

THE HIMALAYAN IBEX

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Introduction. The Ibex (*Capra Ibex*) resembles the wild goat and belongs to genus *Capra*, family Bovidae and sub-order Artiodactyla. Its horns are rounded in the front instead of edged as that of wild-goat. In cross-section they are triangular and the grooving is very striking. In Europe, the Ibex is now found only in the Alps in a small area of Northern Italy, but it has been introduced to special reserves in Switzerland and elsewhere. In Asia, it is found in the mountains of Russian and Chinese Turkistan, Central Siberia, Kashmir, Chitral, Northern Areas, Afghanistan, Palestine and Arabia. There are four geographical races of this species viz; Himalayan Ibex or Alpine Ibex; Siberian Ibex, Spanish Ibex and Caucasian Ibex.

The region of Northern areas has always been the cradle of ancient civilization and cultures of the Indo-Pak sub-continent. It extends over an area of about 80,000 sq: Kilometres of wonderful mountains, beautiful green valleys, big glaciers and fresh water streams enjoyable by the local and foreign tourists. The area was once the happy hunting ground for trophy hunters as it had abundant of Himalayan Ibex along with other valuable game species. Like elsewhere in the world for the negligence on the part of human being, the population of this animal rapidly decreased in the Northern Areas. A census carried out in Alps in 1953 by Dr. Haltenroth estimated the total number Himalayan Ibex to be 3,336 which is not a great number considering the vast area of the Alps. In the Northern Areas a rough estimate was made in 1968-69 and the population recorded was 3,000. Similarly according to the 1976 estimate of this variety of Ibex in Chitral, the number recorded was 3,844.

Distinctive Characters. The length of a male Ibex at maturity is about 4½ feet: and stands about 36" at the shoulders. The fore-legs are slightly shorter than the hind limbs. The colour of Ibex vary according to the season, age and locality. In summer the short fur is ashy grey but with the advancement in the season the colour changes. The Winter coats of old bucks are patchy. The head and part of the neck being sepia brown, the middle of the body generally yellowish white with a dark stripe on the back, and the quarters again brown, with legs of dark sepia. The dark stripe on the back becomes more conspicuous as the male regains its strength after rutting and at the advent of the winter season. During rut season the old males look almost blackish. The shedding of long hair and ashy grey fur starts after mating is complete and with the advancement in the season. The best season for obtaining fur is March and April. The beared is thick and dark brown.

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The horns are long curved backwards and ridged and the front surface of horns is round and smooth, triangular in section and the tips are curved (2). The age of the Ibex is determined from the horns. 40" horn length is normally hunted. The record length of Ibex so far shot in the Northern areas is 57" and 53" (3). A good male in good condition weighs about 200 Lbs. (5)

Female is smaller in size about a foot having more or less straight horns very slightly bent backwards. Colour is dark-brown in winter and light brown in summer. Beard is very small and light grey in colour.

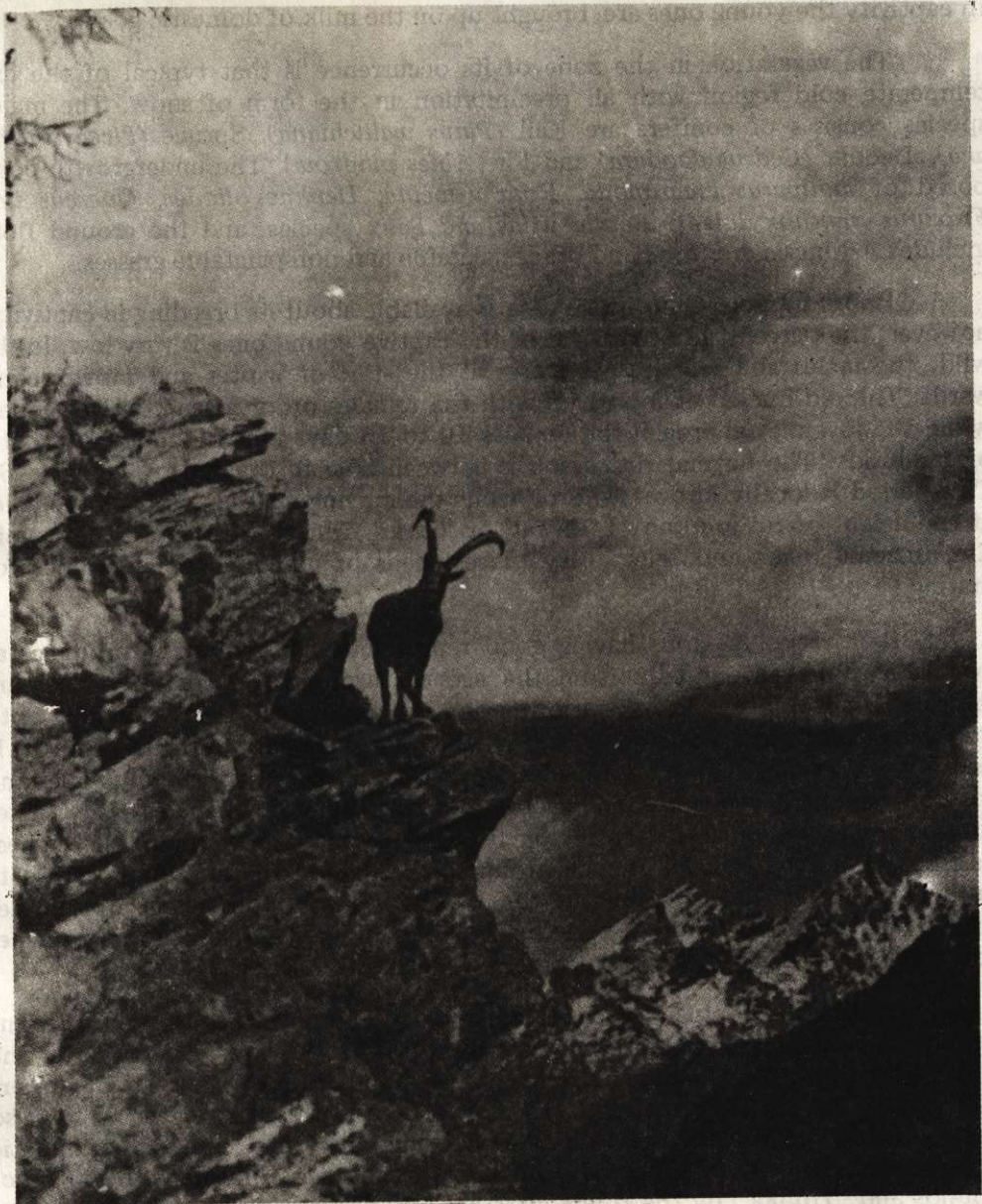
Habits. The Himalayan Ibex is non-migratory but its range of mobility is wide. During early spring it descends down to Markhor zone in search of food as the green *Artimesia* is a great attraction to the Ibex and gradually moves to the alpine pastures with the melting snow when the ground is covered with green grass. It grazes early in the morning and again in the evening but does not normally browse. In June both Ibex and Markhor may be seen feeding together (1) at the alpine pastures. It depends on snow and never approaches the water points down below its habitat. Ibex is a gregarious animal and lives in herds from a dozen to fifty animals, but old males can be frequently seen solitary.

The Himalayan Ibex usually rests and sleeps in broken grounds and mostly inaccessible places beyond the reach of hunters and predators. It is a sensitive animals with exceptionally well developed sense of sight and hearing. The power of smell is also very strong. The females are more sensitive as compared to males. The Ibex is extremely agile and magnificent climber. It is a good swimmer too and crosses the rivers and streams even in flood seasons.

The Ibex always expects danger from below because of greater sensitivity of females one female always remains watching the enemy at higher places while the herd graze in the depressions. In case of danger it alerts the herd with a shrill whistle through the nostrils. Strong smell power makes the alert from greater distances of the enemy and the hunters therefore avoid the wind direction while stalking. In case of danger it tries to approach the higher grounds and normally inaccessible places stopping at intervals and whistling and thus falls easily in the hands of hunters who can conveniently shoot until it goes out of the rifle range, while the markhor takes the downwards routes and easily escapes the hunters.

Distribution and Food. The range of distribution of the Himalayan Ibex in the Northern Areas is wide enough. It covers nearly whole of the main western Himalayas and Kara Korum Ranges. Its natural habitat is 8500 ft (2570 metres) above the sea level and upwards the zone of dry temperate coniferous forests, sub alpine and snow meadows. In this area, the zone includes all the upper limits of the Kallahs from Burzil Pass to Shandar and from Babusar Pass to Khunjerab and Kilik-Minteka Passes on the extreme north of Pakistan at the China Border.

Ibex eats all palatable grasses and forbs during summer season while in winter it normally depends on dry leaves of *Fraxinus*, Birch and Willow by digg-



Himalayan ibex

ing the snow with its feet. In hard days of cold winter it also devours the leaves of other species, which are normally considered unpalatable, to assuage its ravenging hunger. The Ibex being herbevorous its salt requirements is quite high and it has been observed that it travels long distances in search of saline soils and rocks. In captivity the young ones are brought up on the milk of domestic goats.

The vegetation in the zone of its occurrence is that typical of the dry temperate cold region with all precipitation in the form of snow. The major species consists of conifers are Kail (*Pinus wallichiana*), Spruce (*Picea smithiana*), Deodar (*Cedrus deodara*) and Fir (*Abies pindrow*). The undergrowth composed of *Juniperus macropoda*, *Rosa webeina*, *Dephne oliodes*, *Quercus ilex*, *Fraxinus xanthoxyloides*, *Betula utilis* and *Salix* species; and the ground flora includes *Artemisia maritima* and other palatable and non-palatable grasses.

Reproduction. Quite little data is available about its breeding in captivity, however, the percentage of survival of the captive young ones is very low. In the wild, the males and females get closer at the start of winter and move downwards. The old bucks get mixed up with the females on or after 21st December, while the juveniles approach the females 10 to 15 days before the arrival of the bigger heads. The normal rut season is between 21st to the end of January (6). This period is locally known as 'Broi' while the moving males in search of females at the height of rut are known 'Cawat' or 'Gasar'. During this period they avoid the difficult rocks and select easy places, beds of nullahs and land slides for mating.

Ibex is polygamous having good reproduction potential. It produces at average two fawns annually from the age of three years in entirely ideal unmolested environment. The gestation period is 5 months and lactation goes upto one year. The fawns are able to follow their mothers soon after their birth. It happens sometimes that some females are left over without visiting by males and they become darker in colour and can be spotted in a herd of females easily. After rut the males get separated from the females and move upwards to the highest pastures while the females remain around their habitat till lambing is complete during June. The hair shedding of the Ibex starts with the advent of summer season and gradually becomes bare during June and seeks shelter in caves, bushes and coldest and highest peaks to escape the gadflies.

Population Status. Northern areas were abound with this magnificent animal of Himalayan in the recent past. With the worldwide catastrophy of the wildlife resulted through the spread of human population to many virgin corners and destruction of its habitat, the Himalayan Ibex in this part of the world also got serious set back. The indiscriminate shooting with the occurance of automatic fire arms has also caused the rapid decline of this animals. Hunting with the aid of hounds and "Hunka" by the ruling class has also destroyed this animal to a great extent. The common predator of the Ibex is the snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia* Lynx (*Felis lynx*) and Leopard Cat (*Felis bangalensis*) and they normally kill the young ones.

In this region after 1947 it has suffered much on the occupied Kashmir Border line and the area located near the Tribal Territory of Darel and Tangir. The local government has now banned all kinds of its shooting with its territory to give protection to the animal. An organization for the development of wild-life in the Northern Areas has been created and a wildlife ordinance has been drafted for effective regularization of the game and give effective protection to precious animals like the Ibex. Still its staff skeleton is weak and devoid of due equipment and facilities to cope the magnitude of work involved. The population of Ibex is quickly decreasing in the accessible areas and near the habitations while in the closed and secluded places the population is still fairly well. No reliable figures are available to give the exact population of Ibex, however, according to a rough estimate made in 1968-69 the population was 3000 (3), and later in 1976 the Ibex in whole of Northern Areas was recorded as 8,629. (7).

Population Status. The age and sex class of the total population of 8,629 animals recorded in the census is given below locality wise:—

Locality	Male	Female	Peakings	Total
Khunjarab National Park	45	200	150	395
Shiger National Park (Proposed)	850	920	100	1600
Astore Game Sanctuary	300	500	200	1000
Baltistan Game Sanctuary	450	500	800	1750
Kargah Game Sanctuary	5	8	9	22
Nalter Game Sanctuary	32	235	118	385
Sadpara Game Sanctuary	70	100	50	220
Killik/Minteka Game Reserve	9	50	30	89
Danyor Game Reserve	200	300	150	650
Sherkillah Game Reserve	43	65	40	148
Pakora Game Reserve	20	30	10	60
Chassi/Bayuster Game Reserve	40	100	30	170
Nar Nallah Game Reserve	400	600	300	1300
Askor Nallah Game Reserve	50	60	30	140
TOTAL	2444	3968	2217	8629

Diseases. The diseases of Himalayan Ibex are the same which are common in domestic livestock. They are transmitted to them when they pasture in the habitat of Ibex during summer season. These diseases include Anthrax (4), Pleuro, Pneumonia, foot and Mouth Rot and Black Quarters.

Uses. The Himalayan Ibex has been shot for gastronomy since time immemorial. Its flesh resembles mutton with flavour of game. Being an important and quite rare game animal it is a great attraction to the hunters and trophy collectors and many VIPs and reknown hunters from all over the world have visited the Northern Areas for fetching its trophy. Good horns and skin are taken for trophies. Horns are also used for tool handles and "Hukas". The skins are used for making special type of foot-wear and fine fur is obtained for making gloves and pullovers.

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