

Stalking the Snow Leopard's Haunts

by Cathy Pedevillano

"Together we can do more," the motto of IRBIS, the "Snow Leopard Lovers' Club," has recently taken on new meaning. Oleg and Irina Loginov, directors of IRBIS, began collaborating this summer with Bill Pfeiffer, executive director of The Sacred Earth Network (SEN), and me, Cathy Pedevillano, project leader of SEN's new "Eurasian Snow Leopard Project" (ESLP), to increase worldwide awareness of the urgent need to protect this declining species. SEN traveled to Kirghizia, the new home of IRBIS, to meet with the Loginovs and investigate areas of Snow Leopard habitat.

One of the least studied large predators in the world, the Snow Leopard (*Uncia uncia*) ranges from the mountainous regions of the Altai and Sayan of Russia through Central Asia, Mongolia, China and India. Estimates now put the total population of Snow Leopards in the former Soviet Union at just 800 to 1200. Only about five percent of their geographic range is protected in all of Siberia and Central Asia. Due to generally low fertility, the decline of prey species, habitat destruction and high poaching rates, the Snow Leopard has become seriously threatened and is now listed in the Red Data Book of Russia and Central Asia.

This cat's striking appearance, with its thick, beautiful fur and exceptionally long tail, has made it an object of capture for zoos and slaughter for pelts. Some zoos will pay up to \$5,000 for a cub, and a Snow Leopard pelt can draw as much as \$3,000. With profits like this to be made, indiscriminate killing and trapping persists. Kirghizia leads the world in providing Snow Leopards for zoos, and in the past few years populations here have declined by thirty percent. The highest densities of Snow Leopards in the FSU are found in Kirghizia, yet only about two percent of their range in this republic is protected.

IRBIS is the first NGO dedicated to the preservation of the Snow Leopard in the Former Soviet Union (FSU). The Loginovs, both biologists, founded the club in 1993, after working for six years at the Alma-Ata Zoo in Kazakhstan.

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There, poachers were actually killing Snow Leopards and stripping them of their fur ... in their cages. IRBIS began writing a syndicated column in local newspapers which became so popular that even poachers were reading it. This grew into the "IRBIS Bulletin," a quarterly publication educating people about Snow Leopards and their need for protection. The Loginovs also organized anti-poaching campaigns and distributed leaflets and posters in defense of the Snow Leopard. After two years in Ust-Kamenogorsk, Irina became ill from the intense pollution of the factory-laden city. In June the Loginovs moved to Sosnovka, a small village in northern Kirghizia, where IRBIS is resuming operations.

The mission of the eleven-year-old Sacred Earth Network is "to inspire and empower activism in defense of the biosphere." Through its Environmental Telecommunications Project, SEN helped create a computer network of over 300 environmental NGOs spanning 80 cities in all of the former Soviet Republics, and through the Russian Biodiversity Project, SEN has begun to deepen its commitment to some of those NGOs. The Eurasian Snow Leopard Project grew out of an observed need to publicize the plight of the Snow Leopard and support NGOs that focus on saving this species.

Exploring Snow Leopard habitat in Kirghizia this summer left many indelible impressions. Our first expedition led us into Aksu Zakaznik [special purpose nature preserve], a semi-protected area in north-central Kirghizia. There the magnificent snow-capped peaks of the Tien Shan Mountains rise from steep hills of dry desert steppe and valleys forged by raging rivers. Elevations range from 2,000 to 4,000 meters. Our first stop was an incredibly diverse subalpine meadow laced with streams of rushing snow melt. The meadow was bursting with wildflowers such as wild rose (*Rosa*), wild geranium (*Geranium*), and the Pskem onion (*Allium pskemense*), which grows only in the western Tien Shan and is listed in the Red Book. About 100 species of flowers grow in these meadows, many of whose medicinal values Oleg pointed out to us. More than 1,000 medicinal plants and forty species of trees and shrubs are found in the western Tien Shan Mountains. Standing amid these botanical treasures, we spied a Saker Falcon (*Falco cherrug*), a Lammergeier, or Bearded Vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*), and a species of Apollo Butterfly (*Parnassius* spp.), all listed in the Red Book.

Aksu boasts the highest density of Snow Leopards in Kirghizia, 8 to 10 cats in 49,000 hectares, according to the ranger. We stumbled upon the remains of an Ibex (*Capra ibex sibirica*) killed by a Leopard, proof that we were indeed in their home. We also inadvertently spied three poachers in our three days at Aksu. We deduced that they were after Ibex or Marmots (*Marmota caudata*), both staples of the Snow Leopard diet and neither in season for hunting. As a Zakaznik, Aksu is supposed to allow only controlled hunting for non-endangered species, but the entire area is patrolled by just one ranger who makes \$20 a month and has bullet scars on his back from a close brush with poachers. This is the reality of biodiversity conservation in the FSU: unsupported efforts against a backdrop of stunning beauty.

>From Aksu we headed east toward Lake Issyk-Kul, at 112 miles long and 668 meters deep, one of the world's largest, deepest and least known lakes. The crystal-clear waters of this remote glacial lake have made it the national treasure of Kirghizia. It is ringed by snow-capped peaks, wherein lies Snow Leopard habitat. Even though perched 1,607 meters above sea level, Issyk-Kul, which means "warm lake," never freezes, due to its slightly brackish salinity and the region's intensely sunny weather. Since Soviet-era restrictions and secrecy about some of the Issyk-Kul environs which apparently served as a Communist Party retreat and Soviet naval torpedo test site have fallen

away, this area has become open to tourists and development.

We entered the mountains south of Lake Issyk-Kul to see a completely unprotected version of Snow Leopard habitat. Elevations here range from 2,200 to 4,000 meters, with the characteristic snow-capped peaks, dry slopes and raging river. Forty-foot-high Firs (Abies) grow only in this valley. Here the pressures of forestry, mining and grazing weigh heavily on the land. Sheep and horse trails crisscross the dry slopes, and a new "improved" road leading to a gold mine bisects the valley. The road now allows busloads of tourists to visit a spectacular waterfall cascading from the steep cliffs. We spoke with "local cowboys" who had seen Snow Leopards, but only in the more remote regions of this drainage. This was a graphic example of the effects of unregulated development and tourism.

Dr. Emil Shukurov later told us there are organizations engaged in creating sustainable development plans for the Issyk-Kul region which include making portions of the area a Biosphere Reserve and using the Snow Leopard as its symbol. Dr. Shukurov is also involved in a pilot project combining public education, research on the dynamics of Snow Leopard populations and strategies for their protection in and around Zakazniks.

The last leg of our trek brought us to a drainage of the Karabalta River, not far from Sosnovka. This valley has an unfortunate reputation as the place in Kirghizia where the most Snow Leopards have been captured for zoos. A lot of Ibex hunting also goes on here, legally and illegally. The area ranges from 2,500 to 3,500 m. in altitude, with very steep, gravelly, dry habitat. Ibex sign was abundant: scat, beds, trails and skulls and bones left after kills. The steep hillsides were quite prohibitive, making hiking over the ridges into deeper Ibex and Snow Leopard habitat almost impossible.

These expeditions into Snow Leopard habitat and meetings with the Loginovs and Dr. Shukurov gave us an inside view of the Snow Leopard situation in Eurasia. The small number and area of protected territories is obviously inadequate for long-term species protection. Poaching is rampant, and without proper salaries and incentives for rangers to patrol these areas, it will continue. A massive public education campaign is essential to aid in anti-poaching efforts and reduce the market value of Snow Leopard pelts, as well as to stop the needless capturing for zoos.

The immediate goals of the ESLP are increasing public awareness about the decline of the Snow Leopard and raising funds to support NGOs such as IRBIS and others involved in Snow Leopard conservation. The ESLP will soon begin a "road show" across the northeastern United States, armed with a slide show and fact sheets about the Snow Leopard situation in Eurasia to be presented to a variety of groups, including children, environmentalists and the general public.

We truly hope that "together we can do more," and that in collaboration SEN and IRBIS, with grassroots support and other funding, will help stop the destruction of Snow Leopards and their habitat. As the Loginovs say, "the future of this magnificent cat is in the hands of the people."

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