

Stalking the Spotted Panther

Yury B. SHIBNEV

Pictorial Album





In the not too distant future, if no efficient measures for saving the Amur leopard are undertaken, it is not improbable that we may never chance to see the animal any more.

It is inconceivable that one day I will not see on the new-fallen snow footprints of the roundish paws of the Amur panther, perhaps the most beautiful and graceful member of the cat family ...

STALKING
THE LEOPARD WITH
CAMERA TRAPS
/98

STILL NOT LATE
TO SAVE IT
/101

STALKING
THE LEOPARD WITH
CAMERA TRAPS

Yury Shibnev,
photographer & author:

I have lived in the leopard's domains in the wildlife sanctuary Cedar Creek Valley for twenty seven years. At first I mainly studied the life of the birds. But when I got carried away by wildlife photography and by keen desire to capture on film this cunning predator in the wild, after the failure of my predecessors to accomplish this, gradually I have been filled with natural curiosity about this

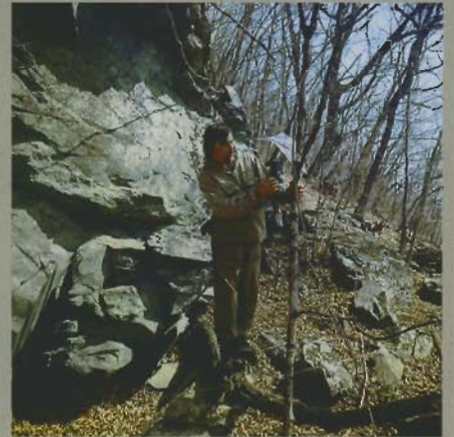
much about the leopard, including its preying habits, places of rest, its mating behavior, and many other aspects of its life in the wild.

I followed hard on the heels of the leopard, but for a long time it managed to stay invisible to me. It has nearly always noticed me first and in time retreated to the hills to hide amid the rocks. I have managed to see the leopard on 11 occasions only, that is, once per every two years. I failed to take photographs by approaching the animal close enough. Now my camera went wrong because of heavy frost, now the leopard showed up when I had failed to take my camera along with me, now the dusk, bushes, or trees rendered photography impracticable. Most of my encounters with the animal were unforeseen. I have spent many sleepless nights designing a special attachment to my



In the wild the leopard never reaches an old age and in our mind it is always agile, cunning, and strong

beautiful, cunning animal. In winter, when snow would fall, I headed for the taiga forest to stalk the leopard. I tried to study its habits by its tracks. In this way I have learned



Lyubitel («amateur») camera, the simplest and cheapest one on sale, to make it fixable on trails, near lures, or in the leopard's places of rest; I also tried to make the camera self-releasing, that is, turn it into a camera trap with the help of which the leopard would take a picture of itself.

The self-releasing mechanism of the camera trap is simple enough - a release lever is fastened to the shutter release button, the film advance lever is pulled and fixed with a fork-like clip; from the clip through wire rings



passes a fishing line up to the place where the leopard is to show up. The leopard trips over the line, the shutter is released and thus the leopard makes a picture of itself

It is easy enough to say ... There have sprung up quite a few minor problems: it was virtually impossible to guess in advance at what time of the day or night the leopard will pass by; I had to set the exposure for daylight photography; unfortunately, at dusk or at night close-ups turned out to be no good. It also explains why I was so happy when at least two close-ups out of 12 turned out to be passable. I was very glad every time I got a tip-top close-up. Nearly every day I was actually running 15 to 20 kilometers along

springs, hillsides, and mountain ridges to pull the camera's lever after the leopard had tripped over the fishing line. I was taking pictures mainly from mid-fall to mid-spring when the weather in the sanctuary is rather dry. The fact is that in summer drizzle and rain caused moisture to get inside the camera, despite all my efforts to render it dampproof by applying waterproof adhesive plaster - the film used to turn green with mold. Naturally the camera photographed deer, wild boars, and other animals, even bears. And these unexpected close-ups made me very happy. On several occasions my camera was thrown down by the tiger -



Leopards as well as tigers have a special liking for Japanese deer as food. Stalking slowly and silently forward, the leopard approaches to within 15 to 20 meters of its unsuspecting prey. Then suddenly it bounds forward with great speed. In case the deer sensed the danger and started running, neither leopard nor tiger can catch up with it ...



I can narrate my adventures with camera traps, which began in 1985, virtually endlessly. But as the English saying goes: Seeing is believing. Let the nature-lovers judge my pictures for themselves.

Once I was told that a stray dog had been stricken by a locomotive; I decided to try to feed the leopard on the dog carcass. It was already springtime and the dog's body began to slightly decompose. But my eagerness to photograph the leopard near the lure got the better of it. I carried the carcass in my backpack for about four kilometers. In the wildlife sanctuary roe and other deer



Deer, the wild boar, and the leopard walk along wood trails, sometimes passing through bush thickets and wind-fallen trees ...

it used to come up to it and, mischievously, would strike the camera with its paw; then it would lie down beside it watching.

Each time the picture was different - now the leopard approaches the lure, now it sharpens its claws, now it passes by in the belly-deep snow. The more successful pictures I got, the more interested in wildlife photography I became. In due course, my first accounts began to appear in the world's most prestigious magazines. Nobody believed that such excellent pictures could be taken with the primitive, children's *Lyubitel* camera.

had become scarce through too frequent cases of poaching and I hoped that leopards will not refuse to taste my boon, however high it might be.

I put the dog carcass under the cliff where leopards liked to take a rest, placed camera traps all over the place, and ran there every day to check my lure. And my efforts were not made in vain - on the third day a male leopard showed up and, for all that, tasted my present. One close-up turned out to be good enough: there the leopard is pulling the carcass to a more convenient place to eat at. In this way I came to photographing leopards near lures.

For lures I began to use fallen deer from game parks as well as stray dogs shot there. I used to tie the lure to a tree trunk or a wind-fallen tree to prevent the leopard from carrying it away





The tiger is not a rare visitor in leopard's domains: sometimes their habitats overlap. The tiger, being a larger animal, has larger domains which may overlap the habitats of several leopards. The conflicts between these two members of the cat family mainly arise out of their special liking for deer as food. The tiger may easily overpower the leopard, as the latter does with the wild cat. In such a fight the leopard's only chance of escape may be the nearest tree or a small cave inaccessible for the tiger



The leopard and the Asiatic black bear live side by side and may easily encounter one another on a taiga forest trail. Both these beasts are agile climbers, but they are not rivals because the bear prefers fruit, nuts, and fish. The more alert leopard is certain to make way for its large, powerful, and shaggy fellow creature



Male and female leopards mark their territory to show their rivals that it is already occupied. They leave scratches with odorous urine marks along the trails and mountain ridges. They urinate on the rocks and outstanding trees, rub against them with their napes, and sharpen their claws against tree trunks

too soon; what is more, opposite the lure in the tree I have erected a platform, put up a camouflage tent on it, and lived there for several days in a row waiting for the predators to show up. But the leopard is mainly nocturnal in habit, that is why these big cats showed up at dusk and stayed for the night there. Such a timetable was rather inconvenient for me. Usually, I came there in the small hours and returned at dusk. But the leopards made me spend several nights in the tree: it turned out that at dusk they are fearless of human beings.

Once at dusk a female leopard with its young showed up at the place, but it was too dark to take pictures and that is why I tried to scare them off the lure and only after that to return home. I crawled out of the tent and began shouting and waving them away. But the pan-



thers only stepped back a little and stared at me, obviously taking me for a crackpot. So I had nothing to do but stay side by side with the predators overnight, and, you know, in February it is still 15 to 20°C below zero. It was helpful that, to be on the safe side, I always keep my sleeping bag there. The leopards spent the night crackling the lure carcass's bones, sauntering under my tree, and even rummaging in the bags I had brought them the lure carcass in. They had only to take two jumps up the tree to reach me and then ... I don't know what could have happened to me - I had with me only a small axe to fight for my life with ... When I woke up in the small hours of the next morning I was very glad to find



myself safe and sound. The leopards were still there, near the carcass and I resumed taking pictures.

In 1993 I spent 25 days and 3 nights in the tree tent (from January 25 to February 20). During that period leopards showed up 12 times - females: 5 times, females with cubs: 4, and males: 3. I made quite a few high-quality close-ups, gained vivid impressions, and gazed to my heart's content at the beautiful, graceful big cats. I will never forget a visit by a male leopard when I, having developed a high temperature and, consequently, being very thirsty, had to keep to the tree tent for 24 hours in a row. All my efforts to scare it away failed: I hurled stones aiming at the place in front of it and, driven to desperation, I even threw a glass jar with my soup at it (which got broken right in



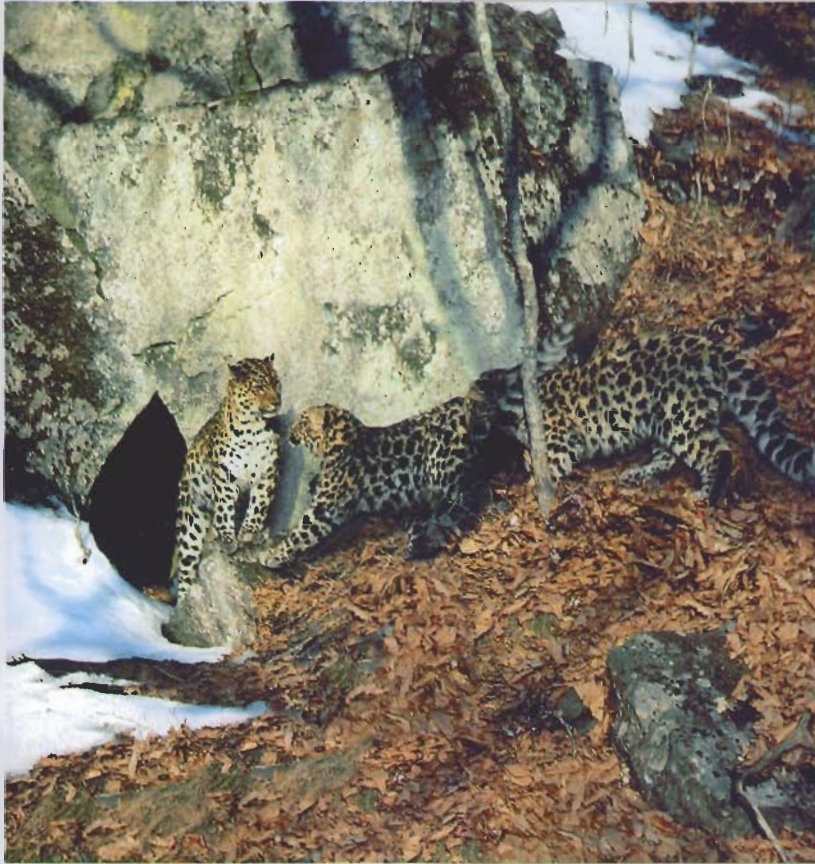
front of its paws), but it would only step back a little and shoot such nasty looks at me that I felt myself to be a sure prey for it.

In 1994 I spent in the tree tent 11 days and



3 nights. At that time I was working closely with U.S. wildlife biologists trying to introduce a radio tracking system for boosting the study of the leopards. We would catch leopards, take all possible analyses, put on radio collars, mark leopards' ears with red paint and then release them. The radio collars allowed us to track leopards' movements. The winter was extremely cold, there was lack of prey and female leopard nicknamed «Svetlana» and its cub *Malysh* («toddler») stayed near the lure. During those 11 days, the female came to the lure twice alone and five times with its cub ...

STILL NOT LATE TO SAVE IT



In Amur leopard's habitat lives the golden eagle, one of the largest and most powerful birds of prey in the world. It is a leopard's rival, partly because it preys upon comparatively big game, that is, hares, pheasants, and sometimes even foxes or roe deer fawns. It may also feed upon the remnants of leopard's prey

101



... The Amur leopard is threatened with extinction ... There are only 50 to 60 Amur leopards living in the wild and any procrastination with the introduction of measures to save this beautiful big cat may in the nearest future result in its disappearance. It remains only to be amazed at the fact that still there have not been undertaken emergency measures to save this rare, graceful member of the cat family included on the Red List of Threatened Animals (Category I) of both the IUCN and Russia.

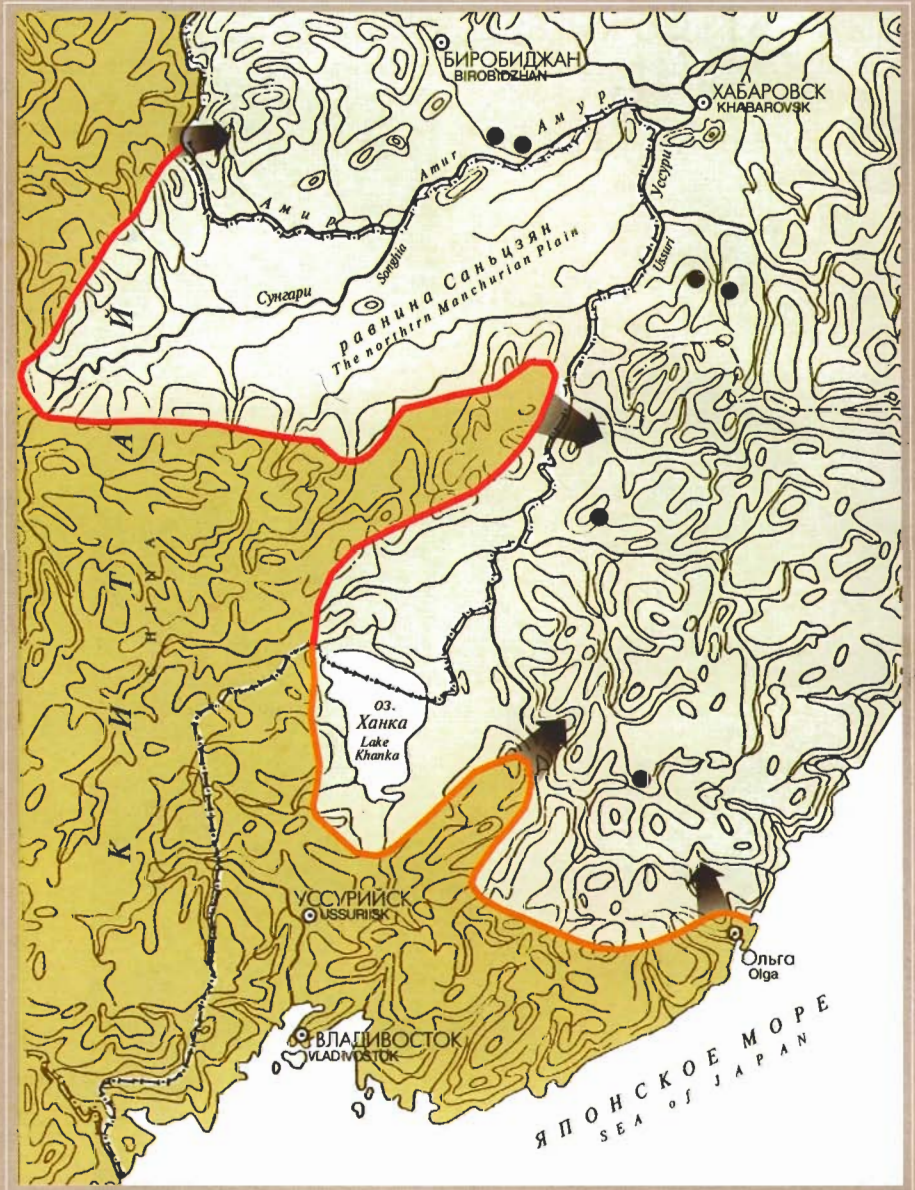
Quite recently - in the mid-20th century - on the territory of the wildlife sanctuary Cedar Creek Valley lived the goral and the wild red dog ... It is a marvel that the Amur leopard, due to its inherent alertness, still lives there, despite such a relentless intrusion into its habitat by man and under such severe, unfavorable conditions ...

In the wildlife sanctuary Cedar Creek Valley only one or two female leopards produce cubs and only one male leopard constantly lives there. Practically all the young leopards grown in the sanctuary, having

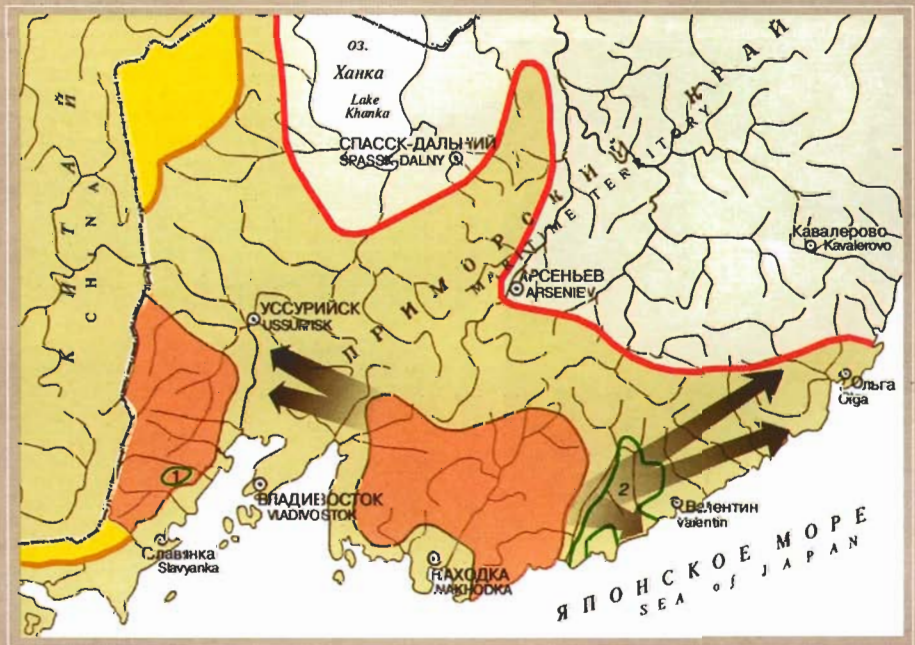


The former habitat of the Amur leopard

The Amur leopard (*Panthera pardus orientalis* Schlegel) is a rare, endangered subspecies. Its habitat, which earlier covered Northeast China, Korean Peninsula, and the southern part of the Maritime Territory, Russia, has shrunk to now to a critically small area. There are two dozen Amur leopards in China. According to the data of wildlife biologists, there are no Amur leopards in Korea; in the Maritime Territory, Russia, they live only in its southwestern part. There are 25 to 30 leopards there, with some of their habitats extending into the territory of China. In the early 20th century, the leopard was frequently spotted by local people on the spurs of the Sikhote-Alin mountain complex and to the Southwest of Lake Khanka, but with the passage of years wildlife biologists failed to spot the leopard there any longer.



The habitat of the Amur leopard in the southern part of the Maritime Territory, Russia, in the early 1970s



The habitat maps have been drawn on the basis of data furnished by D.G. Pikunov

Legend

- Former habitat boundaries in the Maritime Territory
- Tentative former leopard's habitat boundaries in Manchuria
- Former constant migration routes
- Places where leopards have been spotted

- Former habitat boundaries
- Boundaries of temporary migration areas in the Northwest (1972-1973)
- Constant habitat boundaries in the Sikhote-Alin and southeastern areas
- Temporary habitat boundaries in southwestern area Cedar Creek Valley (1) and Lazo (2) wildlife sanctuaries
- Arrows indicate possible migrations



Unfortunately, there are still no sponsors to fund the program.

In 1992 to 1998 there were shot, with my participation, two videos about the Amur leopard for NHK (Japan) and for a TV station from South Korea. The videos were shot from three tree tents put up near lures and with the help of sensor-based cameras installed on trails and in leopards' places of rest.

We hope that there are people who are not indifferent to the fate of the Amur leopard. Let us save this graceful big cat from extinction!

Unfortunately, it is impossible to narrate everything about the Amur leopard in detail

left its territory, are killed by poachers. Young leopards are extremely vulnerable - even a small dog may drive a young panther up the tree and it is unlikely that the poacher would miss the opportunity ...

Wildlife biologists D. Pikunov, V. Korkishko, and V. Yudin have worked out measures to protect and restore the population of the Amur leopard in the Maritime Territory, Russia. The measures are as follows:

- Put a stop to any economic activity in the leopards' habitats; reforestation measures are to be carried out in the forest lands suitable for the leopard to live in;
- Breed the leopard in semi-wild sanctuaries and release the young to the leopards' habitats to renew the gene pool;



ries to be later included into the branch of the wildlife sanctuary Cedar Creek Valley;

- Prevent forest fires that decrease the panthers' habitats and result in the destruction of their prey;

- Restore the populations of deer, for which the leopard has a special liking as food, especially those of roe and Japanese deer; introduce new herds of deer in the forest lands suitable for leopards' habitats by way of releasing deer from the game parks;

- Set up a large wildlife sanctuary on the basis of the best-preserved natural complexes on the territory between the Kedrovka River that flows in the Razdolnaya River in the north and the Narva River in the south where the leopard still lives naturally in the wild;



- Restore the leopard's population in the southern part of the Sikhote-Alin mountain complex by way of releasing leopards caught in the wild as well as those grown in the wildlife sanctuary;

- Set up sanctuaries in the forest lands most suitable for leopards' habitats, specifically on the Ananyevka River and its adjoining territo-

- Carry out an anti-poaching program, that is, set up special groups of wildlife guards equipped with all-terrain vehicles, radio communications equipment, etc.

in the format of a pictorial album - how it hunts roe and Japanese deer; about its mating behavior; about the role of female and male parents in raising the young ... I have brought into the discussion only some of the panther's predicaments and problems that are critical for its survival.

If this pictorial album will attract the attention of the general readership and the public at large to consolidate the efforts for the preservation of this rare predator, then we will prepare for publication an edition of a larger book on the Amur leopard.