Snow Leopards of Ladakh: Photography Tour Report 2020

14 April 2020

by Mike Watson

Our eighth visit to the mountains of Ladakh in search of Snow Leopards was happily yet another success and resulted in a record 13 sightings of the *'Grey Ghost of the Mountains',* which has become much less of a ghost these days, with all the resources dedicated to finding it. Most of our sightings were, as usual, very distant, however, we were privileged to enjoy a 50 metres-range-view of a cat at an ibex kill and also another at a second ibex kill at around 200 metres range. Both of these views were much closer than normal. Other mammalian highlights included: Siberian Ibex; Urial, Ladakh's endemic '*red sheep*', a subspecies of Mouflon; abundant Blue Sheep (or Bharal), the Snow Leopard's favourite prey, as well as other hardy alpine inhabitants such as Woolly Hare, some very co-operative Large-eared Pikas and (Tibetan) Red Fox. We also managed a decent view of the generally trickier Royle's Pika. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 crisis resulted in the east of Ladakh being locked-down the day before we were due to visit so we were unable to visit the Tibetan Plateau this time. Instead we had a day at the Tanglangla Pass, before all areas away from the immediate vicinity of Leh were closed too. By this point we only had a couple more days left, which we spent at spots in the Indus Valley. Billed as a joint Birdquest/Wild Images tour, our birders were also happy with a good selection of Himalayan specialities including: Himalayan and Tibetan Snowcocks, Tibetan Partridge, Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle, Ibisbill, Solitary Snipe, Hill Pigeon, Red-billed and Alpine Choughs, White-browed Tit-Warbler, Wallcreeper, Güldenstädt's Redstart, Brown and White-throated Dippers, Robin and Brown Accentors, Brandt's Mountain Finch, Streaked and Great Rosefinches, White-winged Grosbeak, Mongolian Finch and Twite. We also added eight new species to our list for this itinerary: Greylag Goose, Northern Shoveler, Hen Harrier, Common Snipe, Caspian Gull, Eurasian Skylark (a first for Ladakh), Bluethroat and Pine Bunting. 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 our amazing Ladakhi hosts made our stay another once-in-a-lifetime pleasant experience for our group. I keep saying this, but 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 visible on at least the return flight (albeit rather briefly this time before the aircraft banked left to head south to Delhi): 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 outbound flight were returning after spending the worst of the winter in the relative warmth of the capital, just in time for the schools to reopen. Little did they know that this would not be for long this year! 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 a mild headache, disturbed sleep and breathlessness. I am happy to report that, again, no-one had any serious issues with the high altitude this time thanks to a combination of taking time to acclimatize and/or taking it easy for the first few days. Keeping your heart rate and blood pressure under control are the two big factors in avoiding AMS, which everyone managed to do very well this time despite a couple of tough hikes midway through the tour. Winding our way past 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 one of Leh's outdoor ice hockey rinks. Ladakh is connected to the rest of 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. More recently 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. We saw yet another example of this on our return. 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 best birding from its stony banks and muddy edges here and there, to the stands of sea buckthorn, reeds and cultivated fields along its course. Having said this, we did a great job of mopping up almost all of the species seen before the official start to the tour, leaving only Common Black-headed Gull behind.

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 sunny morning. In fact, this version of our tour was the mildest so far, with relatively little snow on the ground and only a few flakes falling throughout the tour. Spring had come early to Ladakh! Along the unfrozen river here we saw Water Pipits in peachy breeding plumage and Masked Wagtails and a female Hen Harrier flew over. In the gorgeous little cultivated fields with their buckthorn hedges and stands of poplars and willows were lots of Black-throated Thrushes and Güldenstädt's Redstarts, by their roost in a large tangle of buckthorn. I commented that Spituk always turns up something unusual and this time it was a lone Eurasian Skylark, spotted by sharp-eyed Jacob, loosely associating with a flock of Horned Larks. A pair of Common Mergansers was on the River Indus just south of Spituk Bridge and a couple of Great Cormorants flew over. The highlight here though, was a pair of Ibisbills, on the shingle downstream from the bridge, which we watched mating! Spring was definitely in the air! Brown Accentor and Eurasian Wren were also noted at Spituk. The prayer flags of the bridge were a popular photo subject too! Heading back into town, we stopped off at Changspa Bridge, the seventh of ten bridges that cross the stream that cuts through the west end of Leh. The hoped-for Brown Dipper was present by the prayer wheel, a pair in fact, with a lovely Blue Whistling Thrush also here as a bonus. Snowflakes in the air added to this atmospheric sighting! We even had a little time to spare to check the vicinity of the Mahey Retreat, an occasional site for Black-throated Accentor. No luck with this uncommon visitor but we did have some lovely views of Robin Accentor instead, near their favoured copse. A pair of Cinereous Tits put in an appearance here as well before it was time for lunch.

In the afternoon we visited Sindhu Ghats, a Hindu cremation site in the Indus Valley east of Leh. This has been another reliable spot in recent years for *THE* bird everyone most wants to see, the peculiar Ibisbill. We were not disappointed, with at least three birds present today. 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. A couple of Green Sandpipers and a Common Redshank were also along the side channels of the Indus here. A young Golden Eagle flew over and on a hidden pool there was a veritable waterfowl collection! A drake Red-crested Pochard was top of the bill of a line-up that also included Gadwall, Mallard, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Teal and Common Pochard. A couple of Eurasian Coot was also present. The ghats themselves have a lot of prayer flags that make a nice composition with Stok Kangri in the background. Happily, there no longer seem to be any folks here cleaning their vehicles and/or clothes, so the channels are less polluted and disturbed and this was reflected in bird sightings this year. There is, however, now a helipad behind the ghats, that offers a pilgrim flight service to Zanskar!

We continued along the valley a short distance to Shey, where the roadside ponds below the palace usually hold something interesting. The Golden Eagle flew over again here, scattering the waterfowl and we also saw a couple of Himalayan Buzzards here. Another Northern Shoveler, an immature male this time and another nine Gadwall were on the ponds themselves. A Large-billed Crow was also here. Next stop was Shashi Bridge, where the western flood channel produced a cracking male Hen Harrier, four Greylag Geese (still hanging around the carcass of a dead dog for some reason) and a Common Snipe. Two more Northern Pintails were among the flock of Mallards on the flooded meadows, four noisy Green Sandpipers were along the flood channel and a Water Pipit flew over ,but most birds were a challenge to photograph this afternoon. We ended day one, as usual, at the spectacular Thiksey Monastery, where a Himalayan Buzzard

and a couple of Red-billed Choughs were high overhead. However, this stop was mostly a scenic one, overlooking the Indus Valley. There was not much snow this year, so I was a little concerned about our Snow Leopard prospects. Their favourite prey, Blue Sheep descend lower down the mountainsides in snow, bringing the leopards with them and of course the leopards are easier to track in snow. I should not have worried though!

Thiksey Gompa is a 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 afternoon 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. I was already up to 93% oxygen saturation today, well and truly acclimatised, for 3500m ASL at least.

Next morning saw us retracing our steps eastwards to Thiksey and then beyond, crossing the River Indus at Hemis and entering the National Park of the same name. Our usual valley here has been closed for a few years to limit the effect of tourism, so we diverted to an alternative, this time with road access! En-route, Jigmet saw a Blue Whistling Thrush along the Indus by the zip wire. Driving along the impressive Shang Valley gorge, our geologist Ian explained the various rock formations, recumbent folds and layers of conglomerate rocks between bands of silt galore! Ladakh really is a paradise for rock fans. A pair of Brown Dippers and an adult Northern Goshawk were also noted. Another goshawk, this time a second calendar year bird, was soaring over our campsite itself, a nice welcome! Once we had settled in, we decided to have a short walk upstream, quickly adding Streaked Rosefinch to our growing list. They would be seen daily during our stay, feeding in the Sea Buckthorn bushes along the road, their loud '*beep*' call became a regular sound. A few steps beyond the first rosefinches and the kitchen truck came speeding towards us. '*Snow Leopard*' were Gyaltsen's first words to me, not even enough time for a '*hello*'! And so, our first Snow Leopard encounter began…

Pretty soon Nazir arrived in the minibus and we were off, to the trailhead at the end of the valley. This was the first example of how an excursion does not always go to plan. So often on this tour we ended up staying out until dusk, watching leopards! We hiked, well staggered actually, along the valley for another kilometre or so, a walk that would normally take only a few minutes but in the thin air it took a lot more! The two Gyaltsens had scored immediately, hearing a cat calling up on a ridge above the valley and then locating it soon afterwards. Wow, that was the quickest ever, eclipsing even Fiona Ayerst's day two, 6pm sighting of 2016! By the time we got to our spotter's viewpoint, the cat was asleep so we had plenty to time to get our breath back and enjoy watching it get to its feet and walk about a bit, even doing an incredible *'Where's Wally?'* style peep at us over the top of a boulder. The leopard's face simply melted into the background. It was still present high up on the last ridge visible from the trailhead at dusk, when it finally descended, rather quickly! Maybe with Blue Sheep on its mind, they were gathered on the opposite side of the valley after all. Also, at the head of the valley, were two or three Lammergeiers. What a fabulous location! Predictably my oxygen saturation had dipped to 90% this evening after today's exertions.

We enjoyed the first of many fabulous meals cooked by Urgain and his team in the most basic conditions and retired to our tents for the night. We woke up to a chilly minus nine degrees Celsius and although this was actually much milder than usual it was still rather a shock to the system when camping. The viewpoint above the small hamlet of Shang Sumdo (= *Shang Junction*) affords panoramic views of both the Shang and Ozang Valleys. There were no leopard sightings before breakfast time this morning, but the Hill Pigeons kept us amused and a distant Himalayan Snowcock was spotted. An adult Lammergeier circled the campsite after breakfast, as we prepared for a hike in the Ozang Valley its shadow usually more easily spotted than its maker. We checked out some sites where Solitary Snipe had been seen recently, tiny spring-fed streams along the edges of the stony watercourse but to no avail. It was rather a quiet walk apart from the usual species like Chukar, Güldenstädt's Redstart and Robin Accentor of note. A small flock of Red-fronted Serins was near the road bridge below the village and a couple of very approachable Twite was in the campsite.

After lunch we headed back up Shang Valley again and hiked along the road beyond the village. There were a lot of Blue Sheep on the terraced fields in the valley and a trio of rams put on a great show with a three-way head-butting contest, dust flying all over the place. I'd never seen a threesome like this before. Overhead, both Lammergeier and Himalayan Vulture were noted, and distant flocks of choughs swirled high above the mountain ridges. Again, our afternoon stroll was interrupted by the news that Gyaltsen had found a pair of Snow

Leopards on the cliffs opposite the small village of Shang. Wow! Fast work by one of the best spotters in all of Ladakh! In mid-afternoon they weren't going anywhere, and we watched them mostly slumbering but they did get up to mate three times between 4-6pm. They were again fairly distant but at least a little closer than the previous evening, getting there!

Next morning the temperature had dropped a little lower to minus 10.6 degrees Celsius. After breakfast we had another pointless hike in search of Solitary Snipe in another partly frozen streambed. There was an influx of visitors to the valley today, no doubt tipped off by someone about our sighting the previous day. There is a mobile signal in Shang Valley. A convoy of five Toyota Innovas had brought 20 Snow Leopard tourists and although they did well to relocate the leopards, their numbers, as well as bright colours and Tilley Hats are the reason we like to go somewhere away from the crowds in search of leopards. The pair of leopards had moved a couple of ridges downstream but were still present all afternoon. They only mated once this afternoon though, a sign that they would soon be going their separate ways. After enduring some incessant dog barking, we eventually moved to a lower viewpoint, a little closer to the leopards and waited until they finally got up and walked a bit in the early evening, after all of the convoy had to leave to return to Leh. There was a couple of Lammergeier sightings as well as the usual species.

After another cold night we made a couple of major breakthroughs the next day. First of all, we finally connected with Solitary Snipe, seeing two birds (presumably a pair, or an '*irony*' as Adam suggested, as a new collective noun for this species) in the stream bed. We managed some great photos of them both, on the ground, among the stones, after some effort though! They are masters of hiding in their rocky domain, with only the tops of their heads visible. The second was Tibetan Partridge, expertly located hiding in a tiny copse by Jigmet's boys, way up in Ozang Valley, where we also managed some great scenic photo opportunities of the rugged mountain landscapes. Happily, the partridges stayed put until we had all staggered across a frozen stream and up to the terraced field from where they could be seen much more closely. Outstanding walkaway views and frame-filling photos! A Red Fox had scurried along the side of the valley below the copse moments earlier. There were no leopard sightings today, but we did add some more birds – Brandt's Mountain Finch and a Saker. We also had a couple of great close encounters with a large old Blue Sheep ram, first on top of a house eating the winter hay store and then sauntering close by across the stream before it went on its way. I had been wondering how to shoot a fabulous lone, ancient poplar in the valley and this evening the mountain slopes behind it were beautifully lit so there it was! 1970s punk Andy let slip that he was listening to The Exploited on his headphones at bedtime! At last someone on tour with the same interest in music as me but surely Watty would be more suitable for an alarm tone rather than a lullaby? I was happy to be back up to 93% oxygen saturation today.

Cloudy skies meant warmer temperatures next morning and we were pleased to see only minus 4.3 Celsius today. We decided to walk downstream today, towards Martselang but apart from the pair of Brown Dippers and a Wallcreeper for Mike and Gyaltsen only it was fairly quiet. We did see a couple of very good Large-eared Pikas though, sitting quietly in their rockpile homes. Ian pointed out ripples in the sedimentary rocks that were formerly patterns in sand on the sea floor and the mudstone layers between conglomerate rocks. Fascinating stuff indeed. A mid- afternoon walk to Shang Monastery revealed a flock of accentors, including at least 20 Brown Accentors. None had a hoped-for black throat though! On an overcast and windy afternoon, we had another look for Solitary Snipe, for those who missed out on a photo the previous day but again had no luck. There was a Brown Dipper all the way up there now though. Having done so well in Shang Valley, with five sightings, it was easy to make the decision to switch locations when news of a female leopard with two cubs fighting over her ibex kill with a male near Ullay, our next destination. So, we brought forward our departure from Shang by two nights and packed up camp next morning.

Our pre-breakfast walk turned up another Large-eared Pika under the buckthorn bushes not far from the campsite. Our journey west took us via Shey and then to Spituk, diverting around Leh before we climbed out of the main valley, passing the junction with the Zanskar River and then up onto the Basgo Plain. As well as the spectacular views of Basgo's fortress monastery, a flock of Red-billed Choughs was feeding on roadside buckthorn bushes as flakes of snow fell around us. Passing some stunning high-altitude desert landscapes and yet more jaw-dropping geological features, expertly explained by Ian, we finally reached our mountain hideaway at Ullay. Our homestay here sits at 4000m asl, next to a sacred juniper tree (which was looking a little worse for wear this year sadly) and enjoys a commanding view over the valley. After lunch and Nilza's particularly good masala chai we set out in search of leopards again. The ibex kill was at the head of Spango Valley, just over the mountain ridge from Ullay as the chough flies but a much longer distance via the many switchbacks on the mountain dirt road and then a long hike up the valley itself. Our local man, Stanzin Changchuk, had been watching the progress of the kill

in recent days and was able to guide us directly to it. We passed some folks returning on the way up, who reported no sign of the leopard! Oh dear!

Gasping for air, we found the leopard not far from its kill, surrounded by a small group of Yaks, one of which chased it onto a large rock. It took some time to make its way to the ibex after the Yaks had moved off, straining at the already well-eaten carcass to rip off pieces of meat. We didn't manage a closer view than around 200m but this is still a fairly close range as they go. This male had fought off the female leopard, which had actually killed the large male Siberian Ibex in the first place. She had two large cubs in tow but even as a collective, they were no match for this fearsome cat. Time went by and the setting sun lit up the tips of the cathedral spire peaks at the head of Spango Valley, as evening shadows crept up the hillsides. There could hardly be a more dramatic setting for this wonderful animal up at over 4200m asl! A flock of nine noisy Himalayan Snowcocks flew over at dusk calling but we saw little else here.

Ullay has become something of a birding hotspot as well in recent years and we always find something interesting here. The valley is full of fruit-laden rose bushes and sea buckthorn and being a geographical dead-end it no doubts benefits from a funnel effect. This time it was White-winged Grosbeak again, or rather grosbeaks! There were at least three feeding on rose hips in the fields below the village, one of them a male and sometimes affording stunning views! At least the male and one female remained in this area throughout our visit and could often be located by the cracking sounds of their massive bills, while they fed out of sight under the tangle of rose bushes that lines the network of terraced fields. The male was particularly approachable, but the female was much more wary. White-winged Grosbeak is not even mentioned in Otto Phister's 2004 'Birds & Mammals of Ladakh', although it will be in the second edition! Hot on the heels of the grosbeaks, a Wallcreeper flew over and landed briefly on a low cliff face for some. A Large-eared Pika showed nicely from time to time in the lower fields area and a flock of around 300 Alpine Choughs roamed the valley descending on sea buckthorn berries at times. This afternoon we hiked back up Spango Valley in a much more orderly fashion, but the Snow Leopard was now sitting well away from ibex. No doubt there was little meat left on the carcass and he wasn't in the mood for a closer view, simply slinking away further uphill at around 200m range. We were happy with our views from the previous day, so this wasn't too much of a disappointment. We hiked back out of the valley as a full moon rose over the mountain wall.

The temperature next morning was a positively balmy minus 7.8 degrees Celsius, it is usually much colder here at this time of year although a northerly wind soon started to cool this down. Again, there was nothing doing on the early morning leopard watch apart from a few very distant Siberian Ibex, so we headed to breakfast to enjoy a masala chai or two and more delicious apricot jam, a speciality of Ladakh! We had an excursion over the Tsarmang Chanda La today to Hemis Shukpochan *(= lots of stones, lots of junipers*). Another birding spot that never lets us down. However, the sacred juniper grove was rather quiet today, the trees themselves did not have any berries, so there were no Tibetan Blackbirds this time. A couple of Black-throated Thrushes, Streaked Rosefinches, Twite and Red-fronted Serin were all that we could muster. There weren't even any Woolly Hares seeking refuge here and what had happened to White-browed Tit-Warbler? We would usually have seen several by this point in the tour. Three Lammergeiers were tallied over the valley and a Red Fox scurried on its way on a distant hillside.

Returning to the bus, Changchuk *said 'I photographed a bird and I don't know what it is'.* Bam! Male Pine Bunting! A very uncommon bird in Ladakh and a write-in for this tour! It had been in the last juniper at the northern end of the grove, where the boys had been scanning hillsides from. It was time for something to eat so we decided to leave it until after lunch. It would hardly be going anywhere? We drove uphill beyond the village to Dakmar ('*Red Mountain*') from where we enjoyed stupendous views down to the River Indus, with some terrific rock formations stretching out below us. After lunch we set about trying to relocate the Pine Bunting but after another careful circuit of the grove, I threw the towel in and headed back to the bus. However, at the last moment, Changchuk managed to refind it in spectacular style atop a distant willow. The only thing was there were two, then three, four and five of them, two males and three females! They were mostly feeding just to the north of the juniper grove but after some great herding by Blair we could see them much more closely atop the master juniper again. Fab-u-lous! On a sad note, today we lost our amazing cook, Urgain, who had to leave suddenly owing to a family bereavement. I was worried about what might happen next but no need, '*All my boys can cook*' said Jigmet and he was right. Gyaltsen, probably the best Snow Leopard spotter in all of Ladakh and mountain porter for the military in the summer, simply stepped into Urgain's position and we even didn't notice the difference. Incredible!

The temperature dipped again slightly this morning at Ullay and we drew a blank in the north fields, again hoping for the elusive tit-warbler. Adam saw the grosbeaks again below the village, so it was good to know they were still around. After breakfast we ventured

uphill to Lungtserpa, the imposing homestay at the head of the valley. Situated at 4200m ASL it has the best view of all but with the altitude comes thinner and colder air. A party of Himalayan Horned Larks was on the approach to Lungtserpa and several Robin Accentors were lurking in the irrigation channels. The lady of the house was just returning from collecting water from the stream in the valley below with plastic containers loaded onto a Yak. The homestay is over 200 years old and is a fascinating look at traditional life in this part of Ladakh (the present building of Nilza's homestay is only around 25 years old!!!). We admired the prayer rooms, the main living room with its ornate stove and wonderful pots, pans, crockery as well as the special jugs for butter tea and Chang, the homemade barley beer. A Chiru (= Tibetan Antelope) horn hangs on the wall here alongside Lammergeier feathers. We also had a quick look in the storeroom. Lungtserpa also has a secure animal night shelter funded by Jigmet's Snow Leopard Conservancy, which forces *'the cat'* to seek natural prey instead of raiding livestock, thereby reducing conflict with local people. We hiked back down to Nilza's place seeing Brown Dipper on the way, pausing occasionally to admire the amazing views down the valley and across the Indus to the jagged Zanskar range. The afternoon was rather quiet too and some folks even had a siesta but at least the male White-winged Grosbeak put on a great show, allowing some crazy close approach in the lower fields. My oxygen level had dipped to 89% today, still within the safe range but I did feel more tired after going uphill today.

The temperature dipped further today, to minus 10 degrees Celsius and it felt decidedly colder. The female White-winged Grosbeak showed early on then flew towards the village and the pika was about again in its usual place. We had another fabulous breakfast unaware that today was going to be a record Snow Leopard day! News filtered through early on that the female leopard and her two cubs were currently heading towards the west ridge of Spango from Akir Valley (the valley to the east of Hemis Shukpochan). We quickly descended and there was already a gathering of Snow Leopard tourists on the switchbacks below looking up into Spango. We chose a little higher switchback and looked from there and it was not long before Jigmet's bionic vision picked up the leopard family on one of the highest ridges. However, this was probably my most distant ever view of a Snow Leopard, maybe around 2km away in a heat haze. Still it would be ungrateful to complain, Peter Matthiesson, author of the iconic book *'The Snow Leopard'* never even saw a single one yet made a lifetime's work of talking about looking for and not seeing it. Oops I did it again, spoiling the ending of his book. That's me on 24 sightings though! I'm much luckier.

Snow Leopards rarely move during the day, as proved to be the case with this trio. They finally got up at 5pm and walked back over the ridge and out of sight into Akir Valley. Got job that we decided to leave them after a short while and go to the next village to the east instead, Saspotsay. There had been a big influx of Snow Leopard tourists into Ullay today, in fact everyone from Rumbak Valley. The villagers of the nine households there had decided they wanted everyone to leave owing to fears about the spread of Covid-19. We had already started to keep ourselves to ourselves, generally avoid other people and not let any other foreigners look through our scopes etc but the sense of fear had already reached the most remote valleys in Ladakh, where if you develop pneumonia, you get AMS (Acute Mountain Sickness) for free and that will probably kill you more quickly than the pneumonia. There are no medical facilities here and few supplies. There were now over 50 people on the switchbacks at the entrance to Spango, including a local man, Tashi Chospel, who reported that a leopard had attacked one of his cows down in the valley below at Yangthang Tokpo the previous evening, while he had been away from home. His wife had tried to fight it off with sticks and stones, but the leopard later returned and badly injured the cow again, biting it in the neck. Gyaltsen Dadul and Changchuk had looked for tracks earlier but had lost its trail, however, on our way to Saspotsay they picked them up again, on the road from Yangthang to Saspotsay. A mother and two tiny cubs. We followed them for a couple of kilometres before they veered off onto the mountain and there ahead of us was local guide Norbu, who had also followed them. However, there was no trace of their makers though, presumably now hiding during the middle of the day.

Saspotsay started very slowly with a couple of unproductive short birding walks. There were a few Hill Pigeons among the Rock Doves but alas no Snow Pigeon. A Golden Eagle was sky dancing over the cliffs that tower over the small village and a few Robin Accentors and Cinereous Tits were in the bushes that line the fields below. We had just decided to explore the vicinity of the monastery that overlooks the village but as soon as we rolled up there, we got a call on the radio, '*Snow Leopard*!'. Not only was it a Snow Leopard but it was at a kill in the village! Nazir demonstrated his awesome driving skills in turning the minibus on a sixpence and we raced downhill to where the boys were gathered, behind the village looking up one of the narrow ravines that emerges at the foot of the tall cliffs. They told us that the cat had left its kill, an ibex wedged between some large boulders. The leopard had forced the poor ibex off the cliff and it fell to its death on the rocks below. Even more amazingly, the kill was directly behind one of Jigmet's Snow Leopard Conservancy's Himalayan Homestays! He was already arranging access for us and we were soon drinking masala chai in the yard of the homestay and waiting for

the leopard to return to its kill only around 50 metres away.

In typical style, Jigmet said *'the cat is here'*, I've heard him say this lots of times now! The cat was indeed here, sitting high up on the crag looking down at the kill. I had been so sure that it would approach down the narrow ravine it had disappeared into but no, this incredible animal thinks nothing of climbing up and down sheer cliffs. Time went by and local folks came and went too, taking a look at the cat, excited kids held up by their mums so they could see. At last the leopard tired of the magpies bothering it and came down, more or less straight down, except for one small detour around a vertical section. Wow! An amazing show of agility. Even a passing Wallcreeper spotted by Jacob couldn't distract us! We hid out of sight for a short while so it would continue all the way to its kill and then it proceeded to tuck in, starting with the intestines and juicy bits. An awesome experience but we did feel a bit sorry for the female ibex. We returned to our mountain homestay very happy after a very exciting day! Maybe it was the excitement, but I was still at 89% oxygen saturation this evening or maybe I was still struggling after the exertion of the Spango hikes a couple of days earlier?

Well there wasn't really a question about where we would start the following day. We were back at Saspotsay before dawn in the hope of some more Snow Leopard action. However, there were far too many other folks with the same idea, a traffic jam of taxis and minibuses clogged up the tiny village's streets. The leopard was also clearly full after a night at its *'all you can eat'* ibex buffet. Although it was still on view, for a while at least, before noise levels grew too high, the views and light (in now overcast conditions) were nothing like the previous afternoon so we went off to look at the monastery. The government-funded road stretches a little further each year and has now reached the monastery but there wasn't anything going on here either so after a lunch gathered around another second-hand Indian army wood burner at Jigmet's son's in-laws we headed back to Ullay. We had another enjoyable session watching the White-winged Grosbeaks, cracking rose hips again in the lower fields. At dusk the female flew into the sacred juniper tree, next to Nilza's place, the only bird I've ever seen in it.

Eventually our time at Ullay came to an end but not before we had one last try for the elusive White-browed Tit-Warbler. As we were passing the last sea buckthorn bushes down the track through the fields, BINGO! A very thin, high-pitched call signalled its presence and happily Blair and Jacob, who particularly wanted this one, were able to get on a couple of these hyper-active birds as they made their way through the dense buckthorn and away. Phew! That was a close one. I have never struggled for it as we did this year, maybe something to do with the early spring I wonder? There wasn't much else happening this morning though, just a couple of Himalayan Snowcocks calling from the crags above the village, reminiscent of curlews. After another hearty breakfast we were off again, bumping into a group of fairly close ibex from the switchbacks below the village, another box ticked! We only had very distant views of live ones so far. There was even a male in the group with a fairly good beard and white winter saddle. We also stopped for a brief hike at Capray Chumik, a small, narrow canyon not far from Likkir, where Changchuk had found an ibex kill a year earlier. The remains of the large male ibex were still present, propped up on a rock for posterity. As we neared Leh, it became apparent that many businesses had shut up shop and the streets were almost empty. More fears of the spread of Covid-19. We passed many Güldenstädt's Redstarts, including more females lower down in the valleys and on the outskirts of Leh a Ruddy Shelduck was among the coots on the ice hockey lake. There were facemasks everywhere now, something I have never seen in Leh before. As always, everyone was relieved to be back at the awesome Grand Dragon Hotel for some creature comforts, albeit only for one night, or so we thought.

Well, it was very pleasant until I received a call in the evening advising that all Inner Line permits had been revoked. This meant that no-one was allowed to travel along the Indus Valley east of the police checkpoint at Upshi, therefore cancelling our Tibetan Plateau Extension itinerary. This was a major blow and ultimately cost us about 10 species, not to mention the awesome experience of travelling to Tso Kar (= *Salt Lake*). The casualties included stars such as Tibetan Sandgrouse, Ground Tit, Black-winged and Blanford's Snowfinch as well as mammals like Grey Wolf, Kiang, Argali and a very slim chance of Pallas's Cat. We switched to recovery mode and planned an alternative. Access to the Leh to Manali road across the Tanglangla Pass (the pass itself closed by snow of course) did not require an Inner Line Permit and we could realistically hope to find a few of the missing species here. It also has some awesome scenery, along the meeting place of the tectonic plates. Ian reminded us that this is the only place in the world where there is not any volcanic activity at such a meeting point! Good to know!

We stopped in the Indus Valley, where Jigmet showed us some ancient petroglyphs carved into the rocks. These are believed to date back around 2,000 years, as with the advent of Buddhism, carvings switched from animal figures such as Blue Sheep, Ibex and Snow Leopard to Buddhist symbols. Such treasures would usually qualify somewhere for UNESCO World Heritage status but here they are by the main

road. The shops and cafes at Upshi were very quiet, there were still lots of dogs here begging for food as we turned south following the Leh to Manali road. Along the way we had fun reading the helpful road signs encouraging road safety. Some of our favourites signs: ' *It is not rally, enjoy the valley', 'Drive on horse power not rum power', 'Driving faster causes disaster' and 'After whisky, driving risky*' but there was also *'Don't gossip, let him drive'*. The *#metoo* movement has obviously not yet reached Ladakh it seems. Interestingly, a Snow Leopard had killed a Blue Sheep within sight of our guest house in the tiny hamlet of Lato the previous day, but the villagers had chased it off in an attempt to save the sheep!!! The sheep died and was placed on the hillside opposite but there was no further sign of the leopard. We checked in, admired the covey of Tibetan Partridges behind the guest house, and continued towards the Tanglangla pass, knowing that things might change so we ought to try and get it done while we still could. We followed the winding road up into the sky, stopping and scanning every now and again. There wasn't much up here apart from awesome scenery. A couple of flocks of mixed Himalayan Horned Lark, Brandt's Mountain Finch and Twite livened things up and high in the valley Lammergeier and a couple of Golden Eagles were spotted. However, the greatest excitement came, especially for Andy, when a Woolly Hare bolted across in front of us and away up a hillside. Higher and higher we went, crossing occasional patches of snow until we got to a switchback at 4953m ASL. We could have gone further but this was probably the best vantage point in the valley. After a couple of cups of masala chai, Changchuk eventually showed everyone why he is one of the best spotters in Ladakh, picking up a pair of the desired Tibetan Snowcocks at an extreme range indeed. They were walking along a cornice way up in the sky. It would have been nice to see them closer as we do at Tso Kar but we'll take this view for now. Jacob followed this up with another great bit of spotting, a pair of Great Rosefinches, high on rocks above us. They too were already up at around 5,000m ASL. Spring really was on the way. As we drove back through the ribbon villages in the valley it was clear that all the young guys had returned from their work in Leh now and there was a big cricket match taking place on a bumpy field. More of this later. After reaching our highest altitude today I dipped a bit to 87% oxygen saturation today, the air was really thin up there!

I woke to see a flock of 22 Tibetan Partridges in the field outside my window this morning, as well as a light dusting of snow. There had been snowflakes in the air at 2.30am when I made the necessary trip outside and when we asked Changchuk what the road to the pass might be like, he indicated a couple of feet of snow. We had been lucky to get there yesterday. However, as we went uphill again, things went rapidly downhill. A car with headlights flashing as we reached Rumtse, the last village in the valley, belonged the village headman. He told us that the villagers had a meeting the previous evening and they wanted us to leave, including from our accommodation at Lato. He had also called the police at Upshi asking them to enforce the new restrictions, which had now closed this valley as well behind us. So, unfortunately, we had no choice but to leave and head back to Leh. Well at least our folks could now draw a line under freezing cold nights, but it did mean the end of our hopes of salvaging any more species featured in the extension. We could also understand the fears of the local people, bearing in mind the serious risks associated with pneumonia at high altitude but it was a bit much that folks should run away indoors to get away from us, particularly when the young guys who had returned home from Leh would have had so many more recent connections than us. On the return to the Grand Dragon we added a drake Eurasian Wigeon at Shey and Common Moorhen in a roadside channel as we passed Sindhu Ghats.

So, what to do now? It transpired that Delhi flights were already full, so we couldn't start the long journey home yet, even if we wanted to. Birding in the Indus Valley was the only possibility, so first of all, we headed back to Spituk. Oh dear! A scene of devastation greeted us. A retaining wall was being installed near to the Shiva Temple and there was even a JCB in the channel, where we usually see something interesting. Secondly, the poplars and willows were being harvested in the area of the Güldenstädt's Redstart roost, which had been completely trashed. Even in its degraded state, Spituk did not let us down though. It always delivers a surprise and this time it was a lovely male Bluethroat, another write-in for this itinerary. It was '*sulking*' in the shadows of the vegetation on the opposite side of the flood channel and even sang in response to playback! A large gull flew over that was surely a Caspian Gull on the basis of its very long bill and white underwing. The only other possibility, Steppe Gull does not have nearly as long a bill. In the fields below the monastery a flock of five Mongolian Finches sat up on electricity wires and there were still plenty of Horned Larks around. Downstream of Spituk Bridge, there was no sign of any Ibisbills but instead we saw lots of Güldenstädt's Redstarts and Black-throated Thrushes. A Golden Eagle was soaring quite close to the flight path of one of the huge Indian Air Force transport planes and a pair of Common Mergansers drifted downstream. Back at Sindhu Ghats, a White wagtail of the subspecies *dukhunensis* was feeding along the main channel, occasionally being harassed by Masked Wagtails. A Royle's Pika and a Blue Whistling Thrush were also on the bank of the channel in this area. Also here of note, was a pair of Ruddy Shelduck, five Tufted Ducks and three Red-Crested Pochard on a warm and sunny afternoon. A few of us went in search of dippers in the afternoon along the stream on the western edge of town. A pair of Brown Dippers, and after some considerable effort, a White-throated Dipper were our reward thanks to a great bit of spotting by Blair!

On our final morning we ran into more restrictions. Shashi Bridge was closed owing to a small village beyond it being locked down owing to the Coronavirus outbreak. Some of its residents had tested positive for Covid-19 on their return from a pilgrimage to Iran and one, an elderly man, had died. We were turned back at the Police checkpoint, even though we didn't want to go anywhere near the village. We returned to Shey and checked the pools and surrounding fields. The Greylag Geese had now increased to five but there was nothing else of any significance. A short session at Choglamsar, however, was action packed and added three new species to the trip list, Common Greenshank, Eurasian Sparrowhawk (with Masked Wagtail in its talons) and Carrion Crow (one very ragged bird over, west). Best of all though was the pair of Ibisbills present on the shingle in the river here. It was great for Adam to catch up with them in the end. The new road bridge here is still not yet finished and they are now on their second rickety footbridge, with taxis piled up at each end of it. Our last afternoon birding session was spent at Sindhu Ghats, where we had lunch again and a fly-by Grey Heron was our final addition to our list. As we packed our bags for the early morning flight the Grand Dragon was eerily quiet, the only lights on were at reception and on the floor we were staying on, staff were already packing up furniture and there was no buffet anymore, just an á la carte breakfast. We were the only and last guests, the hotel was closing down after our departure, owing to the Covid-19 crisis. Happily, we all made it home before everywhere closed down behind us, some taking a rather imperfect route but all safely in the end.

Finally, a big thank you to our amazing hosts, Jigmet Dadul and his Snow Leopard Quest team for taking such good care of us and for making this tour another great success. Thanks also to our intrepid group of Birdquesters and Wild Images Photographers for being such fun people to travel with and for coping so well with the rather disappointing end to our adventure in Ladakh. At least we did our best to make the most of it! See you in the mountains in 2021, when things have returned to normal?

Animal of the trip (as voted for by group members):

1. Snow Leopard
2. Siberian Ibex
3. Ibisbill
4. Blue Sheep
5. White-winged Grosbeak
6. Solitary Snipe
7. Güldenstädt's Redstart
8. Lammergeier
9. Pine Bunting
10. Bluethroat