



Leopard (Snow)

Snow Leopard:

Panthera uncia



Distribution:

Mountainous regions of northern India, the former USSR and in the Himalayas.

Habitat:

High up in rhododendron forests and above the tree line, living in caves in the rocky cliffs. Usually solitary.

Description:

The leopard's thick fur is about 5cm long along the back - 10cm long underneath. The coat is a soft ashy-brown colour with black rosette markings.

Size:

Body Length - 1.2 to 1.5m (4-5ft). Tail - 90cm (35.5ins). Weight: 25 - 75kg

Life-span:

Approx. 20 years in captivity.

Food:

Wild sheep and goats, deer, wild boar, small mammals and some birds.

Town cats, alley cats, farm cats, wild cats, big cats - all are members of the mammal family Felidae. All are hunters, each in its own way deadly. In fact, there are 36 species of cat in the wild. They are widely distributed across parts of Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas.

The big cats include the tiger, lion, leopard, jaguar, puma and cheetah. The biggest and most magnificent of all the cats is the Siberian tiger, which is more than three metres long and weighs 270 - 320kg. The smallest of all the wild cats are the Rusty spotted cat of India and Sri Lanka - and the Black-footed cat of southern Africa, both of which are about 40cm in length and weigh 1.3kg.

One of the most strikingly beautiful of all cats is the snow leopard - sometimes called the ounce or once. It is related to the common leopard of Africa and Asia, but because its way of life and general appearance are so different it is regarded as a separate species.

The snow leopard has a head and body length of about 1.2 - 1.5m (4-5ft) with a tail measuring 90cm (35.5ins). The thick fur is about 5cm long on the back - but almost twice that length on the underparts of the animal.

The coat is a soft ashy-brown colour with black rosette markings. This long, soft coat of fur provides the snow leopard with effective and much needed protection from the bitterly cold winds encountered by this extremely rare and endangered species!

Owing to the sad fact that some humans like to adorn themselves in animal skins, the snow leopard's coat of soft and beautifully marked fur caused the species to be a target for the fur trade. The International Furriers Association has now banned the use of snow leopard fur, so snow leopard skin clothes are made strictly on the black market. It should be remembered that it takes the skins from up to seven dead leopards to make one coat for one human!

The snow leopard lives in the remote mountainous regions of Central Asia, from Pakistan and Afghanistan to parts of Russia and China - including the lonely Altai Mountains and the Himalayas, where in summer it hunts at altitudes of up to 6,000m (about 19,500ft). During the harsh winter weather, the snow leopard follows the example of its prey and descends to lower levels of around 1,800m (about 6,000ft). The prey species include wild sheep, marmots, and other rodents, hares and ground-dwelling birds.

It is at this time of year that the snow leopard will attack and kill domestic cattle - or may itself be killed by

hunters or herdsman, although generally it will avoid anything to do with humans.

Snow leopards are powerful, agile animals capable of making huge leaps to cross ravines or clear other obstacles.

Usually a solitary creature, it leads a lonely life wandering the mountains, although the female leopard may be accompanied by cubs. These are born about 100 days after mating takes place, with two or three cubs in a litter.

There are several reasons why the snow leopard is an endangered species. First and foremost, it has probably never existed in large numbers. It is solitary by nature and lives in a harsh, dangerous environment where a false step or misjudged leap could end in disaster. There is also danger from hunters, who kill the snow leopard for its beautiful coat of fur. Herdsman will kill snow leopards to protect their cattle and humans also affect the species by felling forests for cultivation or hydroelectric schemes.

The total population of the snow leopard is now in hundreds rather than thousands. It has been fully protected in India since 1952, and is also protected in the USSR. It is also illegal to possess a coat made from snow leopard fur, but such coats are still sold. Urgent and decisive action must be taken if this species is going to survive into the 21st century.

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