

Snow Leopard in Kanji Wildlife Reserve, Ladakh

by David Mallon

Gazetted in 1981, the Kanji Wildlife Reserve in Ladakh, northwest India, lies about 120 km west of Leh and south of the main road to Srinagar. A seven-day survey of the area in the summer of 1991 found that snow leopard scrapes and tracks were widespread in the upper part of the reserve.

The Kanji river is a tributary of the Indus and the reserve occupies the whole valley drainage from the watershed ridges northwards to the point where the river intersects the Leh-Srinagar road. According to official figures, the reserve covers 100 sq km, but measurements from Landsat-based maps indicate the real figure could be nearer 300 sq km. Elevation ranges from 3800 m to 5800 m. Human settlement is limited to one village with about 30 families. The arid Transhimalayan climate produces sparse vegetation, with low shrub communities dominating most of the reserve. Willow, poplar, and a few birch trees grow along streams; and numerous herbaceous plants grow in damper areas.

Terrain is characteristic of the mountains of Ladakh, consisting of steep and broken slopes with a high proportion of rocky areas, cliffs, and talus. Three main headwater streams coalesce to form the main river and it was in these upper valleys above 3960 m where most snow leopard signs occurred. Signs consisted of tracks, scrapes, droppings, and spray sites and were distributed in the expected locations: under rock overhangs, along cliff bases and by trails, with concentrations in gorge sections and at stream junctions. Good quantities of signs were also found in the valley bordering the eastern side of the reserve.

The main large prey species in the Kanji area is the ibex (*Capra ibex*), and a small number of blue sheep (pseudois *nayar*) inhabit one corner of the reserve. Long-tailed marmots (*Marmota caudata*) are common, and other potential prey include chukar partridge (*Alectoris chukar*) and Himalayan snowcock (*Tetraogallus himalayensis*).

It appears that snow leopard distribution is still continuous across Ladakh. This situation is of great importance since it allows the conservation of maximum genetic variability through the movement of individuals between subpopulations. It is clearly necessary to establish a series of protected areas across Ladakh to act as population refuges for the snow leopard and its prey species, and Kanji WR represents one such center. Its importance will increase further if the designated Rangdum Wildlife Reserve, which adjoins it to the south, is finally confirmed and officially notified.