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For Immediate Release

## **ELUSIVE SNOW LEOPARDS CAUGHT ON CAMERA**

*Survey indicates that Zorkul nature reserve could be a key area for snow leopard conservation*



When scientists decided to carry out a biodiversity survey in a remote nature reserve in Tajikistan, they didn't expect to find a snow leopard hotspot.

The Zorkul nature reserve is a wild, inhospitable landscape located close to the Afghan border in Tajikistan. The most recent research conducted revealed the importance of Lake Zorkul and its wetlands for migrating birds, however what life could be found in the surrounding mountains remained largely

unknown.

To address this, Fauna & Flora International (FFI) assembled a team of local and international scientists to complete the first detailed biodiversity survey of the reserve, with the aim of establishing a baseline for future conservation work.

The team also hoped to learn more about one of the world's rarest cats: the snow leopard.

### **A rare glimpse into snow leopard family life**

The snow leopard lives in the remote mountainous regions of central Asia. Protected by thick, smoky-grey fur, capable of leaping thirty feet and taking prey three times its own weight, it is well adapted to the cold, harsh landscape.

The IUCN lists the snow leopard as Endangered, and numbers are thought to have declined by at least 20% in the last 16 years<sup>1</sup>, largely due to habitat loss and poaching.

Another threat to snow leopards is the fall in prey, caused by livestock damage to fragile mountain grasslands. As natural prey numbers fall, snow leopards are forced to feed on livestock as an alternative, and are killed in retribution.

The shy and elusive nature of snow leopards makes conserving the species even more problematic, as it is not easy to estimate population numbers, or to identify critical habitat areas for protection.

Techniques such as camera trapping (the placement of automatic, motion-detecting cameras) can therefore be a valuable conservation tool. Snow leopards can be identified individually by their unique spot pattern, and cameras are often placed in pairs to photograph both sides of these big cats.

With the support of [Panthera](#), the world's leading wild cat conservation organization, the Zorkul survey scientists placed 11 automatic cameras at seven locations high up in the Wakhan mountain range of Tajikistan where snow leopard signs had been found, in the hope of gaining some insight into snow leopard activity and behaviour in the region.



They were in luck. Over the survey period, the camera traps photographed five separate snow leopards living in one valley system, including a family with two cubs.

When the team returned to retrieve the cameras after three months, one camera was missing; when the images were uploaded the culprit was caught – the paired camera showed the cheeky cubs carrying it off.

The cameras also picked up many other high-mountain creatures, such as mountain Ibex, Marco Polo sheep (the world's largest wild sheep species), and a rare mountain weasel. The final survey also identified several new records of birds, mammals, plants, and rare insects.

### **What's all the fuss about?**

According to the survey's lead scientist, Dr David Mallon, "This is the first detailed biodiversity survey of the area, and it's very exciting to see so much diversity. But the highlight was confirming the presence of what seems to be a healthy population of breeding snow leopards."

So what do these results really mean for snow leopard conservation?

"Snow leopards have low population densities, which means that large areas need to be protected in order to conserve this species effectively," explains Dr Alex Diment from FFI. "This survey has revealed an unusually high number of snow leopards in the Wakhan Mountains, which indicates that this could be a key region for snow leopard conservation."

Panthera's [Snow Leopard Program](#) Executive Director, [Dr. Tom McCarthy](#), added that "Tajikistan's Pamir Mountains provide a critical corridor that links snow leopards living to the north and south of this region, and that helps to ensure the genetic diversity of the species. These survey results demonstrate that there is hope still for the Endangered snow leopard."

Fauna & Flora International has been working in Zorkul reserve since 2006, and aims to develop the skills of the Zorkul Reserve team to enable it to effectively manage the ecosystem, habitats and species for which it was designated to protect.

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**For more information or high-resolution images, please contact:**

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**About Fauna & Flora International (FFI) ([www.fauna-flora.org](http://www.fauna-flora.org))**

FFI protects threatened species and ecosystems worldwide, choosing solutions that are sustainable, based on sound science and take account of human needs. Operating in more than 40 countries worldwide – mainly in the developing world – FFI saves species from extinction and habitats from destruction, while improving the livelihoods of local people. Founded in 1903, FFI is the world's longest established international conservation body and a registered charity.

**About Panthera**

Panthera, founded in 2006, is the world's leading organization devoted exclusively to the conservation of wild cats and their ecosystems. Utilizing the expertise of the world's premier cat biologists, Panthera develops and implements global conservation strategies for the largest, most imperilled cats – tigers, lions, jaguars and snow leopards. Representing the most comprehensive effort of its kind, Panthera works in partnership with local and international NGOs, scientific institutions, local communities and governments. Panthera's Snow Leopard Program Executive Director, Dr. Tom McCarthy, oversees Panthera's snow leopard conservation initiatives in nine of the twelve countries where snow leopards remain. Visit <http://www.panthera.org/>

**Notes to editors:**

<sup>1</sup> Source: IUCN Red List (<http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/22732/0>)