



Tracking the Snow Leopard

▲ Because snow leopards usually hide from humans, photographer Steve Winter used camera traps to take this photo and the one on the next page. The traps automatically took a number of photos whenever the animal came near.

- 1 “When a snow leopard stalks¹ its prey among the mountain walls, it moves . . . softly,
slowly,” explains Indian biologist Raghunandan Singh Chundawat, who has studied
the animal for years. “If it knocks a stone loose, it will reach out a foot to stop it from
falling and making noise.” One might be moving right now, perfectly silent, maybe
5 close by. But where? And how many are left to see?

Best known for its spotted coat and long
distinctive tail, the snow leopard is one of the
world’s most secretive animals. These elusive²
cats can only be found high in the remote,
10 mountainous regions of central Asia. For this
reason, and because they hunt primarily at
night, they are very rarely seen.

Snow leopards have been officially protected
since 1975, but **enforcing** this law has proven
15 difficult. Many continue to be killed for their
fur and body parts, which are worth a
fortune on the black market.³ In recent years,
though, **conflict** with local herders has also
led to a number of snow leopard deaths.
20 This is because the big cats kill the herders’
animals, and **drag** the bodies away to eat high
up in the mountains.

As a result of these pressures, the current
snow leopard population is estimated at only
25 4,000 to 7,000, and some fear that the actual
number may already have dropped below
3,500. The only way to **reverse** this **trend**
and bring these cats back from near
extinction, say conservationists, is to make
30 them more valuable alive than dead.

Because farming is difficult in Central Asia’s
cold, dry **landscape**, traditional cultures
depend mostly on livestock (mainly sheep
and goats) to survive in these mountainous
35 regions. At night, when snow leopards
hunt, herders’ animals are in danger of snow
leopard attacks. Losing only a few animals
can push a family into desperate **poverty**.
“The wolf⁴ comes and kills, eats, and goes
40 somewhere else,” said one herder, “but
snow leopards are always around. They have
killed one or two animals many times . . .
Everybody wanted to finish this leopard.”

To address this problem, local religious
45 leaders have called for an end to snow
leopard killings, saying that these wild
animals have the right to exist peacefully.
They've also tried to convince people that
the leopards are quite rare and thus it is
50 important to protect them.

Financial **incentives** are also helping to slow
snow leopard killings. The organization
Snow Leopard Conservancy–India has
established Himalayan Homestays, a
55 program that sends visitors to the region to
herders' houses. For a clean room and bed,
meals with the family, and an introduction
to their culture, visitors pay about ten U.S.
dollars a night. Having guests once every two
60 weeks through the tourist season provides the
herders with enough income to replace the
animals lost to snow leopards. In addition,
Homestays helps herders build protective
fences that keep out snow leopards. The
65 organization also conducts environmental
classes at village schools and trains Homestays
members as nature guides, available for hire.
In exchange, the herders agree not to kill
snow leopards.

70 In Mongolia, a project called Snow Leopard
Enterprises (SLE) helps herder communities
earn extra money in exchange for their
promise to protect the endangered cat.
Women in Mongolian herder communities
75 make a variety of products—yarn for making
clothes, decorative floor rugs, and toys—using
the wool from their herds. SLE buys these
items from herding families and sells them
abroad. Herders must agree to protect the



▲ Stanzin Pulit, a yak farmer, has to guard his animals from snow leopard attack.

80 snow leopards and to encourage neighbors
to do the same.

The arrangement increases herders' incomes
by 10 to 15 percent and elevates the status
of the women. If no one in the community
85 kills the protected animals over the course of
a year, the program members are **rewarded**
with a 20 percent **bonus** in addition to the
money they've already made. An independent
review in 2006 found no snow leopard killings
90 in areas where SLE operates. Today the
organization continues to add
more communities.

Projects like the Homestays program in India
and SLE's business in Mongolia are doing
95 well. Though they cover only a small part of
the snow leopard's homeland, they make the
leopards more valuable to more people each
year, and in doing so, they help preserve this
endangered animal.

¹ If you **stalk** a person or animal, you follow them quietly in order to catch or kill them.

² Something that is **elusive** is difficult to find.

³ If something is bought or sold on the **black market**, it is bought or sold illegally.

⁴ A **wolf** is a wild animal that looks like a large dog.

◀ Snow leopards' big eyes are so good in low light that they are able to hunt in near total darkness.