



INDRI

Ultimate Wildlife Tours

Snow leopard trip report February 2014

by tour leader James Kydd



To some, searching for a snow leopard is akin to trying to find a unicorn. There is so little known about this mysterious cat, and so few of them left living in such a harsh and inaccessible environment... their existence has been witnessed by only a handful of people. Over the last few years, thanks to time, research, local will, determination and a good helping of luck sightings of this grey ghost of the mountains have increased in India's Hemis National Park. But the great cat is not all this wonderland hides: this is a place of gigantic peaks, frozen waterfalls and explosive night skies where wolves scour the cliffs, golden eagles lord over the air, and a plethora of some of nature's most hardy and fascinating survivors make their home.



You couldn't script a more spectacular curtain-raiser for the beginning of our snow leopard adventure than the flight over the Himalayas. Every passenger was glued to the window, entranced by the white desert below, and the magnificent mountains rising up to meet us in the sky. There's something magical about only being able to access this part of the Kingdom of Ladakh by air during the winter months.



We stepped out of the plane into a gentle mist of snow crystals. What an incredible change from the crowded chaos of Delhi we'd left only two hours before...the vast, open valleys, the crisp, sweet air, the amphitheatre of giants surrounding us...even the people were markedly different: faces with lines of character and a strong influence from the Orient.



Our initial two days in the ancient capital of Leh were spent acclimatizing to the altitude. Resting can feel like a hard thing to do when there is such a fascinating cultural adventure just outside your hotel, but at over 3500 metres up the body soon learns that it is crucial to slow down and minimize exertion.

The first afternoon was spent at the office of Jigmet and his team from the Snow Leopard Trust, learning just how incredible some of the local community's efforts have been to conserve this rare creature that we were hoping to find. In the gardens outside we were treated to a flock of red-fronted serins searching for seeds amongst the fresh snow.



The next morning we watched the sunrise from a giant Stupa (a place for Buddhist meditation) overlooking Leh. After watching the light pushing the shadows off the Himalayas we were invited by one of the local monks into his house for some masala chai and conversation. Lobzang showed us a picture of himself joining the monastery as a child, and when asked for advice on how to deal with the cold, he told us "Embrace it". We visited the impressive Thiksey Monastery, home to a two story high statue of Maitreya, the Buddha of the future. We also visited the Shey Palace where locals dressed in all manners of colourful garments had gathered to sing beautiful mantras and pray for world peace. Drums, prayer bells, incense and song flooded our senses.



We spent the afternoon along the tributaries of the Indus River where we were rewarded with sightings of black-throated thrushes, Guldenstadt's and white-winged redstarts, white wagtails, gadwalls, common sandpipers, common mergansers and mallards. And as we were heading home we found a pair of ibisbills, an elegant wader restricted to the high plateaus of Central Asia.

Day three had arrived, and after meeting our incredible team of porters, chefs and spotters we were winding our way through the breath-taking Indus valley and deeper into the great mountains. After a two hour drive we transferred our luggage to pack mules and entered the mighty Hemis, the largest National Park in South Asia. Following the Rhumbak Valley we were soon greeted by two towering rocks on either side of us, like gigantic Tolkienesque gatekeepers guarding the 3350 km² of wilderness within.





An hour into the trail and the harsh, barren landscape had already shown many signs of life. We had an excellent view of a Royle's pika, a small rodent eyeing us suspiciously while trying to absorb whatever warmth the sun would provide. A Himalayan griffon soared overhead and a flock of brown accentors flitted between the valley scrub. We had our first view of the bharal or blue sheep, the most plentiful large herbivore in this part of the world, and the staple diet of the snow leopard. It was an impressive herd numbering around forty individuals and we admired them for some time (while also catching our breath).

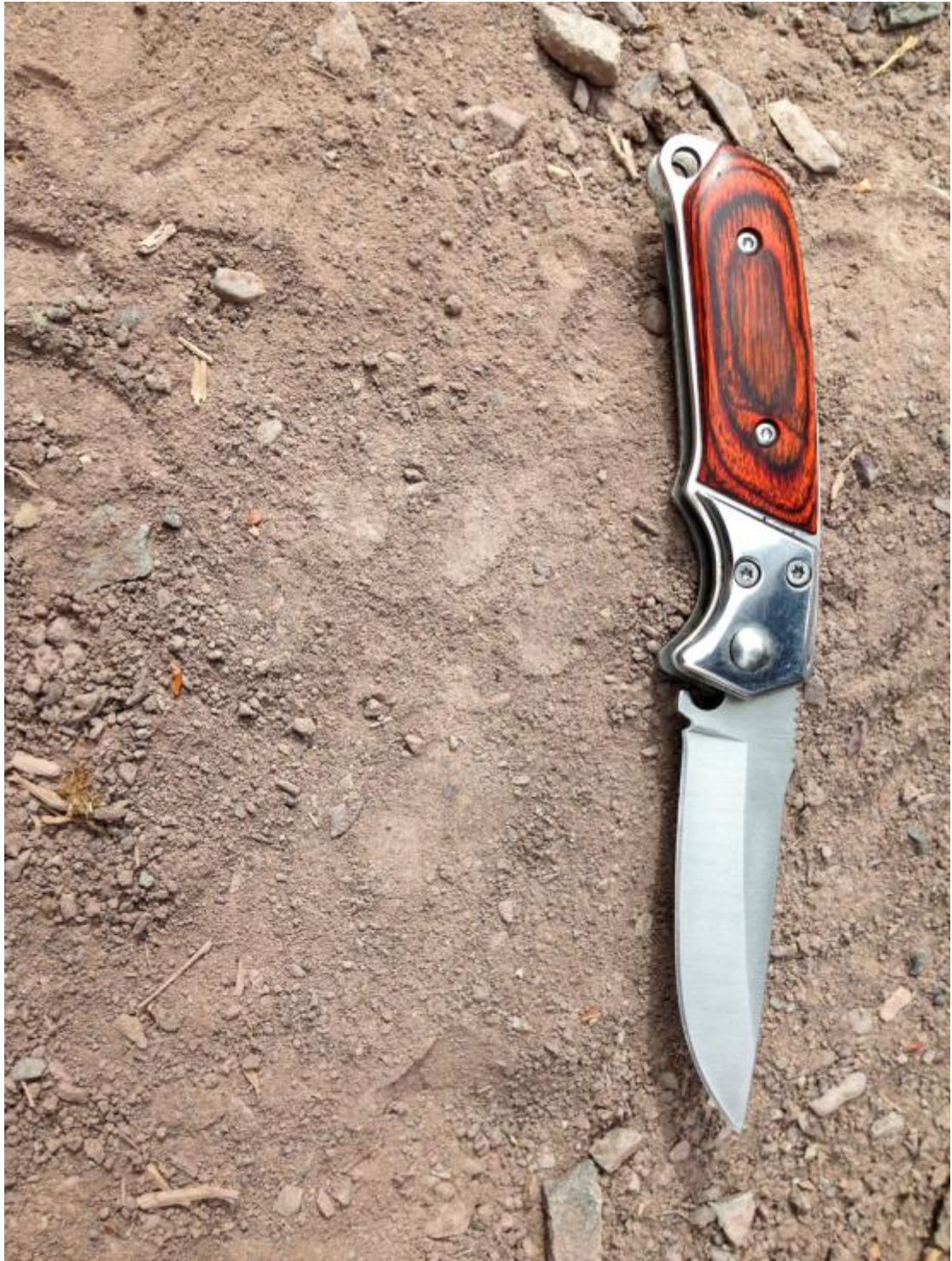


Soon afterwards we had arrived at our base camp for the next eight days. The camp had a wonderful science fiction look to it. Domed neon tents on snow-covered ground alongside a frozen river and surrounded by Martian peaks. Coming past us in the opposite direction was a local Rhumbak villager and his herd of domesticated yak, led by huge bull with majestic horns and a flowing coat of fur. A pair of Eurasian magpies heralded our arrival, and a flock of hill pigeons watched us with slanted heads from their perch above the prayer flags.





We enjoyed a hearty meal, unpacked, and after a rest hiked up to an elevated point to begin scanning for the ghost and the other inhabitants of the Indian Himalays. On the way up we were followed by a curious flock of chukar, and later had our first sighting of the impressive Himalayan snowcock. There was also sign of our holy grail: an overhang of rock darkened with the scent marking of a snow leopard. On closer inspection I found a couple of hairs where it had rubbed its body against the rock, and although the cat had long since passed that way, touching the remains of its coat gave me an powerful sense of connection with this ghost.





As the light faded and we returned back to camp a woolly hare crossed our path just metres from us! It had been an invigorating first day.

After a cold first night in Hemis it was a pleasure to wake up to a warm mug of tea and a bowl of hot wash water, as well as our dramatic surrounds. We explored deeper into the Rhumbak valley and were rewarded with an excellent sighting of a flock of shy Himalayan snowcock, as well as a brief sighting of Tibetan snowcock, not often encountered in that area.



We had another incredible view of a Royle's pika, and along the frozen river we saw a small group of white-browed tit-warblers chasing each other through the brush. These birds have a delightful wash of mauve over much of their body. We passed a frozen waterfall adorned with prayer flags and emerged into a breath-taking clearing in the valley. Here we rested for much of the day, enjoying a delicious lunch and scanning the distant snow covered mountainsides where wolves are sometimes seen. On the way back to camp we heard the beautifully eerie call of the snowcocks, and watched a common kestrel (a rarity here) in pursuit of some small prey on the valley floor. That night we had a visitor in camp: a stone marten! With our torches we had an excellent view of the stealthy mustelid before it disappeared into the darkness.

The nights were usually silent, except for the occasional breeze and the sound of the river water trickling underneath its frozen cover, but not this night. We woke to the bells of the pack mules jingling as they shifted uneasily at their tethers. Soon afterwards a pair of red foxes sounded their alarm calls from a nearby slope. Then, somewhere higher up across the river, the sound of running hooves and falling scree... something was out there, a large predator. Wolves? Snow leopard? I could find nothing in my torchlight and crawled back into the warmth of my sleeping bag.

The next two days in Hemis included an awesome sighting of a herd of blue sheep not far from camp. The herd was on either side of us, some crossed the ice searching for leaves along the river and some were descending the slopes. They allowed us to watch from a surprisingly intimate proximity. Their skill negotiating almost vertical faces held our eyes for ages. One of the lambs called repeatedly: it seemed to have lost its mother, and I couldn't help thinking a snow leopard had been hunting on the ridges above our camp the night before.



We were blessed with a dusting of snow crystals that danced around us in a light breeze. Great tit, robin accentors and white-browed tit warblers entertained us from the camp. And the Tibetan subspecies of red fox made a few appearances around the campsite, one watching me from just outside my tent.

In the Tarbung Valley we came across fresh pug marks and could see where a snow leopard had scraped its feet while scent marking. Yet the ghost still eluded us.

On our fifth morning while scanning from the camp we heard excited shouts from one of the spotters further up the valley "SHAN! SHAN! *Snow leopard!!!*" And so began one of the toughest physical tests of our trip as we climbed higher and higher up the slopes of the Husing Valley. Our lungs and muscles were burning, and it was only the fear that our prize would disappear over a ridge that drove us to take that next step forward. Finally we reached the top of our climb and aimed our scopes on a scene beyond description. Not one.... but three SNOW LEOPARDS casually strolling along the skyline in the early morning gold. A mother and two sub-adult cubs! When I finally pulled my eye from the scope and looked around I saw tears running down faces and strangers embracing each other.

They found a ledge next to a small overhang and settled down to rest. One of the cubs gently groomed the mother. We had the privilege of spending the entire day in their domain graced by their presence. We left when the low light forced us to descend, and the leopards disappeared like spirits into the rockface.



On most of the nights we were treated to exceptional skies. The Himalayan winter air was crystal clear, and we had exceptionally clear views of many of the prominent constellations as well as Jupiter and Venus. One of our guests, Margie, saw the sky lit up by a large meteor burning a green trail as it entered our atmosphere... something I too had witnessed the last time I was here.

Two days later we were in the Tarbung Valley investigating a nervous herd of blue sheep and a cloud of dust where something seemed to have been running. Dorjay, our chef came racing around the corner to tell us our snow leopards had been seen again close to camp! Half an hour later and we were back on the same ridge watching the same three leopards sunning themselves on the same ledge! We spent another half a day watching this rarest of families before they left on their evening hunt. It was the last time we were to see the grey ghosts on this adventure. We floated back to camp.



The next day we decided to head deeper into the Husing Valley, and soon after we walked into unfamiliar territory we were back on the tracks of the mother snow leopard and two cubs, going the opposite direction to where we had last saw them moving. This was the first time we had been able to follow the tracks for an extended period of time, and we excitedly trailed them for a couple of hours, high into the snow line, following the impressions left by their paws and their huge tails dragging on the ground. Along the way we passed the old remains of two blue sheep which the cats had clearly stopped to investigate. Two masters of the Himalayan skies watched our party from above. First, a lammergeier with its two and a half metre wingspan dropped low enough that we could make out some of the details on its striking face. Then a pair of golden eagles, birds capable of killing blue sheep, soared past like dark angels scanning the rocks for their next feast. We left the tracks when the gorge narrowed alongside a magical glacier and the path became a bit too slippery.

Our second last morning started with sounds of snowflakes falling on canvas, and we emerged from our tents into a white wonderland. We again found fresh snow leopard tracks, this time in the Tarbung Valley, and once more followed them high above the snow line, past an old donkey carcass, until we could follow no more. A small flock of plain mountain finches darted past in a blur. A huge flock of red-billed and alpine choughs gathered on the slopes opposite us, the noise of the wind jetting through their wings as they dived could be heard from some distance. We enjoyed masala chai while watching some more snowcock and were back in camp when the sun set behind the protective rows of prayer flags. I woke up that night to a strange, almost mechanical sound, and as hard as it was to leave the warmth of the sleeping bag I walked thirty metres down river where I found the source: an alarming snow martin. It was perched awkwardly in a small tree, growling at me... it seemed as if something had scared it up there moments before I arrived.



The light of daybreak revealed a pair of wolf tracks that passed right by our camp and the tree. After one last climb onto a nearby ridge to scan until sunrise, we left our magical camp and embarked on the spectacular walk out of Hemis. We took a detour on our way back to Leh in order to catch the celebrations of the Dosmoche Festival at the Likir Monastery. Along the way we passed some dramatic scenery including the turquoise confluence of two of Asia's great rivers: the Zaskar and the Indus. We arrived at Likir just as the trumpets blew and dancers spun in a frenzy of ornate colours and masks, chasing away the evil spirits and welcoming in the new year. From there we headed through to the hamlet of Ney in the Sham valley in search of Siberian ibex, and although we had no luck with this proud creature we did get to see an enormous golden Buddha overlooking the valley, as well as an incredible day time sighting of a Tibetan red fox, who watched us curiously for a moment before disappearing behind some rocks.



We were back in Leh by sunset and although a hot shower and comfortable bed were very welcome the wilderness was already calling, and in some way it felt like a part of all of us was still lingering in the wild mountains of the ghost. It had been an incredible adventure in so many ways...with the two sightings of a mother snow leopard and cubs the most precious of our memories. I cannot recommend this journey more as an ultimate life experience.

Special thanks to our wonderful guests Chanel, Stewart, Matthias and Margie, as well as our awesome ground staff Phunchok, Dorjay, Dorjay, Stanzin, Sonam, Spalzung and Lobzung.

James Kydd, Indri tour leader.



Annotated List of Mammal Species seen

Pikas Ochotonidae

Royle's pika

Ochotonidae

Two excellent sightings of this beautiful rodent, both reasonably close to camp

Hares and rabbits Leporidae

Wooly hare

Lepus oirotulus

We had exceptional viewing from our base camp

Dogs and allies Canidae

Red fox

Vulpes vulpes Montana

Seen on a few occasions around the camp at night, and were alarm calling on one of the evenings. We had an excellent daytime sighting near Ney in the Sham Valley.

Cats Felidae

Snow leopard

Panthera uncia

Two breathtaking sightings of a mother and her two cubs!

Mustelids Mustelidae

Stone marten

Martes foina

A few excellent sightings of these fascinating creatures around the camp at night.

Bovids and horned ungulates Bovidae

Bharal (Blue sheep)

Pseudois nayaur

The most common large mammal: we had numerous fantastic sightings of some very relaxed individuals.

Annotated List of Bird Species seen

Clements [ommissions] and (changes)

Pheasants Phasiannidae

Himalayan snowcock

Tetraogallus himalayensis

Seen on four days of the trip

Tibetan snowcock

Tetraogallus tibetanus

We had one lucky sighting in the Rhumbak Valley

Chukar partridge

Alectoris chukar

Seen on a number of occasions throughout the trip

Ducks and geese Anatidae

Northern shoveler

Anas clypeata

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus

Northern pintail

Anas acuta

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus

Common merganser

Mergus merganser

Two excellent sightings 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

One sighting on our initial approach to base camp

Golden eagle

Aquila chrysaetos

This impressive avian predator was seen on most days of the trip, and there was a pair preparing a nest in the Rhumbak Valley gorge.

Falcons Falconidae

Common kestrel

Falco tinnuculus

One sighting of this kestrel hunting close to camp.

Crakes and coots Rallidae

Common moorhen

Gallinula chloropus



Seen in Leh along a tributary of the Indus

Ibisbill Ibidorhyncha

Ibisbill

Ibidorhyncha struthersii

An excellent sighting of a pair outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus

Sandpipers and snipes Scolopacidae

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.

Common sandpiper

Actitis hypoleucos

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.

Hill pigeon

Columba rupestris

Seen at basecamp.

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

Encountered less regularly than the red-billed chough, we nonetheless had some excellent sightings.

Carrion crow

Corvus corone

A flock had gathered around a fatally injured dog outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus.

Northern raven

Corvus corax

Seen on a couple of occasions flying above the skyline in Hemis.

Tits Paridae

Great tit

Parus major

Seen throughout the trip especially around the camp.

Bushtits Aegithalidae

White-browed tit-warbler

Leptopoecile sophiae

Seen on a couple of occasions, we had an excellent sighting at the camp.

Wrens Troglodytidae

Eurasian wren

Troglodytes troglodytes

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus.

Thrushes Turdidae

Black-throated thrush

Turdus atrogularis

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus.

Chats, old world flycatchers Muscicapidae

Guldenstadts (White-winged) redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus*

Seen on numerous occasions in the valleys around Leh.

White-capped redstart

Chaimarrornis leucocephalus

Seen outside 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

Brown accentor

Prunella fulvescens

We had a few sightings especially in the river brush of the Tarbung Valley.

Wagtails Motacillidae

White wagtail

Motacilla alba

Seen outside Leh along a tributary of the Indus.

Finches Fringillidae

Plain mountain finch

Leucosticte nemoricola

We had a good sighting in the Tarbung Valley

Red-fronted (Fire-fronted) Serin

Serinus pusillus

Seen once in Leh, and once briefly near base camp

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