

***Snow Leopard: Stories from the Roof*** edited by Don Hunter in “pasateimpo,” in the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, November 22, 2013

Reading about snow leopards is tantamount to opening a thesaurus to find synonyms for *elusive*. Of the 21 entries in *Snow Leopard: Stories from the Roof of the World*, edited by Don Hunter, the words mythic, ghost, rare, cryptic, stealthy, secretive, solitary, and fleeting appear throughout.

From Peter Matthiessen, whose book *The Snow Leopard* won the National Book Award in 1980, to Avaantseren Bayarjargal, a Mongolian translator of research teams, contributors were charged with writing about their “most profound or heart-touching experiences” with snow leopards. The most salient common theme is passion: wonder, privilege, and awe. Seeing one in the wild, Hunter says, “throttles the senses.”

The collection embraces an engaging variety of experiences. Against prevailing policy, Nasier A. Kitchloo, a wildlife warden in India’s Ladakh region, raised a snow leopard cub. An old woman presented the foundling to him because she was a Buddhist and couldn’t allow the cub to die. In Pakistan, Shafqat Hussain, another wildlife official, inadvertently acquired a snow leopard pelt, compromising his position before he could deliver it to a museum in Islamabad, 600 miles away. Eminent researchers such as George B. Schaller, considered the world’s first snow leopard specialist, and leading expert Rodney Jackson, the first to place a radio collar on a snow leopard, added their reminiscences. Besides Bayarjargal, two other women are included. Helen Freeman founded the Snow Leopard Trust, and Darla Hillard wrote *Vanishing Tracks: Four Years Among the Snow Leopards of Nepal*.

Nearly half of the wildlife biologists, researchers, and conservationists are American. An Australian filmmaker also contributed. Others from China, India, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, and Russia represent six of the 12 countries where snow leopards range across.

This animal is charismatic. Its silent roar whispers mystery. Its very appearance beguiles. Thick, luxuriant fur provides protection from the sub-zero temperatures at elevations ranging from 11,000 to 23,000 feet above sea level. The pelt is smoky gray with black accents and dark rosettes. A white belly, reflecting the colors over which the cat moves, further enhances the ability to disappear into rocky terrain. The snow leopard weighs 60 to 120 pounds and can measure 6 feet from nose to tail. Long legs and paws like snowshoes facilitate travel through snow and on precipitous slopes, “as if a feather has brushed the ground,” Freeman writes. The leopard’s tail, nearly as long as its body, not only provides balance when running and turning but also adds warmth when curled around the body, shawl-like, in rest or sleep.

Like all big cats, snow leopards kill efficiently. In pursuit of prey, they drop down mountainsides as effortlessly as water falling or bound pell-mell to pounce decisively on

their targets. Their preferred diet is the wild sheep and goats of the high elevations, though they will also take advantage of local herders' livestock. The latter form of prey causes conflict in the villages near snow leopard habitat.

The contributors have worked with indigenous people to address the issue. Home-stay programs, in which local residents offer housing to trekkers, researchers, and filmmakers, have been established. Insurance programs to compensate herders for livestock lost to snow leopards have also been created, as have programs for local women to produce handcrafted items for sale abroad.

But outraged, impoverished herders are not the only threat the snow leopards face. Poachers prize their hides. These cats are also sought for use in the Asian medicine market. Add climate change and greater human encroachment into their habitat, and you have an animal whose future isn't bright. Other themes common among the contributors are the expense, danger, and arduous nature of research in Himalayan ranges.

In 1996 Hunter, science director for the Rocky Mountain Cat Conservancy, traveled to Mongolia to work with Tom McCarthy of the Snow Leopard Trust and Panthera. Hunter flew from Fort Collins, Colorado, to Tokyo; Beijing; and finally Ulan Bator, Mongolia. From there, a flight to Altay in a "tired Russian two prop airplane" afforded a view of the Mongolian steppe — like "Wyoming on steroids." He reached his final destination after eight hours in a jeep, witnessing the magic of the Gobi Desert sky at night.

For researchers, coping with dysentery might be the first priority before they reach base camps at higher elevations, where possibly fatal mountain sickness awaits. Setting live traps and placing motion-detecting cameras to collect data means traipsing from five to 14 miles to sites in steep rocky valleys bristling with shrub "that disdains leaves and the color green." Repeat to check results after returning to camp. These perambulations take place at elevations exceeding 10,000 feet above sea level. Snow or cold factors into the exercise.

Mountainous challenges notwithstanding, all the writers convey a sense of the snow leopard as magical. Alluring. Whatever they suffer is worth it. Rinchen Wangchuk, former director of the Snow Leopard Conservancy — India Trust, calls the snow leopard the "spirit animal" of his youth. Overwhelmed by his first sighting of one in the wild, Schaller crouched on a ledge to observe the snow leopard in the morning. Snowfall during the night thoroughly soaked his bedding. Kelly regards the snow leopard as "the most potent symbol of wildness."

Now a wildlife biologist himself, Kyle McCarthy accompanied his father to Mongolia for snow leopard research when he was young. "At sixteen," he writes, "I was ready to fall in love, and I did."