

Snow Leopards of Ladakh: Photography Tour Report 2019

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by Mike Watson

Our fifth Wild Images visit to the mountains of Ladakh in search of Snow Leopards happily resulted in three sightings of the same mating pair opposite our campsite over the course of four days. Although these sightings were all beyond reasonable DSLR range it was still a privilege to spend time with one of the most elusive of cats. However, the ultimate highlight for most of us came later, on the Tibetan Plateau Extension in the form of a wonderful view of a Pallas's Cat, an even more elusive creature in Ladakh than Snow Leopard! To put this into perspective, our local guide Jigmet has now seen Snow Leopard more than 300 times but this was only his second Pallas's Cat! Other mammals photographed included: Grey (or Tibetan) Wolf; Siberian Ibex; Urial, Ladakh's endemic 'red sheep'; abundant Blue Sheep (or Bharal), the Snow Leopard's favourite prey, as well as other hardy alpine inhabitants such as Woolly Hare, a very co-operative Large-eared Pika and (Tibetan) Red Fox. The Tibetan Plateau Extension added Argali (the world's largest sheep, although a little distant for photos) and Kiang (Tibetan Wild Ass). Billed as a joint Birdquest/Wild Images tour, birds included a good selection of Himalayan specialities among the species photographed, including: Lammergeier, Ibisbill, Solitary Snipe, Hill Pigeon, Eurasian Eagle Owl, Red-billed and Alpine Choughs, White-browed Tit-Warbler, Wallcreeper, Güldenstädt's Redstart, Brown Dipper, Robin and Brown Accentors, Brandt's Mountain Finch, Streaked and Spotted Great Rosefinches and Twite on the main tour. We also found a rarity for this itinerary, a Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch. The Tibetan Plateau Extension added the Tibetan trio of Tibetan Partridge, Tibetan Snowcock and bonkers-close views of Tibetan Sandgrouse as well as lots of Blanford's Snowfinches and 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 remain my nomination 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 from the flights from/to Delhi, (from the left side of the aircraft, outbound and the right side on the return, window seats ahead of the wing are best). The second highest peak in the world, K2 8611m and three other 8000-ers were clearly visible on at least the return flight: 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. Many of the Ladakhis on my flight were returning after spending the worst of the winter in the relative warmth of the capital. A Brokpa lady from western Ladakh with Aryan features had an arrangement of flowers in her hair. 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. I am happy to report that no-one had any serious issues with the high altitude this time thanks to a combination of being fit, taking time to acclimatize and/or taking it easy for the first few days. 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.



Dave Romea making slow and steady progress up a mountain pass in Hemis National Park (Image by Mike Watson)

Ladakh is connected to India by two 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 annual summer 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.



Buddha will take care of you on the mountain roads of Ladakh (Image by Dave Romea)

More recently (at the time of our visit in fact) and generally ever since partition there has been friction between India and its sibling rival Pakistan (and also the looming threat of China) so 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 so book with care. Another reason (in addition to the important need for time to acclimatize) to aim to arrive in Leh several days early! Fortunately most 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.



Colourful Buddhist religious monuments or stupas decorated with prayer flags and other things can be found all over Ladakh (image by Mike Watson)

The official start of the tour was followed by 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 a rather overcast and grey afternoon. Along the unfrozen river here we saw Red-crested Pochard, Green Sandpiper and Water Pipit and in the gorgeous little cultivated fields with their buckthorn hedges and stands of poplars and willows were four Black-throated Thrushes and Güldenstädt's Redstarts, Masked Wagtail (White Wagtails of the Asian form *personata*) as well as our first Streaked Rosefinches, including a smart male. However, the most spectacular sighting was of a pair of Northern Goshawks, which flashed low over our heads, a streaky second calendar year bird in the company of an adult a little too quick for the cameras though. Unusually, most of the valley was still white following a period of snowfall in recent days. It is normally just the mountains and north-facing slopes that remain so at this time of year. This boded well for our Snow Leopard chances. The snow brings the leopard's favourite prey, Blue Sheep, lower down and with them come the leopards themselves and they are easier to track with snow-covered ground of course.



Our awesome local guides serve another delicious lunch in the mountains (Image by Dave Romea)

The bird everyone most wants to see 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 eight of them still present in their usual feeding area along the stony banks of a side channel of the sacred river at Sindhu Ghat 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 channel and expertly spotted by Anne! We could enjoy some lovely views of it for as long as we wanted, although the photographers amongst us could have done without the nearby plastic flotsam. Also here were a few other waterbirds within camera range including Eurasian Teal, Common Redshank, Common Greenshank and Green Sandpiper.



Sonam, Jigmet and Tashi hard at work in Hemis National Park (Image by Mike Watson)

As the sun dipped low in the winter sky we continued east along the valley a little way to the impressive Thiksey Monastery. 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. We enjoyed some lovely masala chai in a homestay in the shadow of the monastery before it was time to leave and head back to Leh at the end of a very memorable first day.

Next morning saw us retracing our steps to Spituk, where we crossed the River Indus. Our usual route to the mountains of Hemis National Park was closed this year owing to the construction of a new bridge at Choglamsar. As we approached the trailhead where we would meet our pony man it became apparent that there was even more snow lying in the foothills than on my last visit in 2017, 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 two hours, walking past lots of Chukar Partridges and leaving the last Güldenstädt's Redstarts behind for a few days. It was much harder going than usual, with deep snow covering the ice sheet of the valley floor, melting in the warm sun. Our campsite was set on the opposite side of the valley this year, which turned out to be very fortuitous, more of that later! It was centred around the site of

the stone walls of a long-abandoned homestead on the valley floor, just above the frozen river, which we could hear flowing under the ice. After our usual introductions to the magnificent Snow Leopard Quest team, who would be looking after us during our stay in Ladakh we settled into our tents and the first viewpoint vigils for the 'grey ghost' of the mountains began from the hillside above our camp.



Taking a break from the search for Snow Leopards (Image by Dave Romea)

Around the camp itself regular sightings of Tibetan Snowfinches were a feature of the tour this year and one each of Brown and Robin Accentors made frequent visits to our dining tent. The latter did not have a tail and was easily identifiable as the same individual. We got rather attached to it! Himalayan Snowcocks were active on the ridge to the northwest, calling like mad and strutting around high above us way out of the reach of our cameras, a couple of Lammergeiers and a Golden Eagle were also around and our spotters managed a total of seven Bharal (or Blue Sheep). Some good news was the recent trail of a Snow Leopard heading down into the valley from behind our camp! Game on! We also began a ritual of checking our oxygen saturation each evening, I was at 91% after the hike, which was already pretty good and better than my previous tours' figures, showing the benefit of spending time acclimatising. We enjoyed the first of many fabulous meals cooked by Urgain and his team in the most basic conditions and settled in to our tents for the night as flakes of snow fell steadily.



Mark Tasker, the search for the elusive Snow Leopard begins (Image by Mike Watson)

We woke up this morning and it was snowing. It had snowed all night, I had been shaking it off my tent for hours and by morning there was a fresh covering of around 10cm on the ground but consequently the temperature was a comparatively balmy minus 7 Celsius under the cloud cover. However, the snow continued to fall until well into the morning and we abandoned the pre-breakfast vantage point watch in poor visibility. Gradually the snow eased and we were able to make our first hike up the valley to behind the old fortress, where we were thrilled to catch up with a Wallcreeper, which put in a brief appearance, suitably above some prayer flags. There is always someone who has always wanted to see this bird and this tour was no exception! Happy days! The hike was otherwise rather uneventful except for the many Bharal we watched coming down from the high tops and into the valley to look for food, this was just what we were hoping for.

The following day saw the weather improve further and we were able to hike higher up the valley in search of Snow Leopard signs, of which there were unfortunately none to be found, to the Changma tea room, where we had a picnic lunch. However, when the skies clear the temperatures fall and we recorded minus 11 Celsius overnight. The usual birds were around, with plenty of snowcock activity as well as some lovely sky dancing Golden Eagle action high above the jagged spires of the valley, spring must be on the way! The flocks of Red-billed Choughs contained the occasional Alpine Chough, with sharp-eyed Mark ever on the look out for them. A few Chukars by the tea room caused some excitement, wait until later on the tour when they are like farmyard chickens! The hike back to camp was interrupted by a report of Blue Sheep alarm calls and their makers staring in the same direction and stamping their feet, a sure sign that there was a Snow Leopard in view somewhere. However, time ticked away and with no sign of a predator we headed back for the night.

5 March 2019 will go down in the diary of most of our folks as 'Snow Leopard Day'! The pre-breakfast vantage point watch came up with the goods this time as Tashi, on his down valley hike looking for fresh tracks reported Blue Sheep alarm calling from the large hillside above him. Before long Jigmet said *'the leopard is there'.* Well done Tashi! There were in fact two Snow Leopards, both staring over the precipice at the sheep, which were now fleeing downslope for safety in a panic. The Snow Leopards watched for a while and then crossed a large snowfield step in the hillside in unison to the ridge below. Their massive tails acting as counterweights as they descended the steep slope. However, although we enjoyed quite nice scope views, they were beyond reasonable DSLR range even with extenders on. It is a sign of the times that this is now regarded as a failure! Such is the expectation. It is worth mentioning that we have 'succeeded' in taking good DSLR photos twice now in five attempts so far as the true percentage chance of 'success' becomes clearer. It is also worth

remembering that as recently as 20 years ago just seeing a Snow Leopard was an impossible dream for most people, let alone taking a good photo of one! There is also our Snow Leopard Quest team's 100% success rate in almost 20 years of guiding to consider so while we do not always expect good photos, we do not expect to miss seeing one, which is an incredible thing in itself.



Hendrik Liebers takes some time out to enjoy the endless stunning mountain scenery (Image by Mike Watson)

The leopards were obviously male and female, the male with much broader and less attractive face plus a grey neck collar. It was one of the animals captured in nearby Rumbak Valley. The fact they were male and female was also obvious from the fact they were mating occasionally! After a while they disappeared behind some rocks and that was that for the time being. No need to hike anywhere today, we waited until they became active again, after 5PM and enjoyed some slightly closer views from the old prayer flag lookout a little down the valley, opposite their chosen cliff. Dark shadows crept up the valley sides and eventually we left the leopards after the sun dipped below the mountain wall and returned to camp, where Urgain presented us with a superb celebratory Snow Leopard cake with whipped cream on top ('*schlagsahne*' Hendrick told us). A lovely end to a great day. The morale in camp was well and truly boosted by this sighting. As time goes by without a sighting there is an unspoken feeling of anticipation and tension, particularly considering that my previous sightings have been no later than day two in the past. Day five wasn't too bad though! 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!

We resumed our vigil next morning but there was no sign of the leopards so we decided to hike up the valley again, this time to the false pass above the tea room at 4216m asl, our highest so far. This took some effort but spirits had been raised by a Eurasian Eagle Owl at one of its regular roosting spots behind the old fortress (the only day we saw it!) and two Wallcreeper sightings in the same area, which may have involved different birds. The view from the stupa on the pass was as glorious as ever and again we saw a couple each of Golden Eagle and Lammergeier. The temperature this morning had dipped to -13.5 Celsius before dawn, a more normal reading for this time of year. In the afternoon the boys had heard a Snow Leopard call from the same direction they had been in the previous day, surprisingly they give a loud '*meow*' rather than a roar.

They had not gone anywhere in fact and were still together the following morning on the same hillside, where today they chose to show themselves in the morning and again in the afternoon, although more briefly this time. Still out of our reach though high on a precipitous slope. We hiked up to the summer tearoom again but did not add anything to bird list, instead the only addition came at the campsite itself where a Eurasian Sparrowhawk took a small passerine. A nervous couple of days followed until we saw both of 'our' accentors again. It was probably one of the dumb Tibetan Snowfinches then. The early morning thermometer watch reported -12.5 Celsius in stable conditions and my oxygen saturation was up to 93% today and heart rate 71 bpm, so well and truly acclimatized.

The early morning vigil next day did not report anything so we hiked way up the valley today, some almost to the watershed, to where a White-winged Grosbeak was seen in 2017 and others up a frozen stream bed high above the Changma tea room. These considerable efforts only yielded a couple of high altitude Little Owls of note. The boys flushed two separate Solitary Snipes from the valley bottom stream as well. Bharal numbers peaked at 42 today, many of them were still fairly low down after the recent snowfall. Back at camp in the late afternoon the Snow Leopards showed again, for the last time and after evening meal we heard one calling from behind the camp... from the dinner table! Sadly it could not be seen once we had gone outside. Also after dark Linda managed to capture some photos of the Stone Marten, which had been leaving its calling cards around the kitchen waste. I saw it too, in my headlamp on a midnight trip to the toilet tent!

Finally the time came to say goodbye to Hemis National Park. As always, it had not let us down. We made one last watch from the vantage point above the camp and then packed up and left. It was amazing to see the boys tear the camp down so quickly, they have done this once or twice before! The pony man appeared with his sturdy animals and we began the hike out after breakfast. Making our way slowly back down the valley (always much easier! Phew!) we had some very nice looks at our first Urial, three, including one ram high above the small stupa down the valley. We saw another nine by the village at the trailhead plus 53 at the western end of Basgo Plains and six near Capray Chumik on the way to Ullay on a very big day for them! 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.

We had time for a sit down lunch at our regular homestay stop in Likkir, always a delightful experience in lovely surroundings, cross-legged around the main living room. The yak curd here was particularly delicious! As we ventured further onto the north bank of the Indus towards our homestay at Ullay we saw at least one million Chukars, as expected! Apologies for my lack of excitement earlier on the tour! A pair of White-browed Tit Warblers was seen on a brief hike into Capray Chumik valley and a Brown Dipper in lower Ullay valley was new for the tour. On the mammal front a Large-eared Pika was spotted by the drivers, below Capray Chumik, while we were on the hike and showed again briefly for some and on the bird front a smallish heavily streaked rosefinch was seen at dusk from the Snow Leopard lookout in Ullay valley itself. More of this later.

Our usual routine was to begin the day with a watch over the surrounding ridges from the Snow Leopard lookout in Ullay village. It was -13 Celsius here on our first morning but at least we all had a little warmth in the form of a wood-burning stove in our rooms and some even had an electric fan heater! A fine male White-winged Grosbeak flew low over the viewpoint and down into the valley and was lost to sight. Wow! This is the second time we've seen this bird in Ullay – it isn't even listed in Otto Pfister's book *'The Birds and Mammals of Ladakh'*! On our first full day out of Ullay we hiked up Akyar Valley, the second valley to the west between Ullay and the village of Hemis Shukpochen. There had been a Snow Leopard with two cubs seen here the day before. Ultimately we were not in luck, in fact we blanked out again completely in the Ullay area, the second time in the last three tours this has happened. Akyar was very picturesque but ultimately unproductive apart from a couple of adult Lammergeiers and a pair of Brown Dippers was again in the lower Ullay valley.



Otzer pours the first of many tens of cups of masala chai, the sweet, spiced milky tea that keeps many of us going in cold conditions! (Image by Mike Watson)

After the early morning watch, during which Himalayan Snowcocks could be seen, as well as our first Siberian Ibex, a speciality of this area (they are very difficult to see on the south bank) next day saw us explore Ullay a little more. We visited the Lungtserpa homestay at the top of the valley, where we have stayed in the past. We enjoyed the fine views from there as well as a small flock of nine very tame Brandt's Mountain Finches feeding in the snow along the entrance track to the homestay. We also saw a Twite here and lower down in the valley there were another three very showy birds. The homestay now has a new secure overnight animal shelter, provided by the Snow Leopard Quest team, following the killing of one of their valuable dzos by a Snow Leopard the previous summer.

In the afternoon we left Ullay again and travelled to Hemis Shukpochen *(= 'lots of stones, lots of junipers'*), where we explored the ancient juniper grove. This always has some good birds and this time we were able to find two Tibetan Blackbirds, three Spotted Great Rosefinches, a female Black-throated Thrush and a White-browed Tit Warbler, as well as the hoped for Woolly Hare, it is something of a haven for the latter! Not to mention admiring the wonderful old gnarled trees, the ancient Methuselah-like contorted junipers are preserved here (as in all of the villages in this area). There is only one juniper at Ullay, behind the homestay so it is always nice to see so many surviving at Hemis Shukpochen. The sky had now clouded over and a very cold wind was blowing so we did not linger here long.

The trail of the female Snow Leopard and her two cubs had gone cold (although there was a lot of Lammergerier activity in Ullay so we wondered if she actually had a kill somewhere there?) so we decided to hike up Spango Valley, the next valley to the west of Ullay. At least we should see some closer ibex there if nothing else. This was indeed the case, with a very calm herd not too far up one of the sunny slopes of the valley. We logged a total of 59 in Spango today plus 10 in Ullay including some impressive white-saddled billy goats. 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. Spango was once the hunting preserve of the King of Ladakh, whose boundary walls can still be seen here.

We also enjoyed watching some yaks locking horns in the valley bottom at morning teatime. The puzzle of the rosefinch was also solved today, it was still around in the lower fields. We managed some record shot photos and it transpired to be a female Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch (here of the western subspecies *blythi*), the first we have seen on this itinerary. It is mentioned by Otto Pfister as a *'rare*

spring vagrant' to Ladakh. After four nights at Ullay it was time to make our way back to Leh for the end of the main tour. Again the morning watch failed to produce a Snow Leopard sighting (quite a contrast to our first visit here, which produced sightings daily), although we did see both Brown Dipper and White-browed Tit Warbler from the viewpoint. The very showy Large-eared Pika was still around by its hole in the wall in the lower fields and en route to Leh we enjoyed some very nice views of Urial. Finally we drew up at the Grand Dragon, always a very welcome sight after some rather rudimentary toilet facilities and general extreme cold.

TIBETAN PLATEAU EXTENSION

After saying farewell to a couple of our folks who would not be making the journey eastwards towards the Chinese border we started on our way, following the winding course of the sacred River Indus, which cuts an awe-inspiring gorge through the middle of Ladakh as it flows westwards off the Tibetan Plateau and into Pakistan. We stopped to admire some ancient petroglyphs carved into stones by the roadside. They clearly depicted the outlines of Bharal amongst other animals, overlooking the river, where these creatures have lived for thousands of years. Even though these ancient carvings are thought to be around 2000 years old they are afforded no special protection and are simply weathering away. They pre-date the Silk Road and even the arrival of Buddhism in Ladakh, when the subjects of carvings shifted from depicting hunting scenes to religious ones such as chortens.

Travel in this region of Ladakh involves obtaining an 'Inner Line Permit' to access the restricted area, which stretches east to the sensitive border with China and once we had completed the checks at Upshi we were free to continue along the Indus, passing many army camps on the way to Mahe Bridge. Following the course of the river 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. One of the vehicles enjoyed a close encounter with a very showy Solitary Snipe near Puga Somdo and we stopped for lunch at Chumathang hot springs, surrounded by lots of Masked Wagtails, attracted to the warm muddy stream leading to the river plus one lonely Grey Wagtail. Continuing upriver, past numerous unfinished road works, incredible purple hued rocky hillsides rich in lead carbonate and crossed to the south bank over the rickety Mahe Bridge in mid afternoon and a young Lammergeier flew past, no doubt in search of an animal carcass. Just across the bridge we encountered our first herd of Kiangs (or Tibetan Wild Asses), grazing quietly in the valley bottom clad in their lovely thick winter coats. We also ran into a covey of nine smart Tibetan Partridges at the roadside at Puga Somdo, feeding quite close by, unconcerned at our presence.

Our route took us on a minor road, well a jeep track actually, beyond Puga Sumdo hot springs and over the Polokonka La (5200m) 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 by spring-fed pools. There were hundreds of Horned Larks now, everywhere along the roadside as well as Brandt's Mountain Finches and Tibetan Snowfinches. It was also a delight to meet old friend Dick Filby and his Wildwings group, who would also be staying at Tso Kar, high up on the pass looking for Tibetan Snowcock. Within minutes Jigmet duly obliged with a small group of these smart highest altitude chickens and we could all admire them for a while as they foraged on the rocky slopes by the roadside before they headed off downhill. There were flakes of snow in the air and clouds building so we were keen to get over the pass to the safety of Tso Kar before the weather worsened, which it did. The boys did a great job of setting us up in the closed-for-the-winter Tso Kar Eco Resort, nailing a rug around the doorway to our makeshift restaurant, which was actually an emptied room with bedroom furniture replaced with tables and chairs as well as gas heaters. This would become our welcome refuge from the bone-chilling cold of Tso Kar. Before we turned in, sharp-eyed Mark Tasker spotted a Saker, stood on the ground towards the salt lake, eating something and a few Kiangs were scattered around, albeit far fewer than usual. We would discover the reason for this later. A few smart Spotted Great Rosefinches could be found around the lodge buildings, along with some Horned Larks and Tibetan Snowfinches, attracted by the rice we put out for them and, from time to time, they were joined by a massive Northern Raven. Eventually Dick's group arrived as it got dark, we had been getting worried about them but it transpired they had tarried seeing more snowcocks on the pass and much more impressively, a flock of Tibetan Sandgrouse, our most wanted here! It was going to be a long night hoping they would still be around next morning and I regretted my more cautious approach for a while.

Tso Kar is a very important grazing area and is home to several groups of Changpa nomads, who have a couple of permanent settlements around the mostly frozen salt lake. This year there were many more families with their grazing herds of sheep, goats and yaks than usual and we witnessed them actively chasing the few Kiangs that were around away with their dogs. There is obviously fierce

competition for the little grass left here at the moment between domestic and wild animals. We visited some nomads, who complained of losing animals recently owing to poor grazing and some were even having grass delivered to them in an effort to save them! The simple truth is the area was massively overstocked at the time of our visit, with grazing flocks dotted as far as the eye could see. The snow continued to fall overnight and there was a covering of a few inches next morning. Scratching the ice off the inside of the windows in our unheated rooms we could see a white wonderland outside. The weather front had passed leaving a perfectly still morning of clear blue sky and sunshine and a rolling white landscape like icing sugar. After breakfast the boys had managed to unfreeze the vehicles (by lighting fires under the diesel tanks!) and we were off, meeting Dick and his group a stone's throw away, where they had found a small group of Ground Tits by the roadside. The tits were popping up out of the holes of mountain voles, where they presumably spent the night. Dick had actually gone closer to view the Argali grazing high on the hillside above, which had been spotted from the Eco Resort and we could now admire the massive racks of horns of these impressive beasts, the world's largest wild sheep, although well out of DSR range. Also here was an almost comatose male Desert Wheatear, desperately fluffed up in the freezing cold of early morning. Dick's folks went back for breakfast and we continued on, past the nomad settlement, seeing one of the pair of Little Owls that lives in the wolf pit here. A hulking Upland Buzzard was perched on a rock just south of the settlement before we started to search for sandgrouse in earnest.

It wasn't long before Jigmet expertly spotted a flock of sandgrouse not far from their last reported position from the previous day. However, they seemed miles from the road and Dick had commented on how skittish they had been. Added to this, a herder and his massive flock of sheep and goats were already headed in their direction on the lower slopes of the hillsides above the road. Well we might as well try for a closer view, it's not every day you see a bird as special as Tibetan Sandgrouse! We should not have worried! Once we had managed to drag ourselves away from a flurry of lovely little Blanford's Snowfinches we gradually closed the gap on the sandgrouse, which were feeding in a distant haze (the snow here seems to melt before penetrating the bone dry sandy ground!). However, as we venturing closer, Karen spotted some more sandgrouse *MUCH* closer! Only a few metres away in fact. *BAM*! They were approachable as well, simply turning their backs on us and walking away through the low thorn bush-clad sand dunes, rather than flying. We could follow them for ages, sometimes getting some nice profiles in the snow as well before they eventually flew off. Exploring further, there were yet more groups of sandgrouse here and everyone who could stagger up here in the thin air had time to enjoy this special experience. The sandgrouse also completed the trio of Tibetan named birds, adding to the partridge and snowcock from the previous day.

We were already thrilled by a great morning but there was even more to come this afternoon to make this our ultimate Tso Kar day and one of my best wildlife days ever. After a late lunch and a short break we set off again, hoping for a wolf, the last piece in our jigsaw, or so we thought. While cruising along slowly and checking some roadside birds I noticed a small cat trotting along the snow-free road ahead of us. It couldn't be surely, could it? Well it was! Otzer turned on the gas and as we neared it, the cat veered off the road and crouched in front of a small raised patch of ground only a few metres away as I fired off a few frames at what was now clearly a Pallas's Cat!!! Significantly rarer and more difficult to see in Ladakh than Snow Leopard, Jigmet mentioned that although he had now seen Snow Leopard more than 300 times but this was only his second Pallas's Cat! The cat was clearly very cross at being disturbed and headed off across a nearby snowfield, pausing to scowl back at us every now and again. All three of our cars could watch its progress across the deep snow, a huge *WOW!* moment for all of us. We called the Wildwings group, presently on a hillside watching sandgrouse and they arrived soon afterwards. Unfortunately the cat was now well out of sight. A search party was assembled and Jigmet and his boys tracked the cat to a gully around half a kilometre away, where its trail went cold on bare ground. Time ticked away and the group of searchers dwindled, some connecting with a wolf that David Salt had spotted walking across the snow in front of the vehicles back at the roadside. However, a cruel twist to our story was that after everyone else had given up and gone back to the Eco Resort at Thukje, Gyaltsen and Changchuk re-found the cat sitting at the entrance to a den in a small outcrop. Sadly too late for anyone to return in daylight and all that could be done was to admire the face-only portraits on their smartphones at evening meal.

Next morning we woke up and under clear skies it really was flipping freezing – a minimum of -32 Celsius was recorded just before dawn. Tso Kar acts as a cold sink for the air on the surrounding mountains. Our guys had stayed up all night keeping the vehicles ticking over so we were ready to roll. We hooked up with the Wildwings folks again and headed out to the Pallas's Cat den. In a nutshell there was no sign this morning of its feisty little occupant, who was either fast asleep inside or had moved off to another nearby bolt-hole, of which there appeared to be several, along with more than one set of tracks! We had lunch and decided to get out of Tso Kar and enjoy some heating back in the Indus Gorge at Chumathang, our results at Tso Kar being well and truly off the scale. We crossed the now much

snowier Polokonka La without incident, seeing a few Tibetan Snowcocks and en route Jigmet conjured up some great views of Stolicka's Mountain Voles roadside at Puga Somdo, much to the delight of our small mammal enthusiast Linda. Some of the hot springs had plumes of ice frozen over them, such is the extreme cold here that boiling water freezes in the air. Further west along the valley, a Wallcreeper sought refuge on the stones in the hot springs at Chumathang, affording some point blank views, a sparrowhawk took one of the Masked Wagtails and a Blue Whistling Thrush was drinking from the river – a great end to the day (but not for the poor wagtail that is).

After a pleasant pre-breakfast walk around the field system at Chumathang village, which is always productive (this time with a large flock of several hundred Brandt's Mountain Finches and both Streaked and Spotted Great Rosefinches too) all that was left to do now was to retrace our steps back downstream to Leh. The Wallcreeper and Grey Wagtail were still in the hot springs and a small party of Mongolian Finches by the roadside just beyond Chumathang was a great pick up. We briefly explored a small side valley of the Indus at Hymia, seeing a good number of Brown and Robin Accentors but no Black-throated this time unfortunately. There were some Tibetan Snowfinches here just below the prayer flag covered stupa and some had a White-throated Dipper but there was little else here today. Our journey finally ended back at the rather splendid Grand Dragon Hotel in Leh, with its heated bathroom floors it is always a special place to look forward to!



The Indus Gorge is one of the world's classic road journeys (Image by Mike Watson)



Pallas's Cat, the holy grail of Himalayan mammals, a hundred times more difficult to see even than Snow Leopard (Image by Mike Watson)



Great Rosefinch is one of the prettiest birds of the high mountains of Ladakh, seen here on the veranda of our lodge at Tso Kar (Image by Mike Watson)



A wolf pit at Tso Kar, some local people put their Buddhist beliefs to one side when it comes to losing the livelihood to a wolf pack (Image by Mike Watson)



Tibetan Sandgrouse, the most sought after of all the sandgrouse family, here at Tso Kar (Image by Mike Watson)



These petroglyphs depicting Blue Sheep are thought to be around 2000 years old but are not afforded any protection, see them before they weather away or fall into the River Indus (Image by Mike Watson)



Kiangs, or Tibetan Wild Asses can withstand the harsh conditions of the Tibetan Plateau in their thick winter coats (Image by Mike Watson)



This Tibetan Red Fox was unusually tame, beware! (Image by Mike Watson)



Tibetan Snowcocks can be seen on the tour extension to the Tibetan Plateau, high on the Polokonka La pass (Image by Mike Watson)



Tiny sand dunes held together by thorn bushes, Tibetan Sandgrouse habitat at Tso Kar (Image by Mike Watson)



The lovely Ullay valley, our base for several nights on this tour (Image by Mike Watson)



The first rule of Yak fight club is? (Image by Mike Watson)



Spango Valley near Ullay is usually a good bet for Snow Leopard (Image by Mike Watson)



The Himalayan race of Twite found in Ladakh is a paler than the one we are used to on the moors of East Lancashire (Image by Mike Watson)



The sacred and protected Juniper grove at Hemis Shukpochen is a haven for wildlife (Image by Mike Watson)



A Bharal (or Blue Sheep) makes its way through deep snow in the valley at Hemis National Park (Image by Mike Watson)



Fortunately these little tough guys carry all of our baggage and equipment to our remote campsite in the mountains of Hemis National Park (Image by Mike Watson)



Brandt's Mountain Finch is a nomadic wanderer of the mountains in Ladakh and can sometimes show up in huge flocks (Image by Mike Watson)



Our campsite friend, the tail-less Robin Accentor (Image by Mike Watson)



A Bharal lamb, the Snow Leopard's favourite food in Hemis National Park (Image by Mike Watson)



Searching for signs of Snow Leopard high in Hemis National Park (Image by Mike Watson)



A frozen mountain stream high in Hemis National Park (Image by Mike Watson)



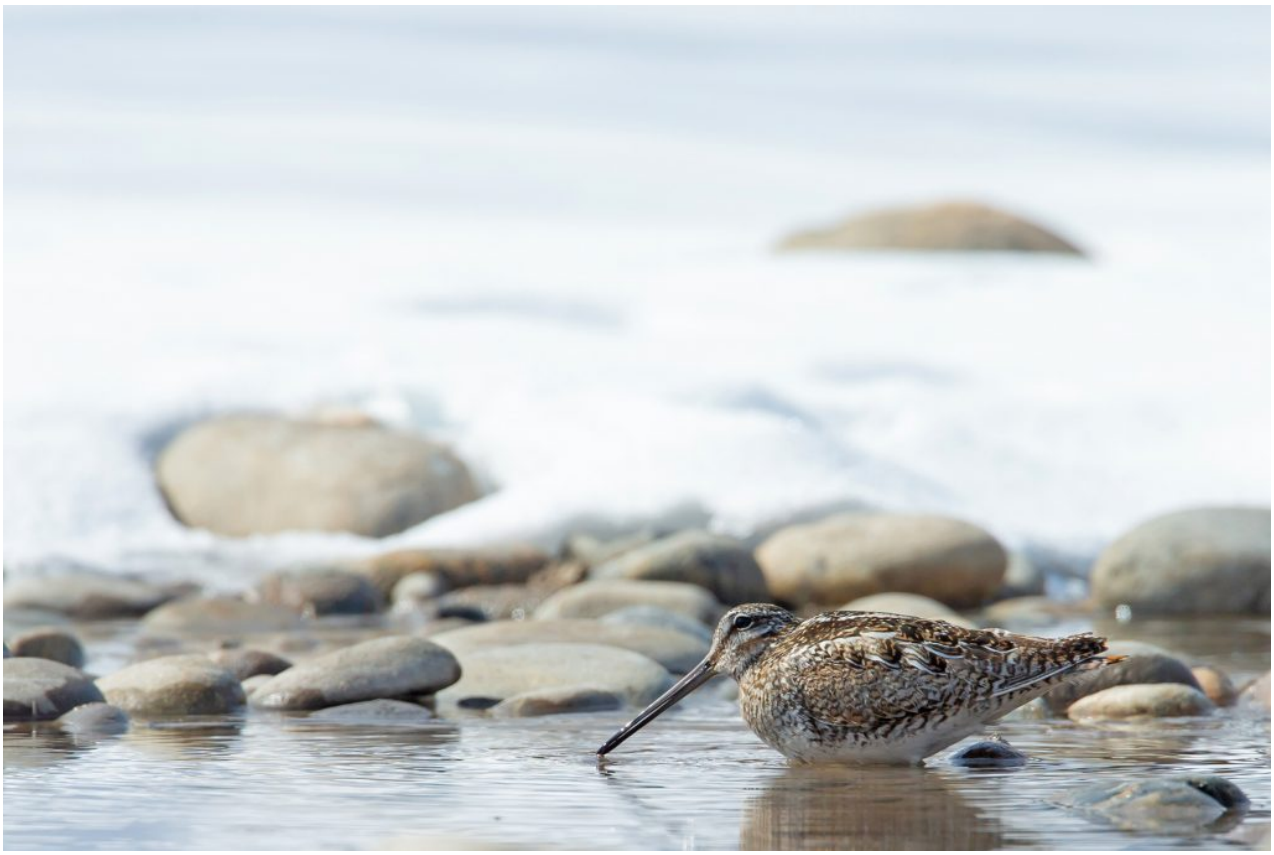
Our little tented campsite almost disappears into the snowy landscape of Hemis National Park (Image by Mike Watson)



Thiksey Monastery has a commanding view over the Indus Valley, much snowier than we have seen it this year (Image by Mike Watson)



The unique Ibisbill can be found along the banks of the sacred River Indus in winter (Image by Mike Watson)



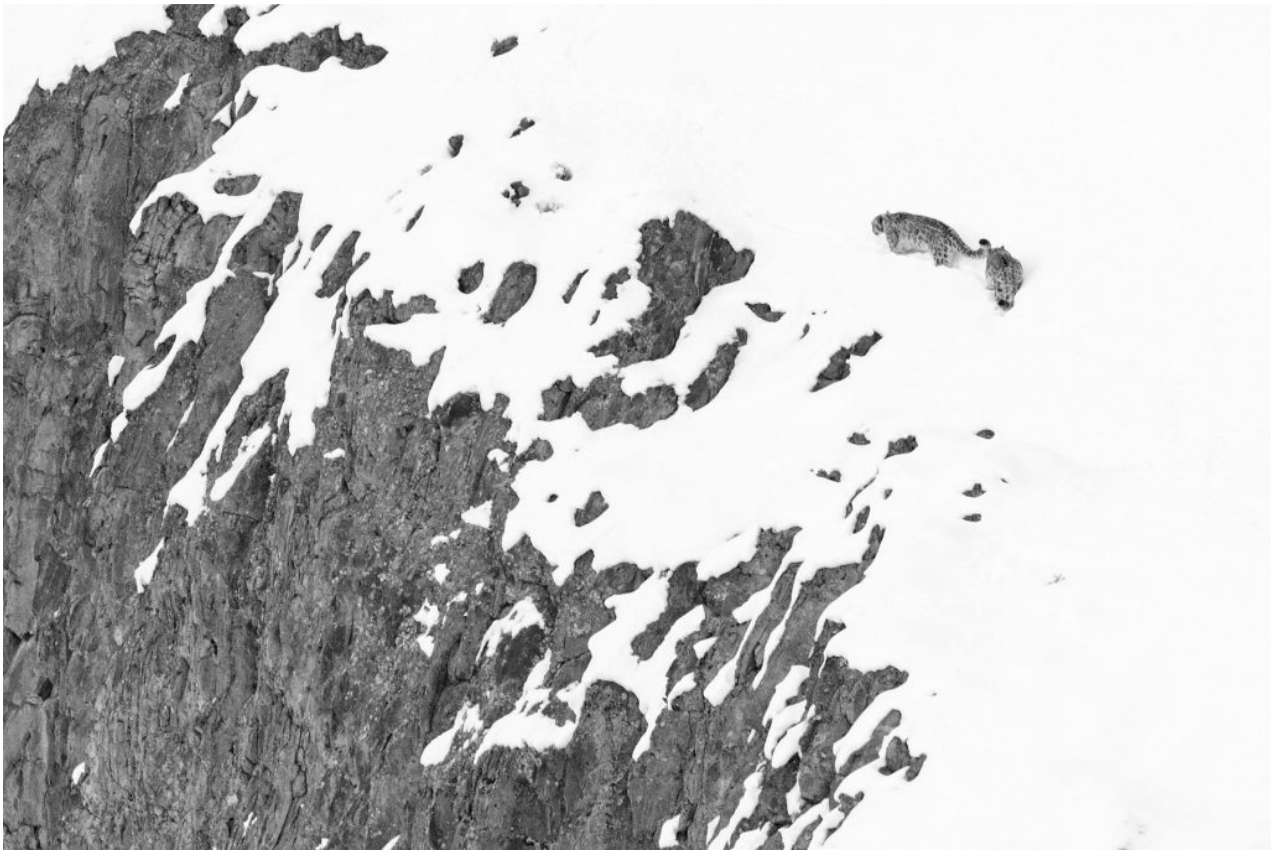
Solitary Snipe is another bird species that descends from the surrounding mountain valleys to spend the winter along the Indus (Image by Mike Watson)



Male Güldenstädt's Redstarts ad a splash of colour to the landscape of the Indus Valley (Image by Mike Watson)



The pair of Snow Leopards spent most of the day lounging about in between their regular bouts of mating (Image by Dave Romea)



A pair of Snow Leopards make their way carefully along the snowy edge of the abyss in Hemis National Park (Image by Dave Romea)



This male Snow Leopard had been fitted with a transmitter collar in the next valley to our campsite in Hemis National Park (Image by Dave Romea)



A view across the Indus Valley (Image by Karen Van Roy)



Pallas's Cat in Ladakh, we can still hardly believe our luck! (Image by Karen Van Roy)



Once in a lifetime! A Pallas's Cat picks its way across deep snow in Ladakh (Image by Karen Van Roy)



Wild Images group hiking high in Hemis National Park, Ladakh (Image by Dave Romea)



A covey of Chukars scurries across the snow in Ladakh (Image by Dave Romea)