

Natural World
Leopards: 21st Century Cats



BILLING

Against a backdrop of escalating and often deadly human-leopard conflict across India, conservationist Rom Whitaker sets out to uncover the fascinating truth behind the gory headlines. How is it that such a large predator is still relatively common in a country of 1.2 billion people? What is it really like living with these big cats on your doorstep? And why is it that some leopards prefer to avoid us, while others become man-eaters?

Filmed and produced by **Icon Films**

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THE STORY TOLD IN THE FILM

Against a backdrop of escalating and often deadly human-leopard conflict across India, conservationist Rom Whitaker discovers that a huge leopard has moved into his *own* backyard. Intrigued by the leopard's ability to thrive alongside humans, yet anxious to find out why so many people are being attacked, Rom sets out to uncover the fascinating truth behind the headlines. How is it that such a large predator is still relatively common in a country of 1.2 billion people? What is it really like living with these big cats on your doorstep? And why is it that some leopards prefer to avoid us, while others become man-eaters?

Travelling first to rural Rajasthan, Rom's notion that these are solitary and highly secretive animals is immediately flipped on its head. Guided by local leopard enthusiast **Devi Singh**, he sees an entire family relaxing in broad daylight, close to human activity, and finds a seemingly balanced relationship where villagers and big cats rub along without too much trouble.

So what upsets this delicate balance? Rom heads north to the foothills of the Himalayas – a region long infamous for its man-eating cats - to experience the darker side of living with leopards. Here he meets ex-school-teacher-turned-leopard-slayer, **Lakhpat Rawat Singh**, who blames the problem on a shortage of wild prey. In search of further clues, Rom meets the family of a boy who was attacked and eaten just ten days earlier, and later joins Lakhpat on a hunt for the culprit. Aware that an alarming

number of *leopards* are also being killed, both legally and by poachers, Rom wonders if this could also be a factor.

Still puzzled, Rom hits the road in central India, where scientist **Vidya Athreya** has been studying the conflict for several years. She explains how trapping and removing leopards actually *creates* man-eaters, and insists that while the risk is “never zero”, it is far better to leave the cats alone. Rom meets some of these ‘man-made’ man-eaters, now behind bars, and sees for himself how local farmers are adjusting to the presence of leopards. Their philosophy even extends to fishing them out of wells! In a remarkable scene beside a busy village, Rom creeps to within 40 feet of a huge male leopard on its kill.

It’s hard to imagine how leopards and humans could live any more ‘cheek by jowl’, yet in some cases these big cats are known to infiltrate *cities*. For the final leg of his journey, Rom heads into Mumbai – a megalopolis of some 20 million inhabitants. This place is the ‘ultimate test’ - both of the leopard’s remarkable adaptability, and of people’s willingness to accept a large predator in their midst.

Returning home, Rom concludes that the safest leopards are the ones we leave alone. Crucially, their future depends not just on conserving wild habitat, but also on our collective capacity for tolerance.

THE CONTRIBUTOR

Romulus (Rom) Whitaker is a multi-award winning conservationist, writer, speaker, and film-maker who has dedicated much of his life to saving India’s endangered reptiles. For full biographies, please see the two attached documents, which also give details of his associated natural history expertise.

Rom’s previous films include: *The King Cobra and I*, *Supersize Crocodiles*, *Dragon Chronicles*, *Crocodile Blues*, and *One Million Snakebites*.

LOCATION

The story moves between several, very distinctive locations across modern India:

- Rom Whitaker’s house in **South India** is set in a quiet rural backwater, where no-one has seen a leopard for 30 years.
- A rocky hillside in the arid state of **Rajasthan** provides spectacular daylight viewing of wild leopards, surrounded by colourful herdsmen and their livestock.
- In the state of **Uttarakhand**, the stunningly beautiful foothills of the Himalayas form the backdrop for disturbing accounts of man-eating leopards.
- In central India, the lush and densely populated croplands of **Maharashtra** provide perfect cover for some of the world’s largest leopards.
- **Mumbai** (Bombay) is a mega-city of over 20 million people, and India’s largest metropolis. Surprisingly, it also has the highest density of wild leopards anywhere on Earth.

SPECIES NOTES

The Leopard [*Panthera pardus*]

Leopards are powerful, nocturnal, tree-climbing predators of the cat genus, *Panthera*, which also includes tigers, lions, and jaguars. Black panthers are naturally occurring melanistic variants of normal leopards. Comparatively stocky, they are built for strength rather than speed, with short legs and a very muscular neck and jaws. They are competent swimmers, and able to run in short bursts at up to 36mph. Enhanced night vision and long whiskers help them to operate under the cover of darkness.

Superbly camouflaged and notoriously stealthy, leopards are widely distributed across Africa and Eurasia. They are able to thrive in a very broad range of habitats – from deserts to rainforests, and even within large cities.

Though often described as solitary, leopards (especially related individuals) may be more sociable than we tend to think. Adults call to each other with a distinctive, saw-like vocalisation. Males stake out and defend mutually exclusive territories, which overlap with those of mature females. Litters

typically consist of two to six cubs, which are born after a three month pregnancy. As with other cats (and indeed many mammals), males will try to kill the cubs of their rivals.

Leopards possess a very strong homing instinct. If an adult is trapped and removed from its territory it will try to make its way home – even from a distance of several hundred kilometers away.

The typical lifespan for a wild leopard is between ten and fifteen years. Aside from other leopards, the main threats come from tigers and lions, which will attempt to kill leopards or their offspring if they can.

Leopards are opportunistic ambush hunters that will eat pretty much anything, from a cockroach to buffalo. Their diet often includes a wide range of small or medium-sized prey, such as frogs, civets, hares, porcupines, and monkeys. But they are extremely strong, and fully capable of tackling large ungulates like deer. Their classic technique for killing large prey is a powerful bite to the throat that severs the windpipe and major arteries. But leopards are also known to pin their victims onto their backs and chew into the chest cavity. Clawed hind legs are used to rake and shred the flanks of their prey, opening up the abdominal cavity. Leopards are also scavengers with an exceptional ability to stomach rotting meat.

In human-dominated landscapes, leopards rely heavily on untended livestock and stray dogs, which together make up a major portion of their diet.

Depending on availability of prey, leopards vary widely in size – from as little as 20 kilos to as much as 80 kilos or more. Males are typically around 30% heavier than females.

Leopards have vanished from over 50% of their former range in Asia. Owing to its shrinking range and declining population, the leopard has been listed as 'Near Threatened' on the IUCN Red List. Asian subspecies are listed under CITES Appendix 1, which bars all trade in the animal or its parts. However, according to a recent report by TRAFFIC, at least four leopards are being poached every week in India; and based on 2012 figures for seizures of skins and body parts, the death rate may be closer to one leopard a day. The state of Uttarakhand is the main source of poached leopards in India. Most of the skins and body parts smuggled out of India go to other countries in Asia, notably Burma, Laos, Vietnam, and China.