



# Snowleopards

YOUR FIELD REPORT  
**ISSUE 3**





This is one of many stunning camera trap images captured during our snow leopard population survey in eastern Dolpa in Nepal. The survey will help guide the future of conservation efforts in the region



# Hello!

## Welcome to your latest snow leopard update



**Sheren Shrestha,**  
global snow leopard  
coordinator,  
WWF-Nepal

Prowling the remote peaks of central and south Asia, snow leopards are renowned for their elusive nature, earning them the nickname 'ghosts of the mountains'. But

to protect these magnificent big cats, we need to understand more about their populations and where they're roaming. Luckily, camera traps can give us a glimpse into their secretive lives. These unobtrusive bits of kit can automatically capture and store thousands of images, giving us solid evidence of these mysterious felines, as well as revealing behaviour we'd never be able to see in person. Turn the page to find out what our latest camera trap survey has uncovered.

**Pheri bhetaula!**

*(This means 'see you again' in Nepali!)*



## FIELD NOTES

Where are you, snow leopards?

# BEYOND BORDERS

### You've helped us study snow leopards on the doorstep of Nepal's biggest national park

**P**rotected areas such as national parks and nature reserves have long been strongholds for endangered species and the cornerstone of efforts to conserve them. In Nepal, where your support is making a difference, snow leopards roam across seven such areas.

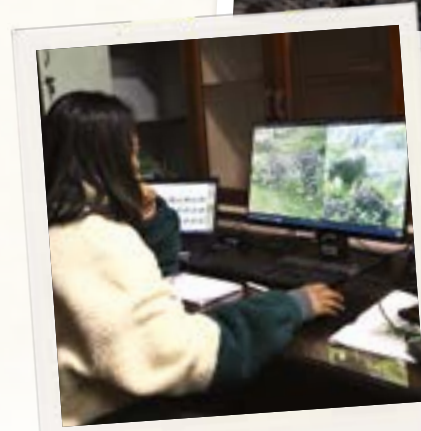
But these big cats know no boundaries, and the connecting spaces between protected areas aren't just voids on the map. In fact, it's thought that around 42% of Nepal's snow leopard

habitat lies outside officially protected areas, and that these in-between spaces are crucial both as corridors and as habitats in their own right. While Nepal is at the forefront of snow leopard habitat research, vast areas of the country remain unstudied.

Your support helped us carry out the park's first comprehensive camera trap survey of snow leopards, which revealed an estimated population of 90. But what about the big cats prowling just



Snow leopard territory is beautiful but often inaccessible and inhospitable



Checking the photos

beyond its borders?

Thanks to your donation, we've completed yet another piece of the snow leopard puzzle. You've supported a camera trap survey of Nepal's eastern Dolpa region, which connects Shey Phoksundo National Park with two other protected areas.

### Counting cats

Over two months, a team set up camera traps in 66 spots across nearly 2,000 sq km of rugged terrain. After analysing hundreds of photos, we've worked out there are around 1.5 snow leopards roaming every 100 sq km of the region – not far off the estimated 2.2 per 100 sq km within Shey Phoksundo National Park itself. This means about 30 snow leopards call this unprotected expanse home, bringing Dolpa's total population to around 120 – the highest of any district in Nepal.

This discovery does more than just add numbers to our count – it's the first evidence that unprotected areas can sustain healthy populations of the big cats. It's clear we need to expand snow leopard conservation efforts beyond protected zones. With your help, we can do just that. Thank you.

Sheren



To make sure our count is as accurate as possible, two other researchers review the findings. A thousand images could take over a week to sort. It's painstaking but rewarding. After all, spotting a snow leopard is rare – for many people, this is as close as they'll ever get to one.



Eastern Dolpa is a key corridor between two protected areas

### SPOT THE DIFFERENCE

Every snow leopard has a unique pattern of rosettes and spots that helps us tell them apart. Analysing each camera trap image, a researcher examines the patterns on a snow leopard's head, front legs and tail, then compares them against our records, to see if the cat has been snapped before.



To date, only around 3% of snow leopards' global range has been surveyed using rigorous and scientifically acceptable methods

The Eurasian lynx is a shy and elusive wild cat that plays a key role in the Himalayas as a top predator



# HIMALAYAN HUNTERS

The high Himalayas are tough for predators, but several other species share the snow leopard's range, maintaining this unique ecosystem

**W**ith rugged terrain, brutal weather and limited prey, the high Himalayas are home to only the most specialised hunters. The snow leopard is uniquely adapted to prosper here, and sits at the very top of the food pyramid.

But it has a rival in the Himalayan wolf, another apex predator that inhabits the same range, hunts in packs and feeds on similar prey, mostly wild sheep and other large ungulates. Also known as the Tibetan wolf, this subspecies of the grey wolf is furrer than its lowland cousins.

Several smaller predators also share the snow leopard's range. Most abundant is the red fox. This canine is widespread across central Asia and the Himalayas, where the thick-furred local variety is known as the hill fox. Much smaller than snow leopards and wolves, it usually hunts smaller prey, such as marmots and rodents, but will also scavenge dead animals. Its compact cousin, the Tibetan fox, eats even smaller prey, such as rodents and pikas (a rabbit-like mammal), and is found only in the high Himalayas.

Size-wise, the biggest predators are bears. The rare Himalayan brown bear is

found mostly in the western Himalayas, where it can reach altitudes of more than 5,000m. It's powerful enough to kill a yak, but plant material makes up the bulk of its diet. During winter, it hibernates in caves. Further east, the Asiatic black bear frequents the lower Himalayas. It feeds largely on bamboo, but sometimes wanders above the treeline.

## Cats of all sizes

Snow leopards aren't the only hunting cats in the region. The Eurasian lynx is a medium-sized cat that hunts prey such as marmots and young ungulates. And the small, fluffy Pallas's cat looks like a miniature snow leopard, but at just 2.5-3kg this ambush specialist preys on small mammals such as pikas and voles.

Last but not least are the aerial predators. Golden eagles hunt anything from hares to foxes and young goats, while vultures – including the bearded vulture and Himalayan griffon vulture – soar over the mountains in search of animal carcasses.



## CLIMB TO THE TOP

From small rodents to sizeable goats, there's a range of important wild prey species for Himalayan predators



**HIMALAYAN IBEX**  
Large wild goat with horns up to 1.4m long. Lives at 2,000-5,000m in the Himalayas, but lower in the Gobi Desert. Hunted by snow leopards and wolves.



**BLUE SHEEP (BHARAL)**  
Agile, medium-sized wild sheep with grey coat and shorter horns. Grazes in small groups on steep slopes at 3,000-5,500m. The main prey of snow leopards.



**HIMALAYAN TAHR**  
Medium-sized wild goat, with short horns and a thick red coat. Found at 2,500-5,000m. Rarer than ibex and blue sheep but important prey for snow leopards.

### HIMALAYAN MARMOT

Large rodent weighing 4-9kg. Colonies live in burrows at 3,000-5,000m. An important prey animal for many species, from snow leopards to foxes, lynx and golden eagles.



### WOOLLY HARE

Smallish, thickly furred hare, weighing around 2.5kg. Found in alpine meadows at 3,000-5,300m. Solitary, fast and largely nocturnal. Prey for snow leopards, foxes and eagles.



### HIMALAYAN PIKA

Small, rodent-like mammal related to rabbits, but with shorter ears. Lives in crevices or among boulders at 2,400-4,200m. An important prey animal for small predators such as Tibetan foxes and the Pallas's cat.



## Each to its niche

You might think all these predators would struggle to compete for the same resources. However, each has found its own niche in the mountains, hunting prey that reflects its size or its habitat.

So while the diets and ranges of wolves and snow leopards overlap, studies show that snow leopards prefer steeper ridges, cliffs and gullies, where they largely hunt cliff-dwelling herbivores such as blue sheep and ibex. Wolves prefer mountain meadows, where they hunt Tibetan gazelle and argali sheep. This natural preference means these two top hunters usually avoid competing with each other.

The red fox is a generalist and can coexist with the larger predators by enjoying a broader diet. Where wolves and snow leopards are around, it shifts its diet to smaller prey such as marmots and pikas, but it will also benefit from the bigger predators' presence by feeding on the carcasses they leave behind. Tibetan foxes have even learned to follow brown bears as they dig for food, capturing voles and pikas flushed out from hiding.

The adaptations that enable all these different predators to coexist have evolved over millennia. Recently, however, changes within their mountain home have disrupted some of these balanced relationships.

Snow leopards are vulnerable to change. They're adapted to living in the highest mountain terrain – a world of rocks and snow, where they hunt in conditions that few other animals can handle. But as people are increasingly grazing livestock in these areas, snow leopards are forced to venture lower in search of food, putting them in direct competition with wolves.

Meanwhile, a warming climate is allowing forests to grow higher up mountain slopes. In Nepal, this is bringing the snow leopard

## DID YOU KNOW?

Genetically, snow leopards are more closely related to tigers than to common leopards, which are closer to lions and jaguars.

into contact with the more powerful common leopard. The two species traditionally occupy different niches, with the latter preferring forests lower down. But in some places, the two species are now running into one another. This is bad news for snow leopards, which struggle to compete with the larger cat.

It's clear that our work to maintain the ecological balance of the mountains is vital, and it's possible thanks to your support. ■

Snow leopards are often blamed for livestock losses but wolves will also hunt livestock when wild prey – such as these ibex – are scarce



# A WORLD OF GOOD

Try a daily dose of nature to boost your mental and physical wellbeing

**I**n fast-paced Hong Kong, many of us are living under constant pressure. Work, studies, family responsibilities and digital overload can take a real toll on both our emotional and physical wellbeing – particularly for young people growing up in an increasingly urban and screen-dominated environment.

Yet one of the most effective remedies lies closer than we think, often just beyond our doorsteps: nature.

## How nature helps us feel better

An overwhelming body of evidence shows that connecting with nature is one of the best things we can do for our mental wellbeing. It helps us relax, lowers stress levels, boosts confidence, self-esteem and creativity, and helps us to find focus and emotional balance.

However, despite Hong Kong's rich biodiversity, stunning landscapes and easy access to country parks and beaches, recent studies show that Hong Kong people scored the lowest among 18 studied regions globally for the level of nature connectedness and well-being index.

While many people recognise that nature makes them feel better, busy urban lifestyles often leave little room to do so.

## Let's reconnect with nature

At WWF, we believe that strengthening our connection with nature is essential – not only for our own wellbeing, but also for fostering greater care and action in protecting the natural world.

You don't need a long hike or a remote destination to make a difference. Spending just 20 minutes a day engaging with nature can make a massive difference to our mental wellbeing.

While spending time in the great outdoors is rewarding, you can also connect with nature when you're at home too – from growing herbs, listening to birdsong, to enjoying images of nature to bring a sense of calm to your day.

The great news is that many of the powerful mood boosters are totally free – as long as we look after our world. Let's restore nature, and let nature restore us.

**GET YOUR DAILY DOSE OF NATURE**

**Take a moment each day to reconnect with the natural world around you – for your own wellbeing, and for the planet we all share.**





Working to sustain the natural world for people and wildlife  
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As well as helping to safeguard snow leopards, you support our other vital work to help protect our beautiful planet and its wildlife. Thank you.