

Tso Kar extension

Jon Hall has already posted the excellent summary for our snow leopard trip in October. This is a short report on the trip extension that five of us (Charles Foley, Kate Goldberg, Morten Joergensen, and James and Jason Woolgar) made to the Tso Kar valley.

It's fair to say that the visit to Tso Kar classified as a last minute change of plan. We had originally signed up to do a three-day extension at a homestay in Ullay at the end of our trip, with the main attractions being the Siberian Ibex and Ladakh Urial, with a chance of Wolves and possibly even Snow Leopards. However during our discussions with several fellow Snow Leopard watchers, we learned about a lake basin to the east of Leh, called Tso Kar, which offered the opportunity to see Kiang (Wild Ass) and Argali, as well as a number of other Tibetan Plateau species. There were even a few good birds in the area (meaning large and colourful), such as the Black-necked Crane, that we could almost include as honorary mammals. Realising that it was unlikely that Exotic Travel could accommodate this change at such short notice, we nevertheless approached Phunchok to see what he could do. Clearly we had seriously underestimated Phunchok's organisational talents, as within a day he had found a place for us to stay at Tso Kar (a resort belonging to a friend of his that was officially closed in the winter), and allocated a guide and a team of drivers and cooks to accompany us. Very impressive; try changing your safari plans like that in East Africa and see what the operator says to you....

Tso Kar lies about five hours east of Leh, mostly along a very good tarmac road. In order to get there you have to cross the Taglangla Pass, which is 5,300m above sea level, and which is apparently the second highest road pass in the world (the other one also being in Ladakh). The scenery of snow-covered mountains going up (and down) is magnificent, but it seriously breezy and cold at the top, and five minutes out of the car for the obligatory photos was about all we could muster. Michel Gervais, a fellow nature enthusiast who had visited Tso Kar a few days before us, said he'd seen a small colony of Ladakh Pika close to the summit, and sure enough one ran across the road just a few hundred meters beyond the summit pass.



Ladakh Pika (all photos by Morten Joergensen)

Soon after the pass we turned off onto a dirt road, and entered the Rupshu Valley and had our first glimpse of the Tso Kar Lake. The lake is saline and, until recently, provided an important source of salt that the nomad people living in the area used to collect and sell in Tibet. The white salt deposits around the lake accentuated the astonishing blues and greens of the lake itself, which change colour constantly with the light. Right away we started seeing herds of Kiang, which are very common in the valley. We saw several hundred animals while we were there, and I would estimate that there are a few thousand individuals in Tso Kar. They were remarkably tame for large animals living in an unprotected area, and they would only start turning away from the vehicle at around 150-200 meters.



Kiang

Tso Kar is used by nomadic pastoralists who move their sheep and goats up to the high mountain passes in the summer and return to the lake in the winter. The village where we stayed had an abandoned quality about it (most of the herdsmen were still camped in the summer pastures), with one small homestay and the empty resort that Phunchok had managed to borrow for our stay. The area is both high (4,500 meters) and very, very cold! In fact, as soon as the sun went down and the wind picked up the place became gonad-shrinkingly cold, and we were very grateful to be spending the night indoors. I believe that Karl van Ginderdeuren's group stayed in tents when they visited shortly before us. It can be done, but all I can say is that they are more manly than I will ever be. Or perhaps just more mad. As in Hemis, we had a merry team of cooks beavering away in the kitchen and producing excellent soups and a variety of Indian food at regular intervals. Too regular perhaps. Some of us were hoping that a couple of weeks of hiking in the Himalayas would produce a svelte body tone, but there was a distinct absence of svelteness when an examination was performed in front of the mirror in the hotel in Leh at the end of the trip!



Tso Kar Lake

The following day we drove into the surrounding hills to look for Argali, and rapidly found a group of 10+ animals far in the distance, as well as a larger herd of Blue Sheep. On the road we also came across fresh Wolf tracks and droppings, but despite lengthy searching we couldn't find the animals. However, we did find and photograph a Pika, that we believe is probably the Plateau Pika, also known as the Black-lipped Pika. In the afternoon we drove to an abandoned settlement on the edge of the Lake and spent several hours scanning the area. This proved profitable, with several sightings of Woolly Hare, and two Wolves that appeared close by, sauntering across the landscape. The birdlife was also excellent, with several Black-necked Cranes, Bar-headed Goose, and many other species of waterfowl. In the evening we roused ourselves to go on a night drive, despite the freezing temperatures that made holding the spotlights a painful task (thanks James and Jason!). Given that we were now on the Tibetan Plateau, we were hoping that we might come across a Pallas Cat, although we hadn't actually heard of any verified records of the species from that area, so it was something of a long shot. We didn't find any Pallas Cats (despite a few false alarms), although we saw more animals than I expected, including several Red Fox and numerous Woolly Hares. At least, we thought, they were all Woolly Hares, until I got a good view through binoculars of the last hare we saw and realised that it was in fact a Cape Hare.



Plateau Pika (we think)



Woolly Hare

The next day we returned to the abandoned settlement and found a large herd of male Argali that had descended from the hillsides to drink at the Lake. We watched them for 20 minutes and were rewarded by some rutting behaviour, with several males raising onto their hind legs and head-butting each other rather spectacularly. While Morten and Kate focussed on the birds (they added Tibetan Sandgrouse to the list), Jason, James and I staked out one of the numerous burrow complexes in the area, and spent several hours watching the Black-lipped Pikas and **Stoliczka's Mountain Voles**, which are abundant along the lakeshore. The Silvery Mountain Vole is also supposed to be in the area (apparently it is most common on the southern side of the lake), but we didn't find any despite searching several places.



Stoliczka's Mountain Vole



Black-necked Cranes (honorary mammals)

The following morning we left for Leh, stopping along the way at a place where Phunchok had seen Siberian Ibex in the past, although on this occasion we only saw a herd of Blue Sheep. Tso Kar was an excellent addition to the Hemis Snow Leopard trip, and one that I would strongly encourage people to make. Phunchok and his team once again performed admirably, and I cannot recommend them highly enough.



Tso Kar mammal list:

Ladakh Pika

Plateau (Black-lipped) Pika

Kiang

Argali

Blue Sheep

Woolly Hare

Cape Hare

Red Fox

Wolf

Stoliczka's Mountain Vole