

Professional Camera



Hide, seek and capture

Hector Skevington-Postles chooses VariCam LT for Big Cats, a new BBC series following the snow leopards of Himachal Pradesh.

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Challenge

To film the elusive snow leopards after hiking for miles in freezing temperatures to capture them.

Solution

Using the VariCam LT meant Hector could shoot in low light conditions, with a camera that is light enough to carry around the mountainous Himachal Pradesh.

“ We were very fortunate to have some excellent local guides. When you finally see the snow leopards you're simply amazed. Then you need to remember to focus on getting a good shot!



Hector Skevington-Postles



Himachal Pradesh, meaning the Abode of Snow, is a mountainous state of North India. Located in the Western Himalayas, it is home to the highest living community of people in the world.

With two-thirds of the state covered in forests, Himachal Pradesh also accommodates 77 mammalian species, with one in particular which is extremely camera shy. The rocky slopes are the perfect camouflage for the smoky-grey fur with dark-grey to black rosettes, of the snow leopard.

The cats of Northern India

Endangered and reclusive, the snow leopards choose to live in steep terrains, full of rocky outcrops and ravines, allowing them to hunt in peace. At present there are thought to be just 450 to 500 snow leopards living in India.

"Seeing a snow leopard for the first time is like a childhood dream come true."

"Seeing a snow leopard for the first time is like a childhood dream come true. This also creates a certain amount of pressure to ensure that I take the perfect shot after two weeks on the side of a hill walking miles and miles everyday," says Hector Skevington-Postles, Director of Photography on Big Cats, which aired on BBC One in January 2018.

With the help of spotters, the crew managed to capture three different snow leopards on four occasions. "If you see one, it would be a kilometre away or even more, then you walk for as long as three hours to get to where it was," comments Hector. "It's an amazing moment that you've really got to look for. I really enjoyed that time."

"Thanks to the native 5000 ISO, I was able to achieve a clean shot of the wild cats in very low light conditions."

Snow leopards were first shown on the first series of 'Planet Earth'. Their behaviour was then captured for 'Planet Earth II'. As the animals are most active at dawn and dusk, the shooting had to take place in low light. "VariCam has dual native ISO settings. Thanks to the native 5000 ISO, I was able to achieve a clean shot of the wild cats in very low light conditions," adds Hector. "You have the right place, the right environment, the right people on the ground but it still takes a lot to just get in a position to film it."



The dawn and dusk in Himachal Pradesh

The crew spent a total of five weeks in Northern India. Five weeks became six, because just as they finished shooting the weather conditions meant they weren't able to leave Himachal Pradesh for a further eight days.

"I was offered a number of cameras which I immediately ruled out due to their weight."

The days spent in North India were sunny and bright, however at night the temperatures could drop off even to minus 10 degrees. "This wasn't my first trip to this region. I've been there before shooting on the 'Mountains' series for the BBC Natural History Unit," comments Hector.

Hence, the camera operator was aware of the weather conditions in North India and was certain about what camera would be the perfect fit for the project.

"Considering the cold weather, I had to bear the battery in mind. Having used VariCam LT before, I knew its power usage," explains Hector. "Also, if you've got to do 10kms up the hill you want to save as much weight as you can. It was therefore crucial how many batteries we could carry but more importantly, how big the camera could be. I was offered a number of cameras which I immediately ruled out due to their weight."

Capturing snow leopards

"I'd say another crucial reason for choosing VariCam was the viewfinder. I believe it's the best viewfinder out there and it makes so much difference to me. I take it everywhere, put it on different cameras, it's incredible," says Hector. "The cats are always going to be a long way away. So I chose the VariCam LT, in order that we had the option to increase the ISO."

It meant that, once we combined it with a Canon CN20 50-1000mm lens, we had the extra sensitivity needed to maintain the focus - which is always a problem over that kind of distance."

"It's an amazing moment that you've really got to look for. I really enjoyed that time."

Nevertheless, the quality of the camera does not guarantee success in natural history, you still need luck. "We were very fortunate to have some excellent local guides. When you finally see the snow leopards you're simply amazed. Then you need to remember to focus on getting a good shot!" adds Hector.

Big Cats airs on BBC One in the UK January 2018: bbc.co.uk/bigcats

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