

Jaguar vs Leopard - How to tell the two Big Cats apart



What is the difference between a jaguar and a leopard

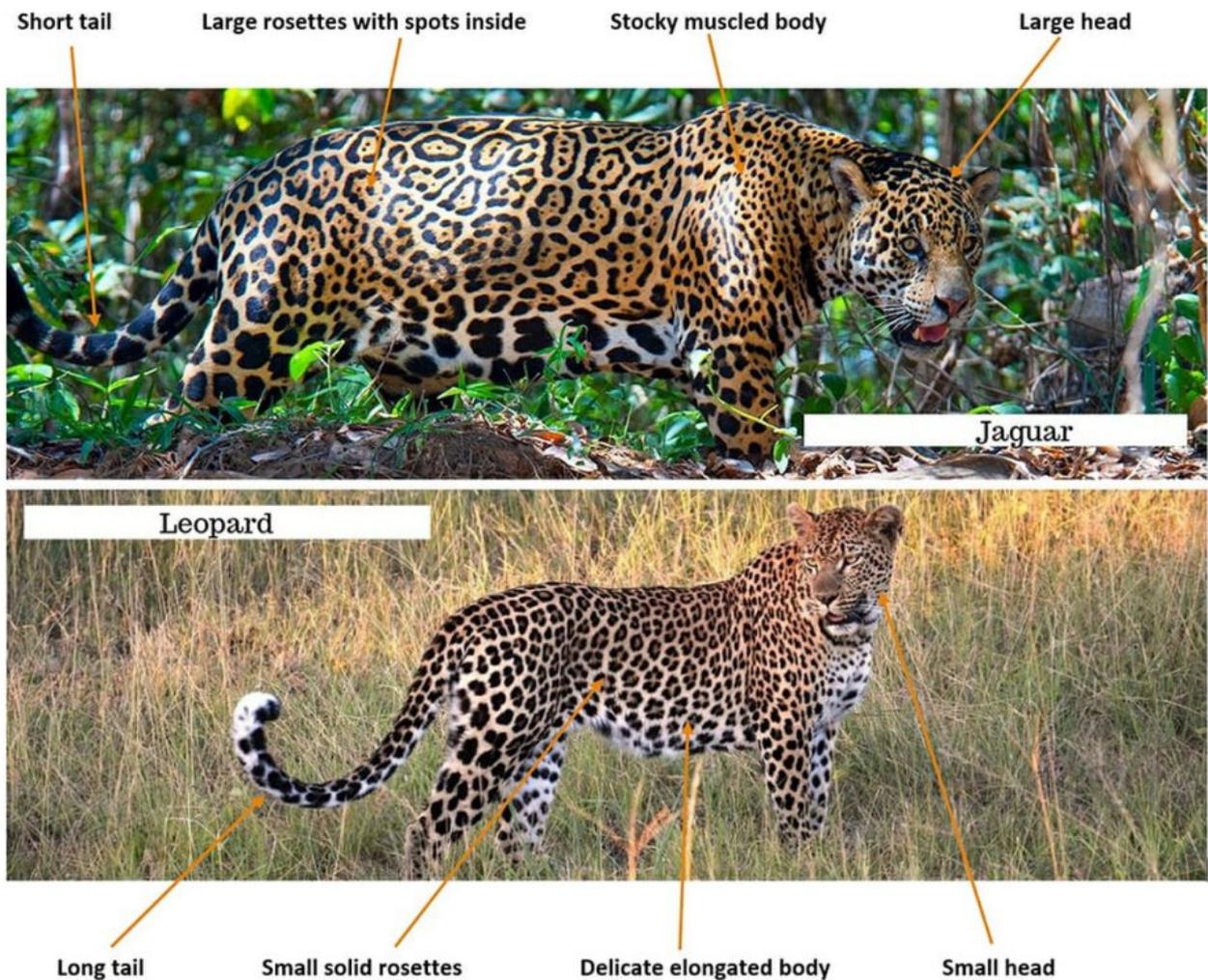
Jaguar vs leopard – the two magnificent spotted **big cats** that are so similar in appearance, most people find them indistinguishable. But can you learn to tell them apart? Well, the good news is, you will never have to guess which of these two cats you are looking at in the wild. Jaguars and leopards live on different continents.

If you are in **Latin America**, the only big cat you can come across is the jaguar.

And if you see a spotted big cat in **Africa**, **Asia**, the Middle East or **Russia**, it will be the leopard. Unless, of course, you are lucky enough to spot the snow leopard in the **Himalayas**, but these cats are instantly recognizable by their thick, smoky coats.

However, when taken out of the geographical context, the jaguar and the leopard become quite difficult to tell apart. So, what is the difference between a jaguar and a leopard?

Jaguar vs Leopard – How to tell the difference



© The Wildlife Diaries

What is the difference between a jaguar and a leopard

The body shape

The main physical characteristic in which the two cats differ is their body shape. The jaguar is stockier and more muscular than the leopard, with a shorter body and broader chest. It also tends to have a large barrel-like abdomen. Male jaguars, especially often look as if they just had an enormous meal or have miraculously fallen pregnant.

The leopard is much more delicately built than its South American cousin. It has a more slender and longer body and generally has a lighter appearance. However, despite its light frame, the leopard is capable of dragging large carcasses of its prey up a tree.



Jaguar vs Leopard Body Shape

The head

Just like their body shape, the size and shape of each animal's head are quite different. Jaguars generally have large heads with a broad forehead, wide jaws and round shape to their faces. While leopards tend to have small angular heads with prominent cheekbones and large ears.

What is the difference between a jaguar and a leopard

The differences in these cats' heads are easily explained in terms of hunting technics. The jaguar has the most powerful bite in relation to body size among [wild cats](#). It uses its powerful jaws to crush the skulls of its prey.

While the leopard kills its prey by the suffocating bite to the throat, or to the back of the neck.



Left: Jaguar; Right: Amur Leopard

The tail

Another physical difference between the jaguar and the leopard, the length of their tails can also be explained by their habits. The leopard has a longer tail, necessary for keeping balance when climbing trees. Jaguars are also good climbers, but their short tails hint that they are not as agile in the trees as the leopards.

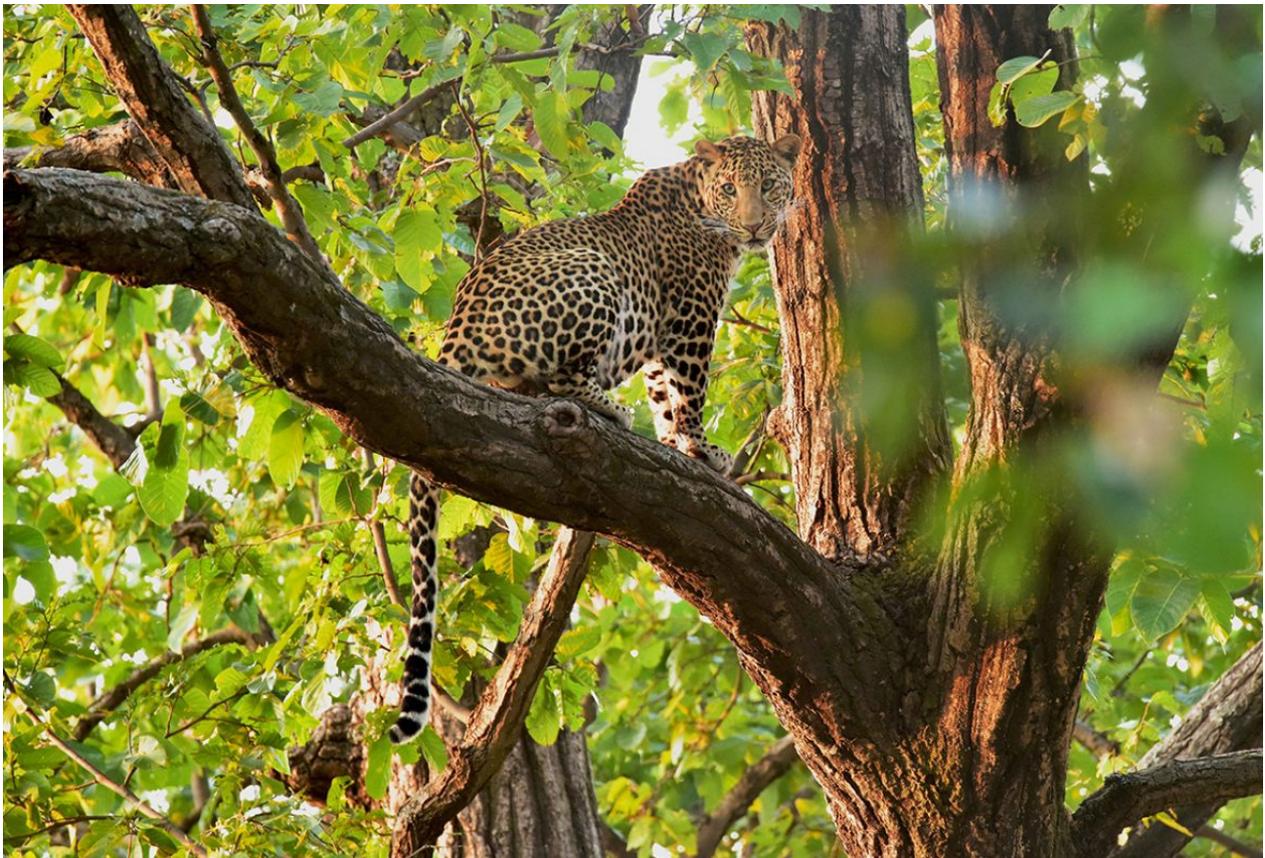
And the reason the jaguar doesn't need to climb as much is that it doesn't have any natural predators. As the only [big cat in the Americas](#), the jaguar reigns supreme in its habitat and doesn't have to drag its prey up into the trees.

Leopards, on the other hand, have to protect their dinners from other predators, like lion, hyena or tiger, depending on where they live.

What is the difference between a jaguar and a leopard



Jaguar walking



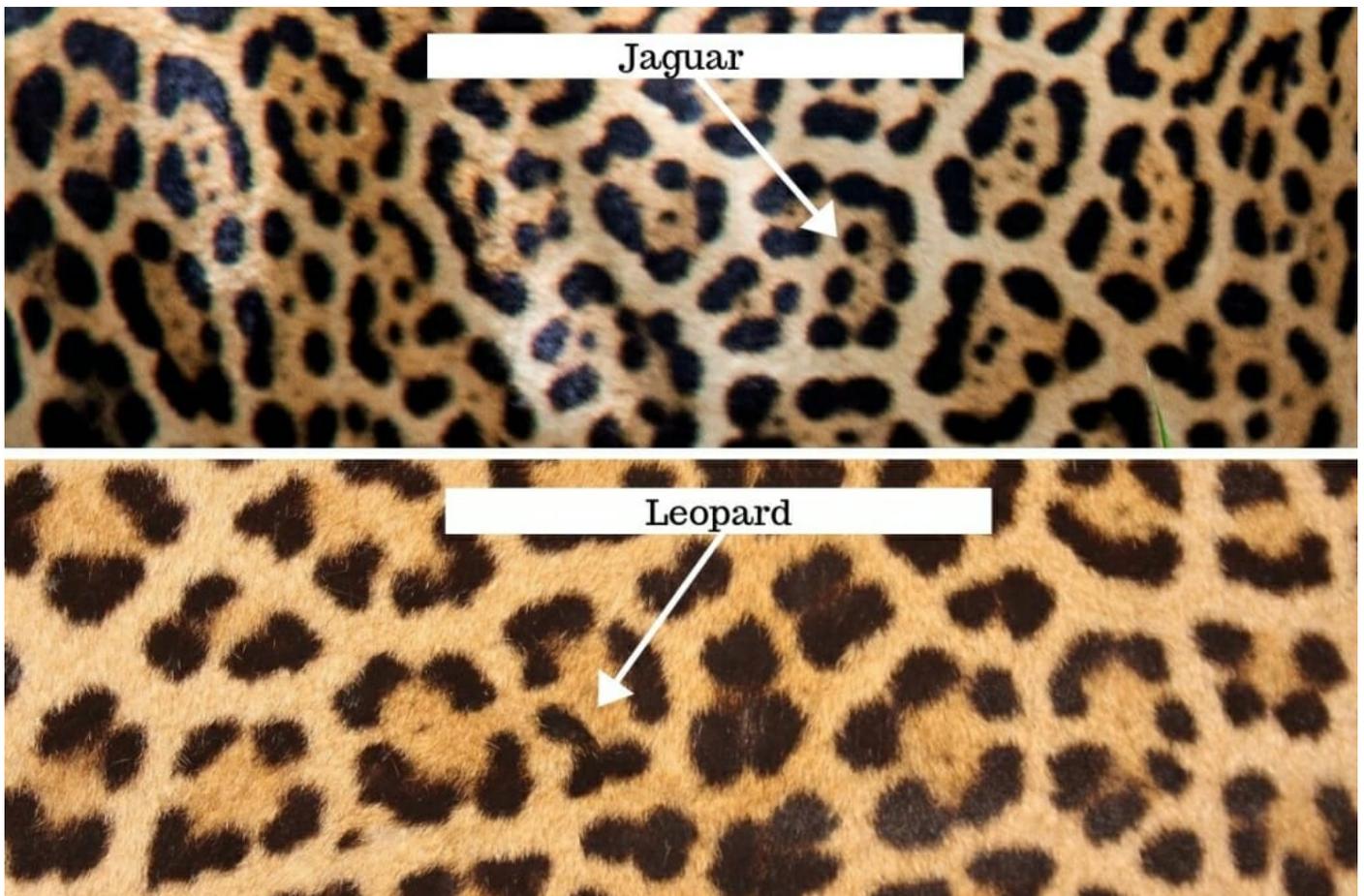
Leopard

What is the difference between a jaguar and a leopard

Coat pattern

Both jaguars and leopards have spotted coats that feature black rosettes on cream or orange background. This pattern provides excellent camouflage for the cats in the dappled light of the forest. The rosettes effectively break the shape of the animal allowing it to merge with its environment.

But while the leopard's and the jaguar's coats appear identical, there are noticeable differences in their rosette patterns. The jaguar's rosettes have spots inside them, while the leopard's rosettes are solid. The jaguar's rosettes also tend to be much larger, while the leopard's rosettes are smaller and spaced closer together.



Jaguar coat vs Leopard coat

An interesting [study](#) by the University of Bristol used computers to simulate what the tiger looks like to its prey, particularly to 'dichromat' species – those which cannot differentiate between red and green. Scientists have found that while tigers appear bright orange to humans, deer see them as green. Same probably goes for leopards and jaguars – at least some of their prey might see them as green with black spots, virtually indistinguishable against the background of green leaves and blotchy sunlight.

What is the difference between a jaguar and a leopard

What is a Black Panther?

The term black panther is applied to both, leopards and jaguars, causing a great deal of confusion. A black panther is not a different type of a big cat, it is simply a black morph of either a leopard or a jaguar.

The black fur is caused by a genetic condition known as melanism, where the natural pigmentation turns black. If you look closely at a black jaguar or a black leopard, you will notice that the rosette pattern is still present on their coat, it is just obscured by the black pigmentation.

Melanism is a common mutation in [wild cats](#) and it is thought to increase crypsis, the ability of the animal to avoid detection by other animals. It is, therefore, not surprising that black cats are more common in dense forested habitats where less natural light penetrates the thick canopy and a dark-colored predator has a higher chance of remaining unseen by its prey.

If you are curious about black morphs in other wild cat species, check out this story about my encounter with a black [Geoffroy's cat in Argentina's El Palmar National Park](#).



Black Indian Leopard in Nagarhole National Park. Image – [David Vraju](#) / Wikipedia

What is the difference between a jaguar and a leopard

Behaviour

Top predator vs Intermediate predator

The jaguar and the leopard inhabit slightly different niches in their ecosystems. As the only **big cat** in the Americas, the jaguar is the top predator. Its distribution and activity patterns are determined primarily by its prey availability (and by the degree of human disturbance in its habitat). The leopard, on the other hand is an intermediate predator that shares its habitat with lions in **Africa** and tigers in **Asia**. So, safety from the larger predators is a concern for the leopard that influences where it lives and when it hunts.

Man-eating

Interestingly, there are very few records of man-eating jaguars while the leopards are known for targeting humans as prey. Jim Corbett, the British hunter who lived in India in the early 20th century recorded two man-eating leopards that have killed 400 and 125 people respectively. Occasional attacks of leopards on people are still occasionally reported from rural India.



Jaguar swimming in the Pantanal

Swimming

Jaguars and leopards both can swim very well, but jaguars love water and specialize in hunting caiman and capybaras on the riverbanks. Leopards generally avoid water and don't tend to hunt crocodiles, preferring deer and other terrestrial prey.

What is the difference between a jaguar and a leopard

Population

The jaguar (*Panthera onca*) is unique among big cats in that, all the jaguars, ranging across 18 different countries belong to the single [interconnected population](#), there are no different subspecies of the jaguar.

The leopard (*Panthera pardus*), on the other hand, is distributed across multiple isolated populations from South Africa to Sri Lanka. The total number of leopard subspecies has been debated over the years, but as of 2017, the Cat Classification Task Force of the [Cat Specialist Group](#) recognizes the following 8 subspecies.

- African leopard (*P. p. pardus*)
- Indian leopard (*P. p. fusca*)
- Javan leopard (*P. p. melas*)
- Arabian leopard (*P. p. nimr*)
- Persian leopard (*P.p. tulliana*)
- Amur leopard (*P. p. orientalis*)
- Indochinese leopard (*P. p. delacouri*)
- Sri Lankan leopard (*P. p. kotiya*)



African leopard. Image – Adobe Stock

What is the difference between a jaguar and a leopard

Conservation Status

Both the jaguar and the leopard are threatened across their entire ranges. The jaguar is listed as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, while the leopard is listed as Vulnerable.

However, some of the leopard subspecies are in [greater peril](#) than the species overall.

The Amur leopard of the Russian Far East, is one of the most endangered wild cats on earth, with less than 100 individuals remaining in the wild. It is listed as Critically Endangered and faces a serious risk of extinction.

The Javan leopard is restricted to the Indonesian island of Java. With approximately 250 individuals remaining in the wild, it is also listed as Critically Endangered.

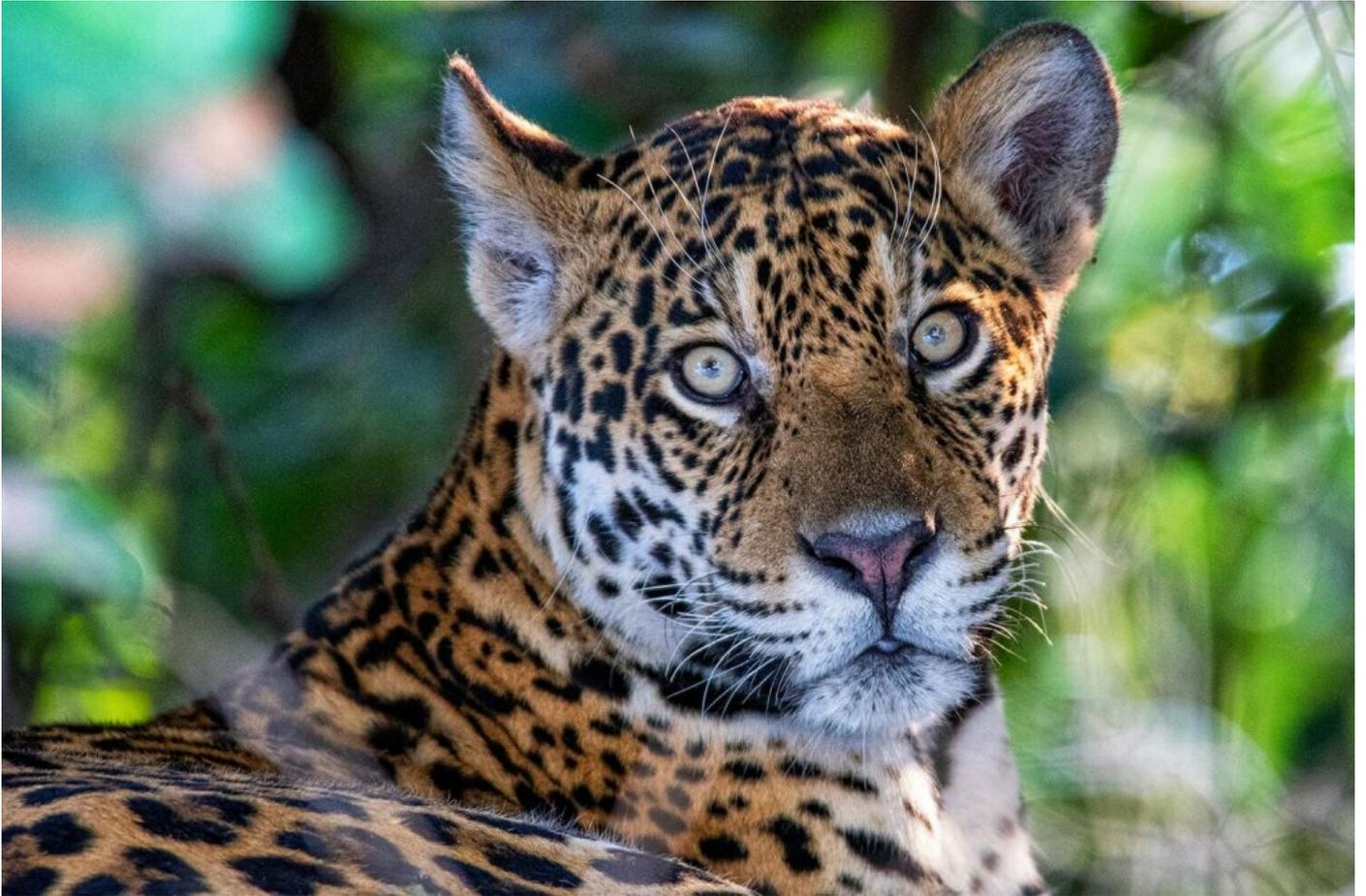
The Persian leopard occurs from Turkey and Iran into Afghanistan and Central Asia. Its current population is estimated at fewer than 870-1290 mature individuals and considered declining, despite being listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List.

Where to see jaguars and leopards in the wild

Leopards have a much wider distribution which makes them the easier of the two cats to spot in the wild. Most [African safaris](#) will give you a good chance of seeing a leopard, as well as a visit to Udawalawe National Park in Sri Lanka.

For the best chance of [spotting wild jaguars](#), head to the [Brazilian Pantanal](#) to the small fishing community of Porto Jofre, which is developing a reputation of the jaguar watching capital of the world.

What is the difference between a jaguar and a leopard



Jaguar in the Brazilian Pantanal