



BELLINGHAM SAFARIS

WORLDWIDE WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES

Snow Leopard Expedition 2016



Bellingham Safaris Snow Leopard Expedition 2016 Trip Report

Dates: 10-21 March 2016

Location: Hemis National Park, Ladakh, India

Conditions: Cold! We had a number of mild evenings, but also some very cold ones, two thermometers recorded -15C inside the “relative warmth” of the tent. There was very little snow when we arrived, but we got a fair amount of it on our last few days obscuring visibility.



One of the most impressive sights on this expedition is from the flight into Leh and the view of the Himalayas from above. We spent our first two days acclimatizing to the 3500m altitude at the Grand Dragon Hotel, and took a few minor excursions from this base. We had some good birding in and around Leh, highlights being excellent sightings of both Ibisbill and the elusive Solitary Snipe. The visit to the Thiksey Monastery and the beautiful Maitreya Buddha was a cultural delight with Phunchok teaching us the intricacies of Ladakhi Buddhism. Some of us spent an enjoyable afternoon bargaining in the Leh market. We managed to catch a delightful sunrise over the mountains from the elevated Shanti Stupa, and then dedicated an afternoon to looking for the Ladakh urial, passing the confluence of the Indus and Zaskar rivers and eventually finding a herd near the Nimmo village just as we were about to call it a day.

The next day we made our way deep into the mountains, the winding roads and their precarious drop-offs adding to the building excitement. We loaded up the mules and made our way up the valley. There had been very little snowfall so far this winter, and so not only was the snow-line at a much higher altitude, so were the blue sheep, the snow leopards' major food source in Hemis. We thus decided to shift base camp from our usual area to just below the little Rhumbak hamlet at an elevation of 3950m.

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I had really missed Hemis and was delighted to return to its towering rocks, ice-capped streams and frozen waterfalls. When we arrived in camp we were greeted with the news that there had been no sightings for the last 5 days, and that 15 groups this season had returned home empty handed...not that it in any way dampened the positive spirit in our team. We spent that afternoon just above our camp on an open field that would be our main scanning area for the next 8 days.



The following day we headed up the Rhumbak valley, and found a woolly hare, robin accentors, Chukkar Partridges and a few flocks of Fire-fronted Serins. There were also tracks of both Snow Leopard and the Tibetan Wolf.



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We took our time, allowing our bodies to adjust to the altitude, and before we knew it the day had passed. We returned to the little Rhumbak hamlet for a memorable tea with Dorjay's family, and then made our way back to camp for a last scan before sunset.

The radio suddenly was ablaze with excited voices, and luckily we were in the perfect position.... within minutes we had our scopes on a mother Snow Leopard and her two sub-adult cubs! They were far away, perhaps 1.5 - 2km, but we could see them clearly as they moved about on the opposite slope. We watched them in the evening light for roughly an hour, even watching her attempt to hunt some Blue Sheep (with the impatient youngsters eventually betraying her presence). There was much hugging and dancing...we couldn't believe our luck having a sighting on our second day! According to Smanla this was the first time these cubs had been seen!



Scanning these mountainsides metre by metre, day by day is a meditative experience, requiring great patience and concentration, and can be difficult for anyone who is used to a world of instant gratification.

Though we saw no more Snow Leopards for another week, Hemis was full of magical experiences, and here are a few of our highlights in the eyes of our expedition team:

The smiling faces of Dorjay and Dorjay. The sound of the water flowing underneath the iced river. The Blue Sheep jumping from impossibly precarious perches, and their ability to survive on the incredibly sparse vegetation. The plethora of colourful lichens that stained the mountain rocks. Petroglyphs on the rocks that could date back pre-1500 BC. The light falling on snow flakes. The jangling sound of the bells on the donkeys' necks, that somehow seemed to add to the peaceful Buddhist atmosphere. The haunting call of the Himalayan Snowcocks. Cups of hot, sweet masala chai that always seemed to arrive at the perfect moment. The Tibetan Foxes

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calling around camp in the evening. That first kiss of morning light on the snow capped peaks. The giant yak that gently sauntered through camp every day like an old samurai warrior. Finding fossils in the rocks and the consequent thought of these great mountains being pushed up from the sea as India crashed into Asia some 40-50 million years ago. Having a mountain weasel run in between a few of our group, and then allowing us to watch it for a good ten minutes. A young Lammergeier, with its formidable wings, that would soar right over our heads at 12 o'clock each day. The flocks of Hill Pigeons that danced through the valleys in unison. The thrill of scoping, and looking for treasures through the eyepiece. Meditations on a rock overlooking the Rhumbak valley. The beautiful places we stopped for lunch. The jangling melodies of the Fire-fronted Serins as they drifted past in little clouds. The family of Chukars ice-skating their way across the frozen rivers. The anniversary celebrations of two of our guests and the cake chef Dorjay somehow managed to make. Following tracks of a Snow Leopard into a small valley (with Petra) in a howling snow storm. The hot water bottles in our sleeping bags. Waking up to a white wonderland after an evening of heavy snow. Making snowmen and even a reasonable effort at a Snow Leopard sculpture. The fleeting glimpse of the Large-eared Pika. The majestic Golden Eagles that lorded over the skies. The moonlit evenings, and the stars when the clouds cleared. The celebratory snow leopard dance...caught on film!



The best was saved for last. On our final morning we headed up to our usual spotting area for a last attempt. One of our ground crew came to meet us and had information about a Snow Leopard that had been seen near the Matho village, about an hour from the Grand Dragon where we were to stay that night.

We immediately packed up all our gear and began our decent. Four hours later we were within 150m of a snow leopard that was resting next to two calves it had killed in the village!

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The villagers were amazing and thanks to a good relationship with our team had not chased it away. We were able to spend most of the afternoon in its presence. A sighting as good as this we had not imagined, and it was an incredible finale to our trip.



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Much thanks to the amazing team that looked after us with such care and constant smiles: Dorjay and Norbu for your gentlemanly service, Chefs Dorjay and Sonam: your food was amazing, Spalzung and Dorjay you have incredible eyes and great natures, Tundup for all your help carrying the load, Smanla for your incredible knowledge and skills, Stanzin and Phunchok for always going out of your way for us. And lastly thanks to this year's expedition team for your good nature and positive vibes...that's the first time there's been such a party in such a small tent!

Annotated list of mammal species seen:

Pikas (Ochotonidae)

Large-eared Pika, *Ochotonidae macrotis*

An excellent sighting of this beautiful lagomorph

Hares and rabbits (Leporidae)

Wooly Hare, *Lepus oiotolus*

We saw few hares compared to previous trips, but were able to get a good sighting of one through the scopes.

Dogs and allies (Canidae)

Red Fox, *Vulpes vulpes Montana*

Seen once around the camp at night, and were alarm calling on one of the evenings.

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Cats (Felidae)

Snow Leopard, *Panthera uncia*

We had a distant and breathtaking sighting of a mother and her two cubs, apparently the first time they had been seen by our local guides. We had an excellent sighting of another snow leopard on our last day near a tiny village called Matho.

Mustelids (Mustelidae)

Mountain Weasel, *Mustela altaica*

We had a couple of excellent sightings close to camp, after many hours of searching.

Bovids and horned ungulates (Bovidae)

Bharal or Blue Sheep, *Pseudois nayaur*

The most common large mammal: we had a number of distant sightings but few close sightings compared to previous years, probably due to the snow line being so much higher this year.

Ladakh Urial, *Ovis orientalis vignei*

The Urial proved to be hard work. After an afternoon of searching we had a long distance view of a herd near Nimmo Village, and then a lucky sighting just before Zingchen on our way into Hemis.

Annotated list of bird species seen:

Clements [omissions] and (changes)

Pheasants (Phasiannidae)

Himalayan Snowcock, *Tetraogallus himalayensis*

Seen on most days of the trip

Chukar Partirdge, *Alectoris chukar*

Seen on most days of the trip in and around camp

Ducks and geese (Anatidae)

Ruddy Shelduck, *Tadorna ferruginea*

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus

Northern Shoveler, *Anas clypeata*

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus and at the Shey Marsh

Northern Pintail, *Anas acuta*

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus

Garganey, *Anas querquedula*

Seen at the Shey Marsh

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European (Green-winged) Teal, *Anas crecca*

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos*

Seen near the Shey Marshes

Gadwall, *Anas strepera*

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus

Hawks, vultures and eagles (Accipitridae)

Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier), *Gypaetus barbatus*

Seen on most days of the trip, we had some excellent sightings

Himalayan Vulture (Griffon), *Gyps himalayensis*

We had two distant sightings

Golden Eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*

This impressive apex predator was seen on four days of the trip.

Crakes and coots (Rallidae)

Common Moorhen, *Gallinula chloropus*

Seen in Leh along a tributary of the Indus

Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra*

Seen at the Shey Marsh

Ibisbill (Ibidorhyncha)

Ibisbill, *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*

A couple of excellent sighting of this prized bird outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus

Sandpipers and Snipes (Scolopacidae)

Solitary Snipe, *Gallinago solitaria*

A wonderful view of this hard to find bird near the Thiksey monastery.

Common Redshank, *Tringa totanus*

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus.

Common Greenshank, *Tringa nebularia*

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus.

Green Sandpiper, *Tringa ochropus*

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus.

Pigeons and doves (Columbidae)

Rock Dove (Pigeon), *Columba livia*

Seen in most villages of the larger villages we passed through.

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Hill Pigeon, *Columba rupestris*

Seen at basecamp and in the small hamlets of Hemis.

Owls, *Strigidae*

Eurasian Eagle-owl, *Bubo bubo*

Crows, jays (*Corvidae*)

Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica*

Seen on most days throughout the trip.

Red-billed Chough, *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*

Seen on most days throughout the trip.

Alpine (yellow-billed) Chough, *Pyrrhocorax graculus*

A handful of sightings in Hemis.

Carrion Crow, *Corvus corone*

Saw a number of individuals in Leh.

Tits (*Paridae*)

Great Tit, *Parus major*

Seen throughout the trip especially around the camp.

Wrens (*Troglodytidae*)

Eurasian Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes*

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus, and once within Hemis.

Chats, old world Flycatchers (*Muscicapidae*)

Güldenstädt's (White-winged) Redstart, *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus*

Seen on numerous occasions in the valleys around Leh.

Old world Sparrows, Snowfinches (*Passeridae*)

House Sparrow, *Passer domesticus*

Seen around human habitation.

Tibetan (Black-winged) Snowfinch, *Montifringilla adamsi*

Seen in the Rhumbak Valley.

Accentors (*Prunellidae*)

Robin Accentor, *Prunella rubeculoides*

Seen on a number of occasions, we had an excellent view of one in the Rhumbak Village

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Brown Accentor, *Prunella fulvescens*

We had a sighting close to our camp.

Wagtails (Motacillidae)

Grey Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea*

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba*

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus.

Finches (Fringillidae)

Brandt's Mountain Finch, *Leucosticte brandti*

Seen in the Rhumbak Valley

Spotted (Great) Rosefinch, *Carpodacus severtzovi*

Seen near the Rhumbak village

Red-mantled Rosefinch, *Carpodactus rhodochamys*

Seen by one of our team in the Rhumbak Village

Red-fronted (Fire-fronted) Serin, *Serinus pusillus*

Seen once in Leh, and once briefly near base camp



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WORLDWIDE WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES

4 Sunbird Circle, Kommetjie, Cape Town, 7975, South Africa

Tel: +27-(0)21-783-4380 (GMT +2hrs)

Tel USA/Canada toll-free: 1-844-455-5505 (GMT +2hrs)

www.bellinghamsafaris.com

