

THE DEATH OF A SNOW LEOPARD

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The incident took place in late February. The students at the Agricultural Institute in Irkutsk were doing a survey on the wildlife of the sanctuary of Alma-Ata which is located in the central parts of the Zailiysky Alatau mountains.

In the morning a forest-guard ran towards us and said that he had seen a snow leopard. Taking our photographic equipment we hurried to the place where he had seen the animal, but it had already disappeared. Frightened by the man it had gone to the northern side of the canyon where we also found its tracks and heard the

alarming calls of the magpies in the dense spruce forest. From the tracks we could see that the animal had come from the canyon of Central

Talgary. During the night it had investigated all the small buildings at the guard station. It had unsuccessfully tried to catch caged nutrias, hurt its paw and left some blood tracks in the snow. It had gone round the yard where sheep and cattle were kept as well as round the paddock where the horses were. The snow leopard had also jumped onto the roof of a small hut from where it could overlook the movements of the horses. Apparently it had realised that it would not catch such a big animal, and so it returned via the paddock to the sheep-yard and climbed into a coal depot. Neither the horses, cattle nor a free running dog, were nervous about the snow leopard because it had circled the area so carefully that they did not notice it.

In the early morning the forest guard took the cattle to their drinking spot. When he passed the coal depot he checked it and faced the animal, curled up like a house cat. The old man avoiding any quick movements, withdrew to his house and woke up his son. He then returned to the front door but the snow leopard had already disappeared into the spruce forest.

Such a scarce and elusive animal as the snow leopard is seldom seen even by these people who work in the mountain areas. Therefore we decided to stay the night at the forest-guard's place in the hope that the animal would return.

In the next morning I went out before the sunrise. The whole night had been peaceful and I could not see anything in particular after inspecting the huts. I followed the path to the nutria cages and passed a barn near the spruce forest. I walked slowly and arriving at the barn I saw the snow leopard lying within the barn from which hay was taken daily. It had curled up in the hay and was watching me. I felt very uneasy facing the king of the mountains, but the snow leopard seemed to be calm although it did

not let me out of its sight. After taking some pictures I returned to the hut and told my colleagues what I had seen. Four of us returned to the barn where we found the snow leopard exactly where I had left it. We watched the animal for about 10 minutes, until it rose and went to the forest towards a small river. Because of its movements and behaviour, we drew the conclusion that it was an old and sick animal. One could clearly see that it was lean and the fur was shaggy. We followed the animal downstream for about one kilometer. We could approach to within 5-6 meters but if we came closer, it tried to escape. The guard's dog even sniffed the tail of the leopard on which it only reacted with a vague growl.

We decided to feed the animal and gave it a chicken. Despite our presence, the snow leopard grabbed the chicken immediately but did not start to eat it. Instead it kept the chicken in its mouth between its front paws. We left the animal alone but returned to the same place the following day. Only one third of the chicken

was eaten - the internal organs as well as the soft breast. The animal itself we found under a protruding cliff 100 meters away from the river. This was the last resting place of this snow leopard. It died the following morning after spending four days in the close neighbourhood of the forest station. Why did it come near human beings?

The necropsy revealed that the snow leopard

was an old female. The canines were completely torn out and old age was apparently the cause of death. I

After some time we did a new trip to Central Targary and again we found tracks of a snow leopard. In the summer the forest guards had found a nest with two cubs in a nearby canyon. Life goes on and our snow leopard ended its days in the museum of the sanctuary.