

Sovereign of a Menaced Realm

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High in an immaculately blue sky, a large white backed vulture soars and wheels on the invisible currents and up draughts that cut the crisp morning air. The mountains below are still and vast, an impenetrable inner sanctum of stone and snow stretching in every direction as far as the eye can see. It is winter in Chitral Gol, and the jagged summits, the ridges and steep rocky spurs, the forests of oak and pine, all lie asleep under a shroud of pristine white.

The presence of the vulture tells its own story: somewhere in one of the valleys through which the streams wind their way to join Chitral's main river, the blood of a markhor stains the snow. A snow leopard, the predator supreme in this harsh and uninviting domain, has killed in the early hours of the morning. The vulture's patient attendance may be in vain, for the snow leopard has cubs to feed and precious little meat, if any, will be left for the scavengers. With her offsprings' stomachs to fill as well as her own needs to look after, the mother will find this a hard winter. Her movements are inextricably linked with those of the markhor on whom she depends for food, and now she and her young have followed them from the ice-bound summer pastures to the relative comfort of the lower elevations.

Like all big cats, the snow leopard is a shy and retiring animal that shuns contact with man. Certainly, the few people who frequent the odd rest house or dwelling in Chitral Gol are observed by the snow leopards more often than they themselves spot the cats. Though tracks in the snow are common, an animal adept in the art of disguising its presence is not so easily seen. Bearing in mind their habits and the vastness and remoteness of their range, the difficulty in estimating their numbers is understandable and it is fortunate when actual sightings change, augment, or confirm what was before guessed at. By a mixture of such good fortune, with a fair measure of hard work, we were able for more than a month to walk into the lives of four snow leopards in an area where only two had been estimated.

When on the day after our arrival at Chitral Gol, we came across the tracks of a snow leopard disappearing straight up a dauntingly steep and craggy slope, we were reminded of the difficulties we might have to endure in order to see and photograph this animal. It was only by creating a feeding site that we were eventually able to lure the ghost of the mountains, the most enigmatic of the big cats, with the prospect of an easy meal. The site could only be arrived at by trial and error and we were always more dependent on chance than on our speculations on the cats' movements and moods. The more we have come to know of these animals, the more we realize just how much about them remains unknown to us; and with every answer, more questions appear.

Our elation can scarcely be described when, on the morning of January 16th, 1990, an adult male arrived to accept our offering of a live goat. He was a splendid animal in the prime of life. The sight of his finely chiselled features silhouetted against the snow, his low slung carriage, the fluid action of his muscles and the majestic confidence of his rolling gait—these are things we can never forget. He was a paragon of that combination of raw power and masterful control that few animals can aspire to. His coat was rich and deep, of a hue neither gray nor buff, nor any of the colors commonly used to describe it. Its sheen responded differently to different light conditions and was always luxurious. We felt sure that he was the cat whose tracks we had most often seen in the past few weeks;

The adult female snow leopard walks toward the base of a rocky cliff while two cubs scan the surroundings in Chitral Gol National Park. *(Photo by Linda Nolte-Wilson)*

although we had reports of the presence of another snow leopard in the area. a female. Seeing his pug marks. we had been surprised by his size. His stride on flat land measured around 80 cm and it seemed certain that it was he who was now before us.

For the next three days we had many opportunities to watch and photograph him as he descended from the shade and shelter at the foot of a big Himalayan oak tree nearby to eat of the meat we had brought him. This oak was his chosen resting place. a comfortable spot from which he could guard his

food from the marauding crows and occasional vulture. We made no effort to conceal ourselves in our vantage point but simply kept our distance. staying silent and confining our movements to a minimum. In this way. though he retained the wild animal's natural and healthy suspicion of man. I believe that in some measure he came to trust us a little. If this trust were not there. I do not believe that what followed would ever have happened.

On the morning of the 19th he took his leave of us. We watched him go. his lithe form ploughing through the snow on the open slope until it disappeared into

the profusion of rocks and trees beyond. As time passed, it began to seem as if that might be the last we should see of him. Then on the afternoon of the 20th, our sole companion Mohammed Akbar spotted no fewer than three snow leopards basking together in the sun way up on the ledge of a precipitous rock face adjacent to us. Closer scrutiny revealed that there were in fact four. As we watched them, one disappeared from view and then reappeared at the same oak aforementioned. Closer observation showed that here was not the same snow leopard that we had seen before.

This cat had the kitten features, the oversized paws and fluffy facial fur of a cub, but a grown up cub he surely was. We reckoned him to be anything from

18 months to two years old, though we could not at first be certain. He was characterized by a bib of thick white fur on his neck and breast, his coat was more silver-gray and less golden than the other's, and his spots and rosettes were less distinct, particularly on his flanks. It was only when a fully grown female accompanied by another cub arrived on the scene that the truth began to unfold for us. Though the father was now nowhere to be seen, he must have communicated to his family that here was a place where they might find food.

The mother was lean and petite, also more silvergray than her mate, with a smaller and somewhat more delicate face. Her spots were dark and well defined. Her other cub was the warmer, darker color of the father and had a slightly thinner coat than the silver cub, with clear, dark rosettes and spots. Though there always remained some doubt, we feel she was a female and the other a male. Happily, they too came to accept our presence at a distance; and as they settled into the area, we came to know something of their characters and of the ways they communicated with one another.

The first cub was by far the bolder of the two.

Although the mother was never far away, he was growing more independent and seemed on the threshold of fending for himself. It would surely not be long before he began hunting his own markhor and would leave his mother and sister on the quest to find his own range. His appetite was immense and he often went on eating long after the other two had retired to their place of repose, finally sauntering away nursing a barrel-sized stomach.

For many days we observed them spellbound. As time wore on, the inevitable question formed in our minds: would the father, who had called them in the first place, return to meet his family?

This question was finally answered for us on the evening of the 24th. By this time, a welcome spell of mild weather had melted the snows from the south-facing slopes and the area was bathed in the warm colors cast by the declining sun. While the cubs lay preoccupied with gorging themselves, their mother cast a watchful eye around from where she lay just further up the slope. It seemed as though she were gazing after something. Suddenly from behind the root of the great oak we had come to know as his place, the big male sprang down. His presence was electrifying and the atmosphere on the whole slope was alive with it in an instant. The silver cub, normally so sure of himself, suddenly disappeared without a trace. The mother crouched low, body poised, tail held horizontal and rigid, every muscle in her body steeled and tense. Only the other cub retained her composure, continuing to gnaw at the meat. The eyes of the mother were intent on her mate as he loped down the hillside, slowly circling the area. So it was that the snow leopard whom we had first seen, after guiding the family to partake of the food, had now returned.

He left his presence all over the site, spraying, scratching, sniffing the meat inquisitively, pawing, rubbing himself on the gnarled branches of a dead tree and rolling in a clump of coarse grass. Finally he sidled over to the place where his consort lay, then pounced toward her, teeth bared and claws extended; and she recoiled, snarling. He swerved at the last moment, then rolled over, writhing ecstatically on his back at her feet. They played with each

other, rubbing noses, rolling and pawing. It was an enchanting sight. Later when father, mother, and daughter lay at ease, they flicked their tails at one another, the great, bushy tips flashing black and white as they rose up over the grass. As night drew on, we were left to surmise what might go on among them in the dark hours while we lay in our hut.

We hoped deeply that they would afford us more insights into their lives; but in the days that followed, the weather turned and hard winter tightened its grip on the forested hills and stark mountains. The snow leopards vanished like phantoms

and the fast falling snow covered their tracks and all other traces of their presence. The slope was suddenly divested of any indication of what had gone on there. Once again it became just one small corner of a great white wilderness. We waited in vain for the leopards' return, until we too were forced to retreat from the advancing snows, lest we be cut off without provisions until springtime.

But now we were captivated by a fascination for the snow leopards that compelled us to change our plans and return as soon as the weather had cleared. There were still so many unanswered questions, such as what would happen now to the cubs who seemed on the verge of independence? We feared that perhaps it would be too much to expect the magic of those days we had spent together to be rekindled. But sure enough, scarcely two days after our return, the female appeared on the slope alone. There was no sign of the cubs; and though we worried for them as if we, not she, were their parents, we were glad that they had broken free to find their own way. Their mother stayed with us for three days alone, though from her calls we expected company. These haunting calls, echoing a melancholy note that resounded through the valleys, bespoke a longing with indescribable beauty.

On the 20th, February, they were answered. The big male reappeared and we were witness to their courtship. Though she had called him in and allowed him to partake of her food, their contact was a delicate affair. A peaceful scene between the two would suddenly change to teeth and claws unsheathed and snarls and roars easily audible to us across the gully. Then they would stop as suddenly as they had started, as though nothing had happened. This time when our provisions ran out, we left without waiting for the snow leopards to depart before us.

We had been fortunate enough to see snow leopards in an environment where they, their kin, the prey species and the forest on which they depend for survival all thrive under the N.W.F.P. Forest Department, Wildlife Wing. Inevitably this underscores the predicament of less fortunate snow leopards elsewhere. How much of this animal's formerly vast range is now dangerous and uninhabitable? In spite of the various national parks and

sanctuaries along the Himalayan chain, the snow leopard's future is still in doubt. Human encroachment on their territory, the decline in numbers of their prey species, the devastating effects of war, and the eternal problem of hunting continue to take their toll. In many places that we visited, grazing has resulted in the decimation of wild herbivores, as domestic cattle spread rinderpest, foot-and-mouth, and other afflictions against which the wild animals have no natural resistance. As the herbivores decline, so the carnivores suffer.

The protection of such a wide ranging animal as the snow leopard cannot be ensured merely by increasing the manpower and supervision of a few select areas like Chitral Gol. It ultimately depends more on the local people who share the hills and valleys with the markhor, the ibex, the wolf, the bear, the lynx, the snow leopard, and others. Poster campaigns, talks about animals from local forest department officials, even free film shows, would all be good ways to begin to get the message of conservation across. Bright and open-minded, the children of Chitral are also sharp eyed and make excellent spotters. If their interest in saving their local wildlife were raised now, they would grow up to be a conscientious generation. On them as much as the national parks system will depend the future of the remarkable animals of these mountains. It is to the credit of the N.W.F.P. Forest Department, Wildlife Wing, that Chitral Gol remains a fairly secure sanctuary for the snow leopard and its prey.

As we watched the two big snow leopard cubs, we worried for them, wondering where they would find their own range. How many places are there left for them to live and hunt at liberty? Will there ever come a time when the true sanctuaries such as Chitral Gol are not simply isolated, beleaguered islands surrounded by a sea of human settlement? Is it really too idealistic and visionary to envisage a chain of such sanctuaries linked one to another by wilderness "corridors," bereft of man's habitation, running the entire length and breadth of the Himalaya, Karakorum, and Hindu Kush? A tall order, but anyone fortunate enough to have seen all that we saw of the snow leopard in the wild would agree that so royal an animal deserves nothing less. We hope and believe that Chitral Gol and places like it are the first step.