

Cool Cats

One man's mission to save the world's rarest felines

BY STEVE DITLEA

A GHOSTLY red sun rises in the morning mists of Cambodia's Cardamom Mountains while Jim Sanderson sets out to catch a clouded leopard. Few people have ever seen this beautiful cat. Sanderson's mission is twofold: to capture the creature on film and keep it alive.

Armed with cameras, radios, syringes and a sample case of designer fragrances (cats seem to love them—the ocelot is

CLOUDED LEOPARD, an elusive cat that roams the ground and lower jungle canopy in Borneo and Sumatra.



Jim Sanderson, crossing a stream in the Caxiuã National Forest in northern Brazil. Above, the endangered **ANDEAN MOUNTAIN CAT**; right, a wide-eyed **MARGAY**.

obsessed by *Obsession for Men*), Sanderson has documented eight rare and endangered species of small cats since 1997. Six months or more every year, he's deep in the wilds of Kenya, Bolivia or another exotic locale, braving raging rivers, poisonous snakes, leeches, malaria and dengue fever.

Why is he risking his health, spending time away from friends and family, and even some of his own money, to search out these cats—exotic animals that are too dangerous to be pets and too undersized to compete with the better known majestic big cats?

Sanderson is a true cat lover, and after each stay in the field, he returns to Washington, D.C., with blood samples for genetic testing. He gives the samples to Stephen O'Brien at the National Institutes of Health to determine DNA characteristics that may help us better understand disease resistance in America's 70 million pet cats—perhaps in humans as well.

Sanderson estimates only \$75,000 a year is spent worldwide on small wild cat research. Lions, tigers and other large cats get the limelight, and the corporate funding.

Sanderson, working with a team, recently filmed another of the rarest species, the Andean mountain cat—seen only three times by humans.

The 55-year-old Sanderson found his calling late in life. Originally he earned a PhD in mathematics. After a decade of working on numerical analysis, he took a 1985 vacation to Rwanda to see the mountain gorillas. That trip inspired him to make a difference in the natural world. So he began a concentrated study of landscape ecology. Then, fascinated by territorial charts filled with question marks about wild species, he set out to photo-trap picturesque pampas cats, shy oncillas, camouflaged margays, wily African wildcats, skittish sand cats, and a half-dozen other diminutive

cat species unknown even to most naturalists around the world.

Now on staff at Conservation International's Center for Applied Biodiversity Science in Washington, D.C., Sanderson also surveys feline populations in the field and tracks their movements with radio collars.

In 1998 he was first to radio-track the Chilean guigna, the smallest cat in the Western Hemisphere. Farmers routinely killed the cats for poaching chickens, and believed them to be vampires. Sanderson dispelled the vampire myth and devised a simple solution to save the cats: chicken wire! He gave it to poor farmers so they could build fences around their coops.

It takes more than field study to assure that these cats will survive, however. Sanderson is setting up programs with local students to continue photo-trapping in their countries. So far, he has started such projects in Guyana, Suriname, Brazil and Cambodia. "Good scientific information will make conservation planning possible," he explains.

Just what keeps him going, spending long stretches of time away from his wife, an understanding biologist who studies predatory birds in Connecticut? Jim Sanderson says his motivation is simple: "I will not permit the extinction of any species of cats on my watch. Small cats need help." ■



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