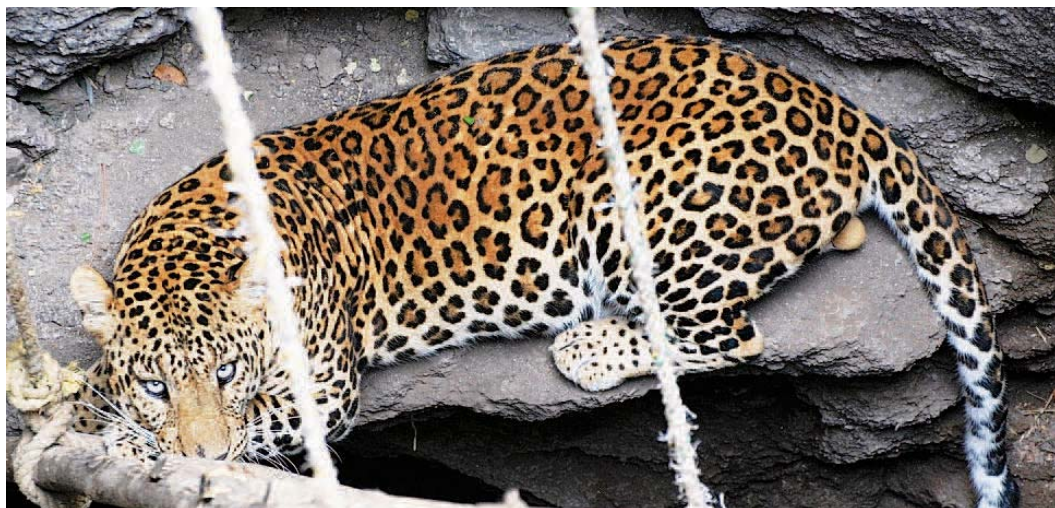


MumbaiMirror

TEMPERATURE MAX 31 | MIN 24 | HUMIDITY 92%  FORECAST HEAVY RAIN IN SOME AREAS | SUNRISE 0606 HRS | SUNSET 1920 HRS | SENSEX 17937.20 ↑ | NIFTY 5,383 ↑ | GOLD 18700 ↑ | SILVER 29050 ↓

WATCHING CAT WALK

A pug-by-pug account of a leopard's thrilling 120-km trek from Nashik to Mumbai before he disappeared mysteriously



Manoj Bidkar and Siddharth Gadkari
feedback@indiatimes.com

Even as you read this, experts are busy unravelling the mystery of a six-year-old male leopard who is probably marking his territory, sniffing the monsoon air for prey in the Sanjay Gandhi National Park. Ajoba, which means grandfather in Marathi, has

enthralled wildlife experts and arm chair enthusiasts with his long trek from Nashik to Mumbai. Fitted with a radio collar, the adult male leopard provided invaluable insights into the tenuous relationship between man and animal before disappearing from the radar, as if by design. Until then, if you tuned into the radio at 152 megahertz, you could hear the cat's

footsteps as it made its way through the ghats. The thrilling pug-by-pug account of Ajoba's 78-day, 120-km journey is a first-of-its-kind endeavour to track a leopard's movements in Maharashtra.

It began with Ajoba straying into the thickly populated areas in villages near the forests of Ahmednagar district in April 2009.

TURN TO PAGE 2 >>

IS SHE FOR REAL?



56-YR-OLD DEFIES TIME, AND GRAVITY IN HER NEW PORTFOLIO FOR FILMFARE P26»



150 YEARS OF HERITAGE

Accredited to:

- International Baccalaureate
- UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE International Examinations

ADMISSIONS OPEN

FOR GRADES IV-VII (ICSE), VIII-X (IGCSE) & XI (IB)
FULLY RESIDENTIAL

Please contact the admissions office at the school.
Admission Forms Available: All Days (9 AM to 5 PM)
Local Lonavala students are welcome as Day Boarders (Classes IV to VII)

The Cathedral Vidya School, Lonavala

(An Affiliate of The Cathedral & John Connon School, Mumbai)
Village: Shilatlne, P.O.: Karla, Taluk: Maval, Distt. Pune, Lonavala-410405, INDIA (Off Old Mumbai Pune Highway NH-4)



Information is available on :
www.cathedral-lonavala.org
or Call us on :
+91 9689751992, 9923796467
9158025151, 9272461190
+91 2114 282113 / 282693
Email: admissions@cathedral-lonavala.org STUDIES MAKETH FAMOUS



THERE ARE 24 LEOPARDS IN CAPTIVITY AT SGNP

BETWEEN 2001-07, LEOPARDS HAVE KILLED 57 PEOPLE

MumbaiMirror 2
TUESDAY, JULY 13, 2010
www.mumbaimirror.com/city
mirrorfeedback@indiatimes.com

78 days of cat and mouse game

» PAGE 1

Ajoba had come to Takli Dhokeshwar village in search of prey such as dogs, pigs and goats, and accidentally fell into a well. He was rescued by Forest Department officers who fitted him with a radio collar to track his movements.

IN AJOBA'S FOOTSTEPS

In the first week of May, Ajoba, fitted with the tracking device was released at Malshej Ghat, 80 km from where he had been found trapped in a well. Seven days later experts began to worry as readings showed the leopard was wandering in the forested Malshej Ghat area. In a couple of days however, Ajoba began to trek up from the foothills towards the hilly Ratangarh area.

On the third week, the team nearly lost sleep as it lost contact with Ajoba. Soon it emerged Ajoba was crossing the busy Mumbai-Agra Highway at a point not far from the Tanja Abhay Forest, straying dangerously close to habitation.

Nineteen days later, Ajoba, who seemed to have a flair for drama, gave

a few more nail-biting moments to his trackers as he crossed the rail tracks one km from Kasara station before entering the Tanja Abhay Forest, west of Kasara. The next day, on May 20, the leopard veered closed to the Wada village near Dahanu in Thane district.

The team watching over Ajoba panicked as the leopard, as if drawn to humans, walked right into the Vasai industrial area in Thane. The tense

📍 We lost Ajoba after 633 readings. It could be due to a malfunction in the collar, or it may have been damaged during the cat's movements through water bodies

VIDYA ATHREYA
WILDLIFE SCIENTIST TRACKING AJOBA

moments continued as Ajoba got close to the city. On the fifth week since he started walking, Ajoba reached the forests of Nagla Block in SGNP. For weeks, Ajoba, fascinated with the Nagla Block roamed the area, leaving his pugmarks all over the place. Though he crossed the Ulhas river to check out the other forest areas, he returned to the block which obviously felt like home. Three weeks in the Nagla Block Ajoba mysteriously broke free from the tracking device. The collar began to malfunction, no more readings were recorded. No one has heard Ajoba's footsteps on the radio after that.

BIG CAT DIARY

Vidya Athreya (43), a wildlife scientist and Observer with the National Centre for Science, has been tracking Ajoba. He said, "I took up Ajoba's case on referral from the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, which is doing a project on leopard-human conflict in collaboration with the Norwegian government. I had to apply for permission to the State and Central wildlife authorities, which came through promptly."

Explaining Ajoba's movements, Athreya said the radio collar transmits the big cat's location around eight times per day on an average. "Since it is a heavily forested area through which Ajoba travelled, radio signal is not always available. The radio collar is fitted with a chip that transmits locational data to a Norwegian satellite, which passes it on to its terrestrial server. We access the server using a password to collect information on Ajoba's movements. The collar falls off usually after 5,000 readings. However, we lost Ajoba after 633 readings. It could be due to a malfunction in the collar, or it may have been damaged during the cat's movements through water bodies."



Ajoba after being rescued from the well, was fitted with a tracking device by wildlife scientists and voluntary workers



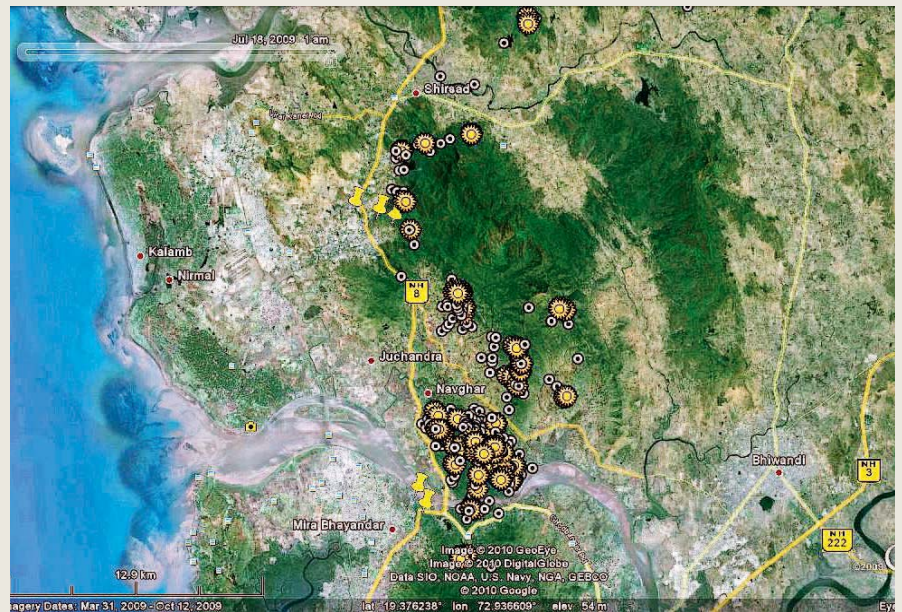
The radio collar that was fitted on the leopard

EXPERTSPEAK

LEOPARDS USUALLY don't attack humans. They stray into human-populated areas in search of easy prey, such as pigs, goats and dogs as well. They prefer to take cover in sugarcane farms in the region during daytime. Villagers often spot leopards at watering holes and river banks, but unless they provoke the animal, they are safe.



MAPPING PUG MARKS



Satellite image of the Western Ghats showing Ajoba's movements as he began his trek from Malshej Ghat area via Thane, towards Sanjay Gandhi National Park. Ajoba finally settled down in Nagla Block before the team tracking him lost all signals