



## Snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*)



**Also known as:** Ounce  
**Synonyms:** *Uncia uncia*

**French:** Irbis, Léopard Des Neiges, Once, Panthère Des Neiges  
**Spanish:** Leopardo Nival, Pantera De La Nieves

**Kingdom** Animalia  
**Phylum** Chordata  
**Class** Mammalia  
**Order** Carnivora  
**Family** Felidae  
**Genus** *Panthera* (1)  
**Size** Head-body length: 100 - 130 cm (2)  
 Tail length: 80 - 100 cm (2)  
 Male weight: 45 - 55 kg (3)  
 Female weight: 35 - 40 kg (3)

### Top facts

- At almost a metre long, the thick tail of the snow leopard is used for balance and can be wrapped around its body for warmth.
- Snow leopards are able to jump as far as 50 feet (15 metres).
- Snow leopards are capable of killing prey up to three times their own weight.
- Snow leopard fur was once highly prized in the international fashion trade and around 1,000 pelts were traded a year in the 1920's.
- With long body hair, thick, woolly belly fur, and an enlarged nasal cavity to warm inhaled air, the snow leopard is well adapted for the cold.

## STATUS

The snow leopard is classified as Endangered (EN) on the IUCN Red List (1). Listed on Appendix I of CITES (4) and Appendix II on the Convention on Migratory Species (the CMS or Bonn Convention) (5).

## DESCRIPTION

The beautiful snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*) is a white to smokey-grey colour, with yellow tinged fur and patterned dark-grey to black rosettes and spots (6). The snow leopard has many adaptations for its cold habitat; long body hair and thick, woolly belly fur, large paws and a well-developed chest and enlarged nasal cavity that warms the cold air as it is breathed in (6). The long, thick tail is almost a metre in length and is used for balance and as added insulation when wrapped around the body and face at rest (6). The short forelimbs and long hind limbs enable this leopard to be particularly agile in its steep and rugged habitat (6).

## RANGE

Extremely fragmented populations are found in the harsh, remote, mountainous areas of central Asia, with the majority of snow leopards located in the Tibetan region of China (3).

## HABITAT

Snow leopards are generally found at elevations between 3,000 to 4,500 metres in steep terrain broken by cliffs, ridges, gullies and rocky outcrops (3).

## BIOLOGY

Adults are solitary, although the **home ranges** of males and females overlap extensively (7). Females reach sexual maturity at two to three years and the mating season runs from early January to mid-March, when long-drawn-out wailing calls can be heard echoing amongst the cliffs (7). Litter size is usually two to three cubs, which are born with black spots (7), and become independent from their mother at over two years old (3).

Most active at dawn and dusk, snow leopards are opportunistic predators capable of killing prey up to three times their own weight (3). Their prey consists mainly of wild sheep and goats, although livestock will also be taken, especially if wild prey has been depleted (3). These cats will kill an average of one large animal twice a month (6).

## THREATS

The natural prey of the snow leopard have been systematically hunted out of many areas of the high central Asian mountains and leopard numbers have declined as a result (3). Big cats often turn to domestic stock as an alternative source of food and this can incite retaliation from local farmers (3). Snow leopard fur was once highly prized in the international fashion world and around 1,000 pelts were traded a year in the 1920's (3). A further threat to this species comes from the increasing demand for bones for traditional Oriental medicine (3).

## CONSERVATION

Snow leopards are protected throughout most of their range and international trade is banned by their listing on Appendix I of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) (5). The International Snow Leopard Trust and the Snow Leopard Conservancy are the world's two leading organizations dedicated specifically to conserving this endangered cat (6) (8). Both organisations have developed a multifaceted approach to the conservation of this species; involving research and data storage, educational initiatives, community-based conservation, and the protection of livestock to prevent retributive killing of snow leopards (6) (8). Local people are involved in various initiatives and there are plans to link fragmented populations by habitat corridors (3), which may improve the chances of the long-term survival of this secretive and critically endangered cat.

## FIND OUT MORE

For more information on the snow leopard:

- IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group:  
<http://www.catsg.org/>
- The International Snow Leopard Trust:  
<http://www.snowleopard.org/islt/index2.html>
- The Snow Leopard Conservancy:  
<http://www.snowleopardconservancy.org>
- BBC Wildlife Finder:  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/species/Snow\\_Leopard](http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/species/Snow_Leopard)
- WWF – UK:  
[http://www.wwf.org.uk/what\\_we\\_do/safeguarding\\_the\\_natural\\_world/wildlife/snow\\_leopard/](http://www.wwf.org.uk/what_we_do/safeguarding_the_natural_world/wildlife/snow_leopard/)

## AUTHENTICATION

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<http://www.snowleopardconservancy.org>

## GLOSSARY

- **Home range:** the area occupied by an animal during routine activities, which is not actively defended.

## REFERENCES

1. IUCN Red List (May, 2009)  
<http://www.iucnredlist.org>
2. WCMC Species Sheets (June, 2002)  
[http://www.unep-wcmc.org/species/data/species\\_sheets/snow.htm](http://www.unep-wcmc.org/species/data/species_sheets/snow.htm)
3. IUCN Cat Specialist Group (June, 2002)  
<http://www.catsg.org/>
4. CITES (May, 2009)  
<http://www.cites.org/>
5. UNEP-WCMC database (June, 2002)  
<http://quin.unep-wcmc.org>
6. International Snow Leopard Trust (June, 2002)  
<http://www.snowleopard.org/>
7. Macdonald, D. (2001) *The New Encyclopedia of Mammals*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

8. Snow Leopard Conservancy (October, 2005)  
<http://www.snowleopardconservancy.org/>