

# Ladakh - A Snow Leopard Quest

Naturetrek Tour Report

16 February - 1 March 2017

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Snow Leopard by Clive Turnbull

Report compiled by Sujan Chatterjee  
Image courtesy of Clive Turnbull



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Tour participants: Sujan Chatterjee (leader) with nine Naturetrek clients.

## Summary

A Snow Leopard quest is by no means an easy trip. High altitude, freezing conditions and camping outdoors ... it's a combination all the rough in the world. But the rewards can be extraordinary. This year, in February 2017, we had sightings of the Snow Leopard every day of the trek. In and around Leh, we saw the Ibisbill, the Gldenstdt's Redstarts (also known as White-winged Redstarts) and the Mongolian Finches. On one of our day trips we also found Urials close to the road, and several Siberian Ibex up on the mountain slopes near Ulley. After acclimatisation, we camped at Zinchen valley for a week. We had a call from Rumbak the first afternoon and we had rushed four kilometres to see our first Snow Leopard through heavily falling snow. On the second day, we witnessed a secret kill from a distance, a rush of Blue Sheep and later a dead Blue Sheep in a gully. We also saw the female Leopard up close on the rocks. She stayed for next three days, closely guarding her kill and keeping it warm under her belly. In between, we saw a lot of Pikas and the most beautiful Mountain weasel. White-browed Tit-warblers and Chukar Partridges kept us company around the camp. We also had a surprise visitor in form of a Red Fox. We then saw a male Snow Leopard close to our camp. He gave us great views, while he walked on top of the distant ridge, scraping the ground at places, scent marking the stones and even rolling around on the snow. Once he actually slipped, going head over heels on the snow. On the last day, we had this male Leopard on the ridge above us. But there was surprise ... he had a female following him. He sat patiently and waited for the female to catch up. The duo disappeared behind the ridge in the glowing morning light as a grand finale of our trip.

## Day 1

Thursday 16th February

The group members were in flight to Dehli, via Dubai.

## Day 2

Friday 17th February

At 2.40am this morning most of us reached Delhi from Dubai. We were due to board our 6.30am flight to Leh but the weather conditions at Leh delayed our flight by an hour. The flight to Leh in winter is a psychological preparation for Hemis National Park, passing, as it does, over the astonishingly vast snow- and mountain-scape of the Himalaya. The banking and swerving of the plane to find the runway between high peaks was equally thrilling in their unique way.

At Leh we were met by cold fresh air and a warm greeting from Morup, one of our ground team. We were soon settled in to the Mahey Retreat, our base for the next three days. The snow-clad Stok Kangri range across the Indus Valley from the hotel was magnificent.

In the afternoon, we went for a short walk near the hotel and added a flock of Mongolian Finches and Plain Mountain Finches feeding in a field. We then drove up the Shanti stupa with our Guide Jigmet. We spent some time taking in the breath-taking view of the snow-clad mountains fringing the Leh valley.

## Day 3

### Saturday 18th February

Today we travelled to the village of Ulley, along a spectacularly varied and dramatic road, past the confluence of the Indus and Zaskar Rivers and the villages of Nimmu and Likir. The first wildlife sighting was a herd of six Ladakh Urials. We were lucky to get them close to the road. Next was a pair of Blue Sheep, spotted by one car. We stopped to photograph the frozen Zaskar river where we saw our first Golden Eagle. Then we stopped at a location where we found Asiatic Ibex. They were distant but we got great views of them. As we approached Ulley, we spotted several more Snow Leopard spotters. We were told that a kill happened a few days ago, but the wolves had polished off the carcass. We found the remains, very close to the road... just a few bones of a male Ibex. While scanning the mountain sides we found a flock of 4 Himalayan Snowcocks.

As we drove to our highest altitude of the trip (4,200 metres, above the village of Ulley) we met lots of Chukar and several White-winged Redstarts. We had a picnic lunch up here in a villager's hut as we watched a distant group of Asiatic Ibex (Sakeen) in mountains around us. We also found three very obliging Robin Accentors in the dung pile of the cattle shed. On our way back, we searched and searched for wolves but we found a Red Fox instead, sleeping in a rocky den. We also saw a flock of Snow Pigeons.

## Day 4

### Sunday 19th February

We went looking for Ibisbill today. Near Choglamsar bridge we found five birds along with few Greenshanks, a pair of Redshanks and Green Sandpipers. The weather turned after that. As we went further looking for Solitary Snipe, we had some good snow fall. We next visited the Thikse Monastery where Jigmet took us through the monastery, explaining in details the life of a Buddhist. From the rooftop of Thikse we spotted a flock of Tibetan Snowfinches (also known as Black-winged Snowfinches) and a Great Rosefinch. On the way out, we saw three Brown Accentors.

Our next stop was the Shey Gompa, formerly a palace of the Ladakhi royal family. The lake across the gompa had Mallard, Gadwall, Pintail, Coots and Carrion Crows. After lunch, we reached the flag-festooned footbridge to Palam, to look for Solitary Snipe. The Solitary Snipe was not in this afternoon but there were lots of White-winged Redstarts and Black-throated Thrushes.

## Day 5

### Monday 20th February

We had some heavy snowfall this morning, and the hotel ground was covered in white fluff. But we were ready to move with our scopes, sleeping bags, base layers and down jackets. We drove for an hour to the trailhead at Zinchen, past Spituk Gompa. We then gently walked for half an hour into the Rumbak Valley. We spotted our first Blue Sheep (Shapo) as we walked. As we reached camp, we were greeted by Hill Pigeons, Cinereous Tits and White-browed Tit-warbler. Our ever-smiling camp staff and Denzel the stud Yak patiently waited for our arrival.

After some lunch, we decided to go and see some Blue Sheep seen close to the road in the valley. The sky was overcast and the path full of ice. We reached the place where we photographed a herd of Blue

Sheep grazing peacefully. But peace was broken as the radio crackled. A Snow Leopard (a Shan) had been sighted a few kilometres inside the park. We rushed off, unprepared, in search of the animal. We struggled hard to reach the spot at Wualumpa opposite Tebzing, as we were still not so well acclimatised. We skated over the frozen river and were rewarded by a distant view of the Grey Ghost. She walked in the falling snow across the scree over the ridge.

Tea arrived behind us and, after we had rehydrated ourselves, we started to turn back. As we watched a Woolly Hare feed off a bush, one of us took a fall on the ice. Then another one.... nothing broken. We carried on trudging through the falling snow and icy track. Unfortunately, disaster struck close to camp. One of us took a fall broke a wrist. Splints were put in place by our two vets and some horse bandages came in handy too.

## Day 6

**Tuesday 21st February**

It had snowed heavily at night. The campsite was completely white with Woolly Hare and Fox tracks all over the place. After breakfast Jigmet took the duo to Leh to get the wrist set, while the rest trekked up to Tebzing valley through thick ice and snow to a viewing place. Several scopes were set up already by many teams. A Snow Leopard had been seen there that morning. We waited patiently for something to happen. Lunch arrived and we fell on it like hungry wolves.

A shout from Sonam got our attention. He has spotted a cat on the slopes. We all peeled our eyes and watched it disappear behind the rocks. Suddenly a herd of Blue Sheep ran down from below the Snow Leopard and came down to the frozen river. A kill must have happened. The cat kept appearing over the rocks several times. It kept pacing up and down the slopes, which was unusual. Some of the spotters decided to investigate. They walked about a kilometre and confirmed that there was a kill. The crowd made a dash for it and we trekked on the snow to the location. The dead Blue Sheep had fallen down a crevasse and the Snow Leopard was sitting up on the rocks pretending to be asleep. We got some good shots and then decided to head back to base, as the Leopard decided to remain static. At Base, the duo was back with the wrist set in place and ready for action.

Our second day of Snow Leopard sightings.

## Day 7

**Wednesday 22nd February**

Today the team split up. Some of us walked to Tebzing again in search of the Snow Leopard while some walked up Rumbak Gorge, in search of Large-eared Pikas (Zabra in Ladakhi) in the jagged rocks and Blue Sheep, which grazed very close to the path. We had great views of both Red-billed and Alpine (Yellow-billed) Choughs on the cliffs, and overhead were Golden Eagles, looping above their magnificent stick nests.

Both teams were rewarded. The trek team got their Snow Leopard. The kill had been dragged up the slope and partly eaten. All day she stayed close to the kill eating it intermittently.

For the Pika team there were rewards too. As Pikas started popping up at different locations, a Mountain Weasel appeared to entertain us. It went hunting for Pikas, diving down into the Pika holes

at very high speed and appearing at various places. It even got chased by Tit-warblers. After about 20 minutes it tried one of its trance dances on the snow before it disappeared. We then headed back to camp for some delicious food from the kitchen tent, served by Stanzin and Angchok.

Late in the evening we heard Fox (Watse in Ladakhi) close to our camp. A third day of Snow Leopard sightings.

## Day 8

Thursday 23rd February

This morning, even the wet wipes and toothpaste were frozen. The reported temperature was  $-25^{\circ}\text{C}$  at Rumbak Valley homestay, and we clocked  $-18^{\circ}\text{C}$  at our campsite, with  $-7^{\circ}\text{C}$  inside our tent! While one team targeted the female Snow Leopard with the kill, the rest of us spent most of today in the Tarbung Valley, searching distant hillsides for signs of a cat. As we climbed, a large herd of Blue Sheep (Bharal) came down the slope and the majestic males stood against the sky with their big horns glistening in the sun. A Red Fox rushed up the snowy slope giving all a quick view of the red fur coat. Later we found tracks of a Snow Leopard in the snow. It had walked uphill dragging its tail behind it.

After lunch, we got a radio message of a Snow Leopard heading toward our campsite. We rushed down to a vantage point but, unfortunately, we did not find it. Instead, Tibetan Snow Finches and the Brown Accentors kept us entertained for a while. However, the first team had been successful in seeing the female Snow Leopard again – the fourth day.

## Day 9

Friday 24th February

It was another cold morning, but true grit was shown when all decided to visit the lady with kill. So off we went, trudging in the snow and ice and found her lying on the kill, keeping it thawed. We waited long hours while she slept. Himalayan Vultures (also known as Himalayan Griffons) and Upland Buzzards flew over us intermittently. Eventually, she moved and stretched, and gave us some good views as she came up on a rock to sit.

## Day 10

Saturday 25th February

It was slightly warmer today. Before even we had our shoes on, a shout from good old Sonam, got us scrambling towards the kitchen. A Snow Leopard had come walking along the Tarzing Valley and sat on a rock which resembled a samosa. We had enough time to put up our scopes, and the male Snow Leopard whose tracks we had seen two days before, sat there watching. He then got up and scraped the ground, marking his territory. He sat again, and walked again, scraped another time and then decided to walk along the slope, down in the valley. A few Blue Sheep looked down anxiously into the valley. What a sight it was.....Another day of snow leopard, and a different one too.

After breakfast, some of us decided to return to the Pika site and some stayed back surveying the slopes. A group of four Blue Sheep on a high slope kept us very eager by looking down at something and stamping their feet. But after some time, they disappeared from sight. Some of us decided to take a

snooze while some finished off the Douglas Adam book. At the Pika place a Saker Falcon was seen, being harried by the choughs. It was possibly just arriving into the region to breed this summer.

## Day 11

**Sunday 26th February**

We woke to a call from Sonam: two Leopards had been seen. The male from the day before was walking along the slope above us, this time followed by a female. He stopped now and then to look behind, as if to see if she was catching up or not. They rested at places and walked along the ridge, and eventually disappeared behind the ridge. What a send-off it was for our team!

We packed our stuff and the mule train brought them down to the road head. Back at Leh, after washing with some hot water, we took a walk in the town square, buying a few gifts and souvenirs.

## Day 12

**Monday 27th February**

We took an 8.30am flight this morning from Leh to Delhi, over the white mountains of Ladakh and the forested slopes of Himachal. After checking in and freshening up, we took a ride to the Connaught Place for lunch.

## Day 13

**Tuesday 28th February**

This morning we drove to Najafgarh, near Sultapur. It took us long time to make it there but the bird life was good and we saw masses of Greater Flamingos, snipe, geese, and waders.

After our farewell dinner at the hotel, we said goodbye to each other. Our flights were at different times and some were staying on for an extension. Our Snow Leopard Quest had been an amazing experience.

## Day 14

**Wednesday 1st March**

Those returning to the UK landed in London.

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## Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	Leh	Ulley	Leh	Hemis	Hemis	Hemis	Hemis	Hemis	Hemis	Hemis/Leh
			February									
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
1	Siberian or Asiatic Ibex	<i>Capra sibirica</i>		✓								
2	Ladakh Urial	<i>Ovis orientalis vignei</i>		✓								
3	Blue Sheep	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		✓					✓			
5	Snow Leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	2
6	Woolly Hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>				✓				✓		✓
7	Large-eared Pika	<i>Ochotona macrotis</i>				✓	✓	✓			✓	
9	Mountain Weasel	<i>Mustela altaica</i>						✓				

## Birds

1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>			✓							
2	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>			✓							
3	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>			✓							
4	Great Egret	<i>Ardea alba</i>			✓							
5	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓							
6	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>			✓							
7	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>			✓							
8	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>			✓							
9	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>			✓							
10	Common Merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>				✓						
11	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>										✓
12	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
13	Himalayan Vulture (Griffon)	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>					✓				✓	✓
14	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓
15	Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>								✓		✓
16	Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>								✓		
17	Himalayan Snowcock	<i>Tetraogallus himalayensis</i>		✓					✓			
18	Chukar	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
19	Ibisbill	<i>Ibidorhyncha struthersii</i>			✓							
20	Hill Pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
21	Snow Pigeon	<i>Columba leuconota</i>		✓				✓	✓			
22	Eurasian Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo bubo</i>							✓			
23	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			✓							
24	Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓	✓							
25	Robin Accentor	<i>Prunella rubeculoides</i>		✓		✓	✓		✓			
26	Brown Accentor	<i>Prunella fulvescens</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
27	Black-throated Thrush	<i>Turdus atrogularis</i>			✓							
28	White-browed Tit-warbler	<i>Leptopoecile sophiae</i>				✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
29	Güldenstädt's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus erythrogastrus</i>		✓	✓							✓
30	Cinereous Tit	<i>Parus cinereus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
31	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>	✓	✓	✓							
33	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

	Common name	Scientific name	Leh	Ulley	Leh	Hemis	Hemis	Hemis	Hemis	Hemis	Hemis	Hemis/Leh
			February									
			17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26
34	Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>			✓							
35	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>									✓	
36	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>		✓	✓							
37	Tibetan Snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla adamsi</i>			✓			✓	✓		✓	
38	Plain Mountain Finch	<i>Leucosticte nemoricola</i>	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓			
39	Mongolian Finch	<i>Bucanetes mongolicus</i>	✓	✓	✓							
40	Brandt's Mountain Finch	<i>Leucosticte brandti</i>	✓						✓			
41	Great Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus rubicilla</i>			✓							
42	Red-fronted (Fire-fronted) Serin	<i>Serinus pusillus</i>			✓							

## Birds recorded at Najafgarh on 28th February

Common Name	Scientific Name	Comments (LO leader only)
Bar-headed Goose	<i>Anser indicus</i>	
Indian Spot-billed Duck	<i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i>	
Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	
Green-winged Teal (Common Teal)	<i>Anas carolinensis</i>	
Indian Peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>	
Black Francolin -- Heard only	<i>Francolinus francolinus</i>	
Greater Flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	
Woolly-necked Stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>	
Painted Stork	<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>	
Little Cormorant	<i>Microcarbo niger</i>	
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	
Purple Heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>	
Eastern Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus coromandus</i>	
Black-headed Ibis	<i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i>	
Red-naped Ibis (Indian Black Ibis)	<i>Pseudibis papillosa</i>	
Black-winged Kite (Black-shouldered Kite)	<i>Elanus caeruleus</i>	
Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	
Western Marsh Harrier	<i>Circus aeruginosus</i>	
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	
Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>	
Sarus Crane	<i>Grus antigone</i>	
Common Crane	<i>Grus grus</i>	
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	
Northern Lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>	
Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	
White-tailed Lapwing	<i>Vanellus leucurus</i>	
Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	
Little Stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	
Jack Snipe	<i>Lymnocyptes minimus</i>	Was seen feeding in the mud

Common Name	Scientific Name	Comments (LO leader only)
Common Snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	
Marsh Sandpiper	<i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	
Greater Coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>	
Common Hawk-Cuckoo	<i>Hierococcyx varius</i>	LO Heard only
Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	
White-throated Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	
Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	
Brown-headed Barbet (Large Green Barbet)	<i>Psilopogon zeylanicus</i>	LO
Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	
Isabelline Shrike	<i>Lanius isabellinus</i>	
Long-tailed Shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>	
Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	
Oriental Skylark	<i>Alauda gulgula</i>	
Grey-throated Martin (Plain Martin)	<i>Riparia chinensis</i>	
Wire-tailed Swallow	<i>Hirundo smithii</i>	
Graceful Prinia	<i>Prinia gracilis</i>	
Yellow-bellied Prinia	<i>Prinia flaviventris</i>	
Ashy Prinia	<i>Prinia socialis</i>	
Plain Prinia	<i>Prinia inornata</i>	
Large Grey Babbler	<i>Turdoides malcolmi</i>	
Indian Robin	<i>Copsychus fulicatus</i>	
Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	
Pied Bush Chat	<i>Saxicola caprata</i>	
Brown Rock Chat (Indian Chat)	<i>Oenanthe fusca</i>	
Pied Myna (Asian Pied Starling)	<i>Gracupica contra</i>	
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	
Bank Myna	<i>Acridotheres ginginianus</i>	
Purple Sunbird	<i>Cinnyris asiaticus</i>	
Western Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>	
Citrine Wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>	
Paddyfield Pipit	<i>Anthus rufulus</i>	
Sind Sparrow	<i>Passer pyrrhonotus</i>	
Indian Silverbill (White-throated Munia)	<i>Euodice malabarica</i>	