

The irbis or snow leopard (*Uncia uncia*) lives in the high mountains of Central Asia—from East Turkestan to Kashmir and Sikkim, from the Altai and Pamir mountains to southeast Tibet. It is a medium-sized predacious feline and a typical mountain animal. Its nor-

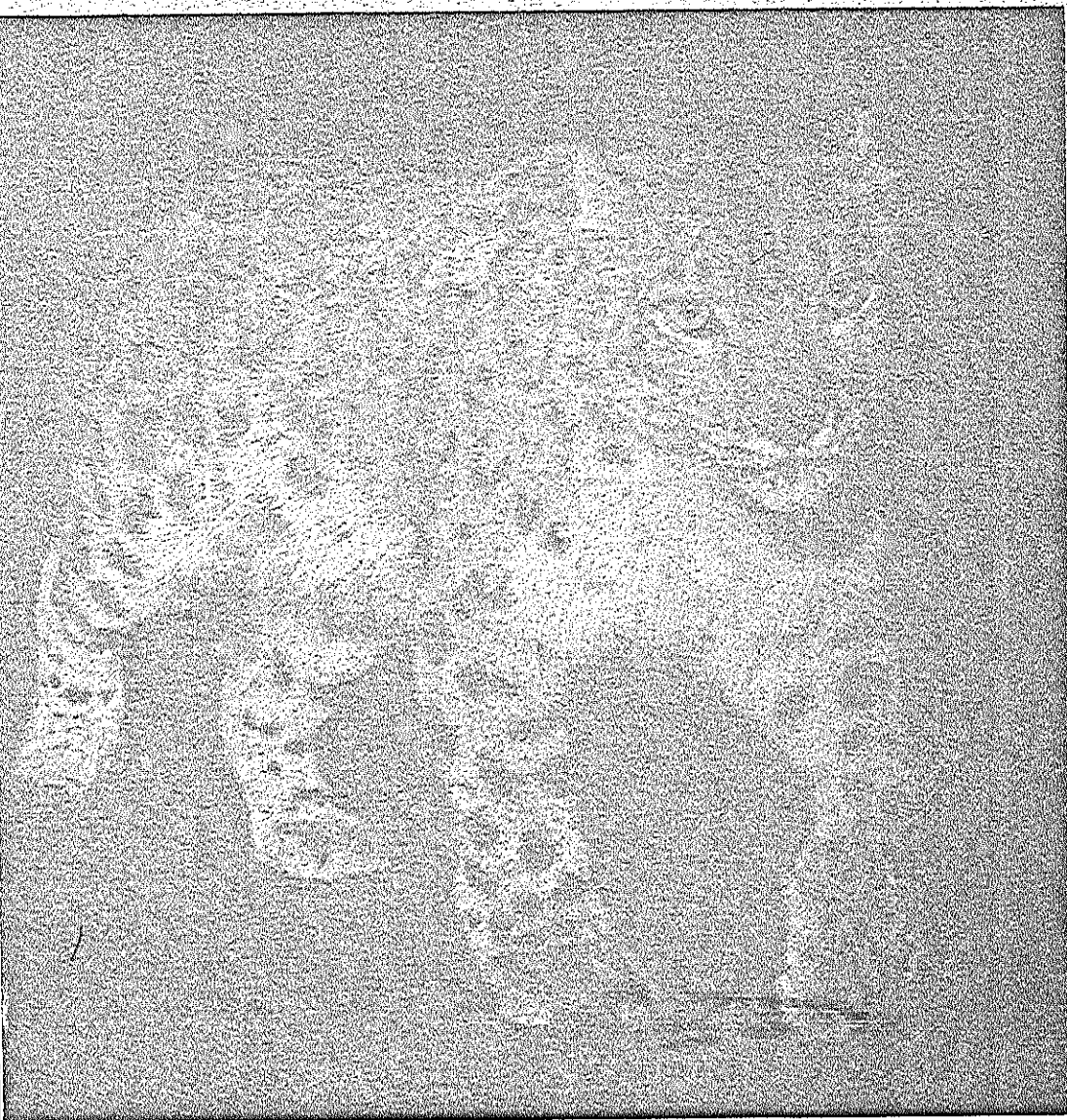
mal habitat and hunting grounds lie at a height of 6,500 feet to 9,800 feet. Generally speaking, the coniferous forest zone marks its lower frontier. In the hot season, the snow leopard also moves into the sparsely vegetated high mountain regions up to a height of

19,600 feet. It likes to use the many caves and crevices in the rocks as places of refuge and for breeding. Its prey are the alpine animals, especially wild sheep and goats, but also birds and rodents. During the snowy winter months it follows the wild animals into lower-lying valleys.

Daring and clever hunters search out the snow leopards in the mountains. Padded spring traps await them—not to take their lives but to capture them. The hunters bind them in such a way that they cannot injure them with their teeth or forepaws. Snow leopards captured in this way can be kept in zoological gardens, where they are among the rarest and most attractive animals. In the experience of a number of zoos, snow leopards can become extremely good-natured and friendly under the protection of man.

There are no accounts available of the breeding habits of this feline in its natural surroundings. It is therefore a happy circumstance that snow leopards have been bred and reared recently in a number of zoological gardens. As early as 1912 a young snow leopard was born in the Leipzig Zoo, but it unfortunately did not survive. Three snow leopards were born in the Dresden Zoo in 1936, and the father also helped to rear them.

The same thing happened on the Alberta Game Farm in Canada. The two parents reared their young without difficulty. It is therefore probably the normal thing, in the inhospitable habitat of the snow leopards, too, for



the parents to care for and feed their young together. Whether they live in pairs at all times or only during the breeding period is not clear from the small quantity of literature available, in which opinions differ.

According to observations made in the zoos of Kaunas, Krefeld and St. Louis, the rutting time is between January and March. This is marked in the case of the females by loss of appetite and increased miaowing or howling. The rut lasts about seven days and during this period there can be ten to twenty copulations a day. The gestation period was found to be 98 to 107 days. Births generally occurred

in the morning and lasted two to three hours. The number of a litter varies between one and five. The birth-weight was between 300 and 380 grams (10.5 to 13.3 ounces) in Kaunas, and between 368 and 708 grams (13 to 25 ounces) in St. Louis. The young open their eyes between the 7th and 9th day of life. Of the 96 snow leopards living in a total of 42 zoos in mid-1969, 20 were born there.

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