

# rumble in the jungle



**A**lthough perhaps not quite Ali versus Foreman, the sight of these two male leopards battling it out on a crisp winter morning was equally arresting. It was not the world heavyweight title that was on the line, but some prime leopard real estate in Mala Mala Game Reserve, adjacent to the Kruger National Park in South Africa.

Male leopards are territorial, defending a defined home range that contains sufficient resources to ensure their survival and, more importantly, access to reproductive females. Such defence is normally passive: an individual advertises his presence by means of scent marking or a distinctive rasping call. Familiar neighbours recognise one another and generally respect each other's boundaries. But problems arise when a newcomer enters the scene. ▶

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In this case, a young, powerful male had dispersed from an adjoining area and was looking for somewhere to settle. In a high-density population such as the one at Mala Mala, there are no vacant territories and individuals must fight for ownership. The outcome of these clashes depends on the size of the challenger and the age and condition of the resident male. There is much at stake; fights like this are sometimes fatal. Even if both animals survive, once a leopard has been ousted from his range, he has little chance of re-establishing himself: an old leopard without a territory is soon a dead leopard. There was no obvious winner in this particular brawl. The leopards went their separate ways, battered and bruised, but calling continuously and raking the ground in defiance.

In a natural system, male leopards hold tenure for up to seven years, providing essential stability for females to raise cubs successfully. However, where there are human threats – such as trophy hunting and poaching – the turnover in males can be artificially elevated, producing a host of harmful effects on populations (see preceding article). ■

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