

Imperiled Phantom of Asian Peaks

FIRST PHOTOGRAPHS OF
SNOW LEOPARDS IN THE WILD

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SUDDENLY I SAW the snow leopard. Wisps of cloud moved between us, and she became a ghost creature, appearing and disappearing as if in a dream. We were 120 feet apart on a rugged Pakistani cliff, neither of us moving—two beings bound to each other in a world of swirling snow (right). Thus, last December, I glimpsed one of the rarest and least known of the world's great cats.

I had traveled to a private hunting preserve in the Chitral district of northern West Pakistan to survey its wildlife—particularly the Kashmir markhor, a rare wild goat (pages 704-705). My associate, Zahid Beg Mirza of Punjab University, and I also hoped to advise His Highness the Mehtar of Chitral, who was turning his preserve into a sanctuary.

One day I saw leopard tracks in the snow at 11,000 feet. Determined to meet the elusive *Panthera uncia*, I began daily quests for fresh paw prints and "calling cards"—urine-splashed rocks or patches of gouged earth.

To entice the leopards I used live goats, but for two weeks the cats spurned my offerings. Then one morning the wheeling of vultures overhead told me a goat had been killed. Near the carcass I spied a female leopard on the crest of a spur. She stayed around for a week, consuming that goat and several more—and giving me the opportunity to make these unique photographs.

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CAMOUFLAGED behind a rocky parapet, the snow leopard (**right**) surveys her domain. The cats feed on musk deer, hares, wild sheep, and Kashmir markhors (**below**). Spiraling horns and white ruff characterize markhor rams, which often lead solitary lives except during the rutting season.

In winter markhors drop to lower slopes, where forage is more plentiful. There they climb evergreen oaks, teetering along their branches to browse on leathery leaves. The snow leopards also descend from the heights in search of prey. In the valleys the cats find domestic animals an easy mark. Here, too, they confront their only serious enemy—man.

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EXTACHROME (BELOW) AND REDMORNING © R. R. S.

STALKING THE HEIGHTS, I found tracks (left and lower) of both the hind feet and the larger forepaws of the 80-pound cat. Chiefly nocturnal and solitary, snow leopards roam crags up to 18,000 feet in the Hindu Kush, the Himalayas, and other central Asian ranges (map, below).

The fluffy tail of this female (right), almost the length of her yard-long body, seemed to assume a life of its own when she moved. But her eyes were her most extraordinary feature. Pale, with a frosty glitter softened only by a tinge of amber, they were the eyes of a creature used to immense solitudes and snowy wastes.

A luxurious smoky-gray coat, sprinkled with black, both protects and imperils the snow leopard. It permits her to fade into rocky backgrounds, but its magnificence arouses man's greed. The International Fur Trade Federation recently recommended that its members halt all trade in snow-leopard pelts, but tourists in Pakistan and India often defy export bans and buy illegal skins for as much as \$150 apiece.

Conservationists consider the species threatened, and much study is needed if it is to be saved. No one knows how many snow leopards exist; zoos house fewer than 100. My survey in Chitral, supported by grants from the New York Zoological Society and the National Geographic Society, provided a few facts, but many questions remain. With the realm of the snow leopard shrinking, its future looks bleak unless large sanctuaries can be created to safeguard this lovely cat. □



