

The photographer knelt behind a waist-high, snow-topped boulder, careful not to make a sound. As if in slow motion, she adjusted the settings on her old-fashioned film camera, which was still her favorite after 20 years of taking wildlife photos in every habitat on Earth. The boulder's cold, hard, jagged skin sent its freezing touch through her gray parka, making her want to shiver. But she didn't shiver. She waited, releasing her breath slowly, through pursed lips, so as not to give away her presence with a cloud of white vapor.

Then the snow leopard appeared, pale brownish-gray with black spots and almost colorless gray eyes, blending near-invisibly into the mountainside as it slinked downward between rocks and over rocks, swift and sure as a stream of water. Before she could stop herself, the photographer let out a sigh of wonder. She almost couldn't believe her luck, seeing the rarest of felines during the first few minutes of her search.

The leopard turned in her direction, staring hard, but the photographer held still and the big cat turned its attention aside, for cats only notice objects that move. It sensed the presence of something, but did not know what it was or what its sour, unpleasant scent signaled. It had never encountered a human before. But it could tell that this newcomer's scent was that of a predator, and so the elusive, alert cat increased its speed and changed its direction, heading upslope once more, into crags that were too tight for bigger animals to squeeze through.

"I just saw one," the photographer whispered into her microphone, her voice shaky with excitement.

On the other end, the expedition's wildlife specialist uttered a loud, thrilled, "Yay!" This result was better than he had hoped for. He imagined publishing his article on snow leopards soon, perhaps even getting a magazine cover.

"Did you get good photos?" he rushed. He wished he were crouching behind the rock, tracking the leopard along with her, exposed to the elements and the hazards. But instead, his job was to sit waiting at the base, receiving information second-hand, dependent on what someone else saw with her own eyes.

The sky darkened. In amazingly few minutes, it was blotted by heavy, charcoal-gray snow clouds. In such conditions, it was necessary to take shelter without delay. The photographer's earpiece crackled.

"Okay, hurry back down. We don't want to have to dig for you in the snow."