

Ladakh - A Snow Leopard Quest!

Naturetrek Tour Report

1 - 14 February 2009



Scoping for Snow Leopards



Mountain Viewpoint

Report compiled by Gerald Broddez

Images by Iain Stewart and Gerald Broddez



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Red-billed Chough



Monastery



Robin Accentor



Picnic along the Indus River



Ibisbill



Royle's Pika

Tour Leader	Gerald Broddelez
Local Guides	Jigmet Dadul Tashi Tundup Sonam Phuntsog Gyaltson Gyaltson Nawang Tsewang Norboo
Pony men	Tsering Dorjey Yangjor
Tour Participants	Ian Doe Karen Doe Nigel Francis Arlene Flexman Harry Flexman Richard Abell Catherine Abell Thomas Rivest Iain Stewart Paul Cottis Alain Verstraete

Introduction

One of the most beautiful and elusive animals on the planet, the Snow Leopard, inhabits rugged mountainous regions over an area that ranges across 12 countries from Pakistan's Hindu Kush, to the north-west of India, China and Lake Baikal. The total wild population is estimated at between 4,000 and 7,500 individuals, with about 200 thought to be living in Hemis National Park, Ladakh. Ladakh is the highest plateau of the Indian state of Kashmir with almost all of it being over 3,000 metres. It spans the Himalayan and Karakoram mountain ranges and the upper Indus River valley.

Ladakh is a high-altitude desert as the Himalayas create a rain shadow, denying entry to monsoon clouds. The main source of water is the winter snowfall on the mountains. In the depths of winter Snow Leopards descend from the high peaks in the north-west Indian state of Ladakh into valleys to pursue their main prey species, the Bharal (Blue Sheep). On this tour, we went in search of this most elusive and beautiful of cats, journeying into the spectacular Himalayan mountain ranges.

To increase our chances of seeing Snow Leopard, we made use of the expert knowledge of Jigmet and Tashy for this tour. Snow Leopards come down from higher altitude areas in the winter to look for prey and our local guides directed our search efforts to known haunts, scrapes and kill sites, as well as helped us follow other signs of Snow Leopard activity.

This 14-day tour is one of the most amazing and adventurous trips you are ever likely to do, giving you the chance not only to look for the Snow Leopard but also to visit the spectacular state of Ladakh, renowned for its remote mountain beauty, picturesque villages and fascinating Buddhist monasteries.

Day 1

Sunday 1st February

In Flight

We departed London late morning on a scheduled direct British Airways flight to Delhi.

Day 2

Monday 2nd February

Fly Delhi to Leh

On arrival in Delhi we relaxed for a couple of hours before transferring to the domestic terminal for our morning flight to Leh in Ladakh. This was a spectacular flight taking us over the Himalayan range to Leh, leaving the hot and humid monsoon plains for the arid rocky mountains of trans-Himalayan Ladakh.

Leh is situated at 3,500 metres, so acclimatisation was essential in order for us to enjoy our holiday so we took things easy at first in order to adjust to the altitude. We spend most of today relaxing in our hotel and made a short outing into town.

Day 3

Tuesday 3rd February

Leh, Ladakh

The morning was again spent acclimatising to the altitude today, spending time in and around Leh. During the morning we made a gentle stroll in the town's winding streets and bazaars and visited the Monastery. The impressive 16th century Leh Palace rises eight floors high and dominates the views from town. Below Leh, through a wide flat valley, flows the Indus. Fields, poplar and willow groves sit either side of the stony banks of the great river. Birds were thin on the ground still we had good views of our first White-winged Redstart, a Goshawk and Golden eagle overhead and smart Robin Accentors.

The afternoon was spent visiting the Shanti Stupa. We drove up by taxi and walked back down the stairs to the town. We had great views all around us of magnificent scenery and our first mammal, a Royle's Pika was playing hide and seek among the rocks.

Day 4

Wednesday 4th February

Sightseeing in Leh; cultural visits to Shey & Thiksey

We started the day by visiting Hemis Gompa, one of the richest, largest and most famous Ladakhi Gompas, built during the 1630s. Red-billed Choughs and Hill Pigeon gave good views. Next we visited Shey, which was once the residence of the royal family. The monastery here is famous for its high gilded statue of Buddha. A marshy area along the Indus held lots of White-winged Redstarts, Coot, Moorhen, a single Goosander and Green Sandpiper.

Twelve miles from Leh, and spectacularly situated, is one of the finest examples of Ladakhi architecture – Thiksey. This is one of the largest and most impressive Gompas in the area and has several temples containing images, stupas and exquisite wall paintings. Thiksey monastery has an outstanding collection of art in its chambers. The Gompa is incredibly atmospheric, with hypnotic chanting and music to be heard in the background, and there are wonderful views of the valleys from the roof.

Sankar Gompa, is a monastery situated three kilometres from Leh belonging to a Buddhist sect known as ‘yellow-hat’. The monastery serves as the residence for the head of this sect and a few ‘lamas’ (monks) reside here. Though only 90 years old, the Gompa is built on the site of a small 500-year-old temple and is set in a stunning location, against a backdrop of snow-clad mountains.

Late afternoon we were invited by a local family to taste the famous Ladakhi tea before retracing our steps back to the hotel.

Day 5

Thursday 5th February

Drive to Latho; trek to Zingchen, Hemis (High Altitude) National Park

Today we drove to Latho, a distance of six kilometres across the Indus in Spituk. A first stop was made at a bridge over the Indus and one of our target birds, a nice pair of Ibisbills was found immediately. They gave very good views and allowed the photographers some good shots!

Walking along the Indus-valley for a while adding some nice and rarely encountered birds to the list. Black-throated Thrush, Solitary Snipe and Great Rosefinch all gave excellent views. We then continued along the stream coming out of the Rumbak gorge to where it joins the Indus. Here we soon found our quest a nice male Ladakh Urial, while overhead a Lammergeier and Himalayan Griffon Vulture put on a good show. Just a little bit further the road came to an end and after a picnic we were on our way to our base camp for the next week. En route we found our first signs of Snow Leopard, scrapes and urinated rocks.

After settling into camp and a cup of tea we went to the viewpoint and saw our first Blue Sheep, a flock of Tibetan Snowfinch and several Lammergeier and Golden Eagles. A nice introduction to the wildlife of the area!

Days 6 – 10

Friday 6th – Tuesday 10th February

Search in Snow Leopard Country

Our next days were spent searching for Snow Leopards. Forced down from high altitude summer haunts, the Snow Leopards in this region make their way down to the valleys and gorge sides in Hemis National Park during midwinter to search for prey. Our camp at Husing lies at a crossroads of a major Snow Leopard corridor and mornings and evenings found us scanning some of the slopes around Husing camp (altitude 3,700 metres) and Rumbak (4,000 metres).

The schedule for our trek over the next five days was to be decided on by our expert guide. Each morning before breakfast several scouting parties were sent out into the various valleys in search for any signs, while those willing spent the first hour of daylight scanning the ridges from a viewpoint near the camp.

After breakfast and depending on the success by our scouts we would make up a plan for rest of the day. We spent most of our time over the next couple of days scanning the wild, endless mountain ridges from various viewpoints.

One morning our guides had found fresh tracks in the snow that had fallen overnight so we set off on a trek for several hours in a narrow but steep gorge. We had great sightings of several groups of Blue Sheep on the steep cliffs, A Red Fox and Pika, but alas no Leopard! There were lots of Lammergeier – sometimes five or six at a time. We saw the adults dropping bones so that they broke, and then they ate them! That was great to see!

On another day we climbed even higher to the village of Rumbak. This is a very spectacular place, a narrow gorge suddenly opened into a wide valley surrounded by high mountains, including Stok Kangri 6,120 metres high! Here we all spent a very comfortable night at one of the home-stays. It proved to be one of the highlights of the trip. Each party had different experiences with the locals, from dancing and singing, to cooking or telling stories using “handsigns”! It was also our only opportunity to spend any money, so woollen gloves and hats (with or without Snow Leopard written on it) were in heavy demand!

Birdwise, Rumbak proved also a highlight...Streaked Rosefinch, a nice party of Horned Larks, coveys of Chukar, groups of Hill Pigeons and abundant Robin accentors kept us all busy for a while. After a “local” breakfast and tea we spent the rest of the morning scanning the surrounding ridges in vain for our quest. Luckily the local kids playing cricket kept us entertained and warm until it was time to say goodbye and retreat to our “base” camp.

The Snow Leopard is one of the most elusive animals on the planet and until the last day it decided to remain hidden. Some people were slowly giving up hope but others were very optimistic and even predicted that we would see one on our last afternoon!

Then on our last day.....

On our last morning we had just finished breakfast when one of the guides came back shouting that He had seen a Snow Leopard. We all dropped what we were doing. I've never seen people move so fast, running...and this at 3700 m altitude! Unfortunately by the time we reached the place where it was seen, it had gone! We stayed in the area for about two hours and by then it was lunchtime. We were just having lunch when one of the horsemen shouted: “Snow Leopard!”, so we all ran to look – down a slope, about 500 metres from where we were sitting – and there it was, about a mile away, on top of a ridge. A male Snow Leopard!

We put up our scopes and watched it sitting on a ridge, on top of a rock. We could just see the silhouette at first, but then it started walking down the ridge and you could make out the light yellow colour of its fur, and the relatively small head compared with, say, a Leopard. We got clear views of the long tail and long low body low to the ground. It was just fantastic! There were lots of hurrahs and hugging - the excitement was incredible! And on our last afternoon too! We watched as it came down the rocks and then disappeared – a total of about two or three minutes and ten out of eleven of the tour group managed to see it.

Our last night was spent celebrating with rum and singing by the campfire!

Day 11**Wednesday 11th February**

Morning Walk; return to Leh via Zingchen

After a last look from the viewpoint and breakfast it was time to retrace our steps to Leh. We walked down into the Hemis Valley to the confluence of the Indus to see the ancient petroglyphs (a type of ancient rock carving) of the area. From here we drove to Leh and stayed at the Hotel Omasila for the night.

Day 12**Thursday 12th February**

Fly Leh to Delhi

After saying goodbye to our trekking team we caught the slightly delayed morning internal flight to Delhi, arriving there early afternoon. We then transferred to the City Park Hotel and had a free afternoon. Some explored the city park opposite the hotel while others relaxed or went exploring Delhi.

Day 13**Friday 13th February**

Sightseeing, Delhi

The morning was spent birding at the Okhla reservoir. The pretty little Five-striped Palm Squirrel was seen everywhere, while a pair of Macaques and a single Langur was a surprise. There was time for some city sightseeing today and to sample some of Delhi's historical sights. In Old Delhi we visited the famous Red Fort (this and the Taj Mahal were both built by the Emperor Shah Jehan), the Jama Masjid Mosque with its tapering minarets and wonderful marble domes, and Chandni Chowk (Old Delhi's business nerve centre), which provides a chaotic but fascinating snapshot of commercial life to a noisy backdrop of traffic and voices. We had dinner at a local restaurant and time to fresh up before our late night transfer to the international airport.

Day 14**Saturday 14th February**

Fly London

We caught our return British Airways flight home in the early hours this morning, arriving back in London in the morning.

Species Lists

Mammals

Ladakh Pika (*Ochotona ladacensis*) - 1 seen at high altitude 4200+ m

Royle's Pika (*Ochotona roylei*) - 2 Seen during the trek and at Leh

Woolly Hare (*Lepus oiostolus*) - 1 at Rumbak

Snow Leopard (*Uncia uncia*) - 1 On our last afternoon we had just finished our lunch when one of the horsemen shouted "snow leopard". We all ran down as fast as we could and put up the scopes. There it was high on the ridge, first silhouetted against the sky sitting on a rock, then slowly moving down the ridge showing of its long tail, its light yellow colour and low body .It was a fantastic end to our Holy Grail quest!

Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*) - 2 seen well near the village of Rumbak.

Ladakh Urial (*Ovis aries*) - 2 of these rare mammals seen at start of the trek, here sp Ladakh Uria (*ovis vignei*)

Bharal (*Pseudois nayaur*) - Common during the trek...the largest group was about 60 animals. Some great mountain climbing seen!

Delhi area on 13th February 2009:

Rhesus Macaque (*Macaca mulatta*) - 4

Northern Plains Grey Langur (*Semnopithecus entellus*) - 1

Water Buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*) - Scarce at Okla

Indian Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus palmarum*) - Common

Birds

Ladakh birds:

Goosander (*Mergus merganser merganser*) 2 on Indus river

Lammergeier (*Gypaetus barbatus*) Common during the trek with max of 6 seen in a single day, watched the typical "bone" breaking as it dropped bones from high in the air onto the rocks, fantastic!

Himalayan Griffon (*Gyps himalayensis*) 3 on several days during trek

Northern Goshawk (*Accipiter gentilis*) 1 A nice male flew overhead during our visit of Leh!

Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) Seen daily in small numbers

Common Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) 1

Himalayan Snowcock (*Tetraogallus himalayensis*) Scarce. seen daily ,mainly fly-bys or high on ridge tops

Chukar (*Alectoris chukar*) Common at Ladakh.

Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) 4 on Indus

Common Coot (*Fulica atra*) Scarce at Ladakh.

Ibisbill (*Ibidorhyncha struthersii*) Fantastic views of a pair at the Indus River!

Solitary Snipe (*Gallinago solitaria*) A single bird in the marshes near the Indus River.

Common Sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*) 1 along Indus.

Green Sandpiper (*Tringa ochropus*) 3

Rock Dove (*Columba livia*) Common.

Hill Pigeon (*Columba rupestris*) Scarce. Seen well at Rumbak

Eurasian Eagle-owl (*Bubo bubo*) Heard only. Heard above camp

Little Owl (*Athene noctua*) 1

Horned Lark (*Eremophila alpestris*) Small groups at Rumbak

White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*) 1

Brown Dipper (*Cinclus pallasi*) **3 seen along the river near our hotel and along the Indus**

Northern Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*) 2 in garden of hotel

Robin Accentor (*Prunella rubeculoides*) Common

Brown Accentor (*Prunella fulvescens*) Scarce

Black-throated Thrush (*Turdus atrogularis*) Seen well in the Indus valley

Blue Whistling-thrush (*Myophonus caeruleus*) 3

Güldenstadt's Redstart (*Phoenicurus erythrogastrus*) Very common in the Indus valley

Great Tit (*Parus major*) Common

White-browed Tit-warbler (*Leptopoecile sophiae*) A pair was seen regularly above our camp at 3800 m!

Wallcreeper (*Tichodroma muraria*) 1 briefly

Eurasian Magpie (*Pica pica*) Common

Red-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*) Common

Yellow-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*) Scarce

Carrion Crow (*Corvus corone*) Scarce

House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) Scarce

Black-winged Snowfinch (*Montifringilla adamsi*) Scarce Small groups seen during the trek

Plain Mountain-finch (*Leucosticte nemoricola*) Scarce

Black-headed Mountain-finch (*Leucosticte brandti*) Scarce. Small groups at high altitude

Streaked Rosefinch (*Carpodacus rubicilloides*) 4 Singles at Rumbak at close range

Great Rosefinch (*Carpodacus rubicilla*) 2 males seen well in the Indus valley

Fire-fronted Serin (*Serinus pusillus*) Recorded at Hemis monastery

Delhi birds (at Delhi-Okla dam on the 13th February 2009):

Little Grebe (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*) 2 at Delhi-Okla dam

Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam

Indian Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax fuscicollis*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam

Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam

Purple Heron (*Ardea purpurea*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam

Great Egret (*Ardea alba*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam

Little Egret (*Egretta garzetta*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam

Cattle Egret (*Bubulcus ibis*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam

Indian Pond Heron (*Ardeola grayii*) 5 at Delhi-Okla dam

Black-headed Ibis (*Threskiornis melanocephalus*) 3 at Delhi-Okla dam
Indian Black Ibis (*Pseudibis papillosa*) 20 at Delhi-Okla dam
Eurasian Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*) 10 at Delhi-Okla dam
Greater Flamingo (*Phoenicopterus ruber roseus*) 10 at Delhi-Okla dam
Greylag Goose (*Anser anser*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Bar-headed Goose (*Anser indicus*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Ruddy Shelduck (*Tadorna ferruginea*) 10 at Delhi-Okla dam
Eurasian Wigeon (*Anas penelope*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Gadwall (*Anas strepera*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Spot-billed Duck (*Anas poecilorhyncha*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Northern Pintail (*Anas acuta*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*) Very Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Common Pochard (*Aythya ferina*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Ferruginous Duck (*Aythya nyroca*) 4 at Delhi-Okla dam
Tufted Duck (*Aythya fuligula*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Black-eared Kite (*Milvus migrans lineatus*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Egyptian Vulture (*Neophron percnopterus*) 1 at Delhi-Okla dam
Eurasian Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) 2 at Delhi-Okla dam
Indian Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio poliocephalus*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Common Coot (*Fulica atra*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Bronze-winged Jacana (*Metopidius indicus*) 4 at Delhi-Okla dam
Black-winged Stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
River Lapwing (*Vanellus duvaucelii*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Black-tailed Godwit (*Limosa limosa*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Wood Sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*) 2 at Delhi-Okla dam
Ruff (*Philomachus pugnax*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Brown-headed Gull (*Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Caspian Gull (*Larus cachinnans*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Feral Pigeon (*Columba livia 'feral'*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Eurasian Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Spotted Dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Yellow-footed Green Pigeon (*Treron phoenicoptera*) 3 at Delhi-Okla dam
Rose-ringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Asian Koel (*Eudynamys scolopaceus*) 1 at Delhi-Okla dam
House Swift (*Apus nipalensis*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
White-throated Kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) 4 at Delhi-Okla dam

Brown-headed Barbet (*Megalaima zeylanica*) 2 at Delhi-Okla dam
Coppersmith Barbet (*Megalaima haemacephala*) 1 at Delhi-Okla dam
Plain Martin (*Riparia paludicola*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
White-browed Wagtail (*Motacilla madaraspatensis*) 2 at Delhi-Okla dam
Yellow Wagtail (*Motacilla flava*) 4 at Delhi-Okla dam
Citrine Wagtail (*Motacilla citreola*) 2 at Delhi-Okla dam
Red-vented Bulbul [bengalensis] (*Pycnonotus cafer bengalensis*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Red-spotted Bluethroat (*Luscinia svecica svecica*) 1 at Delhi-Okla dam
Red-breasted Flycatcher (*Ficedula parva*) 2 at Delhi-Okla dam
Common Tailorbird (*Orthotomus sutorius*) 4 at Delhi-Okla dam
Yellow-bellied Prinia (*Prinia flaviventris*) 2 at Delhi-Okla dam
Ashy Prinia (*Prinia socialis*) 4 at Delhi-Okla dam
Jungle Babbler (*Turdoides striata*) 4 at Delhi-Okla dam
Purple Sunbird (*Cinnyris asiaticus*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Long-tailed Shrike (*Lanius schach*) 1 at Delhi-Okla dam
Black Drongo (*Dicrurus macrocercus*) 2 at Delhi-Okla dam
House Crow (*Corvus splendens*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Bank Myna (*Acridotheres ginginianus*) 2 at Delhi-Okla dam
Common Myna (*Acridotheres tristis*) Common at Delhi-Okla dam
Asian Pied Starling (*Gracupica contra*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
Brahminy Starling (*Temenuchus pagodarum*) 2 at Delhi-Okla dam
Common Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) Scarce at Delhi-Okla dam
House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) Scarce

Butterflies

Plain Tiger (*Danaus chrysippus*)

Short-tailed Blue (*Everes argiades*)

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