

Snow Leopard Conservancy Field Notes by Rodney Jackson

Leh, Ladakh
February 18, 2005



This year's trademark can only be described as "snow, snow, snow and yet more snow." In fact it is the most severe winter for 20 years, with many communities cut off from the outside world, including 1,500-plus vehicles stranded along the main highway into the Srinagar Valley by snowdrifts 10-15 feet deposited during a rapid succession of winter storms of surprising severity even in the Himalayan region.

One of our staff members, Tashi was stranded for 15 days in Zanskar, along with 40-50 foreigners, from disruption of the normally accessible *Chaddar* (frozen or ice-river), trekking route. This is Zanskar's only wintertime lifeline to food and other vital supplies. This year it was broken by a combination of avalanching and thawing associated with periods in which temperatures hover just above 32 degrees – causing melting and weakening of the ice sheets under which the Zanskar River flows strongly. Were the thin, transparent platforms to give way, one's chances of surviving the extremely frigid waters would be pretty bleak. Cliffs, towering many thousands of feet high fringe the gorge, leaving travelers no option of walking along a river bank for there simply is none for most of the deep gorge. In fact, no alternative but to walk on ice or through odd pools of dammed water, and hope the surface will hold your weight and that of the porters carrying all the gear. As I write, Indian Air Force helicopters are being organized for a rescue mission.

The Zanskari people have braved such conditions for centuries, and in fact have developed a unique way of sleeping on ice. By kneeling in a praying position, and throwing a yak or sheep's wool blanket over themselves, they are able to minimize loss of body heat and, somehow, get a night's sleep! And this after wading through body-numbing pools of water along the 30 mile canyon into which sunlight usually penetrates but for a few minutes each day! Zankaris will tell you that they hope for clear nighttime skies and plummeting temperature for keeping the roadway of ice from melting during daytime. With the advent of nylon, sleeping bags and other good outdoor gear, few sleep in the praying position any longer, but still I have not encountered people more hardy than these wonderfully friendly residents of one of the world's most remote and best snow leopard hotspots. Tashi has been visiting local communities in preparation for SLC's major new conservation initiative that will be formally launched this summer – involving predator-proofing corrals and bringing the UNESCO Himalayan Homestays program to Zanskar.



Back in the normally “rain-shadow” part of Ladakh, the trails are also snowbound or frozen over with expansive sheets of blue-green ice. Domestic sheep, goats, yaks and horses paw at the ground, desperate to find something to eat to stave off hunger and cold. Blue sheep hug cliffs in search of bare spots with the occasional plant, yet wary of the ever present damage of avalanches. Their tracks criss-cross mountain slopes, interrupted here and there by the scouring of a fresh avalanche. I wonder if any avalanches have engulfed a herd of blue sheep, burying them in winter’s frozen larder

for the lucky snow leopard, wolf or villager to find in spring, several months from now. Clearly, this is going to be one of those winters when ungulate populations, especially domestic stock, are prone to a drastic reduction in number. Above, golden eagles, lammergeiers and Himalayan griffon vultures search for food, mostly snowcocks and the odd hare exposed on a snowbank, or an exposed avalanche victim’s carcass. Even snow leopards are lying low until the snow melts more.

And, clearly, that may take some time if this cold wind from Afghanistan and northern Pakistan persists. Looking out of the window of my guesthouse, I am confronted by a world of ghost-like mountains stretching across the entire horizon. The odd vehicle struggles up the icy road (there are no snow-ploughs here), and the skies have been silent for a week with no planes able to land in Leh. The weather is taxing even the resources of the Indian Army, who assign dozens of soldiers to clear the runway after each fall of snow. Of course, the plus side to all this whiteness is the prospect of a water surplus to nourish crops and renew pastures after several years of abnormally dry summers. The people of Ladakh depend desperately upon glacial runoff, and everyone is acutely aware – and fearful - of predictions of global warming.

Within the peaceful and almost Christmas-like landscape, Rinchen, Jigmet and I have been catching up on office work. We spent the first two weeks of February camped in Hemis National Park, at the cross-roads of the Husing and Tarbung nullahs – the primary snow leopard travel routes. We were accompanied by members of the first *Special Winter Snow Leopard Trip* group, consisting of the venerable “old Himalaya hand” Tom Eastman, the eminent British bronze sculptor Mark Coreth and his friend Rupert Merton (a bust sculptor and former rock-band manager), writer Paul Kvinta and photographer Ami Vitale on assignment from *National Geographic Adventure* magazine.

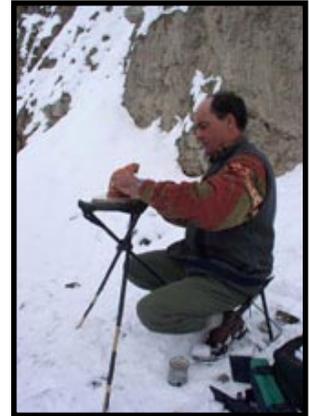


Our assignment, of course, was to see a snow leopard or two. That would not have been especially difficult last year or the year before, when we spotted the elusive feline 4-5 times from near camp. Continued snowfall changed all that. Instead of the leopards traveling past camp almost on a daily basis, we went four days without a single visit. Nearly all of the few visits appeared to be from a very large male, whom we think displaced Mikmar, the dominant male from 2001 through December 2003 (after which he failed to appear in any of our many remote cameras).

Unfortunately, we have been unable to deploy cameras this year to obtain his "mug-shot," because of the repeated snow and the directive by a government official that will require new clearance for our "sensitive equipments." Any of you familiar with the labyrinthine bureaucracies in the developing world and the widespread paranoia surrounding spying, will guess the major challenge that we now face in convincing army and intelligence agencies that camera traps are simple routine tools for biologists, hardly a weapon suited to spying with its maximum detection range of 150 feet! Saving snow leopards is more of a social and political challenge than gathering or applying biological knowledge of the species status, distribution and habits.



On the high side, we have had a share of successes. Mark Coreth finally saw his snow leopard after 10 days of dogged perseverance, including hours seated in a cramped hide on a windy ridge in Husing nullah. It was the big male, majestically scanning the landscape from a high promontory, plainly



more interested in a small group of female blue sheep than in Mark or Jigmet and their spotting scope. Mark quickly pulled his "portable studio," a stool and rotating table, a packet of plasticene and sculpted what we all hope will be the centerpiece of a fundraiser in London in late 2006 to benefit SLC's work. Mark is traveling the world in benefit of endangered wildlife, from snow leopards to jaguar and the Bactrian camel. For a glimpse of his work, visit: www.sladmore.com



We think Mark's cat displaced Mikmar, who was featured in the PBS Nature *Silent Roar*. Jigmet, Rinchen and the other Ladakhis in the team quickly named him *Lathto Gyapo* meaning King of the Protected Place, for his size and the fact that he was spotted close to the sacred shrine (a frozen waterfall) of Rumbak village. The next day we visited Rumbak so that Mark could teach the children to sculpt animals out of barley flour. Surrounded by 8 excited kids, the group made a yak (using wool to give it hairy

appearance), a blue sheep, snow leopard, donkey and a human hand. Mark has a special way of making a skeleton from wire which gives him a remarkable ability to capture dynamic animal movement in still life.

Thanks to Paul and Ami for reporting the fresh tracks of *Lattho Gyapo* on their way down from Rumbak village where they had experienced a homestay, adding a new dimension to their Ladakh experience and the National Geographic Adventure storyline. Rinchen and I had to go to Leh for a meeting and so we missed the sighting. Tom had also passed on the Homestay, having had many similar experiences in Tibet, Nepal and Sikkim. Camping for so many days during the harshest winter in several generations made the idea of a hot shower and a warm room irresistible!

It is my privilege to profusely thank Tom, Paul, Ami, Mark and Rupert for all they have and are doing to highlight Hemis's Rumbak Valley as the "snow leopard capitol of the world," and for joining with the SLC team to protect this species for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations. Words cannot begin to portray what it feels like to be surrounded by the habitat and spirit of such a magnificent creature — from the almost eerie and dominating silence of winter to the roar of a passing storm, the soft plaintive calls of the white-rumped snowfinch or whistle-like sound of the horned lark, the conspicuously raucous black-billed magpie (our camp sentinel), or the strong pungent odor of a rock freshly scented by a snow leopard that passed by in the early morning light.

And THANKS to all of you for participating in and supporting the efforts of the Snow Leopard Conservancy to transform the paradigm for snow leopards from one of conflict with people to the beneficial co-existence for both. Together, let's make more friends or associates aware of the rich opportunities and returns that come with conserving the Ghost of the Himalayas!

Rodney Jackson

P.S., Leh, 22nd February

Of course, Tashi's wife was very worried about him being stranded in Zanskar, and is was extremely happy at his safe return. He said the snow was up to his knees, you could not see the ice below and he had no idea how thick it was. Many people fell into the freezing water, but thus far, we have heard of no deaths. Speaks very well of the skills of the Zanskaris, and their communal sense of responsibility to make sure everyone was in good care. This was the worst Chaddar in their memory.