

Sunshine and the Shadow

Text: **Kulbhushansingh Suryawanshi**

‘**What** could it be that the boy had confused for a sheep stuck in the snow?’ Curious, I had peered through the spotting scope. There were two of them ... was it *Sunshine*? But who was that with her? Why were they here in broad daylight...? *Sunshine* was afar in the low resolution photograph that my friend Charu had sent to me. But, she was one of the most beautiful beings that I had ever seen. Though the photograph was not too clear, one couldn’t miss the striking features of this elusive cat – a Snow Leopard. Charu’s email read “results from last summer’s camera trapping exercise in Spiti”. The camera traps had captured many images of four different snow leopards. He had attached few low resolution images of all the four snow leopards. The first was a large male who had lost his tail; he had been named ‘Tail cut’. The second was another male but not as large as Tail cut; he had been named ‘Eureka’. And finally there was a photograph of a mother and her cub. The mother had been named ‘Sunshine’ and her cub had been left unnamed.



Currently pursuing his Ph.D. on livestock depredation by Snow Leopards in the Trans-Himalaya at Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysore, Kulbhushan is the alumni of WCS-NCBS Masters Course in Wildlife Biology and Conservation and has studied the blue sheep for his Masters thesis.



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Sunshine and her cub in the vast expanse of snow surrounding Spiti, Himachal Pradesh

This fall winter I had set off on a mission to Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, with the hope of studying the foraging behaviour and eating habits of the blue sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*), one of the most important preys of the white cat, the snow leopard.

Spiti which lies in the rain shadow area of the Trans-Himalayan region is subject to harsh winters (the temperature drops down to -35°C). The ground is covered with over two feet of snow with gale forced winds blowing throughout. Following the blue sheep in such weather conditions was a tough task, but I was geared up to rough it out.

On reaching Spiti in early December at the camp, a remote village of Tashigang, I was feeling strange to set base in a village comprising of merely

6 houses and 18 people. The winter had already set in and the night time temperature would drop to -20°C . Takpa and Kalzang, two local guys were to help me with my data collection alongwith Sushil, Thillay, Kalzang Gurmet and Sheru working in the Nature Conservation Foundation for wildlife conservation in the region. Together we set up the camp; my home for the next six months!

Thus, began my quest of running the camp and working in the fields with the aid of Kalzang and Takpa. I began to follow the blue sheep, spending days and nights watching and taking meticulous notes on their foraging behaviour. One fine day on our way from the camp to the area, where I had last seen the blue sheep, we came across a dead blue sheep

alongwith two sets of snow leopard pug marks around the kill. On following the tracks for a little while, we came to a site where the pair had rested, and then the tracks disappeared into the craggy cliffs, which we could not follow.

My routine was pretty much in flow, I would take a day off once every ten days. On one of those idle days, I was lazing around the terrace of our camp with my spotting scope, sipping on a hot tea, imploring lady luck as I hadn't spotted anything yet. Time passed by ... a little boy from the village walked up to the roof of the camp and started peering through the spotting scope. He saw something and concluded that it was a blue sheep stuck in the snow. I laughed his remark off, "blue sheep are adapted to living in these conditions and would



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Bharal graze on open undulating grassy slopes but do not hesitate to take to precipitous cliffs when disturbed

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not get stuck in the snow”! He acknowledged my argument, and did not pursue the subject any further. But then, my curiosity got the better of me. What could it be that the boy had confused for a blue sheep stuck in snow? I peered through the spotting scope. What I saw was one of the biggest surprise of my life. It was a snow leopard, a kilometre away, silently plodding through about two feet of powder snow; with only the head showing it seemed as if it was swimming in the deep snow! I kept my spotting scope focused and tried hard to see where the snow leopard was headed. Suddenly, I noticed another movement through the corner of the spotting scope. There were two snow leopards, walking parallel to each other maintaining a distance of about twenty

feet! Enthralled, I decided to get a closer look and ran downstairs, calling Sushil, Kalzang and Thillay on the way. The next moment the four of us and a couple of boys from the village headed to a place where we could hide and wait for the approaching snow leopards to take a closer look and note the direction in which they were headed.

Soon we were positioned at the right spot and the two snow leopards arrived without any further delay. They were across a deep gorge from us but the distance as the crow flies was less than a few hundred meters. Snow leopards are known for their secretive behaviour. The first photograph of a snow leopard was taken in the 1970s. They are nocturnal, live in extremely rugged terrain and are very well camouflaged; appropriately

called by some as ‘ghost of the mountains’. And here they were two of them, in bright day light, barely a few hundred meters from us.

One was clearly older than the other. It had to be them! Sunshine and her cub ... they were the only mother-cub pair existing in the area! It was unlikely that another mother-cub pair would have its home range overlapping that of Sunshine. While Sunshine lay in the snow, her cub played with her tail. All of a sudden both were still and alert, we could feel the tension in the air. Further away, on the same slope, we noticed movement ... immediately we focussed our lenses ... another snow leopard! We couldn’t believe our eyes. One of most elusive wild cat of the world and we were watching three together! Trans-fixed by this development we failed to notice the tension building up, around Sunshine and her cub. The cub’s movements softened; it crouched, belly brushing the floor, almost disappearing into the surrounding.

The third snow leopard appeared to be a large male. He stayed about 100 m from Sunshine and her cub, hidden in a rock crevasse by now. The tension persisted for over an hour, throughout which Sunshine while basking in the open sunny slope kept a close watch on the new male, while her cub stayed put in its rocky hideout, peeping outside at regular intervals. There was no doubt in my mind that the large male was aware of the cub’s presence and location, but never displayed any aggression. In many large cat species, males are known to be aggressive towards cubs that are not their own, sometimes even killing them. That explained the undercurrent here ... but why was the large male so calm? Was he the cub’s father? I will never know...

Our insufficient observations didn’t allow us to pick up details on the male, we couldn’t even confirm if he was one of the resident leopards or a new visitor

to the area. By now it had been over 5 hours since the first leopard was spotted, soon it was evening and the sun dipped below the ridge-line in the west and the temperatures started to dip rapidly, a signal for us to leave soon (I was unable to hold the binoculars due to the cold). We left the snow leopards after it became too dark to notice any movement; even against the bright snow.

That night I stayed up wondering about what must have happened after we left. Who was the large male? Would he attack the cub in the dark or would they just be fine together? What about Sunshine? This was the breeding season of the snow leopards. Would she mate with this large male? Was her cub old enough to wean off and look after himself? The next day, at the first light of the day, we were back at the site; but they were gone! The wind had cleaned whatever little remained to be read of the footprints. There was no evidence of the presence of the animals from the previous day, just uniform snow cover all across.

That day onwards I was much more optimistic about sighting a snow leopard, I was watchful and rewarded soon. A few weeks later, while observing a herd of blue sheep over the deep gorge formed by the Shilla nala (one of Spiti river's tributaries), a rock suddenly moved in the valley below. The movement was not at the bottom of the gorge, but on a ledge on my side of the gorge; only a few hundred metres below me.

A grey shadow slyly slid past a few rocks and settled down again. I focused my binoculars on the exact spot, but it was difficult to spot the shadow. It moved again and kept walking along the ledge and finally ... a beautiful snow leopard emerged from the stealthy shadow. It must have been on the ledge for quite some time but I had noticed it only when it moved, warily it kept



NCF CAMERA TRAP IMAGE

The strikingly beautiful snow leopard reminds one of the most mysterious cats in the world. This wandering cat is rarely sighted by local people. Due to its elusiveness; its accurate population is not known, though the estimates range from 100 to 200. Snow leopards inhabit mountain regions of central Asia. In India, their geographical cover encompasses a large part of the Western Himalaya including the states of Himachal Pradesh, J&K and Uttarakhand with a sizeable population in Ladakh, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh in Eastern Himalaya in addition to Nepal, Bhutan and parts of China.

walking. I knew it hadn't noticed me as I was watching it from the top, literally a bird's eye view. The peculiarity of this leopard confirmed my doubts – it was Sunshine's cub. I had often seen pug marks of an adult leopard and a cub in this area ... but where was Sunshine?

I followed the cub along a parallel ledge vertically above it. I lost sight of it for some time but knew where the ledge would lead him; I rushed along the ledge and waited for the cub to emerge at the other end. It took him a while, but he came and startled a herd of blue sheep that were feeding there. Although he walked like a ghostly shadow, his movements were awkward when he approached the blue sheep herd. His hunting techniques were still poor ... which meant that he had not weaned off completely. Maybe Sunshine had gone

hunting and her cub was just trying his luck around their den? The startled blue sheep soon left and the cub sat down under an over hanging rock. After a while, Takpa, my friend and assistant, came looking for me. We just sat there watching the cub sleep. Then just as silently as it appeared, it got up and disappeared like a shadow in the boulders at the bottom of the valley bottom; never a sound nor a glint; always camouflaged in his surroundings.

I saw the cub only one more time before the end of the project, a brief glimpse. It peeped at us from behind some rocks. But now every time I return to the mountains and see a pug mark in the snow, it fills me with joy, hoping that it is the shadow, a little older now ... holding its own territory ... hunting for itself!