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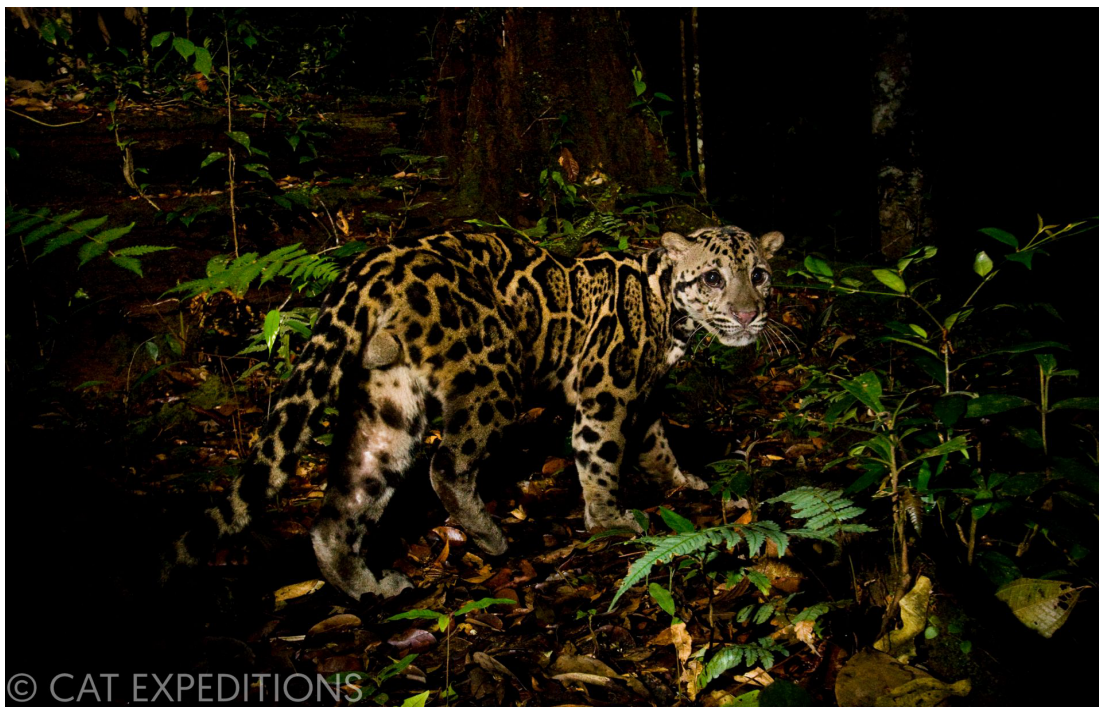


MAMMALS

(THE SUNDA CLOUDED LEOPARD)

In Malaysia, we have a large variety of cats, ranging from domesticated to wild cats. Among the wild cats, we have the Malayan tiger, spotted leopard, bay cat, marbled cat, leopard cat and the species that we want to highlight this month - the clouded leopard. Clouded leopards can be found in both West and East Malaysia. The clouded leopards found in Peninsular Malaysia is from the mainland clouded leopard species, where it inhabit dense forests from the foothills of the Himalayas through mainland Southeast Asia into South China. While on the islands of Borneo and Sumatra, it is known as Sunda clouded leopard, a sub-species to the mainland clouded leopard.

The Sunda clouded leopards primarily inhabits dense forests but can also be found in hilly areas and low rainforests. Due to habitat loss, they can be found near human settlements but are rarely spotted in plantation areas.



The Sunda clouded leopard has a stocky look with short legs. They get their name from their cloud-like markings on their body, head, legs and tails. The overall colour of their body is greyish brown to yellowish-brown, while the colour of their cheeks and necks is striped with black. It has white underparts and inner sides of the legs. The Sunda clouded leopard has longer teeth than any other living cat and a broad muzzle with a long and narrow head. The colour of their irises ranges from brownish yellow to greyish green. It has short ears, round and dark on the backs with central white spots. Their hind legs are longer than the front leg with broad paws. Their tail is thick and marked with rings and is tipped with black or grey colour. The head-body length is generally between 70 and 105 cm with a height of approximately 50 cm. The tail length can grow as long as its body and ranges between 60 and 85 cm. There are differences between the tails of the male and female cats. The male cat's tail is long and slender, but female cats tend to have fluffy tails. The tail with a short leg helps maintain body balance when jumping from one tree to another. They weigh between 12 and 26 kg. This species is known to be the biggest wild cat in Borneo.



The Sunda clouded leopard is generally a solitary cat and can only be seen together with another adult cat during the breeding season which occurs between December and March. The female cat gives birth to a litter of one to five cubs after a gestation period of about 85 to 95 days. Sunda clouded leopard cubs are born helpless with closed eyes and no teeth. At ten months old, the cubs wean off and become independent from their mother. Sunda clouded leopards reach maturity at two years old. The cat's life span is estimated to be between 11 and 17 years old. The habits of the Sunda clouded leopard make them known as secretive animals. Generally, they are arboreal, meaning they spend more time on trees and significantly less time on the ground. However, in Borneo, the Sunda clouded leopard is less arboreal as based on sightings reported, about 82% of the cats walked along trails. There have also been sightings of these cats using logging roads for hunting and roam between their home range. Due to forest fragmentation, these behaviours have changed to adapt to the new environment. It is also believed the Sunda clouded leopard in Borneo is less arboreal because their predator, the tiger, does not exist in Borneo. Based on the ecology and behaviour study of the Sunda clouded leopard in Sabah, only one female and three males have been collared to trace their home range in a secondary rainforest. It has been reported the home range for female cats was 16.1km² while the male cats was estimated to exceed 45km².



The Sunda clouded leopard is a nocturnal animal, meaning it starts its activity from late evening until dawn. They mainly hunt on the ground and use their climbing skills as defence mechanisms. The Sunda clouded leopard is a carnivore, meaning it only eats meat. Their diet varies from small mammals, like squirrels, to large mammals such as deer, macaques, and bearded pigs. When the cat is on a tree, they may also attack young proboscis monkeys. The Sunda clouded leopard communicates using vocal cues and olfactory markings. They mark their territories using scent glands, so no other cats can pass by or enter their home area. They are unable to roar like other big cats, but they do growl, hiss and meow.



The population of Sunda clouded leopards has been decreasing due to their major threats, such as habitat loss, forest fragmentation, and possibly hunting. Their population size in Sabah is estimated to be between 1,500 and 3,200 individuals. The Sunda clouded leopard is a totally protected species in Sumatra, Kalimantan, Sabah, Sarawak and Brunei. Even though this species is fully protected by law, there is still a demand for their body parts, which include flesh and skin, that have a high commercial value in Asian medicine. Their population has also dropped due to unintended hunting for other species. There are many cases reported where they are

caught in snares set up for other animals. It is crucial to stop the decline of the Sunda clouded leopard, which is considered a flagship species. More studies on the ecology and behaviours of the Sunda clouded leopard have to be done. It is also crucial to investigate the threats to this species from hunting and illegal trade. Other than scientific studies, awareness programs to the public are also important to help spread messages about conservation needs and to protect the presence of this secretive mammal in our forest.