

INDIA 2013 : LADAKH AND GUJARAT (October-November 2013)

Since several years I was looking to join a group or a tour to go in Ladakh during winter in order to look for Snow Leopard. But I was always unlucky (groups full; tours cancelled). By the beginning of this year I book a tour with Indri. The tour was focused on Snow Leopard in Hemis National Park in Ladakh. I was really afraid the tour was too early in the year: October 21st to November 1st. Most of the tours go in February. Four years ago I had already been independently in Ladakh during July, trekking in Hemis National Park, but also visiting the Tso Kar area. I saw quite a lot of mammals (Long tailed and Himalayan Marmot, Kiang, Red fox, Urial, Argalis, Blue Sheep) but no Snow Leopard.

After that I decided to extend my trip with a 3 weeks stay in Gujarat where I had been twice before.

LADAKH:

The tour was organised by Indri.

Indri uses a local company for the logistic and 2 to 3 local guides (Samla, the main guide, Georgi and sometimes the cousin of Samla.) There was also a cook, and 3 more people serving food and preparing the camp. The food was excellent (the best I have ever got in India). And the guides were also excellent and I don't regret to have been with Indri.

The camp was set up in the Rumbak valley, at around 3600m, below Rumbak village. There was no other camp at this time. We slept in tents. There was also a large tent for the meals, including a heater (very useful at dinner). Indri leader was Simon Bellingham, with which I travelled before in China to see Giant Panda. Except me, the participants were a couple from Canada, 1 person from California, 2 people from South Africa and for 4 days only 3 leaders of Rockjumper.

We spent 2 days for acclimatization in the Indus valley. But on the second day afternoon we went in a valley just before the entrance of Hemis to look for Urials at a reliable site: we saw 12 (males, females and young ones). The second day as the others visited a monastery I stayed outside and saw a Mountain weasel. By pishing it even came on my right foot!

The 3rd day we went by minibus to the entrance of the park, Zingchen, and started to walk to the camp. A short walk. After the meal and went around and saw several females and young Blue Sheeps. By 3 pm we went at a view point in Hussin valley looking for Snow Leopard. Nearly immediately, Samla found a Snow Leopard in a valley (Kardung) opposite of where we were. We saw it for a long time, even trying to catch a Blue Sheep. But it was really far, maybe 2km away.

The 4th day was unproductive: nothing from the viewpoint, so we went climbing in the Kardung valley. No sign of Snow Leopard, but Samla shows a camera trap with wonderful photos of Snow Leopard, including one from the day before. There was several groups of females and young Blue sheeps. But high in the mountain I found a group of large males.

The 5th day Georgi found a Snow Leopard from the view point, but again in the Kardung valley. We saw it briefly and then went in this Valley. Soon Samla found the Leopard lying at the top of a rock, 400 to 450m away. We spent the full day (from 8am) looking at the Leopard. It was most of the time

sleeping, sometimes looking at us. When the sun has disappeared, it stood up and began to walk along the rock, walking down where there were 2 females and 1 young Blue Sheep. It was invisible for the Blue sheeps. Its head appeared several times from a passage in the rock. Then finally, as the young Blue sheep had approached, it bounded and after a short pursuit caught the young Blue sheep, grabbing the neck for at least 5 mn. It was exhausted, and after resting carried the prey to hide it. Then the night arriving we left to the camp.

The 6th day early morning we went to the same place and saw the Leopard laying on the ground at the base of a cliff just above we saw it last evening. When the sun arrived on it, it moved twice, then disappeared in what was a cave or a passage in the cliff (it was a passage). As we didn't see more, we left and came back in the afternoon. This time the Leopard was at the top of the cliff where it was resting the full day before. Again, late afternoon we left.

The 7th day, we tried the Hussin valley in the morning. Nothing except the usual Blue sheeps. In the afternoon we went again in the Kardung valley at the place where we had seen the Snow leopard, but saw nothing. Then most of us climbed to the base of the cliff to see if the dead Blue sheep was still there. It was, but there still was only the head, skin, legs, stomach and intestines.

The 8th day we walked up in the main valley to our new camp set above Urutse village. It was higher up and of course colder. In the afternoon we looked for animals from the camp. I saw a nice male blue sheep, when the others called me: They had spotted and showed me a Snow Leopard on the ridge of a mountain far away. Then I saw my first Woolly hare.

The 9th day we climbed to the pass, looking for Argalis without luck (it is one of the places where I saw Argalis (only 3) on my first trip-I saw more above Tso Kar). Woolly hares were common, but no sign of the hoped Eurasian lynx. After that we slept again in the main camp.

The 10th day we went down from the camp to Zingchen. While stopping at the junction to Rumbak village, 1 of us saw what she thought was a squirrel. In fact it was a Mountain weasel, but it was not alone because there was a second one smaller (apparently a young one). Then we arrived in Zingchen where our minibus was waiting for us. Our aim was to drive to Ulley village to look for Siberian ibex. Just before arriving the villagers had seen a Wolf killing one of their sheep. We arrived just a little too late.

The 11th day we looked again without success where the wolf had been seen, and spent the rest of the morning looking for Ibex. Finally I found a far young male. After lunch we were driven back to Leh. But near Likir Georgi spotted from the car 3 Urials.

During our stay in Hemis NP we saw more or less 100 Blue sheeps: females and young at "low" altitude and large males high in the mountain.

If when we arrived in Leh and Hemis it was not cold (even warm in Leh), day after day it became colder, freezing by night (but less than minus 5). Nevertheless it was really cold when you stay 1 full day seating in front of a Leopard. I don't regret to have been at this time of the year, and not in February when it get minus 20 by night.

The 12th day I left the group and flew back to Delhi, and the day after to Ahmedabad, capital of Gujarat.

GUJARAT

In Ahmadabad I saw 5 Hanuman's langurs and Five Striped Squirrels (saw the latter in most cities including Delhi).

It was my third visit in Gujarat. The 13th day I went by taxi at camp Zainabad (I just booked 1 hour before) in the Little Rann of Kutch where I stayed 3 nights. During each drive I saw plenty of Wild asses, 1 Desert Fox, several Nilgais and Mac'Queen Bustards.

The camp is nice, the food good and the manager very helpful.

The 16th day after a morning safari I went by bus and train to Bhavnagar. Thanks to the manager of Camp Zainabad I met somebody from the forest office who arranged my stay at Velavadar NP (where the lodge was full). I got finally a very basic room where I spent 2 nights. Velavadar is a nice park where animals are easy to see (it was my third visit). I walked only and saw a lot of Blackbucks (350+), 40+ Nilgais, 1 Wolf, 3 Jungle cats, 1 Grey mongoose, 15 Wild boars and 2 sightings of Striped Hyenas (each time 2 and once seen at leisure and approached 30m away). Great.

The 20th day I travelled to Gir. But Gir is not what I had seen 10 years ago. It is a very busy, crowded and noisy place, with hundreds of tourists. The following morning when I saw the queue at the entrance of the NP I left immediately (I had already seen the Lions of Gir), caught the next bus and arrived in Jamnagar. From there I took a night bus to Bhuj before booking my stay at the Kutch Ecological Reserve in Tera. The first afternoon I saw 1 Mac Queen Bustard but no mammal. The following day I got 7 Golden Jackals, 12+ Wild boars and 10+ Chinkaras. And the day after I went to the Banni Grasslands where I saw an Indian fox. This place is said to be good for Desert Cat.

The 25th day I travelled by bus from Bhuj to Dhrangadhra where I was waited by a car to reach Eco Tour Camp near Jogad village in the Little Rann of Kutch. I stayed 3 nights there, saw 80+ Nilgais, 300+ Wild asses, 1 Indian Fox, 4 Grey Mongooses and 15 Wild boars. The camp is also nice, the food OK, but less varied than at Camp Zainabad. The managers are also very nice and the place also worth to visit.

The 29th day I visited Thol Sanctuary from Ahmedabad and saw only Grey mongooses.

The next days saw me flying to Delhi and back home.