

# Wildlife

The International Wildlife Magazine (formerly Animals Magazine)

## Comment



It is understandable that the killing of skylarks and ortolan buntings by the French has dominated the headlines whenever the EEC draft Directive on bird conservation is mentioned in the media in Britain. This has to some extent however obscured the real issue on which the draft Directive is at present foundering — the content of Annex III, the list of dead species which may be sold.

The Commission originally proposed that it should be illegal to sell any dead wild bird with the exception of six species: pheasant, red-legged partridge, partridge, red grouse, mallard and woodpigeon. These (with the exception of woodpigeon) represented species

commonly reared and released for sport and therefore considered commercially harvestable. This concept of protecting species through the banning of commercialisation in their corpses is not unknown in the UK; for example in Northern Ireland the sale of corpses of most species, and in Great Britain the sale of dead geese, is prohibited. Limitations on the scale envisaged in the EEC Directive however brought cries of protest from British shooting organisations.

Meanwhile in France, hunters who found most of the Directive unpalatable supported strongly the Commission's proposal in Annex III and urged the French government to stand firm on this issue. Their concern over the sale of dead game apparently dates back to the French revolution when much land was freed and hunting rights became held in common. The principal means to control hunting excesses which might arise was considered to be restrictions on sale of the quarry. So hunting organisations in France have long been used to this practice.

Conservation interests, so vital in the Directive, have therefore found themselves embroiled in a hunter against hunter dispute, with French hunters urging a ban on commercialisation and British, German and Danish hunters opposing the ban. The situation becomes more complex when it is realised that the French government could anyway continue to ban commercialisation in France under the Directive, since this is a further protection measure allowed under the Directive which is a base line. Equally the British, German and Danish governments could give up the right to sell many species since in practice few if any are sold.

Given these facts a compromise is only made impossible for the governments involved because of political manoeuvrings entirely unrelated to the real bird conservation problems tackled by the Directive. A compromise is what is urgently needed by all on this issue but until it is reached birds will continue to be killed in untold millions by methods outlawed in the Directive.

Ian Prestt

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# Snow Leopard

by Rodney Jackson

Despite complete legal protection, still hunted by impoverished tribesmen in Nepal

The snow leopard, perhaps the most beautiful of the large Asian cats and certainly one of the rarest, is being hunted to extinction in west Nepal despite local and international laws to protect it. My search for the elusive cat began in the Namlang Valley, a remote inner region north of the Kanjiroba Himal near the Tibetan border — an area of sparse vegetation and a dry climate north of the main Himalayas. It is in rugged and harsh country like this that the shy snow leopard, avoiding contact with man, finds refuge in Nepal.

More common on the northern slopes of the Himalayas, the snow leopard is most often encountered above the timber-line, at elevations from 3,000 to 4,500 metres, where it inhabits rocky wildernesses, snow fields, glaciers and meadows. Standing about 60 centimetres at the shoulder, the snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) is distinguished from the forest-dwelling leopard (*Panthera pardus*) by a thick, smoky-grey and spotted fur, short muzzle, high forehead, and metre-long tail. It can weigh up to 75 kilograms.

A nocturnal animal that lies in rocky lairs by day, the snow leopard covers vast distances in search of food, primarily the blue sheep in west Nepal. Little is known about the behaviour and ecology of this secretive animal because few scientists are willing to undertake the long and arduous journey to its habitat, but it is thought to be largely solitary though pairs may occupy joint territories and hunt together.

During the course of my search for the snow leopard I came upon over thirty poisoned spears set out to kill the cat, and undoubtedly there were more. Angled in the ground along a favoured trail, and tipped with poison concocted from forest herbs, each spear constitutes a highly effective death-trap — even for an animal like the snow leopard that may pass the same way only once in six weeks. The poison is extremely potent, and one fully grown female blue sheep weighing about 45 kilograms ran less than thirty metres before it collapsed dead, although its spear wound was not major.

The snow leopard is not a threat to livestock according to the local people who reported few losses, and who generally expressed indifference to the animal. The value of its pelt has plummeted from nearly £25 to the current £4 or £5 that the hunter can get for his trophy. This decline is apparently related to international agreements restricting trade in the furs of endangered species like the snow leopard. Traders in India, the main market for pelts from Nepal, are increasingly loath to trade in the item, and prices have correspondingly dropped, at least to the hunter. Other wildlife products, like musk extracted from special glands in the musk deer, are far more profitable. So why does the killing of the snow leopard continue? The only plausible explanation is the strong hunting tradition of the local Bhotia peoples, especially those living in remote and agriculturally impoverished villages.

Some thirty hunters from one village alone spent the fall and winter months hunting the musk deer, blue sheep and snow leopard. Hundreds of poisoned spears were set out in the birch scrub and along sheep and leopard trails, and no attempts were made to conceal the hunting camps. Several camps contained up to 20 pelts at a time, and all were later taken back to the village. The musk deer, which fetches as much as £125 for each adult male animal killed, is the primary target of the poachers. Musk is highly prized as an ingredient for medicines and perfumes in cities as far away as Hong Kong and Singapore. Blue sheep were killed for consumption only, while the snow leopard was hunted by



All photos by Rodney Jackson



Left: Poisoned bamboo spears. Above: Tracks reveal that a snow leopard followed the author

some individuals as a status symbol and proof of their hunting skills.

By hunting musk deer many hunters were able to supply their families with enough cash to last the year. In the village of Dalphu hunting was especially rampant, being conducted under the leadership of the headman who served as a middleman, selling the musk to smugglers who visited the village. The openness with which the hunting was undertaken undoubtedly stems from the fact that the locals had little fear of unexpected visits by government officials. Rugged country, and poor, often dangerous, trails strongly discouraged such visits.

While the agricultural productivity of villages like Dalphu has always been limited by poor soils, dryness and lack of irrigation, it is only recently that hunting has provided the major source of income for its residents. Historically, trading based on the exchange of commodities like salt, wool, rice and wheat, supplemented by some crop production, livestock husbandry and mining of copper (used for jewellery), constitute the livelihood of the village.

Traditional trading patterns between Tibet and the lowlands of Nepal have been severely disrupted by the Chinese invasion of Tibet, and particularly by the development of the Terai jungle that until recently precluded cheap Indian salt and wool from entering the Himalayan market. People can no longer graze their livestock in Tibet, and they have found that Tibetan salt simply cannot compete with Indian salt as a trade item when it has to be carried such great distances on the back of a man or by sheep caravan (many of the higher trails are too narrow for larger animals of burden). And the centralisation of government in Nepal has resulted in greater pressures for a cash economy. In the 1960s the Nepalese banned the mining and smelting of copper because of adverse effects on forests, the main source of heating and cooking fuel. More recently the same authorities banned the trade of musk, thereby inflating prices even further.

As a result the local people are adapting in the only way they can — by exploiting wildlife as a source of hard cash. Being the furthest village up the Namlang Valley, Dalphu effectively controls extensive musk deer habitat. But the hunting of the snow leopard appears especially senseless

given the low economic returns that are realised. Musk poaching is far more profitable. To the individual in a community of hunters, however, the snow leopard provides an opportunity for him to prove his skills. After all, it is not only scarce, but is rarely seen even by these peoples. In reality, placing poisoned spears is a simple and extremely effective means of killing the leopard because many of its trails are well defined and there are numerous locations where the animal has difficulty avoiding placed spears. The hunter need check his traps only infrequently while concentrating on musk deer, for sooner or later the snow leopard will visit and its chances of surviving are slim.

Two leopards were killed and one injured during the three months I was in the area, and I estimated that about three cats roamed the valley while another two occasionally visited from the mountains to the east. When I left there was probably only one wounded animal left in the valley, exemplifying the efficiency of the hunting methods. This low density is typical of snow leopard populations; one investigator found evidence of only six animals in nearby Dolpo district in an area of similar size to mine (about 3,000 square kilometres).

The hunting activities of the Bhotia tribesmen affect the snow leopard in many ways. Besides being killed intentionally or by spears set for other wildlife, the leopard's prey is being depleted by hunters. Numerous grass and brush fires, started by the hunters to drive wildlife towards their traps, adversely affect the habitat for these prey species. The hunting technique employed evidently selects a significantly greater proportion of reproductively active male blue sheep than other age classes or sex. The snow leopard has probably persisted in the face of this hunting pressure only because the area borders on country completely uninhabited by man or grazed by his livestock—in short, terrain that is extremely



rugged and inhospitable. It is doubtful that this population of snow leopards can sustain present levels of depletion.

The future of the snow leopard in Nepal and elsewhere is indeed very bleak. While Nepal has effectively prevented tourists from exporting snow leopard pelts, it has not eliminated decimation of the species. Many western countries with restrictive import laws have evidently substantially curbed the import of endangered species like the snow leopard. Though these actions have greatly reduced economic incentives for killing the snow leopard and largely eliminated trade in the species in Nepal, we are no closer to protecting the animal. There are only two viable alternatives left—the creation of large and defensible sanctuaries, and the development of ecologically sound economies for remote Himalayan villages like that of Dalphu. □

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*This page: The author walking along a snow leopard trail in Namlang Valley, and examining hunters' poison spears. Left: Hunter selling a snow leopard pelt to a Nepali trader*