

Finding your own a snow leopard

an experience beyond all expectations

text by Jan Kelchtermans, founder of *Europesbig5*

Intro

Several years ago I watched the BCC *Frozen Planet* series. As usual: pure art those images. The reason I looked especially forward to the result, was a field encounter with a camera crew in Finland related with the series. They just finished their video footage of the appearing wolverines; the same individuals I encountered afterwards with a group of fellows. Always nice to see an animal you've watched yourself in high definition, especially when seated in your home chair!



I must confess it weren't the wolverines knocking me out. This happened even earlier. Difficult to describe - while watching the *Planet Earth* series, another BBC wild life mile stone - the degree of both words *astonishment* and *amazement* I felt when the footage of a mother snow leopard, with two kittens on the hunt, appeared on the screen.

To be honest, I also felt a bit of disbelief, especially after watching the 'making off' material at the end of that specific snow leopard episode.

'This is an out of range target. Or maybe not?' Mixed feelings for sure!

It was the start of realizing a dream and hazy plan: 'Would I ever be lucky to get a grip of the most enigmatic cat on earth with my own eyes?'

What follows is a true story based on one of the best field notes I ever made.

Enjoy!



3rd of November 2012, six o'clock in the morning. It is still dark in the base camp of Zinghen, Hemis NP. The sporadic, silent crackles come from a moderate wind that gently moves the frozen igloo tents. Day three of the Snow Leopard-expedition starts abruptly as one of the porters, just like during the previous days, in his personal unorthodox way, makes clear it's time to get up. This hard noise, created by knocking on a metallic object, echoes loudly through the valley where our tent camp is erected. Sleeping bags and tents zippers open; the gas burner is on a roll. In dribs and drabs troops gather all around the fan heater in the dining room. As long as the sun does not climb above the hills, it is here that dawn, at an altitude of 3700 meters, is just an unpleasant experience. But a cup of coffee and some cookies do miracles. There is a brief discussion where the search for the snow leopard, the target species of this expedition, will continue.



Given the fresh tracks and the territory marks from the last 2 days in Husing La, Jigmet Dadul, our guide on site, thinks it's recommended to post there again. Quickly all group members gather their necessary material which help in locating a snow leopard: telescope, binoculars, photographic material, warm clothes and a portable seat all go in or to the backpack. All of this does not provide certainty. Spotting our target species remains a huge challenge. On the appropriate vantage point, looking three hundred sixty degrees around in the endless and vast landscape shows our search is like looking for a needle in a haystack.

The gray ghost, because that is the elusive snow leopard also called, after all, can be everywhere and nowhere in this endless mountaineous region with innumerable potential rock formations and slopes behind which he can hide. Being present in this prime habitat at the crack of dawn, however, is the most important condition and increases the chances significantly in this jungle of omnipresent rock. It is well known that all felines are most active and mobile at dusk, as well as during the first two hours after sunrise. Once this period is over, the chance to locate them is minimal. Daytime is equal with napping cats, usually on a carefully selected, situated high place in the sun and out of the wind.



EUROPE'S BIG 5



"Will it be today that we are going to succeed?" I join Jigmet and the other group members during their last climb towards the central vantage point. The slope is dangerously steep and does not allow, once there and seated on a chair, to scan the environment in a comfortable way. I therefore abort the last climb and place myself a bit lower down and away in the valley.



A large rock formation on the end of the valley gets my full attention. The resident blue sheep there behaved different the last few days than on other places where we encountered this species. Obviously, one of them in the foraging herd was alert and, like us, on the lookout. 'There must be a reason for that' I thought...

Well and good seated and my tripod set up, it precisely lasts three telescope images before total euphoria takes over from supreme concentration. In what are clearly the contours of a great, sitting cat suddenly comes movement. Immediately it is also the typical long, thick tail and black spots pattern which become visible. An error is impossible: SNOW LEOPARD! In total excitement I turn myself around with both hands high in the air. The ' YES! ' that irresistible bubbles up and out of my body does create a scream that I never produced before. The echo's do sound until far in the Himalayas for sure! A surge of adrenaline causes uncontrollable, shaking limbs. While the others, in total confusion, start their rush to me, I keep a close eye on the grey ghost. The discovery turns out to have another unexpected surprise in store. The female snow leopard runs towards her litter. Both kittens are clearly not yet fully familiar with their steep, rocky environment. The cautious, awkward way in which they move, pleases their mother clearly not. With body expression and head punches, she admonishes them to stay in the shelter. But this seems not enough for her playing offspring. Therefore she grabs both individuals, already dangerously close to a ledge, one by one at the scruff of their neck and drops them back at the entrance to the nest cavity.



While I enjoy this seldom seen and rare spectacle, the other tour members are coming closer and steadily are growing in size towards my direction. Their walk up must be stressful and not definable. Imagine: someone in the distance, acting the cheerful dancing way, looks through his telescope with an eyesight on one of the world's most imaginative animals, and yourself literally are not getting enough breath. Reaching the place that crazy guy is standing is actually nothing else than a struggle up to a heaven. Your mind says 'forward, come on!' but your body says 'No, this is not possible! I need air!'. And then the ubiquitous question: is the snow leopard still there when I get there? Running uphill with a backpack in an environment like this, with low oxygen levels, is a combination that just doesn't work.



Those with the best physical condition are the first to arrive on the scene. They throw a look through the telescope before they position themselves quickly trying to get the mythical cat in their own visor. But then comes the anticlimax: someone pushes in the tumult of the discovery against the tripod. Target species and location out of the picture! When relocating the shelter, it's soon clear why snow leopards are notoriously being nick named as the grey ghost: the cat trio is gone. In the meanwhile, another expedition has also arrived. It seems I must have been heard! Also the crews related with both expeditions arrive on the scene. The size of the group has now grown to about twenty people. Whether you're ecotourist, chef, driver, nature guide or carrier: everyone wants to witness this rarely seen spectacle. After half an hour the mother snow leopard is being rediscovered. Total salvation follows. Soon all kind of expressions sound from behind everyone's eye objective. 'Wooooows! - Yeaaaaaaaahs! and Waaaaaaaaws! are uttered in all possible ways. Also a second climax doesn't get long before coming in: the female snow leopard moves rapidly towards some unsuspecting blue sheep a bit further on the slope.

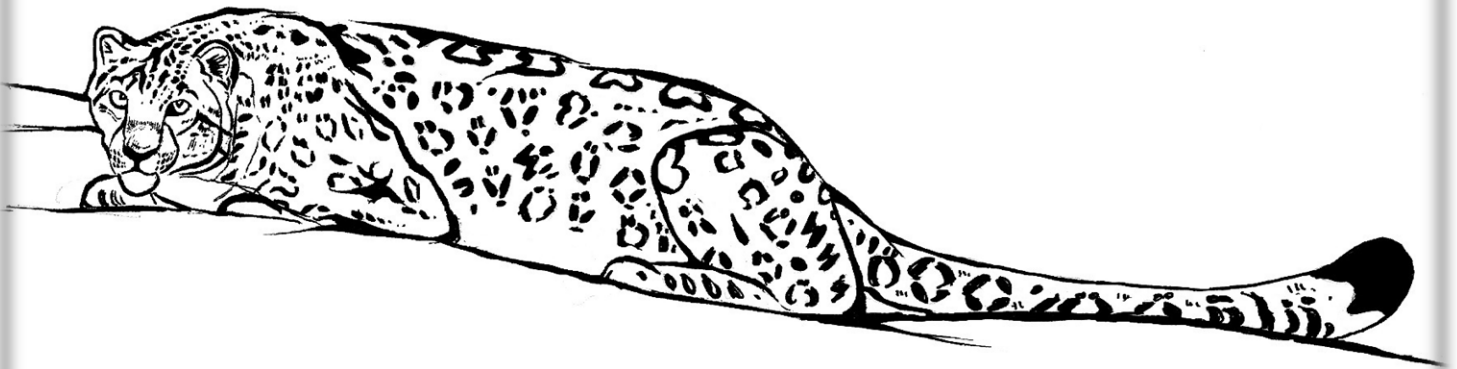




On a stunningly nimble way, she drops down on the steep cliffs off to the sheep. The thick, long tail acts as an extra clear vestibular system. Also her good knowledge of the area is obvious to notice. In no time she does approach in an invisible way to near her unsuspecting prey. Only one rock is the distance from the two foraging blue sheep.



One last glance before she quickly throws herself half over the remaining rock between her and those ungulates. She hesitates, but less than a second later she shoots like a rocket towards her potential early meal. Unfortunately, caused by her hesitation, both blue sheep are alarmed, turn and run, on their way now, up the slope. The acceleration capability of the prey is clearly faster than that of the hunter. The snow leopard immediately ceases the attack. With her curved tail high in the air and with the ears flat, the cat dripps off in a dismayed way. The sheep, a bit higher up now, triumph their victory. With their hooves stomping on the ground and the head and horns slightly leaning forward, they leave clear notice that they are the moral victors. The snow leopard is already on her way back. The pace with which she moves is now a lot slower. A few moments later she lies sprawled and stretched on a great rock. Afterwards she moves a few times to another lazy vintage point. In between, she enjoys, curled up like a sphere, the warmth of the sun.



During the evening we see her on the hunt for a second time, but the large distance makes the perception a little less qualitative. When dark we retreat to our base camp. While having supper, the chef serves us snow leopard-cake. As the day comes to an end, it's around the campfire we enjoy our outstanding wild life encounter. A memorable day for all of us and a personal (BBC) dream realized.

I should like to say 'thanks' to the following people for their help to pimp up the writing of this text:

Szabolcs Kokay, Detlef Tiebax, Simon Feys, Kristof Goemaere and Dave Dierckx

