

First Pallas's Cat Photo-trapped in Khojir National Park, Iran

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As part of a camera-trapping survey for the identification of felid species in Khojir National Park, Iran, a manul or Pallas's cat *Otocolobus manul* was photographed on 6 February 2008 for the first time. There being only a few reports of this secretive cat in Iran, this new locality is very interesting with regard to its national range.

The Pallas's cat is among the least known of the eight species of wild cats surviving nowadays in Iran. Previously the Pallas's cat has been reported from north-eastern Iran and there have been a few sporadic records from central and north-western parts of the country. Iran is the western limit of the global range of the Pallas's cat which is believed to be a Central Asian species.

This is the first camera-trap photograph of this species in Iran and the first record from Tehran Province in the Alborz Mountains. Two photographs of this cat were taken on the Sarv'kouh mountain (35°38'01'' N / 51° 42'42'' E) in Khojir National Park, after 15 days of operation of two camera-trap units. One photo (Fig. 1) was taken on a day after a heavy snowfall in the area which has an elevation range of 1300-2100 m. Khojir National Park (Fig. 2) is part of a larger reserve on the southern slopes of the Alborz Mountains which has been protected as a royal game sanctuary for more than two centuries and is known to be the oldest protected area in Iran. During the last 30 years two parts of this area have been designated as national parks (Khojir and Sorkheh Hesar) located to the east of the capital, Tehran. The Pallas's cat has never been recorded before in Khojir National Park or even in the central Alborz Mountains.

Pallas's cats are rare in Iran and in recent years there has been little evidence of the presence there of this cat. As in many Pallas's cat habitats around the world, the distribution range of this species in Iran overlaps with that of the Afghan pika *Ochotona rufescens* or large communities of rodents, although

there is no information on the presence of pikas in Khojir. Other possible prey is the chukar partridge *Alectoris chukar* which could be easily caught in heavy winter snow. Pallas's cats have been reported feeding on chukars in other parts of the Middle East (for instance, in Pakistan).

Most of the reports of the Pallas's cat in Iran are of dead or live-captured animals and come from shepherds in the high-altitude steppes of the country. Very little is known about this cat in Iran including basic information on its distribution range, diet, reproduction and social behavior. Killing by shepherds' dogs is known to be a potential threat to this species in the country, but most of the time the animals killed remain unreported and unidentified.

This project has been supported by the Tehran office of the Department of Environment and the Plan for the Land Society since 2005. Invaluable data has been gathered from the felids of this reserve, including the presence of the Persian leopard *Panthera pardus saxicolor* and the Wild cat *Felis sylvestris*. Identifying the areas where Pallas's cats



Fig. 1. Manul or Pallas's cat photographed in Khojir National Park, Iran (Photo Mehdi Chalani/Plan for the Land Society)

live and how they are related to human-dominated landscapes and natural habitats in this highly fragmented reserve is believed to be the next step that needs further technical and financial support from international organizations. Indeed more effort is needed to collate all the existing information on the presence of the Pallas's cat in Iran and to start appropriate surveys in its habitats.

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Fig. 2. A typical landscape of Khojir National Park during early spring (Photo H. Moshiri)