

THE SNOW LEOPARD IN THE EASTERN SAYAN MOUNTAINS

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Concerning the snow leopard, *Uncia uncia Schreber*, in the Eastern Sayan mountains, there is little information in the scientific literature. There has never been any direct evidence of the animal's presence in this area. All published records are based upon data from interviews. Long ago Grum-Grzhimailo (1914) pointed out that the snow leopard is a rare animal in the alpine regions of Altai and Sayan, and other authors (Scalon 1936, Bobrinsky 1944, Stroganov 1962) came to the same conclusion. Geptner & Sludsky (1972) assume that in the past the range of the snow leopard covered a number of East Sayan mountain ridges, such as the Udinsky mountain ridge, the Tunkinskiie and Kitoiskiie Goltsy. Nowadays the carnivore has disappeared from Sayan, although it may make occasional visits from the Mongolian territories .

According to data collected by the author, the snow leopard was to be found in the Sayan highlands in the 1950s . At about that time local hunters encountered it in the east, in the highest part of the Kitoiskiie Goltsy mountain ridge, in the Ulan-Ospin-Sardag peak area (3,215 m). Here, at the source of the Onot river, the chief prey for the snow leopard, the Siberian ibex (*Capra ibex sibirica*), are found in large herds comprising 50 animals.

Possibly, these areas were at one time occupied by the snow leopard, but abandoned when geological researchers penetrated into the region. Herdsmen of the Okinsky district of Buryatia say that before that time the snow leopard inhabited the Pogranichny mountain range and the source areas of the Zabit and Sorkhoi rivers. In winter 1953, a snow leopard was sited further west the Tissa river. Judging from eye-witness accounts, this encounter was due to the migration of a great herd of ibex from Mongolia.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, snow leopard tracks were recorded in the Eastern Sayan on the borders of Touva and Buryatia. In the Touvinian territory the snow leopard was seen in the Izig-Sug and Choighan-Khem river basins. Shurygin (1988) reports from the Touvinian part of the East Sayan rather far towards the west: In 1973, a snow leopard was seen by geologists in the basin of the Kizhi-Khem river, which rises in the mountains of the Udinsky ridge.

In recent years the snow leopard has been observed at the source of the Sentsa river in the territory of Buryatia. This area is close to the sources of the Touvinian rivers Izyg-Sug and

Choigham-Khem.

The reports of the hunters N. A. and A. A. Antonyuks can be considered reliable. These men came across snow leopard tracks in the valley at the head of the Bolshoi Zharbogai the right tributary of the Urda-Oka river (Buryatia). The animal had been climbing towards the source, in the direction of the Irkutsk border. The diameter of the tracks measured 14 cm. In some places tracks of the tail could also be observed. This is not the only case of northward migrations of snow leopards to the borders of the Irkutsk region and into this territory.

According to a game biologist, Ayupov, in February 1986 some hunters from the Tulun district of the Irkutsk region found tracks of a large snow leopard near the source of the Belaya Zima river not far from the geological base camp. At the same time tracks of another snow leopard were found by hunters at the Barbitai river. The animal had left for Touva through the watershed of the utkhum and Karah-Burien rivers. This is probably one of the farthest northern migrations of the snow leopard in this area. Presumably in the Irkutsk region the snow leopard inhabits the source area of the Uda and Kazyr rivers or at least enters this area from the neighbouring territories of Touva and Krasnoyarsk. In this area the ibex occurs in large herds

of 30 - 40 animals.

At present, the conditions in a number of the Eastern Sayan areas as a habitat for the snow leopard may be considered quite satisfactory. In the Tunkinskiie and Kitoiskiie Goltsy mountain ridges the number of Siberian ibex is stable and sufficient for the snow leopard. But neither the snow leopard itself nor any signs of its activities in this part of the mountains have yet been discovered. The reason for this is probably the increasing influence of man, whose presence alters natural conditions of the mountain area. This has recently included the construction of a road in the Central Sayan regions and the development of mining and building projects. The influence of climatic changes is also possible, for example the humidity may be increasing.

The mountain areas on the border of Touva, the Irkutsk region and Buryatia should be considered the most probable habitats for the snow leopard in the Eastern Sayan area as well as the highlands of the Touvinian and Krasnoyarsk territories. Migrations from Mongolia are also possible.

In order to establish special snow leopard reserves in the Eastern Sayan, a more wide ranging specific investigation of the area is needed. For financing the scientific

research and establishing a protected area for snow leopards, a special account should be opened in the USSR and international banks in order to collect donations for all these arrangements. A wide-based data collection schemes should also be organized. Questionnaires should be published in the newspapers and magazines of the settlements situated in and around the snow leopard area. This would make it possible to obtain important new information as well.

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