

Snow Leopards of Ladakh: Photography Tour Report 2023

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by Mike Watson

My fifth Ladakh Snow Leopard tour produced another four leopard encounters, with a total of seven animals, crucially, one of which was a <50 meters sighting at a kill. While for most of our people a close Snow Leopard sighting is no.#1 on their wish list, there was much else to enjoy on our travels. We added a couple of top-quality world mammals to this tour in the form of Tibetan (Sand) Fox and the near-threatened Tibetan Gazelle (or Goa) high up on the Tibetan Plateau in the southeast of Ladakh. We also scored with Pallas's Cat again and enjoyed sightings of Kiang (Tibetan Wild Ass), Siberian Ibex, Ladakh Urial (still 'just' a subspecies of Mouflon!), Blue Sheep (or Bharal), Woolly Hare, Large-eared and Plateau Pikas. Operated as a joint Birdquest | Wild Images tour, avian highlights included close encounters with: Tibetan Partridge; Tibetan Sandgrouse; Hill Pigeon; Ibisbill; Solitary Snipe; Pallas's Gull; Bearded and Himalayan Vultures; Golden Eagle; Upland Buzzard; Black-throated Thrush; Güldenstädt's Redstart (by the dozen); Brown and White-throated Dippers; Black-winged and Blanford's Snowfinches; Robin and Brown Accentors; White-winged Grosbeak (for the fourth time in a row!); Brandt's Mountain Finch and Streaked and Great Rosefinches. Although a pre-tour Smew did not hang around for all of us for the official start, we added three new birds to the Birdquest list for this itinerary: Common Chaffinch; Common Black-headed Gull and (the much more interesting) Tibetan Lark! The jaw-dropping scenery of Ladakh's high-altitude mountain desert took what was left of our breath away again in the thin air and we reached a new highest point for this tour of 5330m on the Kalang Tar Tar. Our awesome Ladakhi hosts, still in the running for the award of 'nicest people on Earth', helped make this another 'once-in-a-lifetime' experience for our group. Following its split with Jammu and Kashmir and new status of Union Territory, the pace of development has picked up in Ladakh and many of the birding sites, particularly in the Indus Valley are being degraded, as new homesteads and small businesses spring up everywhere. A visit sooner than later is recommended!



Thiksey Monastery looks beautiful in the layers of mountains in Ladakh (image by Mike Watson)

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 delighted to report that again we had no AMS issues on this tour, with everyone sensible enough to arrive early and acclimatise as well as not pushing themselves too hard for the first few days of the tour. 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. Another reason (in addition to the important need for time to acclimatize) to aim to arrive in Leh several days early!



Thiksey Monastery is sometimes known as the 'Little Potala' (image by Mike Watson)

The official start of the tour began with a visit to a rushing stream not far from town where a Solitary Snipe was happily still present from the previous day's recce in a tiny side channel. Not the most picturesque setting for this large, ginger-breasted snipe unfortunately, with some plastic rubbish in its chosen habitat, but this is a much sought-after shorebird, with a scattered distribution from Iran to Japan. Ladakh is one of the most reliable places to see it and although I have never seen it in the same place twice, we always manage to connect with it. A soundtrack of Buddhist chanting from the nearby monastery was very welcome, as was the singing of a nearby Brown Dipper. A few Horned Larks, of the western subspecies *albigula* (sitting on a different side of the mooted split of this group from the birds we would see later, on the Himalayan Plateau, ssp. *longirostris*) were feeding on the edges of snow patches on the adjacent hillside. Masked Wagtail, Rock Dove and Eurasian Magpie were also new for the tour, but bird activity was otherwise quiet.



Solitary Snipe – one of the most sought-after shorebirds (image by Mike Watson)

We continued downhill from here to the River Indus itself at Spituk, however, the Ibisbills we had lined up at this next location were not at home today. A drake Common Merganser was on the river, a couple of Green Sandpipers were along the riverbank and in the buckthorn bushes and nearby willows and poplars were Cinereous Tit, Brown Accentor, Black-throated Thrushes (including some smart males) and the first of very many Güldenstädt's Redstarts, which adorned the buckthorn bushes like Christmas decorations. A change of plan saw us switch to our reserve Ibisbill location to the east of town, Sindhu Ghats, where, after some searching (they kept us waiting this time!) we managed to locate a pair of this unique shorebird. They were feeding quietly in one of the many side channels of the Indus and allowed fairly close approach. This monotypic shorebird is one of the most enigmatic birds of the Himalayas, is unusual in having purple legs when breeding and it also lacks a hind toe. It was something of a relief to find it! Missing Ibisbill would be unthinkable on this itinerary! While watching them another pair flew in from way downstream, calling loudly. Also here were Common Moorhen, Eurasian Wren, Water Pipit (of the western form *coutelli*) and a super-smart male Citrine Wagtail of the black- collared form *calcarata*. It was a shame to see what is happening at this once excellent site. The helipad has been developed and access upstream from the ghats has become trickier, a large villa has appeared by the channel and the ghats themselves are getting a makeover.



Ibisbill in flight over the River Indus (image by Mike Watson)

So, with both of our most-wanted birds seen by 10am on day one, we could relax a little. As luck would have it, sharp-eyed Alain spotted another pair of Ibisbills at our next location, Choglamsar Bridge. They had not been present during my pre-tour recces and they were eventually joined by a third bird and were taking an interest in the large undisturbed shingle island just upstream from the bridge. They were a bit more photogenic than the Sindhu Ghats birds. The course of the river here has changed every year since I started visiting Ladakh. Two Common Greenshanks were also present here and afforded some nice views, a welcome sight for our US group members! A small flock of Red-billed Choughs flew over, calling, a couple of Brown Accentors showed briefly, and some Mallards loitered in the shallows, but we did not add anything else here. We returned to our hotel for lunch before heading out again in the afternoon.



Choglamsar bridge, covered in prayer flags (image by Mike Watson)

Shey Holy Pond is always a happy hunting ground for us and this time we were rewarded with a first winter female Red-throated Thrush among the Black-throated flock feeding behind the prayer wheel here. Like an oversize female Güldenstädt's Redstart it flashed its red tail now and then. Otherwise, it was rather difficult to pick out in the ever-moving throng and remained out of reach of the cameras. There were some interesting waterfowl on the pond itself, in the form of Gadwall, Northern Pintail and Common Pochard as well as Common Moorhen, Eurasian Coot and right at the death, an all-too-brief roadside Blue Whistling Thrush, which vanished before everyone could get a look at it. Another stop, at Chuchot Marshes, produced the hoped-for (for our US group members at least) Greylag Geese recced a few days previously. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk flew overhead, a couple of Carrion Crows were also still around and another 15 Horned Larks of the western subspecies *albigula* were noted. We ended the day as usual on the rooftop of the wonderful Thiksey Monastery, enjoying a stupendous view over the Indus Valley. Thiksey is the largest monastery in the Indus Valley and was established in the fifteenth century. It is home to the Gelug sect of Buddhism and is a miniature version of the Potala Palace in Lhasa, Tibet. We climbed up a few of its twelve stories, home to around 60 monks and nuns.



Young monks playing football at Thiksey (image by Mike Watson)

Day two of the tour saw us heading for the mountains of Hemis National Park, which dominate the southern horizon of the Indus Valley. We explored a new area of fields and riverine scrub along the river at Ranbipura, seeing five pintails on the river, our first Robin Accentor and notably a mini-flock of three Common Chaffinches in large poplars not far from the main road. Another addition to the our Ladakh list and understandably only exciting for our US and Indian folks in the group! As lunchtime approached, we entered the lovely Shang Valley, our home for the next six nights. Chukar Partridges are very common here and a small group of Great Rosefinches and Red-fronted Serins was near the settlement of Shang Sumdo. As we settled into our new surroundings, the first of more than 20 Lammergeier sightings on this tour soared into view. There was at least one pair whose territory included the upper valley where our campsite was situated, by a partly frozen rushing stream. The sound of the water flowing under the ice rumbled on day and night. We also had three Himalayan Vulture sightings today, they remain scarce and are probably becoming scarcer. A short walk to explore the immediate surroundings produced a large flock of Brandt's Mountain Finches high up on the scree above the campsite but no Solitary Snipe in one of their former haunts (we checked lots of times over the coming days without any sign of them). Our first evening scanning produced the only wolves of the tour, expertly spotted by Amber, distantly on what became known as 'Lucky Ridge', to the south of and upstream from the campsite. We enjoyed the first of many fabulous meals cooked by Urgan and his team in the most basic conditions and retired to our tents for the night.



Shang Valley (image by Mike Watson)

Next morning saw us adopt a regular routine, which started with a very welcome cup of masala chai delivered to our tents followed by pre-breakfast scanning of the very extensive mountainsides visible from our camp. Small groups of Blue Sheep were always dotted here and there and every now and again there would be something of more interest. It was a handful of Himalayan Snowcocks on the ridgeline today. Also logged today were Golden Eagle and another three Lammergeier sightings. A very photogenic White-throated Dipper in the stream by the campsite was another popular distraction from the intensive search for the 'Grey Ghost' Snow Leopard. It was seen to catch several small fish and bash them to death on stones on the sides of the brook. Small flocks of choughs often remained unidentified high in the sky but we were able to tally at least four Alpine Choughs today among the commoner Red-billed. Bird of the day was the ultra-pale Northern Goshawk perched high above the campsite again too far for the cameras. With no trace of barring on the underparts it was surely of one of the northern/eastern races?



Slow progress in Shang Valley (image by Mike Watson)

After a very nice close encounter with a pair of Golden Eagles (one of them a youngster) opposite the campsite, day four saw us venture further afield, to the tiny hamlet of Chogdo (or *'Chok Do'*) in the adjacent Ozang Valley. A large flock of Twite was followed by a rather surreal picnic lunch among the vegetables in a greenhouse! A Lammergeier soared over Chukirmo just upstream from Chogdo and a pair of Golden Eagles perched high above the valley. Scanning did not reveal anything new today, but persistence is the name of the game and there are none better than our spotters in my opinion. Persistence paid off next morning! Day five was Snow Leopard Day. Jigmet's son, Nawang Gyaltsen came up trumps with a mother and cub ascending a ridge behind Shang village. We all piled in the bus, with our driver Stanzin rudely awakened from his sleeping bag. Soon enough we were gasping for air, after climbing to a low vantage point above the village, from where Gyaltsen had spotted the leopards. We settled in to watch them, mum stalking four Blue Sheep, one of them a tiny lamb, that walked right into her path. I felt sure we were going to at least see her attempt to catch one of them but to our amazement she let them go. Eventually they caught sight of her, their lookout stamped its feet, and all departed swiftly downslope and away. The leopard returned to her cub and moved out of sight. They were between 1-2km away so not particularly close, but it was a lovely sighting, watching them from a distance, uninfluenced by our presence. Other sightings in the vicinity of the campsite this morning included a White-throated Dipper just upstream and another couple of Himalayan Snowcocks on the ridges high above us.



Snow Leopard watchers (image by Mike Watson)

The leopards woke from their slumber in the afternoon and started walking slowly further along the ridge, after relocating to another vantage point we could follow their progress for a while. A young Golden Eagle flew through our field of view… and again! It started to circle and show an interest in the Snow Leopard cub, buzzing it a few times, the cub swiping back at it. The eagle then landed on a small pinnacle and by that point mum had enough of its antics and both leopards made a beeline for it. The eagle drifted off, realising it was game over. Some of our long lens heavy brigade got some nice 'in-the-landscape' images of the pair as they made their way across the vast mountainside and out of sight. They weren't seen again, despite all the spotters in Shang turning their attention to their possible course over the next day. This year saw the warmest temperatures I have experienced on this tour, although I recorded a low of minus 12 Celsius inside the tent one night, it was regularly around minus 5 – a good 10 degrees warmer than usual and it felt positively warm in direct sunlight.



Our hardest-working scanner takes a break (image by Mike Watson)

We walked upstream again the next day to the stupa towards the head of the valley seeing some of the now-familiar species including Lammergeier, Himalayan Vulture and Golden Eagle, a couple of Alpine Choughs among the many Red-billeds and a female Great Rosefinch. We explored a side valley – the Gyumchu Tokpo, finding the remains of an old Snow Leopard kill, some undigested vegetable Blue Sheep stomach contents and fur, but the cat had long gone. We also got to see just how far the shepherdess, who passed our camp each day grazed her flock – miles up the valley sides, a distant flock of Blue Sheep dispersed ahead of them. In times of scant snowfall there must be serious competition between them.



Shang Valley Shepherdess (image by Mike Watson)

Today was Snow Leopard Day no.#2. After the coldest night so far, we were woken by a wren was singing next to the tents. The morning scanning did not produce anything of note, so we decided to revisit Ozang Valley. Tomek expertly spotted some roadside Tibetan Partridges among the Chukars at Shang Sumdo. Significantly easier than the terrain at Chogdo! A family party of three Lammergeiers and a Himalayan Vulture circled the hillside above us. This time we walked up the frozen streambed of the Kichen Tokpo, to the cattle herder's homestead. The lady of the house, Karma made our boys tea and they set about scanning the surrounding mountainsides. Within no time Gyaltsen struck again, this time with a mother and two cubs climbing a ridge that John calculated was 2.7km away. They were small in the frame, but we very much enjoyed the sighting as they slowly traversed the distant ridge, as we watched from the most idyllic setting above the homestead. Around the homestead itself were Chukar and Tibetan Partridges, Twite and Robin Accentors. During the evening watch from our camp (roughly in the path of the Snow Leopard family if they continued in the same direction) a Snow Leopard appeared briefly on the ridge opposite, creeping about so furtively that only two of us managed to see it! Four in one day! A little earlier a Wallcreeper had flown through one of the scope views, not far from a distantly perched Hill Pigeon. We used to see the latter much more easily here!



Ice hiking in Kichen Valley (image by Mike Watson)

Our six nights camping stay came to an end and it was time to leave Shang Valley, a nice scope view of a perched Alpine Chough was the highlight of our last morning's scanning. After the tear-down we counted nine Tibetan Partridges (plus one dead next to a wire fence) at Shang Sumdo and a couple of noisy Brown Dippers downstream from the hamlet. With the comfort of a warm night in a Leh hotel in prospect, we could endure a little more hardship and detoured via the Tanglang La pass on the Leh to Manali highway. The border roads in Ladakh have numerous humorous safety signs, such as: *'It is not rally, enjoy the valley', 'Drive on horse power not rum power', 'Driving faster causes disaster'* and *'After whisky, driving risky'*! We hoped for some high-altitude species and at 4400m ASL we found a couple of parties of Ground Tits. What excellent little birds they are! Pecking away in the dust of the high-altitude mountain desert, it was formerly known as Groundpecker! It always impresses me that anything can survive up here in the cold thin air. We enjoyed some great point-blank looks at some of them and some great photos. Also up here were Common Raven (a pair), another eight Tibetan Partridges, a couple of pairs of singing Horned Larks (of the Tibetan Plateau subspecies *longirostris*) and a Lammergeier passed by. We ventured further up the pass to more than 4800m without luck in our search for Tibetan Snowcock, however, in keeping with the rest of the tour, there was less snow up here than usual for the time of year and maybe the snowcocks were even higher? Either way, the hot shower and under-floor heating in the bathroom was very nice this evening!



Alain at Tanglang La (image by Mike Watson)

Feeling refreshed we headed out next morning on the next section of the tour, to the north bank of the Indus and the granite mountains of Ullay. A quick stop at Guphuk's Viewpoint over the River Indus added Northern Shoveler, Eurasian Wigeon and Black Kite to our list and his nearby pond produced a Common Black-headed Gull standing on the ice. This one has been a pre-tour recce bird before but hadn't made it onto the official Birdquest Ladakh list until now. It could have been a Pallas's or Brown-headed but instead it had to be a garden bird back home, didn't it? We continued into the hills passing small villages and renovated chortens, adding a couple of flocks of Urial totalling 24 individuals (they are just Mouflons, apparently), the lovely lower altitude sheep species of Ladakh. Clinging to the boulder slopes and winding uphill towards the sky Amber spotted a Wallcreeper on a cliff above us but it quickly vanished without being properly grilled. We eventually rounded a bend in the road (well, jeep track) and there was Ullay, Shangri La-like, tucked away out of sight at 4000m ASL at the head of a hidden mountain valley. This idyllic location would be our base for the next three nights, as we spread our net wider in the hope of a closer Snow Leopard sighting. As most of us now know, watching one at its kill is by far the best way to secure a closer view, when they are much more tolerant of people and keen to keep scavengers away from their precious prize. Ultimately there was no '*Jullay*' from Ullay this time and we did not get a sighting at all here (we saw two kills in the same area in 2020!) but there was much else to look at.



How many cups of tea KC? (image by Mike Watson)

On our first evening scanning session a blackish morph Upland Buzzard flew along the ridge opposite the village, Chukar Partridges abounded and a couple of groups of Siberian Ibex totalled around 50 animals. This goat replaces Blue Sheep on the north bank. In the strong sunlight, the usually productive fields below the village were deathly quiet. Only a couple of Güldenstädt's Redstarts and Robin Accentors had survived the apparent apocalypse. Next morning was not much better with only Twite and Black-throated Thrushes new here in a bitterly cold northerly wind. I can't recall feeling so cold in Ladakh before! The morning scan produced nothing of note apart from enjoying the songs of the Himalayan Snowcocks on distant ridgelines and some distant migrating geese, surely Bar-headed?



Güldenstädt's Redstart, one of the commonest birds in the Indus Valley in winter (image by Mike Watson)

After breakfast we headed for one of our favourite places, Hemis Shukpachen's sacred juniper grove. Approaching the grove, Chukar Partridges and Horned Larks were ridiculously common in the small stone-walled fields. We knew there was a female White-winged Grosbeak in the grove from the previous day (it was absent from Ullay this year) and after some searching Jigmet Tarchin did very well to locate it, feeding in a quiet corner. It was not particularly obliging but a few of us got some record shots. Other birds here included the usual Black-throated Thrushes, Great and Streaked (photo by Martin!) Rosefinches and a small flock of Twite. We spent some time here enjoying the ambience and as a Golden Eagle flew low over us, I tried to knock myself out on a juniper tree branch. I almost succeeded. The rest of the day was rather uneventful with Red Fox added on the evening watch.



Siberian Ibex bosses at Ullay (image by Mike Watson)

Lungtserpa Homestead sits highest in the valley at over 4200m ASL and we enjoyed a lovely hike in the snow above it today, in the hope of getting closer to a couple of large male ibexes that had been hanging around on the crags in that area. We could make our way a bit closer to them, but they remained quite far for the cameras. Lungtserpa is thought to be around 5-600 years old and is a magnificent building. It was nice to see that the Birdquest-sponsored animal shelter was still in good condition, playing its part to reduce human-leopard conflict. In the afternoon we drove east to the village of Saspotsay, in the hope of a repeat of the tremendous sighting we had there in 2020. We had a nice walk past its monastery and an ancient sacred willow tree, but ultimately there was no cat action this afternoon. The fields here were also similarly almost devoid of small birds but an adult Lammergeier flew along the cliffs, a Himalayan Snowcock showed quite nicely, and Hill Pigeon made an appearance. We hoped the small group of ibex on the cliffs that dominate the village would attract a leopard but no luck this evening. As we departed, a sparrowhawk was spotted from the bus window, perched at eye level in the large poplar wood on the south side of Saspotsay. Back at Nilza's place in Ullay wolves were howling after dark, we did not see them though, just a reminder that they pass close by at night.



Motorbike explorer Tomek on Norboo's Royal Enfield (image by Mike Watson)

The second section of the tour ended without a leopard sighting, not the first time this has happened to us at Ullay but it does come up with great sightings from time to time and I have seen more kills here than elsewhere. Next time then. We said goodbye to our lovely hosts Nilza and Norbu and retraced our steps to Leh, via some more scanning and a very nice lunch at our usual homestay stop in Likkir. We hiked up the pretty Capray Chumik canyon in the hope of a Wallcreeper but apart from the stunning granite scenery we had only a Himalayan Vulture to show for our efforts. Another roadside stop towards Leh revealed some of Ladakh's severely endangered petroglyphs. Depicting ibex and a hunter on a horse they probably date back more than 2000 years, prior to the arrival of Buddhism, after which these rock carvings are thought to have been replaced by symbolism. Finally, a waterbird fest at Guphuk's Viewpoint on the Indus added Grey Heron, the sought-after Ferruginous Duck, Red-crested Pochard and Tufted Duck as well as Himalayan Buzzard to our list among a good selection of other birds. Al distant though. Another hot shower in Leh was very welcome indeed.



Scanning at Capray Chumik canyon (image by Mike Watson)

After leaving the Ullay area behind, we had come to terms with the prospect of not getting a close leopard encounter on this tour, disappointing after our successes in 2020. Driving east through the Indus Gorge, the temperature dropped like a stone as we entered a cold sink untouched by the rays of the sun. In the small village of Kungyamdo Jigmet stopped to give a lift to a guy who was hitch-hiking to work. Mr Lotus was an army labourer, nobody we knew. Amazingly he told Jigmet there had been a pony killed above his village a day or two previously. After some swift detective work Jigmet found the poor dead pony but also a Snow Leopard not far away in the rocks above the last field above the village. We descended from the switchbacks above the village and hastened up through the fields, and past the corpse of the pony, to where Jigmet was watching the leopard, sitting quietly not far from its kill. The leopard did not tolerate us all having a good look and slunk off upslope where it sat and watched us from a safe distance. Sometimes only the tip of one of its ears was visible, twitching whenever a magpie called nearby. After some time, it must have become concerned in case a scavenger was nibbling at its all-you-can-eat horse buffet, so it came back, affording the best views of the encounter as it bounded over the boulders and back to the vicinity of the dead pony. We watched it for some time and then made to leave, which was the cue for the leopard to head back up into the rocks of the cliffs above the village. An excellent encounter! So, we succeeded again with a close view of a Snow Leopard. Based on my five tours the odds of seeing a leopard at a kill stand at 60% (OK it's a small sample and the number of kills has been 0,1,0,2,1) but it would be unfair to complain about '*only*' getting a distant view. Peter Matthiesson, author of the iconic book *'The Snow Leopard'* never saw a single one, yet he 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 36 Snow Leopard days now so, while nothing can be guaranteed, it is realistic to expect to see at least one!



Kungyamdo, the scene of the Snow Leopard kill (image by Mike Watson)

Three of the group stayed in Kungyamdo in the hope of more leopard photos but the rest of us continued east along the Indus Gorge towards the border with China. Roadside encounters included some Blue Sheep and a Himalayan Vulture, which started on the road itself. Traffic out here is very light! Chumathang Hot Springs was quiet, with only Masked Wagtails of note but after Chumathang Ruddy Shelduck started appearing on the river, along with numerous Common Mergansers and our first Kiangs (Tibetan Wild Asses). The hillsides became less jagged, and a more rolling landscape unfolded. The river became wider with braided channels wandering across the valley. We had a fine adult Pallas's Gull on its muddy banks, before the last police checkpoint at Loma. Very unhappily the police would not let us through, amongst other things, saying it was too late in the afternoon to go to Hanle!? This is a sensitive and disputed border area. While a gaggle of police and army guys were quizzing our team, we couldn't help but notice the point-blank Great Rosefinches, Masked Wagtails and Horned Larks all around us as well! We dared not raise a camera to them though. We didn't complain when they allowed us to return to our homestay at Nyoma and we were cleared to try again in the morning!?



The wide-open spaces of Changtang (image by Mike Watson)

Our new cars arrived late in the evening, including Otzer, on his third driving stint on this tour, and our big day on the Tibetan Plateau followed. This time we passed by the checkpoints without incident and headed up the wide valley past Rongdo. We picked up our local guide in Hanle and made our way out to its famous marsh, the site for both Pallas's Cat and Tibetan Fox. A pair of Upland Buzzards was perched on a low escarpment on the edge of the huge frozen marsh. Before too long we saw both special mammals we had come here for, however, they were quite far off in the developing heat haze. The cat was spotted by Jigmet Tarchin and was in hunting mode, taking an interest in the many vole holes and holding its banded tail quite upright at times. The fox was moving steadily away out of view towards the middle of the marsh. Our local guide thought the cat would eventually make its way to the low cliffs ahead of us and sure enough, it did. Always well out of camera range though. Numerous Kiangs and a couple of Tibetan Larks were on the marsh, chasing each other all over the place, a very welcome addition to the Birdquest Ladakh list. Common Kestrel was also new here and we tallied a few more Great Rosefinches and Hill Pigeons. Tibetan or Black-winged Snowfinches were also common in this area, particularly around a Changpa nomad camp. A terrific low-level flyover by an adult Lammergeier was very welcome, by far our best so far. Maybe it was checking us out for a potential meal?



A cup of tea at Hanle Marsh (image by Mike Watson)

After we had finished looking for the lower altitude animals it was time to go up into the clouds and way over 5000m ASL. Rough tracks led up and up onto the Kalang Tar Tar, a plateau area to the south of Hanle, known as the last Indian stronghold of the gorgeous Tibetan Gazelle. It was not long before Gyaltsen had spotted some of these delightful animals, but we did not approach in our vehicles across the fragile alpine grassland habitat. It was not immediately obvious as grassland but on closer inspection tiny, almost invisible clumps of grass were dotted over the ostensibly barren landscape. The weather changed quickly up in the sky, with wind blowing clouds across the landscape, one minute we were in bright sunshine and then the next snowflakes filled the air. The blue sky at this high altitude looks almost black and it is easy to forget how high you are when looking at a gentler rolling landscape to the jagged peaks and boulders we had become used to over the past couple of weeks. That is, until you get out of the vehicle and breathe the thin air! While watching more gazelles (we saw 13 in all, more than 10% of the Indian population apparently, they are more commonly seen in Tibet proper) a flock of 42 Tibetan Sandgrouse flew over. Gyaltsen suggested we walk towards them rather than take the cars, which turned out to be spot-on. We could watch them feeding on tiny seeds at very close range at 5330m ASL, our high point of the tour. I have approached them before and from downslope seems best, they do not like silhouettes in the skyline. Back down at the marsh in the afternoon we watched a Tibetan fox digging up voles, again a little too far for the cameras but everyone got a great look at its weird flat, triangular face.



Another road less-travelled on the Kalang Tar Tar (image by Mike Watson)

Our time in Ladakh was drawing to a close, but we had one more roll of the dice for a couple of species we did not see at Hanle. We hadn't found the hoped-for Blanford's Snowfinch or Tibetan Snowcock yet, so we detoured from Mahe Bridge to the nomad settlement of Puga Sumdo, past its hot springs and up the Polokonka La pass, to where we have seen them before. The nomad settlement at Puga Sumdo was lifting with birds, mostly Brandt's Mountain Finches, many hundreds of them, lining the electricity wires and crowding into the nomads' animal pens looking for food. It was quite a sight. A few Robin Accentors, Great Rosefinches and Tibetan Snowfinches joined them, however, there was no sign of Blanford's, which usually likes more barren areas. We wound our way up the pass scanning the surrounding ridges without any snowcock luck. Woolly Hare showed at last and there were some Ground Tits here, above 4500m ASL. However, there was hardly any snow this time. On previous visits the area of the pass itself is usually 100% snow cover, including the road (well, track) we were driving on. We crossed the pass and started down the other side towards Tso Kar but with limited fuel we could not venture too far. Just enough to find a handful of the gorgeous Blanford's Snowfinches in with a group of mountain finches around a deserted nomad enclosure at 4860m ASL. There were more Ground Tits here too. We didn't have enough gas to look further for Argali and the snowcock so we would have to leave these until next time and retrace our tracks back to the Indus Valley and lunch at Chumathang Hot Springs. Jigmet Tarchin showed us where he had made an ice hockey rink to teach the game to local kids. He's something of a celebrity now, being the first Ladakhi to climb Everest (with only one porter, alpine style!) and everywhere we went folks seemed to know who he was. He is rather over-qualified to be guiding us around in the valley bottoms! We made a couple more stops, one in the lovely little side valley of Hymia, where we have always seen something interesting and this time it was Brown Dipper, which showed beautifully by a mostly frozen stream. Our adventures ended back at the Grand Dragon again, with its underfloor heating and hot showers! It was time to go back to sea level and skip around like athletes. Thanks to our awesome local guides who made the trip possible and successful again, we could not do it without you. We will be back.



Polokonka La (image by Mike Watson)



White-throated Dipper (image by Mike Watson)



White-throated Dipper, Shang Valley (image by Mike Watson)



Ladakh Urial (image by Mike Watson)



Twite (image by Mike Watson)



On the ground, a flock of Tibetan Sandgrouse are remarkably well camouflaged (image by Mike Watson)



A small flock of Tibetan Sandgrouse feeding at 5330m altitude (image by Mike Watson)



Tibetan Partridges in the Shang Valley (image by Mike Watson)



The gorgeous Tibetan Gazelle, one of India's most endangered mammals, down to double figures now (image by Mike Watson)



Thiksey Monastery looks beautiful in the layers of mountains in Ladakh (image by Mike Watson)



Thiksey Monastery is sometimes known as the 'Little Potala' (image by Mike Watson)



The Snow Leopard was sitting in the rocks not far from the dead pony (image by Mike Watson)



Siberian Ibex bosses at Ullay (image by Mike Watson)



Snow Leopard (image by Mike Watson)



The Snow Leopard uses every bit of cover to slink away (image by Mike Watson)



The cat watches us from a safe distance (image by Mike Watson)



The Snow Leopard was sitting in the rocks not far from the dead pony (image by Mike Watson)



The cat makes its way up the cliff behind the tiny hamlet of Kungyamdo (image by Mike Watson)



Snow Leopard tracks along a frozen river (image by Mike Watson)



Snow Leopard shows its teeth (image by Mike Watson)



Snow Leopard. Ever wondered how many have seen you without you being seen themselves? (image by Mike Watson)



Solitary Snipe – one of the most sought-after shorebirds (image by Mike Watson)



The Snow Leopard bounds over the boulders effortlessly (image by Mike Watson)



Staring into the cold eyes of the Snow Leopard (image by Mike Watson)



Ground Tit habitat, Tanglang La (image by Mike Watson)



Wild Tanglang La (image by Mike Watson)



The Snow Leopard's large paws! (image by Mike Watson)



The long Snow Leopard's tail acts as a counterweight as well as a shawl (image by Mike Watson)



Snow Leopard (image by Mike Watson)



Young monks playing football at Thiksey (image by Mike Watson)



Siberian Ibex at Ullay (image by Mike Watson)



Shang Valley Shepherdess (image by Mike Watson)



Shang Village (image by Mike Watson)



Shang Valley poplar (image by Mike Watson)



Shang Valley (image by Mike Watson)



Shang Valley (image by Mike Watson)



Robin Accentor is often found around homesteads in the mountain valleys (image by Mike Watson)



Polokonka La (image by Mike Watson)



Petroglyphs near Leh (image by Mike Watson)



A Pallas's Cat dwarfed by the vast landscape of the Tibetan Plateau (image by Mike Watson)



Herders' homestead at Kichen Tokpo (image by Mike Watson)



Kungyamdo, the scene of the Snow Leopard kill (image by Mike Watson)



Lammergeier incoming (image by Mike Watson)



Enter the Bone-breaker! (image by Mike Watson)



'You don't look well' said the Lammergeier (image by Mike Watson)



Gyaltsen and Sonam heading up another ridge in Shang Valley (image by Mike Watson)



Masked Wagtail is a common winter visitor to the Indus Valley (image by Mike Watson)



The north bank of the Indus (image by Mike Watson)



Nurbula Top (image by Mike Watson)



Ozang Valley (image by Mike Watson)



Prayer flags reaching up to heaven (image by Mike Watson)



Ibisbill in flight over the River Indus (image by Mike Watson)



Kiangs on Ladakh's Tibetan Plateau (image by Mike Watson)



Ibisbills turn their backs on you to hide their flashy front ends! (image by Mike Watson)



Ibisbill, a unique shorebird! (image by Mike Watson)



Ibisbill in its element on the banks of the Indus (image by Mike Watson)



No journey too high! (image by Mike Watson)



Another road less-travelled on the Kalang Tar Tar (image by Mike Watson)



(Tibetan) Horned Lark is a common sight on the plateau (image by Mike Watson)



Himalayan Vulture is an occasional sight in the skies over the mountain valleys of Ladakh (image by Mike Watson)



Himalayan Vulture is a less regular visitor to the roadside! (image by Mike Watson)



We will take you to some amazing places (image by Mike Watson)



The lofty Kalang Tar Tar (image by Mike Watson)



Kalang Tar (image by Mike Watson)



My favourite view of the Indus Valley from the roof of Thiksey Monastery (image by Mike Watson)



A pair of Ibisbills on the banks of the Indus (image by Mike Watson)



The vast Hanle marsh (image by Mike Watson)



Güldenstädt's Redstarts, like Christmas decorations (image by Mike Watson)



Güldenstädt's Redstart, one of the commonest birds in the Indus Valley in winter (image by Mike Watson)



Ground Tit, formerly known as Groundpecker is found way above 4000m ASL in Ladakh (image by Mike Watson)



Black-throated Thrush (male), a common winter visitor to Ladakh's Indus Valley (image by Mike Watson)



Blue Sheep or Bharal, the favourite prey of the 'Grey Ghost' (image by Mike Watson)



Brandt's Mountain Finch swarms over the highest mountainsides (image by Mike Watson)



Brandt's Mountain Finches gather at Puga Sumdos Changpa Nomad Camp (image by Mike Watson)



Brown Dipper at Hymia (image by Mike Watson)



The wide open landscape of Changtang (image by Mike Watson)



The wide-open spaces of Changtang (image by Mike Watson)



Choglamsar bridge, covered in prayer flags (image by Mike Watson)



Chukars find something to eat in winter around livestock (image by Mike Watson)



Gadwall at Shey Holy Pond (image by Mike Watson)



Golden Eagle opposite our campsite at Shang Valley (image by Mike Watson)