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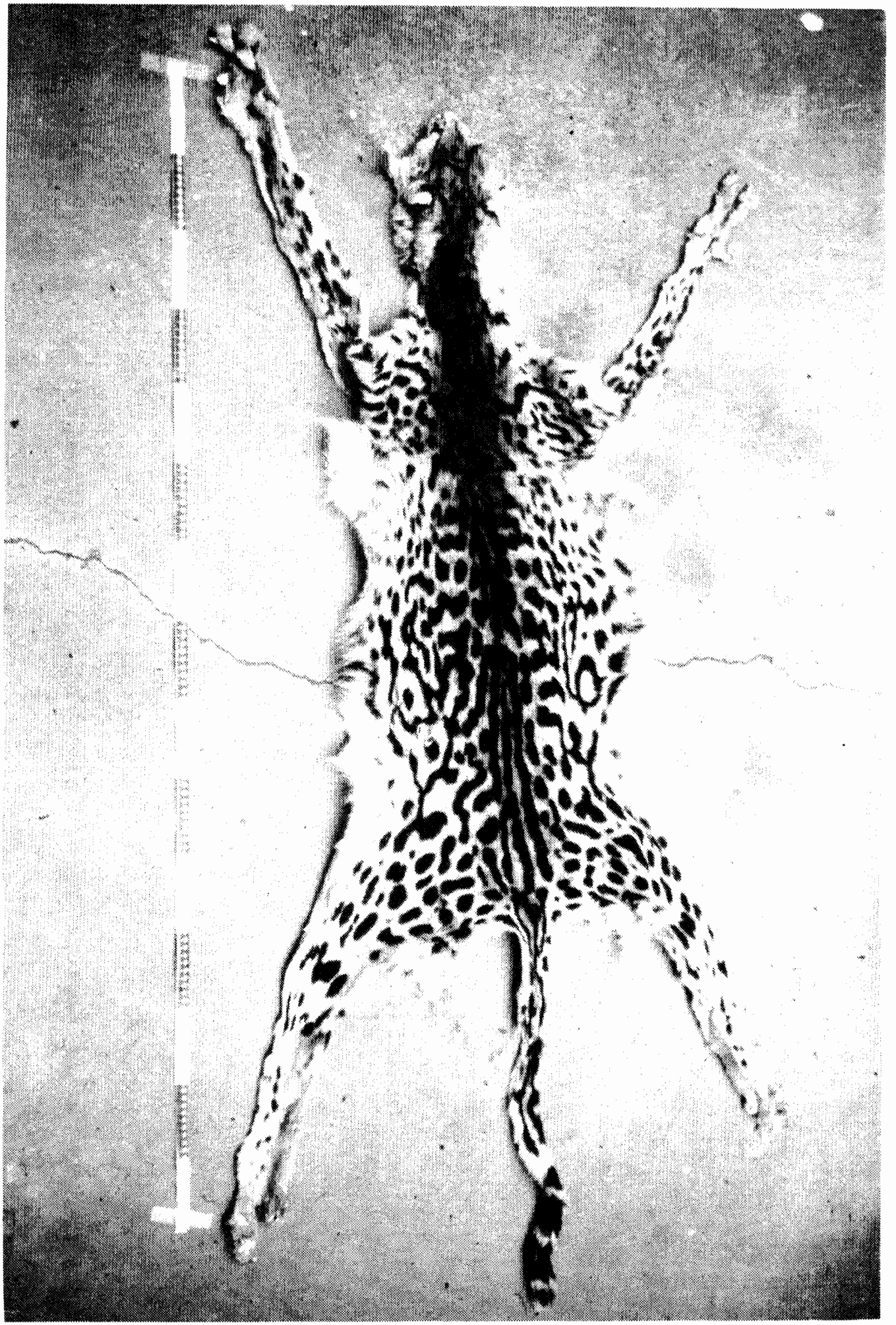
Abstract: The distinctive, but rare, striped coat pattern of the cheetah *(Acinonyx jubatus)* that is described as the 'king cheetah' is well-known from the northern and eastern Transvaal in South Africa and from contiguous areas in Zimbabwe and eastern Botswana. The king cheetah has never been reported elsewhere in Africa. In 1988 a cheetah skin showing a strong resemblance to the king cheetah of southern Africa was recovered from a poacher in eastern Burkina Faso, West Africa.



First Record of King Cheetah Outside Southern Africa

by George Frame*

The distinctive, but rare, striped coat pattern of the cheetah *Acinonyx jubatus* that is described as the "king cheetah" is well-known from the northern and eastern Transvaal in South Africa and from contiguous areas in Zimbabwe and eastern Botswana. The king cheetah, however, has never been reported elsewhere in Africa. The purpose of this note is to document for the first time the occurrence of a cheetah coat pattern in Burkina Faso, West Africa, which is similar to the king cheetah of southern Africa.

The king cheetah coat pattern is believed to result from a mutation of the tabby gene. Nine cheetahs of the king cheetah type were born in captivity in South Africa between 1981 and 1984. These captive births of known parentage provided sufficient data to show that a single recessive gene controls the king cheetah coat pattern. For color photographs and an excellent description of the genetics of the king cheetah coat pattern, see the article by Lindburg (1989); or read the brief summary in CAT NEWS 11:18.

In 1988 a cheetah skin showing a strong resemblance to the king cheetah was recovered from a poacher in eastern Burkina Faso. The location where the poacher shot the cheetah, and where the poacher subsequently was arrested, is the northern end of the Singou Total Fauna Reserve (latitude 11°51'N, longitude 1°01'E). The skin was confiscated by Urbain Belemsobgo and foresters of the Ministry of Environment and Tourism. Presently the skin is owned by U. Belemsobgo, which is why we were still able to photograph it in November 1990 (see Fig. opposite).

The length of the neck ruff, and the relative lengths of the black spots compared with the brown hairs of the ruff, suggest that the individual was about 8 to 10 months old (from the cheetah ageing scale by Frame and Herbison Frame 1974). We measured the dried skin as follows: tip of nose to base of tail = 112 cm, tail length = 58 cm. (By comparison an adult male cheetah in Tanzania measured 127 cm and 74 cm, respectively: Frame, G. & L. 1981: 215.) The total length of head + body + tail = 170 cm. Thus, the cheetah probably was still with its mother at the time it was shot, and was not fully grown.

The Singou Total Fauna Reserve is part of the 20,000 sq km (or larger) Singou-Arli-W-Pendjari ecosystem, which lies in the valleys of the Niger and Pendjari Rivers in Burkina Faso, Niger, Bénin, and Togo. The ecosystem comprises the W National park in three countries, the Pendjari National Park, the proposed Arli National Park, an assortment of partial reserves and total reserves, and a relatively small proportion of unprotected lands. The various protected areas within the Burkina Faso portion of the ecosystem were described by Rogers and Belemsobgo (1986).

Apparently there still might be viable populations of cheetahs, lions, and other felids in the ecosystem. During a foot-transect survey of large mammals in the proposed Arli National Park in February 1991, four lions *Panthera leo* and one cheetah were seen (Frame et al. 1991a). During an aerial survey in the Burkina Faso portion of the W National Park in March 1991, 3 lions but no cheetahs were seen (Frame et al. 1991b). Local foresters say that African wild cats *Felis libyca*, leopards *Panthera pardus*, servals *Felis serval*, and caracals *Felis caracal* still exist, although none was seen during either the foot-transect survey or the aerial survey. With the new conservation attention and funding that are being focused on this ecosystem we predict that additional "king" cheetahs eventually will be found.

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*George W. Frame, African Wildlife Husbandry Development Association, 01 B.P. 5570, Ouagadougou 01, Burkina Faso, and Urbain Belemsobgo, Nazinga Game Ranch, 03 B.P. 7044, Ouagadougou 03, Burkina Faso.