

MOUNTAIN GHOSTS

The recent arrival of a pair of snow leopards at RZSS Highland Wildlife Park represents both a treat for visitors and a privileged opportunity to contribute to the conservation of a species whose future is far from certain in the wild, writes Richard Rowe

Elegant and elusive, the snow leopard is one of those mystical creatures that appear almost an extension of the landscape they inhabit – smoky grey apparitions that reveal themselves in glimpses before melting away into the rocky backdrop of their high-altitude homes in mountainous regions of Central Asia. Little wonder then that they are known as the ghost of the mountains.

But these ghosts are now rather easier to spot following the arrival of a pair of snow leopards at RZSS Highland Wildlife Park earlier this year. Chan, the male, came to the Park in April from Zoo Krefeld in Germany, while the female, Animesh, arrived in July from Marwell Zoo in England. With both of them being two years old and approaching sexual maturity, the hope is that the pair will breed as part of a managed European Breeding Programme.

“I sometimes forget how people might react to certain animals,” admits Douglas Richardson, Head of Living Collections at the Park, who has a long personal association with snow leopards. “With Chan and Animesh, visitors are just in awe – it’s a reminder of just how special these animals are.”

Mountain specialists

Largely solitary, snow leopards inhabit the high mountain ranges of a dozen countries across Central Asia, typically living at altitudes between 9,000 and 17,000 feet. The animals live in very low densities across a vast geographical area in an arc that extends from western Mongolia through Pakistan, Afghanistan and then back through the Hindu Kush, along the Himalayas and north into central China.

Perfectly adapted to living in bitterly cold environments, these stocky animals are equipped with dense, insulating fur, wide paws that act like snow shoes, and a long, thick tail that provides balance and additional warmth when wrapped around their bodies. Given the inaccessibility of their habitat, it is hard to determine exact numbers, but it is thought that there are now only around 5,000 snow leopards left in the wild.

If there was ever a captive environment that was made to house such an animal then it is RZSS Highland Wildlife Park – a site which continues to

expand its specialist collection of native species past and present and cold-weather adapted species from around the world.

While it is not possible to replicate the altitude of the snow leopard’s home range, the Park has been able to mimic the kind of rugged terrain they inhabit in the wild. The animals’ new home, located near the top of the hill in the centre of the Park, is in two parts: large holding areas, where they have spent their first few months acclimatising to the new surroundings, and a huge main enclosure that begins with a grassy plateau overlooking the Cairngorms, but which then plunges down a stepped cliff all the way to a new public walkway at its base. Having gradually adjusted to their new environment, and to each other, the pair were then released to explore the main enclosure.

“We’re so fortunate to have this naturally rugged environment,” explains Douglas. “You could spend millions creating this kind of habitat, but we’ve already got it right here. I’ve had this spot in mind for snow leopards for years.”

Another striking, and perhaps zoologically unique, feature of the Park is the presence in a neighbouring enclosure of a breeding population of markhor – spiral-horned wild goats from Central Asia that are natural prey in the wild. When the snow leopards are in their holding areas, the plan is to let the markhor into their enclosure where they will graze and leave scent marks. “It’ll be like nectar to the cats – a classic example of environmental enrichment for carnivores,” says Douglas.

Wider conservation efforts

The snow leopards are a continuation of RZSS’s commitment to the conservation of a whole range of wild cats, large and small. Visitors to the Park can already view species such as the Amur tiger, Scottish wildcat, Pallas’s cat and Northern lynx, while a new off-show breeding facility for one of the rarest cats in the world, the Amur leopard, is also being built.

The arrival of the snow leopards coincides with the signing of a three-year partnership with the Seattle-based Snow Leopard Trust and Nordens Ark – a Swedish zoo of similar size and ethos that

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MEET CHAN

The male snow leopard at RZSS Highland Wildlife Park arrived in April from Zoo Krefeld in Germany.



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coordinates the European Breeding Programme for the species. The agreement sees a joint project covering both snow leopards and Pallas’s cats that combines field research with public education.

“It’s a perfect fit, with each partner contributing specific areas of expertise,” explains Sarah Robinson, Head of Conservation Programmes at RZSS. “The region we are all focussed on is the Tost Mountains in Mongolia, one of the areas where the Snow Leopard Trust has a presence on the ground.”

The captive breeding of snow leopards is a hugely important element of this wider work. “Having the species at the Park gives us the opportunity to tell people about the very real conservation challenges being tackled in the wild,” says Sarah. “Hopefully, visitors to the Park will be informed about the plight of snow leopards and inspired to support efforts to protect them.”

And, as a species under extreme pressure in parts of its range, snow leopards need all the help they can get. Often the most serious threats stem from human activities – particularly where local herders expand numbers of domestic livestock and encroach into the snow leopards’ territory. The resulting loss of habitat and overgrazing has a direct impact on availability of wild prey species, which in turn increases the chance of snow leopards taking domestic livestock instead.

It’s a vicious circle that can see retaliatory killings of snow leopards by herders who can ill-afford to lose any of their animals to predators. Add the temptation of the potentially lucrative rewards of poaching – the demand for snow leopard fur, plus bones and body parts for use in traditional Asian

medicine, remains high – and it’s clear why there is concern for the future of the animals in some areas.

As is often the case with top-of-the-line predators, snow leopard conservation is as much about people as the animals themselves. In the programme countries where it has on-the-ground presence, the Snow Leopard Trust takes a community-based conservation approach, working with local populations to help manage livestock in ways that reduce losses, and highlighting the value of protecting snow leopards. “It’s important work that really does make a difference,” says Douglas.

Breeding hopes

Back in Scotland, the immediate focus is on continuing RZSS Highland Wildlife Park’s excellent track record in the breeding of carnivores. The mating season for snow leopards typically runs from January to March and hopes are high that there could well be cubs by June next year. “Two cubs are the norm and three not unusual,” explains Douglas.

In the meantime, the animals will play something of an ambassadorial role, giving visitors an opportunity to learn about one of the world’s most endangered big cats and potentially helping inform how snow leopards are managed in captive programmes elsewhere.

More long-term, they will also serve as part of a wider safety net in a worst-case scenario for the species. “If, down the line, we ever need to work on reintroduction of snow leopards, then hopefully animals that are bred here or their successors could play a role,” says Douglas. “I heard an analogy recently about zoos like ours being akin to ocean liners, with the collections being like lifeboats ... you hope you’ll never need one, but it’s comforting to know that they are there.” ■