

INDO-U.S. SNOW LEOPARD PROJECT

Progress Report for Spring, 1986

From the Field

The snow leopard survey project research team left Dehra Dun for the Garhwal Himalayas on April 5. This new survey site is northwest of Delhi and in the extreme northwest of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The area of snow leopard survey was within the Govind Pashu Vihar Wildlife Sanctuary, which encompasses the upper Tons river catchment and the popular tourist destination of Harki Dun. The highest peaks include Bandarpunch (20,956 ft.) and Swargarohini (20,512 ft.). Several snow leopard sightings have been reported here over the years, prompting the choice of this area as the first comparative survey site on the south side of the Himalayas.

The sanctuary includes 47 villages and is subject to substantial forest and medicinal plant exploitation, as well as continued illegal hunting. The local people are primarily farmers, with a limited number of livestock. However, during summer, migratory sheep and goat herders utilize the higher elevations near and above timberline.

The villages are present up to about 8,500' ft. with adjacent lands dominated by open forests of chir pine, deodar cedar, oak and other broad leaved species. From the upper villages to timberline (11,500 ft.), the slopes are heavily forested with blue pine, deodar cedar, silver fir, spruce, yew, and broad leaved species such as oaks, maples, walnut, horse-chestnut, hazelnut and rhododendron. In mid-April, deep snowpacks still occur above 13,000 ft. on southerly slopes and above 9,500 ft. on northerly slopes.

The sanctuary has a diverse large mammal fauna, including blue sheep, Himalayan tahr, serow, goral, barking deer, wild boar, black and brown bears, and both the common leopard and snow leopard. There is also a small number of large deer which appear to be an unusual high elevation population of sambar. The research team surveyed the main and tributary valleys up to and just above the snowline. About 50 blue sheep

were seen in very rugged terrain in the upper valleys, and tracks of all other large mammals (except brown bear) were encountered. Several goral, Himalayan tahr, wild boar and sambar were seen. Leopard sign was found in several places, but at this point we are unable to confirm whether this was of snow leopard or common leopard.

There is a similar confusion among locals as to whether their livestock losses were due to common leopard or snow leopard (sometimes

also to bears). However, most of the village

dogs wear wide iron collars around their necks to deter the attacks of common leopard, indicating a high elevation presence of this species. No such protection measures were used on dogs in Ladakh, where the snow leopard is resident on the southern side of the Himalayas in this area (which is likely), then the deep snowpacks must force it into contact with the common leopard in winter. This interaction and the identity of leopard species present in various areas of the sanctuary are important factors that must be determined in the future.

The snow leopard project team moved to the Kulu-Manali region of the upper Beas Valley in northern Himachal Pradesh on May 5. After meeting with local Wildlife Department officials, the team split into two groups to survey several areas in the upper catchment of the Beas and its tributary, the Parbati River. This region in the eastern Pir Panjal mountain range is near the southeastern extreme of ibex distribution, includes populations of other snow leopard prey (blue sheep and Himalayan tahr), and is the southern limit of snow leopard range in this part of the Himalayas.

We first surveyed two side-valleys just east of Manali, one of which is used as a major route for shepherds and their livestock heading north into Lahul. Evidence of wildlife included a small population of ibex, sign of brown bear and musk deer, and some leopard tracks. Then, in the upper Parbati Valley, east of Kulu, we found a few more ibex on peaks bordering the north side of the catchment (near the previous survey site), about 80 blue sheep in the upper Parbati, one brown bear, and more leopard tracks. As in the last survey region in Uttar Pradesh, there was confusion as to whether the leopard tracks we found were those of common

leopard or snow leopard. However, the reported scarcity of common leopards in the upper reaches of the Kulu-Manali region suggests the probability that these were tracks of snow leopard. Even so, the snow leopard does not appear to be well known or frequently encountered in this area.

Late spring snowfalls near timberline kept

the alpine meadows deep in snow, and made travel relatively difficult at the higher elevations. However, these conditions also kept the wildlife relatively low, with most of the ibex and blue sheep observed at between 11,000 ft. and 13,000 ft., and the leopard tracks at about 11,000 ft. Similar to the previous survey region in Uttar Pradesh, the mountains here are covered with coniferous and deciduous forests up to about 11,500 ft. on northerly slopes and 9,000 ft. on southerly slopes. Timber harvest and grazing are the most important impacts on the forest, although some of the forest lands we passed were isolated by areas of rugged terrain and are still in good condition as wildlife habitat. Conservation areas in the region include a proposed national park that may border on the Parbati river, and a wildlife sanctuary just west of Manali. Due to continued snowfalls at the higher elevations in May, the Rohtang pass into

Lahul, which we needed to cross to continue to the next stage of the survey, was still closed to vehicles. We had to go on foot over the pass, then by vehicle through Lahul to the starting point for our trek over the Himalayan crest back into Zaskar, Ladakh. Here we will complete the field work with surveys near our original location in the upper Suru Valley, and in the vicinity of previous work in the proposed Hemis National Park. In mid-July we return to Srinagar, and from there to the Wildlife Institute of India in Dehra Dun to compile reports and plan for the next phase of the snow leopard project - a detailed study of snow leopard ecology in Ladakh.