

CAT news

N° 86 | Summer 2026



 SPECIES SURVIVAL COMMISSION
CAT SPECIALIST GROUP



CATnews is the newsletter of the IUCN SSC Cat Specialist Group, a component of the Species Survival Commission SSC of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It is published three times a year, in spring, summer, and late autumn. It features original articles and short communications relevant to the conservation of the free living wild cats, including news on the IUCN Red List and Green Status of Species assessments, important ex situ conservation breeding programmes, and from Species Working Groups affiliated with the Cat SG.

The publication of CATnews is made possible through the support of the **Fondation Hans Wilsdorf** and the Friends of the Cat Group. CATnews can be subscribed to by joining the [Friends of the Cat Group](#). It is shipped to all Members and Friends of the Cat Group three times a year.

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Design: Barbara Surber, werk'sdesign gmbh
Layout: Laila Bahaa-el-din and Christine Breitenmoser
Print: Stämpfli AG, Bern, Switzerland
ISSN 1027-2992 © IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group

September 2026

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Editor: Laila Bahaa-el-din
IUCN SSC Cat Specialist Group
KORA, Talgut-Zentrum 5, 3063 Ittigen
Switzerland
<l.bahaa-el-din@kora.ch>

Editorial board: Christine Breitenmoser-Würsten
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Cover Photo: Adult male black-footed cat on
Benfontein Nature Reserve,
Northern Cape Province, close to
Kimberley, South Africa
Photo: Alexander Sliwa

UMESH PAUDEL^{1*}, PRAKRITI CHATAUT¹, RABIN KADARIYA¹, RAJAN PRASAD PAUDEL¹ AND RABIN BAHADUR K.C.¹

First rescue and translocation record of a snow leopard in Upper Mustang, Nepal

This is the first documentation of the rescue, translocation, and post-release monitoring in the wild of a snow leopard *Panthera uncia* in Nepal. On 20 February 2025, a snow leopard that was trapped in a corral house (killing 13 Himalayan goats) in Samar, Upper Mustang, was safely captured without any sedation and translocated 62 km north (25.4 km aerial distance) to Thurlungphant, where it was hand released. The rescue and release locations were monitored using 24 camera traps over 34 trap nights. While two snow leopards were detected near the rescue site, none were detected at the release site. Additionally, locals reported that the captured snow leopard returned, but due to a lack of clear photograph, we were unable to verify it as the same individual. No livestock depredation was reported in the release area or in the capture site following the event. This study highlights the challenges of large carnivore translocation, the need for standardised protocols, and the importance of post-release monitoring to evaluate conservation outcomes.

Translocation is a widely used conservation and wildlife management intervention which involves transferring animals from one location to another with the aim of species reintroduction, population supplementation, ecosystem restoration and mitigation of human-wildlife conflicts HWC (Fischer & Lindenmayer 2000, Treves & Karanth 2003). In Nepal, wildlife translocation has primarily been undertaken for species restoration (e.g. blackbuck *Antelope cervicapra* and gharial *Gavialis gangeticus*), reintroduction in native habitats (e.g. one-horned rhinoceros *Rhinoceros unicornis*) and HWC management (e.g. Bengal tiger *Panthera tigris*) (Aryal & Aryal 2023, Kadariya et al. 2025, NTNC 2025).

The globally threatened snow leopard is an elusive apex predator with a distribution spanning 1.2 to 1.6 million km² across the Central Asian mountains (McCarthy et al. 2017), of which Nepal's Himalayas comprise approximately 1.6% of the range and support 7 to 8% of the global population (DNPWC & DoFSC 2025). Globally classified as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ (McCarthy et al. 2017) and nationally classified as Endangered in Nepal (Jnawali et al. 2011), the species is a major driver of HWC due to livestock depredation, accounting for 11.1% of livestock losses in western Nepal (Devkota et al. 2013), 48% in Kanchenjunga Conservation Area and 19% in Annapurna Conservation Area (Ale et al. 2014). In Upper Mustang alone, 49 of 84 registered livestock depredation cases between 2020

and 2025 were attributed to snow leopards, resulting in approximately 400 livestock mortalities, primarily horses, mountain goats and sheep (NTNC-ACAP 2025a). Although snow leopards have been rescued, sometimes from unusually low elevations in Nepal, such incidents have either resulted in captivity, or they lacked systematic post-release monitoring (Chetri et al. 2024). Here, we present the first documented case of a snow leopard in Nepal that was rescued and released back into the wild, accompanied by post-release monitoring to assess its short-term response and implications for conservation practices.

The study area, Upper Mustang, lies in the northern part of the Mustang district within Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) at approximately 29°04'60.00"N / 83°54'59.99"E (Fig. 1), where snow leopards, humans and domestic livestock have long coexisted (Aryal et al. 2014). The area can be characterised as a cold desert, desiccated by strong winds and intense solar radiation, dominated by rocks (51.1%) and pasturelands (29.85%) (NTNC-ACAP 2025b).

Rescue

On 20 February 2025, at approximately 22:00 h, a snow leopard entered a corral house through a damaged wire mesh roof, in Samar, Chhusang, Waragaun-Muktishetra rural municipality ward 4 of Upper Mustang (28°57'18.48"N / 83°48'37.07"E). The enclosure, ca. 2 m high with a tin and wire mesh covering, housed 337 Himalayan goats. Dur-

ing the incident, between 22:00 h and 00:00 h, 13 goats were killed by a snow leopard before the herder managed to free the remaining animals from the enclosure. Fearing the snow leopard might harm him and his family, the herder trapped it inside the enclosure.

The following morning, at around 11:00 h, a rescue team from the National Trust for Nature Conservation NTNC's Annapurna Conservation Area Project ACAP reached the location. The Rescue and handling of the snow leopard was conducted in accordance with the wildlife rescue and management guidelines issued by the Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation DNPWC, Nepal, which outlines standard operating procedures, ethical considerations and risk mitigation measures for the rescue and movement of wild animals (DNPWC 2025). The operation was led by trained wildlife technicians and a ranger from NTNC, authorised to respond to wildlife emergencies by the ACAP.

The rescue team conducted a rapid situational and risk assessment by consulting the residents and the herders regarding the circumstances of the incident, the duration of the entrapment and the snow leopard's behaviour. The team also conducted a visual assessment of the snow leopard's temperament, physical condition and reaction by creating mild noises. At the time of observation, the animal was resting in a corner of the now empty corral house, with no response to human presence outside and showed mild signs of aggressive behaviour to the noises. Based on these assessments as well as the lack of any chemically restraining equipment, the team decided that physical restraining methods would be best to minimise the handling stress and avoid risks associated with darting in a confined structure. A live trap cage was strategically positioned at the corral gate, reinforced with planks to ensure that the only exit led into the cage. After clearing the surroundings and ensuring that the team members were positioned in a safe location, noise was produced from the roof to stimulate movement, and the snow leopard was successfully guided into the trap. Due to the lack of suitable holding facilities, veterinary support or medical equipment, the team only examined the leopard for external injuries, reflexes, movement and responses to different stimuli. The snow leopard exhibited normal reflex responses and coordinated movement with no major injuries apart from a minor forehead scratch, likely incurred while attempting to escape (Fig. 2). As prolonged con-

finement in the absence of proper veterinary support and immobilisation equipment could increase the risk of capture-related stress, injury and capture myopathy (Arnemo et al. 2006), the team decided to go for an immediate hard release.

Release

Following the rescue, local community members, including livestock owners, were consulted to identify feasible management options for the rescued individual. In Upper Mustang, snow leopards account for a substantial proportion of livestock losses (NTNC-ACAP 2025a), contributing to negative community perceptions towards the species and its conservation. Although immediate release was considered, the locals strongly opposed it due to concerns over repeated livestock depredation. Given the history of conflict in the area, locals' perception and potential retaliatory harm to the animal, the rescue team, in coordination with the community representatives, concluded that translocation to a suitable release site, away from the settlement area, would be the most effective measure to reduce conflict while safeguarding the rescued snow leopard. The release site (29°9'25.73"N / 83°56'14.79"E; Fig. 1) was ca. 62 km by road (25.4 km aerial distance) from the rescue location, falls within the broad range of movement for the species. The primary objective of the translocation was to reduce immediate conflict risk and safety of the animal rather than a permanent displacement beyond its potential home range. Snow leopards exhibit highly variable home ranges, spanning from 11 km² to several hundred square kilometres, and have the capacity for long distance movements across rugged Himalayan landscapes (Johansson et al. 2016, McCarthy et al. 2017). While return movement towards the capture area was biologically plausible given the homing behaviour seen in wide ranging carnivores, we assumed that the animal would avoid going back to the rescue site due to the impact of the entrapment incident.

The habitat suitability studies for snow leopard in Upper Mustang, field assessment and local knowledge were referenced when selecting the release site. Based on Budha et al. (2025), the release site falls within moderately to highly suitable habitat in the ACA. Field observations confirmed rugged mountainous terrain and arid alpine steppe, with elevation ranging above 3,500 m and slopes 10–79 degrees. These geographical charac-

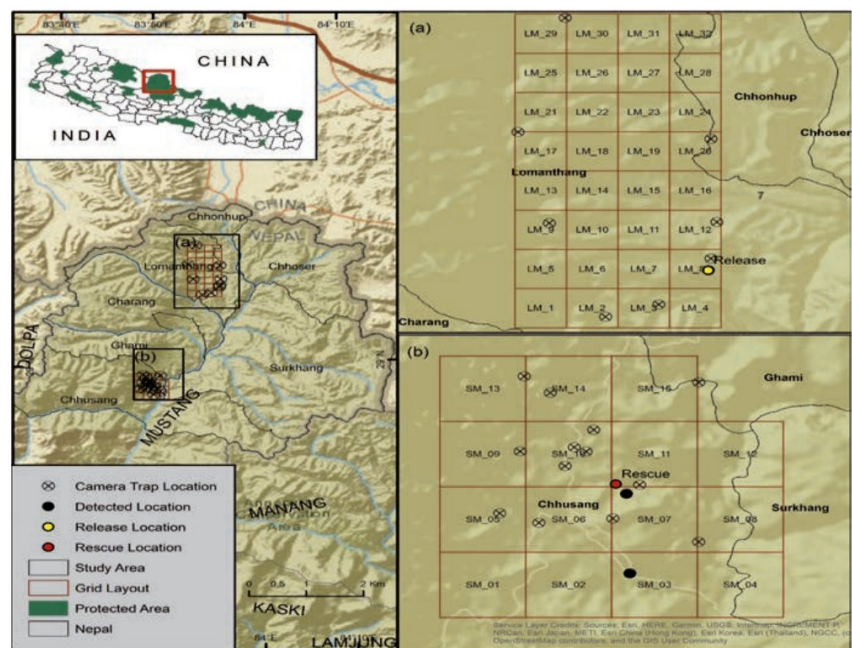


Fig. 1. Map showing rescue and release locations of the snow leopard in the Upper Mustang region of Nepal.

teristics are consistent with the reported species' habitat preferences by several studies (Jackson 1996, Fox & Chundawat 2016). Presence of wild prey species such as blue Sheep *Pseudois nayaur* and marmot *Marmota himalayana* in the proposed release location, as well as absence of any other snow leopard individual or large carnivore in the release site, was ensured through the reports of local herders and ACAP field staff who regularly monitor ACA.

To assess post-release response and adaptation of the snow leopard, 24 camera traps (Bushnell, Cuddeback, and Panthera models) were deployed for 34 effective trap nights: 15 around the rescue site (systematic 1.5 km x 1.5 km grid) and 9 around the release site (strategically positioned to detect movement away from the release point). During post-release monitoring, three snow leopards were recorded near the rescue site, including two photographed together, whereas no snow leopards were detected at the release location. Due to lack of clear photographs of the snow leopard, we were unable to identify the captured snow leopard in camera traps. However, local herders reported sightings of a snow leopard with a forehead scar in the rescue site within seven days of release, suggesting possible homing behaviour. Moreover, no livestock depredation was reported from Lomanthang rural municipality, ward 5, during the two months following release. On 19 April 2025, a single incident

involving the killing of a horse by a snow leopard was recorded, after which no further depredation cases were reported (NTNC-ACAP 2025a). This pattern may indicate several possibilities, including temporary behavioural disorientation of the released individual or predation by a different snow leopard while the translocated individual returned to its original site. The possible return to the capture area would disprove our assumption that the individual would avoid going near settlement areas or the previously entrapped area, as it suffered from stress during the entrapment experience. This phenomenon also reflects the inherent limitations of short distance translocation for a wide-ranging carnivore.

There are various management strategies that are used to control problematic wildlife, such as translocation, euthanasia, culling, or hunting (Miller et al. 2014). The Nepal government addresses such issues of conflicts by capturing the problem animal and keeping them in captivity without resorting to killing (Gurung et al. 2008, Chetri et al. 2024). Translocation of problem animals carries significant risks including low survival rates, extreme dispersal, homing behaviour and potential disease spread (Massei et al. 2010, Stuparyk et al. 2018). Despite these challenges, translocation can be necessary in critical scenarios such as conservation efforts for endangered species, ecological management and to mitigate HWC (Chipman et al. 2008).



Fig. 2. Picture of the snow leopard after the successful rescue from the coral house (Photo Umesh Paudel).

Harbouring 1.3% of the world's biodiversity in only 0.1% of the earth's land area, Nepal's highly integrated socio-economy and environment leaves limited scope for using translocation as a conflict mitigation measure (MoFSC 2014). Moreover, as the effectiveness of this approach for large carnivores remains poorly understood, we don't recommend translocation in the wild in all conflict situations. Relocating problem individuals could also create intra- and inter-specific competition with resident individuals (Smith 1993, Harihar et al. 2011). Instead, we emphasise the need for establishment of well-trained Rapid Response Teams supported by equipped stations across conservation areas for timely and professional responses to future emergencies. Additionally, further research on identification of sustainable and specific human-wildlife conflict mitigation measures is necessary to ensure coexistence between communities and wildlife.

This case highlights the challenges of carnivore rescue and urgent need for standardised translocation protocols. While hard release was necessitated by field constraints, future efforts should integrate veterinary checks, radio telemetry, and long-term monitoring to better evaluate adaptation, survival, and the effectiveness of translocation as a conflict mitigation tool.

Author contributions

Study design: UP, RK, RBKC; fieldwork: UP, PC; data analysis: UP, PC, RBKC; original writing: UP, PC, RPP, RBKC; revision: all authors.

Acknowledgements

We thank the National Trust for Nature Conservation - Annapurna Conservation Area Project (NTNC-ACAP) team in Upper Mustang for their swift response and dedication during the rescue and translocation operation. We are grateful to Mr. Madan Poudel, ranger at NTNC-ACAP, unit conservation office, Lomanthang, for his active role in the snow leopard rescue and rewilding as a part of the NTNC-ACAP rescue team. We also thank the local communities of Samar and Thurlunghant for their cooperation and support throughout the process. We also acknowledge Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP), for granting access to the data. Special thanks are due to the field assistant, local herders, and camera trap technicians for their invaluable contributions to monitoring efforts.

Ethical standards

This study was conducted in strict accordance with the permission granted from Annapurna Conservation Area Project. The rescue, handling and subsequent translocation of the snow leopard were performed following wildlife rescue and management guidelines issued by Department of National Parks and Wildlife Conservation (DNPWC), Nepal.

Data availability

Data that support this study are available from the corresponding author, UP, upon reasonable request.

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¹ National Trust for Nature Conservation, Lalitpur, Nepal
*umeshlogy@gmail.com>