

stored by ground squirrels in north-eastern Siberia c. 30,000 years ago. The seeds were found, preserved in the permafrost, in the squirrels' burrows 20–40 m below the current surface of the tundra. A total of 70 burrows were found, surrounded by bones of mammoths and other prehistoric animals. Previous attempts to grow plants from seeds found in these burrows failed post-germination, so in this instance researchers used placental tissue from *Silene stenophylla*, which, when cultivated in vitro, produced shoots that were then used to propagate more plants. These plants produced fertile seeds, which have been grown into a second generation of fertile *S. stenophylla*. Differences between the prehistoric *S. stenophylla* and modern plants of the same species suggest that the 30,000-year old specimens are a distinct phenotype adapted to the environment of the Ice Age.

Source: *Nature* (2012), 482(7386), 454

NORTH AFRICA AND MIDDLE EAST

Iranian wildlife documentary wins award

An Iranian Cheetah Society's (ICS) documentary entitled *In Search for Persian Leopard* has won the category for Best Documentary Feature at the 2012 Fajr International Film Festival. ICS film maker, Fathollah Amiri, received the award at Iran's annual film festival during a ceremony on 12 February in Tehran. The film was also nominated for two other awards in the category for documentaries including Best Director (Fathollah Amiri) and Best Research (Bagher Nezami and Mohammad Farhadinia). *In Search for Persian Leopard* reveals the efforts of a dedicated research team studying the elusive large cat at high altitudes in Alborz, northern Iran and highlights the threat to the species posed by poaching. Celebrating the 10th anniversary of its establishment, the ICS is hopeful that the documentary will increase community support for effective protection of the Persian leopard in Iran.

Source: ICS (2012), <http://www.wildlife.ir>ShowInfo.aspx?Lang=2&InfoId=342>

Sociability in elephants goes back a long way

Analysis of a fossil trackway of a proboscidean herd in the United Arab Emirates dating from the late Miocene has shown that the complex social structures seen in living elephants was probably already extant. The fossilized tracks at the site,

known as Mleisa 1, are of a herd of at least 13 individuals of different sizes, including a single, small-sized individual whose prints are faint, suggesting a lighter body weight. The way in which the tracks are displayed is indicative of a group of animals moving and interacting simultaneously. In addition to the group of footprints, the site also contains fossilized prints of a solitary trackway over a distance of 260 m, which appear to have been made by a single, large individual moving at a steady pace. The tracks from Mleisa 1 are consistent with the social arrangements seen in living elephants, of a matriarchal family and solitary or loosely associated groups of adult males. Source: *Biology Letters* (2012), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2011.1185>

Egypt's illegal ivory trade continues apace

Despite the fact that no ivory can be sold legally in Egypt without a permit, none of which have ever been issued, Egypt is one of Africa's largest markets for ivory items. The authors of a recent report examining the Egyptian ivory trade believe this is because there has been little law enforcement in Egypt over the last 6 years, while the number of tourists, particularly from China where the trade in ivory is booming, has increased. Chinese buyers are now reported to buy over half the worked ivory sold in Egypt. According to Egyptian government officials interviewed for the report, only two seizures of ivory have been made since 2009, and there have been no confiscations of ivory from retail outlets since 2003. The report's authors call on the Egyptian authorities to carry out raids and confiscations of ivory items to end the open sale of ivory in the country.

Source: *TRAFFIC Bulletin* (2011), 23, 117–122

Licences given to hunt houbara bustards

Dignitaries from the Arabian Peninsula have been given permits to hunt the houbara bustard in the 2011–2012 hunting season, according to a report in a Pakistani newspaper. Twenty-five permits have been issued, with 12 being given to the United Arab Emirates, seven to Qatar, five to Bahrain, and a single permit to Saudi Arabia. In the majority of cases the licenses have been given to rulers, crown princes and other members of royal families. The 10-day permits come with codes of conduct, which stipulate that the named permit holder is the only person allowed to hunt the bustards, using falconry, and the maximum number of birds that can be caught is 100. The houbara bustard is

categorized as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List because of a rapid population decline over 3 decades caused by unsustainable hunting levels.

Source: *Dawn* (2011), <http://www.dawn.com/2011/12/04/houbara-hunting-permits-issued-to-gulf-dignitaries-3.html>

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Illegal hangover cure bad news for South Africa's rhinos

Despite increased law enforcement efforts South Africa lost 448 rhinos to poaching in 2011. Official government statistics reveal that the total loss for 2011 included 19 Critically Endangered black rhinos, of which < 5,000 remain in the wild. Although sentences imposed for poaching-related crimes in South Africa have increased in recent years the increase in rhino killings is thought to be related to an increased demand for rhino horn in Vietnam, where it is viewed as a luxury item and as a purported cure for cancer. Although rhino horn has no proven curative properties for the treatment of cancer it has more recently gained popularity among wealthy Vietnamese as a post-party cleanser used to mitigate the effects of a hangover. Although South Africa remains the epicentre of rhino poaching other African and Asian range countries are also being targeted.

Source: *TRAFFIC News* (2012), <http://www.traffic.org/home/2012/1/12/rhino-poaching-deaths-continue-to-increase-in-south-africa.html>

New species of viper discovered

A new species of viper has been discovered in an isolated forest fragment in the Southern Highlands of Tanzania. The yellow and black snake, which has distinctive horn-like scales above its eyes, has been named Matilda's horn viper *Atheris matildae*. The exact location of the new species has not been divulged because of the threat posed by the illegal pet trade. However, it is estimated that the snakes' habitat amounts to only a few square kilometres and has been subject to severe degradation as a result of logging and charcoal manufacture. Researchers involved in the discovery expect the snake will be categorized as Critically Endangered and have already established a small captive breeding colony.

Source: *BBC News* (2011), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-16486549>, and *Zootaxa* (2011), <http://www.mapress.com/zootaxa/2011/f/z03120p054f.pdf>