





Encyclopedia of Endangered Species

Edited by Mary Emanoil
In Association with IUCN-The World Conservation Union

IUCN
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Snow leopard

Uncia (Panthera) uncia

Phylum	Chordata
Class	Mammalia
Order	Carnivora
Family	Felidae
Status	Endangered, IUCN Endangered, USFWS Appendix I, CITES
Range	Afghanistan; Bhutan; China; India; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Mongolia; Nepal; Pakistan; Russia; Tajikistan; Uzbekistan

Description and Biology

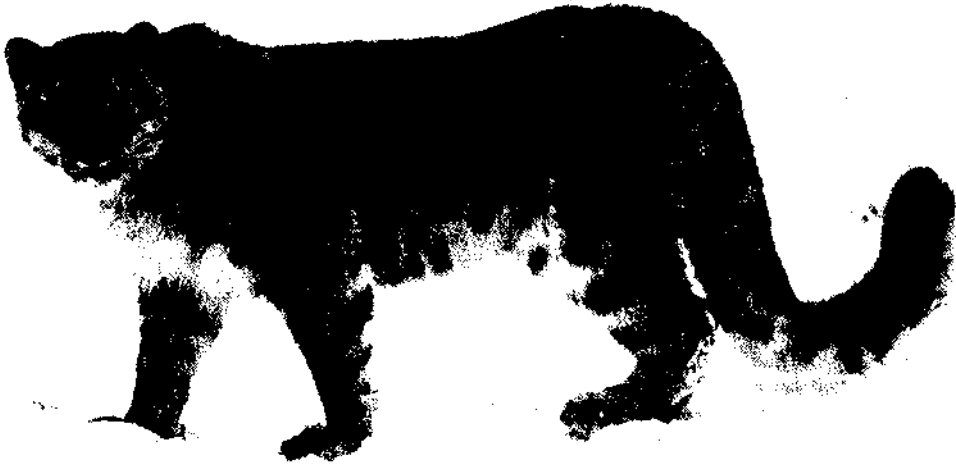
This beautiful leopard has a coat of long, pale gray fur with white underneath. Its coat is patterned with solid spots on the head and legs, with dark gray rosettes (larger spots) on the rest of the body. A little smaller than the leopard, the snow leopard averages 48-56 in (122-142 cm) in length at maturity, with a tail length of 32-40 in (80-100 cm) and an average weight of 132-165 lb (60-75 kg). Its adaption to a cold and snowy high altitude terrain can be seen in several features: strong chest muscles for climbing, large and heavily padded forepaws for walking through snow, and a thick coat in winter.

Although this leopard is mostly nocturnal, crepuscular (dawn and dusk) activity has been recorded in some locations. The preferred prey in most parts of its range is the bharal, a kind of goat with sheep-like characteristics. Snow leopards also take Asiatic ibex, yak—which can weigh more than 440 lb (200 kg)—marmots, musk deer, and domestic livestock. Individual home ranges in one snow leopard population in Nepal varied with availability of prey from 5-15 sq mi (12-39 sq km) and overlapped considerably. A superb leaper, this animal has been reported to jump as far as 50 ft (15 m) in a single bound.

Like other big cats such as tigers, snow leopards are generally solitary animals. Males and females associate only for mating, with females giving birth to one to four cubs in a den in spring or early summer; the gestation period is 98-103 days. Cubs nurse for at least two months and remain dependent for nine months to one year.

Habitat and Current Distribution

The snow leopard's range extends over a massive area of almost one million sq mi (2.5 million sq km). The species is found in the Hindu Kush mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan, along the Karakorum and Pamir mountain ranges. The habitat further extends through the Tien Shan, Altai, and Sayan ranges along the borders of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, and Mongolia, continuing south through the Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan provinces of China, into Tibet and the Himalayan countries of Bhutan, Nepal, and India. The species occurs sparsely throughout this range; population figures in the wild are unknown, although some biologists put the population as high as 5,000.



Snow leopard.

Snow leopards inhabit alpine and subalpine zones above 9,840 ft (3,000 m), where these zones are closely associated with arid and semi-arid steppe habitats. The species has been seen as low as 1,968 ft (600 m) in some parts of its range and, in the summer months, may be found as high as 18,040 ft (5,500 m). In India and Pakistan, these leopards are known to move down to oak, fir, and rhododendron forests in winter, and in certain parts of their range are reported to remain in conifer forests throughout the year.

History and Conservation Measures

As might be expected, the snow leopard has long been hunted for its handsome coat. Legal restrictions to animal trade instituted by the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) have eliminated much of the demand for leopard fur, but it is still poached and sold on the black market. Enforcement is difficult because of the inaccessibility and isolation of much of the habitat.

Although poaching remains a problem, the primary threat to this species is now the expansion of human activities into its habitat. As the human population grows and habitats are developed for livestock grazing, traditional prey becomes scarce. Snow leopards are then forced to feed on domestic livestock, thus becoming targets for angry livestock owners. Survival of this leopard depends upon the preservation of areas of natural habitat large enough to provide hunting ranges and support sufficient prey. It also depends on improving the living standard of local human populations and ensuring that they benefit economically from the presence of such wildlife in their region.

Since the remaining snow leopards are scattered over a such wide range, they are divided into small, isolated populations. Studies are in progress to determine the effect of this isolation on genetic variability. Scientists are also trying to determine if inbreeding has occurred.