

# Snow Leopard

By Vicky West

**Scientific Name:** *Panthera uncia*

**Irish Name:** Liopard sneachta



Snow leopards are smoky grey in colour with white undersides. They have ringed dark grey or black markings on their coats, to help camouflage them from prey, and they have pale green/grey eyes. They are quite stocky animals, growing to 60cm in height (at the shoulder) and to 2.3m in length, up to 1m of this can be their tail.

Snow leopards originated in the mountains of Central Asia, including the Himalayan Mountains. They prefer to inhabit steep, rocky cliffs as this type of habitat provides them with camouflage for ambushing prey. Having stalked their prey, they usually use their long and powerful hind limbs to spring on them. They can leap up to 15m, up to six times their body length. Snow leopards are carnivorous and often prey on wild sheep and goats. Though they are able to kill animals up to 3 times their weight, they are also



opportunistic feeders and will eat smaller prey such as hares and game birds.

Other adaptations, which allow them to live in these harsh environments include:

- \* long, thick fur, which provides insulation;
- \* fur-covered feet, which not only keep their feet warm but act as snowshoes, preventing them from sinking into the snow and aids with grip on unstable surfaces;
- \* and long tails, which are able to store fat to keep them warm and can also be wrapped around themselves when sleeping, acting like a blanket. Their long tail is also very important to help them maintain their balance on the rocky terrain that they live in.

## Family

The Snow leopard, despite what its name suggests, is more closely related to the tiger than it is to the leopard. Other relatives include the lion and jaguar.

Snow leopards are shy, solitary animals, however, they come together for the mating season, which often take place between January and mid-March. Gestation lasts about 3 months, with cubs being born between April and June. The female will give birth in a rocky den, which she has lined with her own fur, and will give birth to 2 or 3. The cubs, which are born blind and helpless, are able to see after 7 days, walk after 5 weeks and are fully weaned at 10 weeks. They will leave the den at 2-4 months, but will remain with their mother for up to 2 years. The shy nature of snow leopards makes it hard to determine their lifespan in the wild, but they have been known to live for as long as 21 years in captivity.

## An Endangered Species

Snow leopards are an endangered species and there are thought to be between 4,000- 7,000 adults left in the wild, with up 700 in Zoos. One of the biggest threats to snow leopards is humans, who illegally hunt the leopards for their fur or for their bones to make traditional Asian medicine. Conflicts between snow leopards and farmers can also arise when the leopards attack their livestock when food is short. Other contributing factors include vanishing habitat and the decline of their larger mammal prey.

