

EUROPE'S BIG 5



Snow Leopard quest

Synopsis 2015-2016

Day 1 Collected from guest house. Quick visit to Shanti Stupa, then down to Indus for some bird watching. Saw **Mountain Weasel** hunting along the bank near the Spituk bridge. No birds of note. Switched to Choglamsar bridge. Ibisbills were in plentiful supply, coming quite close and looking good in the sunshine. Very good views through the scope. Also Greenshank feeding side by side with the Ibisbills and some Red-breasted Mergansers flew past. Plus usual redstarts and magpies.





Day 2: Explored the road to Shanti Stupa and hills behind, on foot as it was a local holiday. Saw Goldies, Lammergeier, Great Rosefinch, Black-throated Trush and Robin Accentor.



Day 3: Headed off to Hemis. The base of the valley we entered looked just magnificent. Lots of Chukar running around and a Sparrowhawk was quartering a nearby field. The ponies were waiting, but the crew had not arrived so the guide and all of us headed off up the valley. Twenty minutes out we saw three vultures circling. There was a herd of approx 20 **Urial** on the Eastern side of the valley and 5 or 6 more visible on a knoll on our Western side. Had a really good view through the scope.





After scanning our guide spotted a Golden Eagle on a sheep kill about 300m distant and above us on the Western slope. This was a big adult female and she was feeding on what looked like a young sheep kill. Waiting nearby were two Himalayan Griffon vultures, two immature Lammergeiers and an immature Golden Eagle as well as the inevitable magpies. The image in the scope was brilliantly clear and we could see every feather. Fantastic! Our guide climbed up to have a look at the kill, to ascertain if it was worth coming back to, but found it to be almost totally consumed. After a couple of hours there, and after the ponies had passed us on their way, we headed up to camp which was another 40mins up the valley. Our camp was established when we arrived so we did some scanning. A herd of **Blue Sheep** was high up on the Northern slope of the valley. I spotted a **Mountain Weasel** hunting **Large-eared Pika's** by the river opposite camp. It scampered away quickly. Two guides headed up the valley to scout it out.





Day 4: Our first scan showed the same herd of **Blue Sheep** high up on the Northern side of the valley. We headed to a castle built on a ridge by the first bend in the river further up the valley from camp. Spent the day scanning in glorious sunshine. Saw **Blue Sheep** in the distance on ridges nearer Stok Kangri, but no Snow Leopard.



Day 5: Christmas Day! A pre-breakfast scan showed the **Blue Sheep** herd in normal location. After breakfast followed the river further up the valley past the castle ridge for about an hour to the point where the path separated by a hut. We located a sizeable herd of **Blue Sheep** in breeding mode with lots of big rams performing Flehmen! Some good pics were had. Just beyond the hut the path started climbing up to a ridge overlooking an S-shaped valley and here we stopped for the day. The sun was hidden and so warm clothes were soon put on. One of the guides spotted a Solitary Snipe on the valley floor but digiscope pics did not turn out well. A small group of 6 **Blue Sheep** were grazing a slope to the South West about 500m away and on a ridge just above them we spotted a Himalayan Snowcock. The light was fading and just as we were packing up a **Snow Leopard** was spotted. It was about 600m away to the West sitting on the ledge of a pinnacle on a ridgeline surveying its domain. It could have been there for some time!



After about 10 mins watching it jumped off its perch and headed in the direction of the Blue Sheep but we lost it in the dark. Everyone so very happy! We travelled home in the dark without torches - tricky! **Day 6:** Up early and off at 07:00, breakfast was taken with us. Up to Castle ridge, where we had breakfast of fried bread and omlette. Delicious! Moved on to the same ridge at 4150m as the day before. Spent the day scanning but, apart from a **Blue Sheep herd** on the valley floor, there was little to be seen. Towards the end of the day our guide spotted fresh Snow Leopard tracks and everybody scanned but nothing was seen. We left in time to get home just as darkness fell.





Day 7: Up and scanning early. The **Blue Sheep** on the mountain have moved! Something is going on! After the initial excitement we headed up a valley behind camp where we followed Snow Leopard tracks. We were then called back urgently by Urgyen the cook. A **Snow Leopard** had been spotted from camp.



We rushed back. **Two Snow Leopard** were resting behind a rock on the opposite side of the valley to us about 3-400m away. We took a few pics before they moved towards a gulley. In the gulley a kill was spotted and nother Snow Leopard was feeding at it. I took some stills and a short video clip which turned out well. A second Snow Leopard was watching us from behind a rock but not sure of the relationship between the two. Possibly the first two were mother and cub, and the feeding leopard was a male. We watched him feeding until dark. Everyone elated! Explains why the Blue Sheep had moved!



First sunny day in three. Ravens were at the kill and were joined by an immature Lammergeier but no sign of leopard. After 40 mins **the leopard** reappeared, but had obviously finished feeding. He dragged his swollen belly out into the morning light and rested. No sign of the other two leopards. We spent the day watching him in warm sunshine. He usually lay behind a rock and periodically moved up the slope. After lunch we crossed the valley and moved up the slope below him to get a better view but he kept moving up the slope from us. Last view of him was as he unhurriedly crossed a ridge and out of view.





Day 9: Early morning scan. Our guide spotted a **leopard** on a high ridge to the East of camp and we watched it for 20 mins until it walked out of sight behind a ridge in the foreground. Another guide spotted fresh wolf tracks and followed them down the valley.



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The pony men phoned to report a kill down the valley and we all rushed down. An adult Blue Sheep kill lay beside the river just 300m from camp just around a bend, it was well stripped and probably a day or two old. Lots of fresh tracks on either side of the river. No sign of Blue Sheep anywhere. Everyone came back to camp in a state of high excitement and we spent a sunny afternoon scanning from half way up the valley side but saw nothing except soaring Lammgeiers.



Day 10: Up early scanning. Nothing except a few **Blue Sheep** high on the ridge on Southern valley wall. We headed down but no sign of Urial or Eagles. Drove to Ullay stopping for lunch on the way in Likir. Saw group of 6 **Urial** South of road between Basgo and Likir, but they were 600m away, in a heat haze. Stayed in a homestay where they fed us royally! Incredibly warm in the kitchen, we almost fainted! Reached Ullay and scanned. Some **Asiatic Ibex** high up on Eastern wall, but nothing else except Chukar.



Day 11: Up early scanning. Little to be seen. But with only one day it was always going to be a matter of luck. But it was great to be back in Ullay, it is so beautiful!





Client Comments

- *Although the trip sounds hard core, I must emphasise how well the guys looked after us.*
- *They brought a 'Super Ser' type gas heater up the valley on the back of a pony and this made all the difference in the dining tent where we slept. In fact we often had to turn it down as the guys had it going full throttle. They filled a hot water bottle every night and provided blankets! Absolute luxury!*
- *They also brought up a small generator, which powered the lights in the cook tent and dining tent where we slept, at the guys suggestion. It also charged batteries.*
- *The food was amazing, both in variety and quantity, and delicious.*
- *In addition the guys were always providing cups of tea and hot water, throughout the day to make sure we were hydrated.*
- *The reason I'm saying all of this is that the advantages of going in winter dramatically outweigh, I believe, the disadvantages and I think that it is important not to undersell the December trips.*
- *The animals are more likely to go about their business, free of disturbance.*
- *And the region takes on a completely different beauty in winter. It is a great trip!*

Synopsis & comments: taken from daily notes by tour participant Paul Tierney. Jan, EB5 founder, wants to say a huge thanks to the following people for their contribution to this report: Sofie Lembrechts (graphical design), Detlef Tibax (drawings), John Wright (proof-reading and correcting the English), Herman Paelinck, Jigmet Dadul & Paul Tierney (pictures), PJ and Karl for doing all EB5 facebook postings.