

THE SNOW LEOPARD IN PAKISTAN

The photograph on the right is one of a unique set taken by the American GEORGE SCHALLER. They are probably the only colour photographs ever taken of the snow leopard in the wild

The tide may be turning for the snow leopard – but its future is definitely still in jeopardy. As mentioned last month, the skin – fur – of this large and attractive cat may not be imported into Britain. The United States had previously enacted a similar measure. It is protected in India, and its skin may not be exported from Pakistan; it is protected throughout its range in the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, it is a creature that is little known and certainly very rare, and may still become extinct in the wild despite these recent moves.

Found in the mountain ranges of central Asia, the snow leopard is patchily distributed in the Soviet Union, China, India, Mongolia, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. It inhabits the Himalayas, Pamirs, Hindu Kush, Tian Shan, and Altai mountains. It tends to live in the region between the tree-line (somewhere around 12,000 feet) and the permanent snow (perhaps 18,000 feet), and descends into the upper valley bottoms in the winter months. It is reportedly rare and uncommon in every area that it inhabits.

The rainfall pattern in the Himalayas is such that while precipitation levels of about 400 inches are found in Assam in the east, only 20 inches are experienced in Pakistan in the west. This pattern is reflected in the coniferous mountain forests, which are heaviest and most uniform in the east; they become progressively lighter as one travels west, until in Pakistan they are no more than scattered patches growing on those hillsides that are directly exposed to the nonsoon winds. As the snow leopard appears to be incapable of living in a true forest habitat, this fact probably

controls the extent to which the species descends in winter.

In Pakistan snow leopards largely subsist on markhor, ibex, and urial – all of which are still relatively plentiful – probably supplemented by pikas, snowcocks, and other birds and small mammals. They must also feed on musk deer, which are usually found in the birch and willow zone above the forest edge. Farther east, where there are no markhor or urial, the blue sheep must largely replace them in the snow leopard's diet. Everywhere they take domestic sheep and goats whenever those animals are not guarded effectively at night.

Estimates of numbers for this species are largely a matter of guesswork, but a realistic figure would be no more than about 400 to 500. In addition, there are some 90 or so in the world's zoos. Because of its strip distribution, it must always have been much less common than the ordinary leopard, even in the Himalayas, since the latter can (and did) exist anywhere from tree-line down to sea-level.

The Pakistan population is put at about 100, despite that country's rather small share of the Himalayas, and the following information derives to a great extent from Ian Grimwood.

'I was pleasantly surprised,' he told us, 'at the number of *nullahs* (watercourses) that are reported still to have a resident pair, particularly in Gilgit and Chitral – and it may be that the snow leopard's current status is better in Pakistan than in India, possibly because of an originally denser population and/or because its major prey species have not yet disappeared.'

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that in Pakistan the species is under such severe hunting pressure that its future survival is critically endangered. The reason for this state of affairs is not so much that the animal is persecuted for its fur – although the £15 to £20 that a skin fetches is undoubtedly a welcome dividend to many hunters – but because the hunting instinct of the average hill man is highly developed, and the mere existence of a wild animal of that size constitutes a challenge to him. In consequence, every snow leopard is ruthlessly persecuted as soon as its existence in an area becomes known, and there are now few if any unexploited valleys in which the species can live in safety.

The legal position is most unsatisfactory because the snow leopard is not accorded even game status, so that it may be hunted without licence and without limit. Even though the Wildlife Enquiry Committee set up by the Government of Pakistan in 1969 recommended that it should be placed on the totally protected list, the necessary legislation had not been enacted up to the time of the recent war with India. Nor is there any National Park or any other kind of reserve which gives territorial protection to even a single pair of snow leopards – except for Chitral Gol, where George Schaller's superb photograph was taken.

Chitral Gol is a narrow side valley joining the main Chitral valley near the town of that name (in the far north of Pakistan, and close to Afghanistan). Chitral Gol has been maintained as a private hunting reserve by successive generations of Mehtars, as the rulers of



that former State are called. Since the absorption of the State into the then Province of West Pakistan in 1969 the status of the area has been in doubt because the land commission, which was to consider individual claims to ownership of land, and to award title deeds thereto, has not yet done its work. H. H. Mohammad Saifulmulk Nasir, the present Mehtar, is a keen conservationist, as is his Regent, and they want to keep the area as a complete sanctuary for wildlife. But they are unable to implement their plans unless or until the land commission decides that Chitral Gol forms part of the Mehtar's private estate. Meanwhile for technical reasons it has not been an offence for anybody to hunt there.

Fortunately the prestige of the ruling family is such that with the aid of a few guards the area has in fact been kept almost inviolate and has escaped the fate of the more than 150 other private hunting reserves in the State, most of

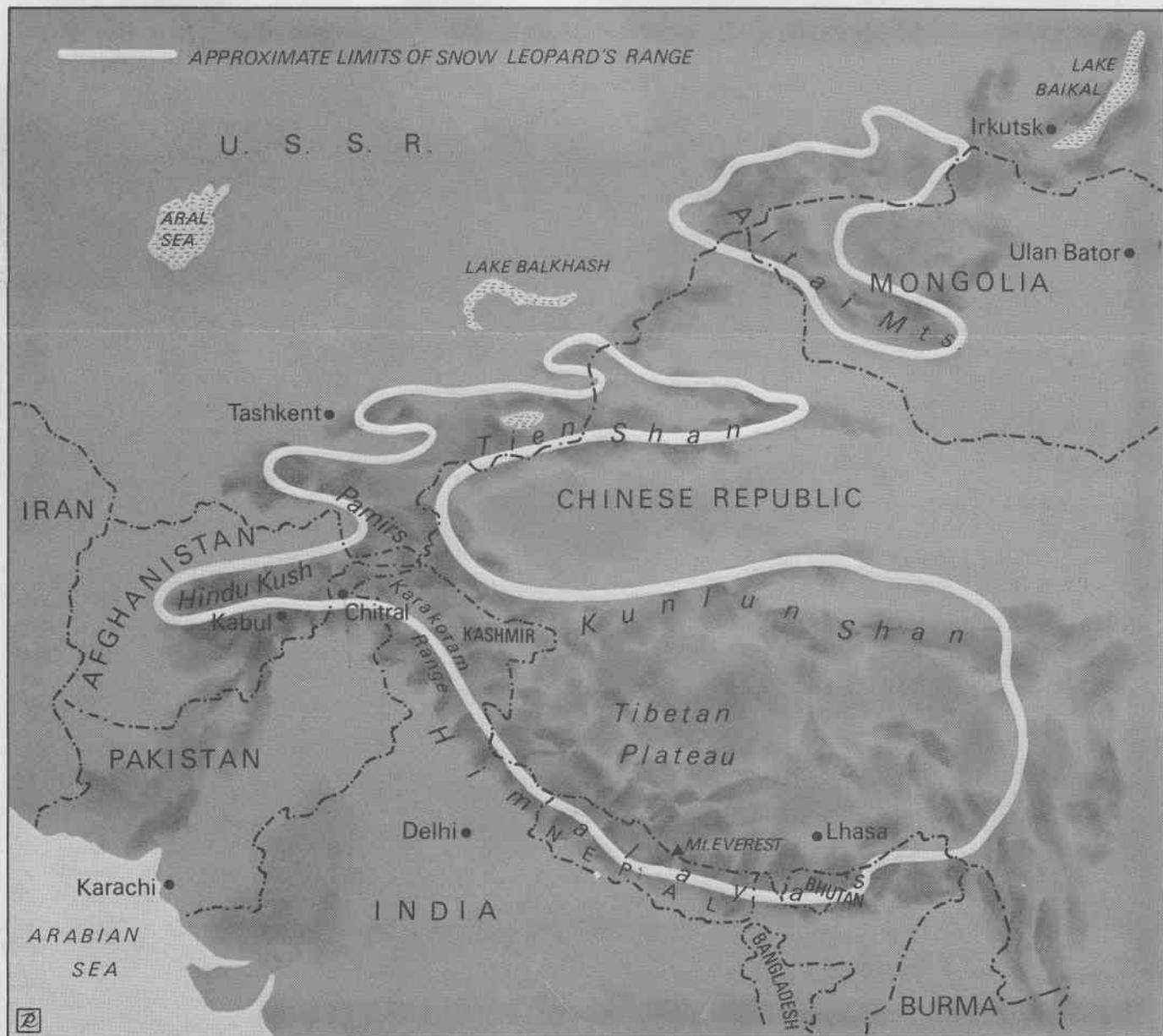
which have been overrun by local poachers (for once not acting illegally) and have had their wildlife almost exterminated. For several years a single pair of snow leopards have bred in Chitral Gol, at the remarkably low altitude of 7,000 feet, apparently producing their cubs in a different lair each year. Unfortunately, however, the valley is too small and narrow to contain even that one pair at all times, and George Schaller estimated that they spent no more than a third of their time there, despite the presence of an abundant population of markhor.

Whenever the animals leave the sanctuary they expose themselves to acute danger in the neighbouring valleys, which are heavily used by graziers and heavily hunted. As their cubs grow to adulthood and move out permanently to establish their own territories elsewhere they encounter similar peril. And so if Chitral Gol is to become a private wildlife sanctuary as part of the

Mehtar's estate, it will have to be bolstered by some other form of reserve covering the surrounding country to make it effective — or if it is to become some sort of national reserve or sanctuary, that reserve must cover a much wider area than the Chitral Gol valley itself.

'It is obvious', notes Ian Grimwood, 'that despite its endangered status, the snow leopard in Pakistan has no legal protection from hunting, nor is even a single pair adequately protected in any form of sanctuary or reserve, though both forms of conservation have been under consideration by the Government for some time. Unless the necessary legislation is enacted soon — and enforced — the outlook for the species in Pakistan is gloomy indeed.'

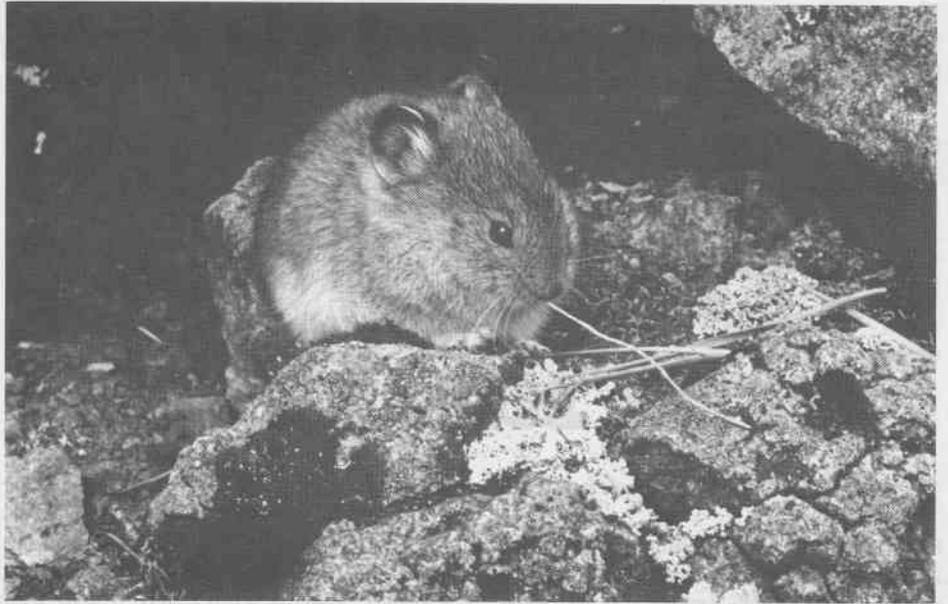
While the export of snow leopard skins is prohibited, articles made from them are not covered; and because most snow leopard skins are traditionally made up into fur coats and other



garments before being exported, the result is only a small brake on the fur trade (which as we have seen is not in itself the main incentive for killing). In point of fact, the new British legislation provides a similar loophole, in that while skins may not be imported, certain articles made from them apparently can be.

The skins which do find their way to the hands of the traders are difficult to monitor, and it is anyone's guess what percentage of the yearly kill they represent. It is significant, however, reports Grimwood, that in 1969-71 a furrier in Peshawar usually had some 15 to 20 whole skins in his store and he admitted that his annual turnover might be as high as 50. Since he is far from being the only man in the trade, it is clear that the present offtake is very much higher than a total population of certainly no more than a very few hundreds can possibly withstand for long.●

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Map below left shows approximate range of the snow leopard. This page: two probable prey species of the snow leopard. Pika (above) is found in both Old and New Worlds — this one is actually a North American species. Urial (below) was photographed in north-west Pakistan

JAMES HANCOCK

