

# AN UNUSUAL HUNT

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In the winter of 1984-1985 I was looking for snow leopard tracks in the central Tien Shan Mountain area. My camp was located where the Western and Southern parts of the Kojlju rivers unite at about 3.000 m above the sea level (Picture 1). The sun and the wind were quickly melting the snow and therefore the mountains appeared to be autumn like though it was still winter (Picture 2). In this weather it was extremely difficult to find tracks and also to do longer hikes - seldomly more than 2-3 kilo meters.

This area was frequently visited by a snow leopard and it seemed to be one of its favourite hunting places. Each year remnants of prey were found in the area, most of them found in the valleys between the Western and Southern rivers where Siberian ibex (*Capra ibex sibirica*) usually graze.

Because of the shattered formation of the mountains, the snow leopard succeeded in hunting in this area. On the ridges the animals had some observation points from which they could easily observe both the slopes of the valleys. Usually the animals were observing the surroundings while roaming, though I twice also found typical resting points, from where the predators either could wait for the prey or follow them. Snow leopard tracks as well as scratchings and feces were often seen in both the upper parts of the area as on the slopes. These places always contained feces of ibex too.

On the 10th of December I succeeded in seeing a snow leopard with its prey in the Southern valley of the Kojlju river. Despite the fact that the wind was blowing behind me, the snow leopard was concentrated on eating, noticed me relatively late and only descended about 40-50 meters from the river. When the snow leopard

went over a snow-covered area, I saw that it was a big male, at least 40 kg, in the binoculars. It moved fastly without stopping and paying any attention to me. The snow leopard moved the 400 m long distance from the river to the mountain at least five times as quickly as I did. Twice I lost it because of its remarkable camouflage and I only found it again because it was moving.

When the snow leopard had left I looked at its prey which was an adult male ibex. Both the spinal cord and the femur were broken and the animal was also struggled. The bites in the throat were 1.7 X 1.7 cm and 4.7 X 6.3 cm. No signs of combat between the snow leopard and the victim were to be found.

It seemed that the snow leopard had arrived from the Irtash-direction; from the upper part of the ridge. After descending the ridge, it crossed the river and went to the point where the two rivers meet. While observing the area, it returned three times to the observing point and then went in the direction of the ridges. Without stopping it roamed about 600 meters along the slope and returned to the river via a gorge. After once more crossing the river, the snow leopard moved to the opposite slope and orientated against the shattered ridges. Along these it continued to walk for about 120-150 meters. Here I lost the tracks but succeeded in finding them again much lower, close to the place where the ibex had been killed.

I also found the tracks of five ibex which had been walking in the direction of the river. The size of the tracks revealed that all animals must have been males. Higher up on the slopes, the snow was trampled and it could be seen that the animals had grazed here. Signs of grazing could also be found downhill.

The snow leopard had apparently already

noticed the ibex herd from the point where the rivers unite and constantly followed them. The open terrain prevented it from approaching the herd. It remained waiting until the ibex had not yet moved to the other slope. After descending to the river, the snow leopard ascended along the gorge and orientated against a single male. On a big stone which was close to the place where the ibex had been grazing, one could clearly see the tracks of the leopard's front paws in the snow. This stone was used as an observation point by the snow leopard. From the stone it returned to the gorge and went along it to a mountain massif, below which there was a path which the ibex used.

The attack took place from a close distance when the male ibex returned to the rest of the herd. It looked like the snow leopard had hidden at only 2.7 meter's distance from the path and the ibex had to pass between the snow leopard and a steep mountain wall. As deep wounds were found at the left side of the mouth of the ibex and below the scapula, and as the ibex moved

with its left side against the snow leopard, one can assume that it had got the wounds on the throat during the attack.

In a few seconds the snow leopard succeeded to get its victim. It kept it until the terrified ibex got free and run downhill. The snow leopard followed it on the left side at about 1.6-5.1 meter's distance. Apparently the snow leopard was left behind, because its jumps got longer halfway down the 90 meter's slope. The ibex had fallen down from a 15 m high steep cliff. At a distance of 30 meters from the steep cliff, in front of a big stone which the ibex had rounded from its right side, the snow leopard jumped, first 3.25 m and thereafter 6.60 m, 3.82, 3.24, 2.80, 2.43, and 1.64

meter. At the same time the snow leopard forced the ibex to accelerate and panicked it by at the same time slowing down its own speed. At the steep the ibex tried to turn to the other side but could no longer stop and fell down the steep on the frozen river. The snow leopard stopped five meters from the steep and continued to the victim by walking. The flight of the remaining four ibex

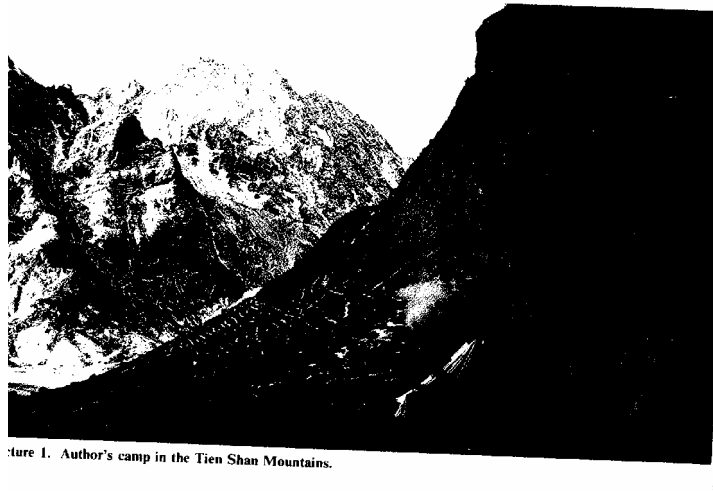
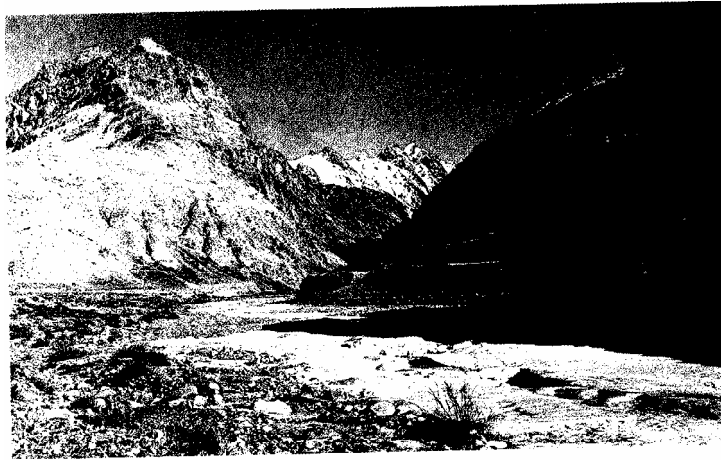


Figure 1. Author's camp in the Tien Shan Mountains.



Picture 2. On sunny and windy days the snow melts quickly even in mid-winters.

could be found 240 meters from the point where the attack took place. The unexpected appearance of the snow leopard had frightened the ibex downhill to the river and furthermore to its other side. It is significant that the ibex were spared by the snow leopard in an open terrain and not among the rocks.

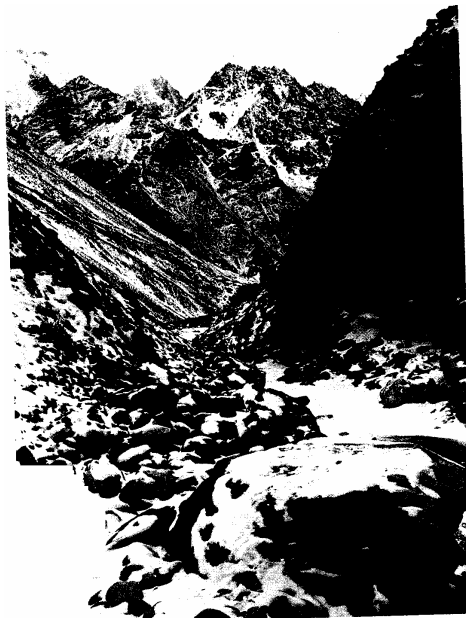
At the fall off the steep the ibex broke its spine and its left thigh-bone. Although the main hemorrhage was internal, blood could also be seen in the tracks of the ibex. Although it was dead, it still succeeded to get down to the river.

The snow leopard had observed its victim from the side of the steep. About 70-75 meters from the spot where the animal had fallen down, the snow leopard descended the steep, cleaned its front paws from snow and dirt and started to follow the ibex without trying to kill it. The wounded ibex followed the frozen river for about 140 meters before the thin ice was broken and it fell into the water. After escaping from the water (the depth was only 30 cm) it still succeeded in continuing four meters before it died.

I calculated that the snow leopard had started its hunt on the 9th of December just before the dawn. When I arrived to the spot, it had spent 19 hours by its prey and visited it twice - at the evening after the killing and at noon the following day when I arrived. During these visits it had consumed 3-4 kg meat from the broken leg and beside the spinal cord. The internal organs were untouched; it had a massive hemorrhage into the abdominal cavity. The animal had a *Sarcoptes* sp. infestation. armpit and chest areas were most severe infected. sides, feet and muzzle to a lesser extent.

At a distance of 24 meters from the spot where the ibex was killed, on the left side of the river bank, I found the resting place of the carnivore. The place it had chosen was an open spot close to a copse. From here it could overview the situation without being noticed. The resting spot had the size of 85 X 126 m.

The snow leopard did not move directly from the resting spot to its prey, but chose instead a path via its observing spot which was a big stone located 28 meters from the resting spot and 32



Picture 3.

Snow leopards prefer to overview their surroundings and often choose big stones like the one in the front to lie on.

meters from the place where the killing had taken place. I had never seen anything like this before and I got the impression that the snow leopard feared something. Therefore it checked the place where the ibex was lying before going there. Because of the size of the stone, it was a perfect observing point and from there one could see 160 meters in the direction of the valley (Picture 3). The snow leopard expected wolves which recently had been seen in the Kojlju-area to arrive.

I spent two weeks in this area but the snow

leopard did not return to this place.

The description of a snow leopard hunt completes the scarce information we have on the hunting technique of this species. It clearly shows that the terrain facilitates the snow leopard to find suitable hunting places. The snow leopard is not a passive animal. It is of utmost importance that it is familiar with the terrain in the Asian mountain massif and also has the ability to roam in these rugged mountains.