

## TOUCHED BY A LEOPARD

*We are staying at Urikaruus, a most enviable position in the park. It has become so difficult to get a booking at this wilderness camp that we only have 2 nights here, and we feel quite lucky to have snagged one of the 4 accommodations in this camp. The other 3 couples in camp are Germans. I wonder how they have gotten so good at booking Urikaruus. It is something that must be done thirteen months in advance, and it has become quite competitive.*

*The cottages are elevated on telephone poles, and they are all connected by a walkway, so we can move freely above the ground while viewing the waterhole in front of the cottages. Otherwise, we are not allowed to be out and about, as this is an unfenced camp.*



*The earliest we can leave is 6 a.m., and this morning we are first to depart. It is 18°C, and the wind has abated significantly. We are obviously getting into the groove, as we both awoke at 4:50, raring to go. The moon is still up as we leave camp, and it feels chilly after the blustery night. Still wearing shorts, however, so it is not fall yet! We think it might be a good morning for cats, as the wind has died down, and surely a cat would need to sit in the sun to warm a bit this morning.*

*At 6:28, Bob spots a leopard up on the ridge on his side of the car. We are a few K south of Rooibrak waterhole when he sees it, and we are sure it is the cat we saw day before yesterday. Amazingly, it sits on the ridge for only a few seconds, and then it comes directly to us, as if mesmerized by our vehicle. It is like we are a magnet pulling it straight to us. Its eyes never leave the car as it strides down the hill, the rising sun glinting in its eyes. As it gets closer, we can tell this is not the same cat we have seen but a much smaller and younger cat, still a large cub. We quickly scan the surroundings to see if its mother is anywhere near, as it looks a bit too*

*young to be off on its own. It comes so close to the bonnet of the car that we are positive it is about to leap up onto it*



*Bob has to raise his window several times, as it is just too close to tolerate the idea of a wild leopard that near. For the record, this is the first time ever in all our encounters with leopard that we have felt the need to put a window up. They are so elusive and shy that we feel lucky if we get a few snaps off before they disappear. We have never had a leopard even acknowledge the vehicle. Normally a leopard totally ignores a car and doesn't give it even so much as a glance. But not this youngster! It seems completely curious about this object that it has discovered sitting in the track.*

*For at least 20 minutes, the cat investigates our entire car, including underneath it. Often we don't know where it is, only to have it appear on the other side, or behind at our bumper. At one point, it comes up to Bob's window (by now rolled up) and peers up into his face as if to say, "Couldn't I come inside?" There is a strong urge to reach out and scratch its head, but of course we resist, as this IS a wild leopard.*



*As Bob grabs the wide angle lens, the only one that will focus closely enough to use, the leopard stands on its hind paws for just a second and reaches up to pat its paw gently against the back of our side mirror. Perhaps it can see its reflection in the shiny surface. Bob is saying, "I can't believe this...my face is just inches away from a LEOPARD!" He is chuckling so much that it is hard for him to focus the camera.*



*At last, curiosity is sated, and the cat moves away from us, across the track, and into the river bed just as the first rays of sun are striking it. We watch as it walks to and fro in the sand, sniffing and checking things out.*



*Just about this time, a vehicle approaches us from the south. We move over to let them go past and point out the leopard to them, as by now it is no longer in the complete open of the dry river bed but is cruising along the edge of the brush on the opposite side. By the time we turn the vehicle around and move back to the north, it has disappeared, not to be seen again. We drive on north, stopping everyone we meet to tell them to be on the lookout for the friendly little leopard that is between Rooibrak and Montrose waterholes. A couple we meet tells us, "The universe is smiling on you today." We couldn't agree more. What on earth did we ever do to deserve this?*

*The natural high that is caused by an encounter like this is indescribable. I just keep replaying the scene over and over in my head, thinking and wondering, "Did we actually see this? Could it really have happened?" One who has never experienced something like this probably doesn't understand what it means to people like Bob and me who are such nuts over wild things. We absolutely should break out the champagne tonight!*

*Word spreads quickly in the rest camps, and this remarkable encounter makes us "famous" in the park as the people who were touched by a leopard and had the pictures to prove it.*