

Snow Leopards of Ladakh Photography Tour Report 2017

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by Mike Watson

Our fifth visit to the mountains of Ladakh in search of Snow Leopards was another success and resulted in two sightings, involving maybe two different cats, however, the second of these was certainly our most prolonged close range encounter so far involving a leopard at its Blue Sheep kill over the course of three days! Many thousands of images later we felt we could hardly better it so we did not spend quite as much time scanning as usual and looked for other animals instead. This resulted in a longer bird and mammal list than last time when we spend many more hours at vantage points. Other mammalian highlights included: two sightings of Grey (or Tibetan) Wolf; Siberian Ibex; Urial, Ladakh's endemic 'red sheep'; any amount of Blue Sheep (or Bharal), the Snow Leopard's favourite prey, as well as other hardy alpine inhabitants such as Woolly Hare, Mountain Weasel and (Tibetan) Red Fox. The Tibetan Plateau Extension added Argali (the world's largest sheep) and Kiang (Tibetan Wild Ass).

Our birders were happy with a good selection of old favourite Himalayan specialities including: Himalayan Snowcock, Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle, Ibisbill, Solitary Snipe (three plus another while acclimatizing pre-tour), Hill and Snow Pigeons, Eurasian Eagle Owl, Red-billed and Alpine Choughs, White-browed Tit-Warbler (six), Wallcreeper, Güldenstädt's Redstart, Brown Dipper, Robin and Brown Accentors, Brandt's Mountain Finch, Streaked and Great Rosefinches, Twite and Red-fronted Serin on the main tour. We also added several new species to the Birdquest list for this tour, notably Black-throated Accentor (three plus another seven pre-tour) and White-winged Grosbeak but also more common and widespread species such as Little Grebe, Red-crested Pochard, Great Egret, Black-crowned Night Heron, Himalayan Buzzard, Eurasian Jackdaw, Water Pipit, Tibetan Blackbird and Blue Whistling and Song Thrushes. The Tibetan Plateau Extension added Tibetan Partridge, White-throated Dipper and Blanford's and Tibetan Snowfinches as well as the amazing Ground Tit (or Groundpecker). As if all this was not enough Ladakh's jaw-dropping high altitude mountain desert scenery took

our breath away (as well as the lack of oxygen up there!) and once again the truly delightful Ladakhis themselves made our stay another once-in-a-lifetime pleasant experience for our group. They are still front-runners for the title 'nicest people in the world'!

Another very welcome bonus of a visit to Ladakh (weather permitting) is the fabulous view over the Karakoram mountain range on the morning flight from Delhi to Leh, Ladakh's municipal centre (from the left side of the aircraft, window seats ahead of the wing). The second highest peak in the world, K2 8611m and three other 8000-ers were clearly visible: Gasherbrum I 8080m; Broad Peak 8051m and Gasherbrum II 8035m. The Karakoram range also has 30 peaks over 7000m and is the most spectacular mountain range on earth. Lying to the south of the Karakoram and on the edge of the Tibetan plateau Ladakh's peaks are lower but still include the impressive pyramid peak of Stok Kangri, which dominates the view over the Indus Valley from Leh and at 6153m is easily higher than anything in Europe. The monk in the seat next to me was chanting prayers for almost the entire flight! Landing amongst at least one million Indian army installations in Leh you are immediately struck by how little oxygen there is at 3500m altitude although at least the dry cold early morning air feels warmer than the equivalent air temperature back home. There are signs in the airport that all foreign visitors should rest for at least 24 hours on arrival and everyone usually feels some adverse effects of the high altitude for the first few days in the form of mild headache, disturbed sleep and breathlessness. Winding our way past red-cloaked Buddhist monks, ethnic Tibetan folks spinning prayer wheels and Leh's day-sleeping market dogs we eventually reached our rather grand hotel tucked away uphill in the backstreets of the tourist quarter, not far from a large frozen pond that doubles as Leh's outdoor ice hockey rink.

Ladakh is connected to India by two main highways and to Pakistan by another, however, all of these routes become blocked by snow, making it effectively a winter island. A frantic period of stocking up everything from petrol to foodstuffs takes place before the first snows of autumn although fresh fruit and vegetables are flown in daily during the winter. As you can imagine these luxury supplies are therefore expensive but thankfully there is a scheme whereby local folks are guaranteed affordable vegetables at a special government operated market. The town's population is more than 27,500 and this number is swelled by tourists during the spring and summer and particularly during religious festivals such as the Dalai Lama's occasional visits. Leh has long been a stopover on an important trade route along the Indus Valley, one of the world's most ancient civilizations, with goods carried including salt, grain, cashmere wool, cannabis resin, indigo and silk.

More recently, since partition and owing to the friction between India and its sibling rival Pakistan (and also the looming threat of China) this border region has become militarized with obtrusive army installations almost everywhere. Happily though, it is still possible to 'get away from it all' not too far into the mountain valleys. One irritating aspect of the military presence is Air India's apparent readiness to make unannounced last minute changes to their flight schedules as well as to 'bump' passengers off their flights in favour of military personnel. Another reason (in addition to the important need for time to acclimatize) to aim to arrive in Leh several days early! Fortunately all of our folks heeded this advice and those who arrived early were able to do some easy walks down in the Indus Valley that helped with acclimatization. The valley is a main migration route and therefore provides the biggest diversity of birdlife here, albeit still poor in comparison to lands south of the mountains. The river and its immediate surroundings offer the greatest diversity of birdlife from its stony banks and muddy edges here and there, to the stands of buckthorn, reeds and cultivated fields along its course.

We woke up and it was snowing on the first official morning of the tour and started with a walk in the shadow of Spituk Monastery just to the west of Leh, one of several incredible hilltop fortress monasteries in the Indus Valley, on what turned into a lovely sunny morning. On the unfrozen river here we saw Ruddy Shelduck, Little Grebe, Eurasian Coot and Green Sandpiper and in the gorgeous little cultivated fields with their buckthorn hedges and stands of poplars and willows were Cinereous Tit, Eurasian Wren, lots of Black-throated Thrushes and Güldenstädt's Redstarts, Masked Wagtail (White Wagtails of the Asian form *personata*), Brown Accentor, the first of many Brandt's Mountain Finches and a small flock of rosefinches, which included four Streaked (one male) and a male Great Rosefinch. However, the most popular sighting of all here was the two perky little White-browed Tit-warblers that hurried around the small paddocks, never resting for a moment in typical fashion. On the edge of the fields non-birder Tigue showed some great spotting skills in finding a Song Thrush (an Indian rarity) and we also had a Water Pipit here, another BQ Ladakh lifer. Overhead in the valley we added Golden Eagle, Himalayan Buzzard (the local form of Common Buzzard, which may merit full status) and our first Red-billed Choughs. However, most of the snow that covered hillsides in the valley around Leh had been evaporated by sunlight come lunchtime!

The one everyone most wants to see of course is the peculiar Ibisbill and we enjoyed some wonderful views again of these unique birds by the Indus for several days leading up to the tour and were pleased to find three still present in their usual feeding area along the stony banks of the sacred river near Choglamsar Bridge when the official tour start time came. This monotypic shorebird is one of the most

enigmatic birds of the Himalayas and is unusual in having purple legs when breeding and it also lacks a hind toe. Also here was another special shorebird that does not usually give itself up so easily, Solitary Snipe, along the same stretch of river but standing quietly on the opposite bank with its feet in the river and the fast current flowing by. We could enjoy some lovely views of it for as long as we wanted. Also here were a few ducks – Mallard, Northern Pintail, Eurasian Teal and Common Merganser and some other shorebirds – Common Redshank, Common Greenshank and Green Sandpiper. A Great Cormorant flew downstream and there was an amazing gathering of c80 Güldenstädt's Redstarts in the buckthorn here, which still bore some berries. Generally the berry crop looked pretty sparse compared to last year although there have been a lot of thrushes so maybe they simply ate much of it? There were also around ten each of Eurasian Magpie and Masked Wagtail here and a BQ Ladakh lifer in the form of a Western Jackdaw, which has taken up residence on Choglamsar Bridge.



Prayer flags over the sacred River Indus (Image by Mike Watson)

Leaving the prayer flag-strewn iron bridge at Choglamsar behind we headed upstream past Sindhu Ghat to Shey Ponds. This is the migrant hotspot of the area, it tends to hold birds as one of the few ice-free areas of spring-fed standing water and we always find something interesting here. This time it was Red-crested Pochard, Great Egret and (on our return in the evening) a Black-crowned Night Heron. Other birds of note here included Gadwall and Common Moorhen. Soon it was time to move on again, passing by the tens of white-washed chortens at Shey, to another area of the Indus Valley, a quiet flood channel of the main river, where, once we had cleared the folks cleaning their cars in its waters we found a few good birds. However, the first sighting was a Tibetan Wolf, eating something in the middle of a field to the south of the channel. Some of our folks were able to approach it more closely before it loped off with whatever it was eating, some entrails of a dead animal I think. Large-billed Crow was new for our list and we enjoyed some great views of Brandt's Mountain Finch and Brown Accentor. Another Himalayan Buzzard sat obligingly in a tree. Unfortunately there was no sign of the flock of seven Black-throated Accentors seen here on the pre-tour excursions for the official tour list. Although we caught up with this Himalayan winter speciality later, the one bird we saw pre-tour but failed to connect with afterwards was Hen Harrier.

As the sun dipped lower in the winter sky we continued east along the valley a little way to the impressive Thiksey Monastery. Tikse, Tiksey or Thiksey is a gompa or fortress monastery affiliated to the Gelug sect of Tibetan Buddhism and was established in the fifteenth century. It is the largest monastery in the Indus Valley and is similar in construction to the Potala Palace in Lhasa. Climbing up through its twelve storeys and many stairs we enjoyed some time exploring in the evening sun, admiring the spectacular view over the Indus Valley from its roof. The monastery is presently home to some 60 monks and also recently some nuns too. All too soon it was time to leave and head back to Leh at the end of an eventful first day.



Thiksey Monastery commands majestic views over the Indus Valley (Image by Mike Watson)

We switched our programme around this year after some folks had problems acclimatizing last year, with the slightly lower Hemis National Park coming first this time. As we approached the trailhead where we would meet our pony man it became apparent that there was much more snow lying in the foothills than the same time last year, which is excellent news for the local people as well as the wildlife that benefit from the snow melt in spring. We made our way up the frozen valley for about one and a half hours, walking past lots of Chukar partridges and stopping to look at some fresh leopard tracks found by sharp-eyed Tigue, which had crossed our path and headed up the opposite side of the valley, before we reached and settled into our camp. The camp was set on the abandoned terraced fields of a small homestead on the valley floor, just above the frozen river, which we could hear flowing under the ice.

Chief cook Urgain and our camp crew had already set camp and were busy preparing the kitchen. There was a hole cut in the ice to access the water. They are the unsung heroes of our tour, always smiling, always on time and always with a nice hot cup of tea to keep us going. The 6am wake up cup of tea and biscuits, served to our tents was particularly welcome! It was quite incredible how they managed

to conjure up so many delicious meals in very basic conditions. This year saw fairly normal weather for the season with some snow flurries and a minimum of minus 17 Celsius inside the tent at night after last year's mild tour. This sounds horrible but it wasn't too bad. We are well prepared for it, togged up, with expedition rated sleeping bags and even hot water bottles! So this time we got the proper Ladakh in winter experience, in more ways than one. Last time the mild weather had hampered our chances of a close Snow Leopard encounter, with all but one of our views being very distant animals walking skyline ridges and although we were all very happy with our six encounters we had all hoped for something much closer as we know happens from time to time. Our first afternoon scanning from and near the camp produced some nice sightings including at least three Lammergeiers and an adult Himalayan Griffon Vulture (probably all checking us out), two Golden Eagles, c10 Hill Pigeons and c30 Red-billed Choughs but no leopard, yet. We scored on our first evening scanning last time remember.

There was plenty of their favourite prey, Blue Sheep (or Bharal), dotted across the snowy mountainsides though! The males are about half the weight of an ibex but still very impressive, with their black tights and crazy handlebar moustache horns. We enjoyed numerous encounters with them, including some jumping this evening. Next morning was bright and sunny and no sooner had most of us staggered to the top of the vantage point on the opposite side of the valley to the camp than there was a whistle and a lot of movement at the camp itself. Changchuk Dorjay had spotted a Snow Leopard way down the valley sitting on a ridge. Lucky for us that it was still sleepy and enjoying the first rays of the morning sunshine so everyone could hurry back down to the camp before it eventually got up and walked up the ridge, stopping to investigate a couple of rocky outcrops. Wow! It is always exciting to see a Snow Leopard but like so many things it is rarely as good as the first time. What a great start and full marks to Changchuk. There were not many angles this cat could be seen from this part of the valley and it could have been so easily missed. In fact it was sitting at the top of the ridge where the tracks from the previous day that Tigue had spotted led to! Another example of how snow in the valley bottom, which was lacking last year, can help you find leopards. Happy smiles all round. It was a massive boost to morale to get off the mark immediately.

We all marched down to the temple towards the start of the valley but there was nowt to be seen apart from a couple of Lammergeiers and a Golden Eagle. A definite Alpine Chough flew over the valley this morning. The temperature before dawn at the campsite this morning was minus 12 Celsius. After a break at lunchtime we trekked up to the prayer flag vantage point high above the camp site this afternoon and watched from there. Again there was no further sign of the leopard at a time when it might become active towards evening but we did manage three Lammergeiers, a Golden Eagle, a Northern Goshawk and three Himalayan Snowcocks. A distant flock of geese were probably Bar-headed, migrating high over the mountains and heading into the Indus Valley to the north of us and a flock of 17 Great Rosefinches was scoped in small rose bushes on the mountainside. Pink pin-pricks adding a little colour to the desolate barren slopes. They eventually all moved off miles away up the valley. Our first smart Robin Accentor was hanging around the camp today, near where the kitchen waste vegetables were piled. What a great start!



Our Snow Leopard camp high in Hemis National Park is situated in an idyllic location far from habitation (Image by Mike Watson)

Our next day in Hemis started with a hike deeper into the mountains, via the frozen, snow-covered stream in the valley bottom. The micro-spikes came into their own here and it is great fun to walk on this surface when you can be sure of a good grip. One of the Eurasian Eagle-Owls that live in the valley was sitting in the open on a cliff face by the old fortress, just like last time. This species lacks the dark facial disk border of Indian Eagle Owl, by which it is replaced from the Himalayan foothills southwards. Also here were three Lamergeiers and a pair of Golden Eagles. However, today will forever be remembered for the Snow Leopard. We were ambling back along the valley towards the palace having hiked up through deep snow to Stok La, where we admired the stupendous views across the valley towards the rows of saw-tooth ridges like sharks teeth to the west and the prayer flags at the pass, when our kitchen assistant and spotter Morup could be seen running up the valley towards us gesticulating. It was on! He had just seen a leopard kill a sheep near the old palace whilst walking up with our afternoon tea!!!***??? We hurried to the old palace vantage point as fast as we could, Ian and Tigue ran there!!! Oh to be young again! However, nothing was to be seen until soon after Jigmet, the master, arrived and the leopard was spotted BELOW us walking along the edge of the course of the stream. Wow! This was the moment I have been waiting for and how lucky for these dudes on their second day looking for Snow Leopard! I managed to fire off some shots of the cat as it paced through the deep snow in the valley bottom but it did not look round at us for a while. It climbed up the slope about 10m and sat down on a ledge and then

it really glared at us. The range of this sighting must have been around 40-50m but still a little further than I would ultimately wish for. We could now see where the cat had stashed its Blue Sheep kill, under the cliff in the bottom of the valley.

We were able to watch the leopard for a couple of hours until it got dark and even Joe and Kathy, who curtailed their hike could trek up from the camp to see it. Jigmet and his team were concerned in case wolves came this evening and got at the kill. They said that if wolves interfere with a leopard kill, the cat will abandon it so they were thinking of moving it up the hillside a little way. In the end they left it and took a chance. Just as well they did. Earlier in the afternoon, Jigmet had sent Gyaltsen and Jigmet Tarchin to search the higher parts of the valley and Jigmet T had photographed a White-winged Grosbeak very high up in rose bushes. Wow! These young Ladakhi guys are sharp. We would have to leave that for another day though as we had bigger fish to fry for the time being. We all had a good look at the back of his camera though, at a bird that is not even mentioned in Otto Pfister's 'Birds and Mammals of Ladakh' book.

This turned out to be exactly the right thing to do as when we returned first thing next morning the cat had already moved the kill up to a ledge near where it was sitting the previous morning and had tucked into it. The best thing about this was that it was now at eye level with the lower track in the bottom of the valley and only about 40m away. I don't need to describe what it looked like much as you can see very well from the photos, sometimes sitting looking straight at us in a nice pose but often lying awkwardly on the kill, rubbing its fur against its prize. Kills mean everything to Snow Leopards and they are very reluctant to leave them, hence the chance to watch this one at close range for so long. Without a kill the cat would surely slink away before too long with more than 10 people watching it. In fact we spent the entire day watching the leopard, including having lunch next to it in the streambed. This morning's temperature in the camp was minus 14 Celsius but it was calm, clear and sunny the next day. Perfect as the cat was sitting in the shade almost all day. No raptor sightings today, probably as no-one was looking up at all, transfixed by the Snow Leopard. We did see a Solitary Snipe fly past the leopard though and land in a nearby spring. Another coincidence was an abandoned or lost ice axe found by Tigue earlier in the day in this same spring, which is exactly from where the leopard appeared. It hangs on his kitchen wall now I believe.



Wild Images participant Tigue enjoys some morning sunshine in Hemis National Park (Image by Mike Watson)

We wondered if the cat would still be there next morning, the third day and we were thrilled to see that it was and it had also cleaned some of the unsightly blood off its coat that was obviously from the sheep, although the leopard did appear to have a nasty scar on its nose. We watched it again until the sun came up when it went to sleep and we then had a hike up the valley hoping for some different light on the way back down. Some of the last photos today were the nicest light, showing how spending time and waiting for different light conditions can pay off. When our presence got too much for it the leopard would climb up the cliff a little way but as soon as one of the naughty magpies nearby got anywhere near the sheep's carcass, the cat would leap back down to its precious kill and scare them off. During the day today we hiked up to the high side valley where Jigmet Tarchin photographed the White-winged Grosbeak but unfortunately there was no sign of it. Breaking a trail in the deep snow here was very hard work indeed. This morning saw our lowest temperature while camping at -17 Celsius inside the tent, now that was pretty cold but not unbearable. I simply slept in more clothes inside my -35 Celsius rated sleeping bag.

On the fourth morning we knew the show was over and that Elvis had left the building when an adult Lammergeier was wolfing down the sheep's remains and after the vulture had gone the story ended with the magpies finally picking over the last bits. Today saw us make another long hike to the junction of the ice valleys high in the mountains. We found two abandoned Snow Leopard kills here, both Blue Sheep and stashed at the base of the cliffs skirting the valley. One was fairly recent and even included a round ball of compressed grasses – the contents of the sheep's stomach. The hunting here is obviously very good for the leopards. We did not add any significant new birds but did see a Red Fox of the very pale Tibetan form and a Royle's Pika in a large pile of rocks covered in snow. An adult Himalayan Griffon Vulture made a brief appearance and we also saw a pair of White-browed Tit Warblers. Our picnic on the ice of the frozen streambed was particularly nice today, we could not have wished for a more idyllic location. Eventually our camping stay in the mountain winter wonderland of Hemis National Park came to an end and it was time to hike back down the valley. We learnt what happened to the vegetable waste from the kitchen that had piled up in the rocks below our camp. It was quickly devoured by the pack ponies when they arrived to take our bags back down to the trailhead where our drivers were waiting. The hike out was uneventful but

much easier now we had all acclimatized some more.

We drove west today following the course of the mighty Indus, passing many army camps and the confluence with the Zanskar Valley. We paused at the small market town of Nimmu, for tea and samosas and then climbed the switchbacks above the ancient fortified village of Basgo, where a wide moonscape desert vista opened up before us, Basgo Plains. This area is particularly good for wolves and although we were not in luck we did manage to see a flock of Urial, Ladakh's endemic smart reddish sheep species on the journey. Urial's prefer to graze lower than either Blue Sheep or Ibex at 3,000-4,000m, which puts them in competition with man as well as at risk from Ladakh's growing feral dog population. The total population is estimated at around only 1,500 individuals and it is considered vulnerable by IUCN. Next came Likir Gompa, the seat of a younger brother of the Dali Lama, who has married against the rules of his Yellow Hat sect and is now absent from the gompa. We enjoyed a lovely home-cooked meal in a homestay here before we passed the turn for Saspochay, crossed over the Yangthang La pass and wound our way up into the mountains again. A couple of roadside Woolly Hares afforded our best ever views of this lovely creature, sitting still and relying on camouflage to blend into the hillside. Thanks to the military presence the roads in this area are in remarkably good condition, particularly the Srinagar–Leh highway, which we followed for much of the journey.

We were now back in Shan country again (Shan is the local name for Snow Leopard). In fact Snow Leopards occasionally even cross the Indus near Leh so they can literally be anywhere, although, unlike their Indian urban cousins, they usually choose to avoid people of course. Eventually our winding road took us to Ulley and we began to climb what seemed like one million switchbacks, pausing to watch a Wallcreeper on the mountainside above us, before we reached the Lungtserpa homestay, perched high at the head of the valley with commanding views of the skyline ridges all around. Breathtaking was an apt description as up here at 4150m there is even less oxygen but this time we were much better prepared for the highest altitude stay of the main tour. Fortunately there was not too much to do on our first afternoon except to familiarize ourselves with our new surroundings, including a delightful traditional home dining room, spacious sleeping quarters and the dreaded composting toilet, nicknamed the 'stalagshite' on account of the frozen pinnacle in the room below the hole in the earth floor, which was again a more amusing than terrifying prospect. The mountain ridges surrounding the homestay were definitely Shan country with a good track record of producing sightings of the cat. However, ibex were generallu lower downslope this time and we didn't see a Snow Leopard up here. Their movements vary and some folks had seven sightings here a month earlier. It is a question of luck. It is incredible to think that Peter Matthieson never saw a live, wild one yet his 1978 book 'The Snow Leopard' remains a classic read on the subject (or lack of it). There I go again spoiling the ending, apologies if you haven't read it yet!

Siberian Ibex are more easily seen to the north of the Indus Valley and we enjoyed daily sightings of up to 40, the magnificent male ibexes with bright white saddles on their winter coats, long beards and spectacular knobbed horns. Large males can weigh in at over 130kg and their sabre-like knobbed horns can reach a length of almost 1.5m! Siberian Ibex are the longest and heaviest members of the genus Capra and are only surpassed in shoulder height by the impressive Markhor. In contrast to our previous visit, birding in Ulley Valley was excellent this time, especially in the fields below the small hamlet and around our homestay. Himalayan Snowcocks were seen daily with a maximum of six and a Great Cormorant appeared to roost on the top of rock pinnacles right at the head of the valley!!?? Lammergeiers were scarce here with only a couple of sightings although there was a pair of Golden Eagles in the valley as usual. Güldenstädt's Redstarts and Robin Accentors were common around habitation and we also saw Black-throated Thrush and a pair of Brown Dippers here. A male Streaked Rosefinch was occasionally to be found in the fields below the village and four Great Rosefinches (including two males) were seen on another occasion. However the best bird sighting here (and of the whole tour) was the White-winged Grosbeak, which flew past my car as we drove into the village on our arrival. We saw it several times during our stay but it was never easy to find amongst the buckthorn, roses and willows that bordered the tiny field system. On one morning a Little Owl perched up behind our homestay and on another we hiked down to the village and were lucky to see a Mountain Weasel jumping across the stream below the homestay before clambering up the snowy slope on the other side with a pika in its jaws. Amazing! During our time at Ulley we also visited the amazing Spango Valley, a quiet and uninhabited tributary that often produces Snow Leopard sightings but again it was quiet here in the afternoon sun. This was once the hunting preserve of the King of Ladakh, whose boundary walls can still be seen here.

On another day we crossed Hemis La and descended to the village of Hemis Shukpachan ('lots of stones/lots of junipers') and its wonderful little sacred Juniper grove. The gnarled ancient Methuselah-like contorted trees and preserved here (as in all of the villages in this area) and are a haven for birds. Our best find here was a female Tibetan Blackbird (again by 'non-birding' Tigue!) and we also saw White-browed Tit-Warbler, the local form of Twite and Great Rosefinches, including a smart male. A Woolly Hare ran out of the Juniper grove and a pack of seven wolves was also spotted high on a hillside above the town, on their way somewhere. It is nice to see wolves in a place where they are not persecuted. In fact the mountains of Ladakh are one of the least interfered with ecosystems. They still have all

their apex predators remaining, including a few bears, all allowed to co-exist owing to the Buddhist beliefs of the villagers and also lately thanks to some help from Jigmet's Snow Leopard Conservancy who help to provide secure community night shelters for their livestock as well as operating an insurance scheme for losses to Snow Leopards and Wolves. We enjoyed a picnic under the junipers at this special location that would not have looked out of place in 'Lord of the Rings'. Another excursion took us to the attractive village of Saspochay in the next valley to the east, where we enjoyed some great views of a smart Snow Pigeon amongst the town's mixed flock of Hill Pigeons and Rock Doves. We visited the home of Jigmet's sister-in-law, and enjoyed another lovely meal there. She showed us her Perak, a magnificent tuorquise-studded headdress that forms part of the traditional Ladakhi woman's finest outfit. These special and very valuable items are handed down through the generations as family heirlooms. We learned later that a Shan was seen here shortly after our visit so maybe that was where it was hanging out during our time, on the other side of the watershed in Ulley?

It snowed quite heavily towards the start of our stay at Ulley and we wondered if this would affect our ability to get back down to the highway but not to worry, our very capable MPV drivers could manage this easily if called upon. However, we would be happy to be stuck up here in the snow, with a warm yak dung stove and great food as always (Urgain and his crew accompanied us here and cooked for us, cross-legged in their kitchen tent as usual). The homestay was surrounded by gorgeous Robin Accentors and Brandt's Mountain Finches and there were two Woolly Hares in the field next to the homestay. We could follow their movements by their tracks in the snow to their next resting spot. We spent some time scanning from the roof of the homestay and elsewhere in the valley but not with the usual intensity after our jaw-dropping leopard encounter in Hemis NP and it was great to be able to explore this area and see more of it this time. It did not matter that we did not seen a Snow Leopard here and after five nights we said goodbye to Ulley and made our way down into the Indus Valley once more, spending some time scanning from the Yangthang La en route. We stopped again for lunch at the same Likir homestay, rapidly becoming a favourite stop of ours, before we returned to Leh and had a quick look around the Snow Leopard Conservancy HQ. Then some folks went shopping and others went birding in the winding back alleys below Kakshal Fort. We were thrilled to find a Black-throated Accentor here so it made it on to the main tour list after all. It afforded some great views, although always partly obscured in a small garden, the owner of which came out to investigate the noise of whirring camera shutters.



Dzo feeding time at a homestay high in Ulley Valley (Image by Mike Watson)

This evening we enjoyed a good clean up at the Grand Dragon, easily the fanciest hotel in Ladakh, before we said goodbye to our dear friend Tigue, who had to return to real life in the busy ER room of an hospital in Australia. We then headed off east up the Indus Valley once more, on the Tibetan Plateau Extension. A Black Kite circled over Leh as we departed and a single House Sparrow in the car park of the hotel made it onto the trip list. A brief stop at Shey added Eurasian Wigeon and Northern Shoveler to our list and the Red-crested Pochard and Great Egret were still present. A Water Pipit walked along the edge of the main reed-fringed pool and a small flock of Great Rosefinches was nearby. We had a masala chai stop at Upshi, the junction with the Delhi road and had our inner line permits checked before we could proceed. Following the course of the mighty Indus upstream must be one of the world's classic road journeys. The highway clings precariously to the side of a massive gorge, with the rushing river in the bottom, complete with frozen banks and huge chunks of ice here and there. We estimated around 20 Common Mergansers along this section of the journey and logged a White-throated Dipper on the river at Likche and a couple of Brown Dippers, typically on the smaller side streams. 'OMG that was gelignite!' said Graham as we passed a couple of workers who were packing something into a hole in the rock face by the roadside. Only in India! We had another quick birding stop in a quiet steep walled side valley, finding another couple of Black-throated Accentors with a party of five Robin Accentors in the small field system there. Making good time we stopped for lunch at Chumathang hot springs, surrounded by lots of Masked Wagtails, attracted to the warm muddy stream leading to the river. We continued upriver, past numerous roadworks, incredible purple hued rocky hillsides rich in lead carbonate (said Graham) and a small herd of Kiangs, which were spooked by a Lammergeier! We crossed Mahe Bridge in mid afternoon.

Our route now took us on a minor road past Puga Sumdo hot springs and over the Polokonka La (5350m) to Tso Kar, the vast salt lake on the plateau. The air was clear and cold up here! Unfortunately we were a little early for the Black-necked Cranes, which breed up here as the ground was still frozen and spring was still not yet here but we did see c200 Ruddy Shelducks, a couple of Eurasian Wigeon and Teal as well as two Lammergeiers and Golden Eagles. There were hundreds of Horned Larks now, everywhere along the roadside as well as

Brandt's Mountain Finches and a flock of 50 Twite near Mahe Bridge. Jigmet and his boys stopped to add some prayer flags at the pass and we rolled down past herds of Yaks towards Tso Kar in the late afternoon sunshine. Once down by the lake we quickly located the other special mammal of this area, the huge Argali, a flock of 10 of which were feeding on a slope above the lake. Kiangs were abundant here with around 80 dotted across the flat barren landscape. Tso Kar is a very special place (and another Black-necked Crane breeding ground) and is home to several groups of Changpa nomads, who have a couple of permanent settlements around the mostly frozen salt lake.

Next morning we woke up and it was flipping freezing, -25 Celsius to be precise. Well at least we had spent the night in the (albeit unheated) rooms of the Ecoresort, which had opened specially for us. My face stuck to the back of my camera, my breath froze on it, Graham's eyelashes were frozen but to be honest, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be and togged up, with heat pads on my socks and in my gloves it was easily bearable. Going to the toilet wasn't much fun though, an ordeal to be performed as quickly as possible. However, we also had Urgain and his kitchen crew here again and they did us proud as usual, serving up some great food in difficult conditions. Habitation is the best place to see most birds in this area and around the resort buildings were tame Tibetan Snowfinches, Horned Larks and Masked Wagtails. The lake only had a small area of unfrozen water, occupied by a pair of Ruddy Shelducks. There were lots of Hill Pigeons here though and a Northern Raven flew over to inspect us, landing nearby. There were a few Güldenstädt's Redstarts up here as well as some Great Rosefinches. A covey of 12 Tibetan Partridges had sought refuge in the unoccupied buildings at the northern end of Thukje and a Little Owl was seen on a small ridge near the settlement. However, the best birds were around the nomad camp at the southern end of the lake: c15 Blanford's Snowfinches around a colony of Stolicka's Mountain Voles and a couple of Ground Tits (or Groundpeckers) around the buildings of the settlement itself. 'What's this bird I have just photographed?' said Malcolm. Wow! They are unique and delightful little passerines, looking like they were made from the spare parts of other birds.

We explored quite widely here but were unable to find any sandgrouse, the chap at the resort said he not seen any for months but we know some were seen a few days later… so next time then! By now the sky had clouded over and was in fact white to the southwest looking distinctly like snow was on the way. There was a high chance of getting stuck here if we stayed so Jigmet recommend we leave right now as we could still make it to Chumathang Hot Springs tonight. A gamble that they would have rooms for us but better than getting stuck here at the end of the tour. In the event we made it easily, again our drivers were brilliant as was Urgain and his crew, who arrived soon afterwards and immediately cooked another tasty meal late in the evening and served it to us in the little restaurant here, whose kitchen had long since closed for the night.

We woke up and it was snowing. There was a covering of a couple of inches on the ground so goodness knows what it must have been like up on Polokonka La? It was the right decision to cut our time short after all. We had a walk around Chumathang village this morning, away from the hot springs and upstream a little way. This was quite productive with more Twite and Streaked Rosefinches in particular as well as our only Eurasian Sparrowhawk of the tour. There were also around 15 each of Robin and Brown Accentors as we walked through the small fields and past homesteads here. A White-throated Dipper was on the river near a prayer-flag strewn wooden footbridge. Our return went very smoothly indeed and we had time for a birding walk in the same little valley we checked on the outbound journey. This was an excellent session with a Lammergeier, Solitary Snipe, Wallcreeper (singing) and Black-throated Accentor the highlights. Four Blue Sheep were high up on the hillsides above us, this is another Snow Leopard location by the way. A great selection of Himalayan birds to end with. Well not quite, back near Leh at Shey we finally caught up with a Blue Whistling Thrush from the vehicles in its usual place. The Grand Dragon is always a very nice place to end up at!

Thanks to our amazing group this year whose determination and good humour made this a very enjoyable trip. However, without the help of Mr Snow Leopard himself, Jigmet Dadul and his wonderful team none of this would be possible, all we have to do is to drag ourselves from A to B and aim the camera lens. Thanks once again to Jigmet, and his spotters Changchuk Dorjay, Andul, Gyaltsen and Jigmet Tarchin and particularly to Urgain and his brilliant kitchen crew, Morup (a man of many talents, he's a former monk and is a champion Snow Leopard spotter too!) and Gyaltso. I am looking forward to returning to the mountains!.



The Snow Leopard lies on top of its kill with a belly full of Blue Sheep (Image by Mike Watson)



The majestic Lammergeier makes a living scavenging the remains of Snow Leopard Blue Sheep kills. It will quite happily swallow the leg bones (Image by Mike Watson)



Rather than being simply grey Snow Leopards are actually quite buff coloured, which helps their camouflage (Image by Mike Watson)



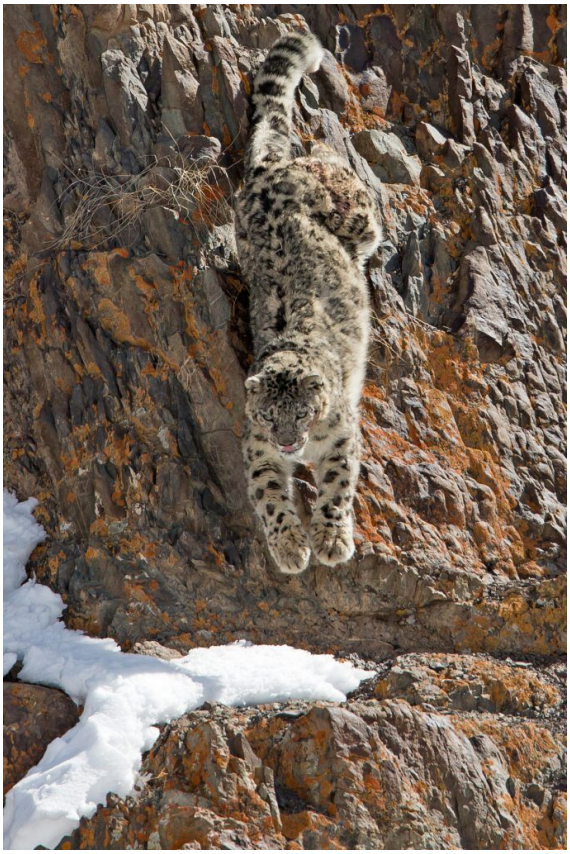
Ibisbill incoming! (Image by Mike Watson)



The Snow Leopard descends a cliff with apparent ease on this occasion but their lifestyle is extremely hazardous and some meet their death in this way (Image by Mike Watson)



A dispute between Kiangs at over 5000m altitude on the Tibetan Plateau of eastern Ladakh (Image by Mike Watson)



Snow Leopard leaping down a cliff face in Hemis National Park, lest the hungry magpie get too close to its precious kill (Image by Mike Watson)



Chukar is a common sight, especially around settlements in Ladakh (Image by Mike Watson)



Snow Leopards easily blend into the barren mountain landscape (Image by Mike Watson)



Prayer Flags reaching up to the sky at Hemis La (Image by Mike Watson)



Snow Leopard is high on everyone's wish list these days and we could not have hoped for a nicer view this time (Image by Mike Watson)



Eurasian Jackdaw is a rare winter visitor to Ladakh (Image by Mike Watson)



Snow Leopard, Hemis National Park. Our first view of the grey ghost was as it slinked away from its kill (Image by Mike Watson)



The hardy Dzo is a cross between a Yak and a Cow (Image by Mike Watson)



The enigmatic Ground Tit has been called several different names over the years, as taxonomists struggled to decide what



Dzo feeding time at a homestay high in Ulley Valley (Image by Mike Watson)



The weathered vertical rock strata of Hemis National park make the perfect terrain for Snow Leopards to hunt their favourite prey, Blue Sheep (Image by Mike Watson)



The unique Ibisbill is a winter speciality of the River Indus near Leh (Image by Mike Watson)



Brown Accentor is one of several accentors we see on this tour (Image by Mike Watson)



The Himalayan form of Horned Lark can also be found high on the Tibetan Plateau in winter (Image by Mike Watson)



Thiksey Monastery commands majestic views over the Indus Valley (Image by Mike Watson)



The smart Güldenstädt's Redstart is a very common winter visitor to the Indus Valley (Image by Mike Watson)



A flock of Argali, the world's largest sheep at Tso Kar in eastern Ladakh (Image by Mike Watson)



Mr Snow Leopard himself, Jigmet Dadul in Hemis National Park (Image by Mike Watson)



Black-throated Accentor is an uncommon winter visitor to the Indus Valley (Image by Mike Watson)



The enigmatic Blanford's Snowfinch can still be found in winter high up on the Tibetan Plateau of eastern Ladakh (Image by Mike Watson)



Brandt's Mountain Finch of the western form is the commonest mountain finch in Ladakh (Image by Mike Watson)



Prayer flags over the sacred River Indus (Image by Mike Watson)



Brandt's Mountain Finch (Image by Mike Watson)



A Robin Accentor against the shadows of a yak shelter during a snowstorm in the upper Ulley Valley (Image by Mike Watson)



A snowy landscape in the lovely upper Ulley Valley (Image by Mike Watson)



Robin Accentors are a common sight near habitation in the Indus Valley (Image by Mike Watson)



A Masked Wagtail by the River Indus near Leh (Image by Mike Watson)



Woolly Hare is well adapted to life in subzero temperatures in Ladakh (Image by Mike Watson)



Snow Pigeons occasionally descend from the highest peaks to villages in the mountains (Image by Mike Watson)



A fine male Streaked Rosefinch in the Indus Valley (Image by Mike Watson)



A mural at buddhist Thiksey Monastery (Image by Mike Watson)



A covey of Tibetan Partridges scurries by at Tso Kar (Image by Mike Watson)



Kiangs near Tso Kar in eastern Ladakh (Image by Mike Watson)



A wolf pit at Tso Kar. This one was baited with a dead horse (Image by Mike Watson)



A Tibetan Snowfinch on a cold morning at Tso Kar, photographed at minus 25 Celsius! (Image by Mike Watson)



Kiangs or Tibetan Wild Asses survive in the bleak winter landscape of the Tibetan Plateau (Image by Mike Watson)