



Spot the snow leopard - or you're dead

By TIM BARLASS

Can you spot the leopard? Or is it leopards?

The snow leopard likes to take its prey by surprise, preferring an ambush from above, before dispatching it, usually rather promptly. Hence the need for camouflage. It's all part of the game of survival.

It's also part of the challenge if you are a wildlife photographer like Inger Vandoye from Cairns.

She is believed to be the first Australian to photograph a full hunt sequence of these endangered and elusive big cats.

She took these images in Ladakh, "Land of the High Passes", in the Indian Himalayas, enduring temperatures down to minus 25 degrees when she led a group of amateur wildlife photographers.

"It was my second time there and we had a client who had searched for them for 40 days without success," she said.

"The encounters we had were extremely rare and can be attributed to being out before dawn until after dusk. We saw them hunting, play-fighting and mating. We managed to commune with three leopards for five days.

"I was very adrenaline-filled and thinking 'Oh, my god, don't get it wrong'. I was terrified of messing it up. The opportunity to be around an animal like this wasn't going to present itself again for me maybe in my lifetime.

"The hardest thing is the sitting. If you move, it will spook. It's lucky that you don't get hypothermia. Your brain stops communicating with your fingers and you are thinking you have got to press the shutter button. You are blowing condensation against the LCD screen which freezes instantly and your camera sticks to your face."

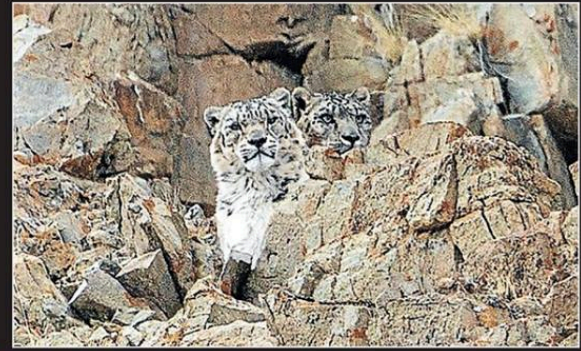
It's less of a game, of course, if you are the intended prey. May be a hare, Himalayan tahr (wild goat) or, in this case, a bhral (blue sheep). If the prey fails to spot the approach, survival is likely to be compromised. In fact, it's game over.

Two years ago, 12 countries signed a declaration to "acknowledge that the snow leopard is an irreplaceable symbol of our nations' natural and cultural heritage".

You can see why. Or perhaps you can't...



Adrenaline: Inger Vandoye. Photo: DilmeX.com



Game of survival: Capturing the snow leopard on camera hunting a bhral, or blue sheep, took patience and persistence, and involved working in temperatures that dropped down to minus 25 degrees.

Study reveals high fail rate for counselling Three pregnancies with 'permanent' birth control

By COSIMA MARRINER

Marriage counselling fails more than a quarter of couples, with those experiencing the greatest distress the least likely to benefit from professional help.

New research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies reveals that relationship counselling doesn't work for 25-30 per cent of couples. "There is this core group that just aren't helped by counselling," senior researcher Cathryn Hunter said. "It's a bit of a cause for concern."

Ms Hunter said there needed to be more research into why counselling failed to help such a "significant percentage" of couples.

Relationships Australia's director of clinical services NSW, Lorraine Murphy, said therapy often did not work if domestic violence was present, if people came to counselling just to tell their partner they were leaving them or if they were simply unable to see any perspective other than their own.

"There has to be a capacity to self-reflect," Ms Murphy said. "If that's missing altogether, there are not a lot of problem-solving shifts that can occur."

When the going gets tough

One in five couples with relationship problems seeks professional help.

Relationship counselling does not work for 25%-30% of couples.

40% of couples who divorce had not sought counselling before splitting up.

SOURCE: AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF FAMILY STUDIES



Ms Hunter's research found that couples having the most relationship difficulties show the least improvement after attending counselling. The latest Household Income and Labor Dynamics in Australia survey, which has been tracking a group of households since 2000, found that poor mental health is a strong predictor of marital breakdown, as is the presence of dependent children.

The AIFS research found that counselling worked for couples who had a good relationship with their therapist, believed in the value of therapy and its likelihood of success

and were committed to making their relationship work. Titled *Relationship education and counselling - recent research findings*, the report also found that only one in five couples having relationship problems seeks professional help. Yet marital discord can affect children, mental health, work performance and social relationships.

Lack of interest in relationship counselling prompted the federal government to abandon its Stronger Relationships trial after just seven

months. There were 100,000 \$200 counselling vouchers available under the scheme devised by former social services minister Kevin Andrews. However, it is thought only 5000 couples attended the taxpayer-funded counselling sessions. Relationships Australia's Ms Murphy said there was a stigma associated with seeking help for marital problems. "It's seen to be the beginning of the end, that there must be something very, very wrong [if you go to counselling]," she said. "It's a shame that stigma is there. [Seeking professional help] doesn't mean the relationship is doomed; it's a healthy and mature thing to do."

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The AIFS research found that 40 per cent of couples who divorce had not sought counselling before splitting up. People are most likely to talk to their friends rather than their partners, a professional, or family, about their relationship issues.

But Ms Murphy said Relationships Australia received "tremendous feedback" from those who did use the government counselling vouchers. "They said it was really helpful to get the other person's perspective," she said.

Olivia* was so determined not to have more children a decade ago, she opted for permanent birth control.

She was reluctant to have surgery so her gynaecologist fitted her with a device she said would prevent her from ever becoming pregnant again.

Essure is a permanent birth control device that consists of soft coils that are inserted trans-vaginally into the fallopian tubes to promote the growth of scar tissue and block sperm from reaching the eggs.

And then she became pregnant - three times - resulting in two terminations and a baby.

A year after Olivia had her Essure fitted, she discovered she was four months pregnant and immediately opted to terminate in a decision that left her traumatised.

"It was in shock. I thought there was something wrong with this baby, because this is not right," she said. "I had to give birth to the baby in the toilet, which was horrific and then I broke up with my partner." After the termination, Olivia's gynaecologist ran tests on the Essure, which indicated that it was properly fitted and operating as it was designed.

But three years later, with a new husband, she became pregnant again.

This time she proceeded with the pregnancy, but it was complicated by gestational diabetes and she was haunted by her earlier abortion and terrified the coils would poke the fetus.

And then she became pregnant again.

Essure has become the subject of a major medico-legal battle in the US, where celebrity lawyer Erin Brockovich has taken up the cause on behalf of aggrieved women who want to bring a class action against Bayer, the manufacturer, but are prevented from doing so by federal laws.

A Facebook support group for women with Essure problems has more than 18,000 members.

In June, the US Food and Drug Administration added information to its website about the risks of the procedure and announced that its obstetrics and gynaecological division would hold a public meeting on the risks and benefits of the device. Now a group of Australian women want to have Essure dere-



Olivia's Essure has been removed.

gistered by The Therapeutic Goods Administration.

The device was pioneered in Adelaide by the late gynaecologist John Kerin, who envisaged it as a game changer to reduce population growth in the Third World because it did not require surgery or anaesthesia.

But women have complained of

side effects, from abdominal pain to perforated uteruses and unintended pregnancies.

Bayer said that, based on 10 years of clinical data, Essure was more than 99.8 per cent effective in women who had the coils correctly placed and that it worked closely with regulatory bodies to monitor the safety of its products.

"Bayer stands behind the benefit-risk profile of Essure and takes all adverse event reports seriously," a spokeswoman said. "It is important that women who have questions or who experience side effects speak with their doctor."

Nicole Russell recently had her Essure reversed after suffering from pain, fatigue and extreme smell sensitivity - though she was initially told it could be done only by hysterectomy.

She believes the device gave her heavy metal poisoning. "I've had no life for the past four years," she said. But biotechnology law researcher Wendy Bonython said registration of a medical device by the TGA was not "an ironclad guarantee" of its safety.

"The question is really whether

there was sufficient information available at the time of registration to support that risk-benefit analysis by regulators," Associate Professor Bonython said.

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists vice-president Steve Robson, who worked under Professor Kerin during the product's development, said all contraceptive measures had side effects and failed in some women.

But he did not use Essure in his practice because it was so difficult to reverse.

Olivia, who was too depressed to continue with her third pregnancy, successfully sued her gynaecologist in the NSW District Court last year for negligence and breach of contract because he assured her the device was working after the first pregnancy and failed to advise her to use further contraception.

In November she finally got rid of the Essure, by hysterectomy, but the pain lingered.

"I feel so blessed that I've had three healthy kids, but I feel for the two souls," she said.

*Not her real name