

Extremely Rare Big Cat Captured, Released

What's believed to be a Far Eastern Leopard was found in southern Russia.

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A team of scientists recently captured and released what's believed to be the rarest big cat on Earth — a Far Eastern leopard — according to a wildlife conservation organization.

The New York-based Wildlife Conservation Society announced Nov. 14 that a rare Far Eastern leopard was found in the remote forests of southeastern Russia. The animal is so scarce that only about 30 are believed to be in the wild.

The team, led by biologists from the WCS caught, analyzed and released the 100-pound male in a snare last week while studying Siberian tigers about 20 miles from the Chinese border.

Before the leopard was released, a team of scientists from WCS, the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of Biology and Soils, and the National Cancer Institute's Laboratory of Genomic Diversity conducted a host of medical evaluations.

The genetic analyses are to be used to determine whether leopards and tigers suffer from the effects of inbreeding by closely related individuals, a common problem in small wildlife populations.

Among the scientists' main concerns is whether Far Eastern leopards, also known as Amur leopards, can continue to sustain their tiny, isolated population, or whether disease and inbreeding could eventually wipe out the cats.

"This capture represents a milestone in our cooperative efforts to save the Far Eastern leopard and Siberian tiger from extinction," Dale Miquelle, project director of the Wildlife Conservation Society's Russia program, said in a statement.

With the information gained from these animals, and others to come, we will be in a much better position to determine appropriate conservation actions."