

Ladakh - A Snow Leopard Quest (Camping)

Naturetrek Tour Report

14 - 27 February 2019



Snow Leopard



Thiksey Monastery

Report & images by Durgesh Singh



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Highlights:

This Snow Leopard Quest camping tour was exciting with good wildlife sightings in Ladakh. We got a bird's eye view of Leh from Shanti Stupa and met the people involved in Snow Leopard conservation on the first day. Our visit to Thiksey Monastery & Shey Palace was an enlightening experience where we got to know more about Tibetan Buddhism. We also saw a good number of Ibisbill, Guldenstadt's Redstart and a single Solitary Snipe on the Indus River! Our visit to Ullay yielded Asiatic Ibex, Urials & birds like Robin Accentor, Brandt's Mountain Finch, Chukar and we got to photograph some stunning landscapes on the way. We saw one Snow Leopard on the very first day of reaching Rumbak in Hemis National Park. We were lucky to see it within 600 metres and the sighting lasted for an hour and a half. Apart from that we also got to see two pairs of Tibetan Wolves, Red Fox, numerous Bharals and Woolly hares in the Rumbak area. We visited one of the local homes in Rumbak village during a trek and got a chance to interact with the locals. Birds like Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Upland Buzzard, White-browed Tit Warbler, Tibetan Partridge, Red-billed Chough, Horned Lark and Himalayan Snowcock were the highlights during our stay. We saw a Lammergeier digging up a kill of a Woolly Hare from snow & feeding on it! Overall it was a very successful trip!

Day 1

Thursday 14th February

Travel to India

Day 2

Friday 15th February

The group arrived in Delhi airport in the late evening and proceeded to check in for their connecting flight to Leh at 4am. We all reached Leh at 8.30am and were received by Dorje at the airport. We went to our hotel, the Mahey Residency, and went straight to breakfast, after which a rest was necessary after a long journey, so we went to rest until lunchtime. As everyone was feeling good at lunch we went for a short walk.

Afterwards we went to visit the Snow Leopard Conservancy where we interacted with the volunteers working on the Snow Leopards of Ladakh. We then went to Shanti Stupa which is perched on a hill top overlooking the Leh city. We enjoyed a bird's eye view of the whole landscape and went to visit the Leh market. After a short visit there, we went back to our hotel and rested till dinner. After dinner we had a briefing about tomorrow and then went to bed.

Day 3

Saturday 16th February

We had our breakfast at 8am and everyone had had a good night's rest. We started our day visit at 9 am. We first went to Sindhu Ghat where we looked for Ibisbills and we were successful in seeing four of this sought-after species. Apart from that we also spotted Green Sandpiper, Guldenstadt's Redstart, Greenshank, Red-breasted Flycatcher, Eurasian Magpie etc. We then went to Shey marshes and saw good number of Mallards and a Large-billed Crow. We looked for Solitary Snipe but did not see one in the area. We then went to one of the bridges on the River Indus close to Shey and saw the Snipe hidden among the rocks.

After this we went to have lunch, and Dorje, our wildlife spotter, very kindly invited us to his home and we had tea there. We then visited Thiksey Monastery and Tonyot, our guide explained us about Tibetan Buddhism and the history of the monastery during the visit. We went to have some tea in the Monastery's kitchen after the visit which was really refreshing. We even enjoyed a very good view of the area from the Monastery's rooftop where Tonyot pointed out some important buildings of the area. After Thiksey, we drove to Shey Palace and walked up to the monastery. After visiting the temple, Tonyot bid us goodbye and we came back to our hotel in Leh. We did the checklist at dinner and then retired for the night.

Day 4

Sunday 17th February

We had an earlier start today at 8.30 am after breakfast. We were going to Ullay to spot some wildlife and to test our acclimatisation as we were going to touch 4,200 metres during the visit. We were joined by another Dorje who was going to be our second wildlife spotter for the trip. After driving out of Leh we spotted a few flocks of small birds which were Brandt's Mountain Finch. On the hillside we spotted our first Urials but they were at a distance. After a few kilometres we saw 15+ Urials on a hillside and close to Basgo we saw 30+ Chukar close to the road. As we climbed higher, the whole landscape turned whiter with recent snow having fallen in the area. We spotted our first Asiatic Ibex, although it was at a huge distance. After passing through Ullay village we went to a higher spot and scanned the area. Not much was seen except for a distant female Ibex.

We came back to the village for lunch and while we were there we spotted three male and three female Ibex through the scope and at better distance. In the village we saw lot of Chukar and Robin Accentors. After lunch we started driving back to Leh, and close to Saspochey we met a group who were scanning for Snow Leopard as one had been sighted by a villager in the morning. We also stopped and scanned but didn't have any success. Close to Likir we saw a group of Urials grazing closer to the road. After scanning the area for some reported Wolves, without success, we left for Leh. We had an early dinner today as we were starting the camping part of the tour the next day.

Day 5

Monday 18th February

We had our breakfast by 8.30am and were ready to set off to our campsite by 9am. On the way we stopped briefly to scan the area near Spituk where we found Mallards and Guldenstadt's Redstart. We reached Jingchan by 10.30am and got ready for the trek to Rumbak Sumdo, our campsite. Our luggage was loaded onto the ponies and we started the trek. Blue Sheep were spotted close to the road and we saw a few birds like Eurasian Magpie, Chough, Redstarts etc on the way. The frozen river near to Husing was a tricky one to cross.

By 12.30pm we reached the campsite and after some rest we had our lunch. Then news of a Snow Leopard being sighted in Tebzing valley got us on our toes again and we started to walk towards the sighting area. It was not an easy walk to do as we were constantly climbing to a higher altitude and parts of the path were quite frozen. We saw herds of Blue Sheep, Golden Eagle and Lammergeiers on the way but we had a single-minded focus of seeing the Grey Ghost of the Himalayas. After two hours of constant trekking we reached the spot where more people and spotters were already looking at the elusive cat. It was really exciting to see the Snow Leopard which to our good fortune was resting on a mountain top. After some time it turned to face us and sat down giving us a very good view. We watched the leopard for couple of hours and then left the spot to get back to our campsite

before dark. We reached the campsite by 6.30pm and rested. Dinner was served and we crawled into our tents by 8.30pm.

Day 6

Tuesday 19th February

We had a little snowfall overnight. After having tea in bed, we crawled out of our tents to enjoy a morning at the camp. Breakfast was served by 7.30am, and then we waited for the snowfall to ease and walked out of our camp area looking for wildlife. After 20 minutes, we saw couple of Magpies chasing a Red Fox down in the river area. They constantly followed the Fox and we had a good sighting of the animal. Finally tired from the constant mobbing the fox decided to rest under a bush. We also saw a Golden Eagle perched up on a hill and a Lammergeier soar past it. A big group of Blue Sheep were spotted high on a mountain and we kept scanning the area for any possible sighting of another Snow Leopard. A few Tibetan Partridges were also spotted close to the camp.

We came back to our dining tent as the snowfall started to pick up again. After lunch we rested for sometime and went out as some more Tibetan Partridges were spotted close to the camp. At 3pm we went to the scanning area close to the camp where a team of spotters including ours were scanning the mountain slopes for any wildlife. We saw Himalayan Griffon, Lammergeier, Golden Eagles, Tibetan Snowfinch, Himalayan Snowcock and Blue Sheep during our stay. The wind started to pick up and chilled us to our bones, so at 6pm we left for our camp and warmed ourselves up in the dining tent. We had our dinner and called it a day by 8pm.

Day 7

Wednesday 20th February

It turned out to be a freezing night, possibly touching -20 or -25 degrees C. Everyone woke up freezing and hurried towards the dining tent where the gas heater was switched on. It took an hour for the sun to come up and we had our breakfast in the meantime. We saw some Himalayan Snowcock and Blue sheep from the camp and we then started walking towards Rumbak village. We stopped and scanned at a few vantage points for any wildlife signs. We saw Streaked Rosefinch, Robin Accentors and Chukars in the village. After going through the village we went into an open valley where we saw a couple of Woolly Hares. We rested there for a while our pair of spotters kept on scanning the area around us.

On our way back we visited a local house which belonged to the second Dorje, where we enjoyed some tea and got a chance to interact with Dorje's older brother and mother in the house. We came back to camp and had our lunch, after which we went to the scanning spot above our campsite. We saw an Upland Buzzard crossing the valley and later saw a Northern Goshawk. One of the spotters spotted a pair of wolves and we had a good view of them till they moved into Tebzing valley. There was no sign of any Snow Leopards in the area, so eventually we came back to the camp for dinner and rest.

Day 8

Thursday 21st February

Around midnight heavy snow started falling in the valley. We could hear it from inside of our tents and by the morning there was quite a bit of snow around. Our camp staff were busy getting the snow off our tents and clearing the pathways. It started getting heavier and we stayed in the dining tent. We thought of going out after

breakfast but we couldn't get far and we returned back to the camp. White-browed Tit Warblers were seen close to a bust near to our campsite. We stayed in the dining tent and some of us started reading just to pass the hours.

By afternoon it became windier and the snow became even heavier, reducing visibility to virtually zero, and we had no option but stayed indoors. We had all our three meals & tea sitting in the camp. It was really frustrating and it continued to snow the whole night. We just hoped for a clear day tomorrow and went off to our tents.

Day 9

Friday 22nd February

The snowfall continued until early morning after which, to our great relief, we had a clear day. After breakfast we went to the scanning area and kept scanning the slopes around the valley. The snow was quite deep and we saw Blue Sheep mostly moving through the snowy slopes. We had a good sighting of a Woolly Hare and a Lammergeier later.

We had our lunch at the scanning spot but there was not much wildlife to be seen in the area. We came back by 5.30pm to the camp and had our dinner.

Day 10

Saturday 23rd February

A clear night led to a freezing cold morning today. Most of the liquids and wet wipes in our tents had frozen and it took couple of hours for us to get back to normal! Once the sun came up we walked towards Yurutse Sumdo. The path was frozen and wet in places making walking quite difficult at times. We spotted some Tibetan Partridge close by, and then a distant scan revealed a dead male Blue Sheep in the snow. Our spotters went deep into Tebzing valley to confirm the kill but found no signs of Snow Leopard in the area, so most likely the kill was made by wolves.

We had our lunch delivered to us and Blue Sheep were grazing on the slopes above us while we ate. We headed back to our scanning spot after lunch. We saw the trail of a fox which had carried its kill, most likely a partridge, on the way back. We scanned around from our spot above the camp, but nothing significant was spotted today. We came back to the camp at sunset and rested.

Day 11

Sunday 24th February

Dorje shouting woke us up this morning! We rushed to the scanning point where a pair of wolves was spotted at a distance. We had a good sighting of the pair before they disappeared. We had our tea there and were really thrilled as it was our last morning and we had seen something good before leaving the camp. We started for Jingchan after breakfast and it took us couple of hours to reach our vehicles. In the meantime the camp staff packed everything and walked with the ponies to the road.

After thanking the camp staff we left for Leh. The whole landscape had changed since we left a week ago. The snowfall which we had experienced was amongst the heaviest in the last 20 years! We thanked our luck to see the Snow Leopard on our very first day and reached our hotel in an hour. After a quick lunch, we went to our rooms for a long awaited hot shower. We rested till the evening and met for dinner to celebrate our last evening in Leh.

Day 12

Monday 25th February

After breakfast, we left for the airport. After thanking the drivers and the guides, the group left to catch their flight to Delhi, which was delayed due to weather conditions in Leh but it eventually landed and then left for Delhi.

Day 13

Tuesday 26th February

The group left to go sightseeing in Delhi in the afternoon and came back for dinner in the hotel. Around midnight they left for the airport for the flight back to the UK.

Day 14

Wednesday 27th February

The group left for London and arrived back after an exciting adventure in Ladakh. The main target species had been seen on our first day in the mountains, and despite the very changeable weather, we all agreed that the trip had been a fantastic experience.

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Species Lists

Mammals (✓=recorded but not counted; H = heard only)

	Common name	Scientific name	February										
			15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25
1	Asiatic Ibex	<i>Capra ibex</i>		✓									
2	Ladakh Urial	<i>Ovis vignei</i>		✓									
3	Blue Sheep	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
4	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>					✓						
5	Snow Leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>				✓							
6	Woolly Hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>						✓		✓	✓		
7	Tibetan Wolf	<i>Canis lupus chanco</i>						✓				✓	

BIRDS

1	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓		✓							
2	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
3	Himalayan Griffon	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>					✓						
4	Northern Goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>						✓		✓			
5	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
6	Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>						✓	✓				
7	Peregrine Falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>			✓								
8	Himalayan Snowcock	<i>Tetraogallus himalayensis</i>					✓	✓		✓	✓		
9	Chukar	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
10	Ibisbill	<i>Ibidorhyncha struthersii</i>		✓									
11	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓							✓
12	Hill Pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>					✓	✓		✓	✓		
13	Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>								✓	✓		
14	Robin Accentor	<i>Prunella rubeculoides</i>	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
15	Brown Accentor	<i>Prunella fulvescens</i>	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
16	White-browed Tit-warbler	<i>Leptopoeile sophiae</i>						✓	✓	✓			
17	White-winged Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus erythrogaster</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓							✓
18	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓			
19	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
20	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>								✓	✓	✓	
21	Yellow-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					✓
22	Black-winged Snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla adamsi</i>					✓	✓					
23	Plain Mountain-finch	<i>Leucosticte nemoricola</i>								✓			✓
24	Red-fronted Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus puniceus</i>						✓					
25	Fire-fronted Serin	<i>Serinus pusillus</i>					✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	
26	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>		✓									
27	Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>		✓									
28	Red-breasted Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>		✓									
29	Solitary Snipe	<i>Gallinago solitaria</i>		✓									
30	Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>		✓									
31	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓	✓								
32	Brandt's Mountain Finch	<i>Leucosticte brandti</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓					