





From October 5-16, Karl Van Ginderdeuren lead a EB5 tour for nature enthusiasts who were eager to fly high: they wanted to see a snow leopard in the wild.

Snow leopards are one of the most mysterious species on planet earth, and are often referred to by locals as the mountain ghost. In the wild, 4000-7000 snow leopards are estimated to remain. Exact numbers are unknown because they are extremely secretive, and live in some of the harshest environments known.

In the past, seeing a snow leopard in the wild was considered only for those who could spend many months in the right area. But times have changed. Devoted conservation projects (Snow leopard conservancy, Panthera) all over its distribution range (mainly Russia, China, India) have yielded a lot of new info regarding snow leopard distribution and their ecology.

It also became clear that the Himalayas in Ladakh (India) contain some of the highest densities on earth. In Hemis National Park (4400km²) some 40 leopards are thought to reside.

Using the skill of local trackers, it has as such become possible to see a leopard when spending several days in this habitat. This means flying in at 3500m and subsequently hike high up in the Himalayas: in summer the cats are found at 5000-6000m but in winter they follow their prey lower down the valleys.

Hence the trip started with eight nervous guys meeting at the airport in Brussels. Nervous because we knew it was possible: we had the best trackers of the Snow Leopard Conservancy, we all had our own scopes, we knew Jon Hall (mammalwatching.com) was going to be there with a crew as well. More eyes scanning the vast landscape means better chances of the leopard. Due to time limitations we were only visiting Ladakh, and no other regions in India for tigers, lions, rhinos. This meant that it was an “all or nothing” trip. You see it, or you come back from a trip seeing only a very barren landscape. Hence, nervous...

When you land at an altitude of 3500m, some acclimatization is required. Altitude sickness is always lurking and as tour leader one of my main concerns was that nobody should be left behind. As such we spent two days birding the beautiful Indus river valley around the Ladakh capital Leh.



All of us were very keen on seeing Ibisbill so we looked for two days along the barren Indus river banks. The Ibisbill is so special being a sole bird species in its family. There are no subspecies. It was only described in 1831 based on a painting.



Other sightings included: *Ladakh Urial*, *Oriental Turtle Dove* (in hotel garden), dozens of *Guldenstadt's Redstart*, *Citrine*, *Grey*, *Masked* and *Himalayan Wagtail*, *Pallas Gull*, *Plain Martin*, *Blue Rock Thrush*, *Robin Accentor*, *Barbary Falcon* (two at Thiksey monastery), *Himalayan Buzzard*, several *Booted Eagles*, *Rosy Pipit*, *Red-rumped Swallow*, *Shore Lark* and *Isabelline Shrike*.

After two days of acclimatisation the time had come to travel towards Hemis national park. There we had planned a seven day expedition with only one purpose: seeing a snow leopard in the wild. For this expedition, We had nine local people involved: drivers, cooks, trackers and spotters



First sight underway: Snow leopard prey! Blue sheep were seen everywhere. We would follow their movements closely. First proof of Snow Leopard presence. A fresh print. This made us agitated yet very focused



Base camp was situated in the middle of nowhere (Rumbak valley).



*All these slopes together form the core area of several snow leopards. **They are there, you just have to find them.***



The first days did not yield any leopard sightings but we saw: Brown Dipper, many Mountain Chiffchaff, several more Robin Accentors, Alpine and a Brown Accentor, Streaked Rosefinch, Chukar, both choughs, daily Himalayan Griffon as well as Bearded Vulture, Rock, Hill and Snow Pigeon, many Red-fronted Serins, Himalayan Snowcocks, Humes Warbler, Plain Mountain Finch, Long-legged and Upland Buzzard, Wallcreepers, several Saker Falcons and even a rare Laggar Falcon, Solitary Snipe, Desert Wheatear. Mammals included: dozens of Blue Sheep, Large-eared Pika, Beech Martin and the beautiful Mountain Weasel.



On the fourth day of the expedition, the lack of decent sleep combined with low oxygen levels started wearing us all down. Yet the motivation to find the illusive cat persevered and people kept looking. Jigmet proposed to get higher up the mountains this day, to have a better view. This was literally breathtaking. We were all totally exhausted but started scanning... again nothing happened and people started thinking what would happen if we simply did not manage to find a leopard...



Yet all of a sudden we heard a radio message from a hiker we had met the days before. We could see him standing far away in the mountains. The radio message was hard to understand but the shouted words "Rock" and "Leopard" sent shivers down our spines. People became very very nervous instantly. Jigmet kept calm and ran down the mountain. This is an insane sight: 50° hillsides and a guide running down as fast he can. Within a few minutes (!!) he was on the other mountain and pointed his scope to where the hiker instructed. Through my binoculars I saw Jigmet looking for ten seconds. Then he got up and ran towards us as fast as he could shouting SHAN SHAN SHAN (local word for snow leopard). By then I was so nervous the only thing I could stutter was "people keep calm, there is a leopard in sight". This is by far the most intense moment I ever had on a nature trip. Jigmet again ran up the mountain and only moments later, we were looking at a snow leopard resting on a slope. Then the cat got up and started to run on the slope... 2m long with its huge tail! An EPIC experience and a very strange moment as tears were flowing, men were hugging, fists were in the air. We were the happiest people in the Himalayas!



I instantly took a picture of the group while the adrenaline was pumping very hard.



The following days we looked for more leopards but no success. Three days later, we traveled further east towards the Tibetan plateau in Tso Kar. Target species here included Tibetan Wild Ass (Kiang) and rare birds (including Tibetan Sandgrouse and Black-necked Crane). Good numbers of Tibetan partridges on the way to Tanglang La pass too.



Years ago, Tibetan sangrouse was extremely difficult to see. Only recently, this population in Tso Kar became known.





In Tso Kar we found several Hume's Groundpeckers as well. But the stars of the Tibetan plateau are by far the Tibetan Wild Ass aka Kiang. They live in huge herds and roam the emptiness...





On the Tibetan plateau we also saw: Brown-headed Gulls, Bar-headed Geese, Black-necked Crane (several families), Greater Rosefinch, Blanford's and Tibetan Snowfinch, Steppe Gull, Large-billed Crow, Little and Rock Bunting and Brandts Mountain Finch. Apart from the Kiangs, other mammals included: Ladakh Pika, groups of Argali, Stolizka Vole, Silvery Mountain Vole, Black-lipped Pika, Red fox. A distant Tibetan Wolf was seen in the scope for one hour too.



Tsokar base camp is very pretty but very cold: 4600 m altitude and -20°C during the night. Big respect to the crew who helped us in this extreme environment! Amazing how the chef cooked decent meals all day long! Again respect only!



We concluded the trip in the Ulley valley, trying for another snow leopard. Here no extra sighting either. Resident Asiatic Ibex were new for the trip list. Views we had from vantage points again awesome. The local homestay provided good photo opportunities of the Buddhist children.



At Europesbig5 we love Ladakh, and we will be back shortly!

Do join us in the future too!

**You will love this mesmerizing experience in the vast emptiness on the roof of the world
and you might receive a nice EB5 souvenir afterwards:**



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