

THE AMBASSADOR **OF THE HIMALAYA**



NON-FICTION STORIES

THE
AMBASSADOR
OF THE HIMALAYA

TRUE STORIES

The Ambassador of the Himalaya

True Stories

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Special Thanks to : Shraddha Shah Rana

Price : **Rs. 198**

Kindly Note : 50% of profits from sale of each book shall go to help conserve the snow leopard.

Published by :



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Sonoma, CA 95476

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Contents

A glimpse on Snow Leopards of Mustang	1
An Encounter with Snow Leopards	8
Why (I think) we should safeguard snow leopards	11
From Herder to Grocer	14
Snow Leopard is a National Emblem	17
Eighty Goats Deceased En route!	20
Samar Chhyor Forest: Habitat of Snow Leopard	23
A Moment when Snow Leopard Gulped Yak	26
A close encounter with Snow Leopards	29
Snow leopards attack in series	32
Misses no Chance to Pounce	36
Preserving Legacy of Forefathers	39
Relishing Mutton with Millet Porridge	42
Marang village: meeting point with Snow Leopard	45
Lost life; reclaimed body	48
A Pregnant Snow Leopard	51
Herbs Treasured More Than Grass	54



A glimpse on Snow Leopards of Mustang

Barely seen by humans, snow leopards call home to some of the world's harshest landscapes — the windswept plateaus of the Himalaya. Perhaps fewer than 400 snow leopards roam the snow-capped peaks of northern Nepal where mountains, their steep, rugged slopes drained of moisture, stretch to the horizon.

The snow leopard is so elusive that it verges on legendary, a near-mythical status comparable with the “Yeti”, the abominable snowman, particularly after Peter Matthiessen recounted his 1973 search for the magnificent creature in his classic book, *The Snow Leopard*.

Closed to foreign visitors until 1992, Mustang, the untouched land, land of snow leopard, acquired an aura of mystery. In the 1950s and 1960s, it served as a base for the Khampa rebels, Tibetan fighters, who



Predator poof corral



The kingdom of Lo

were engaged in a futile struggle against the Chinese occupation, supported by foreign powers.

In much of desolated Mustang, the first time visitors may be surprised to see not a single blade of grass or tree but just high ridges and peaks of dark, brown and red rocks tormented into menacing shapes by centuries of sandstorms. Its wall paintings were first mentioned, albeit briefly, by the great Italian Tibetologist, Giuseppe Tucci, half a century ago.

As recently as 2007, previously unknown Buddhist and pre-Buddhist religious texts and wall paintings from the 15th century were found in series of man-made caves carved onto cliffs. Few have been able to explore the mysterious caves, since the place was long closed to outsiders. A team of researchers and mountaineers scaled the crumbling cliffs on a mission to explore the



The victim (1992) prior to conservation

caves where they discovered ancient Tibetan Buddhist shrines decorated with exquisitely painted murals, including several 600-year-old human skeletons. The National Geographic team and locals even christened one of the caves as "the snow leopard cave" since the elusive animal's footprints were found inside!

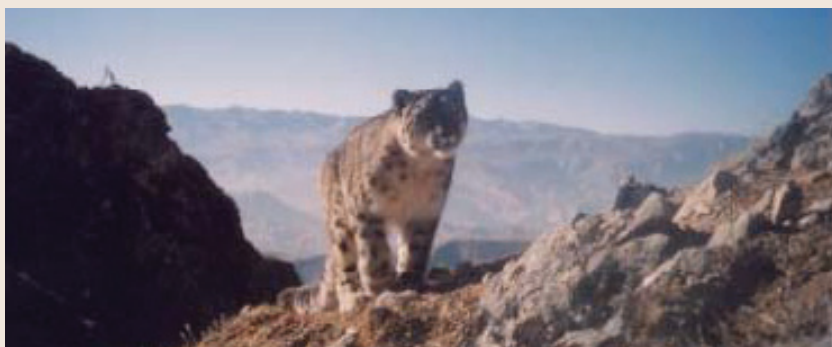
The culture of upper Mustang or Lo remains medieval and is based on belief in Tibetan Buddhism, predominantly of Sakyapa sect. The holy Abbot Ngorchon Kunga of Tibet, who paid a visit to Lo during the reign of the first King of Lo, Amadpal (year 1,380-1,450 BCA), founded a number of large monasteries. The four storey palace of Lomanthang and the wall around the town were built by Amadpal whose 24th descendent, the present Raja Jigme Palbar Bista, still holds considerable respect in the region.



Snow leopard conservation education

The rugged and culturally vibrant Mustang — the abode of holy monks and sky-burials — boasts a thriving population of snow leopards which dwell in the rugged terrains and lofty peaks, spending much of their time climbing craggy outcrops in search of wild goats and sheep.

When wild prey are not accessible, particularly in winter, the endangered cat preys on the region's yaks, horses, and domestic sheep and goats, thereby creating unavoidable people-wildlife conflicts. Lo-bas, people of Mustang, however, tolerate these nuisances, as a result of sharing habitat compared to other local communities elsewhere in Nepal. Perhaps the teachings of Buddhism that emphasize on the value of nature in its entirety may be more scrupulous here.



Snow leopard captured in a remote camera, 2005

The vastness of the Himalaya, uncompromisingly dominated by mountains and sky, relentlessly tested the mettle of its people, thereby shaping human lives to tune with nature. When situations surpassed the tolerant level, there were rare incidents of snow leopard killed in retaliation such as the unfortunate incident of 1992 and the carcass parading along the village street. Such acts evaporated, since 1992, with the advent and success of the National Trust for Nature Conservation's Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP).

Today with the implementation of hundreds of conservation classes, environmental awareness campaigns, home visits, group discussions, and numerous integrated conservation and development programs by ACAP, Mustang is now haven for the elusive snow leopards and other globally significant species such as brown bear and Tibetan argali.



Snow leopards, recently, self-captured, 2011

Since 2000, Snow Leopard Conservancy (SLC), US-based non-profit organization dedicated to snow leopard conservation, joined hands with ACAP to support enlightening programs such as predator-proof corrals and community-based education and awareness. The joint camera-trapping monitoring venture has captured, recently, images of these majestic cats. As their population increases, herders' likelihood of encountering them also mounts. The present snow leopard story booklet "The Ambassador of the Himalaya" is the verdict of such wonderful encounters that have become once-in-a-lifetime experience for those lucky enough to have sighted one of the finest products of nature, the snow leopard.

The booklet compiles exceptional experiences of the herdsmen from Upper Mustang. The stories depict human-snow leopard conflicts in the plateau on

one hand and, on the other hand, recount multiple occurrences of loss and havoc people have suffered in high hills and the village of the upper Mustang, where rampaging snow leopards are rife with the livestock.

"The Ambassador of the Himalaya" is full of wonderful true stories that took place in different parts of Mustang. Some may be "hidden valleys" (known as Shambhala or Shangri-la) thought to represent the Buddhist spiritual paradise, concealed by Padma Sambhava, the Indian yogi, who brought the teachings of Buddhism from India to Tibet through Nepal thousands of years ago. These sacred valleys are meant to remain hidden in a time of unprecedented religious crisis until the misfortune is passed!

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Dolma, a shepherd woman from high hill of Dhiple, was petrified when she saw snow leopards grab hold of her goats. She put her entire effort to reclaim the goats from the mouth of the predator. They both were face to face, extremely scared, but both desperate and determined.

An Encounter with Snow Leopards





Dolma Gurung
Dhiple, Lomanthang

In 2008, Dolma, a resident from the high mountain of Dhiple, drove a herd of sheep and goats to Tongje summer pasture at an altitude of 4,500 meters. Animals were grazing, scattered all over the pasture, and everything was calm as usual. She recollects as she was busy collecting firewood. A flock of yellow-billed chough flew over. “The goat bleated all of a sudden. I raised my head to look, I could not believe what I saw: just in front of me two snow leopards had gripped two of my goats by their neck. I could not think. My mind went blank. Next thing I remember, I was pulling the goat’s leg out of the beast’s mouth. I was not scared! Where did I get the courage from?”

The endangered snow leopard hardly attacks humans as compared to other big predators like tigers. However, a predator is a predator – it can be dangerously unpredictable. Indeed, Dolma showed a great sense of courage to confiscate its prey from a hungry predator.

Obviously the snow leopards were infuriated with Dolma's attempt. They stared at her with frightening eyes, the 27 year old lady vividly remembers. Their roars made her legs shiver in fear, but still, she didn't lose hope. She prayed to her deity and ran some 20 meters toward the nearby corral, shouting for help. Her husband, father-in-law, and fellow shepherds rushed toward the scene. "Perhaps because of so many of us, serken (snow leopard) ran away leaving the goats behind. By the time we reached there, the goats had succumbed to death." Yangdup, Dolma's husband says, "We had to bear a loss of almost 11 thousand Rupees." Tears fell from his eyes in agony.

Yangdup owns 200 sheep, 70 yaks, 40 goats and 2 horses, all dear to him and his family. Livestock rearing is economically very important in this part of the world. "Snow leopards eat our livestock, our only source of income. At times, I feel like killing all of them, but I know they are protected animals," he moans.

"Perhaps due to scarcity of its prey like blue sheep around its habitat, snow leopard has turned toward our cows and sheep." Yangdup sympathizes.

One of the most effective means of conserving snow leopard is through traditional practices or culture. This may be the reason why this graceful gift of the nature exists today.

Why (I think) we should safeguard snow leopards





Pitru Gurung Chuksang

“We have a saying in our village: worship deities with devotion, else snow leopards will create troubles for you”. The 29 year old shepherd Pitru says, “Maybe the deities were unhappy four years ago which was why snow leopard attacked my goat.”

It happened in 2007. One fine day around three o'clock, Pitru's 200 goats were busy grazing in Syar summer pasture. His niece was with him. Leaving the goats in her custody, he was about to go and get baby goat from another herd, one kilometer away. But upon seeing his shepherd dog snarling he stood still. He could see that the dog was reacting to a creature that resembled a cat and was larger than his dog and had a flat stomach. This animal was standing on top of a pile of sacred stones engraved with Tibetan scripts, Om Mane Padme Hun. The ash colored creature was trying to pounce on the dog.

Pitru was baffled for a while on seeing the strange

animal. His sixth sense warned him “It must be the serken (the snow leopard)”. With reverence, he gazed at the leopard. Then he noticed a strip of blood flowing from underneath the slab. The cat had hidden the goat it had killed. It immediately infuriated Pitru, and he hurled a sizable stone towards the snow leopard. “I thought it would then pounce on me, but the snow leopard jumped off the rock, and disappeared into the nearby ditch.” Pitru says.

Pitru is a primary school dropout who had studied up to fourth grade in Darjeeling, India. He stays in the goth (temporary livestock shed) throughout the year. During winter his livestock graze in Syar high hills which lie at an altitude of 3,000 meters and in summer he climbs 500 meters further up to Kyute high hills. The morning meals are prepared inside the shed. Chapatti and dried pickle make the day meal. “My dinner is Dhindo (a thick dough made of millet flour), butter milk and dried pickle.” He explains.

The shepherds go through enormous hardships to raise sheep and goats in the mountainous regions. “Death of a goat is not simply loss of money, but loss of sweat and toil too,” Pitru says, “At times I get mad”. But the underlying traditional belief that he maintains, like many others in this area do, is to never retaliate against snow leopard. “We believe that if we harm the snow leopard for killing a goat, it will kill more. That’s the key reason why we don’t hurt the snow leopard.” Pitru informs.

Sangpo, a school dropout and a shepherd from Lomanthang, had several encounters with snow leopard in the past. When life turned hard as a shepherd, he switched to grocery business. Several examples where people have dumped this traditional occupation as shepherd exist in this region.

From Herder to Grocer





Sangpo Gurung Lomanthang 4

During March 2002, the retail grocer of Lomanthang, Sangpo Gurung, was staying in a cave in the Murchung high hills to tend his flock of sheep. “Underneath our cave lied a corral which I was sharing with my fellow villager Karma,” says Sangpo.

About two hundred goats were fenced inside layers of boulders inside the corral. One night at eleven o’clock, goats started bleating all at once, and the two herders suddenly woke up. Moonbeams flooded the cold night. As they hurried out of the cave and peered into the shed, they caught view of two angry but beautiful looking creatures. Karma hushed, “Snow leopard!” Goats were scattered & started running amok. “Some huddled to enter into our cave for safety.” He vividly recalls this moment that took place nine years ago, “The creatures had long tails and fat bodies.”

Sangpo flashed his torch, his hand was shaking; he could distinctly see the predators in view. There were

two snow leopards, and they were hardly at a distance of twenty meters from him!

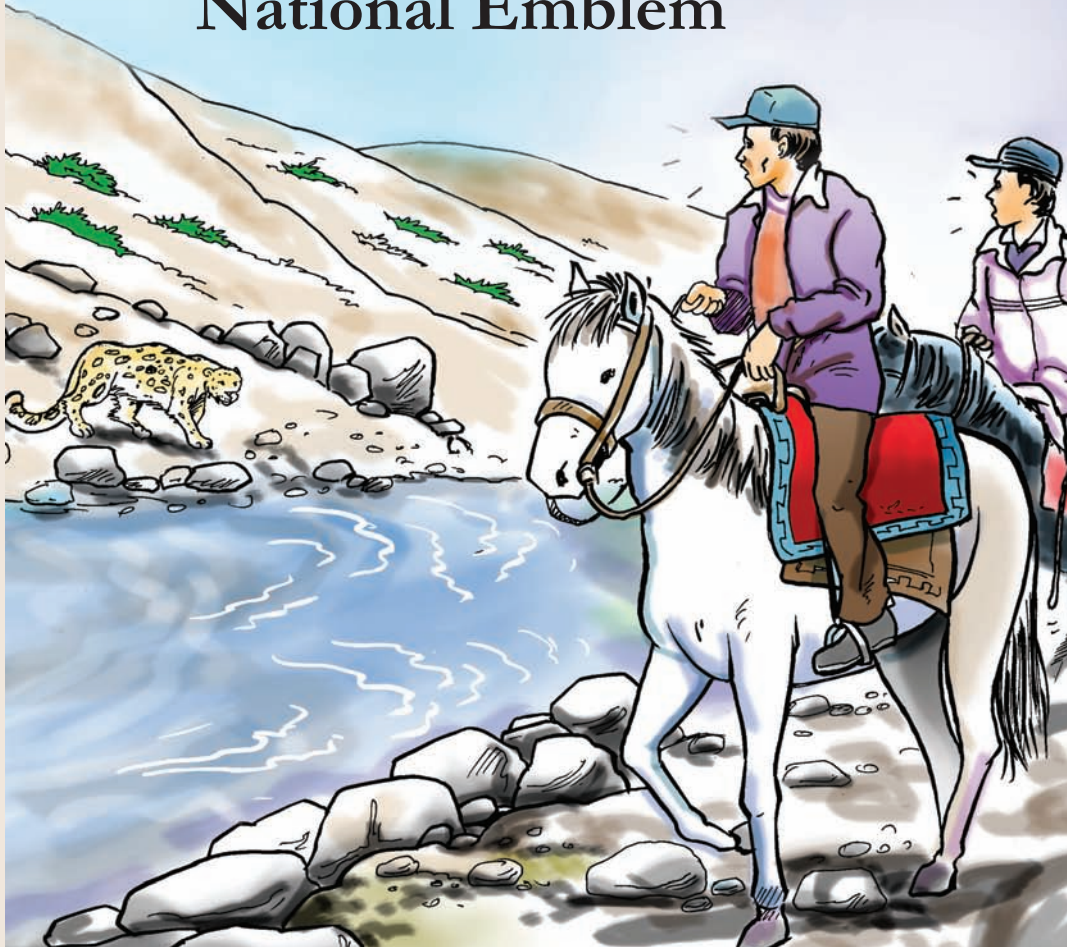
“But mind you, both the snow leopards were unable to kill a single goat on that occasion. As soon as they saw us, they leapt off and vanished.” Sangpo continues, “wild prey such as blue sheep can escape the attack of predators by jumping down the cliff, but poor sheep and goats inside the corral are trapped, they can run nowhere, and hence become vulnerable. In extreme cases, the leopard can kill even 25 goats at a time.”

“Just a week ago, a snow leopard had leapt over two-meter high wall to prey upon a goat. It was such a fine high jump that not even a piece of rock fell off the stall.”

Now Sangpo possesses a flock of 3 horses and 4 cows while previously he had 80 goats, 9 donkeys, 8 horses and 7 cows. It is all because good quality forage has run short. Once the winter sets in and grass dries up, the condition gets further aggravated. He adds, “Also, these days there is an acute shortage of shepherds – they are like a rare bird. Animal husbandry is becoming a tougher business”. Now Sangpo is much aware of conservation activities. “Formerly, we had absolutely no idea that snow leopard should not be killed.” He says “After the Annapurna Conservation Area Project in association with Snow Leopard Conservancy started conservation program in our village, we learnt the value and importance of snow leopard. We learnt it should not be killed as it is an animal of global recognition.”

Dan Bahadur Gurung (Urken) had a sudden encounter with snow leopard on a trip while fetching his yak on the high hills. He has vivid memory of the incident. Urken is now 55 and is a village chief. He is happy about increasing conservation efforts being geared towards snow leopards in the present.

Snow Leopard is a National Emblem





**Dan Bahadur Gurung (Urken)
Chuksang**

Urken has seen snow leopard three times in his life. “First time I saw it at Par, second time in Chhombak, and the third time beside Ghiyoon River.” He counts them on his fingers. Then his weathered face cracked into a smile, “The third one is worth mentioning.”

Six years ago, Urken was heading toward Vena with a friend to collect his yak he left at the high hills.

He carried his lunch, lamb meat, bread and apple-whisky that his wife packed for him.

It was a typical afternoon in November, clear and breezy, about four o'clock, remembers Urken.

He and his companion rode horses along the banks of Ghiyoon River, the murmuring river echoing in his ears. All of a sudden, on the other side of the river, a snow leopard moving languidly captivated his attention. He

pulled the rein to stop the horse and hurriedly gestured his friend. It was an amazing moment. He murmured in the local dialect “Goba Miji Theda Pai” (Its walking style is quite elegant indeed!) For fun, both challenged the beast shouting at it. The beast threw just a hard look and ambled away. Urken remembers, “The serken was beautiful and bulky.”

As a shepherd for almost eight years Urken has tended herds numbering up to 300 goats. He used to reach high hill of Sad-da with his herd. Sometime, he would take the herd to monasteries around Chhuksang, while in other occasions he would reach Vena, the upper part of Samar. Despite his decade long engagement with the occupation, he has now moved on to a hotel business.

Urken is aware of some incidents of snow leopard poaching for its bone and skin. He still remembers an incident that took place fifteen years ago, when a snow leopard, accidentally trapped inside a livestock-shed, was brutally killed by the villagers. But now, this village chief is rather pleased to see the same villagers protecting snow leopards. “Yes, this animal needs to be protected. It is our national emblem.”

Urken has a bizarre experience from one of his business trips to Tibet. Although he has not had an eye-witness account of snow leopard, he proves its presence based upon on-the-spot evidence, his knowledge and conscience.



Eighty Goats Deceased En route!

Almost two decades ago, along with four village folks, Urken rode to Tibet on a horse to purchase goats. "Back then, from Nepal, we bartered parboiled rice, roasted chickpea flour, and terry-cots, mainly, with livestock from Tibet. That used to be our trade practice for ages," says Urken.

They traveled through Chhuksang, Vena, Ghami, Lomanthang, and Samjung & finally reached yungukar of Tibet. There they exchanged stock of food grains and clothes with 170 goats and one horse.

On return, they camped at Rele in Tibet, their goats dozing, munching, around their tent under open sky. Urken recalls, "Around 10 o'clock at night, the goats began bleating, but we were pretty tired so we ignored them and slept. The next morning 30 goats were missing. This was a terrible loss. We were in unfamiliar terrain to search for them. We noticed sharp canine marks around the neck of some goat carcasses we recovered; now we were certain that they were attacked by snow leopards. We continued on our journey."

On the second night, Urken and his friends camped in the high hill of Samjung, an area within Nepal. At an altitude of 6,000 meters, the weather was inclement. The wind was violent, and it was extremely cold and dry.

The journey left them fatigued and they slept like logs. The Next morning, they counted the goats, and found 50 more missing. It was quite overwhelming and catastrophic to Urken and his friends. The onus had come now to uncover which predator it was. They were worried and very angry. As they began the search, they found the carcasses of two to four or even five goats lying at a distance of 5 to 10 minutes from the campsite. Footprints of snow leopard and its teeth marks on the neck of the carcasses were clearly visible.

“The predator had killed fifty goats in just two and a half hours. We were astonished as we returned to the campsite as none of the carcasses existed. The hovering vultures had consumed them all,” wonders Urken.

By the time, Urken and his mates reached home, only 90 goats survived. He links this loss with religious belief and custom, “We paid the price of committing a sin of killing and eating pigeons in Tibet. We had bartered parboiled rice for pigeons.”

The hotelier of upper Mustang, Namgel Gurung, can easily identify snow leopard pugmarks often spotted in open forest trails, a traditional skill that he learnt from his forefathers.

Samar Chhyor Forest: Habitat of Snow Leopard





**Namgel Gurung
Somar, Chhuksang**

Two cows were killed during the months of May and June in 2011. Their half-consumed bodies were hidden under a fir tree. “The pugmarks confirmed that the predator was a snow leopard,” Former shepherd and current owner of hotel Annapurna at Somar, Namgel Gurung, says “Snow leopard’s pugmarks are similar to those of dog but they are rounder and often no claw marks are visible.”

Shepherd Namgel believes Somar forest in Chhuksang is the habitat of snow leopard. Pugmarks are often seen there.

He remembers very well how as a child he witnessed death of twenty two goats in a snow leopard attack in a shed. He claims, “I have seen snow leopard thrice.” Then he explains one such incident that occurred seventeen years ago. “Samar to Chhyor forest required two hour upward trek. I had gone to fetch my jhopa

(yak-cow cross) with three other friends. Hovering vultures in the high hills sky indicated the kill site, perhaps with a fresh carcass. In fact, a big white horse belonging to one of the villagers Karma was lying dead on the ground. About seventy meters away was a snow leopard climbing up the cliff. It looked like a big house cat but had a long tail.”

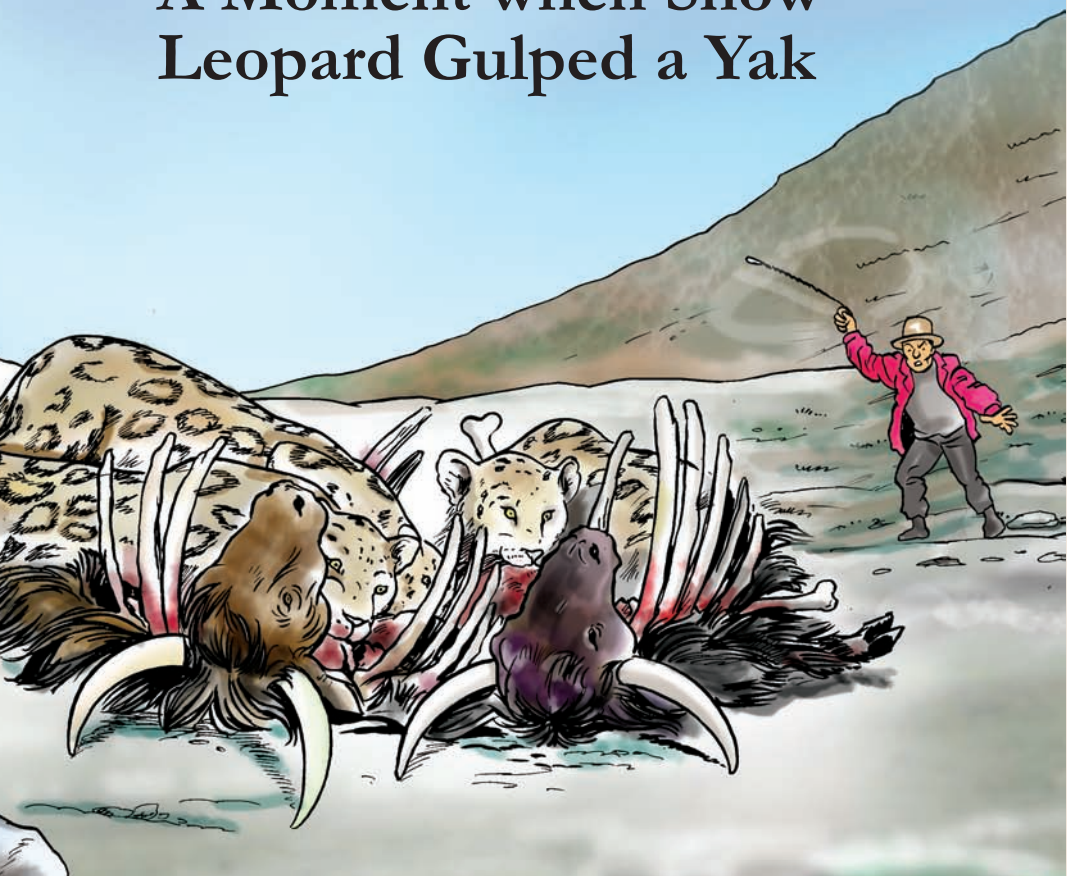
Until about five years ago, snow leopard used to kill one horse per house in Somar every year. Namgel shares his pain, “A good adult horse costs between 50,000 to 200,000 rupees. That is why the villagers dislike the snow leopard.” The tradition of leaving horses in high hills is gradually changing. “Now they leave the horse in forest during the day and bring them back home in the evening.”

Namgel, who has spotted up to forty blue sheep in a herd, explains “It may be tough for a snow leopard to hunt blue sheep. Therefore, in search of easier prey, the snow leopard turns toward the horse, yak and goat, which are relatively docile.”

Namgel finally proposes that there should be unity among villagers to protect the habitat of the snow leopard. “After all, every being has the right to live. Our dharma teaches the same!” he says.

Tashi Gurung is in his seventies and spent his entire life as a yak herder. Dozens of his yaks have become prey to snow leopard. He is emotionally attached to one such incident.

A Moment when Snow Leopard Gulped a Yak





Tashi Gurung
Dhemma,
Lomanthang

It was the first Friday of April, 2011. At about eight o'clock in the morning, as usual, Tashi drove his yaks to Lethmo high mountain at 5000 meters. He was unaware that two of his yaks had already disappeared. He covered his mouth with his palms, howling “oo.. oo..”, now and then. Anxious, Tashi spent entire night without a wink of sleep. The next morning, he rambled along nooks and corners of the rugged terrains and reached Marang village where fellow villagers informed him “Snow leopard killed and ate your yaks!” That day, when he reached Aang summer grazing land at 5000 meters by noon, he was stunned by the scene he saw there.

At a distance of 50 meters, three adult snow leopards were devouring his two yaks each weighing almost 500 kilos. One interesting fact was that the snow leopard, hardly weighing 50 kilos, had killed a prey ten times larger than its own body weight, and were close to

gulping down the kill in one night. "They had consumed almost the entire body," Tasi recalls.

This was not the first case though. Last year alone, snow leopards had eaten up eighteen of his yaks. However, this scene was greatly stupefying. "I never witnessed such an appalling scene in my life," he says, "and it had left me a complete ruin of me. I suffered a loss of Rupees 110,000."

Absence of timely rain hampers growth of grass and scanty grazing turn yaks weak. Unless a yak is weak, snow leopards do not attack adult yaks. Tashi, the owner of forty five yaks, says he witnesses snow leopards every year. He has also helped wildlife researchers.

Tashi was brought up in a shed. "I was married in this shed and have spent my entire life here". The wrinkled cheeked old man had his share of pleasures and pains, sun and rain, torrents and clouds, winter and summer in this yak shed.

Tashi's wife Yangji bids him goodbye every morning and says 'be careful'. In winter Tashi drives his yak herd to the Thulung high hills and to Lethmo in the rainy season. "I eat bread and tea that my wife packs, and tend yaks," says Tashi. Back home, Yangji collects dry twigs for firewood, and knits raadi and paakhi (floor mat and coat from wool). At dusk, as Tashi returns she offers him salt tea before their evening meal.

Once Ungdi observed - two snow leopards had mounted the back of his yak and were gripping its neck with their mouths (as if) trying to drink its blood. He was successful in driving the snow beasts away; the heavily wounded yak later died. Yaks have higher life risks as winter goes dry and grazing land runs poor. He relieves those pains after he shifts his yaks to the greenery, the grazing land in Tibet.

A close encounter with Snow Leopards





Pema Ungdi
Lomanthang-2

Pema Ungdi, 70, a three tenure village chief, was a senior herdsman until fifteen years ago. He started his life with a loan amount from Jomsom Bank against the collateral of his house and property, and made a purchase of 115 yaks from Khampas (Tibetan freedom fighters). He added this cattle property to his 100 goats and 4 horses. He spent next ten years herding livestock.

He explains now, “For livestock, wet years are good.” The year when it rains little, there is shortage of good grass, and this is when he would drive them to Fenje in Tibet for quality forage. He would set up a temporary shed there and spend three months upon paying the grazing fee levied by Tibetan Chinese.

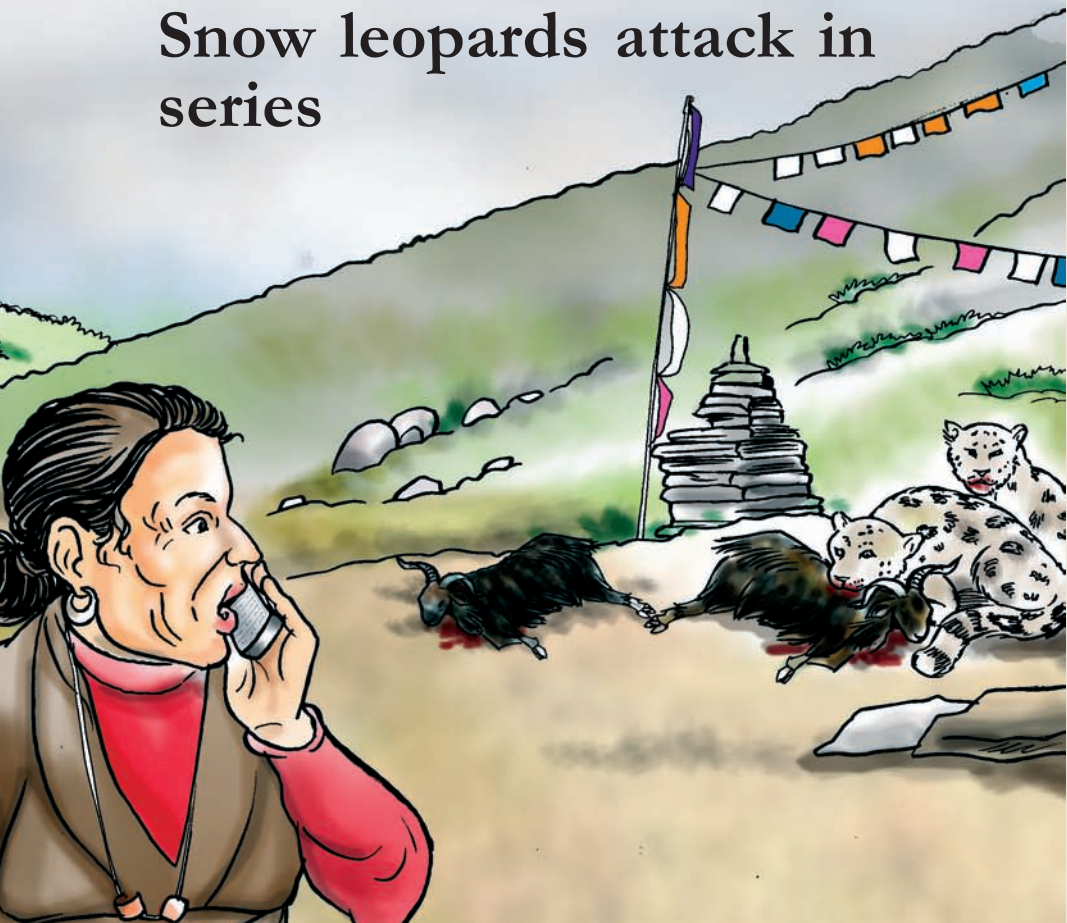
Ungdi recalls an incident of about two decades ago. At about three o'clock in the afternoon, the weather was pleasant on Chherung summer ground; the sun was

sizzling hot and it was drizzling too. He had left the yaks in the high altitude and was himself snoozing, when yaks abruptly huddled to the shed. As he turned to his backside, he was startled to apprehend the moment full of reverie that he still relives. He utters in his native tongue - quite terrible! Just twenty meters away from him, he had apprehended the incredible moment. One snow leopard was mounting his yak and trying to grip its neck while the other one was already on its back.

He had then two challenging moments simultaneously. One, he had lost his yak, and another, the fear of the dangerous carnivore. Ungdi had but enough courage to drive the hungry cat away. He shouted on top of his voice “Q Q” to bully them, and frantically hurled a stick. The leopards fortunately backed off. They leapt and disappeared in seconds. The yak was bleeding in the neck, groin and leg. “It suffered a painful death after three days”, says Ungdi.

Chenga Gurung, 59, of Kaaraa Dhiple high hills recalls a moment that sent shudders down her spine when a group of snow leopards pounced on her goats all at once. Her old age wasn't strong enough to drive away the predators. Luckily, she grabbed her mobile phone inside her bakkhu (wool vest) pocket and was able to call her son for quick help.

Snow leopards attack in series





**Chenga Gurung
Kara Dhiple,
Lomanthang**

One day in April 2011. Chenga had followed her daily routine; she got up at five a.m., cleansed herself, offered holy water to her deities by kneeling down and praying “Save me from obstacles! Give me a good day!”

She was in her temporary shelter at Kara Dhiple in Lomangthang. The 15 square-foot shelter was a self made canopy supported by four props and was called a goat shed. Her grandchildren were sleeping on the floor bedding of a rough woolen carpet. She packed millet bread and a small thermos of salt tea blended with yak butter.

By six in the morning, she set off for high hills with a caravan of 60 yaks and 400 goats. Two Tibetan mastiffs woofed and ran ahead of the thundering herd. Sheep and goats, baaing, followed the dogs, and the yaks were behind them all. After three and a half hours,

they reached the high pasture of Tongje, at 5000m – they were above the clouds. A strong easterly wind was blowing. The pasture looked big enough for few months of grazing.

Soon after the livestock spread out for grazing, she unpacked her food bag of tidbits. As she started eating her lunch, memories of her late husband flashed. Since the demise of her husband, she had the onus to run the family of six. Every year she had to sell 10 yaks and some goats to run the family that included her son, daughter-in-law, and grand children.

Suddenly she saw that her goats startled and ran helter-skelter. It made her shudder. As she raised her head, she saw a goat had fallen to the ground 20 metres away. Immediately, she saw an adult snow leopard clutching another goat by the neck. Chenga now hurriedly rose on her feet. She also saw another snow leopard before her. Panicked and breathless, she quickly took her mobile phone out of pocket and told the terrible event to her son in one breath.

The predators seemed to defy her – as if, to her, they were sucking the blood of the goats.

For a long time then, the snow leopard and Chenga stared at each other. She says “One human alone could not bully the predator.” One and a half hours later, Chenga’s son reached the spot on his horse. The snow leopard then gave away. There were chances that the snow leopard could have returned to reclaim their prey any moment but Chenga and her son were in no mood to abandon the carcass too. They removed the goat’s skin together and returned to the shed with the goat meat.

At first, Chenga had a real temper and wanted to kill the predators. Later she thought coolly, “After all, snow leopards are living creatures and definitely have pangs of hunger.”

Ponchung spent almost half a century as a herdsman. He is well acquainted with the distinctive nature of snow leopard and fears it least.

Misses no Chance to Pounce



Ponchung Gurung
Samjung, Choser 9



When Ponchung Gurung drives his herd of 100 goats and sheep, the entire trail of Chhoser village turns dusty. The jingling bells around the animals' neck can be heard throughout the journey. Every morning he drives the herd from Samjung to the high hills of Na Syama, three and a half hours away, and drives them back home in the evening. Ponchung, 65, explains, "My herd keeps grazing all along. At times wolves or the snow leopards snatch my animals away."

He had several encounters with the snow leopard. Mostly found on the rugged cliffs, this predator observes the prey from a cliff and waits to pounce on it.

The Samjung herdsman usually move alone for grazing their animals. Ponchung also moves alone because if the herds is mixed, there is problem of grazing area and also fear of losing animals to another herd.

In November 2010 with the onset of winter, Ponchung had to put on layers of clothes, a thick lambs wool jacket on top of his bakkhu (wool vest). By seven o'clock

in the morning, he reached Na Syama high hill with his animals. The freezing pasture had also begun to change colors. The herd started grazing.

Ponchung was sitting on the ground watching the herd graze, when he heard a pregnant sheep bleating out loud and understood that she was in labor pain. During so many years of herding, he had faced animal deliveries during grazing several times. Labor pain knocked the sheep on the ground. Ponchung then proceeded to help the sheep and seconds later, she gave birth to two babies. He cuddled the newborns who still had their eyes closed, kissed, and placed them back to their mother. Then he heaved a sigh of relief, sat on a stone a little further away, opened the lunch bag, and put a mouthful of chickpea powder followed with two sips of chhyaang (local beer).

Yet again, he heard another animal bleating louder. What he saw now made the beer mug slip out of his hand. A sheep had fallen to the ground and a fierce snow leopard was on top of it. Quite alarmed, he jumped on his feet and called out to his deity 'Yoolhaa!' for help. He shouted "Q... Q..." to drive away the predator. He hurled a stone. The snow leopard mewed loudly. Ponchung froze. The cat did not attack him. It withdrew without haste.

The wounded sheep died. That day Ponchung had two burdens – carrying the carcass and driving the newborns safely to the shed.

Memories of a lynx preying on a rabbit are still fresh to Dhapla Gurung. He also came across a mother snow leopard who was training her cubs to hunt.

Preserving the Legacy of Forefathers





Dhapla Gurung
Dhemma high hill,
Lomangthang

For the last 45 years, Dhapla Gurung from Dhemma has been tending yaks. The owner of 150 yaks, he sells five yaks every year that fetches him Rs 225,000 (c. 3000 dollars). “In addition, three yaks are slain every year for consumption,” he says. At times, he is unhappy and worried that predators are taking more from their share. “Winter brings terror of snow leopards attack. Red fox, lynx, and wolves also eat up yak calves,” he laments.

He worships the Dalai Lama, Karmappa, and multiple deities every day. “Such acts please the gods and snow leopards do not harass us” Aamo Chhopten, his wife, shares this belief. Dhapla has had countless amazing experiences of snow leopard in his life. He has seen the mother and cub snow leopards moving in the high hills as well as lone cats leaping along the snow white cliffs. In spring, when the high hills turn green, he has also experienced how snow leopards suddenly enter and hunt herds of goats and yaks. Likewise, he has

witnessed this wild animal intrud into has neighbor's shed and kill eight goats.

"The Snow leopards have killed many of my yaks," says Dhapla. One typical day in January of 2010, his 40 yaks were grazing on shrubby in Chhumja high hills. Around 2 o'clock, he saw a brown rabbit dashing at full speed from the western cliff. A lynx was violently chasing it. The rabbit was making a serpentine run when the lynx, light yellow with black spots, in a full stride was struggling to catch the prey. The rabbit tricked the predator for about ten minutes. However, as soon as the rabbit tried to enter a burrow, the predator caught it. The lynx is ferocious, it can kill a yak calf too, he says.

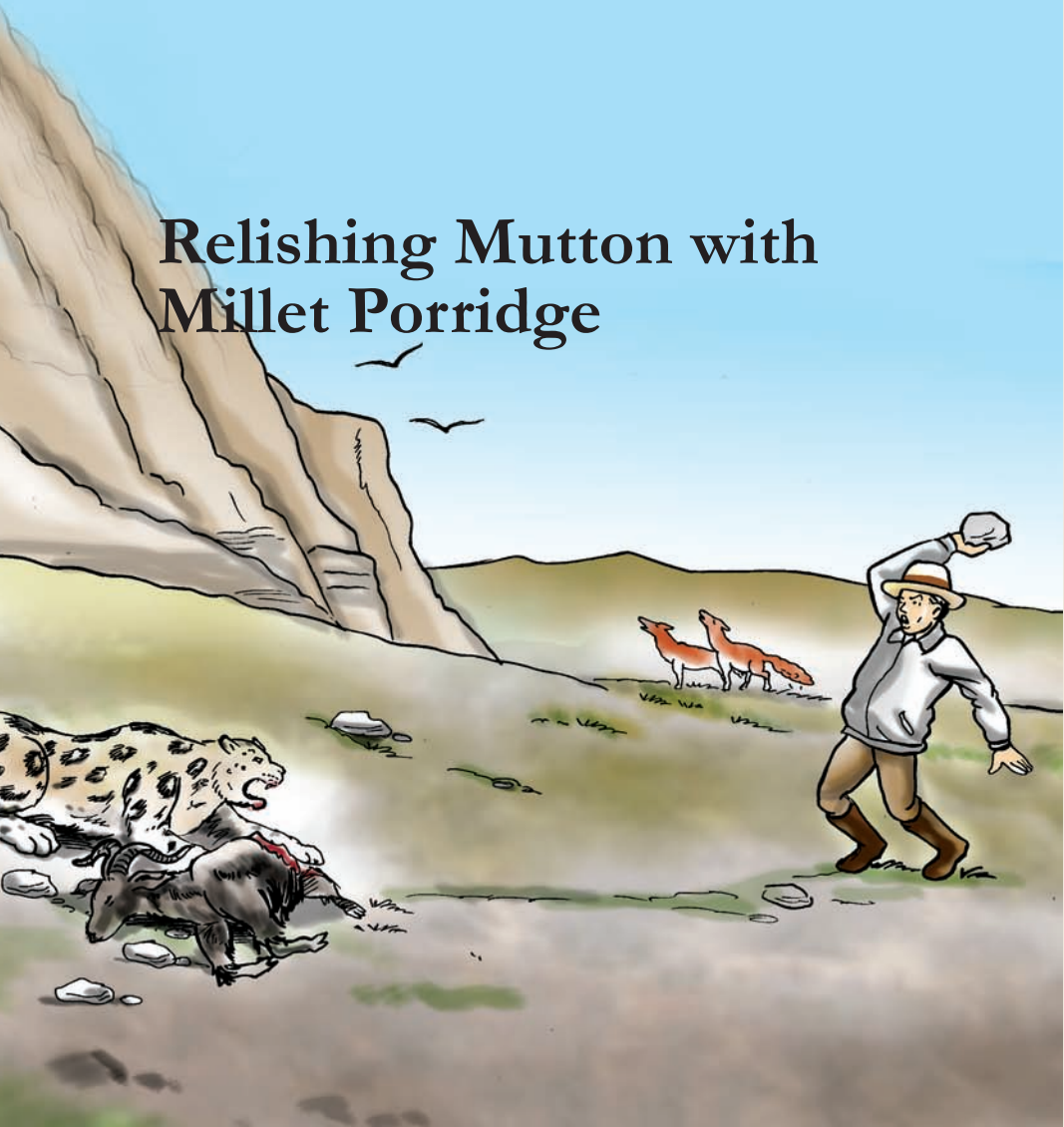
"No sooner than the hunt was over and as I was being sympathetic towards the rabbit, something on the right side attracted my attention. I could see two snow leopards – mother and cub leaning on a three-month old yak calf lying on the ground. In fact, the mother was training her cub to hunt."

"I hurriedly wielded a rock but they hardly moved. I noticed — one leg of the calf was already gone. I didn't want them to eat the whole carcass. I hurled more stones as they were snatching remaining parts. The snow leopards finally moved away. I rushed and hurriedly carried the dead calf to the shed. To my horror, the snow leopards followed me but I kept pelting stones."

Finally, the cats disappeared into the cliff.

Topke Gurung had a hard time snatching his goat from the snow leopard. He then had to save it from the evil eagles & jackals; while carrying it on his shoulder all the way to his shed.

Relishing Mutton with Millet Porridge





Topke Gurung

Samjung, Choser 9

One late evening in April 2011. Sounds of animals' jingling bells were coming closer and louder. Topke Gurung's wife and children were waiting for him inside the shed. After a while, one hundred sheep and goats entered shed, bleating loudly. Topke followed them with a goat carcass on his shoulder in fully bloodstained clothes. He breathed a sigh of relief after taking the carcass off his shoulder. The snow leopard had eaten up one third of the carcass. His wife looked with regret, "Pity on it! We'd better sell it."

His guard dogs were the first to check the carcass, sniffing the dead goat from top to bottom. Shoo! Topke chased the dogs away, then swallowed a large gulp of chhyang (local beer). Then he attended the carcass. He pushed a sharp knife into the carcass's navel and removed its skin in ten minutes. Then he took out innards and put them in a pot. "The snow leopard appeared from nowhere and was eating our goat," he turned to his wife and said, "when I was walking away briefly to herd the sheep."

His wife didn't pay much attention but resumed knitting a Pashmina shawl as she had heard such stories several times from him. She seemed least bothered in his butchering job.

"The snow leopard was ferocious. It came thrice," said Topke cleaning the innards of the carcass. He has seen snow leopards many times. He separated the parts of flesh around the thigh consumed by snow leopard. He mixed the separated flesh with parts of neck and gave it to the dogs, eagerly awaiting their turn. He was aware that the dogs could easily digest the meat with bite marks of snow leopard. The parts of thigh having no bite marks were then hung above the hearth for drying.

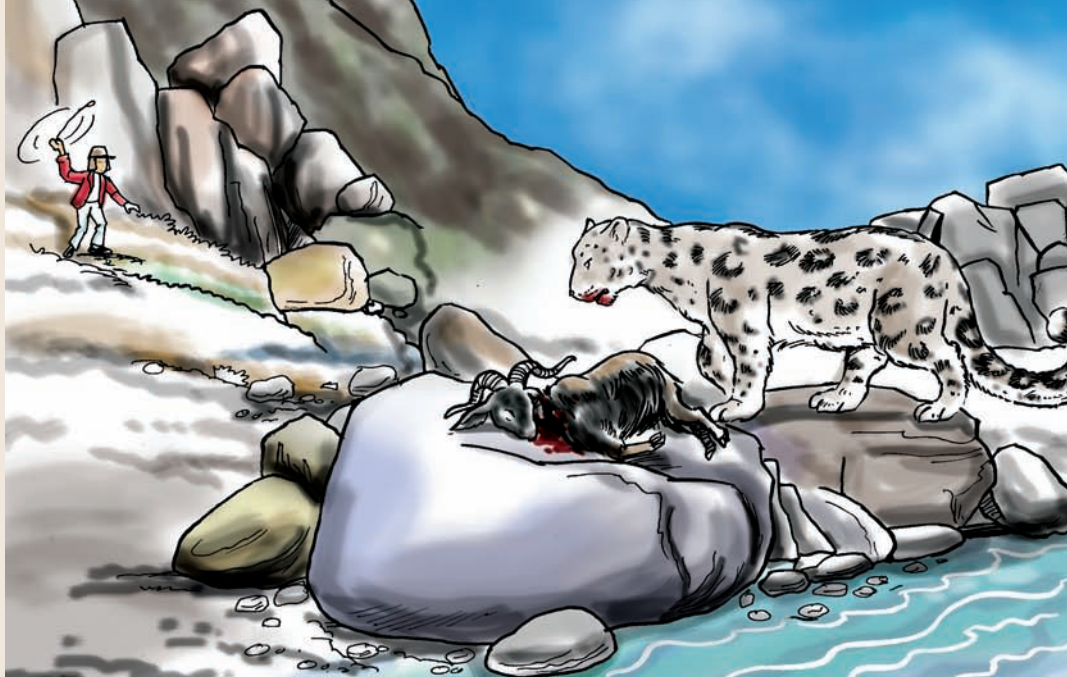
"A Jackal and eagle stalked me." Topke continued his story of the high hills. The two jackals attacked a sheep and when Topke chased the jackals, two hovering eagles took a chance, flew down at wind speed by turns and bite into the carcass. Then he chased the eagles. The predators took turns on the carcass and they were really persistent!

"Ouch" said TopkAS he exchanged a quick glance with his wife and CUT his hand with a knife. Blood trickled over the goat meat His wife applied clean cloth bandage on the wound. He continued to cut the chunks of meat.

Leaving Pashmina knitting aside, Tokpe's wife then started cooking. By the time she finished cooking millet porridge he had chopped chunks of meat and had washed them too. In a few moments, the entire shed was filled with delicate smell of mutton. This attracted the children around to try the mutton with gravy millet. Bleating of sheep and goats continued outside the shed.

Pasang Lowa, former herdsman of Marang village, informs that snow leopards can be seen eight months within a year. According to Pasang, about 30% out of 56 households in Marang have come across snow leopards.

Marang village: meeting point with Snow Leopards





Pasang Lowa
Marang, Charang

These days Pasang Lowa drives commuters in his jeep between Lomanthang and Syangbochen sloped roads. He wonders, “Perhaps, snow leopards run faster than the jeep on these slopes.”

He worked as a herdsman since his childhood, holding his grandpa’s hand, and continued on this job for the next sixteen years. During this time, he saw snow leopard three times. He has memories of one such encounters in the rainy season of 2004.

One afternoon around two o’clock, Pasang was sitting in the Dhim high hills grazing his sheep and goats. Amid the loftiest surroundings, the murmurs of running river echoed in the ears and the rocky river bank of Gharkhola appeared like a masterpiece. The serenity of the whole environment however was disrupted by Nepali folk song– resham fiririplaying in his handy CD player. “About twenty-five meters away in Marang cliff, I noticed movement of a creature that looked like a marmot. I didn’t feel any danger, and listened to my song.”

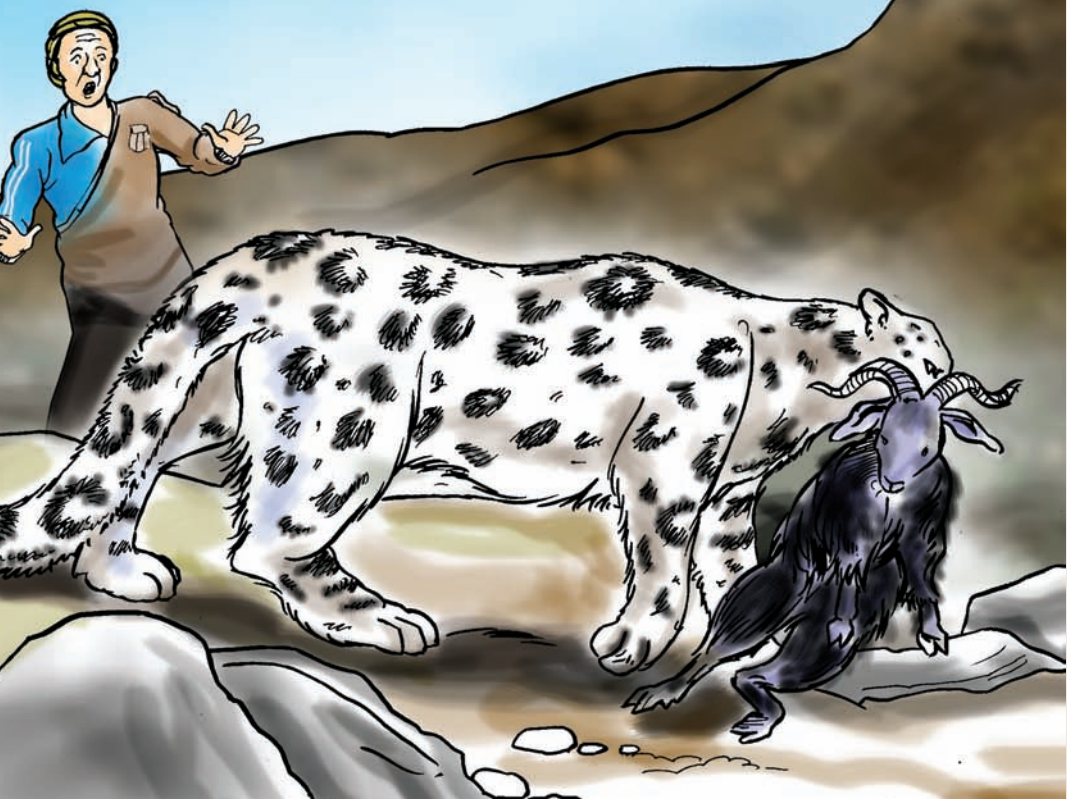
The marmot like creature was an adult snow leopard. Sitting by the side of its dead prey, it looked at all directions and slowly dragged the prey up a big rock. Perhaps the other sheep and goats sensed the danger- there was already chaos in the herd – they were running haphazardly. Curious, Pasang stopped the CD & discovered something moving on the rocks. As the snow leopard took a break from feeding and lifted its head to apprehend the surroundings, Pasang suddenly had a clear view of the snow leopard and one of his goats, now still, flat on the rock. “Ruined!” he thought and dashed to the spot. From a ten meter distance, he hurled a piece of stone that indeed hit the leopard. The cat ran up the cliff and vanished in moments.

“The snow leopard was similar to a lynx but bigger. It had the tinge of smoky, gray spots all over its white fur. It had a bushy, almost one meter long tail,” Pasang remembers. Later, after throwing out the innards of the carcass, he carried it on his back and drove the herd back home.

One of the beliefs in Marang village tells us that snow leopard can cause trouble if a local deity is displeased. Pasang adds, “During February every year, we worship and offer holy water to the deities like “jhyolaa chhegi”. A Lama priest used to fulfill the tradition. But once, the Lama had to visit elsewhere, so that time no worshipping was performed. Following that, a snow leopard killed the village chief’s horse. In the next three days, seven more horses were killed. The killing spree stopped only after the Lama returned and the worshipping continued.”

Tashi Tsering has seen young sheeps and goats He is especially amused to see the cubs of snow leopards frolicking in the high hills.

Lost life; reclaimed body





Tashi Tsering Gurung **Samjung, Choser 9**

Tashi Tsering, a shepherd since he was born, says, “I have seen snow leopard, many times, more than one hundred times. Every time I did, I enjoyed it. The most interesting sight is when the entire snow leopard family moves together with cubs. Also, It is amazing to observe snow leopard hunting blue sheep in the cliffs.

He adds, “When a leopard kills the prey, it either eats it up on the spot or drags it to hide it in a bush to save it from other predators like the wolf.”

The owner of 70 sheep and goats, Tashi Chiring, 55, believes it is a challenging task to save the animals once the snow leopard attacks the herd. Once it enters, it kills at least one animal.

It was a typical day in April 2010 and his sheep and goats had covered the plateau trail fully. He was putting them on the alert with shrieks of “Q...Q...Woof! Woof!”

His Tibetan mastiffs were running ahead of the herd. Their fierce barking was echoing through the cliffs. In the meantime, a snow leopard made a sudden pounce from the cliff and mixed into the herd. Tashi Chiring shuddered in fear. The frightened animals scattered all around. He felt it was God of death, Yamaraj, in the form of snow leopard.

In rush, his shaggy jacket tangled with a spiral horn of an escaping goat and he fell to the ground.

All the animals were in panic. They were pushing and knocking each other on the ground, and catching the sides of cliff to be safe. Many of the weak, small, and old ones fell on the ground, or were trampled or dragged. One goat, in heavysset body, fell into the predator's clutches. At first, the predator scratched the prey over its body and in no time it dug its sharp teeth into the victim's neck. "This snow leopard seemed to have acute hunger," says Tashi Chiring, "so it looked violent." It was determined to kill the goat at any cost. Normally, snow leopards do not attempt such an attack in the presence of a shepherd."

Quickly Tashi stood up, picked up a stone and hit the snow leopard, shrieking ... "Run away!" It stared at Tashi and snarled. As Tasi hurled few more rocks, the snow leopard dragged the prey to some distance but then abandoned it and ran away.

A pregnant snow leopard listened to Urken's plea but she was unable to save her livestock from the cunning lammergeyer, a bird of prey.

A Pregnant Snow Leopard





Urken Sangpo Gurung Samjung, Choser 9

A female goat had just given birth to three kids in Pang Khapyak high hills. Within moments of birth, a bird of prey observing the scene dived down. It was long-tailed bearded vulture (lammergeyer) with broad and elongated wings. Even Before the mother goat could affectionately lick the newborns, the bearded vulture clutched one of the kids and flew away.

Urken, tending the herd, was a bit further away. She witnessed the scene and started screaming and chasing the bird of prey frantically waving her hands. Her wool-coil rolled to a distance and she could hear the female goat bleating. Her throat shrunk and drops of tears fell from her eyes.

It was in 2010, a portion of the Pyang Khapkyak summer pasture at 5,200 meters was covered with 250 sheep and goats. Suddenly chaos set into the herd which attracted Ukren's attention. Not more than five meters away, a

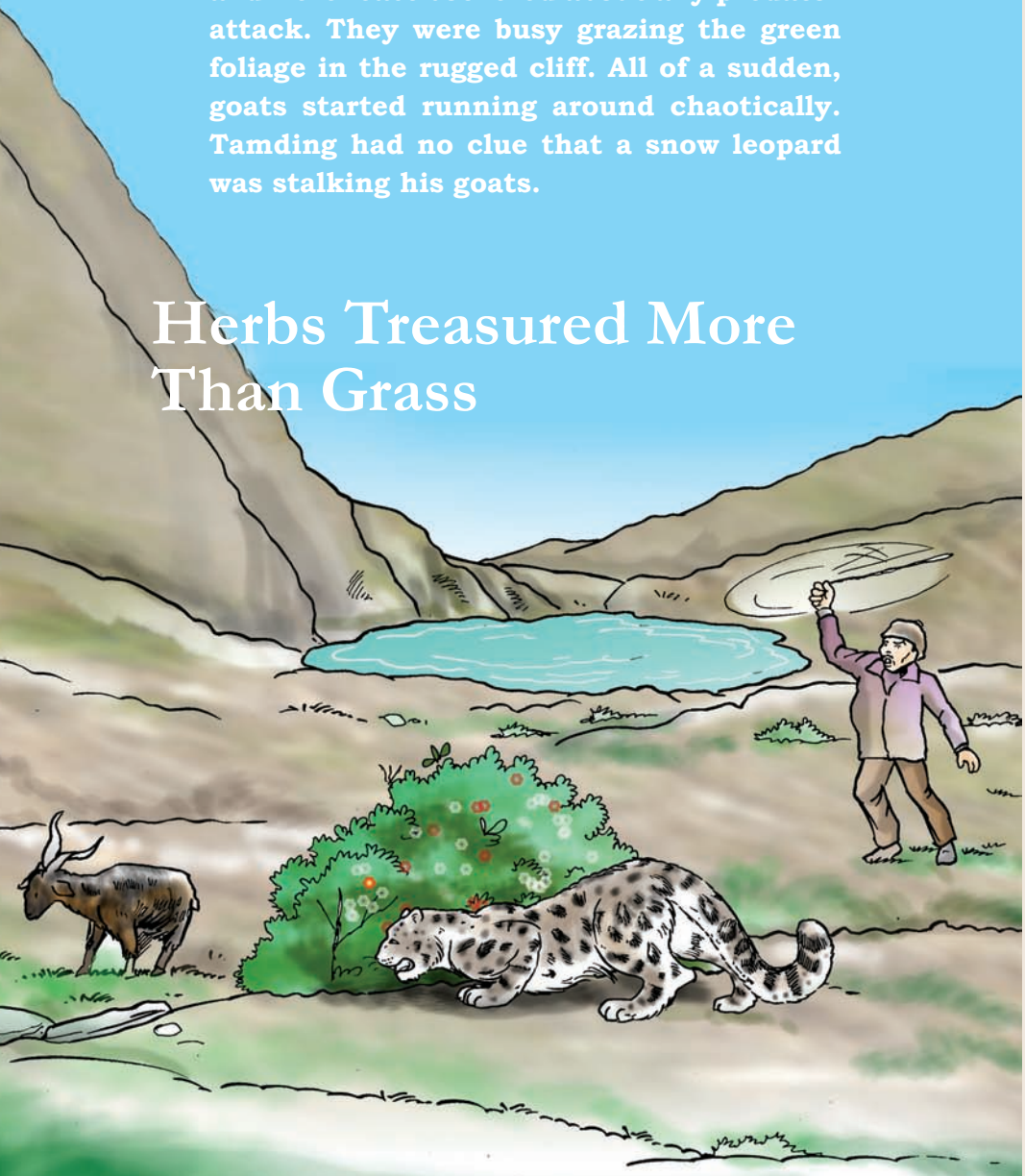
female snow leopard was standing with an adult goat in her mouth. This was Ukren's third encounter with the snow leopard; "She was pregnant as her belly appeared larger than usual," she says.

The constant stare of snow leopard scared Urken. She started crying and yelling in an attempt to chase away the predator. She also feared that rather than running away it could attack her, but to her surprise, thirty nine year old Urken says "The snow leopard dropped the goat on the ground and vanished." Immediately she ran toward the site, and rescued the heavily breathing goat which seemed half dead due to fear.

Badly affected by the two incidents, Urken didn't feel like staying there. She revolved her herd and shouted 'U, U', to call back the sheep and goats. Soon the herd gathered around her and at twelve noon, with the two newborns and the injured goat, she drove the herd back to the shed, one and half hours away. She had the livestock of three different households and most of them looked alike. Throughout the journey, she kept thinking, "Who does the injured goat belong to? Is it mine?"

Flowering medicinal plants of spring season had scented the entire high hills. Tamding's goats were enjoying the herbs and were least bothered about any predator attack. They were busy grazing the green foliage in the rugged cliff. All of a sudden, goats started running around chaotically. Tamding had no clue that a snow leopard was stalking his goats.

Herbs Treasured More Than Grass





Tamding Tempa **Domalang, Lomanthang**

That year, like other usual years, spring had brought greenery as well as happiness and fun. Lomangthang was celebrating the joys of Teeji festival. The denizens were enjoying good food, dances, and merry making. The upper plateau was green and the Dhemmanurma high hill was laden with abundant grasses and fresh medicinal plants. It was the second week of May 2011 and Tamding Tempa was busy grazing his herd of seventy goats, scattered all around, in the nearby rocky cliff. The scented medicinal plants and Tibetan herbs flowering along the cliff ridge had lured the goats leaving the normal grass behind.

“Sheep and goats prefer medicinal herbs to green grasses.” Lomangthang shepherd Tamding says, “But there is risk in attempting such herbs along the cliff. If they are caught by a predator, it would be impossible to rescue them. First, access to the place would be a big problem, and second, by the time we get there, the predator would have killed it and consumed most meat.”

Standing on the high hill plateau, Tamding was struggling to descend, hurling and yelling at the goats. He wielded stones several times targeting the cliff and shouted ‘u, u, u,’. But none of the goats descended. Tired due to scorching heat, he washed his face in the nearby puddle. Then he started collecting scattered dry dung for fuel.

In another half an hour, he heard goats bleating. The herd was running at three hundred meters on the cliff above the pasture. He brought them down by signalling loudly. He was concerned to know “What could have chased them?” but couldn’t find a clue about the predator. He was now more anxious and kept an eye on the cliff dotted with the goats. At last, dozens of goats jumped down to the plateau and started grazing. He was still staring at the cliff with fear and doubt in his mind. To confirm he counted the animals and found the numbers intact. Then he was able to take a deep breath and thank the almighty.

Hungry Tamding opened up his lunch package and took a scoop of roasted flour and gulped it with beer. All of sudden, an unusual sound “Fik, Fik, Fik, Fik,” captured his attention. Towards his right side, thirty meters away, a snow leopard was hiding under a bush. It was trying to ambush a nearby grazing goat that was completely unaware of the predator. Tamding didn’t leave a chance for the snow leopard to attack, and immediately started hurling stones at the leopard. To his relief, the snow leopard hurriedly left.” He thanked the almighty again.