



Risky business

By Roger Beaumont

The clouded leopard is close to extinction as it struggles to survive in our dwindling forests. Finally, some help has arrived

If you think clouded leopards are hard to find in their native habitat of Thailand, and trust me they are, then trying to find the place where they are being bred in captivity can be just as challenging.

The location is Khao Kheow Open Zoo in Chon Buri, a huge sylvan sprawl dotted with Fred Flintstone-style enclosures nestled in the jungled hillside from which hoots, honks and squawks puncture the humid air. Bambi things frolic, giraffes nibble, penguins splash and snakes slither behind glass.

On a previous visit, a friend said that most zoo workers had never heard of the breeding centre, and those who had, had no idea where it was, pointing vaguely to the hills. Indeed, when I asked several Thai colleagues at work if they knew anything about the clouded leopard, seven had never heard of it, five thought it was only found in Laos, three thought it was extinct, and one guy in my soi asked where he could buy one.

Some facts - there aren't many, and that's a problem. What we do know is



that the clouded leopard is charismatic and the least understood of Asia's many cat species. They are most closely related to the snow leopard. They are supremely agile. They can weigh up to 27 kilograms, have huge paws, sabre teeth, large feline orbs rather than cat's eyes, and an amazingly long swishing tail. Imagine one lying across your bed. Beautiful. Just don't disturb it.

They are also nocturnal, elusive and highly vulnerable. Only six clouded leopards in Thailand have ever been radio-collared, and no systematic survey has ever been attempted to determine how many remain in the wild, although a project is now under way at Khao Yai National Park. Their natural habitat has fallen to the rapacious chain saw in just 20 years. While some are killed for their meat and skin (some 30 pelts were seen at one market), others are trapped and sold as pets.

However, help has arrived thanks to the Smithsonian's National Zoological Park, which has collaborated with the Thailand Zoological Park Organisation, Nashville Zoo and the Clouded Leopard Species Survival Plan to initiate the Thailand Clouded Leopard Consortium, a breeding programme at the Khao Kheow open zoo. Phew!

And suddenly, round a twisting track up the hill, is the breeding centre. No sign. No guide. No noise. The first leopard I see slinks sexily along the fence line rubbing his cheek along the mesh. "Now that's what

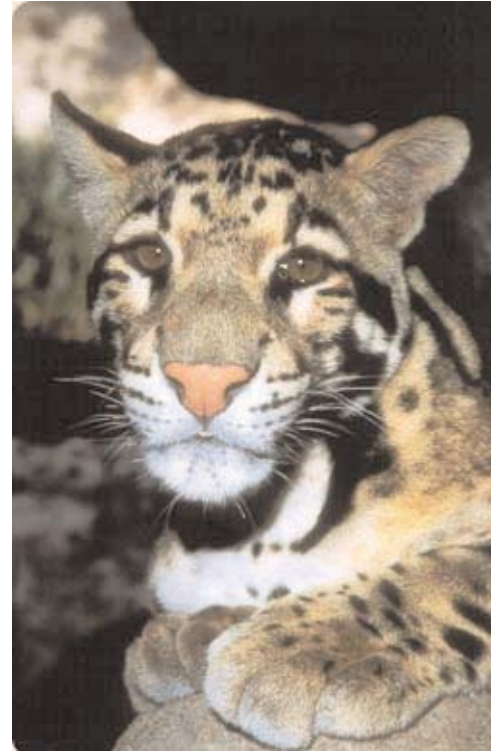
I call a catwalk," purred my partner.

They emit a low, moaning roar, a soft "chuffle", a growl, a hiss and meows as part of their calls. The growl may not be imperious enough

for a lion, but forceful enough to remind you that half your face could be missing if you were to try anything stupid.

A pick-up arrives, and out steps the project leader, Rick Passaro.

"Ah, Dr Passaro I presume," I say, almost saluting.



"Indeed," he says with a chuckle, "you're only the second visitors I've had in two years."

And that's just how he likes it. For these leopards are not on show. They are here to breed. In private. In peace. And that's another problem.

Why?

"Because the males are so aggressive," explains the affable Passaro, as he gives us a tour of the centre.

What do they eat?

"Birds, monkeys, small mammals, whatever happens to be passing."

Passaro now has 20 clouded leopards under his care. To prove his point about the breeding difficulties, he shows us a rather

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