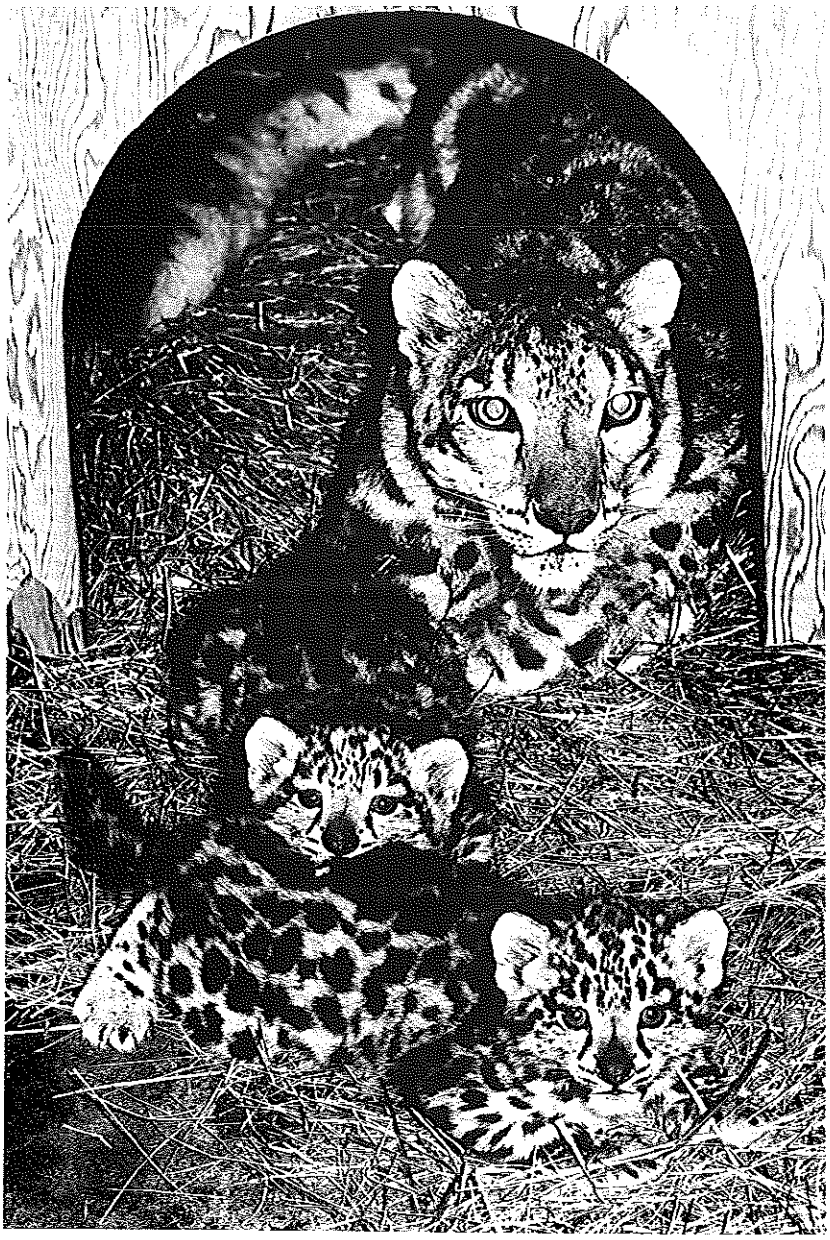
Houston's Summer Snow



Mother snow leopard, Simone, was not present during the initial examination of her offspring. She had been lured out of the den with a choice food item. She accepted the separation and handling of her cubs as part of the natural course of events, settling back into motherhood without incident.

It is a constant source of amazement when watching a snow leopard that so much beauty of both form and function can be combined in a single animal. Its body reflects a remarkable unity with the environment it encounters at high altitudes and northern latitudes. Externally, the snow leopard's shadow-spotted, pale gray coat is thick and fluffy with a dense woolly undercoat; paw pads are cushioned by soft hair; and ears are small to conserve surface area. The long tail is thickly furred and can be used as a wrap-around muffler while resting in extreme cold. We would also expect to find many interesting internal adaptations to low temperatures, but very little is known about snow leopard physiology.

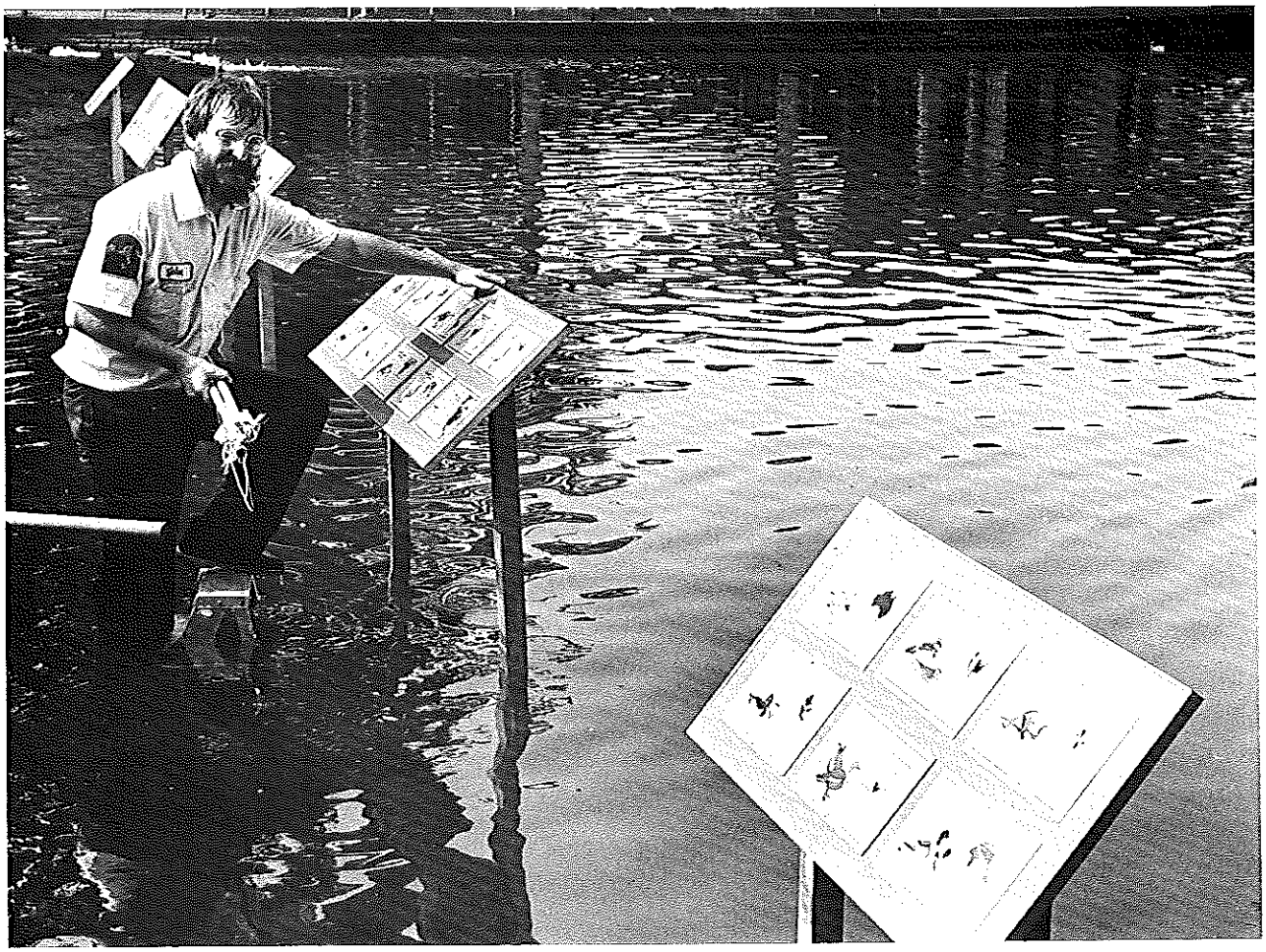
Houston's climate is vastly different from that of the Himalayan region of India, Pakistan, and Tibet, and of several lesser mountain ranges in Mongolia and Russia, where snow leopards originate. Despite their adaptations to the cold, members of this beautiful feline species are apparently able to adjust to altitudes 8,000 feet lower and temperatures 50 °F. higher than those they would normally encounter in the wild.

We were delighted to witness evidence of this adjustment with the successful birth of two healthy female cubs at the zoo this past August. This litter represents the second attempt at reproduction by our young pair. Their first offspring, born in 1977, did not survive, but this is frequently the case with inexperienced mothers. The initial pregnancy often seems to be like a biological trial run. This practice must, however, have made perfect, as this year the mother is giving her youngsters excellent care.

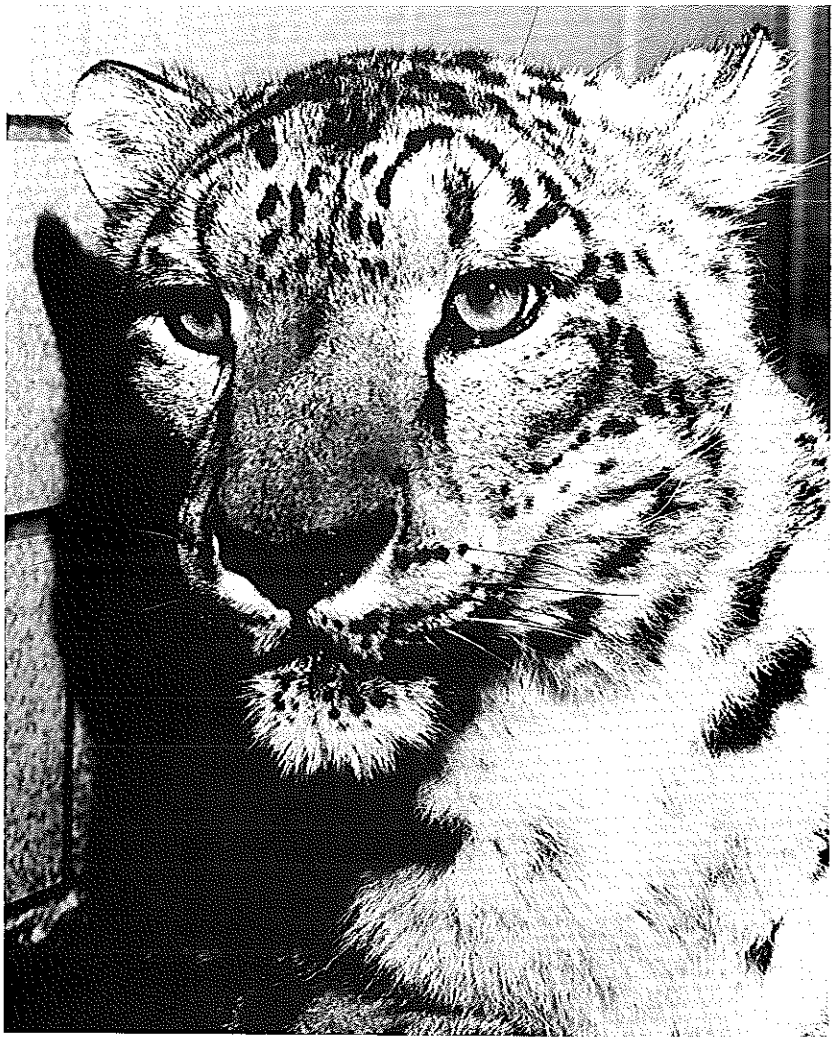
Today, continuing generations of snow leopards are reproducing so successfully in captivity that the removal of additional specimens from the wild for exhibit purposes is no longer justified or necessary. Being killed for their luxurious pelts once posed a critical problem for the snow leopard, as well as for all species of exotic cats, but changing attitudes toward the value of furs as opposed to the value of life have reduced this pressure somewhat.

The greatest threat to endangered species and all other forms of life is the current destruction of the earth's environments brought about by worldwide population pressures. Snow leopards are more fortunate than most threatened species because their habitat is so remote and harsh that human encroachment is still extremely difficult.

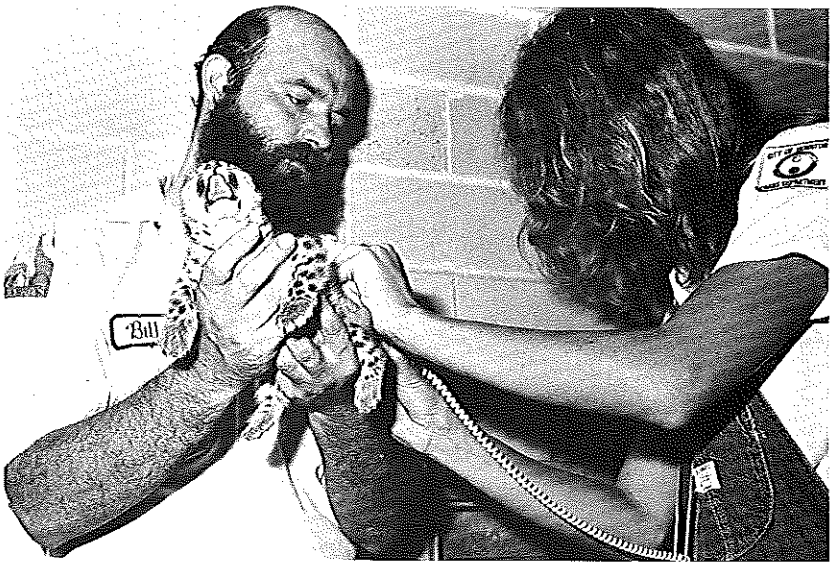
If Zoological Society plans are successful, the lions may soon take pride in a new home. This preliminary study model was recently completed by the architectural firm of Caudill-Rowlett-Scott. The new lion facility is one of seven major large cat displays included in the project. The Society is currently studying the feasibility of securing the estimated 1.5 to 2 million dollars needed for completion.



No, it is not Prince Siegfried from Swan Lake. Exhibits supervisor John O'Fiel is installing new labels for the waterfowl display, which does include swans. These colored graphics will greatly assist the zoo visitor in the identification of the many colorful and graceful species in this exhibit.



The parents of the two snow leopard cubs were themselves born in captivity in American zoos. Rayf, the father, was born in 1973 at the Oklahoma City Zoo to parents who were also captive born. Simone, the mother, was born at the San Antonio Zoo in 1974 of wild-caught parents.



After one week of seclusion, this tiny snow leopard cub was disturbed slightly in her air-conditioned den so her condition could be determined. She and her sister were examined, weighed, and measured; their temperatures were taken electronically; and they were obliged to donate fecal and blood samples. Tipping the scales at one pound, seven ounces each, the fluffy, spotted balls of fur asserted their individuality and indignation at this treatment by hissing and spitting with claws extended, even though their eyes were not yet open. Officially pronounced healthy, the cubs were returned to their cozy nest box.

HOU-ZOO

THE ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF HOUSTON

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Dr. Gary Harwell participated in August in a laparoscopy procedure to determine the fertility of the female gorilla from the Houston collection. It has been determined that the female is indeed capable of conceiving, but the male's sperm is not viable. Artificial insemination procedures will be undertaken at a suitable time to attempt to breed Vanilla.

Welcome Gary Harwell, D.V.M.

What are the most important tools a veterinarian can have to function properly in a zoo setting? According to Gary Harwell, recently hired veterinarian for the zoo, an expert staff of assistants and adequate facilities are uppermost on his list. He is pleased to report that the staff he inherited from Dr. Barbara Whitlock is excellent and that the City of Houston is working to solve the problem of inadequate quarantine facilities for zoo animals. Top priority will be given to the acquisition of a building for performing necropsies, or examinations of animals which have died. These examinations are critical, as they give insight into methods for prevention of similar problems in the living specimens.

Harwell is a recent graduate of Texas A&M University School of Veterinary Medicine. He has had experience working with exotic animals at the San Antonio Zoo, and spent much of his spare time in Houston during the last few months of his schooling observing and assisting in the veterinary program here.

When asked about his goals for the veterinary program at the zoo, Dr. Harwell replied, "I want to be in a position to handle adequately the daily health problems of the animal collection, including all emergencies. We also must maintain all routine programs such as vaccinations, testing, parasite control, and we must be prepared to handle necropsies on all animals which die, regardless of size."

Dr. Harwell also wants to see that research programs initiated by Greg Mengden are continued.

Why is this young man anxious to work in the frustrating field of exotic animal medicine rather than accepting the role of the friendly local dog and cat doctor? "Because I enjoy wild animals and zoo animals and feel more comfortable with them."

We are delighted Dr. Harwell has accepted this challenge and look forward to many years of successful problem solving with him as part of the zoo staff.