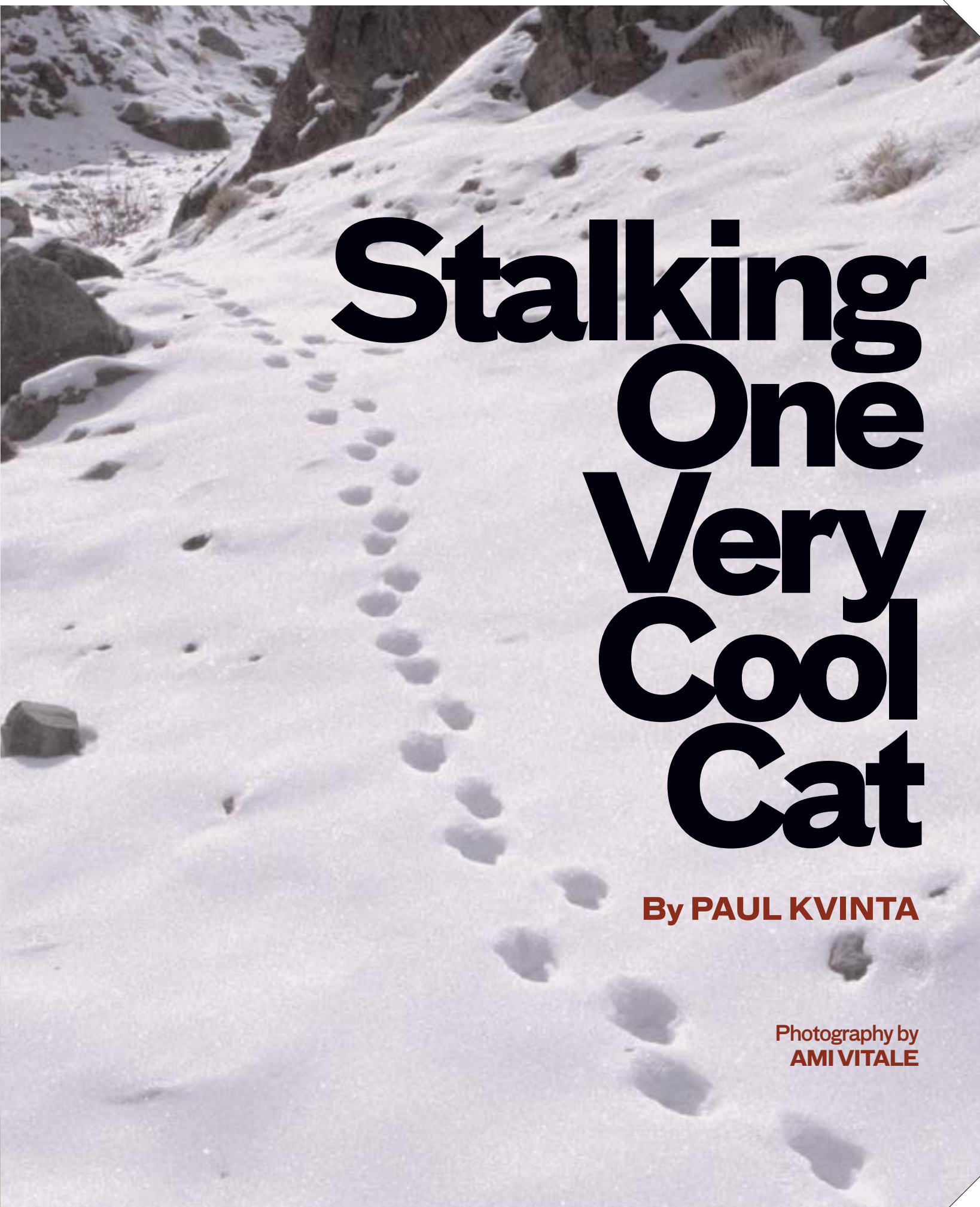




**The snow leopards of the Himalaya are among the most elusive predators on Earth. But even their amazing stealth may not be enough to save them. On one of the first commercial expeditions to see the cats in winter, our reporter investigates whether adventure travel can make a difference.**

**WILD KINGDOM:** The Thiksey Monastery (above) stands at the entrance to Hemis National Park, in Ladakh, India. Opposite page: The tracks of a snow leopard appear in nearby Husing Valley.





# Stalking One Very Cool Cat

By **PAUL KVINTA**

Photography by  
**AMI VITALE**

# Hour

after hour we scan the tortured Himalayan ridgelines, sunup to sun-down, valley after snow-covered valley, first the Rumbak, then the Tarbung, now the Husing. Our binoculars trace and retrace the same jutting cliffs, the same craggy outcrops, the same scree slopes, over and over. Our eyes are red, tired, and bleary, and at nearly 13,000 unacclimated feet, we're more than a bit woozy.

I'm studying a handful of wild blue sheep on the near slope. They're grazing leisurely on tufts of sage, and one ram is particularly magnificent, his massive horns spiraling in on themselves. They're not picky eaters, blue sheep, which is good, considering this moonscape of rock and ice. I inch the binocs just above them, and there he is. A cat. A snow leopard. No doubt about it. He's crouched low, moving bit by bit. Then, suddenly, his long tail shoots straight up, and he's charging down the slope, rocks flying, limbs spinning, snow flaring. "There!" I cry, dropping the binocs and pointing.

Before anyone can respond, before I can be proven a fool, I look again. The sheep are still grazing, heads down, jaws working. Above them is poised a serrated granite outcrop, solitary and still. There is no cat. "Nothing," I say. "It's nothing. Forget it."

"Another one of those moving rocks," says Rodney Jackson, in his quiet way, scanning the opposite slope. "Just be patient."

I can't imagine that shape-shifting granite is what the Buddhist oracle had in mind, but who knows? We'd made a pilgrimage to the village of Sabu specifically to see her at the beginning of our quest, as she was said

## Snow Leopards

Outside of zoos, few Westerners have ever laid eyes on these, the least seen of all big cats.

to be the most powerful healer and fortune-teller in all of Ladakh. The Dalai Lama himself is supposedly a devotee. She would tell us if our search for the snow leopard would be fulfilled.

After graciously seating us in her kitchen alongside several ailing pilgrims who'd traveled far for her curative touch, this diminutive 82-year-old grandmother disappeared behind a cloud of incense and for 30 minutes underwent a dark transformation. In a slow swirl of drum beating, rattle shaking,

and saber waving before an altar of burning candles, she began to yip and yelp, to grunt and groan. She wailed plaintively and flailed her arms and donned an elaborate golden headdress bearing the images of holy lamas from centuries past. Then, eyes rolled to the back of her skull, she spun around to face us, speaking in a gravelly baritone. This new entity, this denizen of some shadowy netherworld, quickly set to work. She pressed her lips to the stomach of a woman with an injured foot, emitted a loud sucking sound, and then spit a green, goeey substance into a bowl. The patient sighed, apparently satisfied that the pain had been sucked out of her. Then she turned to me. Draping a white *kata*, or scarf, around my neck, she assured me, "You will see the snow leopard. He lives high in the mountains. Whichever mountain you go up, you will see him."

I wanted to dismiss this as her merely hoping to please a friendly foreigner. But then she proved her unearthly power beyond a doubt. She grabbed a red-hot iron from the wood-burning stove, and, without flinching, slowly licked it.

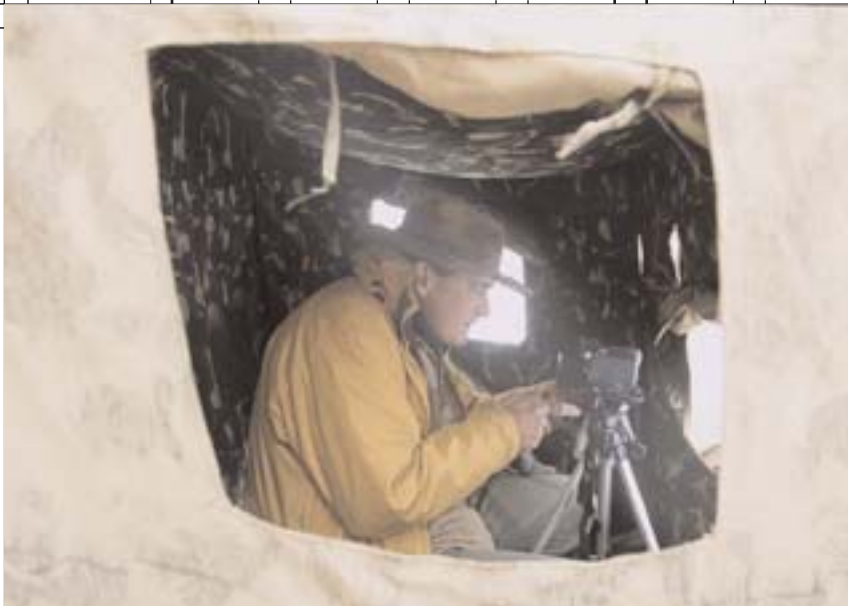
If the laws of nature submitted to the will of this woman, who was I to doubt her? And yet now, cold and a little frustrated, I'm beginning to wonder. Then photographer Ami Vitale knocks me from my





**CAT PEOPLE:** A monk holds what is purported to be the 800-year-old skin of a snow leopard, beneath an array of festival masks in the Matho Monastery near Leh, in Ladakh, India. Opposite page, from top: A bridge near the Thiksey Monastery; snow leopard expert Rodney Jackson measures a paw print; local shepherds keep their herds in covered pens at night to protect them from snow leopards and wolves; a male leaves a scent marker in Husing Valley.

PHOTOGRAPH, BOTTOM LEFT: SNOW LEOPARD CONSERVANCY



stupor. "There!" she cries, pointing at a particular juncture of razor ridge and blue sky. "Something moved! I know it moved!"

We fumble for the high-powered scopes and examine the spot.

Nada. Another moving rock.

Then someone notices the blue sheep. They are no longer grazing. They're staring intently across the valley, at the exact spot where Vitale had seen movement. We hurry down to the frozen river and investigate along its bank when Jackson stops suddenly. There in the snow lies a set of heart-shaped tracks. Cat tracks. Fresh ones. "They might be 30 minutes old," he says, eyeballing the tracks where they progress up the bank and cross the ice. He slowly scans the impossibly vertical slope opposite the river. Then he scratches his head. "I have no idea where this snow leopard is," he says. "But in all probability, at this moment, he's watching us."

**Snow Leopards**

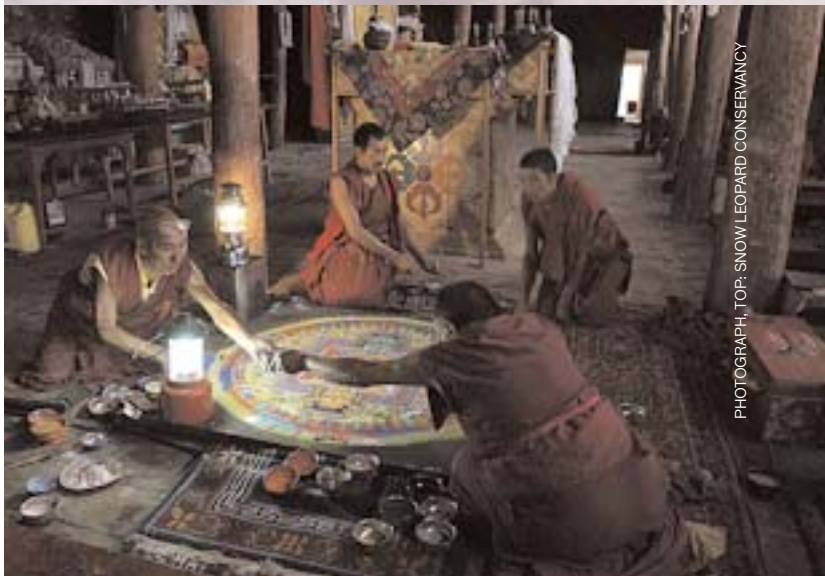
**Few people travel**

to the Indian region of Ladakh in winter. Located in the northwestern reaches of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, Ladakh straddles the world's two highest ranges, the Himalaya and Karakoram, between which runs the Indus River Valley, the heart of this once independent Buddhist kingdom. Ladakh means "land of many passes," and from late October through May these blustery portals, including the world's highest civilian-use pass, 18,380-foot Khardung La, remain buried under ice and snow. The flight from Delhi is almost empty, save the elderly monk across the aisle mumbling Buddhist chants while reading his in-flight magazine, and a handful of plucky Brits with plans to undertake a popular trek several miles up the frozen Zaskar River from the village of Chiling to sleep in caves. One glance out the window explains the dearth of February visitors. Below us soar some of India's mightiest mountains, 20,000-plus-foot peaks knifing above the swirling snow and separated by monster glaciers and frozen valleys, all of it a forbidding no-man's-land of lifeless white.

**"I have no idea where this snow leopard is," Jackson says. "But in all probability, he's watching us."**

When we touch down in Leh at 11,500 feet, the town's restaurants, guest houses, and Internet cafés, all hopping during the summer trekking season, are mostly shuttered, and kids are flying down the empty streets on crude sleds. The sign at the Panorama Hotel boasts that it's "the only hotel in Leh with central heat," but all the water pipes are frozen. I am given a ration of warm water and bathe standing in a bucket.

But winter is when blue sheep descend from as high as 17,000 feet in pursuit of better forage, and wherever blue sheep go, snow leopards surely follow. And snow leopards are why I've come. I've signed on with San Francisco-based Geographic Expeditions (GeoEx) for one of the very first commercial expeditions to track the elusive cats during winter,



PHOTOGRAPH, TOP: SNOW LEOPARD CONSERVANCY



**HELLO, KITTY:** Mikmar, the dominant male of the Rumbak watershed for several years, takes a “self-portrait” by crossing an infrared trigger, on Karlung Ridge in Hemis National Park. Far left: British sculptor Mark Coreth sits in his blind. Bottom, from left: Thiksey Monastery monks create a mandala, an imaginary palace, from colored sand and stones; the expedition’s supply ponies take a breather; a monk at play.





**INSTANT KARMA:** Tibetan Buddhism flourishes in Ladakh, at the Thiksey Monastery, where a young monk stands before a view of the Stok Range. Opposite, from top: A Western visitor receives a *kata*, a small silk scarf, from the oracle in the village of Sabu; an aerial view of Ladakh; a woman from the village of Rumbak makes tea; an entrance to the Hemis Monastery, also in Ladakh.

Go to [www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/adventure) to see more of award-winning photographer Ami Vitale's stunning images of Ladakh.



when they're on the prowl at a reasonable altitude, when there's a more realistic chance of spotting one. It's a modest enough expectation, seemingly—even a fleeting glimpse would constitute success—and yet one that probably borders on self-delusion.

Outside of zoos, few Westerners have ever laid eyes on these mysterious felines, the least seen of all the big cats. The fact that they live in the world's harshest, most inaccessible terrestrial environment has something to do with that, but so do the amazing tools these cats come equipped with: silvery coats dotted with rosettes to blend into the rock-and-ice landscape, huge paws to scramble over loose rocks, and tails almost the length of the cat's entire head and body to assist with bounding up and down 50-degree cliffs. If an 85-pound snow leopard can surprise and kill a nimble blue sheep three times its size, on a near-vertical, snow-covered scree slope, how hard could it be to hide from plodding humans? The cats have been seen

**Ladakh,  
aka Little Tibet,  
is one of the  
last strongholds  
of Tibetan  
Buddhism.**

so infrequently by locals in Ladakh and across their range in Central Asia that they've attained near mythical status. Even Jackson, 61, the world's foremost snow leopard expert, once suffered a five-year catless stretch.

When I meet him, he's testing his infrared beam-triggered remote cameras behind the hotel, instruments that by their very nature doubt the human capacity to glimpse this creature. Over the past two years he's used these cameras to capture nearly 200 cat "self-portraits" in Hemis National Park. By comparison, his actual sightings during the same period number exactly six. But Jackson assures me that we're in the best place during the best season to spy a cat. "Ninety percent of the places where snow leopards live, they're hardly ever seen," he says. "Researchers spend their whole lives trying. But a couple of places on Earth are special, and this is one of them."

Jackson, who has a Ph.D. in wildlife biology, is soft-spoken and unassuming, qualities not unexpected in someone who's spent three decades tiptoeing after the world's cagiest predator. Short and bespectacled, with a gray beard and traces of the South African accent of his youth, he heads the California-based Snow Leopard Conservancy (SLC), which together with GeoEx plans another trip modeled on ours for January 2006. In its forthcoming brochure, GeoEx lists the trip at 19 days—several days for travel and acclimation to altitude followed by a solid week tracking snow leopards in Hemis National Park. On our exploratory trip, Jackson will try to sniff out a cat for me, Vitale, a renowned sculptor named Mark Coreth, and a couple of other clients. Jackson has never played tour guide before, and yet he views this effort as critical for snow leopards, maybe more so than his vast body of fieldwork on the species. To explain why, he flips open a laptop in the empty hotel restaurant and produces a series of satellite maps and images.

With a population numbering between 4,500 and 7,500, snow leopards (*Uncia uncia*) occupy a patchy high-country range that stretches across 12 countries, from the Altai Mountains of Russia and Mongolia, down through the Tian Shan (extending from Kyrgyzstan to China), to the Hindu Kush (primarily in Pakistan and Afghanistan), into the Karakoram, across the Trans-Himalaya, from India to Bhutan, and into several ranges of western China (see map on page 76). Throughout this region, pressures on the cat are mounting. Tibetan villagers can earn \$190 flogging a set of cat bones on the Chinese medicine market, while pelts can sell illegally for about \$2,000 a pop in Kyrgyzstan. Across the entire range, livestock overgrazing has seriously depleted the snow leopards' prey base of blue sheep and ibex. Increasingly, cats are killing domestic sheep and goats, which prompts herders to retaliate in kind.

Jackson estimates that about 175 of these cats lurk in Hemis National Park, an area about the size of Rhode Island that's home to some 1,600 people and more than 4,000 domestic sheep, goats, and



yaks. A snow leopard scrutinizing an open pasture might pick off one or two grazing animals. But a cat that slips into a corral at night instinctively kills everything that moves. “The worst case was 53 animals killed in Markha,” says Jackson. “Multiple losses can ruin a family.” To stop large-scale massacres, he’s helped villagers “predator-proof” corrals with wire mesh. The pasture kills are tougher to prevent. To economically offset those, Jackson plans to tap into the region’s already booming trekking industry, a mostly summertime enterprise. (Since Ladakh opened to outsiders in 1974, foreign tourist numbers have steadily increased; 21,608 visited in 2004, up from 15,362 the previous year.) Jackson wants to bring in winter tourists to see snow leopards and other wildlife, folks who’ll spend a night or two in a village, eat a few home-cooked meals, maybe hire some pack ponies. “We’re trying to turn snow leopards from a threat into an asset,” he says.

It’s a tall order, certainly, and even a distinguished member of the SLC’s own board, wildlife biologist George Schaller, a pioneer of conservation biology, isn’t certain of Jackson’s approach. “It’s a small beginning, but I have no idea whether it will work over the entire snow leopard range,” he says. “You have to look at each local situation individually to know whether an approach will work.”

Jackson’s plan might be a particularly good fit in Ladakh, however, where the cats benefit from something not found in most parts of their range—Tibetan Buddhism. While villagers will occasionally stone to death snow leopards cornered in corrals, “they don’t like killing things,” says Jackson. Often referred to as Little Tibet, Ladakh remains one of the world’s last strongholds of the faith, and evidence of it appears everywhere. We see it in the streetside prayer wheels people spin clockwise while chanting the reverential mantra “Omani Padme Hum.” We see it in 16th-century monasteries perched dramatically on windblown hilltops throughout the Indus River Valley, where monks in maroon robes gather to chant early morning *pujas* (a form of prayer) and slurp yak butter tea. We see it driving south out of Leh and into the mountains of the Stok Range, crossing the mighty Indus over a creaky bridge festooned with prayer flags, and passing cliffside chorten, shrines fashioned from rocks by sure-footed pilgrims. But after the road ends in the village of Zingchen and we continue on foot for another hour and a half up the narrow Rumbak Valley, we learn that the limits of Buddhist tolerance will soon be put to the test, along with Jackson’s entire ecotourism strategy.

When we reach our camp at the mouth of a dramatic gorge, we’re informed that not only have cats been slinking all over the place (according to the tracks, one passed along a ridge over the dining tent the previous evening; the day before that another unseen leopard left tracks in the gorge at sunset), but that one killed at least two sheep, grazing not far

from Rumbak village two days earlier. Nobody saw it, but a shepherd later discovered the bodies, blood splattered across the clean white snow. The villagers aren’t happy.

“What will they do?” I ask Jackson.

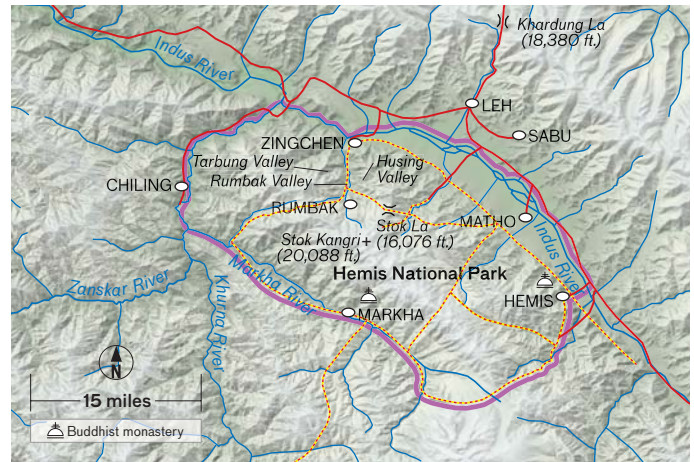
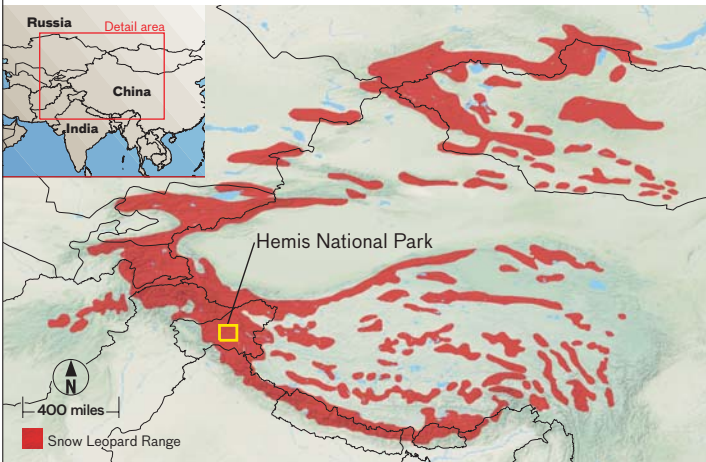
“I have no idea,” he says.

**Granite holds** all kinds of drama, apparently, and Jackson just can’t get enough. We’re perched high on a narrow ridge in the Rumbak Gorge, assembled before an imposing urine-soaked boulder, and Jackson smushes his nose right against the drippy rock and gives a whopping snort. He then flares his nostrils, as though contemplating the bouquet, and urges me to have a whiff. I don’t need to get closer than six inches to know what I smell—the men’s room at Yankee Stadium, eighth inning. But Jackson detects more sophisticated fare. He smells *Les Mis* for snow leopards—life and death, love and betrayal, victory and defeat. As we evaluate the fresh sign before us—this “scent rock,” the large paw prints tracking up to it, the signature scrape marks in the snow and dirt all around it—Jackson shares with us the cat saga that has riveted him for several winters now.

For a long time, a snow leopard that Jackson named Mikmar lorded over this watershed, a system that includes not only the Rumbak Valley, but two tributaries feeding into it just below the gorge, the Husing from the east and the Tarbung from the west. The intersection of these three valleys constitutes perfect snow leopard country, a shattered landscape of jagged cliffs, plunging ravines, and crumbly ridges, and Mikmar had the run of the place, helping himself to the choice females, feasting on blue sheep, and, when necessary, raiding local livestock. Like all snow leopards, he possessed luxurious, one-inch fur to insulate against the cold and haunting, pale green eyes. He traveled solo, also typical, and while he wasn’t a big cat—he was visibly smaller than the average dominant male, 24 inches high at the shoulder, 90 pounds—he was a bold and prolific marker, repeatedly spraying his scent beneath overhanging boulders and leaving telltale scrape marks in the dirt along well-established cat routes. These signs warned the five other cats in this 45-square-mile area to steer clear (a scar above Mikmar’s left eye suggested a brawl with an adversary who’d disrespected these rules) except during the winter mating season, when he wooed females with a loud and haunting yowl. He had mated with a female named Dolma on a low ridge about 250 yards from our camp, and her two cubs had grown up here. But by 2004, for reasons that remain a mystery, Mikmar had vanished. Three other residents Jackson photographed also disappeared, and (Continued on page 86)

## Snow Leopard Habitat and the Ladakh Region

**LONE RANGERS:** The snow leopards’ mountainous habitat (indicated in red on map at left) stretches from Russia to western China. Hemis National Park (right) in India’s Ladakh, where the author trekked, is prime cat-sighting territory. The purple boundary is approximate.



MAPS BY COMPUTERTERRAIN MAPPING

## STALKING ONE VERY COOL CAT

(Continued from page 76)

then new faces started popping up. For a spell there appeared to be a power vacuum, but recently a new dominant male seems to have moved in. It remains to be seen if he'll become the new Mikmar. (Mikmar can still be seen in "Silent Roar: Searching for the Snow Leopard," a *Nature* documentary that premiered on PBS in January 2005.)

Jackson knows all this from his remote photos and from doing what we're doing now, reading sign. As he stoops over to measure the huge tracks in the snow, he suspects a juicy new plot twist. "Ten centimeters by ten centimeters [four inches by four inches]," he says. "He's a big boy. This could be our new resident male." Jackson speculates this new cat climbed over Stok La, the 16,076-foot pass up the Husing Valley, and, sensing an opportunity in the area, looked to take control. We backtrack the prints to the edge of a craggy overlook, where, judging from the paw placement, Big Boy stopped to admire the spectacular view. Jackson's subdued demeanor can't hide his excitement over the thought of such an impressive specimen poised majestically atop this jutting cliff. "This is truly magnificent," he declares. "Maybe he was watching blue sheep. Maybe he was watching someone walk up the trail, or maybe he stopped because he heard our camp. Who knows?"

Whatever the case, it soon becomes clear that Big Boy and other cats have us under constant surveillance, as each day brings new tracks, new scrapes, new scents, all of it within spitting distance of camp. We doggedly pursue all leads. We dispatch scouts early each morning along the Rumbak to evaluate sign. We investigate sightings by shepherds. We pursue tracks up and down valley walls until the terrain becomes so vertical we wonder if the cats don't secretly morph into the golden eagles soaring regularly overhead. The close calls pile up. At the end of our second day in camp, while we are sipping tea outside the dining tent at dusk, Mark Coreth, the 47-year-old sculptor from London, blurts out, "A cat! A cat! A cat!" like a machine gun misfiring. "Right there! He went bounding across that scree slope. *Boing, boing, boing!*" Tea flies everywhere as we dive for binoculars. Coreth swears that something the size of a large dog flashed across the steep slope 300 feet above my tent, and as we scan the area, we notice the evening's first star, rising in the east, right above the spot in question, imbuing the incident with a certain messianic quality that assures us this sighting will be The One.

But no one sees anything.

Still, Coreth is so bent on validating his sighting that he later claws his way up several hundred feet of snow-covered scree to look for tracks. I follow, foolishly, rocks bouncing down to my left and right. One of Jackson's Ladakhi partners comes, too, Jigmet Dadul, 33, a man who is clearly part snow leopard because he sprints up the slope past both of us. Dadul leaves us breathing heavily and clinging precariously to the loose rock while he disappears over the ridge to render a verdict. "Yes, tracks!" he yells, from somewhere above us.

Coreth's eyes light up.

"Wolf!" Dadul yells.

"Good heavens," Coreth sighs. "Where *are* these cats hiding?"

### Jackson wants

us all to see a snow leopard, but Coreth is something of a priority, and for good reason. An acclaimed sculptor whose wildlife bronzes sell for big money, Coreth employs a decidedly unorthodox approach to his art. He sculpts "in the field," which means that each day when we go cat tracking, he schlepps a table, a stool, framing wire, and several pounds of molding clay through the snow. At any moment, were we to spot a cat, he would plop down and immediately begin working the clay. With wild black curls springing from the sides of his otherwise bald head, Coreth comes off as cheery and optimistic but also slightly mad. "This is my studio!" he declares with a sweep of his arm across the mountain scenery. "It's fresh this way, isn't it? Just me and the animal. How exciting!" He's just come from Kenya, where he sculpted a bull elephant that later charged him. After Ladakh, he'll head to Belarus to stalk European bison, and then it's on to Mongolia for wild Bactrian camels. His current project involves sculpting six animals in six countries, after which he'll auction off the pieces, he says, and "give all the money to Rodney and the various Rodney-like people working to save these beasts."

Despite our high-powered scopes and our large human brains, we're terribly overmatched, and the night of Coreth's false sighting we're halfway through a bottle of Johnny Walker Black in the dining tent when someone utters the dreaded "M-word." Matthiessen. Peter Matthiessen. Jackson cringes. "I was trying to avoid a Matthiessen

experience," he confesses. Matthiessen's 1978 classic, *The Snow Leopard*, documents the author's determined but unsuccessful attempt to spot the title character in Nepal.

Anxiety over a repeat of Matthiessen's cat-less trip is certainly building, but it isn't the only reason we're hitting the sauce tonight. Jackson has just received word that his formal request to use remote cameras in the park, while never a problem in seasons past, has inexplicably been sent to the military for approval this year. Jackson is incredulous. Given the tense history in the Kashmir region, with tens of thousands of Indian and Pakistani troops facing off less than a hundred miles to the northwest, a foreigner packing a bunch of infrared-triggered cameras can't expect favorable treatment from the military brass. "Can you believe it?" he steams.

This is the only time I see Jackson's cool demeanor crack. But, if there's one thing the man gets worked up about, it's wildlife, a passion that goes back to his boyhood days in South Africa, when he read obsessively about the continent's great explorers and tracked animals in the bush near his home. From an early age it was clear he would take almost any risk to benefit even the most ferocious predators, and one of his summer jobs during college involved riding around Kafue National Park in Zambia on a bicycle, locating the circling vultures and then shooting the lions off their kill to collect prey skulls for a study on feline feeding habits. Another time, after his focus turned to snow leopards, he spent two days in a Mongolian prison for inadvertently entering the country from China while tracking a cat. Now the entire Indian army stands between him and his life's work. He won't take this lying down, he grumbles.

Fortunately, thanks to the whiskey, and Coreth's zaniness, our spirits rebound quickly, and we're soon hatching an audacious plan. We decide to bivouac Coreth atop a high, skinny ridge in the Husing Valley and leave him there until he sees a snow leopard. It's a breathtaking spot, with snowcapped peaks towering all around and an eagle's perspective on the entire valley, including a busy cat corridor Jackson calls "The Bottleneck." Armed with little more than his molding clay, Coreth should have a decent chance at a sighting, but there's room for only one soul up there, and if he isn't careful he could roll over while sleeping and plunge hundreds of feet to his death. But that only excites Coreth more. "It should be great sport!" he declares. "The world's highest studio. Imagine!" Plus, he's got a secret weapon. He flashes a wicked grin and pulls a bottle of Lady Stetson perfume from his breast pocket. Jackson says that snow leopards love "novelty odors," and he's even sprinkled Calvin Klein Obsession on scent rocks to collect hair samples from cats who can't resist rubbing the perfumed rock. "I'm going to smear it all over my body," vows Coreth. "I want the cat to hug me."

Despite our high-powered scopes and our large human brains, we're terribly overmatched.

## For all our

desire to see a snow leopard, I keep meeting people who want nothing to do with them. On the third day of our expedition, I find Sonam Spalzung's sheep and goats tugging at sad bits of sage in the rocky soil on the sweeping north slope of the Tarbung Valley. The wizened shepherd from Zingchen village, who could be 50, or 60, or even 80 years old, assures me that snow leopards suck blood like vampires. They never eat the meat of their victims, he insists, and, even more unnerving, they appear and disappear at will. He recalls the time he discovered the carcasses of several of his goats just up this valley, all of them with bite marks on their necks. "Where the cat went after these attacks, I don't know," he says. "He just disappeared into thin air." He's not a bad shepherd, Spalzung says, but what can he do against a creature that's practically supernatural? "I stay alert," he says, "but when the cats come, you don't see them."

The notion of the snow leopard as a mystical, malevolent force goes back generations in these mountains, at least to the 11th century, when Milarepa, the revered poet-saint of Tibetan Buddhism, once demonstrated his power, it is said, by transforming himself into a snow leopard, an act that terrified his followers. Even today, during the annual Gurutseschu Festival at the Stok Monastery—on the border of Hemis National Park—if a spirit-possessed monk predicts catastrophic events to come, a war or famine, say, or even if he feels the people simply need chastising for egotistical behavior, he will demonstrate his wrath by appearing before the masses, dressed in a snow leopard pelt and a fiery red wig.

Jackson says there are logical explanations for some of this, particularly the stuff about vampires and vanishing. Cats kill with a swift, suffocating chomp to the neck, and while they might kill more than one animal in an enclosed area, in the wild they never take more than they can eat. Abandoned carcasses with suspicious looking neck wounds are not uncommon. As for disappearing acts, the barren slope where Spalzung and I now sit was covered in juniper, cinquefoil, and bunch grasses 50 years ago, but it's been hammered by overgrazing. Spalzung's animals now must scatter far and wide to find a meal, so guarding them is difficult, and it's easy for a cat to slip in, wreak havoc, and duck out without ever being noticed. But Spalzung doesn't buy any of this, and the more folks I talk to, the more full-blown the magical realism gets.

In the village of Matho, another shepherd, Eashy Tsewang, who appears to be in his 50s, shows me the adobe-and-thatch room off the back of his house where he keeps his sheep and goats. One snowy night in the winter of 2004, he packed his animals in *(Continued on page 88)*

## STALKING ONE VERY COOL CAT

here to keep them warm. The next morning, 13 of the 20 were dead. Tsewang discovered snow leopard tracks outside and determined that the cat had entered through a hole in the roof the size of a compact disc. When I ask him what he thinks happened, he explains it this way: "The snow leopard came after midnight. We were in the house, but no one heard a sound. He drank all the blood, but he didn't eat the meat. He got so drunk on blood he became woozy and stumbled around, so he fell asleep. In the morning he awoke because he smelled our fire, and he panicked. He had to escape, so he stacked the bodies neatly into a staircase and climbed back through the hole in the roof." When I ask how the cat could kill 13 animals with nobody hearing a sound a few feet away in the house, he ponders this for a moment, then says, "The snow leopard is very clever. He knows how to make the animals shut up."

The massacre dealt Tsewang a major financial blow (about U.S. \$300, two-thirds of the average annual income here), and compensation from state wildlife officials won't be available for up to two years. "The snow leopards cause huge problems for us, but the officials say we cannot kill them," he complains. "They say if you hurt a snow leopard, you will go to jail." He adds, angrily, "In my father's time and my grandfather's time, they could kill snow leopards."

**On the fifth** day of our trip, we reach for the final trick in Jackson's bag. He produces a tape recorder and a speaker and has the equipment delivered to Coreth, who's still encamped on the ridge. The rest of us hunker down at the base of a nearby cliff and wait. It's February, the heart of snow leopard mating season, a time when amorous yowling should be echoing through the valleys, but we haven't heard a peep from these cats. We're hoping to lure them out by having Coreth blast a taped version of their come-hither appeals (a surprisingly human-like sound, according to Jackson, if the human were being stabbed to death) across the Husing Valley.

Through a driving snow, we can just make out the silhouette of a majestic blue sheep ram posing atop a precipice to our left. Jackson is so taken with the scene he begins whispering a breathless play-by-play: "This is a perfect day for snow leopards. It's snowing, the mists are opening up. You can see contrasts easier; easier to spot prey. Imagine you're a snow leopard, you're out hunting, and . . ." But his commentary is halted abruptly by a haunting shriek that reverberates through the valley like the cry of some vengeful poltergeist. The ram jerks his head hard to the left, takes a half step backward, looks to the right, then back to the left again. Jackson picks up the action: "That ram's

thinking: Oh, no, not that guy again, What'll I do now? He's confused." Meanwhile, Coreth keeps hitting the play button on the recorder, like an eight-year-old with a new toy, and suddenly the wailing of snow leopards emanates from behind every rock. "I hope he doesn't play that too much," Jackson mutters.

In the end, it's for naught. The sun sets, the cold creeps in, and we trudge back to camp. Big Boy and company are not so easily fooled.

By morning, a foot of snow has fallen, my tent is near collapse, and the visibility outside is zilch. The normally easy two-mile hike through the gorge to Rumbak village, where we'll spend our final night, becomes a three-hour slog through thick powder. Along the trail, Tsering Angchuk sidles up to me and offers some sage advice. Angchuk is one of our Ladakhi guides, a contemplative 25-year-old who's considering becoming a Buddhist monk. "Desire always goes unfulfilled," he warns. "You must rid yourself of desire. You must get control of yourself." He can read me like a Buddhist prayer card, this guy. "Be content with what you have," he counsels. "Only then can you achieve enlightenment."

I'm pondering all this when further down the trail I meet Coreth, who's apparently on the fast track to enlightenment. "There were times on that ridge when I thought, 'What the hell am I doing up here?'" he tells me. "It was colder than brass monkeys. But I realized that even if I don't see a cat, it is so relevant to be here, to understand the creature's environment. The mountains all around, the valleys, the gullies. I think this trip has been a smashing success!"

Nonetheless he confides, "The Lady Stetson wasn't at all effective."

Soon after popping out of the gorge we see the colorful prayer flags flapping from the rooftops of Rumbak, and the community greets us with warm hospitality. We're seated around a toasty wood-burning stove in a family's kitchen and served steaming cups of tea and cookies. Later when I ask about the killing of their livestock by a snow leopard earlier in the week, I get shrugs of resignation. The villagers have apparently decided not to hunt down the cat, but they don't hide their ambivalence. "The snow leopard is big trouble," says the man who lost two sheep and a goat in the attack, a significant financial loss of U.S. \$85. "In the past they have killed huge yaks and donkeys. But killing snow leopards would be a great loss for us because people like you come to see and study these animals." Another woman says, "We earn money from the tourists, so it is good.

**"We're trying to turn snow leopards from a threat into an asset," says our expert guide Rodney Jackson.**

You are our first winter guests."

After having lunch and meeting our host families, I find Coreth in another home surrounded by nine rosy-cheeked children. He's showing them how to sculpt animals, and even though they don't speak English he has them in stitches. He makes a donkey with buffoonishly large ears. He speaks in funny voices and

tells one little girl, "That's coming along splendidly! You definitely have a big exhibition brewing!" The growing tabletop menagerie includes a yak, a donkey, a dog, and a yeti. Then Coreth announces in a spooky voice, "Now for the snooooow leopard." He growls. The kids giggle, and soon the artist has fashioned an exquisite feline, a noble, sauntering creature that not only resembles the cats we've seen in Jackson's photographs but somehow embodies their larger spirit. He turns to Jackson and says, "There's your snow leopard, Rodney." Jackson nods appreciatively and looks at the beaming children. One thing is certain: The cat in Coreth's hands is the one foreseen by the oracle.

**For two days,** after coming out of the Rumbak Valley and Hemis National Park, we relax at the Panorama Hotel in Leh, and then for two more days we're snow-bound, the flights canceled by a blizzard. One morning Coreth bursts into the lobby, babbling incoherently. He'd made special arrangements with Jackson to stay in the field a couple of days longer, and one afternoon he and Jigmet Dadul climbed 800 feet up the scree slope flanking camp. After a few minutes of scanning ridgelines across the valley, Dadul called Coreth over to the scope. There in the viewfinder sat a large cat, probably Big Boy, calmly surveying the blue sheep below him. "I was mesmerized," says Coreth. "It was as though he'd said, 'OK, Coreth, you've been working hard at this. Look, here's my soul!'"

He whips out a video camera. Recorded through the scope about a mile away, the image is small and shadowy, but it's a snow leopard, silhouetted on the ridgeline in the late afternoon sun, looking regal. He's sitting not far from a frozen waterfall considered holy by villagers, so Coreth and Jackson decide that Big Boy's real name is Latto Gyapo, or "Spirit King." "You might think, What could such a brief glimpse do for a sculptor?" Coreth says. "But when I looked through that scope, the experience was total. It was spiritual."

Coreth says he watched the cat for about five minutes before turning away for a split second. When he looked back, the cat was gone. ▲