

# First Record of Pallas's Cat in Northwest Iran

Ali Aghili<sup>1</sup>, Reza Masoud<sup>2</sup>, James D. Murdoch<sup>3</sup> and David P. Mallon<sup>4</sup>

**P**allas's cat *Otocolobus manul* is a wide-ranging small cat that occurs throughout northern and central Asia (Allen 1938, Ognev 1935, Heptner & Sludskii 1972, Nowell & Jackson 1996). Although populations are relatively robust in some areas like Mongolia, little information exists on populations elsewhere, particularly in the southern portion of the species' range. Consequently, the distribution limits of the species are largely speculative and often inferred from the distribution of potentially suitable habitats.

We report a recent record of a Pallas's cat captured in the Azerbaijan Province of northwest Iran. To our knowledge, the capture represents the first record of the species in northwest Iran and the first documented occurrence of the erythristic (reddish) form of the species anywhere in Iran.

On 27 June 2008, Mr. Zamanlou, head of the Azar-Shahr Department of Environment office, announced to the Tabriz (capital of East Azerbaijan Province) Department of Environment provincial office that they received a Pallas's cat captured by two men. The men reported that locals from the town

of Azar-Shahr southwest of Tabriz (37°45'32'' N / 45°56'45'' E; altitude ~1500 m; Fig. 1) chased a Pallas's cat into a tree. The men captured the cat and brought it to the regional Department of Environment office in Tabriz. A veterinarian anesthetised, inspected, and measured the cat, which appeared to be an adult female (>1 year old) and in healthy condition (Fig. 2). Morphometric measurements were: tail length = 26 cm, body length = 48 cm, and shoulder height = 28 cm. Researchers also collected hair for genetic studies and released the cat in the vicinity of the capture location. After release, the cat retreated to a den that seemed familiar to the animal (R. Masoud, pers. obs.).

The region around Azar-Shahr is part of the *Irano-Turanian* highlands and is generally characterized by open steppes and shrublands, often dominated by *Astragalus* spp. with scattered trees. The town of Azar-Shahr is an urban center with a human population of about 36,500 and is well-known for its cultivated gardens. Several gardens have nut trees that support high densities of forest dormouse *Dryomys nitedula* that may have attracted the Pallas's cat to the region. Wild cats *Felis silvestris* also have been regularly sighted in the area (R. Masoud, pers. obs.).

Azar-Shahr is located approximately 60 km south of the southern boundary of the Caucasus ecoregion, a biologically rich region that extends between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea and covers Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and parts of southern Russia, northeast Turkey and northwest Iran (Zazanashvili *et al.* 1999). There are four previous records of Pallas's cat from the southern part of the Caucasus ecoregion (Fig. 1). Two specimens have been obtained from Meghri and Arazdaya in southern Armenia (Ognev 1935, Heptner & Sludskii 1972). In Azerbaijan, it is known from the Julfa and Sadarak areas in the Nakhichevan enclave (Aleksperov 1989, Gadjiev & Rakhmatulina 2000). These four sites are all located on the northern side of the Araz (or Araks) Valley that

forms the border with Iran. According to Heptner & Sludskii (1972), Pallas's cat also occurs in eastern Turkey in the vicinity of Mt. Ararat (Agri Dag), but the species was not included on the list of mammals of Turkey compiled by Kumerloeve (1975) and its occurrence in the country has not been confirmed.

The new record from Azar-Shahr therefore extends the known distribution of this species farther to the south in this part of its range, although its occurrence in northwest Iran is not surprising given the known distribution so close to the border. Another new record from the South Caucasus that has only recently come to light also extends the range farther to the east. A skin examined in the house of a hunter in the village of Dashkesan in Karabakh during autumn-winter 1996 was identified unambiguously as a Pallas's cat by V. Y. Ananian (in litt. to JDM, 22.10.2007). The exact locality where the animal had been shot is not known but is believed to lie in the vicinity of that village (39° 25' 50'' N / 47° 6' 9'' E). The habitat around Dashkesan is described as semidesert with low clayey and rocky hills. Cultivation around the village includes extensive vineyards and pomegranate fields.

Elsewhere in Iran, Pallas's cat is known to occur in Mooteh Protected Area in central Iran (Isfahan province; Jackson & Nowell 1996) and in the east and northeast, e.g. Khorasan Province and the Kopet Dag mountains along the border with Turkmenistan (Lay 1967, Harrington 1977, Firouz 2005). The species was also sighted in Tandoreh National Park in the Kopet Dag mountains in February and September 2004 (N 37°27'31''/E 58°41'11''; Aghili 2004). Pallas's cat is widely distributed on the northern side of the Kopet Dag and in southern Turkmenistan (Heptner & Sludskii 1972), through central Asia to Mongolia and northern China (Nowell & Jackson 1996).

The first record of Pallas's cat from central-northern Iran was obtained in October 2008 when an animal was photographed in a camera trap in Kho-



**Fig. 1.** Map of northwest Iran and surrounding regions showing recent Pallas's cat locations including 1) the Pallas's cat captured in Azar-Shahr, Tabriz, Iran in June 2008; 2) a Pallas's cat reportedly killed near Dashkesan village, Karabakh, Azerbaijan in 1996; and 3) four Pallas's cat records reported in literature (see text for reference details).

jir National Park close to Tehran (DoE Tehran; Chalani *et al.* 2008, this issue of Cat News). This site lies on the southern side of the Alborz range, whose dry slopes and foothills form a potential corridor connecting the known areas of distribution in Northeast and Northwest Iran, and which one can speculate provided the original dispersal route allowing the species to reach the Caucasus ecoregion. Further unconfirmed reports from Kerman province in southern Iran suggest that Pallas's cat may have a much wider distribution in the country than previously suspected.

The erythristic (reddish) form has been reported from Baluchistan province in Pakistan (Ognev 1935, Roberts 1977, 1986) where it inhabits open relict juniper *Juniperus macropoda* forest, and from parts of the former USSR including the Caucasus (Heptner & Sludskii 1972). It is conventionally described as a subspecies *O. m. ferrugineus*, but this has not yet been validated by genetic analyses and it may turn out to be a colour form.

Pallas's cat remains rare and sparsely distributed across most of its range, except in Mongolia, where populations are relatively robust, but declining in some areas (Clark *et al.* 2006, Murdoch *et al.* 2006). This report is one of several during the last 10 years that report sightings and geographical or altitudinal range extensions (Koshkarev 1998, Mallon 2002, Fox & Dorji 2007, Chanchani 2008).

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**Fig. 2.** Pallas's cat captured in Azar-Shahr, Tabriz, Azerbaijan Province, northwest Iran in June 2008 (Photo East Azerbaijan Department of Environment of Iran, public affairs office).

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<sup>1</sup> Persian Leopard Conservation Society, 208 South Mofateh Ave, Teheran, Iran <aagili9@yahoo.co.uk>

<sup>2</sup> Department of Environment of Iran, East Azerbaijan Province Head Office, Tabriz, Iran

<sup>3</sup> WildCRU, Univ. of Oxford, Tubney House, Abingdon Road, Tubney, Oxford, OX13 5QL, UK;

<sup>4</sup> 3 Acre Street, Glossop, Derbyshire SK13 8JS, UK