

INDIA'S ELUSIVE CLOUDED LEOPARD

FELINE DREAM DATE

ARCHNA SINGH ENCOUNTERS AND PHOTOGRAPHS
THE LEGENDARY CAT IN THE FORESTS OF ASSAM

*The Clouded leopard **Neofelis nebulosa** is one of the wild cats found in the North East Indian states of Assam to Arunachal Pradesh, and the smallest among the big cats family of India.*



The Clouded leopard occurs from the Himalayan foothills through mainland Southeast Asia into China. Since 2008, it is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List. Its total population is suspected to be fewer than 10,000 mature individuals, with a decreasing population trend, and no single population numbering more than 1,000 adults.

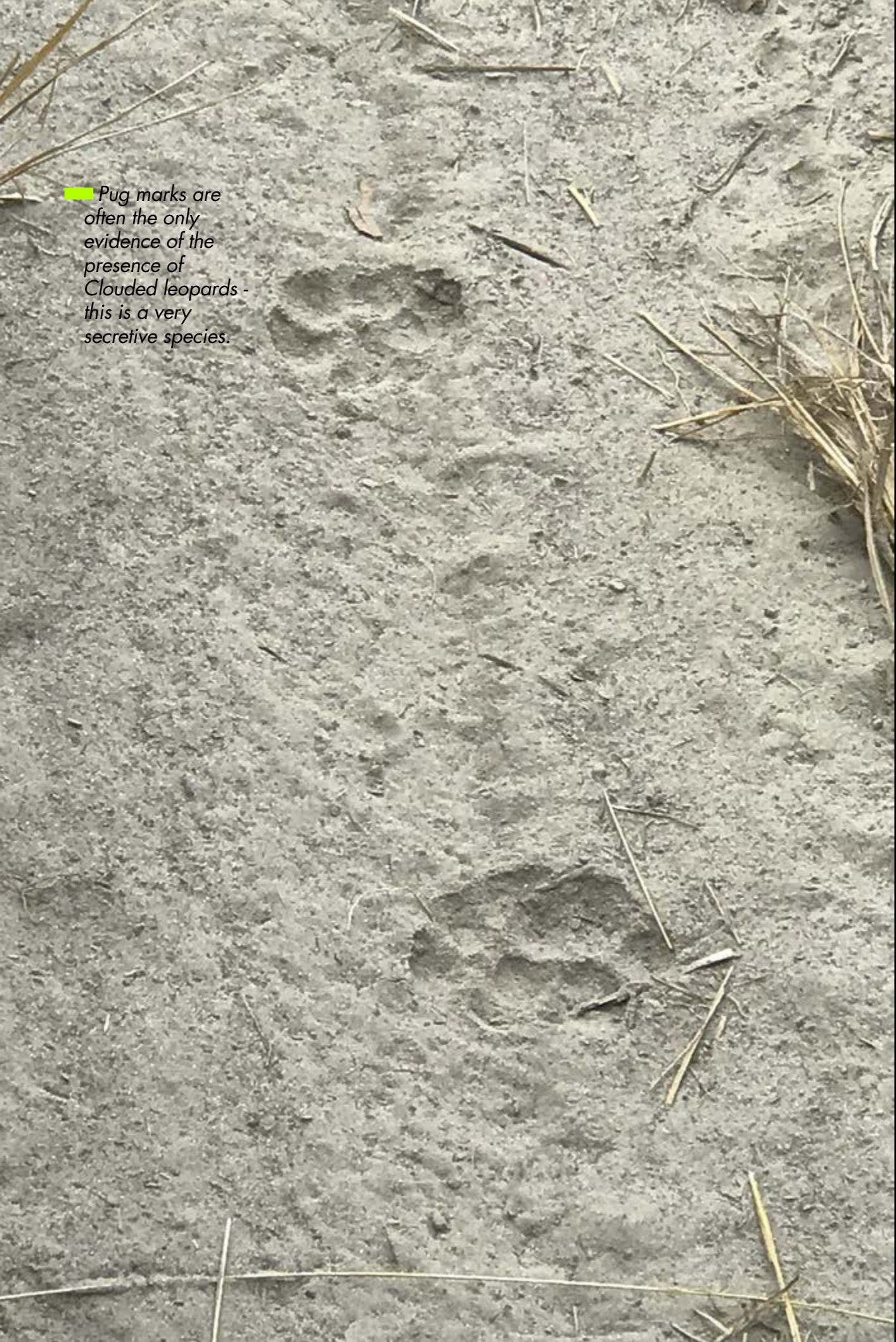


TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY ARCHNA SINGH

We arrived at Manas late in the evening of 28th January 2017. It was dark by the time we reached. This was my first visit to Manas and I was excited to experience a new Park and what I find here. It is not a well-established Park as far as safari organization is concerned. The guides and drivers mostly are locals who have little knowledge of the Park, its species or identifying and tracking pugmarks. That meant mostly we had to rely on ourselves for identifying or tracking any predators that we might find. Although knowing that it is rare to see tigers here, I was still hopeful of sighting one and with that mindset I arrived in Manas. The first hoarding of the National Park that I saw from the car was

impressively lit and had a beautiful tiger picture. But what caught my eye was another picture of a Clouded leopard right besides it. Till now, despite having known that the Clouded leopard is a resident in this Park, I really hadn't thought about it that much. I never thought there was a remote chance also to sight one, due to their small numbers and very elusive and shy nature. It is almost impossible to witness one let alone taking a picture of these shy cats. The Clouded leopard *Neofelis nebulosa* is one of the wild cats found in the North East Indian states of Assam to Arunachal Pradesh, the smallest among the big cats family of India and an arboreal animal found in the Himalayan foothills, which is classified as Vulnerable

because of habitat loss, deforestation, illegal trading and poaching for skin, claws and teeth. The exact numbers of this secretive cat are not known but they are believed to be fewer than 10,000 adults left in the wild world. Clouded leopards are the most talented climbers among the cats. In captivity, they have been observed to climb down vertical tree trunks head first, and hang on to branches with their hind paws and their tail around them. They can climb on horizontal branches with their back to the ground, and in this position make short jumps forward. Apart from information stemming from observations of captive clouded leopards, little is known of their natural history and behavior in the wild. Early



■ Pug marks are often the only evidence of the presence of Clouded leopards - this is a very secretive species.

accounts depict them as rare, secretive, arboreal, and nocturnal denizens of dense primary forest. More recent observations suggest they may not be as arboreal and nocturnal as previously thought. They may use trees as daytime rest sites, but also spend a significant proportion of time on the ground. Some daytime movement has been observed, suggesting they are not strictly nocturnal but crepuscular. Their partly nocturnal and far-ranging behavior, their low densities, and because they inhabit densely vegetated habitats and remote areas makes the counting and monitoring of Clouded leopards extremely difficult. Consequently, little is known about their behavior and status. Available information on their ecology is anecdotal, based on local interviews and a few sighting reports. So until now I was not even thinking about the Clouded leopard, but seeing that image made my mind flip from the tiger in a complete 360-degree turn. No matter how hard I tried, all I could think of was the Clouded leopard. By the time I arrived at the hotel and settled down, I was all set to research about this cat and by morning I had studied and read all about it on the internet. Excited, we left for the first safari on the morning of 29th. Not knowing what to expect, we ventured into the beautiful forest of Manas with an open mind. What followed was a series of tiger pugmarks at not one place but two different areas. We also saw pugmarks of the Clouded leopard in another area, that seemed quite fresh, either from the previous night or early that morning. This got us super excited. The day ended however with no sighting, not a single animal let alone a predator. Till now I hadn't realized how dense the foliage of the Park was and how skittish its animals. With its long history of Bodoland insurgency and the indiscriminate poaching of animals that followed, its not surprising. Assam, one of the seven states of the

North Eastern region of India, has long remained one of the most volatile and sensitive regions in the country because of the problems of Bodo insurgency, ethnic conflict, pressure of migration, underdevelopment etc. Since 2003 things are getting back to normal, but this long drawn state of affairs did result in the immense destruction of wildlife and is also responsible for their extremely skittish behavior. It will be several years before Manas's animals grow out of their fear of humans and become less evasive and used to tourists. The next day we found super fresh pugmarks of two tigers – one smaller than the other and apparently seemed like that of a mother and her young one. We also found fresh pugmarks of a male tiger from another area. It seemed like the tiger was very near and would show himself any time. Unfortunately, no such luck, and we exited the jungle with no sighting the whole day. Not only did we not see any predator we had barely seen any other animal in the entire Park. It was quite frustrating to not even have an opportunity to see any animal besides the squirrels and langurs for two days now. On our third day - 31st January - we saw fresh pugmarks of the tiger again and it was quite possible that it had just disappeared into the jungle upon hearing the jeep. We waited patiently and took rounds of the area to find the tiger, but no luck. We went back for lunch and when we came back for the afternoon safari to the same area, we saw fresh pugmarks of the Clouded leopard over the tyres of our jeep, confirming the fact that the cat had crossed that area in the afternoon just before we came. This strengthened my belief that there just might be a possibility of us witnessing this elusive cat in the wild, if it does venture out during the

Clouded leopards weigh between 11.5 and 23 kg (25 and 51 lb). Females vary in head-to-body length from 68.6 to 94 cm (27.0 to 37.0 in), with a tail 61 to 82 cm (24 to 32 in) long. Males are larger at 81 to 108 cm (32 to 43 in) with a tail 74 to 91 cm (29 to 36 in) long. Their shoulder height varies from 50 to 55 cm (20 to 22 in).



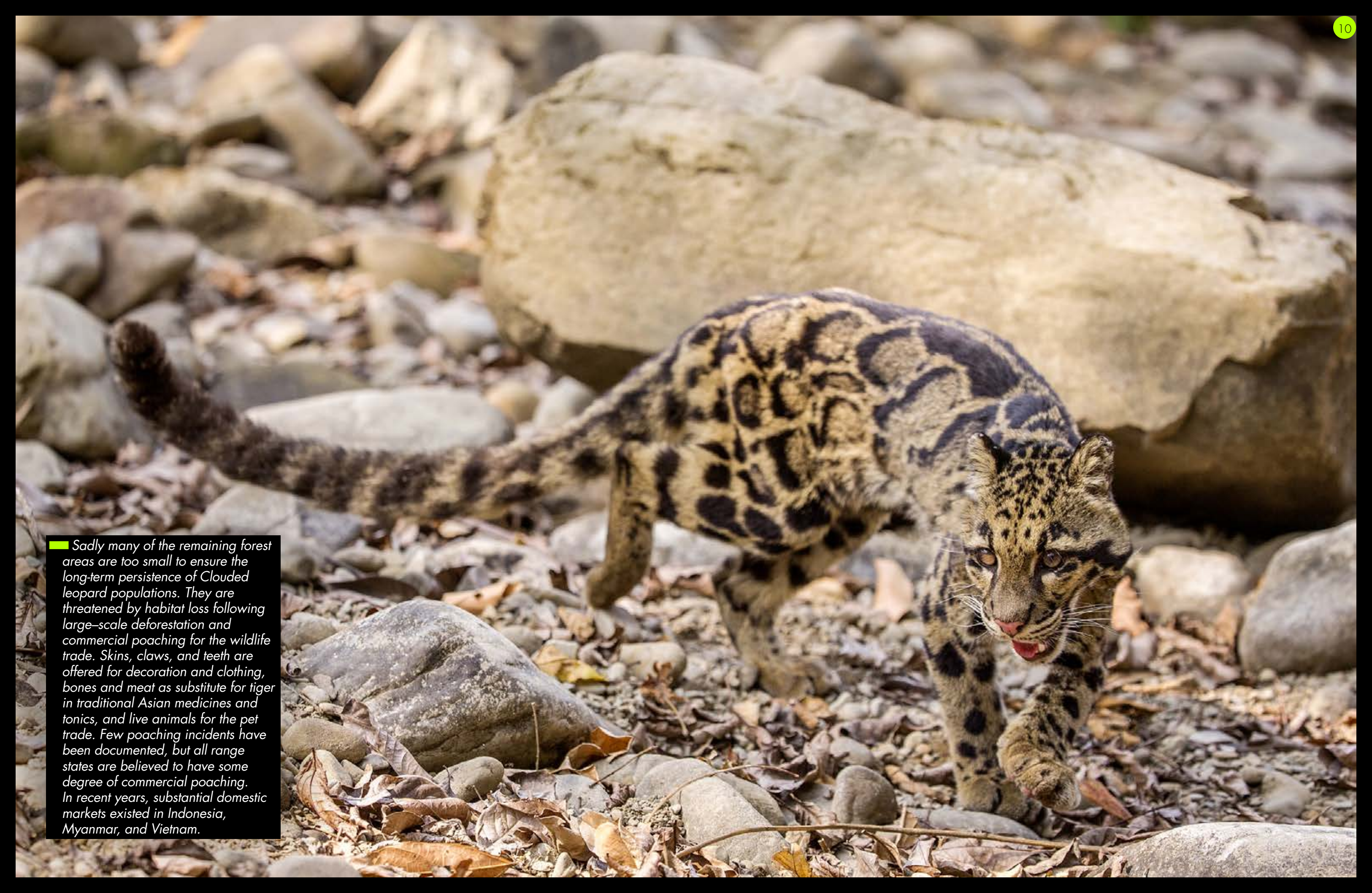
■ The fur of Clouded leopards is of a dark grey or ochreous ground-color, often largely obliterated by black and dark dusky-grey blotched pattern. There are black spots on the head, and the ears are black. Partly fused or broken-up stripes run from the corner of the eyes over the cheek, from the corner of the mouth to the neck, and along the nape to the shoulders.



Clouded leopards ■ have exceptionally long, piercing canine teeth, the upper being about three times as long as the basal width of the socket. The upper pair of canines may measure 4 cm (1.6 in) or longer.



day. It was definitely very exciting. After two days of tracking its pugmarks and following them, expectations were still very bleak as it is rarely to be seen, let alone during the day, but we were extremely fortunate to have identified the sounds that it made this day. Having confirmed that the sound was indeed that of a Clouded leopard, we stopped right there, near a dry river bed, where the pug marks were also being seen for the last two days, we waited patiently in and around that area, trying to hear any sounds that might come from this cat that clearly was in the vicinity. It wasn't long before when we heard some movement in the bushes and to our utter disbelief what came out was this tiny little thing known as the Clouded leopard. It seemed slightly bigger than a domestic cat, slightly longish with quite a long and bushy tail though. It still seems like a dream that I actually saw one. Not believing my eyes, I kept confirming the fact that it was indeed the Clouded leopard. It was a few moments before I could reach out for my camera to take some images. Here are some of my favorite shots. The sighting was short and the light wasn't all that great in the middle of the afternoon, but hey, it's a Clouded leopard, right? Just being able to see him, let alone photograph it, was a blessing in itself. ●

A young clouded leopard cub is walking across a rocky, leaf-strewn ground. The cub has a distinctive pattern of dark, cloud-like spots on its golden-brown fur. It is looking towards the right of the frame with a focused expression. The background consists of large, light-colored rocks and a dense layer of dry, brown leaves. The overall scene is set in a natural, outdoor environment.

Sadly many of the remaining forest areas are too small to ensure the long-term persistence of Clouded leopard populations. They are threatened by habitat loss following large-scale deforestation and commercial poaching for the wildlife trade. Skins, claws, and teeth are offered for decoration and clothing, bones and meat as substitute for tiger in traditional Asian medicines and tonics, and live animals for the pet trade. Few poaching incidents have been documented, but all range states are believed to have some degree of commercial poaching. In recent years, substantial domestic markets existed in Indonesia, Myanmar, and Vietnam.