

Trip to Hemis National Park Ladakh for Snow Leopard

30th august to 12th September 2008. Phil Telfer.

Intro.

The group consisted of myself, Steve Morgan and Mark Bibby. The plan was to spend a few days of altitude acclimatisation and then set up camp in the Rombuk valley of northern Hemis and take daily excursions high into the nearby Tarbung and Hosing valleys.

Ground arrangements were made by Phunchok Tsering (PT) from his base in Leh, the capital of Ladakh, contact phunchok@yahoo.com

We were accompanied by Hari Lama a Nepalise bird guide and Smanla Tseling who works for the park and having spent all his life there has probably seen more snow leopards than anyone. They both put in a great effort for us and are well recommended.

There was also a cook and 2 assistants and we were provided with nice individual tents and the camp also had a kitchen and dining tent so had a proper expedition feel. The food was generally quite good and there was plenty of it and also a regular supply of tea.

We had a real mix of weather, a few days of warm sun but more overcast days and some horrendous driving rain and sleet which forced us back to camp a couple of times.

Diary

Sat. 30th august.

We gathered early at heathrow for our BA flight to Delhi and arriving late evening transferred to the disgusting Sunstar residency hotel for a couple hours of sleep.

Day 2.

An early start back to the airport for the Jet airways flight up to Leh and some spectacular scenery en-route. On climbing down the steps from the plane the air was distinctly cold and dry. We were driven to the very pleasant Lotus hotel for our acclimatisation.

Day 3. Taking it easy, although me and Mark took a walk into town to watch the Leh festival which was actually better than we expected. The altitude didn't seem to be much of a problem as yet until you climbed

some stairs when it was noticeably knackered.

There were a few birds around town, great tit, house sparrow, hobby and kestrel.

Day 4. A welcome birding excursion to the Shey marshes producing mountain chiffchaff, blue throat and a peregrine and later along the banks of the Indus river the 1st mammals of the trip - large-eared pika.

A quick drive-by of the Shey monastery and then back to Leh where we took in an afternoon game of polo. Having overdosed on culture we were now keen to get ready for the main part of the trip.

Day 5. Finally leaving Leh by jeep we headed south and across the Indus river towards the mountains, the 1st hour through rough, barren terrain and then onto a narrow track climbing up towards the Rombuk valley. After another hour we arrived at the tiny village of Zinchen which was as far as the jeep could go. Here our gear was loaded onto a couple of ponies and donkeys along with food supplies and we set off along the trail on foot, arriving at our camping site a couple of hours later. The site was in the floor of the Rombuk and about half way between the entrances to the Hosing and Tarbung valleys each about half a kilometre away. We were surrounded by spectacular scenery and set the tents by a fast flowing stream which was just about bearable for a dip. Later in the afternoon we took our 1st walk into the Hosing valley and eventually found a group of Blue sheep. Birds today were fire-fronted serin, common rosefinch, blue whistling thrush and red-billed chough.

Day 6. Today we went high into the Hosing taking a packed lunch and taking regular stops to scan the hillsides. At the sheep pen near the top of the valley we found some Blue sheep and a Royle's pika on a scree slope. There were however no fresh signs of snow leopard only some scrapes which appeared several weeks old and things weren't looking too promising. Back at camp for dinner and a tea it was great to get the boots off and dip them in the stream. New birds today, alpine chough and golden eagle.

Day 7. We decided on a full day hike into the Tarbung valley and again located some blue sheep high up and way ahead of us. Smanla suddenly announced he'd spotted a leopard near the sheep and grabbing my scope he spent the next 5 minutes trying to get on it. Unfortunately he couldn't locate it. It was a long way off and we realised how much dead ground there was up there.. We carried on in that direction for about half an hour and then climbed a high ridge to get a better view of where he'd seen it. We sat up there for a couple of hours but nothing except sheep. Returning

to camp we wondered if we'd missed our chance.

Day 8. Today it was back to the Tarbung but it was a very cold morning and sleet was falling, the skies looked grim however it cleared enough for us to spot a lammergeier and we decided to continue up. After a while Mark announced that he was feeling really unwell, probably due to the altitude and decided to stop while we went on for another hour. By now the weather was really closing in and we thought it best to retreat to camp so not a great day.

Day 9. Back to the Hosing but after only about half an hour Mark had to return to camp as he was feeling too weak and really didn't look well. Myself and Steve, with Smanla and Hari continued the climb and reached the sheep pen for our lunch break during which a superb Mountain weasel put in an appearance. A great animal but too quick for my camera. The Pika was also on the scree slope again. It was turning into a good day and about to get better still. While we finished lunch, Hari and Smanla wandered a bit further up the valley and suddenly waved us to join them. Amazingly Hari had spotted a beautiful male Snow leopard sat in the rocks about 300 metres above us. We could only see part of its side and tail but every so often it would lift its head above a rock to peer down at us. We watched for around 15 minutes but Smanla had climbed the opposite ridge and called us to join him. We got to a similar height to the leopard and set the scopes up and then had the most brilliant view. Here we stayed for the next 3 hours and the cat occasionally shifted position or rolled over and sometimes stared across at us but didn't want to move much. By about 5pm we needed to leave to return to camp and it had turned really cold with sleet falling again. We were elated to say the least but the downside was going to be breaking the news to Mark.

Day 10. Today the weather was bad again so we settled on a short walk into the Tarbung as Mark was now ok to join us again our aim now being to try and get him a sighting. However the weather beat us and we returned to camp early.

Day 11. An early start back up the Hosing and again reaching the sheep pen for lunch but no luck today and we returned to camp with Mark now feeling he'd missed his chance.

Day 12. Another hike up the Hosing valley produced our first Himalayan Griffons and we stopped at the usual lunch spot. After eating I showed Mark where the leopard had been and scanning the rock-face behind with

bins he said that something had moved. Sure enough it was the male snow leopard again but this time he was climbing up quite rapidly. Mark ran for his scope while I watched through bins. When he returned in a state of near panic he fell over cutting his leg and I had to help him set the scope up just in time for him to see the leopard disappear over the ridge. We waited for about half an hour thinking the leopard might settle down again over the ridge and slowly made our way up the opposite side of the valley climbing as high as possible to get the best view but we never saw him again.

We did however find a blue sheep kill well eaten which explained the leopard hanging around and why he looked so well fed and lethargic on our 1st sighting 3 days before.

For me, Steve and Smanla it was relief that now we'd all had a sighting. So we had a relaxing walk back to camp seeing a Robin accentor.

That night at dinner I developed a splitting headache and felt sick. This was the 3rd time but this was worse and clearly the effects of the altitude. I hadn't been sleeping much anyway so made the decision to return to Leh early next day.

Day 13. Up before dawn and we were joined in camp by a pair of Beech Martens scrounging scraps of food, really smart animals. Said my goodbyes to Steve, Mark, Hari and Smanla as they headed off to the Hosing again. Just as I was leaving camp and a last look at the stream a mountain weasel ran along the far bank. Trip over.

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