



Snow leopards

YOUR FIELD REPORT
ISSUE 2





Nicola's sighting was unusual because the snow leopard stayed near its livestock prey, despite being close to human activity. The cats usually stay near wild prey for a while, but move on more quickly when they've killed livestock



Hello!

Welcome to your latest snow leopard update



Nicola Loweth,
senior programme
adviser, Asia
WWF-UK

Since your last update, I've been to India and Nepal to visit some of the projects that benefit your supported snow leopards. My journey took me to Ladakh in the far north of India, one of the highest

regions in the world. The Himalayas aren't just home to rich wildlife; they also provide vital natural resources for millions of people, including local communities who graze their livestock on the alpine rangelands. During my visit I was lucky enough to spot one of the secretive big cats, but the circumstances brought home the realities of living with predators. Turn the page to read all about my snow leopard encounter, and learn how we're helping foster more peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife.

Thanks for your support!



FIELD NOTES

ROCKY RELATIONS

In the Indian Himalayas, we're helping communities and big cats live side by side

I'd barely stepped off the plane in Leh when I heard that a snow leopard had killed a cow just outside the city. It's famously near-impossible to see the 'ghost of the mountains' so my first instinct was to rush to the scene. But as the sun was sinking low in the sky, and I know snow leopards tend to stay feeding from a kill for a few days, I was confident it would still be there the next morning.

As soon as dawn broke, I drove out of the city to find the snow leopard. Amazingly, it was hiding in plain sight,

its rosetted coat providing superb camouflage against the golden rocks towering above the road. Scrambling up the side of the valley for a better view, I could see blood around its mouth and, nearby, the cow it had killed.

A quiet stillness hung in the air, occasionally interrupted by the roar of a passing vehicle, as my thoughts turned to the herder who had lost their precious cow. In the Himalayas, survival is a daily battle – food and water are scarce and crops are hard to grow, so people

depend on raising livestock to make a living. But as the snow leopards' natural prey dwindles, the cats move closer to settlements – and to domestic animals.

Communities are surprisingly tolerant when the occasional animal, out grazing on the mountainsides, is taken. But when a predator raids a pen overnight and kills an entire flock, their goodwill is sorely tested. These devastating attacks often lead to retaliatory killings – and they're becoming more common.

Coexistence, not conflict

In other regions of India and Nepal, your support is helping herders protect their livestock at night, when animals are at their most vulnerable. So far, we've built predator-proof enclosures in three villages, protecting some 1,800 sheep and goats from snow leopards and Himalayan wolves (often the main culprits in livestock losses). Designed with local community members, these wire-and-stone-wall corrals prevent predators from jumping or digging their way in. We're also trialling flashing solar-powered lights, using 59 of the devices in three high-conflict areas to see if their random flashing is effective at scaring away predators at night.

I watched the snow leopard for two hours, and all the while I contemplated the delicate balance of life here. With your support, we can continue to preserve it.

Nicola

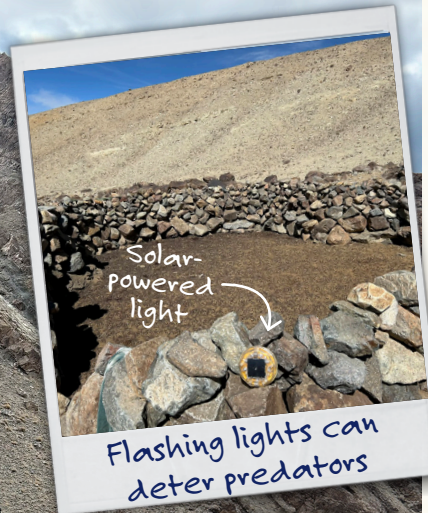


HABITAT GUARDIANS

High in the mountains live the Changpa, nomadic herders who raise livestock in a traditional, sustainable way. They have a deep respect for wildlife, but are facing growing challenges, including an increase in livestock predation. At the same time, rising demand for livestock products is boosting the value of their animals, which reduces their tolerance of predators.



We're supporting the Changpa to incorporate their traditional knowledge into a community-led vision for the future. This includes initiatives that promote human-wildlife coexistence and boost women's income from products such as crafts and luxury goods made of wool. By uplifting their voices, we hope to help restore balance.



When word got around, people arrived to try to catch a glimpse of the elusive big cat



MOUNTAIN MUM

It's not easy raising a family in the mountains of central and south Asia, so a female snow leopard uses careful timing to succeed

Conditions in the high Himalayas pose serious challenges for any animal looking to raise a family, with wild weather, dangerous terrain and food often hard to find. For this reason, breeding in snow leopards is more strictly seasonal than in cats that live at lower altitudes: these mountain dwellers have just a brief window of opportunity, and they must grab it.

The first challenge for a female snow leopard is to find a suitable mate. Breeding starts at around three years in females and around four in males, who are a little slower to mature. Her cubs will be born in spring, when food is easiest to find, so this means she must pair up with her partner during winter. The quest begins in January. A female roams her territory, marking it with droppings and urine, and advertising her presence with loud calls. When a passing male gets the message, he sets out to track her down.

A female's fertile period lasts only five to eight days. A male can tell from her scent that she's ready to breed, and he tries to find her as quickly as possible. The cats' yowling calls can be heard for several weeks as they wander

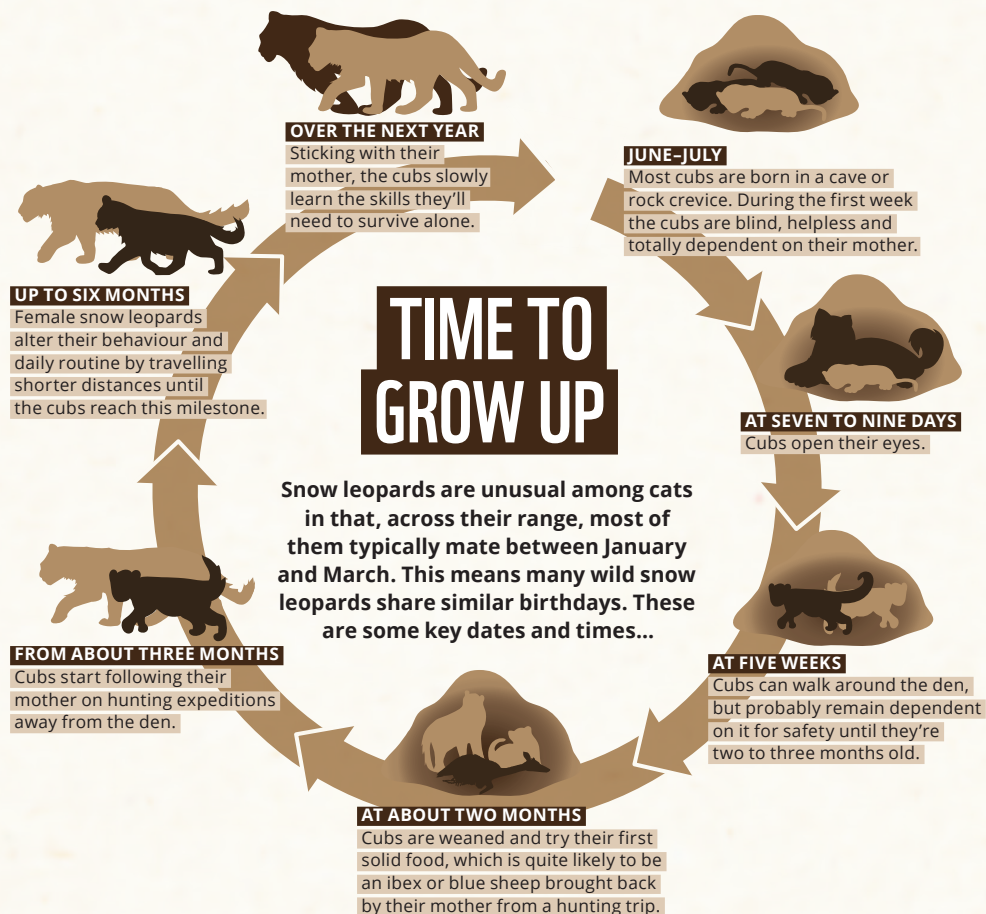
the slopes in search of each other.

Going solo

Once a male and female get together, they may mate 12 to 26 times a day to maximise the chances of success. They know they won't get another opportunity. The male disappears once his work is done, leaving the female to face the next challenge alone. Her gestation lasts between 93 and 110 days. During this period, she seeks out a hidden cave or crevice among the boulders as a suitable birthing den, and lines it with soft fur from her belly, ready for the new arrivals.

Cubs may be born at any time from April to July, but typically in June. Litters of five or more have been recorded in captivity. In the wild, however, a mother would struggle to look after so many cubs, so she generally produces just two or three. These are blind and helpless at birth, covered in

Snow leopard cubs stay with their mother until they're 18-22 months old, when they start moving away



a thick layer of coarse fur to keep them warm. They weigh just 320-700g – about the same as a squirrel.

A female's milk is very nourishing, and her cubs grow quickly, putting on nearly 50g a day. At around day seven to nine, they can open their eyes. By week five, they can walk. By 10 weeks, they're able to start tackling their first solid food. They remain in the den for another two months, while their mother goes off hunting, returning frequently to nurse them. By late summer they're able to

follow their mother on her trips, watching and learning.

Moving on

Snow leopard cubs become independent at around 18 to 24 months. Until then, they remain with their mother, who devotes much of her time to looking after them. Raising a litter takes so much work that a female snow leopard breeds only every second year. Siblings may stay together for a while after leaving their mother. Soon, however, each one strikes

out alone. Ultimately these are solitary cats and must learn to survive solo.

Ready and waiting

Though males become sexually mature at two years old, they aren't generally big and strong enough to secure a territory until the age of four. Each must establish his own home range – somewhere with plentiful prey and, of course, resident females – so that he can spring into action when his first mating season rolls around.

Life in the mountains

DID YOU KNOW?

Another name for the snow leopard is 'ounce', from the Old French word for lynx, *once*. It also explains the cat's genus name, *Uncia*.

is tough. Though snow leopards in zoos have reached the age of 22, wild individuals rarely live more than 10 to 12 years. During her lifetime, a female can expect to produce three or four litters. Each of her cubs, if it survives its challenging early years, will play its part in producing more snow leopards. In this way, these iconic cats can continue to roam their mountain home for generations to come. ■



Young snow leopards need to be able to capture nimble prey in steep terrain before they can leave their mother

MELTING POINT

Sea ice supports incredible wildlife at both poles, but it's disappearing before our eyes

Our planet's north pole is surrounded by a vast frozen sea. Life in the Arctic depends on this sea ice. Caribou migrate across it. Polar bears

use it as a platform from which to hunt seals. The algae that forms beneath its surface supports an ecosystem teeming with wildlife, including beluga whales and narwhals.

At the opposite pole, in Antarctica, emperor penguins need 'fast' (stable) sea ice to raise their chicks on, while beneath the surface, under the ice, krill breed in enormous numbers. These tiny, shrimp-like creatures are a cornerstone of the Southern Ocean's food web, providing food for everything from fish and seals to Adélie penguins and blue whales.

Sea ice also helps cool the planet as it reflects the sun's rays back into space. But greenhouse gases caused by human activities have raised temperatures globally,

which is having a huge impact in polar regions. Sea ice is forming later, breaking up sooner and becoming thinner – with devastating consequences for wildlife and for humankind.

In the Arctic, shrinking ice means polar bears are forced to spend more time on land, where hunting opportunities are limited. In Antarctica, four of the five known emperor penguin colonies in one area experienced breeding failure in 2022 when thousands of chicks died – the ice broke up before they'd grown their waterproof feathers. These and other polar species are facing an uncertain future.

It's vital that the average global temperature rise is kept below 1.5°C, otherwise the Arctic could be ice-free every summer by the middle of this century.

What happens next depends on the actions we take today to reduce carbon emissions. With your support, we're pushing for urgent global climate policies to keep warming in check.

DO ONE THING!

Cut your carbon

Try to increase the proportion of delicious plant-based foods in your diet



Antarctic sea ice is vitally important for all the wildlife living on, under and around it. From tiny krill to vast whales, their survival depends on keeping global warming under 1.5°C

MAKE A CHANGE

Visit our website to find more ways to help nature every day
www.org.hk/en/cities/footprint/





Working to sustain the natural
world for people and wildlife
為人類及野生生物延續大自然
together possible. wwf.org.hk

WWF.ORG.HK

© 1986 Panda symbol WWF © "WWF" is a WWF Registered Trademark

© 1986 熊貓標誌 WWF, © "WWF" 是世界自然基金會的註冊商標

WWF-Hong Kong, 15/F Manhattan Centre, 8 Kwai Cheong Road, Kwai Chung N.T. Hong Kong

香港新界葵涌葵昌路 8 號萬泰中心 15 樓世界自然基金會香港分會

Tel 電話: (852) 2526 1011 Fax 傳真: (852) 2845 2764 Email 電郵: wwf@wwf.org.hk

Registered Name 註冊名稱: World Wide Fund for Nature Hong Kong 世界自然(香港)基金會
(Incorporated in Hong Kong with limited liability by guarantee 於香港註冊成立的擔保有限公司)