

# BOISDALE

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Most people believe that the government is bogged down in Brexit. On the whole, that's my view too. So I was agreeably surprised this summer to receive an invitation to attend October's Illegal Wildlife Trade Conference (IWT) in London.

Organised by the government, the event is aimed at toughening international rules against illegal poaching and trade in endangered or threatened species, as well as to promote national and international action to conserve those species.

And it's not just the charismatic mega-fauna I'm talking about, such as elephants. Take the snow leopard, for example. Globally, the total population could be as low as 4,000 individuals. The snow leopard range is about 1.8 million km<sup>2</sup>, with the largest share being in the Tibetan plateau of China, followed by Mongolia and India.

China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Central Asia could pose a major threat, so can anything be done to prevent the snow leopard slipping over the edge towards extinction?

I pinged off an email saying I'd be happy to attend, but meanwhile I was heading for the Himalayas to gain some practical insights.

That afternoon, after a long flight, I landed in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. An hour later, I was talking to Tolkunbek Asykulov, director of NABU's Kyrgyzstan office (NABU is a German nature conservation NGO). According to Asykulov, the biggest problem used to be the

poaching of snow leopards, but the raising of fines for illegally killing them has led to positive results. However, things were more complicated than that. Challenges now include excessive grazing in the high-altitude pastures, and possible conflict between wildlife and local herdsmen. "But the biggest problem," he added, "is the poaching of the snow leopards' prey; particularly the ibex and the argali [mountain sheep]."

Early the next day, I met the team of conservation volunteers, who had been organised by Biosphere Expeditions, and we headed off in a convoy to the Kyrgyz Ala-Too, a range of mountains in the northern Tien Shan – an eight-hour drive away.

We each had a one-man tent, and met for meals in a traditional yurt, which also served as the focal point for the scientific work. We were taught how to use the GPS equipment, and how to record sightings, working across a grid pattern of 2km cells.

And so we set off, walking up side valleys in the designated research area, sometimes in bright sunshine, at other times battling through rain, hail or snow. When we reached the 'observation point',



## Conservation

# RARE BEASTS

The snow leopard is at risk of becoming extinct – and high up in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan, the fight is on to save it



**STANLEY JOHNSON**

Environmentalist,  
author and  
former jungle  
resident

we whipped out our binoculars to scour the landscape.

At the end of the first week, we had covered 34 cells, some of them multiple times. Of these, 23 had snow leopard prey species living in them, including ibex, argali, marmot and snowcock. We also collected records for three bird and two butterfly species that were completely new to the area.

Most importantly, we collected two distinct records of snow leopard. The first was the dead body of a cub that we heard about from a shepherd. Up near a glacier, meanwhile, we came across two sets of prints, likely belonging to a mother snow leopard and her cub. This suggested not only a strong indication of snow leopard presence – but also the likelihood of a breeding population.

This was great news. And it got better. Soon after I returned to the UK, I learned that a camera trap we had set up showed a snow leopard in the field of vision – an amazing reward for NABU/Biosphere Expeditions five years' of effort.

Kyrgyzstan is now leading an international effort to save the snow leopard, and I'm hoping it will send representatives to the IWT conference to tell their story. For there are indeed – or so it seems – snow leopards to be found in these high mountains.

Those animals will need to be protected through initiatives, which fully involve local herdsmen and which, if necessary, transcend national frontiers. And for that to happen, IWT needs international support and encouragement.

*Biosphere Expeditions is a non-profit wildlife conservation organisation. For information, visit [biosphere-expeditions.org](http://biosphere-expeditions.org)*