

When night falls in Mumbai (Steve Winter)

Leopards are the most adaptable of the big cats. They live in semi-deserts as well as in savannahs and rainforests. They have also taken to the high mountains of the Himalayas as snow leopards. Unlike lions, tigers, or jaguars, they have also managed to exist permanently and near humans: Stealthily, quietly, and silently.

In Mumbai, the leopards can be found during the day, to the north in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park. It is a 104-square-kilometre protected area that looks like a green pearl surrounded by the metropolis. At night, however, leopards sneak unnoticed into the metropolis and walk through alleys and sniff in gardens. Due to the different spotting of the leopards, camera traps could count 41 jaguars living among the 24 million people. This is a unique scenario in the world.

Encounters between predatory cats and humans are extremely rare, because the leopards' target is not humans, but the street dogs, which are found there in large numbers. About 95,000 strays live in the metropolis, which is mainly due to the significant rubbish problem. It was only through an examination of the faeces that it was possible to prove that Mumbai's leopards feed predominantly on dogs and to prove this theory.

This suggested that there was no food left in the forest, but hares, various species of monkeys and deer still live there.

The real reason for going there is that it is much harder to catch prey in the forest. In the wilderness, it takes them many attempts to catch a hare or deer, as these are hard-wired to flee quickly from the attacker. The dogs, however, sleep curled up on the asphalt at night, so that before they can startle and flee, they have already become prey.

The leopards' visits also help the people of Mumbai indirectly. A bite from a dog infected with rabies kills around 20,000 people in India every year. While in the rest of the city there are up to 680 street dogs per square kilometre, around the national park there are only about 17. According to an Australian study, the leopards eat about 1,500 strays every year, which prevents 1,000 dog bites and up to 90 possible rabies infections.

Not only do humans and leopards coexist peacefully, but by being so close to humans they reduce the number of people infected with rabies.

Alina Konrads (Q2)

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