

THE LEOPARDS OF SINGITA



The leopard is a mysterious critter.

It hunts mostly at night, so people rarely get to see it. If you look carefully, you might catch a glimpse of a leopard lying asleep in a tree, hidden behind thick leaves and branches. But usually that's the closest you can get to a leopard.

“The Leopards of Singita” is the story of a mother leopard and two leopard cubs that my guide and I found hidden in a small cave in the African wilderness.



On our first afternoon at Singita, a game reserve in South Africa, we unpacked our gear at the camp and then decided to look for two newborn leopard cubs we had heard about.

The cubs were not in the den where they were born. No one staying at the camp had seen them for a week or two. We knew that the mother had hidden her young critters in a very safe spot.

It was late afternoon by the time we set out. We drove slowly in the direction of the old den. Even though the mother had abandoned this site, we thought the new den might not be too far away.

LEARNING ABOUT LEOPARDS

The leopard is a predator (a hunter) that almost always searches for its prey (animals to kill for food) at night.

Since so few leopards are seen during the day, it is surprising to learn that there are about 100,000 leopards roaming the African wilderness. Actually, there are more leopards in Africa than lions and cheetahs combined.





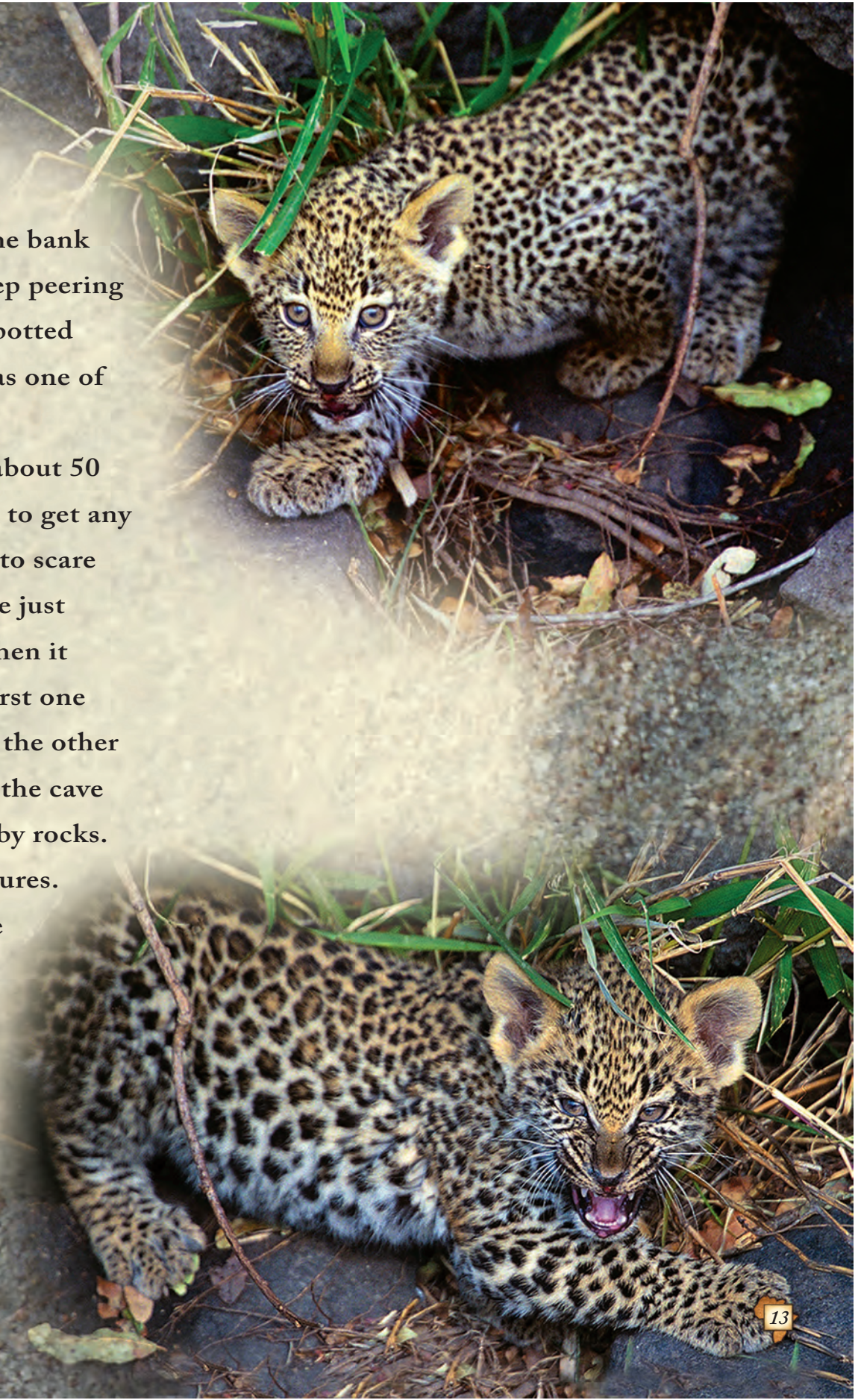
Just before sunset, we reached the bank of a river. We were sitting in our jeep peering through binoculars when I saw a tiny spotted head poke out of a small cave and growl. It was one of the leopard cubs. We had found the new den.

We were on the opposite side of the river, about 50 yards away from the cubs. But we decided not to get any closer. We didn't want to scare

them away. So we just waited. And then it happened. First one cub and then the other crawled out of the cave and onto the nearby rocks.

We took lots and lots of pictures.

In a few minutes, the sun dipped below the hills, and our photo session was over.





Very early the next morning,
we set off in search of the mother.

We knew that our best photos would come only after she returned to the den and the cubs could play under her watchful eye.

We finally spotted her far from her den on the bough of a marula tree, pacing back and forth. Within a few seconds, she jumped from one bough to another and scampered down the tree.

The leopard silently strode through the tall grass, hidden from its prey. Suddenly, she leaped in a graceful arc and landed on a small African hare.

LEARNING ABOUT LEOPARDS

Even though the leopard is smaller than a lion, it has a unique talent that allows it to enjoy a fresh meal without fear of other critters. The leopard has the ability to leap up a tall tree carrying even a full-grown antelope in its jaws. It will then cache (hide) the carcass in the tree and feed over the next day or two in peace and quiet.

