

Snowed In! Leopards arrive at Marwell Wildlife

The snow may have left us (for a few weeks at least!) but two new residents at Marwell Wildlife may not be as happy about that as the rest of us. Indeever and Irina, a pair of beautiful snow leopards have recently arrived at the zoological park as part of a European Breeding Programme for the species. Marwell has a very successful big cat track record and keepers have high hopes this new pair will form a strong bond to last for many years to come.

Snow leopards have thick smoky-grey fur which is patterned with dark grey markings, making them practically invisible as they blend perfectly in with the mountains of Central Asia. They can grow up to 50 inches but that's just their body - their thick furry tails can be just as long again! The tail helps balance the cats as they hunt prey along rocky slopes, and wrapped around the face it is a perfect buffer against the bitter cold.

The last snow leopard cub born at the zoological park was during 2005 and was the seventeenth snow leopard from Marwell to join the European Breeding Programme. Carnivores Section Manager, Phil Hindmarsh added: "Both snow leopards have settled in well and Indeever in particular is quietly confident and likes to sit outside surveying his new territory. Our breeding programme for this species has been very successful and we very much hope that this new pair will raise cubs of their own during the next few years."

Researchers estimate that there are between 3,500 and 7,000 snow leopards left in the wild. However, no-one really knows for sure as they are very elusive creatures and live in very remote habitats, so tracking them is very difficult. Most researchers rely on evidence, such as scrapes in soil, scent marks and droppings to record their presence.

The snow leopards range covers 12 countries, including China, Afghanistan and Nepal, across the mountains of Central Asia. An individual snow leopard range inhabits a defined area which can overlap several of these international borders. This can give them some protection as these sensitive areas are often closed to public access, although it can also add to the difficulty of studying them.

The main threat to their survival comes from human activities: they are hunted for their beautiful pelts which are made into coats, their bones are in demand for traditional Asian medicine, and live cats are also captured for the illegal trade market. As people move into their territory with livestock, they are also increasingly suffering from loss of habitat and decline in available prey.

An adult snow leopard can weigh between 60-120 lb (27-55kg), which is about seven times the weight of a housecat, and one-seventh the weight of a tiger. They hunt a variety of wildlife, including blue sheep known as bharal in the Himalayas, ibex (a wild goat) and wild argali sheep in the Altai Mountains. They will also take small prey like marmots, hares and birds. They are also opportunistic hunters and will attack livestock, which can cause herders to retaliate by trapping, poisoning or shooting them.