

Conservation news

New IUCN Species Survival Commission Parasite Specialist Group launched in 2023

In January 2023, a Parasite Specialist Group was created within the IUCN Species Survival Commission. This international group of researchers and practitioners will work to assess the conservation status of parasite biodiversity globally, develop recovery plans and best-practice protocols for parasite conservation, build networks and partnerships for parasite conservation, and communicate the intrinsic and functional importance of parasite species in ecosystems.

The Parasite Specialist Group faces a great challenge. Although approximately half of all animal species are parasitic during at least one life stage, few parasitic species have been assessed for the IUCN Red List or targeted for conservation efforts. Rather than considering all 15 hyperdiverse phyla of understudied and underprotected animal parasites, the Parasite Specialist Group will focus on a subset of parasite biodiversity: metazoan parasites that use vertebrate hosts. This group includes parasitic worms (Cestoda, Trematoda, Acanthocephala, Nematoda), insects (e.g. Phthiraptera, Siphonaptera, Hippoboscoidea, Oestridae, Polyctenidae, Cimicidae) and arachnids (e.g. Ixodida, Spinturnicidae, Trombiculidae). By 2025, the Parasite Specialist Group aims to have assessed the conservation status of at least one representative species of each taxonomic group.

Just as habitat conservation is critical for the conservation of free-living species, host conservation is critical for parasite conservation. Therefore, the Parasite Specialist Groups is seeking new partnerships with vertebrate conservation groups interested in finding ways to conserve parasites along with host species. For example, ex situ vertebrate conservation programmes have resulted in the extinction of some rare parasite species (e.g. the condor louse *Colpocephalum californici*), but they have also sustained some rare and endemic parasite species along with their threatened hosts (e.g. the chewing louse *Ardeicola nippon* on the crested ibis *Nipponia nippon*). An immediate priority for the new Parasite Specialist Group is to develop best practice guidelines for ex situ parasite conservation and work to with interested partners to begin new parasite co-conservation programmes.

The Parasite Specialist Group invites researchers and practitioners in the fields of parasitology, ecology, veterinary medicine and conservation to reach out with questions, requests for support or ideas for new collaborations.

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Recent illegal killing of Critically Endangered Arabian leopards in Hawf, Yemen

The Arabian leopard *Panthera pardus nimr* is Critically Endangered and endemic to the Arabian Peninsula. Once widespread across the mountainous areas of the region, it now occurs only in small and fragmented populations in Oman, Yemen and possibly Saudi Arabia, although there have been no confirmed records in the latter country since 2014. The Oman population, although small (c. 50 individuals), is considered stable, but there is little accurate information on the status of leopards in Yemen. The illegal killing of leopards continues in some areas in the south and south-east of the country, with reports since 2021 from Lawdar in Abyan, north of Lahij and Ad Dali. All are areas with ongoing civil conflict.

The leopard also occurs in the mountains of Hawf in eastern Yemen, close to the international border with Oman and outside the conflict zone. Following the report of two leopards killed in Hawf in 2014 there were no further reports until recently. Photographs posted on social media showed one animal killed in November 2022 and one in January 2023. Both killings were apparently in response to livestock depredation.

Persecution of leopards in response to actual or perceived livestock predation is one of the major causes of the local extinction of this subspecies from most of its former



An Arabian leopard *Panthera pardus nimr* caught on a camera trap in Dhofar, southern Oman (photo: Hadi Al Hikmani).