

# Ladakh - A Snow Leopard Quest

Naturetrek Tour Report

17 February – 3 March 2015

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Report compiled by Nick Acheson



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Tour Participants: Nick Acheson ( leader) and a group of Naturetrek adventurers

## Day 1

**Thursday 19th February**

For most of the group, our adventure started with an evening flight from the UK which arrived in Delhi early the next morning.

## Day 2

**Friday 20th February**

At Delhi airport we met two more members of our group. We were all then due to fly to Leh, however the flight was initially delayed and then cancelled. It was not clear when we would be able to fly but after some sterling work involving lots of phone calls by staff at the Naturetrek office in the UK, the ground agents in Delhi and the tour leader, flights were obtained with a different airline.

The soonest we could fly to Leh was the following morning, weather permitting, so we contented ourselves with a night in Delhi. Occasionally situations arise which involve changes to a tour plan. This was one of those times and thanks must go to group members for their understanding.

## Day 3

**Saturday 21st February**

The weather did permit and after an unexpected stay in Delhi (with Red-vented Bulbuls, Black Drongos, Bank Mynas and Five-striped Palm-Squirrels as extras) we made it to Leh, the city in the sky.

In the afternoon we moved along the valley of the Indus, visiting first the riverbank known as Sindhu Ghat. Here several people were washing their cars in the shallows, so we couldn't find the Ibisbills which are usually easy here. However, the buckthorn bushes along the river were busy with the quivering liver tails of White-winged Redstarts and on the river were Common Mergansers, Teal, Greenshank and Redshank.

From here we moved to Thiksay Monastery where mythical snow lions guard the entrance and a serene Maitreya Buddha towers through two storeys of a beautiful temple. Finally we drove home past Shey Monastery and witnessed a puja being performed by monks and lay folk alike.

## Day 4

**Sunday 22nd February**

The village of Ulley, beyond the confluence of the Indus and Zaskar Rivers from Leh, sits at the end of a beautiful winding valley. Approaching the valley today we met a herd of Ladakh Urial, or Red Sheep, in the rocky plain near Likker. As we reached Ulley there was snow lying quite thickly on the road and chains were needed to get us round the tight, precipitous corners.

In Ulley we waited for the cold and the snow to pass, sipping fragrant tea in Norboo's lovely wood-beamed home, accompanied all the while by our superb, friendly, always helpful naturalist guides Chosphel and Konchok. At 4,200 metres, Ulley is the highest point on our tour so it was slowly that we made our way up the ridge behind Norboo's house to scan for Asiatic Ibex .

The Ibex were easy; groups of these magnificent animals were on the slopes on either side of the great valley. Then, as we trudged further uphill, there came a shout from above us. Norboo had found the Snow Leopard which three days before had taken a young domestic Yak above the village!

Altitude was forgotten, hearts raced, and we scrambled over snow and rocks to reach Norboo. By the body of the yak she had killed and eaten sat a Snow Leopard, believed to be female, content on a full belly, resting in the first rays of the sun to penetrate the day's snow-laden clouds.

We watched her for two hours as she yawned and flicked her tail, ate snow and defecated, and rolled to face one way then the other. Finally she stood and walked a short distance, her exquisitely squiggled flank towards us, and settled almost out of view on a buttress of rock.

This cat, several hundred metres from us, commanded the vastness of a mountain valley and the focus of eleven westerners (and several Ladakhi locals) crowded around telescopes beneath her. Seeing her you joined the privileged group of souls who have seen this wildest of animals on its own terms, in its majestic landscape, when it chooses to be seen. She knew we were there and sometimes she glanced towards us with disdain in her ice-pale eyes, but she chose to be seen all the same.

## Day 5

## Monday 23rd February

With trepidation, for some, today we travelled to the Rumbak Valley in Hemis National Park. The journey began in cars, driving beyond Spituk Monastery and village to Zigchan at the bottom of the valley. From here we walked for over an hour, over the icy river, through its gorge and past the willow and poplar scrub along its banks, before reaching our camp. Lammergeiers circled above us as we went and along our way we saw our first Blue Sheep.

In camp our superb team – Angchok, Norboo, Sonam and Gyatso, plus cook Gyaltzen – quickly made us feel at home, feeding us, serving us tea and settling us into our tents.

In the afternoon we walked up the first – steep – watchpoint in the Husing Valley, close to camp. From here we scanned but saw nothing. Radios soon crackled however with the news that a naturalist guide at Lato, a little further up the Rumbak Valley, could see a Snow Leopard. We raced to the next watchpoint (to be honest it was more of a trudge than a race at this altitude). Despite much scanning and detailed descriptions from the observer at Lato the Snow Leopard was not to be seen this evening so we retreated to camp and enjoyed our first delicious supper in camp, accompanied as always by Angchok's cheeky smile.

## Day 6

## Tuesday 24th February

Today began with a Himalayan Snowcock walking on the scree high above camp, found for us by the senior Sonam, whose wit, friendliness and extraordinary eyesight would delight us throughout our stay in Hemis.

After our first warm, filling breakfast we walked to Lato and beyond in the Rumbak Gorge. Both Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs were our constant companions as we went. Over the gorge, high above the centennial nest which hangs from the cliff here, circled a Golden Eagle. We stopped at the frozen waterfall in the valley and almost reached the Rumbak Sumdo plain. On our return we saw several Large-eared Pikas in the jumble of scree above camp at Lato and many photos were taken. Just above camp we met a large flock of Brandt's Mountain-Finches, moving like flurries of snow over the rough scree on the mountainside above us.

We spent the afternoon at the second Husing watchpoint but were again unable to find a Snow Leopard.

## Day 7

## Wednesday 25th February

Early this morning many of us walked up to the first Husing watchpoint again. News reached of us of the prints of two Snow Leopards in the Rumbak Valley but the trail was lost. From our vantage point we saw Choshpel rushing back to camp from the Tarbung Valley, where he had gone early in the morning, and sharing news with Morup. Quickly we heard over the radios that he had seen a Snow Leopard so we scrambled down the rocky, dusty slope beneath us, tore past camp, yelling the news to our friends still in their tents and galloped as fast as we could down to Tarbung.

Here the uphill slopes began and, by the time we had reached the point where Choshpel had seen the Leopard, most of you were panting. As we waited in the valley it began to snow and soon it was bitterly cold. It became clear that the Snow Leopard had left, and its tracks were then found leading away into the hills. Disappointed, but excited by the chase, we walked back to camp, to be greeted by Magpies, Great Tits, Denzel the camp Yak, and our smiling, friendly camp team.

For the rest of the day it snowed and in no time our tents were buried. The dim light and slippery conditions kept us in camp where we huddled around the stove in the mess tent and drank hot tea and chocolate.

In the evening Angchok burst into the tent saying (ever polite), 'Excuse me, Snow Leopard.' No excusing was necessary. In the dusk but still clearly visible a Leopard was crossing the scree just above our camp, just a couple of hundred metres from us. With real awe we watched this exquisite animal as it went and finally as it disappeared behind an outcrop above us.

## Day 8

## Thursday 26th February

Shouting at you in your tents to throw on your clothes and see a Snow Leopard had become a Naturetrek tradition by now. Yesterday the attempt was unsuccessful but this morning the Leopard, presumed the same individual as last night, was found by Sonam right above camp before dawn, so it was with good reason that we yelled at you to pull on your fleeces and your gloves. Almost all of you made it out to see the gorgeous animal, as close as last night, walking to the top of a peak just above camp in the dawn light.

One of you sadly left us for Leh this morning, suffering from a bad cold exacerbated by altitude. The rest of us spent much of the day in camp, hoping to see our Leopard again. Golden Eagles and Lammergeiers both displayed above camp, Hill Pigeons dropped in to visit and Brown Accentors flicked along the tumbledown wall in the poplar plantation next to us, but there was no further sign of a Leopard.

In the evening we walked to Lato again with Chosphel. Suddenly he turned to me excitedly and said, 'Yes, Snow Leopard,' news which I shouted down the path to you all. More than a kilometre away, walking and sniffing along the base of a cliff at the top of the mountain above camp was a cat. Quickly though it disappeared behind the edge of the gorge so we hurtled down to the gorge's mouth where Chosphel again found the Leopard, this time perched on the ridge, surveying the vast landscape around it.

From here, intent perhaps on hunting, the Leopard bounded down the ridge, waving its magnificent tail, and disappeared into the gathering evening.

Our fourth Snow Leopard sighting. Fantastic!

## Day 9

Friday 27th February

This morning there came no news of Snow Leopards from the naturalists and scouts so, with the weather clearing for the first time since our first day, we chose to ascend the Rumbak Gorge and visit the stunning snowfield and the village at Rumbak Sumdo.

Golden Eagles and Lammergeiers circled above us as we walked and a flurry of Tibetan Snowfinches billowed over us. At the top we searched in vain for Wolves but Snowcocks flew by and landed high on the slopes and a Red Fox trotted above the frozen river. At the village we were greeted by absurdly tame Chukar and by many attractive Robin Accentors. A flock of Horned Larks, with a couple of Brandt's Mountain-Finches, moved between icy fields and the village's donkeys fought and frolicked (to put it mildly).

We took tea at the lovely Dhung homestay, where another home-made felt Snow Leopard was purchased to support the local economy. Lunch was kindly brought to us, with huge smiles, by Angchok and Norboo as we sat watching the hillsides for Wolves.

Having made our way down the valley, in the afternoon we scanned from the first Husing watchpoint, where it was very, very cold.

## Day 10

Saturday 28th February

Again this morning there was no news of a Leopard (though we were more than happy with those we had already seen), so we walked up the Husing Valley into its gorge where the techier members of the group were excited to see the BBC's camera trap, one of several around the park which are recording the lives of the Snow Leopards and other wildlife.

In the afternoon we again went up the first Husing watchpoint. Again it was brutally cold and there was no sign of a Snow Leopard.

## Day 11

## Sunday 1st March

This morning, with very mixed emotions, we left camp: happy to be taking a first step back to warmth, comfort and cleanliness, elated to have been to such a glorious place and to have seen its wildlife in the company of such generous and charming hosts, and sad to be leaving too. Our walk out was brisk and easy and reaching Zigchan we were hugely cheered by meeting Sanju from the Mahey Retreat who bore the news that our lost team member was well and (dare I admit we were perhaps even more excited by this?) that the pipes had defrosted enough for the hotel to have both hot and cold water running in its pipes. Unimagined bliss!

Leh in the afternoon seemed strange, busy, crowded, and we wandered wraithlike, some washed, some still unwashed, in search of wifi, gifts and, in most cases, sugar.

## Day 12

## Monday 2nd March

This morning we left Ladakh, though not without more flight drama. There was low cloud over the Indus Valley when, all too early, we checked in for our flight at Leh's curious vernacular airport. The cloud turned one airline's plane back to Delhi and left two more, including ours, circling in the hope of finding a gap large enough by which to land. Eventually they did so and, after our third security check (during one of which the soldier frisking me announced that I had unique knees), we boarded the plane and were whisked to the warmth and the bustle of Delhi.

Our flight arrived two hours later than planned so there was little time for exploring the city this afternoon. Instead most of you relaxed and reconnected with the world in the comfort of our fine hotel close to the airport.

## Day 13

## Tuesday 3rd March

Today was Delhi day and, in the hands of our friendly, informative guide Gaurang, we visited many of the city's most remarkable sites. We began driving through New Delhi, past the vast Presidential Palace and India Gate, and from here to the Jama Masjid (the Friday Mosque) in crazy Old Delhi. Having visited the mosque we walked through the bustling, scented lanes of Old Delhi, including Chandni Chowk, to reach the powerful Lal Qila (Red Fort) on what was once the bank of the Yamuna River. Our final stop before a late lunch was at the Rajghat where Gandhi's body was cremated, as a vast new nation mourned, in 1948.

In the afternoon, after a quixotic but delicious lunch, Gaurang took us first past India Gate again, this time slowly for photos, and finally to the remarkable Qutb Minar, bathed in golden evening light, as the Rose-ringed and Alexandrine Parakeets flew home to roost.

Today's other birds and wildlife included Five-striped Palm-Squirrels (everywhere), Jungle Babbler and Red-vented Bulbuls (likewise everywhere), Black-winged Stilts (bizarrely, in the fountain outside the Presidential Palace), great flocks of Rock Doves (being fed at the Jama Masjid) and a Purple Sunbird singing his chipper song at the Qutb Minar.

In the evening you left. Well, I left first, for Patel Nagar and the start of my Tiger Direct tour. Then you left (or I presume you did) for the airport and your homes, your minds full of the icy sights of Ladakh and her barely believable Snow Leopards.

## Thanks

Such tours as these depend on the goodwill, hard work, commitment and generosity of a host of local staff. Special thanks are due to Anit and Rajan for rescuing us from Delhi airport at the start of the tour and making sure we made it to Ladakh. Thanks must also go to Sanju and his very friendly team at the Mahey Retreat and to our three Ladakhi drivers Karma, Sonam and Lobzang. Thanks beyond the power of words to convey are owed to our superb team in Hemis: Chosphel and Konchok our naturalist guides, Gyaltzen our cook, and our camp staff Norboo, Gyatso, Sonam and Angchok. Without them all our tour would have been impossible; with them it was a joy.

It was a joy to travel with you too. Thank you, very sincerely, for the laughter we shared (sometimes too much for our altitude-punished lungs to bear), for your constant enthusiasm and interest even when it was very cold or when there was nothing much to see, and for the respect with which you explored Ladakh's extraordinary wild landscapes and approached her lovely, generous people. Come again: one trip to see Snow Leopards is never enough

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## Species Lists

### Mammals

Ladakh Urial *Ovis orientalis vignei*: Small flocks of these lovely animals were seen well on our journeys to and from Ulley.

Blue Sheep *Pseudois nayaur*: Though not as common as in previous years, seen frequently and very well around our camp in Rumbak and in surrounding valleys. Often on the slope across the river above our tents.

Asiatic (Siberian) Ibex *Capra sibirica sakeen*: Seen in numbers on slopes on both sides of the beautiful village of Ulley.

Large-eared Pika *Ochotona macrotis*: These impossibly beautiful animals were seen and photographed at very close range on the extensive scree slopes at Lato in the base of the Rumbak Gorge.

Woolly Hare *Lepus oiostolus*: Our reliable Woolly Hare was again present in the poplar plantation which runs through camp, at the confluence of the Rumbak and Husing Valleys.

Snow Leopard *Panthera uncia*: This year we had four sightings of the Snow Leopard, each in its way wonderful. The first, and most clearly seen, was in Ulley on a domestic Yak kill. I had been told, in advance, that we would not see as it had left the kill site but was delighted that it returned. We had three encounters in camp in the Rumbak Valley, one animal (probably the same individual) seen in the dusk one evening on a slope above us and again the following dawn (how you loved being hauled out of your tents for that). Our last encounter was a brilliant find by Chosphel: an extremely distant animal on a mountain-crest, silhouetted as it surveyed the vastness of its wild, magnificent landscape.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*: One individual of this densely-furred subspecies was seen trotting over a snowy slope as we reached Rumbak Sumdo on our visit to Rumbak Village.

### Birds

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: One flock at Shey Marshes.

Teal *Anas crecca*: A pair on the Indus River at Sindhu Ghat.

Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*: On the Indus at Sindhu Ghat and on our journey to Ulley.

Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture) *Gypaetus barbatus*: Commonly seen in Hemis National Park.

Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis*: One seen once over camp in the Rumbak Valley.

Hen Harrier *Circus cyaneus*: One seen in the Indus Valley between Choglamsar and Shey. A scarce winter visitor to the region.

Upland Buzzard *Buteo hemilasius*: Seen once in the Indus Valley.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*: Seen commonly in a variety of plumages over the valleys of Hemis National Park.

Saker *Falco cherrug*: One seen over Thiksay Monastery in the Indus Valley.

Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis*: Seen several times in the valleys of Hemis National Park. Numerous individuals seen at Rumbak Sumdo on our one visit.

Chukar *Alectoris chukar*: Common around camp in the Rumbak Valley and especially numerous in the village of Rumbak.

Greenshank *Tringa nebularia*: On the Indus at Sindhu Ghat.

Redshank *Tringa tetanus*: Also on the Indus at Sindhu Ghat.

Coot *Fulica atra*: Present at Shey Marshes in the Indus Valley.

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*: Common around Leh and the monasteries of the Indus Valley.

Hill Pigeon *Columba rupestris*: A group of these beautiful birds inhabited our camp in the Rumbak Valley, often roosting right above our tents.



Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris*: A flock was seen around Rumbak village in Hemis National Park.

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*: Seen on a small stream close to the Mahey Retreat in Leh.

Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes*: Seen several times in scrub along the frozen river through camp in the Rumbak Valley.

Robin Accentor *Prunella rubeculoides*: Commonly seen around Leh and in Hemis National Park, especially around the village of Rumbak.

Brown Accentor *Prunella fulvescens*: Less obvious than the previous species but seen several times in Hemis National Park.

White-browed Tit-Warbler *Leptopoeile sophiae*: This gorgeous but shy bird was seen several times in scrub along the frozen river through camp, usually in the company of the much showier Great Tit.

White-winged Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogaster*: Abundant in buckthorn scrub along the Indus.

Great Tit *Parus major*: Very common both in Leh and around camp in the Rumbak Valley.

Maggie *Pica pica*: Very common everywhere.

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*: Very commonly seen both around Leh and in Hemis National Park.

Yellow-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus*: Flocks of these lovely, buoyant birds were seen several times in the Rumbak Valley, particularly above Lato.

Brandt's Mountain-Finch *Leucosticte brandti*: A flock was present around Lato above camp and a pair was seen in Rumbak Village.

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*: Common in Leh and in the Indus Valley.