

Big Cats

A magazine by IBCA on wildlife conservation

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P24

Petaca, the
Chilean
Beauty

P20

Java King
in Danger

P16

Tracking
Snow
Leopards

Living
with
Lions

India's Conservation Success

October 23
UN Recognises International
Snow Leopard Day



The UN recognition of International Snow Leopard Day is significant in making the international community adapt strategies for protection of this big cat. This day was established in 2013, when 12 countries adopted the Bishkek Declaration to protect snow leopards.

PHOTO BY SASCHA FONSECA



Furry Beings

Marmots (*Marmota*) are abundant in mountainous regions. They hibernate during the winter and emerge from their burrows in late spring. In some regions where marmots are abundant, snow leopards feed on them in summer, which is also the time when snow leopards give birth to cubs.

PHOTO BY JOANNA VAN GRUISEN

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Our Contributors for this Issue



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Erwin is leading the very first island-wide camera trap survey for the Javan leopard. He started his professional career as an animal keeper at a rescue centre in 2002. In 2011, he independently monitored the Javan leopard and assisted in human-leopard conflict mitigation. He formed a volunteer network of leopard monitoring and conflict mitigation in West Java.



CHARU SHARMA

Charu is working as a researcher with the High Altitudes Programme at Nature Conservation Foundation. Her work involves monitoring snow leopard populations across large spatial scales in Himachal Pradesh, India. Her research interests include ungulate and carnivore ecology, grassland ecology, and research-based conservation efforts.



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SHARON OSBERG

Sharon is a former banking technology executive who worked during the very exciting rise of the Internet. But today, she is most well-known for her avocation, the card game bridge. Since she still owns her first Kodak Brownie camera, a relic of bygone days, wildlife photography became a natural extension of her new pursuit. She also serves on three non-profit boards, including the Felidae Conservation Fund.

Editor's Note



Learning to Coexist

We are fascinated by big cats. Some we revere, others we use as symbols of power and majesty. But across the world, big cat population is dwindling. Barely 10% of lion population survives today. Jaguars, snow leopards and pumas continue to be threatened, while some tiger sub-species are already extinct.

Several countries today have the image of a lion in their emblems (see p.14-15). Sadly, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) reports that since 1990 lions have disappeared from at least 12 countries.

Is it possible for humans to coexist with big cats? This issue attempts to answer this question. Our cover story on Asiatic lions of Gir Forest describes how local community members – the Maldharis – live close to the lions. There are 674 lions today in Gir. This is a remarkable story of conservation, given that three decades ago, the species was considered critically endangered. Local communities have become sensitive to the needs of the lions. The lions are today an integral part of their lives.

Another story in this issue looks at how organisations in Indonesia are trying to prevent extinction of the Javan leopard. The challenge in Indonesia is how to mitigate human-leopard conflict, i.e., how to keep a check on human habitations and expand the fragmented leopard habitats.

Our issue also includes rare pictures of the snow leopard being tracked by a group of enthusiastic researchers, and offers a close look at the now famous pumas of Chile. The mother puma is both gentle and firm, offering valuable lessons to her family for survival and existence. Humans have a lot to learn from the big cats. 🐾

Malvika Kaul

MALVIKA KAUL



Snow leopard in Kinnaur Valley

Tracking Snow Leopards in High Himalayas

A demanding field trip in Kinnaur, northern India bordering Tibet, fetches rare images of the snow leopard. A researcher shares the fascinating journey

BY CHARU SHARMA
PHOTO COURTESY
WILDLIFE WING, HPFD
AND NCF



The scent marking of the snow leopard guides the researcher to identify the big cat's presence

Kinnaur's picturesque landscape features steep valleys, high-standing mountains, and the mighty Sutlej, Pare-chu and Baspa rivers. Our quest for capturing the elusive snow leopard began by placing cameras in rugged terrain of Kinnaur that has breathtaking views. The team navigated their way through cliffs, on

ridgelines and steep gorges.

Snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*), popularly known as the 'gray ghost', is an elusive cat occurring in the high-altitude regions of several mountain ranges of 12 Asian countries. As a flagship species, the snow leopard symbolises the conservation of its vast ecosystem.

What are the population densities of



Rinchen Tobge from Spiti and Tanba Chherring from Hango (Kinnaur) deploying a camera trap near Shalkhar village

snow leopards in a landscape surrounded by human settlements, agricultural fields and grazing pastures? How has this changed in the last five years? To address these questions, and chronicle changes over time, the Himachal Pradesh Forest Department (HPFD) and Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) launched the second round of state-wide snow leopard assessment. This initiative aims to deepen our understanding of snow leopard populations and identify priority areas for focused conservation efforts.

55 cameras in 500 km²

Since snow leopards inhabit regions where the tree line starts to disappear, the team stacked stones to set their cameras for them. We had previously deployed cameras here in 2017, and I was surprised to see that the deploy

stations were intact even after seven years! We set up 55 cameras in a 500 km² area in 4x4 km grids, with at least one camera in each grid for representative sampling. It is

Our research engages local communities, recognising that they are central to conservation and their insights of local ecology are helpful for conservation

recommended that study areas be at least 481 km² apart to arrive at accurate density estimates. We hiked up to the ridgelines of mountains and looked for snow leopard signs – scrapes (scratch marks on the ground), scent marks (a typical sign of territorial marking), scat or pugmarks – and microhabitats like cliff bases and overhanging boulders.

Our team of 10 included locals from Spiti Valley who have decade-long experience in tracking snow leopards. Their experience was valuable as the team completed the task in just 12 days. Their expertise helped in deploying cameras exactly in places where snow leopards come and mark their territory. This team also included members from Champions from Kinnaur, who are part of the Champions Network by NCF. Our research engages local communities, recognizing that they are central to



A snow leopard and common leopard observed at the same location in Ropa valley

conservation and their insights of local ecology are helpful to address conservation challenges. Once we set off from our base, we climbed for long distances for several hours, until we reached the mountain tops. En route, we often spotted the majestic mountain monarchs – the ibex and the blue sheep, preferred prey of snow leopards. Another perk of fieldwork is meeting new people every day, especially as they are very welcoming – offering hot cups of tea, tingmo (a steamed bread in Tibetan cuisine), momos and lots of warmth.

Sharing Space with Humans

Snow leopards here live close to human settlements, sharing

spaces with communities. Locals claim they spot them right in front of their houses. Some suggest they have also seen snow leopard cubs in their neighbourhood. We managed to record snow leopards in 29 cameras along with eight other mammals like the Pallas’s cat (first record from the state), and common leopards in many locations where previously only snow leopards were observed. It would be interesting to see how common leopards are impacting snow leopards, especially in the face of climate change. These insightful results from camera trapping are made possible by the dedicated efforts of the field team which included residents from Kibber village in Spiti Valley. Their work underscores the importance

A Siberian Ibex in Kinnaur Valley. Ibex is a preferred prey of the snow leopard



Photo: Kesang Chunit



Panoramic view of Leo village with apple orchards



En route to the village of Kunnu Charang, the last hamlets on Indo-Tibetan border

of promoting multi-use landscapes as conservation units that support both wildlife and human livelihoods, fostering ethical measures of coexistence. The Global Snow Leopard & Ecosystem Protection Programme (GSLEP), an alliance of snow leopard range countries and relevant stakeholders towards conservation of snow leopards and the mountain ecosystems, initiated Population Assessment of World’s Snow Leopards (PAWS) to arrive at a global estimation of their population. As a part of PAWS, in 2021, a study surveyed 26,000 km² of potential habitat in Himachal Pradesh, estimating 34-73 individuals. A nationwide assessment from 2019-23 estimated India’s snow leopard population at 718 individuals. These studies revealed that most snow leopard populations inhabit shared, multi-use landscapes. 🐾

Charu Sharma is a researcher with Nature Conservation Foundation, Mysuru.