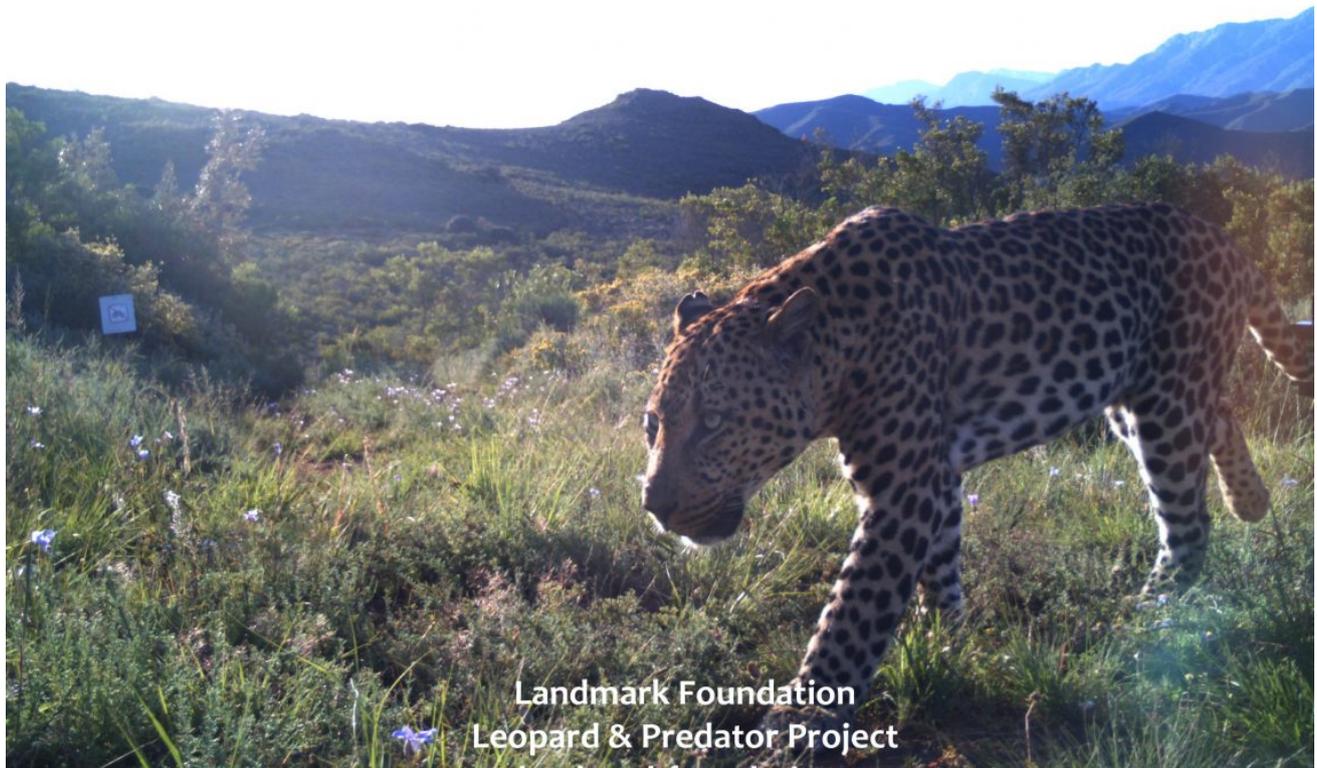


# Oryx

## Leopards in the backyard

By Carolyn H. Devens, 12th October 2019

When people think of leopards they usually imagine a spotted cat up in a tree feasting on its freshly killed prey. They think of the once in a lifetime sighting of the elusive cat on safari in a big National Park or Private Game Reserve. They think of a solitary cat almost as big as a lion weighing up to 90 kg. Well, if you live in the southern part of the Western and Eastern Capes in South Africa, you might instead think about the region's largest free-roaming predator species that is no bigger than your family's beloved dog. These cats are not always celebrated and coveted by residents, as they are by tourists on the other side of the country in Kruger National Park. Lots of people that live in leopard habitat in the Cape have no idea that leopards are even there. This is just how the leopards like it!



Camera trap images courtesy of the Landmark Foundation.

The other side to the story is that in this region these cats are hated and vilified by landowners whose livelihoods come from raising livestock, or game species such as African buffalo, oryx,

wildebeest, springbok and various other antelope species. On these properties, leopards are not welcome and will often be killed if they are caught snooping around. Fences and boundaries are not a guaranteed way to keep leopards in, nor are they a foolproof method to keep them out.



Camera trap images courtesy of the Landmark Foundation.

As leopard habitat increasingly disappears to make way for expanding private land ownership focused on agriculture and livestock, the leopard population and individual leopard's home ranges are pushed further into the surrounding mountainous areas. The problem is that leopards do not always stay where it is safe, their large home ranges often taking them through hostile areas. The Western and Eastern Capes do have some wonderful Nature Reserves and Protected Areas, but these pockets of leopard-friendly habitat are often not connected or nearby, creating an extremely fragmented landscape that can be treacherous to travel.



Leopard Friendly Farm” signs are given to farmers and landowners that advocate for or have participated in Landmark Foundation’s camera trap surveys. These landowners pledge to do no harm to resident leopards on their land or in their neighborhood and greatly help Landmark to spread the message of coexistence and awareness.

We conducted extensive camera trapping across the Western Cape to determine a baseline estimate of the region’s leopard population. Coexistence between people and leopards is not going to become any easier throughout this highly transformed landscape so it is crucial to understand how the current leopard population is faring. This knowledge can influence conservation efforts and appropriate land management practices.



Camera trap images courtesy of the Landmark Foundation.

In addition to estimating the leopard population, we are currently investigating how biotic, abiotic and anthropogenic landscape features influence where these leopard occur, using collar data. Our ultimate goal is to understand how the landscape influences the size of the population, the presence and home range use of individual leopards, and how attitudes of landowners and residents living amongst leopard habitat affect the coexistence and persistence of the species in this region. This research is a small piece of a complicated puzzle to understand the big picture about the relationship between leopards and their remaining habitat in the Cape, in the hopes of conserving the region's last remaining free roaming big cat.

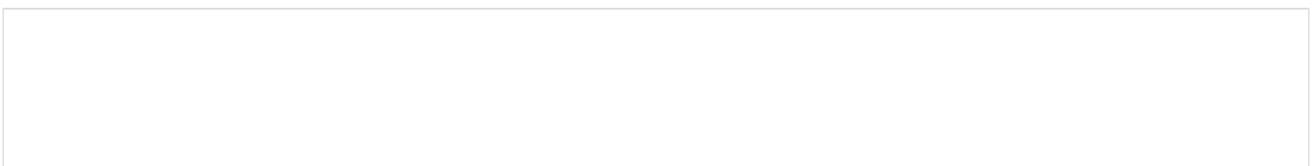


This leopard was collared within the Langeberg survey region as part of the Landmark Foundation's research and conflict mitigation efforts, but sadly this male cat was killed on a nearby farm only a month later.

Check out some of Landmark Foundation's camera trap footage:

<https://www.oryxthejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/Oryx-video-LR.mp4>

The article [Estimating leopard density across the highly modified human dominated landscape of the Western Cape, South Africa](#) is available in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.





## Carolyn H. Devens

Carolyn H. Devens is a PhD student at the University of Pretoria in South Africa. She is a conservation ecologist investigating the impact of landscape heterogeneity, environmental and anthropogenic factors and local attitudes on leopard spatial ecology and coexistence in southern South Africa.