Abstract: The aberrant form of the cheetah, once regarded as a separate species, *Acinonyx rex*, and known colloquially as the "King Cheetah", is characterized by possession of softer, longer and slier hair and partial replacement of normal spots by dark bars. The teeth of the only authenticated skull known in no way differ from those of the normal cheetah, *Acinonyx jubatus*. The configuration of the only known skull cannot further examined as it forms part of a mounted specimen. At one time 13 skins of "King Cheetah" were known; one has been destroyed and the present location another is unknown. The provenance of ten of the skins has been established but it seems unlikely that accurate locality data will be found for the remaining three. In addition 11 sightings, one documented by a photograph, are recorded and considered reliable. All specimens and sightings are from a restricted area of the Southern African Subregion bounded by latitudes 17° S and 25° S and longitudes 24° E and 33° E (Map 1.). Specimens of the "King Cheetah" have been recorded sporadically over the past 50 years and no doubt further sightings will be made in future. The authors would be grateful for any reports of the occurrence of this exceptionally handsome and interesting form of cheetah, but we wish to emphasize that the destruction or collection of specimens is neither necessary nor desirable.
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INTRODUCTION

The animal, later to be known as the “King Cheetah”, was first brought to public attention through a photograph and letter from the late Major A. L. Cooper of Salisbury, Zimbabwe, published in The Field (Cooper, 1926). The photograph, a copy of which was also received by the British Museum (Natural History), showed an unusual feld skin, strikingly marked with irregular spots and bars, and distinct longitudinal stripes along the back extending onto the upper part of the tail. Major Cooper suggested that it was the skin of a leopard-cheetah hybrid, an idea dismissed by R. I. Pocock of the British Museum (Natural History) who, in an answering letter in the following issue of the same publication (Pocock, 1926), supposed the skin to be that of an aberrant leopard. This problem was resolved early the next year, 1927, when Major Cooper arranged for the loan of the skin, then owned by the Queen Victoria Memorial Library and Museum, Salisbury, to the British Museum (Nat. Hist.). On examining the specimen Pocock recognised it to be a cheetah, but described it as a new species, *Acinonyx regalis* (Pocock, 1927a). The Queen Victoria specimens known through correspondence with Major Cooper were cited.

*Acinonyx regalis*, now usually known as the “King Cheetah”, has variously been referred to in literature as the “Mazoe leopard”, “Cume’s cheetah”, “Rhodesian cheetah” and “Striped cheetah”. It is now generally accepted that the “King Cheetah” merely represents an abnormally marked variant of the cheetah, *A. jubatus*. This was first suggested by Cabrera (1932) and eventually acknowledged by Pocock (1939) and other authorities.

Aberrants are known to occur in most species but are especially frequent in the spotted cats; the cheetah being no exception. That they do not always take the form and pattern found in the “King Cheetah” is shown by a photograph, which appeared in The Field (Pocock, 1921), of a specimen shot in Tanzania by Col. W. T. Glegg, now in the collection of the British Museum (Nat. Hist.), in which the spotting over the body is unusually small and is virtually absent over the neck and shoulders, the mane being very sparse. In other specimens, taken in 1877 in the Beaufort West District of South Africa, where they no longer occur, the black pigment was lacking, resulting in a brown spotted cheetah, which had rather short, “woolly” fur (Holdsworth, 1877). In the specimens from the Southern African Subregion listed below the aberration takes the form of the replacement of spots by bars; all are in broad outline remarkably similar, yet each individual is, in the detail of the pattern produced, unique, to the extent that their histories may be traced from original photographs.

“King Cheetah” are very handsome and distinctive animals in which there has been a revival of interest in recent years, stimulated by the sighting and the photograph taken of a live “King Cheetah” in the Kruger National Park (de Graaff, 1974). The correspondence relating to the original discovery and photographs of other specimens was re-examined in response to an enquiry for a book on cheetahs (Wrogman, 1975).

As a result of the material unearthed the preparation of this historical review was undertaken.

A number of discrepancies have occurred in the literature particularly with regard to those specimens first mentioned by Pocock (1927a). In this paper a short history is provided for each of these five specimens and for a number of others collected subsequently, together with notes relating to sightings. The various erroneous records are discussed and corrected.

Several errors, originating in correspondence from Major Cooper, were quoted by Pocock (1927a) and have been repeated by subsequent authors. In his paper, Cooper (1927) revises these earlier statements, invalidating some of the information in the type description which had already been published.

Many of the letters from Major Cooper, both to Pocock and to Oldfield Thomas, written during 1926 and 1927, are still available in the archives of the British Museum (Nat. Hist.) and the Queen Victoria Museum, Salisbury. We have had also, through the kindness of Mrs. Baillie Cooper, access to other papers and photographs relating to her husband’s interest in the “King Cheetah”, included in which there is a volume of correspondence from skin dealers and others, either offering to purchase skins or advising on the species involved.

None of the flat skins listed is accompanied by a skull and although measurements of supposed “King Cheetah” skulls have appeared in the literature (Roberts, 1951), no authentic skull was known until 1979. The mounted specimens (Plates 3, 4 & 5) were examined from flat skins purchased from African hunters and, therefore, do not have their original skulls. The Messina specimen (Plate 5), however, is mounted as a floor rug, with full head mount, and we are assured by Messrs. J. R. I. of Pretoria who processed the skin, that the original skull was used. In evidence they state that one
THE HOLOTYPE OF ACINONYX REX, Macheke, Zimbabwe SE 1931B2

Major Cooper in his letter to *The Field* (1926), which was accompanied by a photograph, first drew attention to this specimen. He stated that the skin, from which the skull was missing, had been "brought in by a native a few weeks previously", having been trapped in the Umvukwes Range, N.W. of Salisbury. By "brought in" he obviously meant to the Queen Victoria Memorial Library and Museum, where it had been incorporated in the study collection. As will be seen later both these statements were in fact incorrect, for the records of the Museum clearly state that it had been presented by Mr. Donald Fraser, a farmer in the Headlands area, and had been taken near Macheke. In the letter Major Cooper invited opinions on the specimen and asked if other similar skins were known. His own opinion was that it was a cheetah/leopard hybrid, having the non-retractile claws and neck ruff of the cheetah, but other characters which were more like those of a leopard. The photograph which accompanied the letter, was of a flat skin against brickwork, later identified as the wall of the old building of the Queen Victoria Memorial in Moffat Street, Salisbury.

At the same time that he wrote to *The Field*, Major Cooper also wrote to the British Museum (Nat. Hist.) London enclosing another copy of the photograph. This was acknowledged in a letter dated 21st September 1926 from Oldfield Thomas who stated "I should think you are right as to its being a cheetah/leopard hybrid — and a very remarkable beast at that — I never saw the like of it. I am tiring it over to Mr. Pocock who is now writing on the Carnivora to see if he can make anything of it".

Pocock's reply was published in *The Field* (1926), in which he suggested that it would probably prove to be an aberrant leopard, a species known to exhibit "remarkable characters from the normal type in the enlargement, integration or rearrangement of its spots, which occurs more so in South Africa than elsewhere".

Correspondence between the British Museum (Nat. Hist.) and Major Cooper followed, with a view to obtaining the permission of the Committee of the Queen Victoria Memorial Library and Museum to send the skin to London for examination. While their agreement to this was not minuted at the time, they obviously gave the necessary authority for, in July 1927, in retrospect, a minute in regard to this specimen reads as follows: "A skin of Headlands, has proved to be a new species. Major A. L. Cooper, with the permission of the Committee, had the skin sent to the British Museum (Natural History) for identification. It has been named *Acinonyx rex* to emphasise the splendour of its livery".

In a letter to *The Field*, Pocock (1927b) confirmed this loan stating that "... with the generous consent of the authorities, Salisbury Museum, to which it had been presented by Mr. Donald Fraser the skin had been received and examined by him. In this letter he considered that "the animal is a cheetah in all its external characters" and refers to his description of it (1927a) as a new species *Acinonyx rex*.

Unfortunately, both in his letter to *The Field* (1927b) and in his original description (1927a) Pocock records that it was trapped in the "Umvukwes Range, north-west of Salisbury, Rhodesia", but the records of the Queen Victoria Museum clearly state that the specimen came from Macheke, Zimbabwe (at 100 km southeast of Salisbury). Major Cooper (1927) later corrected his original statement agreeing that it came from Macheke. In this paper there is a photograph of the skin in question with the caption "Photograph of skin of *Acinonyx rex* from Macheke". This photograph is identical to that which appeared in *The Field* (Cooper, 1926), when Major Cooper gave the locality as "the Umvukwes Range, northwest of Salisbury".

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**Map 2** Location of material records and sightings of the "King Cheetah".


specimens and it seems not unlikely

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Carranza, 1932. Los mamíferos de Mattrucos. Trab. del Museo de Ciencias de Madrid

Cooper, 1926. A curious skin Field: 690.


530-533

JAMES, A. 1962. The puzzle of King Cheetahs. Field: 1018-1019.


1928. The Rhodesian cheetah. Field: 593.


Johannesburg.


