

HOUDINI

the cat who kept escaping

A leopard

eludes

scientists

in South Africa



IT'S AFTER MIDNIGHT, and I'm out in the South African bush waiting for a leopard named Houdini. I can't see a thing in the dark, the humidity feels like glue on my skin, and my ride is an open, cut-down Land Rover with about as much fortification against a hungry big cat as a dinner plate. Just as I'm trying to recall why being part of this stakeout seemed like a good idea, my guide, Carl, hisses, "Listen! That's him." In the distance, there's a sound like a wood saw rasping back and forth. "You hear him?" he asks. "It's called sawing, a territorial call telling other males to keep away. Not that close, a mile off at least." We listen until the leopard's coughing challenge fades out of earshot. "He's going east," says Carl.

By Scott Salzman



I haven't been in the field for long, but already I know that's the wrong direction. Houdini is moving away from us, heading into a tangled stand of thorn tree scrub inaccessible even to the Leopardmobile. It means we won't get closer to him tonight. Carl starts the Land Rover. "C'mon, let's head home. We'll try again tomorrow."

I am in South Africa's Phinda Private Game Reserve, and I'm trying to catch leopards. *Catch*. Not "catch a glimpse of" or "catch wind of." Catch, as in track a leopard by its spoor (tracks, droppings, etc.), approach to within 30 yards, and dart it with a tranquilizer gun. I am a volunteer with the Mun-Ya-Wana Leopard Project, and I feel like I have landed smack in the middle of a National Geographic Ultimate Explorer television episode.

My adventure actually starts 8,000 miles away in South Carolina, where I begin wondering what it would be like to go "on safari." I am fascinated with the wild cats, but apart from impossible-to-see Florida panthers a couple of states away, big cats are thin on the ground in my part of the world. I've already begun the process of wading through the legion of African safari permutations offered by tour companies when I hear about the leopard project.

The deal is this: For a fee, and provided I meet a few basic health requirements, I can get hands-on experience working to conserve wild leopards—in Africa. I don't hike or camp, I've never studied zoology, and the people I know just don't do things like this. But my fortieth birthday is looming, and I've been thinking about doing something special. Apart from guaranteeing up-close viewing of that most elusive of African cats, the offer represents an opportunity to work behind the scenes in wild-cat conservation. It isn't cheap, but my fee helps fund the research. I could pay a safari operator the same amount to drive me around looking for photo opportunities, but if I take this trip, my dollars buy radio collars, tracking receivers, dart guns, or even help keep the Leopardmobile mobile. My decision is an easy one.

And so I find myself in one of the best wildlife destinations on the planet, Phinda. A little more than ten years ago, it was very different. At that

Leopards are secretive and difficult to study. At right, WCS's Luke Hunter (on left) and Phinda Game Reserve's Karl Rosenberg examine and radio-collar a sedated young male. Twenty leopards have been collared so far, and one of the researchers' goals is to follow them (opposite) and find out how the young cats manage to disperse and set up territories of their own.

time, this piece of land sat in the heart of cattle country, and the most common mammal was *Bos taurus*, the domestic cow. But with unpredictable rains, cattle farming had always been risky, and farmers wanted out. CC Africa, a large ecotourism company, saw the writing in the dust and started to buy farms. Their aim? To restore all the large wild mammals that existed in the region prior to European colonization. Unlike livestock, native mammals can endure the occasional drought, and CCA saw the region's future in wildlife. The company sold the cattle, tore down hundreds of miles of barbed wire, and unified a 42,000-acre tract of acacia woodland under the reserve's full name Phinda Isilwane—Zulu for "Return of the Wildlife." More than 1,000 head of wild herbivores—zebras, wildebeest, kudus, giraffes, and other species—were released into the newly born reserve, followed by 30 white rhinos (that's more than remain in most African countries) and 56 elephants. The only species missing were big cats.

No one had ever reintroduced African cats on such a large scale. In 1992, when Phinda wanted a scientist with the expertise and confidence to carry out such a task, they recruited Luke Hunter, then a PhD student at Pretoria University's Mammal Research Institute. He would spend four years following the reintroduced lions and cheetahs of Phinda, documenting their releases and eventual reestablishment. Lions and cheetahs are now common at Phinda, and Luke, who currently heads the Wildlife Conservation Society's Global Carnivore Program, still leads the research on Phinda's big cats.

Strikingly more adaptable than lions and cheetahs, leopards were not reintroduced during the early days of Phinda; they didn't have to be. Leopards are masters at keeping low profiles. Unlike other big cats, they had survived the best efforts of the cattle farmers to wipe them out. Within the newly proclaimed

reserve, leopards simply settled in under their own steam. Why, then, is Luke catching and outfitting them with radio collars?

For all its achievements, Phinda faces major obstacles. There are still cattle farms on its boundaries, and farmers still shoot leopards that leave the reserve. Phinda is surrounded by electrified fencing that ensures most species remain in the safety of the reserve. But the versatile leopards scoot right through the fence as though it isn't there. Luke is the first to point out that farmers must have the right to protect their livelihoods, but the problem is more convoluted. A few locals shoot leopards not in defense of their cattle, but to make a profit. They recruit trophy hunters who pay handsomely for the right to kill a leopard attracted to bait. It's legal and common in parts of Africa.

Some proponents claim that such hunting may even help conserve the leopard. The argument runs like this: Allow landowners to harvest one or two cats a year for a profit, and they end up tolerating all leopards on their land because they want to be able to hunt the following year. But if you ban hunting, they will shoot every cat that pokes its nose over their fence because there's no financial incentive not to. In theory, it sounds reasonable, but Phinda's leopards are on a one-way street. The reserve's leopard population is feeding the hunting demand on neighboring properties, and the pool is far from bottomless. Unless the landowners who are shooting leopards also learn to coexist with the big cats on their properties, they—and Phinda—may wind up with none.

So the leopard project is radio-collaring the cats as a means to protect them. The collars provide the kind of detailed information that will allow the region's conservation authorities to better regulate the hunting. And a hunter who attracts one of the radio-collared leopards to his bait site may avoid pulling the trigger.

Which brings me back to Houdini. He's named that because when he was first captured and collared by Luke and Carl (a project research assistant), he promptly shrugged off his radio collar. It's unusual behavior. Unlikely as it sounds, the cats normally ignore the collars. But even if Houdini has a unique aversion to them, he is essential to the study. His territory encompasses much of Phinda, as well as an adjacent property notorious for leopard hunting. When Houdini was first captured, in 2002, the researchers discovered he had already been wounded once—a shotgun blast to the face and neck that fortunately caused no serious damage. So whether he likes it or not, I'm here to help collar him.

As it turns out, Houdini lives up to his name and we never do catch him during my trip. I spend hours watching him, but he always keeps just out of range of the dart gun. In a way, it doesn't matter. I know that the project team needs to collar him, but my experience has revealed far more about wild-cat research and conservation than it would have if we'd succeeded on the first attempt. I've tasted the joy of spending hours following wild leopards. In all, I see eight of the cats hunting, playing, feeding, and even mating, entirely indifferent to my presence. I've also endured the frustration that is routine for the researchers and have been given a glimpse into how difficult conservation work in Africa can be.

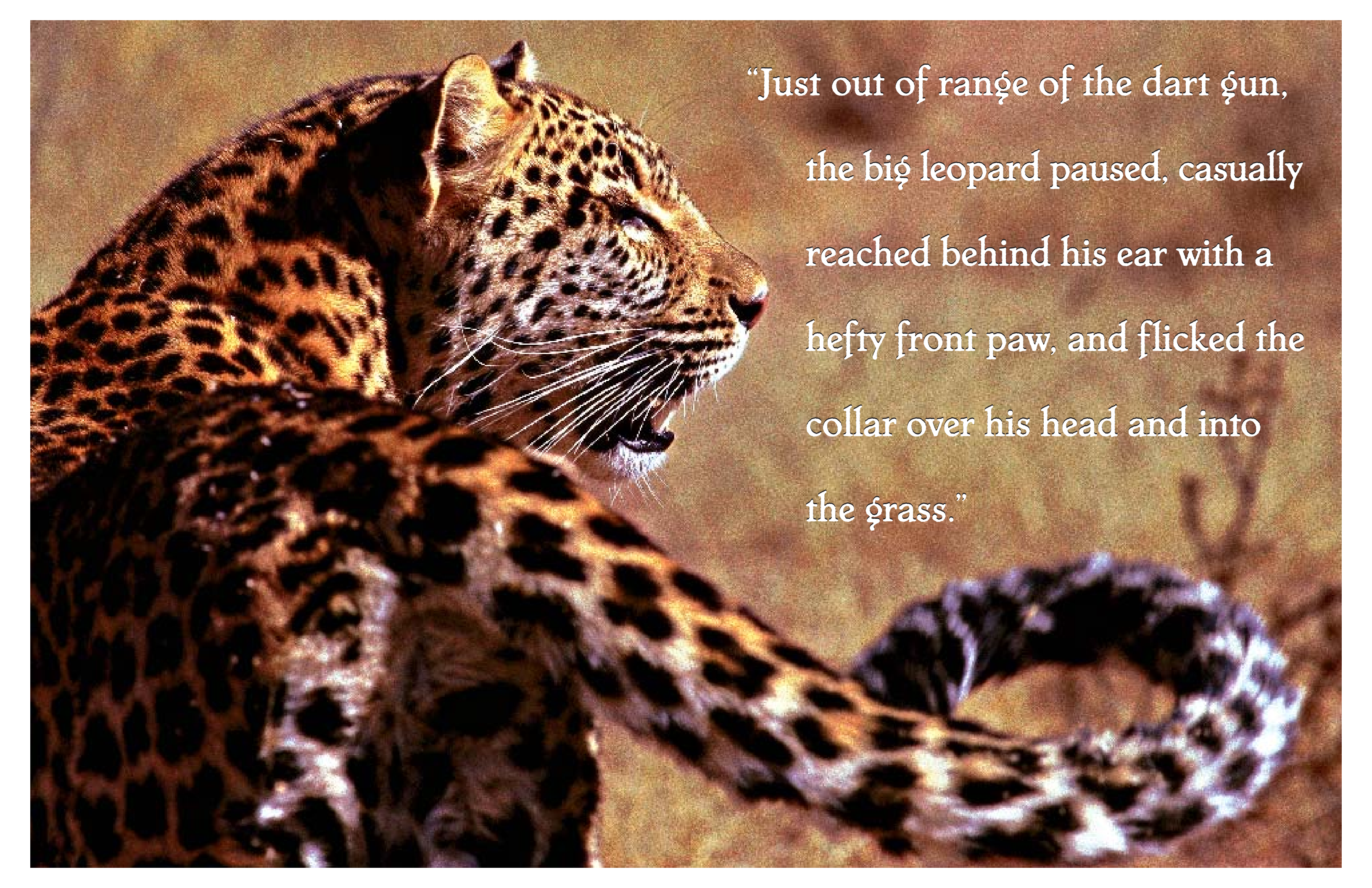
After Houdini has dodged us yet again, Carl takes me with

him to help dart three lions and two cheetahs destined to be moved from Phinda to other reserves. I may never have caught my leopard, but I do know that if I had chosen the safari tour experience, I would have returned feeling a little bit like I had visited a zoo.

Carl wrote to me not long after I got back home. With the help of another volunteer, he finally caught and collared Houdini. Once he awakened from the tranquilizing drug, the cat wandered back into the thorn veldt as though nothing had happened. Just out of range of the tranquilizer dart gun, the big leopard paused, casually reached behind his ear with a hefty front paw, and flicked the collar over his head and into the grass. Carl is still chasing him.

Scott Salzman is a librarian and computer systems manager in South Carolina. For more about the Mun-Ya-Wana Leopard Project, see www.biolsci.monash.edu.au/Honours/leopards. Information on WCS's Global Carnivore Program can be found at www.savingwildplaces.org.





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