

# Cheetah Distribution in Khorasan Province, Iran

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The cheetah still survives in Iran, but with a gloomy future. Information on its abundance has always been scanty and unreliable. Even during the 1970s, when the Iran Department of the Environment had many opportunities to carry out research into its biology, abundance and distribution, no such effort was made. However, efforts to establish safe havens for the species proved successful. I must note that this is almost true for all Iranian wildlife species.

With respect to the number of cheetahs in Iran, Salvadori and Florio (1978) recorded a population between 200 and 300 cheetahs and one live cheetah in captivity at Teheran zoo as late as 1974. Paul Joslin (1984) noted a possible cheetah population of 30 in Khosh Yielagh Protected Region in northern Iran, south of the Alborz Mountains. This area has been severely damaged by great numbers of grazing sheep and goats in recent years.

For the rest of the country, Joslin's "reasonable guesstimate" was 100+. His information was based on information obtained in 1973-76. Much change has taken place all over the country, as in Khosh Yielagh.

Dr Colin Groves (Australian National University, *pers. comm.*) gives the following description for the Asian cheetah, based on a photograph of a cheetah captured in Semnan:

"The Asian cheetah seem to have clearer, darker 'shadow spots', more clearly marked faces (spots on cheeks, thick, bold paranasal stripes), more thickly spotted limbs and more marked manes in the adult, both on the nape and (especially) on the throat. Like North African cheetahs (from Algeria and Libya), the Asian cheetahs are pale, dull fawn in colour (not yellow-buff as in East Africa), have rather big spots, which do not become much denser in the mid-dorsal region, a thicker, more clubby tail and a larger, whiter light tip to the ear. The north-east African cheetahs (Somalia, Eritrea, N. Sudan) likewise have clubby tails and much white on the ea."

Dareshuri (1976) also considers the Asiatic cheetah to differ from the African cheetah by its slightly larger body size, longer fur and darker coloration.

Recent direct observations of cheetahs and their signs or remains in the Provinces of Markazi (central), Fars (south-west) and Khorasan (northeast) have been made by myself, my students and also biologists and/or field personnel of the Department of the Environment. The following is a brief description of the history of observations in the province of Khorasan, which seems to have the largest population of cheetah in the country.

The province lies between 30° 21' and 38° 17' N. and between 55° 28' and 61° 14' E. in north-eastern Iran. It is the largest province in the country and borders Turkmenia and Afghanistan in the north and east. From 1980 to 1987, cheetah observations in the province showed a shrinkage of the range towards the southern part of the province. This shrinkage was brought about by mass killings of gazelles and harassment - the capture and/or killing of cheetahs by armed men. However, the field personnel of the Department of the Environment gradually exerted their control and were able

to reduce the impact. Cheetahs, which had survived on hare populations in the deserts to the south of Tabas, have gradually started to repopulate the province from the south.

The following is a brief description of encounters between man and cheetah in Khorasan during the 1980s:

1. In February 1980, two cubs (1 male and 1 female) were shot by two local schoolteachers at Dashte Goorpan (36° 47' N., 57° 14' E.).

2. In August 1981, two cubs were captured close to a village called Doruneh on the eastern border of Turan Protected Area (35° 23' N., 57° 30' E.). These cubs were confiscated by the game guards of the Department of Environment when they were offered for sale in the Bazar of Sabzevar. The cubs were given to Mashad Zoo. The male is still alive. I photographed it in July 1991. The animal is in extremely poor condition and its hind part is paralyzed. I visited Doruneh area in February 1990 with Dr Gunter Heidemann of Kiel University. Signs of cheetah were observed.

3. In February 1987 one cheetah was killed by a Land-rover of a mining company in Parvardeh Region, 80 km south of Tabas (23° 15' N., 56° 41' E.), bordering Kavir Lut. Following this accident, many cheetah observations were made by game guards in Nay Band area in the vicinity.

4. In September 1989, one cheetah was killed by a person in the Halvan area (33° 24' N., 57° 30' E.), northwest of Tabas. The cheetah had apparently attacked the man's young camel. The man had also burned the body.

5. In March 1989, one cheetah was observed and the body of another found by game guards in Kal Sabz area (35° 23' N., 57° 30' E.), near the city of Kashmar. I visited the area in 1990 and observed cheetah signs.

6. In September 1990, signs of cheetah were observed in a place called Dahane Mary (36° 50' N., 56° 44' E.) inside Miandasht Wildlife Refuge near the city of Bojnord.

These encounters point to the fact that cheetah range has been extending to the northern parts of the province in recent years, thanks to the dedicated field personnel of the Department of the Environment, who are doing a marvellous job of preserving endangered species of wildlife in Iran.

## References

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