

Watching the cat walk

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



Radio collar fitted on the leopard

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

VIDYA ATHREYA
WILDLIFE SCIENTIST TRACKING AJOBA

Ajoba was fitted with a radio collar, a tracking device, by wildlife experts after he was rescued from a well in April this year

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IN PUNE

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 (SGNP) in Mumbai. Ajoba, which means grandfather in Marathi, has enthralled wildlife experts and armchair enthusiasts with his long trek from Nashik district in northern Maharashtra to Mumbai. Fitted with a radio collar, Ajoba provided invaluable insights into the delicate relationship between man and animal before disappearing from the radar.

The thrilling pug-by-pug account of Ajoba's 78-day journey is a first-of-its-kind endeavour in Maharashtra to track a leopard's movements. It began in April 2009 with Ajoba straying into villages near the forests in Ahmednagar district. Ajoba had entered Takli Dhokeshwar village in search of prey, such as dogs, pigs and goats, but accidentally fell into a well. He was rescued by Forest Department officers who fitted a radio collar on his neck to track his movements.

IN AJOBA'S FOOTSTEPS

In the first week of May, Ajoba was released at Malshej Ghat, 80 km from

where he had been found. Seven days later, readings showed that the leopard was still wandering in the forests of Malshej Ghat. A couple of days later, he began trekking up the foothills towards Ratangarh.

In the third week, the team was alarmed after losing contact with Ajoba. Soon, they re-established contact and learnt that Ajoba was crossing the busy Mumbai-Agra Highway at a point not far from the Tanja Abhay forest, straying dangerously

close to habitation.

Another week later, Ajoba, who seemed to have a flair for drama, gave a few nail-biting moments to his trackers, as he crossed the rail tracks one kilometre from Kasara station before entering the Tanja Abhay forest, west of Kasara. The next day, May 20, the leopard veered close to Wada village near Dahanu in Thane district.

Some time later, the team again held their breath when the leopard, as if drawn to humans, walked right into

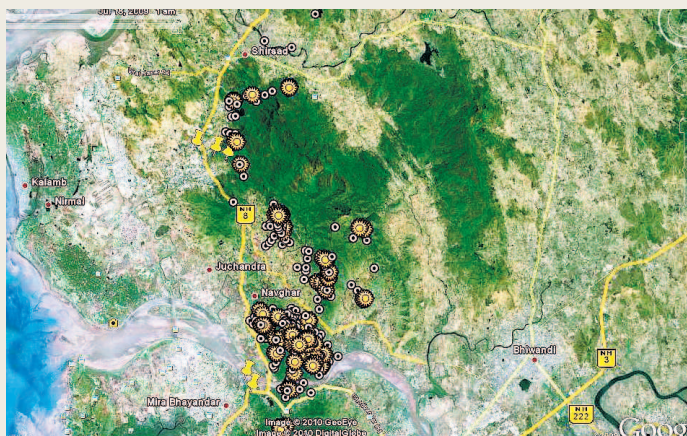
the Vasai industrial area. There was more tension as Ajoba moved closer to the city, which is an extended suburb of Mumbai. Five weeks after being released in Malshej Ghat, Ajoba reached the forests of SGNP and seemed to have taken a liking to the place. He roamed the park, leaving his pug marks all over the place. After three weeks, the team stopped receiving signals from the radio collar. No one has heard from Ajoba since then.

CITY WOMAN IN TRACKING TEAM

Vidya Athreya, 43, a wildlife scientist who is affiliated with the National Centre for Biological Sciences in Bangalore, was part of the team tracking Ajoba. She said, "I got involved through the Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore, which is doing a project on leopard-human conflict in collaboration with the Norwegian government." She said that, on an average, the radio collar transmits the leopard's location eight times each day. "The radio cannot transmit signals round-the-clock because Ajoba travelled through heavily forested areas. The radio collar is fitted with a chip that transmits data to a Norwegian satellite. Usually, a collar falls off after transmitting an average of 5,000 readings.

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

MAPPING PUG MARKS



Satellite image of the Western Ghats showing Ajoba's movements after he began his trek from Malshej Ghat in Nashik district of Maharashtra towards Sanjay Gandhi National Park in Mumbai via Thane. Ajoba was in the park when the tracking device stopped transmitting signals

EXPERTSPEAK



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

