

2011-03-16

I am writing you from our Mongolia office

That said, I want to insert an important note: I have written below regarding the most recent update on the cats and their movements in the South Gobi Desert but I have breaking news to report. Our work this past week has been dominated by the announcement in Mongolia that might allow hunting of snow leopards! We have been working tirelessly with the Snow Leopard Network over the last week and a half to follow up on a newspaper report that the Mongolian Ministry of Nature, Environment, and Tourism has granted permits for the killing of 4 snow leopards for “research” purposes. We see no reason to kill snow leopards for research. Working with the Snow Leopard Network we now have a strategy in place and are working on it even as I type, but if you want to read more, you can visit our blog: <http://www.blog.snowleopard.org>.

Human-wildlife conflict story direct from the field and personal - Shonkhor has a close call:

In our February update from the field, we mentioned that Shonkhor, one of the male snow leopards in the long-term ecological study, had killed 13 livestock belonging to a herding family in the region. The week that followed that report had us wondering, discussing, planning and biting our nails while our field team (with advice from a horde of global experts) did a fabulous job working with the herders – removing the livestock carcasses, chasing Shonkhor away on foot, and sleeping in the vehicle for several nights in sub-zero temperatures, trying to deter him from returning. While it is not very uncommon for snow leopards to feast on livestock occasionally, what made this situation seem peculiar was Shonkhor’s adamantly possessive behavior towards his kill. Usually we know snow leopards to be very shy and wary of humans, but Shonkhor refused to budge. The herder and our field team tried everything ranging from gunshots fired in the air, firecrackers, honking the horn of the car, driving toward him yelling and even throwing small stones, but Shonkhor would not leave his kill. While initially the two dogs belonging to the herder barked at him, they too gave up after a while as Shonkhor refused to move away. Even when approached on foot or in the car, he initially bared his teeth, but then became used to it and ignored the human presence or ‘disturbance’ around him.

Cat specialists from all over the world were contacted including SLT staff, Panthera staff, and the team at Grimso Wildlife Damage Centre in Sweden as well as Raghu Chundawat from India – all of whom offered suggestions. One thing that we learned from experts who know snow leopards well was that this is not very unusual behaviour for a snow leopard, at least in the Himalayas. While we pondered over the possibility that Shonkhor might be injured, it was ruled out since he was behaving very normally by walking away up to about 2 km before the day got hotter and returning when temperatures dropped. He was walking up and down the mountain about 4-5 km every day.

Our first suggestion had been to remove the carcasses but the herder who lost his livestock initially resisted the idea indicating that Shonkhor might return and make another kill. However this did not help because Shonkhor continued to return to feed on the carcass which was within 10 m from his Ger. The herder was becoming concerned for his family and livestock. On the 17th of February, we persuaded the herder to let us help remove all the remaining carcasses. We placed one far away from the family on the path that Shonkhor was using to walk to and from the and we burned all the others since we knew he had eaten well

for almost an entire week and would not be hungry. Shonkhor did leave and we continue to monitor his positions. We hope he will remain away from this ger, but fear he may return.

After about one week, we heard again from some other herders who reported that a snow leopard got close to their Ger. However, having heard the story about Shonkhor, they were prepared and were outside with their dogs who barked violently. Shonkhor was deterred. It is important to note here that felids often behave very differently while hunting than they do when they are eating, even though one activity leads to the other. It appears that snow leopards can be more easily deterred when they are in the act of hunting than when they are in the act of eating. Shonkhor's locations did show a cluster recently, and we have found that he has been eating two horses. Whether he killed these horses or simply scavenged is unknown and we will only get to know once more pictures come in from the field. We will continue to monitor Shonkhor's behaviour and to talk to the local families to let them know about what we are learning and help them know what to do and how to be better prepared.

Mom and Daughter Remain Apart:

Tenger and Zaraa appear to have separated. Although they have been observed within 2 km of each other several times over the last few weeks, they are no longer in the same location at the same time. This could well turn out to be the first time that we are recording a possible snow leopard dispersal. What is interesting is to see what happens now. The timing of Zaraa's apparent separation from her mother is interesting, occurring around the time of year when we believe snow leopards begin breeding. This makes us speculate whether one or both of the females may have come into oestrus and led to the separation. Zaraa has moved to the eastern edge of the Tost Mountains, and although she did return from there, she is still some distance from her mother. We hope to learn about her movement patterns in the coming weeks and are interested to see where she sets up her home range. It will also be interesting to follow whether she re-joins her mother sometimes. Tenger on the other hand has remained in the southern lobe of her usual home range. From her last location she seems to be dwelling in the Southern Badlands. One interesting thing is that Aztai has been seen very close to both Tenger and Zaraa. So it will be interesting to see if Aztai and Tsagaan's movements overlap with these females.

Setting a wider course – Khashaa expands her movements:

We have been observing one beautiful young female that we call Khashaa. Khashaa has been interesting because she has stayed within a very tight little home range of only 40sq. km.

This is very small compared to the home ranges of the other snow leopards, which can cover several hundred to more than a thousand square kilometres. We have been wondering what has kept her in such a relatively small area. Khashaa expanded her movements for the first time, roaming out of her usual 40 sq km range when she went on a quick expedition to the Southern Badlands before returning to the area that has been her range for the months that we have been able to track and observe her.

All in all, a very active week as far as snow leopard interactions is concerned.

Best wishes,

Jen, Koustubh and the SLT team

