

Ladakh, India: 17 February – 4 March 2013 – Snow Leopard Trek -

14 days and 12 species

Snow Leopards have been on our must-see list for a long time. Some 18 months ago we began to discuss such a tour with our Dutch friends and one year ago we contacted Vikram Singh from Wild World India (www.wildworldindia.com / wwi@wildworldindia.com) and booked a 14 day with 10 days looking for the grey ghost. It was perfect organized with very good guides, Manla and Norbod. We had excellent varied food and comfortable tents (well, as comfortable you can be at this altitude and in this cold). Even during the lunch we got a warm meal no matter where we were together with some hot tee.



We can really recommend Vikram and his organization.

We had an excellent group which made it truly enjoyable with our 2 dutch friends Rudy and Theo, and soon to become a good friend, Nigel from Sri Lanka. Nigel was later maybe to become the first from Sri Lanka to see a Snow Leopard in the wild.

A rough start:

Being full of expectations the trip got a bad start when we were not allowed to board our Air India flight to Leh due to overbooking. Our friends could board, we not. The second flight of the day was also full and no flights were scheduled for the next day and we were told that all flights were fully booked until 28 February. After a lot of discussions, Air India promised us to give us seats 2 days later. They could however not print any ticket to confirm this so we had two uneasy days in Delhi. Later on we heard other groups having the same problem also with Air India, so it might be good to plan for this. We missed a mask festival, which was a shame, as this would have completed our Ladakh experience. We have been there a few times during the summer for some excellent trekking.

Anyway, Vikram, booked us a room in the comfortable City Park hotel close to the Delhi airport, and the mammal spotting began as soon as we entered the room. A **Five-striped Squirrel** ran up and down the tree just outside our window. It is a very common squirrel found all over Delhi and beyond.

Hemis NP:

We managed to get to Leh 2 days later. Once in Leh, we had to decide if we wanted to go to the camping site with only one night of acclimatization. We knew this could be a bad idea as if you get into troubles, severe headaches may be the least of your problem. The only way out of Ladakh during the winter is by plane and there are not flights every day. However, we did not want to miss any of the action and as the camping site is only about 200m higher than Leh we decided to go but take it easy the first afternoon.

The camp:

It takes less than 1 hour to reach Zingchen bridge from Leh with a 4*4, the starting point of the short walk (1.5-2 hours) to the camp, albeit a bit slippery.



You only have to carry your day backpack, the rest is loaded onto horses. The camp is situated in a narrow valley by the Husing Nallah at about 3800m. You sleep in a comfortable 2-3 person tent. Mattresses and some blankets are provided. You need to bring a very good sleeping bag as it may get very cold. The coldest day we had during day time was -24 degrees Celsius. We ate in a comfortable dining-tent with a gas-heater, so it got (relative) warm and cozy in the evenings.



A separate toilet tent was provided also. A warm-water bottle is brought before bed-time and in the mornings they bring tee to your tent before breakfast together with a bowl of warm water. I have always smiled at my wife using a warm-water bottle. No more.



Snow Leopard trekking:

We looked for the cat in three areas; Husing valley, Tarbung valley and on the trail to the Rumbak village. They are all close by and the trails are never really steep, although the thin air sometimes made breathing very heavy. We like to think that the high altitude was the only reason for this. The furthest we walked was the 3 km to the Rumbak village at +/- 4100m.

At the Zingchen bridge we got our first teaser. A Dutch group showed us their catch of the week, a Snow Leopard walking on snow. And at a relative close distance too. We were very jealous. Our guides meant we should have a fair chance too as the last a sighting was 6 days back, so statistically, the cats should begin to move again as they roughly eat every 2 weeks or so. The problem was just if they were going to appear in the valley close by. As there was plenty of **Blue Sheep** around, the main prey, the setting seemed to be as good as it gets. On the way to the camp we saw our first group of Blue Sheep and would see them each day.



Early the first morning, our guides heard a call. We were told a kill had been made, and after an early breakfast we went to Tarbung valley looking for it.





It did not take long for our guides to find it. The **Snow Leopard** had dragged his prey from the snowy mountainside to the opposite rockier cliffs where he could easier hide. He lay resting far up on a ledge. We were ecstatic and congratulated ourselves.



He looked down at us and probably hoped that we would go away so he could enjoy his food in peace. Fat chance. So Vikram and team decided to build a hide.



Without the hide the cat would probably wait until nightfall to feed and we would potentially miss something very few people have seen. The hide did not help at first as we of course could not stay quiet in the hide. We just had to peer every so often and the cameras were singing like never before and he knew something just was not right. After a while though he slowly approached but stopped at a safe distance. Maybe the Magpies feasting on his prey was too much for him. And we were told that if we did not stay really quiet we may miss the show. So we did. It was not comfortable at all, but we did our best. Eventually he moved closer and closer, chasing away the Magpies as he went,



and finally came down to the kill and we had the sight of our lives, a feeding Snow Leopard only 40-50m away almost at eye level. Once when he began to feed he was oblivious to our presence and we could leave our hide and take position with our cameras.



For the rest of the afternoon he stayed fed on his prey.



He clearly enjoyed it.



Manla believed he would be there at least the next day also, which he was. Needless to say, we celebrated extensively later that evening and even got a fresh baked cake with a Snow Leopard paw painted on the glazing.



On our way back on the second day, only some 100m from the camp we saw **2 Large-eared Pikas** among the boulders just beside the path and we would find them here every time we looked for it.



We believe it was this kind of Pika anyway, but they are not easily told apart from the Royle's Pikas, which also lives in the area, so we might be wrong.

We of course also went back on the third day and hoped he would not have finished his meal during the night. He had. He had eaten almost everything. The bones and intestines were left. We saw the back of him crossing a ridge, but not alone. I guess with a full stomach it was time to make sure his set of genes would live on. A female had joined him and they walked away and we followed them on the other side of the valley. As they finally rested they were far away, pretty much at the distance we had expected to see them. Following the happy couple, we surprised a **Woolly Hare**, which swiftly escaped. A couple of days later we walked back there and the romantic couple had not moved far. It had begun to snow a little,

but not much. It snowed a few times, but never more than a few centimeters. In the rocky deserts of Ladakh it never really snows very much.



When our old friend left the carcass, it was time for the airborne assault. Lammergeiers, Himalayan Griffin Vultures, Magpies and Yellow-billed Choughs came to have a pick.



As we did not feel any pressure anymore to look for the cat and we hardly expected to get a better view, we decided to follow the narrow valley to Rumbak to try to get some good photos of the Blue Sheep. The valley is narrower so it is easier to get closer to them there.



It is an easy walk of about 3 kilometers. On the way we also found a few **Royle's Pikas** among the boulders.

On sunny days they like to come out to bask and as long as we did not move they stayed put.

Our Big cat spotting was not yet over. The next day we took the short hike to the Husing Valley, the valley closest to the camp. We had not been there long before a female with her cub were spotted and they did approach a herd of Blue Sheep. Later in the evening after dark she came down to the camp with her cub, maybe to check out the horses for an easy meal. The day after a **Red Fox** also visited the camp after dark.

Ulley Valley:

Being very happy with we had seen we decided to go to Ulley valley earlier than planned. From Leh it takes about 2 hours on a partly narrow and steep mountain road. On the way, in the Indus valley on the plains by the road, it should be very good to see **Ladakh Urial**. We in car were not lucky, the car behind us was. We got some very good views on the way back to Leh.



For us the key specie to look for in the spectacular Ulley valley was the Tibetan Wolf. They have had quite a few sightings in the past. It is also good for Asiatic Ibex and is also reasonable for Snow Leopards. I got the feeling that this can be an all-or-nothing trip.

Already on the first afternoon we were lucky with the Asiatic Ibex and saw 6 of them. They were easily seen from our guide Norbod's excellent and friendly homestay right in the middle of the mountains.





The very next day a group of 10-12 Ibex's had come down on the road a bit further down from the homestay so we followed them for a while before returning for lunch.

After lunch, sitting on the veranda enjoying the warm sun and some tea, the name we had been longing for to hear was shouted out, Wolf. A lone **Tibetan Wolf** had come down to the village, maybe to check the status of a Yak, which had been attacked and wounded by a

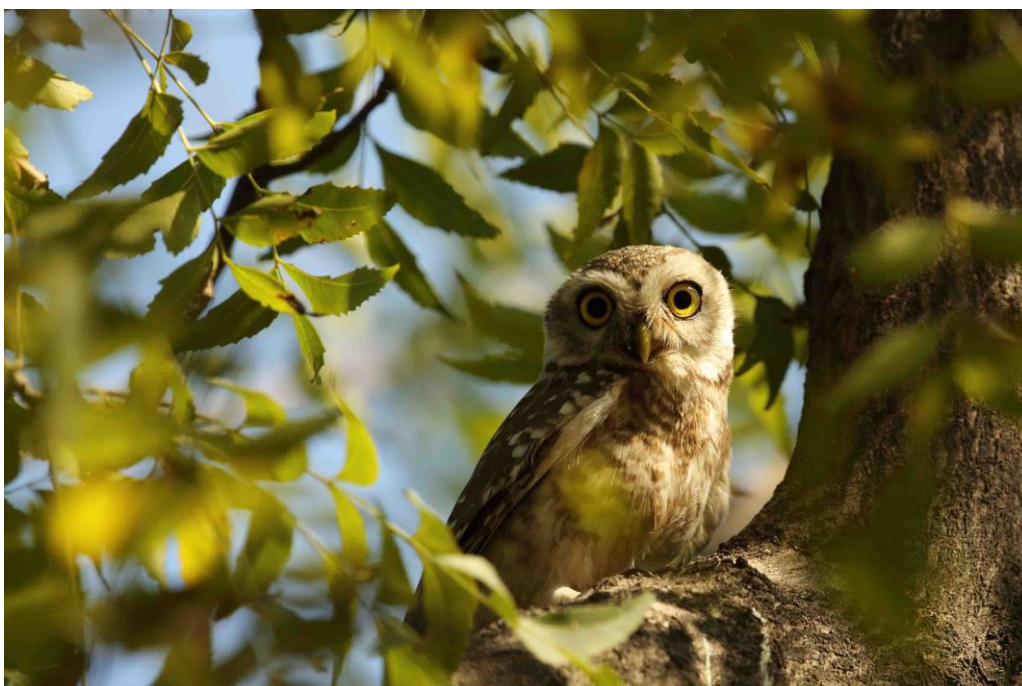
Snow Leopard a while ago. We enjoyed him for several minutes before he disappeared over the ridge. Later that afternoon a Red Fox walked through the village.

The next day, also after lunch the magic word was called out again, this time in plural. 2 Wolves looked down at us from some ruins high up on the mountain slopes. They apparently do so from time to time. Later on we saw a third on the plains. They of course never let us come very close.



Bhindawas:

We planned for an extra day in Delhi as flights sometimes get cancelled to be sure to reach our international flights. Vikram arranged a Delhi-suburban tour to Bhindawas in the state of Haryana, where we should have a very good chance to spot the rare and extremely beautiful **Black Buck** and also some owls, other birds in the vicinity



It took about 2 hours to get there and on the way we spotted 2 **Rhesus Macaques** sitting on a wall and it did not take us long to spot the Buck's. Although they are living close to the surrounding villages, they were not really habituated and kept their distance. At the Okhla Bird Sanctuary about 30 min (no rush hour) from our hotel we spotted our last mammals of the trip, some more Five-striped Squirrels.

All the best

Carmen and Torbjörn Lundqvist