

# **Hunting Behavior of the Snow Leopard at the Alma-Atinski Nature Reserve**

by AD. Dzhanyspaev Alma-Atinski Nature Reserve

translated by Marina Proutkina

In 1987-88 several observations were made of snow leopards hunting in the Alma-Atinski State Nature Reserve, situated in the Zailiyski Alatau about 25 km. from the city of Alma-Ata.

Four different animals must have taken part in the hunt. An adult male, an adult female, and a youngster about a year old participated in one hunt; and in 27 days, two adults were observed near the prey in the same place. Since the young animal which had been with the female was not there, it could be assumed that the second leopard was a different animal.

The hunting area measured 300 x 500 m. and was situated on an eastern slope at an altitude from 1650 to 1850 m. above sea level. A rocky outcrop grown with aspen and isolated fir trees occupied two-thirds of it. Juniper and spirea grew everywhere among the rocks; to the south there was a large opening with brush. Under the rock foundations, openings alternated with aspen woods.

Hunting behavior included waiting and stalking. On March 26, 1987 a snow leopard was observed attacking a nine year old wild goat. At 7:48 AM, a solitary male wild goat at the top line of the rocks was approached by a snow leopard who then followed his prey for about 80 or 90 m. The hunt lasted for two minutes, during which the snow

leopard caught up with the goat twice and attacked unsuccessfully. The goat managed to secure a position on a small ledge near the edge of a vertical precipice where he remained for 110 minutes.

At 7:57 AM. a snow leopard appeared on the rock 7 m. above the goat and started moving away up the slope. In 6 minutes he approached the place of the last attack and sniffed; at that time the second snow leopard appeared- at two-thirds the size of the first. probably a cub. In two minutes both animals emerged into an open space and the second suddenly jumped after a thrush flying by. almost catching the bird. In five more minutes the snow leopards disappeared in the canyon.

The wild goat started descending. falling twice on his way. After 20 minutes he entered the aspen wood. feeding. At 10:08 AM. he was attacked by a bigger snow leopard than the previous ones. who chased him for 20 or 30 m. and then killed the goat by grasping him at the neck. After dragging his prey under a small fir tree. the snow leopard tore open its groin region and pulled out part of the intestines. After that the leopard did not touch his prey for 3 hr.. 44 min.. during which time he moved within a radius of 10 m. 6 times. lay down 9 times. sat 4 times. chased the magpies away 3 times. and slept once. The prey attracted magpies primarily. then crows and a young golden eagle.

At 3:20 P.M. when the observer approached at a distance of 100 m.. the snow leopard abandoned his prey and moved away. During the previous hour and 28 min.. he had eaten all the muscles of the front right leg. the shoulder blade. part of the muscles of the ribs. and part of the breastbone.

The next hunt was observed in the same place 19 days later. At 7 AM. at the edge of a cluster of rocks. where the wild goats generally passed from there to open space. a snow leopard lay in wait among the bushes. The location was most convenient for an attack. since there was a vertical precipice below and the growth of bushes along the path restricted free movement to the sides. At 7:25 AM. four wild goats appeared. spotting the snow leopard from 20 or 30 m. away and running off.

Five days later another unsuccessful hunt was observed in the same area. At 7: 10 AM. a female

wild goat in a group of 12 became excited and started moving up the slope. In five minutes only two males remained from the group and another male joined them later. All three were very excited. looking below where a snow leopard was approaching. running fast, then stalking. When the distance to the goats was less than 30 m.. the snow leopard rushed toward them; but the goats ran away rapidly. Two goats reached the canyon and disap

peared there; while one jumped onto the rocks and kept watching the snow leopard. who walked quickly along the foot of the rock and disappeared. The wild goat started looking around anxiously. At 7:20 a snow leopard appeared 20 m. above the goat and lay down. then ran towards him. The goat rushed down the rocks. the snow leopard following closely. reducing the distance gradually by cutting corners. Having chased his prey for 80 m.. the snow leopard got into a dead end among the rocks and stopped

his chase. At 7:25 he emerged at the edge of a mountain ridge and saw another group of wild goats. The snow leopard lay down immediately but the goats had spotted him and moved away rapidly. The snow leopard lay down on a flat stone. remaining for 18 minutes. At 7:45 he started moving down the rocks. At 7:50 a black grouse flew up three m. below the snow leopard. who started and shot his tail up. almost jumping after the bird. In five minutes. a thick fog developed. obscuring the cat.

Two days later at 7:12 AM. in the area described above. a male six year old goat was caught by a snow leopard. The cat attacked his prey from a distance of 7 or 10 m. and. grabbing it by the neck. rolled around in the bush with the prey for about 12 m. and killed him. That snow leopard was observed until 8:20 P.M. He stayed close to his prey. not moving further than 10 or 15 m. away. He rested. fed. and chased away the birds which tried to approach. At 1:00 P.M. another snow leopard appeared at a distance of 150 m. and disappeared again. He emerged again eight minutes later. sat for a while. and started descending toward the snow leopard with the prey. At 1: 18 the second animal passed within 5 or 6 m. from the first one without stopping; he then sniffed the tracks and sat on a stone after walking for 30 or 40 m. At 1 :23 he left a urine mark and moved away.

The next morning there were no animals beside the prey. All the meat on the goat had been eaten. as

well as the pelvic bone, shoulder blade. and internal organs. except the stomach and intestines.

Another hunt was observed on Feb. 10, 1988. In the early morning a snow leopard approached a four year old male wild goat, rushed at him. and started a pursuit. Having driven him away from the rocks, the leopard grabbed the goat and rode him for about 20 m., strangling him among barberry bushes. Unfortunately neither the cat nor his prey could be seen in the growth from the observation point. At 12:40 P.M. another leopard appeared and, having passed by, lay on the rock 100 m. up. *After* five hours the snow leopard which had killed the goat went up and joined the other. In another 14 minutes, the owner of the prey started descending toward the remains of the goat. After some time, the second followed the first; however, after 60 or 70 m. he turned away and entered an avalanche area, approaching a female wild goat which had been killed by the avalanche a week before. He started eating her. By the next day the remaining parts of the male goat were the head, shreds of skin, a large part of the spine, tubular bones- some of them cracked- and legs up to the knee joints. The remains of the female goat consisted of one rear leg, crushed by the snow, the spine. tubular bones. almost the whole hide. and the head.

During all the hunts. while attacking his prey. the snow leopard kept his tail vertical and used it for steering at the turns: he also spread his legs wide while making the conclusive jump. which action enabled him to extend his leap.