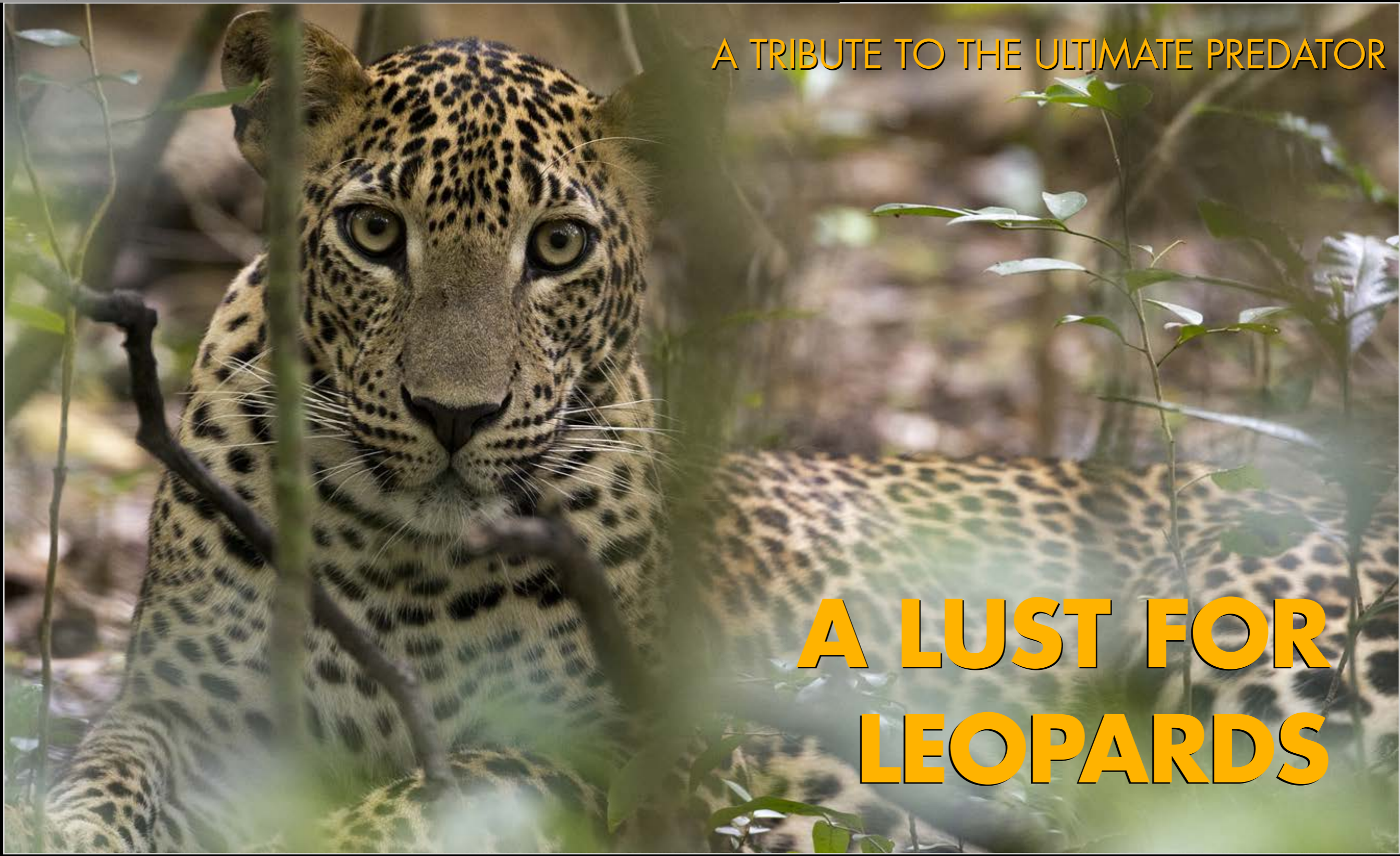


Beauty of the Beast



A TRIBUTE TO THE ULTIMATE PREDATOR

A LUST FOR LEOPARDS

Stealthy, cunning, incredibly adaptable and above all supremely elegant - this beautiful cat is always a prized subject for all wildlife photographers



Panthera pardus kotiya

Possibly the most beautiful among *Panthera pardus* seven subspecies, *kotiya* is endemic to the island of Sri Lanka, where it can be often observed and successfully photographed under optimal conditions in Yala and Wilpattu National Parks. Sri Lanka is possibly the world's best destination to encounter this stunningly beautiful predator in the wild. This is an adult female from Yala NP.

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PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI



Panthera pardus kotiya

A large, powerful male of the Sri Lankan subspecies, photographed in Wilpattu National Park.

We have a passion, a lust for leopards. To us, they are the most supremely elegant and graceful of the large cats. Lions are huge and scary; tigers are massive and majestic; but leopards are just perfect. We have encountered many in Africa, India and Sri Lanka - but always on their own terms, mostly briefly and thanks to a great dose of stubbornness and patience. Those you face on these pages are not the human-habituated "stars" of game reserves and fenced "sanctuaries": these cats are the real deal, and they do not grant audience easily. But when they do, it's an immense privilege, and a thrill - very few other animal sightings can beat that of a leopard lazily reclining on a smooth granite boulder, its golden coat glowing softly in the setting sun, its amber eyes sensuously glowing with an aristocratic, cool, cruel detachment. Why is that? Possibly because a leopard is not as huge as a lion or a tiger, and so we can relate to it more easily (even if they can be just as dangerous). Or maybe because they are so adaptable, clever, successful? Science tells us that the leopard *Panthera pardus* is one of the five "big cats" in the genus *Panthera*, a member of the family *Felidae* with a wide range in sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia. It is a big cat distinguished by its robust build and muscular but relatively shorter limbs, a broad head and a coat covered by spots arranged in rosettes.

Males stand 60–70 cm (24–28 in) at the shoulder, while females are 57–64 cm (22–25 in) tall. The head-and-body length is typically between 90 and 190 cm (35 and 75 in). While males weigh 37–90 kg (82–198 lb), females weigh 28–60 kg (62–132 lb); the maximum recorded weight for a leopard is 96.5 kilograms (213 lb). Sexually dimorphic, males are larger and heavier than females. Similar in appearance to the jaguar, but smaller and more lightly built, its fur is marked with rosettes similar to those of the jaguar, but the leopard's rosettes are smaller and more densely packed, and do not usually have central spots as the jaguar's do. Melanistic leopards are known, of course, as black panthers. Nine subspecies are currently recognised by IUCN, all listed as vulnerable on the Red List as populations are declining in large parts of their range. Leopards have the largest distribution of any wild cat, occurring widely in Africa as well as eastern and southern Asia. Within sub-Saharan Africa, the species is still numerous and even thriving in marginal habitats where other large cats have disappeared. Populations in North Africa may be extinct. Data on their distribution in Asia are not consistent: populations in southwest and central Asia are small and fragmented; in the northeast, they are critically endangered. Luckily, in the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and China, leopards are instead still



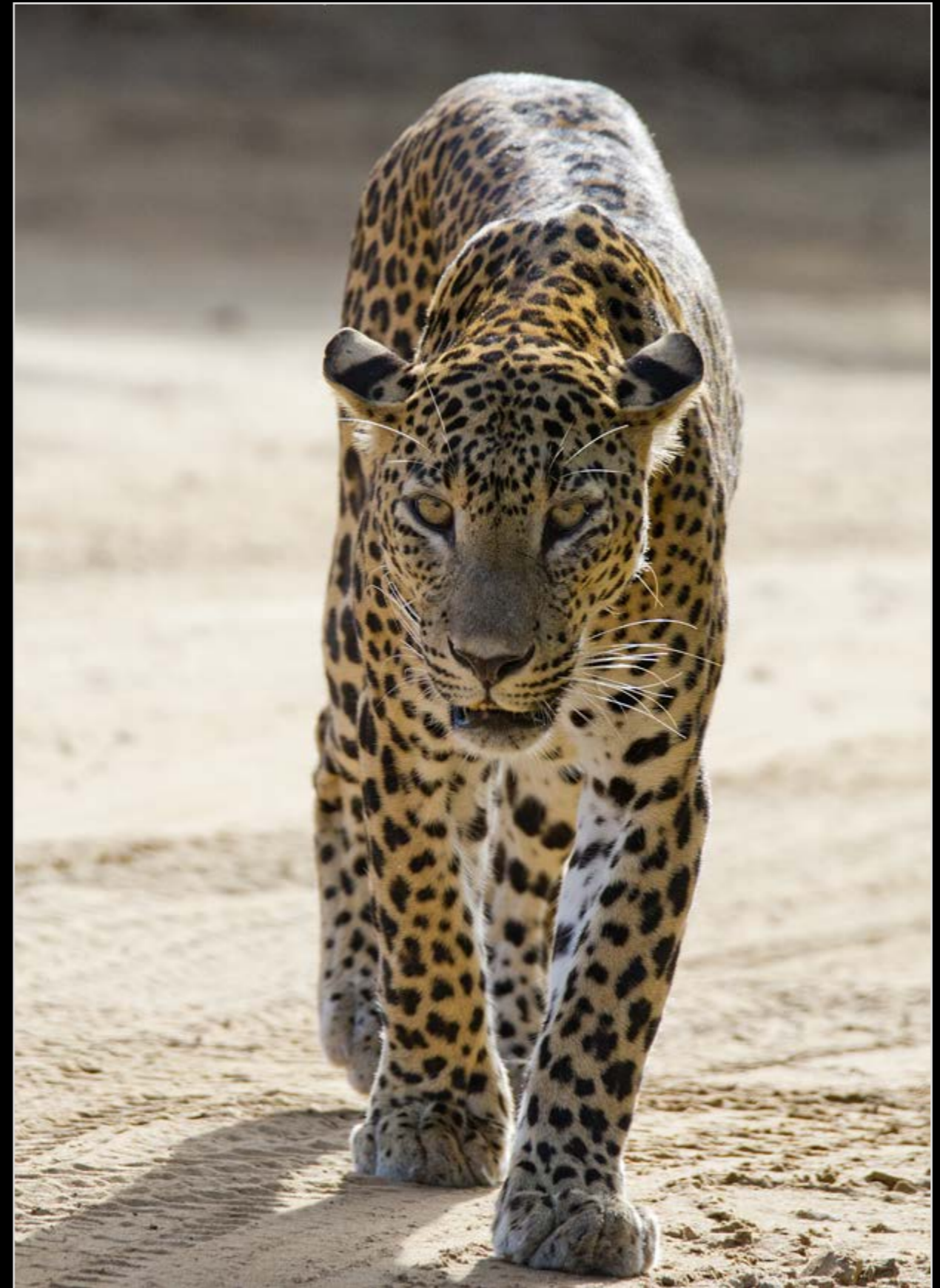
When in Yala National Park, Sri Lanka, one can occasionally admire leopards sleeping, relaxing or surveying their territory while on the enormous, smooth granite boulders which are one of the Park's most typical visual landmarks. It takes some luck - but when it happens, the results can be spectacular.

relatively abundant. Of the species as a whole, its numbers are greater than those of other *Panthera* species, all of which currently face much more worrying conservation concerns. This is because leopards are exceptionally adaptable: although associated primarily with savanna and rainforest, populations thrive anywhere in the species range where grasslands, woodlands, and riverine forests remain largely undisturbed. In the Russian Far East, they inhabit temperate forests where winter temperatures reach a low of $-25\text{ }^{\circ}\text{C}$ ($-13\text{ }^{\circ}\text{F}$). They are equally adept at surviving in some of the world's most humid rainforests and even semi-arid desert edges. Leopards in west and central Asia try to avoid deserts, areas with long-duration snow cover and areas that are near urban development; in India, leopard populations sometimes live quite close to human settlements, in semi-developed areas and even inside large and heavily populated cities such as Mumbai. Due to the leopard's superlative stealthiness, people however often remain unaware that big cats live in nearby areas. At the end of the day, the leopard's spectacular success in the wild is due to its well camouflaged fur, its opportunistic hunting behaviour, broad diet and strength to move heavy carcasses into trees, its ability both to adapt to various habitats ranging from rainforest to steppe and - if needed - to run at speeds up to 58 kilometres per hour (36 mph).



Panthera pardus pardus

A beautiful adult male of the nominate African subspecies from the Greater Kruger area, South Africa. The alert stance is due to a herd of impalas grazing nearby.

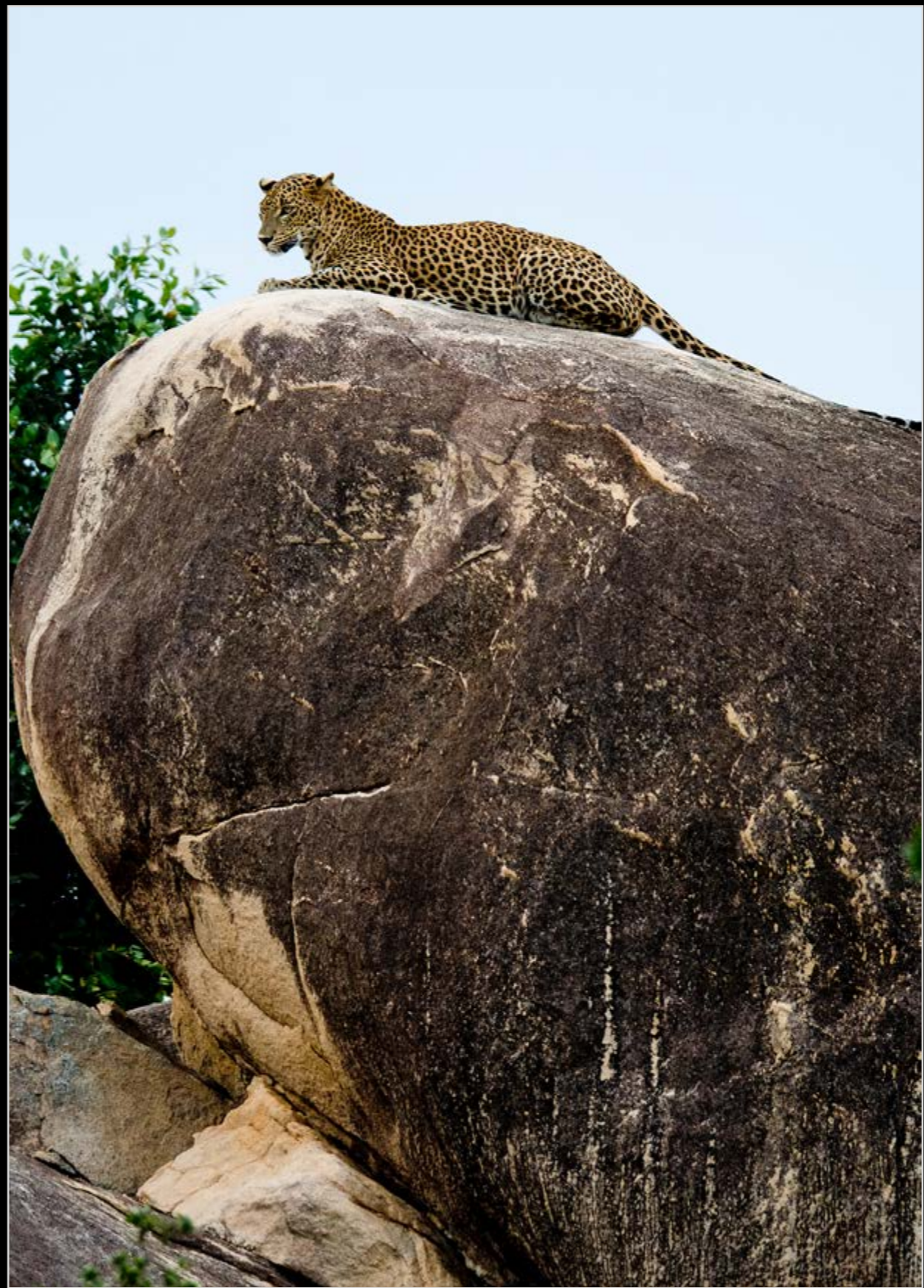


Another large *kotiya* male strides towards us and our friend and guide Mevan Piyasena along a dust trail in Wilpattu National Park, Sri Lanka.



Panthera pardus kotiya

Not all adult leopards are always necessarily sensuously graceful and elegant - this enormously powerful, battle-scarred veteran of many territorial battles, locally known as Shamu, has long reigned supreme as the ruler of its range in Yala National Park, Sri Lanka. Here it belligerently protects its wild boar prey from the photographer.



Panthera pardus kotiya

Prominent rocky outcrops and boulder-strewn slopes - both in Africa and Asia - are the favorite haunts of leopards where these stealthy predators are present. These two beautiful females were photographed - the one at left at dawn, the one at right just before sunset - on the titanic granite boulders strewn across Yala National Park, Sri Lanka.



An adult female Sri Lankan leopard - and the mother of three cubs - is spotted among the Yala shrubbery as she carries a freshly killed Spotted deer *Axis axis* fawn to her progeny waiting in the bushes. Notice that she has already partially eaten the stomach of her prey, no doubt to get back some much-needed energy after the hunt. Raising cubs is a very tough job for leopards.



Panthera pardus fusca

The Indian leopard subspecies *P. pardus fusca* is native to the Indian Subcontinent. It is widespread in India, Nepal, Bangladesh; Pakistan, Nepal and Bhutan, but it is now extinct in China. It is somewhat smaller and usually with a less vibrantly colored coat than its Sri Lankan relative. This subadult was photographed in Tadoba National Park, Maharashtra.



Panthera pardus kotiya

A rare image of an adult Sri Lankan leopard pensively contemplating the wide expanse of the Indian Ocean from its rocky throne by the beach. It is the possibility of such unique encounters and extraordinary photographic opportunities which make Yala and Wilpattu National Parks our hands-down favorite destinations for wild, non human-habituated leopard sightings.

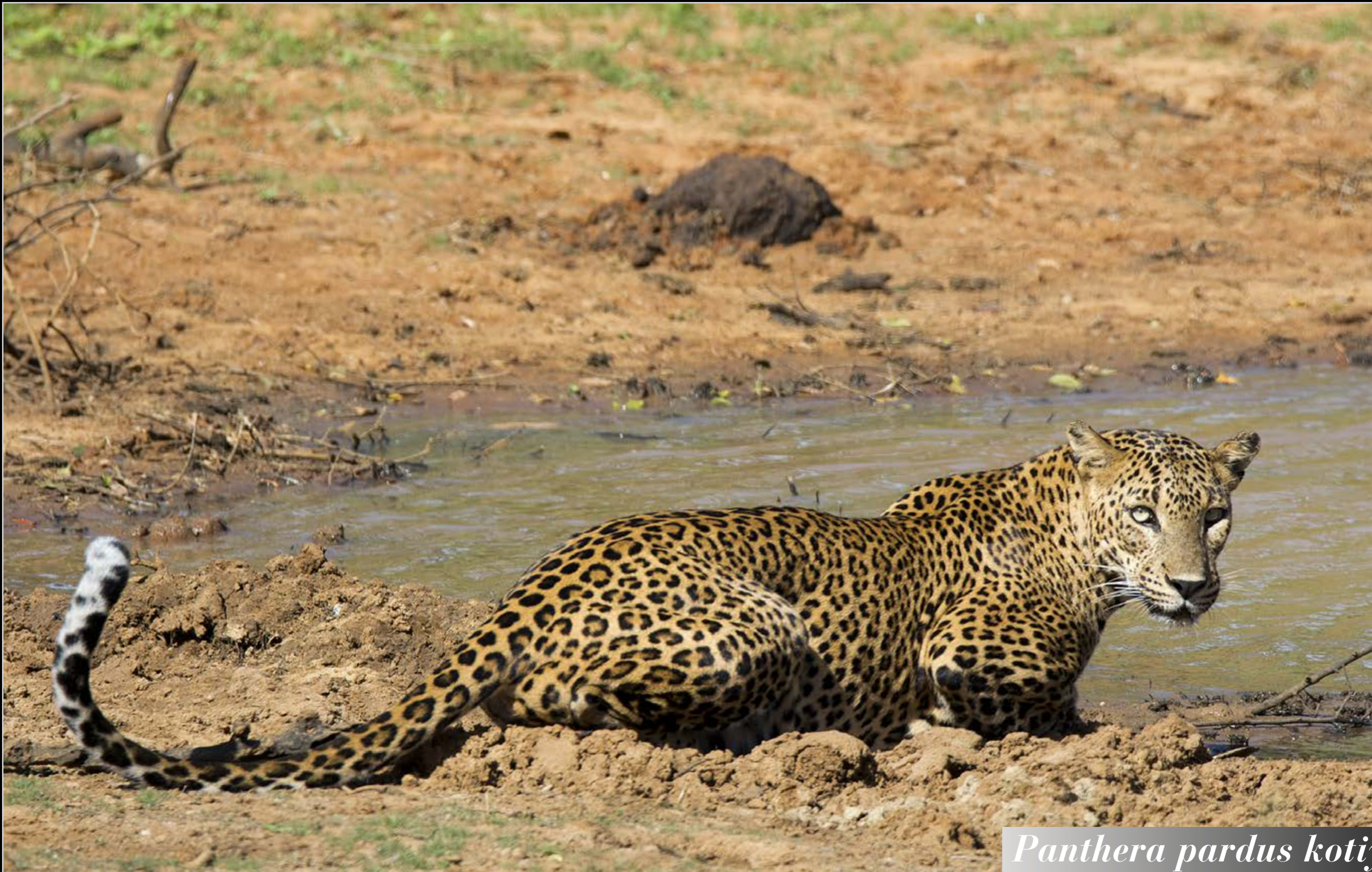


Panthera pardus kotiya

An adult male's yawn reveals the impressive canines of the leopard. These felines - unlike lions - are "clean" killers, usually subduing their prey and administering the death-bite in a matter of seconds. This is probably due to minimize the chance of being wounded by the struggling victim, as leopards hunt alone and are of a relatively small size despite being immensely powerful.



Another rare sight as an adult mother (on the left) and her two sub-adult cubs rest on a sand trail in the late afternoon golden light in Wilpattu National Park, Sri Lanka. The cubs begin to follow the mother on hunts when they are around three months old; at one year, leopard young can probably fend for themselves, but remain with the mother for 18–24 months.



Panthera pardus kotiya

Visibly annoyed by the soft clicking of the cameras while drinking from a puddle, a huge adult female interrupts her lapping to glare at us. Leopard observation often takes a lot of patience - we and our guide Mevan Piyasena had to wait for almost eight hours in the sun in Yala to finally enjoy what turned to be a brief encounter and a wonderful photo opportunity.



Leopards avoid people, but humans may occasionally be targeted as prey. Healthy leopards prefer wild prey to humans, but injured and sickly ones or those with a shortage of regular prey may resort to hunting humans and become habituated to it. In India the "Leopard of Rudraprayag" killed more than 125 people in 1926; the "Panar Leopard" killed more than 400 in 1910.



Panthera pardus kotiya

An adult male of the Sri Lankan subspecies in its prime patrols its territory in Wilpattu NP. The leopard is a carnivore that prefers medium-sized prey with a body mass ranging from 10–40 kilograms (22–88 lb), but prey as heavy as 150 kilograms (330 lb) may be hunted and successfully taken down if larger competitors such as lions or tigers are absent. Dogs are a choice prey item near villages.



Panthera pardus kotiya

Leopards tend to be generally nocturnal, but in West African, Indian and Sri Lankan forests many individuals have been observed to be largely diurnal and hunting during twilight, when their prey animals are active. Leopards are active mainly from dusk till dawn, and rest for most of the day and for some hours at night in thickets, among rocks or on tree branches.



The leopard is solitary and territorial, as are several other felids; individuals associate appreciably only in the mating season, though mothers may continue to interact with their offspring even after weaning. Mothers have been observed sharing kills with their offspring when they can not obtain any meal. At left, a young individual marks its territory.



Leopards have been observed walking 1–25 kilometres (0.62–15.53 miles) across their range at night; they may even wander up to 75 kilometres (47 miles) if disturbed.

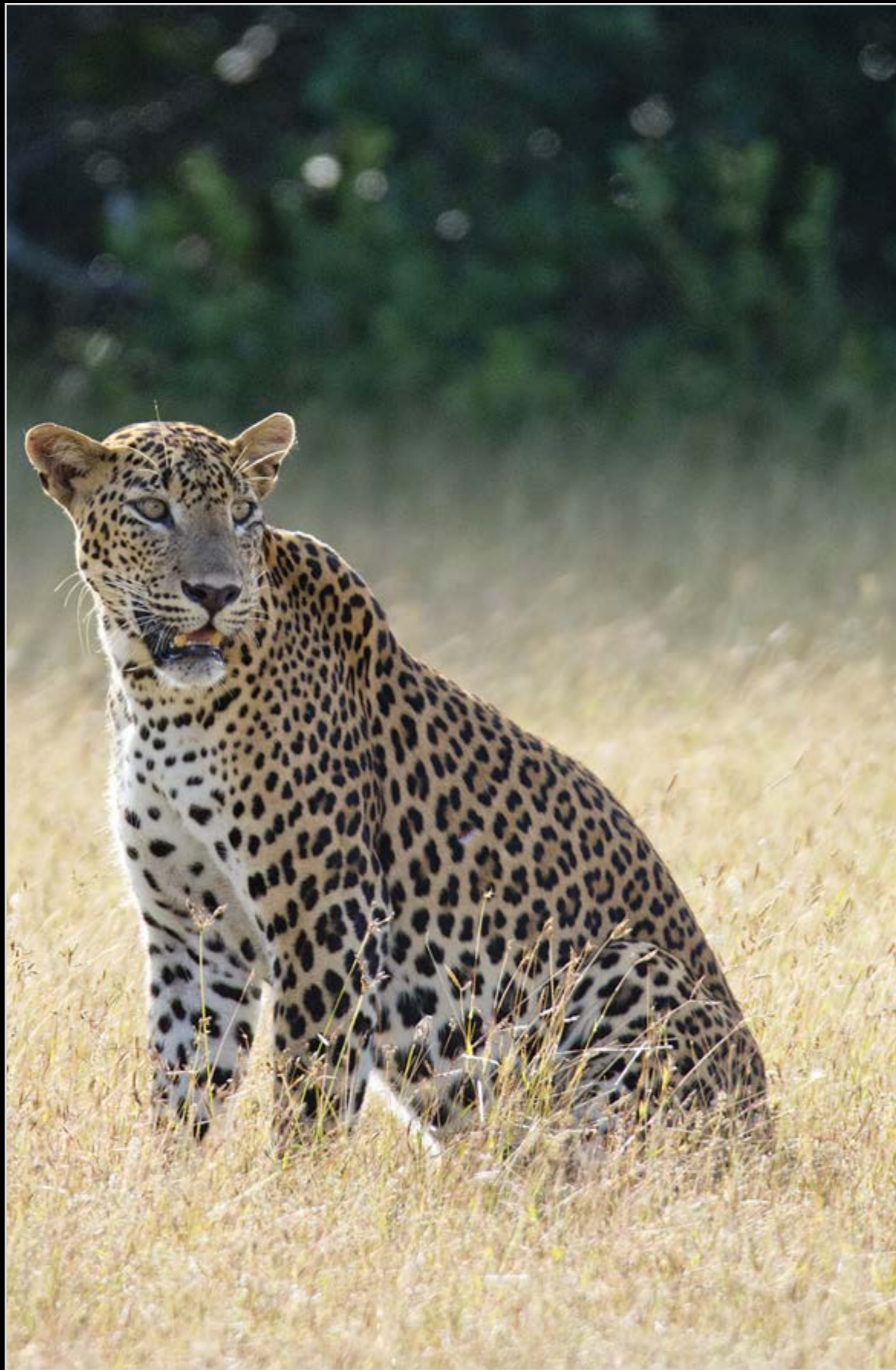


The leopard depends on its acute hearing and vision for hunting. Taking advantage of the superb camouflage offered by its spotted coat, it will stalk the prey and approach as close as possible (within 5 metres) to the target, to finally pounce on it and kill it by suffocation. Small prey are killed with a bite on the back of the neck, while larger animals are held strongly by the neck and strangled.



Panthera pardus pardus

The African *P. pardus pardus* is the most widespread subspecies of the leopards: we met this magnificent male at dawn, while on safari in the Greater Kruger, South Africa. A little-known fact is that the typical, unspotted rosettes of the leopard coat are circular in eastern African populations, but tend to be squarish in southern Africa and larger in Asian populations.



Pale yellow to yellowish brown or golden (except for the melanistic forms), the coat is spotted and rosetted; spots fade on the white underbelly and the insides and lower parts of the legs. Rosettes are most prominent on the back, flanks and hindquarters, and their pattern is unique to each individual. The white-tipped tail, 60–100 centimetres (24–39 in) long, white underneath, displays rosettes except toward the end, where the spots form incomplete bands.



Panthera pardus pardus

A beautiful African leopard female walks across a gravel road in the early morning light of Kruger NP, South Africa. Sexually dimorphic, leopard males are larger and heavier than females, with a noticeably bigger and stronger head. Males weigh 37–90 kg (82–198 lb), females weigh 28–60 kg (62–132 lb), and the maximum recorded weight for a leopard is 96.5 kilograms (213 lb).



Panthera pardus kotiya

A young Sri Lankan sub-adult - clearly in a playful mood - looks quizzically at a butterfly flying above. Leopard gestation lasts for 90 to 105 days and cubs are usually born in a litter of 2-4, with a mortality estimated at 41-50% during the first year of life; the average typical life span of a leopard in the wild is between 12 and 17 years.