

Snow Leopards: Captivity Perpetuates the Species

by Steve Clevenger
OKC Zoo Hospital/Isolation/Rare Species Breeding Area Animal Technician II

THE SNOW LEOPARD (*Panthera uncia*) is certainly one of the most beautiful of the large cats, and, in captivity as well as in the wild, it is almost as rare as it is beautiful. It ranges throughout the Himalayas and is so seclusive that it was not photographed in the wild until 1955. This solitary cat lives alone or in small female-kitten groups and feeds on medium-sized mammals, such as small deer and the markhor.

The Oklahoma City Zoo is one of the zoos leading the world in reproducing this species. Thirty-one youngsters have been born here since the late 1960s. Our present group of breeding adults is housed in the off-exhibit breeding area, although several of the older offspring can be seen on cat row in the zoo.

This spring and early summer have been especially rewarding to us in the breeding area because this was the first year that we have produced litters by all three of our adult females. Preparations for the spring began in late November 1979 when we began introducing Old Man first to Damascus and then to Elektra, both of which had previously given birth. We then attempted in early February to introduce Old Man to the youngest

female, Tangla. Previous attempts at doing this (for the two preceding years) had begun and ended with fighting. Minor losses of hair and some scratches were seen on both animals, and there was general concern on the part of the keepers of their compatibility. Our worries proved to be unfounded, however, for Old Man's approach to the matter was much more subdued this time around. Although aggressive encounters were noted, none were particularly severe and, in fact, breeding occurred the fourth or fifth time they were introduced.

Gestation in our snow leopards has averaged 99 to 100 days and this spring was no exception. The gestation for Damascus and Tangla was 99 days, while Elektra's gestation was 97 days.

Damascus' due date was April 6, and approaching that date she was extremely heavy. She gave birth to three kittens last year after gaining an extremely large amount of weight, so we again expected triplets. Our expectations were rewarded on exactly April 6 by the birth of two males (Manaslue and Nuptse) and one female (Annapurna), all of which are named after Himalayan peaks.

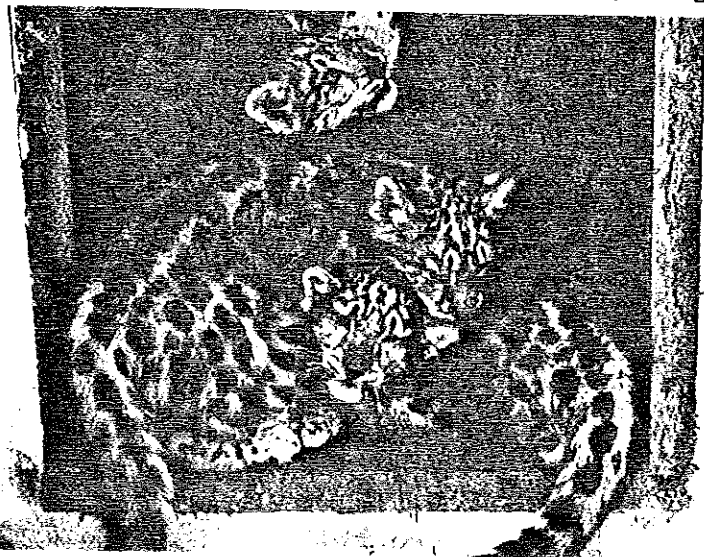
Tangla carried less weight than Damascus and, using the 99-day

gestation period, we had predicted delivery for her on May 27. She surprised us early by delivering two males (Tsen-tsing and Rischa) on May 25. We observed Tangla very closely after the birth since this was her first litter and she showed excellent maternal care. However, Tangla did not eat for the first three days after giving birth and we then became concerned for the welfare of the youngsters.

Separating the mother from recently born kittens is no problem with our females since the protective instinct is strongest in the mother just after birth. This causes no hesitation in her leaving the den to "protect" the kittens from a nearby keeper. We thus moved the mother outside of the den, and veterinarian Dr. James Jensen checked the youngsters' to determine their sex and general physical condition. He found their tiny stomachs distended with milk, and they appeared hale and hearty. We therefore reintroduced Tangla and waited for her to begin eating. This occurred on the seventh day. The general consensus is that she was overly anxious since it was her first birth. Tangla has proven to be a fierce protector and excellent mother to her youngsters.

After an early introduction (November 1979), we expected a birth from Elektra in early February. She did not give birth, however, so we reintroduced her to Old Man the second week in March (which is toward the end of the breeding season). To our delight, breeding occurred and a potential birthdate of June 25 was set. Elektra gave birth to a male and a female in 97 days on June 22.

Then, from that third week in June, weather temperatures began to rise to record proportions on a daily basis. During this period, we noticed an unusual amount of vocalization from the youngsters but, at seven days, a check by the veterinarian revealed them to be in good physical condition.



Damascus' babies at age 17 weeks. (Photo by George Walters)

Animal Technician Jim Powell with one of Tanga's babies at age eight weeks.
(Photo by Susan Carson)



They continued to be active and vocal and to grow normally until July 18 when only one kitten was found in the nest box. It is assumed that the other died and was eaten by the mother. The remaining youngster had a high temperature and was immediately pulled and taken to the nursery for hand-rearing, eventually succumbing to a bacterial infection 10 days later. The unseasonably high temperatures seem to have prevented the youngsters' immune systems from developing properly after birth.

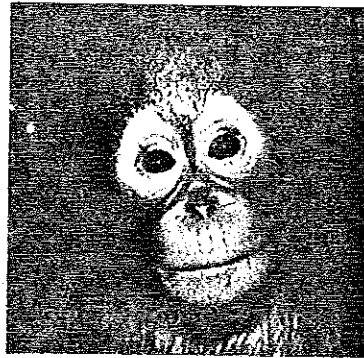
We have made several changes in our husbandry program to eliminate the possibility of a reoccurrence of heat-related problems in the future. Closer observation and a tighter introduction schedule will enable us to introduce the male to the females in November and December so that we can expect all births to take place prior to the end of May in the future. Perhaps next year the combined efforts of the snow leopards, the keepers, and Mother Nature will allow us to have seven (or more!) youngsters instead of five.

The snow leopard may disappear from the wild in 10 to 15 years if stringent conservation measures are not adopted. With successful breeding programs and careful captive management, however, the species will live on in captivity through eternity.

"Caracal Lynx" (4th place, right)
by Richard L. Capps
Clarendon Hills, Illinois



"Kimberley Smiles" (2nd place, below)
by Janet Hawes
San Diego, California



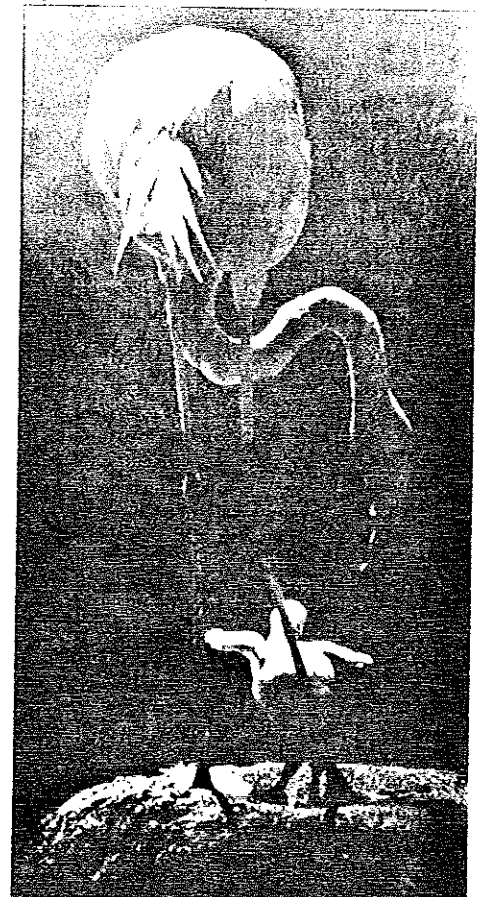
COVER STORY

OKLAHOMA ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY 1979-1980 WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY CONTEST WINNERS

These winners were selected from 391 entries in the three categories — color slides, black and white prints, and color prints. Judges Judy Samter, Dr. Martin Ausmus and Neil Garrison made their decisions from entrants submitted from 55 cities in 17 states. Black and white prints are featured on this page; color slides appear on page 20, and winners in color prints are reproduced in black and white on page 21.



"Russia and Frosti"
(3rd place, above)
by Henry G. Miller
Bronx, New York



"The First Step"
(1st place, right)
by Henry G. Miller
Bronx, New York

(Editor's note: Trusts and donations help to assure the continued growth of the Oklahoma Zoological Society — something to consider when planning your estate.)



Sue M. McKee
Executive Director
Telephone: 427-2461

Oklahoma Zoological Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 18424
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73154

September 12, 1980

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6000 N. Brookline
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May you have a long and happy life.

Sincerely yours,

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COVER PHOTO

"Robin Feeding Young"
by Dr. Pat Garrison

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