappear as mysteriously as they arrive after killing a few domestic animals.

As more and more of the land is opened up to human settlement the limits of distribution of the lion is reduced and in time the species will only be found in large National Parks and perhaps forest reserves.

The greatest concentration of lion occurs in the Hwange National Park and north to the Zambezi River above the Victoria Falls. Wilson (1975) gave the figures of around 500 lions for the Hwange National Park and several hundred more must exist in the country north of the park.

In the Mana Pools area of the Zambezi Valley and in Matusadona National Park, there are also good populations and one could say that the present day status of the species in the north and northwest of Zimbabwe is good.

The total population in Zimbabwe must certainly exceed 1,000 animals.

Caracal *Felis caracal*

The caracal is very widely distributed in Zimbabwe and obviously occurs throughout. However, nowhere is it common and, in fact, in most places it can be considered as rare or perhaps even absent. The species is extremely secretive by nature and is rarely seen even at night and with the aid of a powerful spotlight.

Only eight animals were seen by the writer during a mammal survey of the Hwange National Park. The survey lasted two years and 141 nights were spent in observation with powerful spotlights mounted on a landrover. Caracal were difficult to approach with a dazzling light and would not stand once the light was shone on them (Wilson, 1975).

The species is generally more nocturnal than diurnal and this may also perhaps account for the lack of visual records. However, the species is not common in the country and could more correctly be classified as uncommon to rare.

Wild cat *Felis libyca*

Very widely distributed throughout Zimbabwe and by far one of the commonest small predators in the country. They have been recorded from every part of the country and as they have a very wide habitat tolerance they can and do exist everywhere. However, they have a decided preference for establishing themselves in areas of agricultural development and more especially if crops are being grown. (Smithers and Wilson 1975)

In the Hwange National Park they were recorded every time night work took place and were considered by far the commonest of the predators in the park (Wilson, 1975). They were also found to be more common in the Kalahari sand section of the park and this was possibly correlated with a great abundance of rodents in that area (Wilson, 1975).