



Snow Leopard

Kingdom: Animalia
 Phylum: Chordata
 Subphylum: Vertebrata
 Class: Mammalia
 Order: Carnivora
 Family: Felidae
 Genus: *Uncia*
 Species: *uncia*



Photo courtesy of Karen Marzynski

Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The range of the snow leopard includes alpine meadows and treeless, rocky, mountainous regions of central Asia ranging from Russia and Mongolia through China and into the Himalayan regions of Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. They generally inhabit elevations between 5,700-18,000 feet, but may be seen at lower elevations while following prey in the winter.
- **Exhibit Location:** Wildlife Trails

Characteristics

- The muscular body is 39-51 inches long with a very long tail almost the length of the body. They stand about 2 feet tall. The tail is the longest of any cat their size and is used for balance and wrapped around the body and face for added warmth while resting. Their heads are comparatively small for its body size, with small ears and a distinctive heavy brow. Their eyes are higher in their head than other cats. A well-developed chest and enlarged nasal cavity are adaptations to the cold thin air of their high altitude homes. Males weigh between 90-115 pounds with females weighing between 75-90 pounds. The base color of the thick, dense fur ranges from light gray to smoke gray with “rosettes” covering the body. The unique coloration makes an ideal camouflage in its mountain environment. Their paws have hair cushions that act as snowshoes and also protection from sharp rocks.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** estimated at 10-12 years; **In Captivity** 14-15 years

Behaviors

- Very little is known about the social behavior of snow leopards in the wild. They are normally solitary hunters using their coloration to stalk prey. Hunting occurs primarily during early morning and late evening hours. During breeding season males and females may hunt together, one doing the stalking and the other lying in wait for the kill. They can leap up to fifteen yards when chasing prey.
- Home ranges sometimes overlap, and are marked with scent, scrapings and small mounds of dirt. They scrape out depressions with their hind paws and urinate or defecate into them.
- The snow leopard is somewhere between the small cats and the great cats in that they can't purr like the small cats and they can't roar like the true big cats. They moan when attracting a mate and greet each other with a “chuffing” sound.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** scents, such as peppermint, are placed on logs; cut pine trees, boxes, paper mache animals and other items are placed in the enclosure to mimic their life in the wild

Reproduction

- Sexual maturity is reached at 2 to 3 years of age.
- In search of a mate, snow leopards lay down scents with urine and feces. These aromas carry information about the cats' identity, gender, and readiness to breed. Mating occurs in late winter during a 2-12 day estrus cycle.
- A litter of 2-3 cubs arrives after about 90-103 days gestation in early spring when food sources are plentiful. At 3 months of age, the cubs begin to follow the mother for food and are dependent on her for 12 to 18 months.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** wild sheep (bhari, argali), goats (markhor, ibex), hares, mice, marmots, pika, game birds, and domestic livestock
- **At the Zoo:** commercial horsemeat Monday thru Saturday; rabbit on Sunday

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** Endangered, Red List 2000; **CITES:** Appendix I.
- There are believed to be 3,500 to 7,000 snow leopards in the wild and 476 in captivity. There are only 28 of these cats paired in approved SSP breeding programs.
- Commercial trade in leopard skins is banned between nations adhering to the Convention on the International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). Enforcing these laws in the snow leopards' mountainous habitat is difficult. Not only do they live in politically sensitive border areas, but also the rugged terrain is inhospitable for long term daily monitoring programs. As the top predator of the fragile mountain ecosystem of Central Asia, the snow leopard is important as a key indicator of the health of this ecosystem.
- Recent habitat destruction and killing by local herders have locally eliminated the snow leopard in many areas of its former range. While hunters and poachers continue to prey on the snow leopard for its valuable coat, the loss of vital mountain habitat that sustains them causes the most danger. As humans go higher and higher in the mountains taking their domestic livestock with them, plants become overgrazed. With less food available for the wild goats and sheep, snow leopards' prey numbers decrease, forcing the snow leopards to kill livestock.

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- Snow leopards can bring down prey 3 times their weight, killing a large animal twice a month on average. They eat slowly and remain on the kill for several days, protecting it from scavengers until all meat is consumed.

Sources:

- Big Cat Rescue, (n.d.). Snow leopards. Retrieved April 13, 2005, from Big Cat Rescue Web site: <http://www.bigcatrescue.org/index.htm>.
- International Snow Leopard Trust, (n.d.). Behavior & breeding. Retrieved July 19, 2005, from International Snow Leopard Trust Web site: http://www.snowleopard.org/islt/facts/b_b.html.
- International Snow Leopard Trust, (n.d.). Prey. Retrieved July 19, 2005, from International Snow Leopard Trust Web site: <http://www.snowleopard.org/islt/facts/prey.html>.
- Lincoln Park Zoo, (n.d.). Snow leopard. Retrieved April 13, 2005, from Lincoln Park Zoo Web site: http://www.lpzoo.com/animals/FACTS/mammals/snow_leopard.html.