

Snow Leopards and Wildlife of Ladakh Tour Report 2025

13 May 2025

by János Oláh

We operate many tours to this remarkable country, but this particular one, to the remote corner of India, into the border state of Ladakh, is a very special one! We seek out some amazing birds during the tour, but our main target is a fantastic mammal: the Snow Leopard! Ladakh holds an estimated 450 of these magnificent cats and Hemis National Park is certainly one of the best places in the world to come across one (if not the very best). This area has slowly become the place to see the Grey Ghost, gaining in popularity over the last 20 years and nowadays it is almost guaranteed to find this once-mythical beast due to the amazing people connected in a fine network. Snow Leopard tourism has become an important part of Ladakh tourism. We have been operating tours to see Snow Leopards since 2013 and our team on the ground is one of the most experienced. Jigmet Dadul is our guide, and when he is not conducting tours, he is working for Snow Leopard Conservancy, practically dedicating his life to protecting the Snow Leopards.

Our 2025 tour was a great success as per usual as we had nine sightings of twelve different Snow Leopards being in habitat for only ten days. We watched Snow Leopards for 514 minutes in total, which is more than 8 hours! We also witnessed two unsuccessful hunts, one which ended with a chase, but the Blue Sheep got away on both occasions! Our remarkable success was partly because of weather – as the day before the tour start there was a 25cm snowfall – but mainly because of our first-class spotters and team! During the first ten days we not only saw many Snow Leopards but also saw the main prey such as Blue Sheep, Ladakh Urial and Siberian Ibex. For the first time on a Birdquest Ladakh tour we also managed to track down an Eurasian Lynx and we could watch it for over two hours going about its daily routine. This rather plain and buffy *isabellinus* race from the Central Asian Mountains is sometimes suggested to be a separate species; Turkestan Lynx. In the last few days of the tour, we ventured into the western part of the Tibetan Plateau where we connected with the Himalayan Pallas's Cat, and had extraordinary close looks of a hunting individual – catching and consuming Stoliczka's Mountain

Voles. Birding is limited to a few species in wintering Ladakh, but we got excellent looks of the highly sought-after Ibisbill, Solitary Snipe and Tibetan Sandgrouse! Chickens included both Tibetan and Himalayan Snowcocks as well as Tibetan Partridge and Chukar Partridges. Other goodies included Bearded and Himalayan Vultures, Upland and Himalayan Buzzards, Saker Falcon, the unique Ground Tit, the large Tibetan Lark, the colourful White-browed Tit-warbler, elegant Wallcreepers, hundreds of Güldenstädt's Redstarts and stunning Streaked and Great Rosefinches! It was indeed an experience of a lifetime; an epic tour!

Our main tour started in Leh in the early hours – because of the high altitude everyone usually arrives a few days early to acclimatize – but sadly not everyone made it to the start due to the heavy snowfall and the cancelled flights. It was a cold morning with a lot of fresh snow! We wasted no time and visited an area in the Indus Valley to look for Solitary Snipe (which was staked-out the previous day) and luckily this scarce wader was at the same spot as yesterday and was virtually the first bird of the tour! It was birding in a truly remarkable landscape! Güldenstadt's Redstarts were all over the buckthorn bushes and we soon tracked down a pair of fantastic Ibisbills and spent some timae photographing them. Other goodies included Wallcreeper and White-browed Tit-warbler before lunch. In the afternoon everyone managed to meet up with the tour and in the short afternoon session, we found another Ibisbill in magnificent afternoon sunlight and spent some time photographing Shore Larks and Brown Accentors. We finished our first day at the Thiksey Monastery, often called little Lhasa. On our second day we made another attempt for Solitary Snipe for those who did not see it on the first morning but sadly the bird moved away. Our main spotters KC and Gyaltsen joined us, and we made our way to the Shang Valley. Near Thiksey Monastery we spotted a party of five Ladakh Urials. We had the best views of the tour of this species here! Following the biggest snowfall of this winter the roads were tricky to navigate, and we soon had to stop and place snow chains on. Just when we were getting close to our base of the next week (and lunch) the road was blocked, and many telescopes were pointing into the mountainside. Can it be a Snow Leopard? Yes, it was! A hectic few minutes to place all the scopes on the distant spot, but eventually we were all looking at our first Snow Leopard! Lunch had also arrived, and we spent over three hours watching the Snow Leopard. It was sleeping at first but then started explored large parts of the mountain. It was amazing to watch how it was struggling in the deep snow and backing up when it started a small avalanche! Later on, he slowly climbed to a ridge which took a long time and stopped many times breathing heavily from the difficulties navigating in the snow. It was a distant but amazing insight to the daily life of a Snow Leopard in deep snow. Never to be forgotten!

In the next two days we explored the Shang Valley and saw Snow Leopards both days. One was a youngish individual which crossed the road not long before we arrived and Jigmet spotted the fresh footprints. It was already late afternoon, but the cat was soon found, and we got good and pretty close views for 15 minutes in the fading light. The next day started with a pre-breakfast Tibetan Wolf while it was snowing. Later in the day a mother Snow Leopard with two fully grown cubs was seen, distantly, but again the viewing conditions were somewhat limited with low clouds and light snow. We were rocking with three days in habitat and all three days we had Snow Leopard sightings! The next day, weather was clear again and we had great looks of Himalayan Snowcocks before breakfast! Later, just as we were planning to visit a different valley, the news came in that mating Snow Leopards were spotted. This is great news, as they usually stay together for a day or two with continuous love-action between them, so we decided not to miss this opportunity and drove to the famous Rumbak Valley. About 120 people had already gathered at the spot and upon arrival it became clear that it wasn't a mating pair but a mother with cubs (oops). We got to see the cub walking on the snowy hillside in full sunlight. The mother left earlier. Our leader quickly decided to change location and leave the crowd behind. We staked-out a group of five Blue Sheep about two kilometres away as Jigmet felt this could be promising despite it being the middle of the day. Amazingly, within 20 minutes(!), the mother Snow Leopard was seen walking towards the Blue Sheep. From this moment onwards, it was pure action and like a live nature documentary! She climbed to the highest point and regally looked down on her territory and no doubt formed a plan how to get close to the prey. In the next hour we watched how she stalked the sheep, getting closer and closer. It was thrilling to see her in action – but sadly for us and for her – she did not notice one of the sleeping sheep, which must have been hidden from her angle and when she suddenly went closer to the sheep she had set her eyes on, she stumbled on the sleeping one and the hunt was over; all Blue Sheep ran away and she did not even charge. However, it was yet again an amazing hour with Snow Leopard never to be forgotten! And it wasn't even over yet! As we arrived back to our valley and spent the last hour scanning, suddenly our spotters heard Blue Sheep alarming. They very quickly found the cat again, walking on the hillside. It were our closest looks so far! Light was fading by now, but we followed the cat for half an hour. What a day again!

As we had seen eight Snow Leopards in four days, we decided to do some exploration the following day and made our way to a different valley. It was less rocky and a more open landscape but home to many Woolly Hares! Our target was to locate an even more elusive cat:

the Lynx. There were a few sightings a few days back before the big snow and we were thus hopeful. Driving higher meant more snow but luckily the road was somewhat cleared, so we could get to the scanning area we had aimed for. We found many Woolly Hares but no Lynx to start with, but after some time our main spotter eventually located a Lynx! It was quite distant and walking in deep snow, uphill, at 4400 meter. It was clearly not easy, even for the Lynx. The cat remained in sight for a long time and we could watch it for two hours. The very happy group moved back to the Shang Valley where we were joking with Jigmet if he can show us a Snow Leopard on the same day as well!? Remarkably, he could! The team followed some fairly fresh tracks in the snow and by late afternoon they found a Snow Leopard close to a party of Blue Sheep. Again, we finished our day watching this amazing predator! It was quite a double-whammy: Lynx & Snow Leopard! This was our fifth day in a row with sightings of the Grey Ghost!

Our next day in the Shang Valley was quiet; no cats were to be found for the first time this tour, but not because of the lack of trying! Our best find of the day were two Solitary Snipes feeding in a narrow side-stream which was a very welcome catch-up for those who missed out on the first morning of the tour! The next day we made our way to the Tanglang La pass. We were not sure how high we could go but the habitat towards the pass is also good for cats, so we spent some time scanning between Meru and Gya. Many Blue Sheep were spotted but no leopards. Getting higher, we found a party of Ground Tits and they were very obliging and allowed great photographic opportunities. The road to the pass was blocked by snow but this did not stop us locating four feeding Tibetan Snowcocks on the opposite mountain slope while we enjoyed the stunning landscape. On our last morning in the Shang Valley, we were blessed with a bright sunny morning and a Snow Leopard was called out just as we were putting our clothing on, right by the camp. We all rushed out and in the best morning light we could follow a cat walking down the mountain in deep snow. The leopard did look determined, but we could not see any prey around. He made his way down and it started to go into 'stalking' mode. Eventually he positioned himself between two rocks and was looking to the opposite direction. We still could not see any prey, but then he charged! We suddenly saw a Blue Sheep jumping away in the deep snow while another one was rolling down the hill. At first, we thought it was rolling with the Snow Leopard together, but this was not the case. The main action was concealed from us, but slowly we realized it was yet again another failed hunting attempt, and no Blue Sheep were harmed. It took us some time to drag ourselves to the breakfast table, even if it was only 20 meters!

We left the Shang Valley and made our way to the Uley area, west of Leh. Driving the Indus Valley was still scenic, but the snow was disappearing fast from the southern slopes. A few birding stops along the Indus produced several species of ducks, especially from Guphuk's Viewpoint. By lunch we arrived at the village of Likir where the family of our main spotter had seen three Snow Leopards crossing the road (mother with two youngish cubs) the previous late afternoon, making phone videos of the cats from 30-50 meters away. We knew they would have moved a fair distance during a full day, but our hopes were still high that we might relocate them. We spent most of the afternoon looking for these cats but no success. In the meantime, we saw our first Siberian Ibexes as well as more Ladakh Urials and had a few Shore Larks of the migrant *albigula* race, which is a winter visitor from the Pamirs and Central Asia. Early next morning we were watching Himalayan Snowcocks and Large-eared Pika as well as many Siberian Ibex. We made our way to Hemis Shukpachan where the ancient juniper grove was our birding destination. Nothing special was found but we enjoyed good looks of both Streaked and Great Rosefinch. Moving around the deep snow was not easy! Two Snow Leopards were spotted by the villagers in the afternoon, and we arrived in a few minutes finding the two cats resting on the nearby hillside. They spent the next hour resting and cleaning themselves and later walked off leisurely, soon disappearing without a trace. This was our ninth and last Snow Leopard sighting on the tour. We were so lucky to have several encounters with these special cats, watching them living their challenging life.

The next day we made our way towards eastern Ladakh mainly travelling through the Indus Valley in fascinating scenery. As we were heading east the habitat was first closing in and the Indus moved itself into a tight valley while later it started to open up and Kiangs started to appear. There were very few settlements along here and most buildings belonged to the army, but we had a nice lunch by the hot springs at Chumathang. In the late afternoon we crossed the Indus River near Loma and made our way south towards Hanle. Our first stop in suitable habitat amazingly produced a hunting Himalayan Pallas's Cat and we stayed with this special mammal for some time. When it finished hunting it made its way to the nearby hills allowing some good close looks as it crossed the road. The happy group arrived to Hanle well into the dark. The settlement is located at 4270 meter asl.

We spent the next three days exploring the flat area around town – called the Hanle Marsh – and also climbed to the Kalak Tar Tar and Nurbula Top where we reached 5300 meters above sea level, the highest point on our tour. There is fantastic wildlife in this area, and we enjoyed great looks of singing Tibetan Larks, Upland Buzzards, Black-winged Snowfinches and Great Rosefinches while Kiangs were always visible in the background! Our search for the amazing Tibetan Sandgrouse failed in the first day but eventually we enjoyed stunning looks of these special birds of the Tibetan Plateau. We encountered a flock of twelve and the next day we saw 33 individuals as

they were busily feeding amongst the sparse vegetation, and we could watch them for as long as we wanted! It was certainly the birding highlight for most of us for this trip. At higher elevation we managed to find a few Tibetan Gazelles although they kept their distance from us. A party of five male Tibetan Argali was also found, and we approached them on foot which was quite a task at 4900 meter asl! A pika was also spotted under a big boulder and with patience we could get closer to take some pictures. The ID of these little mammals is not straightforward, but we believe this species was Ladakh Pika. Later on, we found more pikas in a floodplain area and took pictures of those too, possibly they were Plateau Pikas. On our last full day we searched for Himalayan Pallas's Cat again and we got lucky as we managed to see two! The first one we could watch hunting from a distance for a long time before it crossed the icy river (party falling into the river) and disappeared amongst the bushes. The second one was also hunting for voles and we tried to approach it. Luckily the cat was so focused on the hunting that we could get close enough to take pictures and we witnessed an unsuccessful hunting attempt for a while, but eventually a successful hunt was demonstrated as well. Really close; an amazing experience! On our last afternoon we tracked down a Tibetan (Sand) Fox and again we could watch it hunting from a fair distance in the best afternoon light! Icing on the cake was a Tibetan Wolf walking through the marsh at dusk. Our final full day in the field was fantastic!

On our last day in Ladakh, we had to retrace our steps back to Leh via the Indus Valley. On our way out of Hanle we did see one more distant Pallas's Cat while two Pallas's Gulls and a female Merlin was seen by the Loma Bridge. We had several stops on our travel day and scanned for Snow Leopards, but we only found Blue Sheep, Wallcreeper, Himalayan and Bearded Vultures as well as Western Marsh Harrier and Black Kite near Leh. Upon arriving back to civilization our first task at the hotel was to take a hot shower, reminding us how easy life is back home! This was a special tour indeed where you have to cope with high altitude, lack of oxygen, the cold and the basic conditions but nevertheless the truly breathtaking scenery, some amazingly kind Ladakhi people and top-class wildlife make it all worth it, even if you were to only see our number one target, the Shan or Snow Leopard! We had an easy-going and hard-working group, and I hope we will all remember our great Ladakh 2025 trip with fond memories!



White-browed Tit-warbler (image by János Oláh)



Tibetan Lark (image by János Oláh)



Himalayan (Siberian) Ibex (image by János Oláh)



Kiangs (image by János Oláh)



Hanle Monastery (image by János Oláh)



Black-winged Snowfinch (image by János Oláh)



Bearded Vulture (image by János Oláh)



Guldenstadt's Redstart (image by János Oláh)



Kiang in landscape (image by János Oláh)



Ruddy Shelducks (image by János Oláh)



Grey Wolf (image by János Oláh)



Wallcreeper (image by János Oláh)



Hanle Marsh (image by János Oláh)



Argali (image by János Oláh)



Masked White Wagtail (image by János Oláh)



Indus Valley (image by János Oláh)



Great Rosefinch (image by János Oláh)



Chukar (image by János Oláh)



Ibisbill (image by János Oláh)



Lynx (image by János Oláh)



Thiksey Monastery (image by János Oláh)



Upland Buzzard (image by János Oláh)



Blue Sheep (image by János Oláh)



Hemis National Park from the air (image by János Oláh)



Brandt's Mountain Finches (image by János Oláh)



Chemrey Monastery (image by János Oláh)



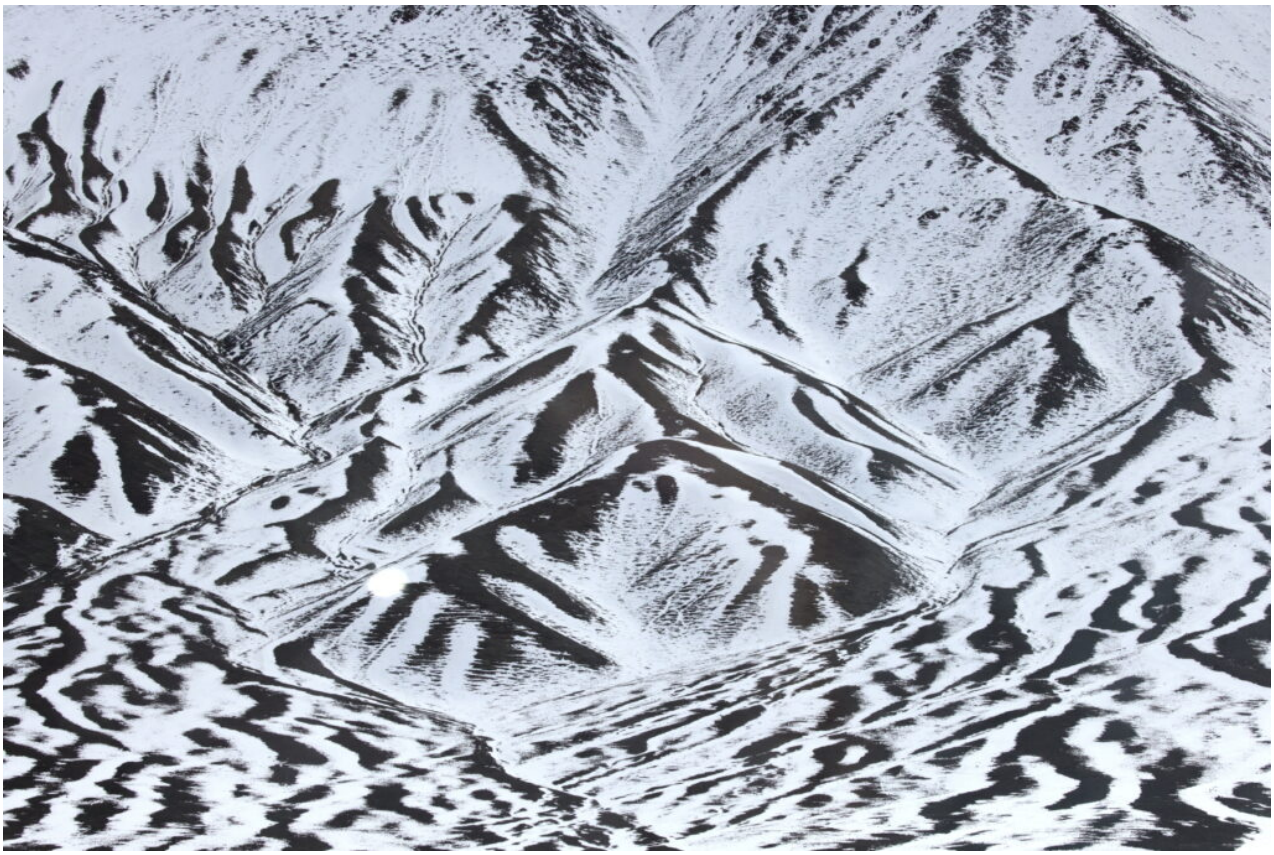
Pallas's Cat (image by János Oláh)



Pallas's Cat on the march (image by János Oláh)



Urial (image by János Oláh)



Ladakh Landscapes (image by János Oláh)



Ladakh Pika (image by János Oláh)



Snow Leopard (image by János Oláh)



Snow Leopard searching for Blue Sheep (image by János Oláh)



Solitary Snipe (image by János Oláh)



Tibetan Sandgrouse (image by János Oláh)



Tibetan Sandgrouse (image by János Oláh)



Tibetan Partridge (image by János Oláh)