

The Leopard



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Photograph:South African Tourism

The most secretive and elusive of the large carnivores, **the leopard** is also the shrewdest. Pound for pound, it is the strongest climber of the larger cats and is capable of killing prey far larger than itself. One of the Big 5 Of South Africa.

Leopards are excellent hunters.

Physically, the animal has a well-toned body. Its limbs are sturdy and powerful. They are designed to run, climb, and jump with both grace and ease.

Instinctively, it prefers to stalk its prey. As its tawny, rosette-patterned fur coat blends in quite well with its surroundings, this ruthless killer is able to keep a low profile when it is on a hunting expedition. At the moment that its target least expects it, the leopard emerges from its hideout and bolts toward the victim. If the intended reacts fast enough, it still has a chance to survive. Otherwise, it will witness its own death in the blink of eye.

The colouring of the leopard varies from white to bright golden brown, spotted with black spots and rosettes. The rosettes consist of groups of 5 to 6 spots arranged in a tight ring. The tail is longer than half the body length measured from head to tail. This fierce animal has small round ears and long whiskers growing from dark spots on the upper lip. The size of the leopard varies considerably. The leopard differs from the cheetah in having shorter legs, and rosette-like spots and is without the cheetah's black "tear" marks from eye to mouth.

Name: Panthera Pardus

Size: The leopard ranges in size from 1 to almost 2 metres long, and weighs between 30 - 70 kg. Females are typically around two-thirds the size of males.

Habitat: Bush and riverine forests. Usually in or near thickets on mountain sides or along streams and rivers. Leopards are mainly nocturnal animals but are also seen during the day, especially in the early mornings and late afternoons. They usually forage alone except in the mating season.

Leopards are shy, cunning and dangerous, especially when wounded. Leopards are very good tree climbers and can pull large prey up a tree to protect it from other predators or scavengers in the vicinity. They return later to feed again. Leopards still occur outside conservation areas.

Socialisation: Leopards are basically solitary and go out of their way to avoid one another. Each animal has a home range that overlaps with its neighbors; the male's range is much larger and generally overlaps with those of several females. A leopard usually does not tolerate intrusion into its own range except to mate. Unexpected encounters between leopards can lead to fights.

Diet: Carnivorous; Small animals and medium size antelope.

Reproduction: Leopard breed throughout the year. The gestation period is 3 months. Number of young is 2 to 3 although more have been recorded.

Life Expectancy: 20 years.

Predators: Humans

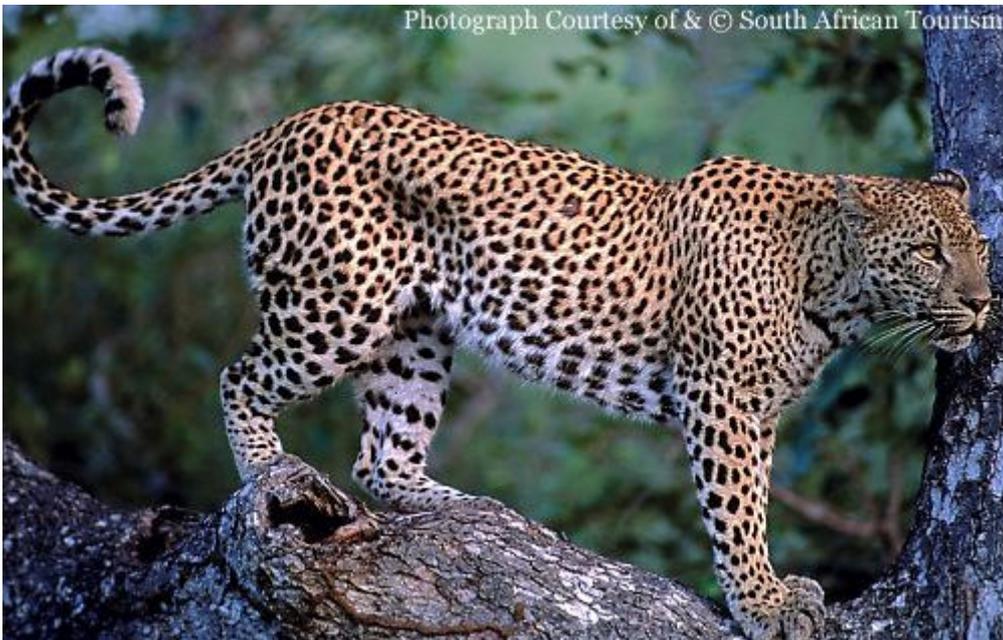
Both lions and hyenas will take away a leopard's kill if they can. To prevent this leopards store their larger kills in trees where they can feed on them in relative safety.



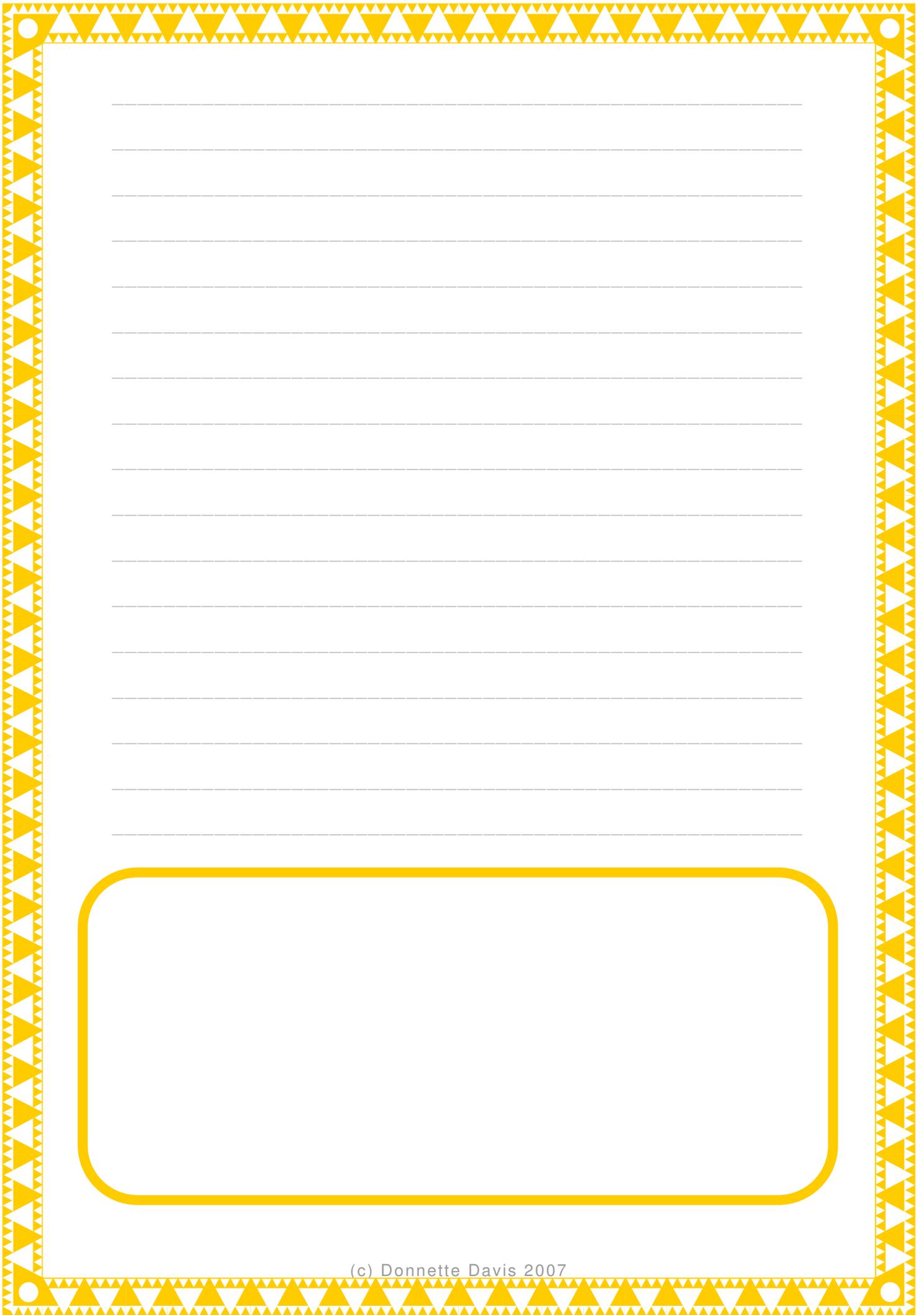
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