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SUSAN LEIBIK



ONCE SAW A CAT IN KATHMANDU.

This lean striped tabby walked the roof edges of a temple in Durbar Square, above the fray of the roads, markets and traffic below. A frieze of carved wooden deities danced along the temple struts while the cat

made its light-footed way across the curves and balustrades. Cats have a way of slipping between worlds. At home in alleyways and living rooms, wild fields and woods, they are equally at ease in the temple or the jungle. They sleep happily in bookshop windows, dreaming among the dust of literature, or eke out a living on the mean streets. I hadn't seen very many cats in Kathmandu, mostly the ubiquitous stray dogs. The only other feline I had seen was a cat sleeping in the kitchen of a Buddhist monastery high in the mountains.

It was a cat that called me back to the Himalayas. In pursuit of wilderness, the mystique of feline being, and the lure of a truly rare cat above all cats (altitude-wise) *Uncia Uncia*, the snow leopard, or Ounce (its slightly archaic name). I wanted to see one. I wanted to say, "I once saw an Ounce." Or "I once saw an Ounce pounce," or other *Cat-in-the-Hat*-style pronouncements. (This by way of deflecting what might be the quixotic absurdity of such a quest.) Yet underlying the yearning were long time dreams and intuitional forces that had their own energetic directives. A desire to *see*, and be changed by that seeing. To come close to something untouchable, a wildness essential to the turning of the world. Beauty. Its searing,

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healing essence. This mountain-dwelling cat has a curious power, beyond explanation—a feline koan; as beautifully evidenced in Peter Mattheissen's classic *The Snow Leopard*.

I was inspired to hear that snow leopards had returned to the lower reaches of Chomolungma (Mt. Everest) and Kachenjunga in Eastern Nepal. This is an endangered cat, one whose domain has shrunk, and continues to face human threat and impact. When the opportunity arose to travel to the Indian Himalayas in way that would support snow leopards, the calling became compelling. The Snow Leopard Conservancy of India has instigated a new form of conservation-based tourism in the remote northern region of Ladakh. Working with villagers who live near the high altitude Hemis National Park, the SLC has set up snow leopard expeditions that utilize a local home stay project that brings income to the lives of people who share land with the wild cats. Herding and subsistence agriculture are the mainstay of rural Ladakhis. Local people sometimes come into conflict with the cats that prey on their livestock. Retaliatory killings of snow leopards have impacted on the populations in Ladakh, which is one of its last enclaves. Shifting the value of the cat from liability to asset has been part of the SLC's work, along with improving protection measures for livestock. Their

conservation work and ethics of community stewardship upholds the integrity of both the human and wildlife needs. A mid-winter journey to the Himalayas began to seem like the best possible course my yearning could take me. A phrase from the poem “The Snow Man” by Wallace Stevens occurs to me, and becomes a recurrent key to this journey: “One must have a mind of winter...” I begin gathering up warm gear, preparing for a long walk in the snow.



I T IS WINTER AND THE HIGHWAY from Delhi through Manali and north to Ladakh in the state of Jammu-Kashmir is closed. The high passes are snowed in. I fly to Leh, seeing the shape of the land from afar. The flight crosses over the ripple and flow of land as it rises from the plains, a ripple and flow that torques and furls from gentle foothills to the wall of the Himalaya, dreamlike and afloat. The plane veers low as we approach Leh. Looking down on the snow-covered peaks and troughs I begin my search for snow leopards. The expanse and scale below—seemingly endless furrows and crags of snow and ice instill a feeling of not-unpleasant futility. I have to smile. Snow leopards! What a fool’s game! The sun is newly risen over the range; the sear of pale gold light touches the diamond hard glacial ice.

Yes, one must have a mind of winter... and one must also have a good winter coat when living in Ladakh. This goes for the shaggy donkeys, dogs, yaks and cows as well as the human inhabitants of Leh. It is freezing, a dry biting cold, tempered somewhat in midday by the intense sun refracting through the high altitude at 11,200 feet. The town sits in a high broad valley ringed by the mountains in all directions. The peaks have a companionable guardian-like presence. They are the water source, the life fount, in what is essentially a high altitude desert.



SOME DAYS LATER my yet to be met traveling companions arrive. These three others have been equally compelled to make this journey, following their own course and reasons for coming to wintry Ladakh to walk into snow leopard country. They are each strong characters, I sense immediately, seeing some similar, even crazed fire in their eyes. Their company buoys me. A fellowship of weathered rucksacks and well-worn boots. I also quickly perceive we all have a shared predilection for privacy and our own visions to pursue.

Anna, from Venezuela, is a mountaineer and passionate defender of animals. In her eclectic career she ran a farm bordering the tropical forest, and readily shared her land with Jaguars. Bob, nearing seventy, has the bright-eyed keenness of a schoolboy. He is a retired forester from Britain. A skilled naturalist, he is an expert on mammals of the world, and in particular, otters (who by legend in Ladakh, have a close association with snow leopards.) He has worked as an environmental assessment consultant, specializing in the remediation of wild lands.

Richard, a British physician, newly retired, is a Himalayan roamer, and a world-traveler, with an artistically-inclined eye. He continues to work as a doctor in medical clinics in remote Nepal, and rural Zimbabwe, as he has done throughout his career.

Over tea we confer with Rinchen Wangchuck, the director of the Snow Leopard Conservancy of India. Bob and Rinchen have met before. Seeing each other again they break into warm smiles, and Rinchen offers a one-word greeting, “Otters!” They tracked Indian otters together on a previous journey. Rinchen has spent much of his career dedicated to the conservation of snow leopards. Much of his work involves working with conservation-based programs that support both wildlife and people.

Rinchen is a skilled mountaineer. He began working as a mountain guide, crossing glaciers, and summiting Himalayan peaks. Yet a deeper pull was the wildlife he came to pay closer and deeper attention to. Drawn to the life spirit of the animal realm, studying their ways became a natural calling for him. For what are mountains without these expressions of diversity and wonder?

We visit the SLC’s small office in a quiet backstreet in Leh. Jigmet Dadul, Rinchen’s colleague sits at a computer that holds, among other data, photographs of snow leopards; essentially self-portraits of the cats as they trigger camera traps on their territorial rounds. Rinchen, Jigmet, and their colleagues at SLC are quietly heroic in their efforts to save snow leopards. The precarious existence of the cats has some hope for a future because of their own rare and wild risks of spirit.

Our journey is dependent on the knowledge of our guides. Chitta Dorje, who will lead our little expedition into Hemis High Altitude National Park, is one of the most experienced snow leopard trackers in India. He has led wildlife filmmakers and photographers from all quarters, including National Geographic and the BBC.

Chitta is possessed of an inner quiet and sly humor that rises through his outwardly serious demeanor. His understated manner blends into a steady strength in the

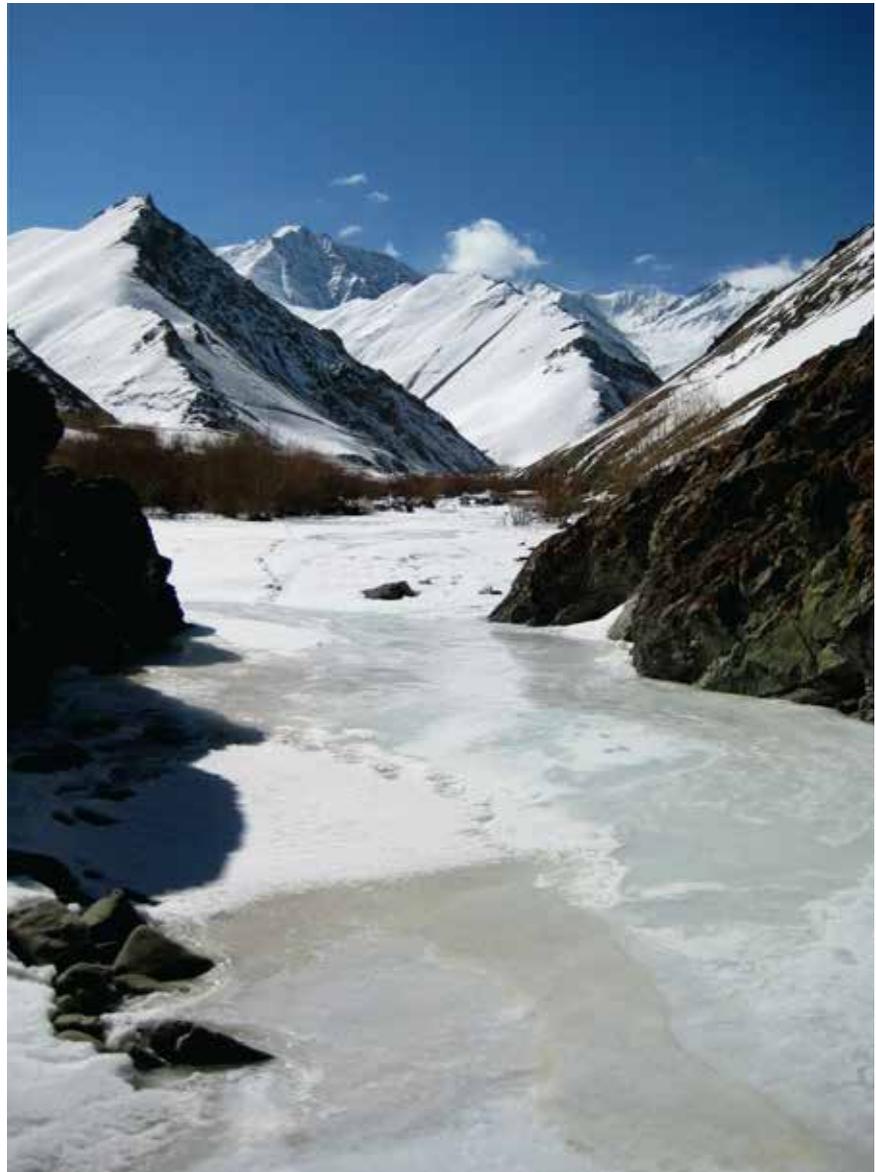
mountains. He is a strategist of the moment; as any experienced tracker he makes decisions based on subtle signs, intuition, and attendance to unseen dimensions of landscape and weather. Sifting news of animal sightings, local politics, he walks a fine line of detente around issues of snow leopard conservation and human needs.

Tashi Thondup, the field director for SLC in Zanskar, will be accompanying us on our trip—he has an ebullient and quicksilver spirit, and a roving mind to match his physical energy. Born and raised in Zanskar, a beautiful and remote region steeped in steadfast religious values, he grew up in mountains that hold the footprints not only of wild cats, but those of Padmasambhva, the founder of Tibetan Buddhism. Tashi was twelve when he saw his first snow leopard, while herding his family’s goats.

“With this team, I think we may be lucky...” is Bob’s appraisal of our collective *juju*. “The snow leopards will be out looking for us,” Richard surmises, “They’ve never seen a *Venezuelan* before!” Anna laughs. We all know our chances are slight, at best, in the small window of time we will be walking in the mountains. But that is part of the quest, this unrealistic desire, which flickers before us, faint as a whisker, but connected to something powerful for us each.



EN ROUTE TO THE TRAILHEAD, we stop the jeeps, and peer down an embankment. The surrounding cliffs look a lot like the American Southwest, with eroded rocks and a desert like feel. Chitta leads us down a few steep gullies, scrambling through bushes and over rocks and snow down to a clearing overlooking a view of the Indus River canyon. An outcrop of large ochre colored



rocks sits directly on the highpoint of the vista. On the boulder are petroglyphs of horned sheep, ibex, hunters, and several distinctive cats. The long curved tail and markings are that of the snow leopard. Nomadic hunters of pre-Buddhist Ladakh were the artists who carved and chipped out these images over 2,000 years ago. These early hunters were clearly inspired by the top predator of the mountain realm—emulating the cat’s techniques of stealth, camouflage, and attack from above.

Very near, alongside a frozen creek, among a scatter of coppery leaves, are the paw prints of a snow leopard. Perhaps a week or two old, made by one of the descendants of the cats documented in stone so long ago.

Like the carvings in rock, the cat's prints are a signature of presence, a language of form, an imprint of life force that carries its own message. A lithe poem; a haiku of passage in its brevity and intensity.



AFTER A ROUGH DRIVE ALONG and the above the Indus, through twisting, bleak, but beautiful terrain we arrive at roads end, and the entry to Hemis National Park. Chitta and Tashi meet up with a local pony man who will haul our gear on train of sturdy ponies in their winter coats. Sonam, our camp cook, and his assistant Yelsin help organize the food and equipment. Morbun, our young sharp-sighted third guide, shoulders up the spotting scope and swiftly moves out, ahead of us all.

We walk up the Rumbak Gorge through the early afternoon. Sheer sided gates of rock frame the trail, an opening into a higher world. A dream-like sense of calm accompanies me. Clear cobalt skies are radiant, deeply blue, limitless azure, a kind of lapis richness of color in counterpoint to the thin air. Stones and their shadows seem magnified, and the bare scrub that punctuates the slopes are a tindery gold, little flames of vegetation that draw down the blue sheep, to feed. These sheep (actually a goat despite nomenclature), or bharal, ('*Napo*' in Ladakhi) are the snow leopard's favorite prey.

We will see blue sheep every day as they roam the vast terrain of the open slopes, ridges, scarps, gullies and high crags. They are tough agile creatures, with strong sturdy legs, delicate, pretty faces, and a short white black-tipped tail. Both males and females have horns—the rams have large rounded ones curving up and around in a semi-circle; the female's shorter and straighter. Their coats are dun and dusky gray brown, with just a hint of bluish tinge. Their legs have a deftly 'painted' black line down the front, and are white on the rear side. This pelage provides good cover among the stones and grasses. Sharp-eyed, sharp-eared, they have evolved in concert with their prime predator. Without blue sheep there can be no snow leopard. When

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a dog accompanying a villager barks, sheep on the rock pitches above us give an alarm cry, and fleetly escape over the next rise.

Scanning the high ridges, the folds and turns of valleys, patterns of rock, snow, and broad barren slopes meld into colors and forms that snow leopards can easily and truly disappear into. To see or not to see, that really isn't the question. The answer is to *be* here. With plenty of snow leopard signs, blue sheep curved into rest on sun-warmed ledges, perhaps Shan is watching us, hearing our voices rise up the canyon walls.



OUR CAMP IS BETWEEN two important snow leopard valleys, the Husing and Tarbung.

A *chorten* with prayer flags and an old sheep skull, its horns stained in red ochre, marks the spot. Sonam sets up the spotting scope right outside the cook tent. He has a reputation for seeing more snow leopards than field researchers do. While others are off, clambering up steep ridges, he watches; pot spoon in one hand, the other on the focusing ring of the scope. He



has seen cats make their way down the scree slopes just west of our site.

Afternoon on our first day. After tea I meander toward the Tarbung Valley. In the stillness I can almost hear the glint of ice and dust. I am sleepy, feeling the altitude, and turn round, thinking of a nap in my tent. When I arrive back Anna is signaling me with South American ‘passionata’—waving her arms, gesticulating with fervor. “Snow leopard!” Everyone is taking off—up the trail a cat has been spotted on a kill. A pony man from Rumbak village has alerted Chitta. I grab my camera and binoculars, and head up. Chitta, Tashi, and Morbun are already well along the way.

I arrive breathless; rings of smiles greet me. Richard, Tashi, Chitta, and Morbun are all gathered at the spotting scope, aimed toward a high red rock prominence above the snow covered creek bed just opposite the trail. Some 80 feet away on a flat throne of rock, the snow leopard sits. Stepping up to the scope I peer through as if to another dimension. That face. The hidden spirit of the mountains themselves, revealed.

The snow leopard is sitting atop her kill, the carcass of a blue sheep. She looks sated, and regal. She takes us in, totally unperturbed, perhaps absorbing some of the awe, gratitude, and astonishment we exude.

Her fur is spotted with dark rosettes along her flank and down her extraordinary long and lush tail. The tawny buff-gold of her coat is luminous, seeming to generate its own rare light. Her face. All the sensory graces of her being converge there; the soft tufts of fur on her inner ears, the unique patterns of spots and ink dark calligraphing curves of marks above her eyes, the broad nose, whiskered muzzle, dark-lipped mouth, and blood stained ruff of pale fur around her cheeks. She is finely, fiercely, in her element. A calm fire burns through her. Her huge fore paws are resting in front of her, instruments of agility and athleticism. They grip rocks, float through deep snow, and lead her leaps in pursuit of prey.

Her eyes are green amber, like some rare and unusual gem. Looking through the scope she seems to be staring straight back, full on. Her gaze overturns me. A bodily, holy joy circulates in my blood, pushes up along the surface of my skin. An ecstatic greeting rises from within, wordless. Emptied of hope and



longing in the best sense, because a great yearning has been met. Erenbatter, a Mongolian herder and ranger once said, “There are very few of them left in the world, and where there is snow leopard there is everything.”

Yes. Everything is here. I cannot take my eyes away from her mesmerizing presence. We all watch, transfixed, as she rises. The long fur of her pelt gleams and changes in the light. Suddenly she is in motion, moving up the rocks in a supple fluid flow. This lightness of form comes from honed strength, a synchronous arc and tension of muscle

and mind. Reading the terrain by sight and feel, she is in perfect duet with the earth itself.

She turns, stretches slightly, and resettles on a higher outpost. Facing down slope to keep an eye on her kill, she lies down with the utmost regality; looks our way casually, and then closes her eyes in contentment. Her poise and face radiate ease. She yawns, well fed and sleepy. The sun is lighting the tips of her fur. The red-gold lichen on the rocks also glows in the late afternoon light. After a while she returns to the kill. She gnaws on some shred of meat and



bone, while eyeing a bold magpie who steals closer. The cat gives a sudden snarl, warning the bird off. Every twitch of her tail, each subtle move is a delight to witness.

The sensuous holiness of the world sits on a pinnacle of stone. All else falls away.

There is ethereality in her—a porous sense that links her to the rock, ice, lichen and cloud. She embodies her own vanishing.

Dusk is falling, the cold bites, while on her perch the snow leopard remains warm in her thick fur and metabolic burning. All of us are aflame with our own visions she has given us.. Chitta keeps murmuring “Good karma group...” We all share our amazement at having seen this cat on our first day in the mountains.

Reluctantly, but spurred on by the freezing temperatures, we one by one begin our descent back to camp. I linger a long while, taking in the now darkening silhouette of Shan. The high cliffs loom guarding their further secrets, having allowed us a glimpse of a true mountain deity. I bow, and walk down the trail, my thoughts in spindrift.



W E SPEND THE NEXT FEW DAYS exploring the Husing and Tarbung valleys, checking camera traps (13 shots have registered—could be cats, domestic animals, and at least one shot of

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Tashi, on all fours doing his best snow leopard snarl to demonstrate the camera’s trigger mechanism). Each valley has its own feel. The Husing is a mysteriously dreamy place. Twists and turns of canyons and defiles beckon. A peacefulness I have never felt so deeply makes me want to stay. The facets of cliffs are like old sacred texts, the light itself illuminated wisdom.

We move camp, heading up to the fields below Rumbak. The high peaks are completely snowbound, dazzling in the sun. Hard ice covers the streams and irrigation courses in the barren barley fields. At night the stars seem close, as if they are peering down into the frost crystallized mountains. Chitta, Tashi, Yelsin and Morbun stay up late. I listen from my tent, as Sonam reels off jokes and stories from the cook tent, where a camp stove quietly roars and laughter sparks up to meet the sky. In the morning I hear him singing ‘*om mane padme hum*,’ a wake-up call of sorts.

There’s been a report of another snow leopard—this cat has killed several domestic goats that had been grazing at lower slopes. It has lingered up a side valley, yet no one knows for sure if it is still in the area. Morbun and Tashi surge on ahead with the spotting scope. I savor the walk upwards along narrow goat paths. The voices of red-billed choughs sound from the skies above ridgelines where they swoop and tumble. The birds would know what was happening below.

I see Morbun in the distance looking through the scope. Animal tracks criss-cross the steep sided snow across from his sights. As I arrive Morbun turns toward me with a quiet greeting. He has a casual air about him as if he is watching nothing more than the play of light on the dark rocks, the sparks of ice crystals caught in sun’s glare. That is all I see as I draw up to the scope. When I ask, doubtfully, “Snow leopard?” He breaks into a wild smile, nodding, “Yes!”



Laying midway up a snow gully, is a shimmering cat. Without the scope it appears as a dark rock against the bright snow. Seen close, his head is up, and he gazes out serenely, belly fur aglow in the sun. His smoke grey coat is tinged with pale gold. A tussle of goat fur is half-hidden by a rock outcrop. The snow leopard stretches out his front paws in a leisurely fashion. Another cat content at his kill. Leaning towards a nearby rock, he rubs his face along its edge, and then puts his head down for what proves to be a very long nap.

When Anna arrives and sees the leopard she bursts into tears. This wonderful abundance of ‘felicity,’ the joy of seeing the rare, the wild, the feline smile. Thus we begin a five-hour afternoon with a snow leopard. It all feels ordinary *and* otherworldly. Napping with Shan, at 4,500 meters some-where in the Ladakh Himalayas. We all alternately gaze and doze. Sun leopards, slow leopards. I clamber up a crag with my binoculars and settle into my own perch opposite the cat’s gully.

We watch as Shan flexes out his front legs and relaxes back into a posture of blissful repose. He is clearly full-bellied, enjoying his slumber in the sun. His luxuriant tail is his prime mode of expression as he lazes. It sweeps and moves, is tucked in, curled round, and occasionally tremors slightly at the tip. Once in a while he gets up and completely arranges his position to better catch the sun angle, or rest in the half-shade of the rock.

The cold begins to return, as the sun drops low in the late day. The leopard has moved back over to its kill, and for a while only the sunlit tips of his ears are visible, aglow in the gilding light. He looks like a young leopard, some air of youth, a kind of sweetness.

Chitta decides to venture closer with his camera. He begins kicking in steps up the steep snow, offside to where the cat lays. The sun begins setting over the white ridge above. The cat is soon aware of Chitta’s approach—he sits up, eyes fixed in Chitta’s direction. He then assumes a low crouch, and stealthily creeps forward, stalking this interloper. From below we wonder if we are about to witness the first known predation on a human by a snow leopard—but Chitta has been around more than a few cats. He simply pauses, going no further. The snow leopard is checking him out; more curious than aggressive, and if anything, wary. Chitta remains very still. They regard each other on the same level plane, across perhaps 30 meters of snow. Chitta’s body posture is relaxed, though an elastic energy seems to bind cat and person together. I envy Chitta’s closeness; this is as about as intimate as one can get with a wild snow leopard. Chitta’s camera is down, he



holds it loosely at his side. Their exchange is direct—in the mind’s eye of each.

The cat moves again, slipping upright and moving sinuously to a perch edged by tufts of tawny grasses. Once again, to see a snow leopard in motion affects a whole other kind of awe. Emerson wrote, “Beauty is the moment of transition, as if the form were ready to flow into other forms.” Shan assumes a shape-shifting essence, an ever-potentiality; fluid, silent and dazzling. The rosette patterns along its tail, its flank, all move in a rhythmic dapple of dark and light. He seems to float upwards, possessed of some inner airiness, a meld of elemental powers, of the earth and free of it at the same time.

It is turning cold, yet we are all reluctant to leave. Night though belongs to Shan and his magnificent thick coat. He had spent an entire afternoon lounging atop snow and ice without betraying any sense of discomfort, and will probably travel tonight, up and over the ridges, his black pupils open to the light of stars and ice.



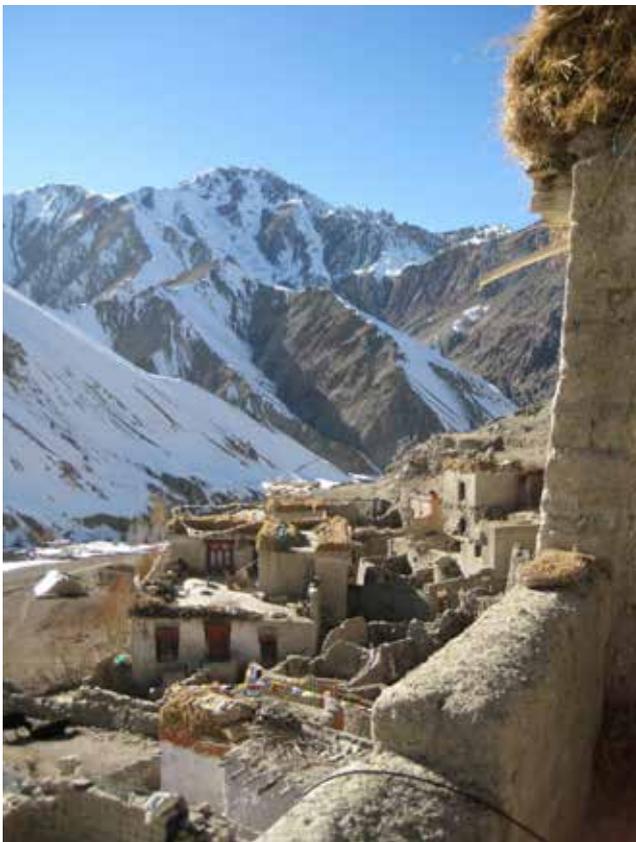
THE LAST DAYS OF OUR SOJOURN are spent in the village of Rumbak, known in some quarters as “The Snow Leopard Capital of the World.” This capital has nine homes, a small clinic and a Buddhist *gompa*. Tsering Dolka hosts Anna and me in her home—a solid earth, wood, mud-brick, and stone structure. Carpets line the low benches along the windowed walls, an ornate clay cook stove and a metal hearth stove warm the spacious interior. A garland of barley stalks is hung around a post beam; a green reminder of the crops of summer.

Dolka is blaze of energy—both practical and

Income from the Homestay programs has also changed the lives of local villagers and improved the status of the snow leopard.

mischievous. Mother of grown kids, farmer, herdsman, and cook, she is skilled in a multitude of livelihoods. ‘Lively’ is her basic nature. She is always at task, tending a baby goat, baking bread, fixing a pony harness, or churning up *soldja*, Tibetan-style salt tea. Our basic communication factor is laughter. She teaches us how to make dumplings, Ladakhi style, resulting on my end in a passel of rather twisted dough balls.

In the morning several of Dolka’s friends come for breakfast. Everyone is interested in our sightings of Shan. All crowd around Anna’s video camera to look at footage of the snow leopard climbing the rocks. For these residents of Rumbak snow leopards have often been more a source of woe than awe. Although they are devout Buddhists who strive to honor the precept of ‘no killing’ living with carnivorous predators as neighbors can be challenging. By economic circumstance they do take revenge killings on



cats that prey on their domestic livestock. Snow leopards have raided corrals—breaking in and killing large numbers of goats and sheep. The losses can be devastating. The Snow Leopard Conservancy has created a predator-proofing project to fortify village corrals, bringing in materials like steel mesh, not available locally. Working together with villagers throughout snow leopard country they have rebuilt many enclosures.

Building these near-impenetrable corrals is proving to be effective. As one herder reports, “We are very relieved to have these improved pens. Not only because our livestock is safer, but because our lives are also better. We can sleep at home, instead of miles away on the cold ground guarding our pens. And we can be better Buddhists because we don’t have to kill the snow leopard anymore.”

Income from the Homestay programs has also changed the lives of local villagers and improved the status of the snow leopard. People such as myself and fellow travellers will come a long way to walk in the home of the snow leopard. Our reverence for the cat comes easily; the villagers who have lived with the realities of sharing that home with the big cats have had their reverence tempered by hardship.

Dolka and her friends rejoiced at the images of Shan—the animal has become an asset, not just spiritually, but economically. It was local people who alerted us to the kill sites and whereabouts of the cats we saw. The wildlife that is regarded the ‘garland of our mountains’ can be celebrated and protected.

A prayer wheel sits in the heart of Rumbak, the handles worn from daily touch, spinning out a moving mantra to the mountains and rivers, animals and people; all beings.

A photograph of the Dalai Lama looks down from the rafters of the shrine. He himself has spoken of the rarity of snow leopards and their special place in the high altitudes of the Himalayas, which merit “special attention to protect them.”

The habitats they live in are indeed spaces of emotion, ideas, and revelations. There is more than one way to travel in snow leopard territory. The whole space of mind is vast, and dreamtime and waking time also interpenetrate. When we meet the snow leopard it is a gift of the triple realms; desire, form and boundlessness.



SUSAN LEIBIK is a visual artist and writer living in Vancouver Canada. Her work is inspired by mountain travel, and the lives of animals and birds.