SNOW LEOPARD
_Uncia uncia_

**Location:** The snow leopard is primarily found in the high Himalayan mountain ranges of Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal. It is also located in some areas of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Russia, China and southern Mongolia.

The snow leopard mainly keeps to the cliffs and rocky slopes of arid and semi-arid steppe habitats below the permanent snow line. This feline normally ranges from 16,000-18,000 feet in elevation, but in the winter, it may descend to elevations of about 4,800 feet. In contrast, Tulsa, Oklahoma, is around 700 feet above sea level.

**Diet:** The snow leopard is an opportunistic predator that preys predominately on ibex, bharal sheep, yak, markhor, Marco Polo sheep, Himalayan tahr and musk deer. Various small mammal and bird species may consist of about 45% of its summer diet.

This cat is a keen stalker, patrolling high points in the mountains from which it surveys the terrain below. The snow leopard depends on camouflage and stealth in order to catch its agile prey. After the prey has been stalked to within 50 feet, the snow leopard uses its muscular legs for a brief burst of speed to capture the food item.

**Life Cycle:** These solitary animals are mainly crepuscular; that is, they are most active in the early morning and late evening. In some areas, snow leopards tend to be more nocturnal.

Both sexes use a scent marking system to communicate with other snow leopards. This is accomplished by using urine or feces on prominent sites. Raked trees also communicate the identity of a particular snow leopard, its sex, relative age and reproductive status to other snow leopards.

After a gestation period of about 90-105 days (roughly 3-3.5 months), approximately 1-5 cubs are born in a den lined with the mother’s fur. At birth, each snow leopard cub weighs around 1-1.5 pounds. Initially, the spots are completely black but gradually become the rosette pattern of the adults. The cubs’ eyes are usually open by 1 week of age. They begin to eat solids when they are nearly 1 month old and are weaned at roughly 2-2.5 months of age.

At around 2 months of age, the young are permitted to go on hunting trips with their mother. They continue to live with the female until they become accomplished hunters, usually between 9-12 months of age. The offspring disperse soon after becoming independent of their mother.

Snow leopards generally reach sexual maturity at 2 years of age. Upon reaching adulthood, these cats weigh approximately 77-165 pounds. Including a bushy 3-foot tail, these animals are about 7 feet long. In captivity, they have a life span of around 15 years.

**Remarks:** There is some dispute among scientists as to whether the snow leopard should be classified in the same _Panthera_ genus as the 4 largest cats, namely the leopard, jaguar, tiger and lion. Snow leopards and big cats have common features, but snow leopards share some small cat characteristics as well. A fundamental distinction between the big cats and the small cats is that big cats can roar, whereas small cats can purr continuously but cannot roar.

Although the snow leopard can purr like a small cat, its principal calls bear close resemblance to those of the cougar’s high-pitched yowls. Similarly, the pattern of spots among the newborn is nearly identical to that found among young cougars. Some experts place this feline in its own genus, _Uncia._