

in**FOCUS**

# TOUGH AT THE TOP

How can anything survive up here? Yet **SNOW LEOPARDS** take the Himalayas in their stride, says Bjorn Persson.

Ice, snow and windswept rock is all I can see through the telescope. But my Ladakhi guide Stanzin Gurmet assures me that “the snow leopard is there”. I trust him, since he’s one of the best wildlife spotters in the Himalayas. At last, on a ridgeline a kilometre distant, I finally make out the elusive ghost of the mountains. Even at this range I see the cat’s thick fur being tousled by the biting wind 4,000m up. Superbly adapted to life in the highest, coldest, most rugged peaks on the planet, it seems content to continue its patrol.

We are trekking in Hemis National Park in Ladakh, one of India’s northernmost states, and our sighting is only possible thanks to the eagle eyes and sheer hard work of Stanzin and the rest of the expedition crew. For cats and people alike, existence on the roof of the world is tough. Very tough. At such high altitudes, the sunlight is intense, cold winds buffet you

from every direction and it’s difficult even to breathe because there’s so little oxygen. Sometimes, the temperature drops to  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

The snow leopard conquers its hostile environment by virtue of extra-long hair and a woolly undercoat, with a long tail that acts as a blanket to cover sensitive body parts against the mountain chill. An enlarged nasal cavity warms the air it breathes, while big lungs draw in as much oxygen as possible. Massive paws are a match for the slippery terrain.

Small wonder this elegant-but-evasive cat became an icon of BBC One’s *Planet Earth II* in 2016 and *Planet Earth* a decade earlier. Its extreme scarcity is a factor, too. Though the species has been – controversially – downlisted from Endangered to Vulnerable, it remains vanishingly rare. Maybe 4,000–8,000 survive.

● *Bjorn Persson is a wildlife photojournalist based in Sweden.*

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**BIG CATS**

DUE TO AIR JANUARY ON

one

Snow leopards are perfectly adapted to their mountain habitat. Their short forelimbs and long hind legs enable them to spring up to 9m – handy when hunting nimble ibex and blue sheep.