

## **Ladakh, India, Snow Leopard Quest, 17th February - 4th March 2017**

Trip Report by: John Wright, email: johnpw2@tiscali.co.uk

**Foreword.** Having missed Snow Leopards in Mongolia in 2015 I knew it was time to bite the bullet and face the cold and tough winter conditions of the high Himalayas in Ladakh. I chose to go with 'Wild About Travel' as it was very reasonably priced with a really good tour package organised by Jo Thomas. Tim Bourne a friend and fellow bird and wildlife enthusiast joined me on the trip. The only other person in our 'group' was a lady named Julia Arden who was from New Zealand although it turned out that actually she is an ex-pat who had emigrated to NZ 30 years ago. We met up with Julia at our hotel in Delhi.

Myself and Tim flew from London Heathrow direct to Delhi on the 17th February arriving in Delhi the next morning. Our return was a direct flight from Delhi on the 4th March arriving at Heathrow the same day. We used Indian Jet Airways both for the international and internal Delhi - Leh - Delhi flights. No complaints all flights on time and a good service throughout.

As part of the package Jo had arranged a trip to Sultanpur National Park on our day of arrival in Delhi and the day before our departure at the end of the trip. This was a good and welcome part of the trip otherwise we would have been hanging around the hotel in Delhi.

Sultanpur is mainly a wetland with the main attraction being wintering waterfowl and waders. It is situated in Gurgaon district of Haryana on Gurgaon-Farrukh Nagar road. It's around 50K west of Delhi. From our hotel, situated not far from the airport it was a fairly straight forward drive of about 35K but of course when you factor in

the traffic in Delhi even this short distance ends up taking at least 2 hours.

The weather in Delhi was warm and sunny. In Ladakh it was cold, of course, but we wore plenty of layers to keep warm. At the beginning of the trip in Leh there was quite a bit of laying snow and we had some light snow falls on a couple of evenings. At the end of the trip most of the snow had gone from Leh. There was plenty of snow laying in Hemis National Park which made the going a bit tough at times, particularly at such a high altitude. But of course snow is a good thing when searching for Snow Leopards as their pug marks can be followed; it keeps the wild ungulates at lower altitudes and consequently the Snow Leopards too. Some of the tracks we walked got icy and slippery as the snow compounded down, melted a little during the day and then froze again overnight. Julia felt a bit ill on occasion due to the altitude but fortunately myself and Tim were fine. All the days in Hemis NP were sunny and calm and so didn't feel too cold but early mornings before the sun had crept above the peaks it was very cold as were the late afternoons when the sun had dipped below the peaks. The nights were of course extremely cold with water bottles freezing solid but we kept warm in the tents thanks to the two sleeping bags each. We each had a tent to ourselves which were pitched, along with about 15 others, at 'Husing tented camp'. The camp was actually in Rumbak Valley but next to the entrance to Husing Valley. For one night in Hemis and three nights in Ulley we stayed in a Homestay which was a unique experience. The Homestays were basic but it was nice not to be in a tent all of the time. The Homestay option has been set up by the Snow Leopard Conservancy or the Wildlife Department to ensure local people benefit financially from Snow Leopard tourism and thereby provide an incentive to protect Snow Leopards.

The team looking after us in Ladakh provided the tents, one for each of us, and we hired a sleeping bag from them. This was all done in advance by Jo Thomas. You can of course use your own sleeping bag but it does make things harder keeping your luggage weight down for the internal flight. As it happens they gave us two sleeping bags each which were definitely needed. Our guide's name was Gurmet, he was equipped with binoculars, telescope and tripod and was very sharp-eyed, he worked hard for us and was good company. We also had a second spotter in the team, Dundop, who also had binoculars and telescope/tripod. Dundop basically looked after Julia staying with her and helping her across the terrain, Julia also used his scope at times which was better optically than her own. There were three other members of the team who did the cooking or helped with the tents and bags, Dundop also helped with the cooking at times. A sixth member of the team was the driver who we used outside of our time in Hemis NP.

The basic routine was we scanned the mountain sides and peaks anytime during the day but concentrated in the early mornings and late afternoons till dusk. It started getting light around 06:45 and started getting dark around 18:30.

**Itinerary.** We had an itinerary which was of course flexible so it could be changed depending on circumstances i.e. to go anywhere Snow Leopards were being seen including moving the tents elsewhere if necessary, which we didn't have to do. This is our actual itinerary:

#### **Fri 17th Feb, Day 1: UK - India**

Myself and Tim on Jet Airways flight departing London Heathrow at 20:50. Arriving Delhi the next morning.

### **Sat 18th Feb Day 2: Delhi**

Myself and Tim's flight arrived in Delhi International Airport at 10:45. We visited the bureau de change counter at the airport and got as many Rupees as allowed, which at the time was only around £55 worth. Met by our guide for the day in Delhi, driven to our hotel the Hotel Lohmod. Met fellow trip participant Julia Arden. Left hotel early afternoon to visit Sultanpur National Park. Overnight stay at Hotel Lohmod.

### **Sun 19th Feb, Day 3: Delhi – Leh**

An 04:00 transfer to the airport to check in for our flight with Jet Airways departing at 06:25 arriving in Leh at 07:30. A sensational flight with some fabulous scenery. Arrived in Leh and transferred to the hotel the Mahey Retreat. Although recommended to rest and acclimatise to the altitude myself, Tim and Julia went for a short walk around Leh. In the afternoon met our guide Gurmet to talk over plans, timings and what's what etc. Gurmet was to be our main guide for the duration in Ladakh. Overnight at Hotel Mahey Retreat.

### **Mon 20th Feb, Day 4: Leh**

Another full day of taking it easy to acclimatise to the altitude if it was felt necessary. But we went out birding with our guide Gurmet and also visited Thiksey Monastery, from which we had great views across the Indus Valley. Overnight Hotel Mahey Retreat.

### **Tues 21st Feb, Day 5: Leh - Zingchen – Husing, Hemis National Park**

Driven to Zingchen and Hemis National Park. From Zingchen walked to the campsite at Husing located at an altitude of approximately 3700m. Met the rest of our Snow Leopard team who were going to take care of us whilst in Hemis NP. Walked up Rumbak Valley. Husing tented camp for the night.

### **Wed 22nd Feb, Day 6: Hemis NP**

All day in Rumbak Valley. Husing tented camp overnight.

**Thurs 23rd Feb, Day 7: Hemis NP**

All day in Rumbak Valley, visited Rumbak Village. Husing tented camp overnight.

**Fri 24th Feb, Day 8: Hemis NP**

Rumbak, Tarbung and Husing Valleys. Husing tented camp overnight.

**Sat 25th Feb, Day 9: Hemis NP**

Rumbak Valley, walked to Homestay at Yurutse. Overnight in Yurutse Homestay.

**Sun 26th Feb, Day 10: Hemis NP**

Yurutse Homestay area then back down Rumbak Valley to Husing Valley. Overnight Husing tented camp.

**Mon 27th Feb, Day 11: Hemis NP - Ulley**

Departed Husing camp, Rumbak Valley and Hemis NP. Driven to Ulley. Overnight Thayokpa Homestay, Ulley.

**Tues 28th Feb, Day 12: Ulley**

Scanned mountain sides and peaks in Ulley area. Overnight Thayokpa Homestay.

**Wed 1st Mar, Day 13: Ulley**

Scanned in Saspoche Valley, Ulley. Overnight Thayokpa Homestay.

**Thur 2nd Mar, Day 14: Ulley - Leh**

Scanned from rooftop of Homestay before driving to Leh. Overnight Mahey Retreat Hotel in Leh.

**Fri 3rd Mar, Day 15: Leh - Delhi**

08:35 flight back to Delhi from Leh. Sultanpur National Park in afternoon. Overnight Hotel Lohmod.

## Sat 4th Mar, Day 16: Delhi

Late morning pick-up from Hotel Lohmod to Indira Gandhi Airport, Delhi, for our early afternoon flight back to London Heathrow. Arrived back in UK at 17:30.

### Daily Log

**Sat 18th Feb.** Afternoon visit for around 3 hours to Sultanpur National Park. There was plenty of waterfowl some of which, but not all, was familiar to UK birding - Wigeon, Pochard, Mallard, Teal, Gadwall, Shoveler, Pintail, Ferruginous Ducks, Garganey, Comb Duck and Greylag Geese. The best waders were the 5 or 6 White-tailed Lapwing but there was also Ruff, Common and Wood Sandpipers. Herons and Egrets were common and we had good views of Purple Herons and Indian Pond Herons and a Black-necked Stork was a good bird to see. We saw at least 6 Nilgai and Five Striped Palm Squirrels were common. On the drive back not far from the park around 15 Rhesus Macaques were on a roadside building.

**Sun 19th Feb.** An 06:30 flight got us to Leh at 07:30. Our guide couldn't meet us at Leh airport so he had arranged for a taxi to take us to our hotel - the Mahey Retreat. It is recommended to rest and just loiter around the hotel drinking plenty of water for a day or two to acclimatise to the altitude. Although wise words and the best thing to do if you are feeling the effects of the altitude it isn't easy to do and so we went for a short walk. After lunch and having suffered no ill effects after our morning walk myself and Tim went out again looking for birds around Leh. We did well finding amongst other things Brown Dipper, White-throated Dipper, Brown and Robin Accentors, Blue Whistling Thrush and Mongolian Finches.

**Mon 20th Feb.** Myself and Tim went on a pre-breakfast walk to look for birds. After breakfast our guide Gurmet and our driver arrived and took us out birding. We visited various locations in the Indus

valley as well as a brief visit to Thiksey Monastery. No mammals were seen but we did see some good birds - Ibisbill, Solitary Snipe, 150+ White-winged Redstarts and around 20 Black-throated Thrush. Then went back for a late lunch at the Mahey Retreat. In the afternoon we visited the HQ of the Snow Leopard Conservancy which was informative and very interesting. After that myself and Tim went out around Leh birding till dusk.

**Tues 21st Feb.** At last the big day had arrived we were to go to Hemis NP and our first chance for Snow Leopard. Tim and myself had a pre-breakfast walk and found 6 Black-throated Accentors, 2 Brown Accentors a few Twite and a Sparrowhawk. At 09:30 Gurmet and the driver picked us up from our hotel to take us to Hemis NP. Soon after entering the park we stopped and scanned the barren rocky slopes above the Indus River as this is the best place to look for Ladakh Urial. Our first stop didn't produce any sightings of Urial but we did see a couple of Golden Eagles. Moving on our second stop was better as we spotted 3 female Urials together and a solitary ram high up on a ridge. A good start to our introduction to Hemis NP - which as it happened was to get a whole lot better. We arrived at Zingchen at 11:00, this is as far as vehicles are allowed into the park. Our bags were loaded onto mules or donkeys and then we walked up Rumbak Valley, which is really a steep sided gorge at this point, to where it meets Husing Valley where our tented camp was located.



Me at the entrance gate to Hemis NP.

As our bags were getting loaded up we were told that a Snow Leopard had been hanging around a low rocky outcrop all morning and seemed to be settled there. As you can imagine we just wanted to go and go fast, we were told to keep walking along the track until we came to the camp and then plan it from there as the leopard was up the valley a few kilometres further. Myself and Tim just walked as fast as we could, given the altitude, not speaking but both silently praying the Snow Leopard would remain where it was until we got there. We got to the tented camp in 30 minutes - not bad going really! The equine train arrived after a bit and our bags were unloaded, we already had our binoculars with us, we had a quick cup of tea, grabbed our scopes and tri-pods and were ready to set off. Gurmet just said yes you must go just follow the track along the Rumbak Valley until you come to the people watching the leopard! So Tim and myself just hoofed it up the valley, not taking in the



fabulous snowy scenery just focussed on what we had to do. It was hard going, slightly up hill, snowy, icy in patches and the sun was shining so we were soon sweating with the exertion of it. But with single minded determination we were at the site within an hour, hardly giving the small group of Blue Sheep we passed a second glance. The viewing site was known as the fields not that we could see any fields as it was snow covered. It was where the narrow gorge like Rumbak Valley opened out to a flatter area where a branch of the valley forked off to the left towards Rumbak village. Once on site we sussed out where to look and established that the leopard hadn't been seen for about 30 minutes. We set our scopes pointing to a broken drystone wall just below a rocky outcrop on the edge of the valley floor about a kilometre away. Tim and myself stared through our scopes at the wall and waited as the sweat cooled rapidly under our multi-layers of clothing. After a little while Julia arrived along with Gurmet, Julia saved time and energy by cadging a lift part way on a pony! After about 20 minutes I suddenly caught sight of the Snow Leopard just poking its head up above a rise in the ground to the left of the drystone wall, I quickly informed Tim and the others. The leopard then rose up into full view, stopped for a short time before walking in front of the wall and behind the rocky outcrop just above and to the right of the wall. It was probably on view for no more than a minute but we were ecstatic, high fives and big, big smiles.

Our support team then brought us our lunch which was most welcome and at the time un-expected as we thought we would have to go back to camp for food. Not that we would have left the leopard of course. So we tucked in to the food and drank cinnamon tea and just relived the moment we saw our first Snow Leopard. A spotter who had walked up the valley after the leopard had gone into the rocks radioed back and we got the word to walk further up the valley as the Snow Leopard was showing. All the guides keep in touch with each other with walkie talkies.



Snow Leopard - Rumbak Valley

Tim Bourne

So we trudged through the snow further up Rumbak Valley for about a kilometre - the walk was tough and on a full stomachs not a good idea. But knowing what was at the end of the walk we just kept going. When we arrived at a spot opposite the drystone wall we couldn't believe our luck the Snow Leopard was just laying on some rocks just up from the wall on the other side of the valley. Hard to say how far away it was but in the region of 250 metres I'd say, we just stood there looking at it and soaking it all up - amazing. On the slope below the Leopard a trail of blood ended at a Blue Sheep carcass. The carcass looked fairly fresh and hadn't been eaten into. This all bode well for the Leopard to hang around the area for a while. On the slopes above the Snow Leopard half a dozen Himalayan Snowcocks fed amongst the boulders. After filling our boots for a couple of hours we started to head back down the valley at a much more leisurely pace and with less distractions we could enjoy the Lammergeiers and Golden Eagles of which there was 6 and 4 respectively wheeling about overhead. Back at the 'fields' we drank cinnamon tea courtesy of our support team and watched 2 Woolly

Hares and small groups of Blue Sheep feeding in the valley. On the walk back to the tents we stopped for 10 minutes and watched 3 or 4 Large-eared Pikas at a part of the trail where a scree slope met the track.

The evening meal was in a tent which was warmed by an oil fire. We eventually crawled into our sleeping bags at around 21:30 all very, very happy after an eventful and super first day in Hemis NP. Later that night we all heard a dog Red Fox barking.



Snow Leopard with Blue Sheep carcass

Tim Bourne

**Wed 22nd Feb.** Up at 06:00 for breakfast and then walked up the valley back to yesterday's Snow Leopard. We had a steady walk up the valley and arrived at the leopard, which was still in the same rocky outcrop, at 08:00. The viewing position had changed this time we were on the same side of the valley as the Snow Leopard at a distance of around 400 metres. For most of the time the leopard dozed but often stretched, stood up and changed position and a couple of times began munching on the Blue Sheep carcass. We

stayed at the leopard all day but scanned the surrounding mountain sides and peaks looking out for other wildlife. We saw Golden Eagles, Lammergeiers, Himalayan Snowcocks, Yellow Billed Choughs all species which as it turned out we saw every day in Rumbak Valley. The only other mammals were Blue Sheep and there was plenty of them. We made our way steadily back to the tents late afternoon. The evening went much the same way as the previous evening - we ate our meal, wrote-up notes and then into the sleeping bags. Later that evening we all heard the fox barking again.

**Thurs 23rd Feb.** A lazy start for us this morning as we had breakfast at 08:30. But of course Myself and Tim were out scanning the surrounding mountain sides before breakfast just in case. Around the vicinity of the camp we came across Hill Pigeons, Robin and Brown Accentors and the brilliantly coloured White-browed Tit Warblers. We walked up Rumbak Valley, stopping and scanning as we went but only saw Blue Sheep. In the more open areas of the valley we came across small parties of Mountain Finches. Before we arrived we heard that the Snow Leopard was still in the rocky outcrop, we arrived at the site at 11:30. The leopard was snoozing on top of what remained of the carcass. The watchers had moved a bit closer to a good vantage point about 350 metres from the leopard. It was obviously aware of our presence as when someone stood up and walked about you could see the leopard lift its head and follow the movement. As we were lazing around in the sunshine and keeping an eye on the leopard a message was relayed to us that a Snow Leopard was walking across a mountain slope back down the valley beyond the 'fields'. We scoped the area where we thought it was meant to be but we saw nothing. Our leopard then chose that moment to get up, stretch, have a little walk about before settling on some rocks in the sunshine - superb.



Snow Leopard Rumbak Valley

Tim Bourne



In the early afternoon we bade farewell to our sleeping Snow Leopard and walked back down the valley to the fields. We had our lunch there which again was brought to us by the team. Here we met the man who had seen the Snow Leopard earlier. Not only did he point out the slope the leopard walked across he also showed us a very nice video of it. After lunch we walked up the part of Rumbak Valley that branches off the main valley and goes to Rumbak Village. We had a nice cup of tea in a village Homestay and did a bit of birding around the village seeing Tibetan Partridges and Chukars and plenty of Robin Accentors before making our way back down the valley to the camp. Apart from Blue Sheep the only other mammal on the way back was a single Large-eared Pika. The evening followed the same pattern as the previous evenings even to hearing the fox barking again late at night.

**Fri 24th Feb.** We did a bit of pre-breakfast scanning of the slopes and peaks above the camp and after breakfast made our way up Tarbung Valley. The entrance to Tarbung Valley is a short walk down Rumbak Valley, in the direction of Zingchen, you have to cross over the river to enter the valley. It was good for Yellow-billed Choughs and white-browed Tit Warblers and Blue Sheep but that was all we could find so after a few hours we made our way back to the camp. We had lunch and generally hung around the camp area. I walked the short distance up the valley and sat by the scree slope and was entertained by up to 6 Large-eared Pikas. In the late afternoon we made our way up the steep slopes of Husing Valley where we placed ourselves high above the camp and scanned for Snow Leopards. We didn't see anything and by about 18:00 the wind had got up the sun had dipped below the peaks and we were frozen! Evening routine as before but no fox calling tonight.



Our tents are the orange/blue ones

John Wright



Large-eared Pika

Tim Bourne

**Sat 25th Feb.** I was up and out of my tent at 07:00 and was wandering a little way from the tents looking for mammals/birds. At 08:00 I noticed a small gathering of people up ahead intently looking through scopes and binoculars. A Snow Leopard had just been spotted high above the camp on the slopes above Tarbung Valley. Tim who was up and out a bit earlier than me had seen it briefly but it had just gone behind some rocks. I had a quick look through Tim's scope to see exactly where to look before dashing back to my scope which was a couple of hundred metres away, I had left it set-up by my tent! I got my scope trained on the rocks and waited but ensured all in the camp were aware that a Snow Leopard had just been seen and gave people directions to the spot. Fortunately before long the leopard emerged from behind the rocks and sat on top of a rock - great stuff, good but distant views. The leopard lay on the rock for quite some time giving everyone in the camp extended views. Then it got up and jumped off the rock, scratched the ground with its hind feet, scent marked and walked off across a scree slope. It traversed the scree at a leisurely pace giving superb views to all. In all it was on view for about 30 minutes. What a great way for us to start the day.





Phonescoped Snow Leopard crossing scree slope, Tarbung Valley, Tim Bourne.

At around 09:15 we started trekking up Rumbak Valley heading toward Yurutse as we were staying in a Homestay there tonight. We saw a single Large-eared Pika in the usual location just along the track from the camp. We took our time on the trek, stopping and scanning en route. We passed the fields at the valley junction that goes left to Rumbak Village and carried on up the valley passed the Snow Leopard site. The leopard hadn't been seen today and was last reported yesterday. Apparently tracks indicated that it had walked off up the nearby Tsarlung Valley.



Rumbak Valley looking toward Yurutse.

John Wright

Where the Rumbak Valley widened nearer to Yurutse we came across good numbers of Woolly Hares in fact by the end of the day we must have seen 20 Hares. On the surrounding slopes we had, as usual, plenty of Blue Sheep and Mountain Finches. We arrived at the Homestay in time for lunch at around 13:00 pretty tired as it was hard going in the snow despite a relatively easy pace. Julia being a bit slower than Tim and myself and finding the going a bit tougher hired a pony to take her there - nice one Julia. We carried water and any bits and bobs we needed in our rucksacks whilst our sleeping bags and cooking gear was brought up the valley to the Homestay by donkey. We had lunch before venturing further up the valley aiming for a vantage point where we could scan the mountain slopes and ridges. Just as we began the walk from the Homestay a Mountain Weasel appeared along a drystone wall in front of the building, it dashed across some open ground and into another wall and

unfortunately never reappeared. A great close view but all too brief and no cameras at the ready. Our guide Gurmet, Tim and myself carried on up the valley to the vantage points and scanned for a few hours but only saw Snowcocks and more Woolly Hares and Blue Sheep. Julia stayed around the Homestay and watched from there with our second spotter/cook, Dundop, who came with us today from the camp. He had his scope so we had the area covered the best we could as there was no one else around. The Yurutse area is one of the better areas for Wolf and Eurasian Lynx so we tried very hard but had no luck. We got back to the Homestay just as it was getting dark.



Woolly Hare

Tim Bourne



Our host, Yurutse Homestay

John Wright

**Sun 26th Feb.** Me and Tim were up on the roof of the Homestay by 07:00, Gurmet walked up the valley about 800 metres and Dundop went to a point about 500 metres down the valley. Despite all of us scanning hard with telescopes for over 2 hours we only saw Choughs, Blue Sheep and Woolly Hares, no wolves or lynx.

After breakfast the donkeys were loaded up and set off back to Husing camp and we followed shortly afterwards. It was much easier going as it was down the valley rather than up. We took our time with frequent stops to scan the mountain sides. When we got to the fields at the valley fork a Spanish couple told us that they had seen a wolf albeit briefly and distantly about 2 hours earlier. We stopped and scanned the area for about an hour but only saw Blue Sheep. We plodded on and had good views of a Wallcreeper in the Rumbak gorge not far from camp. We got back to camp just after 13:00 to be told that early in the morning 2 Snow Leopards had been seen high

above the camp in Husing Valley. So obviously our plan was to go up Husing Valley to look for the Snow Leopards but early afternoon just wasn't a good time - we would go up in a couple of hours.



Blue Sheep ewe

Tim Bourne

After lunch Tim and myself went and had a look for the Large-eared Pikas, we sat quietly in the sun and were soon watching the Pikas. Difficult to say exactly how many as between sunbathing (them not us) they disappeared amongst the rocks and popped up elsewhere but we probably saw around 10 Pikas.

We started the short but steep climb up Husing Valley at 15:00 and got ourselves onto a good vantage point where we could see the ridge and mountain side where the leopards were last seen over 7 hours earlier. There was at least 25 other people scattered about, some had been up there for hours and hadn't seen anything. However, it was quite pleasant and relatively warm in the sunshine.

A group of 9 people were sitting close by and this is what puzzles me none of them had scopes, only 2 of them had binoculars, which were very small and probably ineffectual, 3 or 4 of them had cameras but no telephotos! They had a guide with them who had a scope but if a Snow Leopard appeared they would just have to queue up and hopefully get to see it but how they got decent views of mammals and birds on their trip mystifies me. Perhaps they just aren't too bothered and just enjoyed the experience of being in such dramatic and scenic surroundings - each to his own as they say.

By 16:30 that group and in fact everyone else had had enough and all descended back to camp leaving myself, Tim, Julia, Gurmet and Dundop. At 17:10 Tim picked up a Snow Leopard walking left to right, across the mountain side, we all got on to it - a bit distant and not a particularly long view, 2 or 3 minutes, but another Snow Leopard on our list. Rather frustratingly we probably missed it walking across a wide open snow field looking at the tracks in the snow and the position and direction the leopard had appeared from when Tim first picked it up. Then at around 17:30 Gurmet picked up a second Snow Leopard further to our left, higher up and near the top of a ridge. Again rather distant but great views as it traversed the mountain side, struggled through some deep snow before disappearing over the top of the ridge after 10 minutes. Absolutely great 2 Snow Leopards in a little over 30 minutes what a way to end the day. Patience and persistence paid off and we had now seen 4 Snow Leopards in total.

We made our way carefully back down the valley sides to camp for our last night under canvas. We were also saying goodbye and thanks to most of the team as only Gurmet, Dundop and a cook was coming with us tomorrow to Ulley. The evening meal included what I believe is now obligatory if you have seen a Snow Leopard - a cake with a Snow Leopard paw print made of icing on it. A very nice gesture and a very nice cake.

**Mon 27th Feb.** Today we were leaving Hemis NP and going to Ulley. Up and out of the tent by 07:00 and scanning the valley slopes and ridges - a few Blue Sheep only. At 07:15 a Red Fox trotted passed the tents and along the edge of the river. A Wallcreeper flew past the camp hugging the steep slopes as it whizzed by, unfortunately not landing. After breakfast at 09:15 we made our way down Rumbak Valley to Zingchen where our bags and sleeping bags were unloaded off the donkeys. Our vehicle, plus the driver we had in Leh, was already there so the 6 of us piled in. The bags, sleeping bags etc were loaded on to the roof and off we went.

We made a few stops but didn't see anything until well outside of Hemis NP when we found 9 Ladakh Urials and 12 Blue Sheep along the Indus Valley where the Indus River meets the Zaskar River. We stopped en route for about 45 minutes for lunch in the town of Nimo/Nimmo/Nimmu - it has different spellings. Continuing on our way we stopped and scanned a mountainous area further east, nearer to Ulley, and found 2 Siberian Ibex high up on a slope. In the late afternoon we arrived at Thayokpa Homestay at 4,300 metres in the snowy Ulley Valley. We were soon scanning from the roof of the Homestay but didn't see anything and sometime after 18:00 we called it a day as we were freezing!

**Tues 28 Feb.** Myself, Tim and Gurmet were on the roof of the Homestead just after 07:00 scanning a high rocky hillside on the other side of Ulley Valley. Gurmet had told us that two weeks earlier he had watched a female Snow Leopard with 2 well grown cubs on the other side of the mountain we were watching. Unbelievably at 07:45 Gurmet spotted a Snow Leopard and after some minor panic trying to get on to it myself and Tim both had it in our scopes - fabulous. Gurmet went and got Dundop who was cooking breakfast and Julia who was taking things a bit easier inside. But soon Dundop had his scope set up and on the leopard for Julia to see. The leopard walked about and scent marked, disappeared behind rocks for short

periods or just lay on top of rocks. At one point whilst on top of a rock we could see the leopard calling but were far too far away to hear it. Later after it had been out of view behind rocks for about 10 minutes I picked it up again sitting on a rock and was describing to Tim and the others where it now was Tim replied well in that case I'm watching another Snow Leopard as the one I've just picked up is walking through snow! Indeed it was another Snow Leopard, the two eventually met up, greeted each other with a bit of play fighting and sparring. We could then see that the first leopard was the adult and the second one a well grown cub - it being smaller, slimmer with a paler pelage but well grown nevertheless. We were sure that the calling we saw the adult doing earlier had called in her offspring. We watched both leopards going about their business on the hillside until just after 10:00 when they went behind a huge rock wall and never reappeared. No doubt this was the adult and one of the cubs Gurmet had seen a couple of weeks earlier. No sign of the second cub but given the size of the one we had been watching they must be living semi-independent lives.

We went in for a late breakfast, well we could hardly break off from watching our 5th and 6th Snow Leopards of the trip for breakfast now could we. We then of course had a late start getting out to look for some wolves that had been seen on a ridge most of the previous day which unfortunately we only heard about after dark yesterday. They weren't there of course but we had to try. The rest of the day we explored the area and finding good birds like Himalayan Snowcock, Wallcreeper and small parties of Brandts Mountain Finch and a small copse of willows adjacent to the Homestay held 2 White-browed Rosefinch. After a sunny morning it clouded up in the afternoon and eventually snowed, the visibility was terrible so we called it a day and was back in the Homestay by 17:30.





Tim looking for Snow Leopards

John Wright

**Wed 1 Mar.** We were up on the roof of the Homestay about 07:00 until 08:30 but no Snow Leopards this morning. We did see 12 -15 Siberian Ibex however. After breakfast we drove to Saspoche Valley and scanned the surrounding mountains from 10:00 to 13:00 and ate our lunch there. The only mammals we saw were around 15 Siberian Ibex including some fine males with huge horns. Of interest the Ulley area doesn't have Blue Sheep, Urial or Argali only Ibex which is the staple diet of the Snow Leopards in the region. After leaving Saspoche we drove back to Ulley Valley where Gurmet, Tim and myself got out of the vehicle and walked the final kilometre or so back to the Homestead. We walked along some of the smaller mountain river edges and fields looking for birds - we found Brown Dippers a White-winged Grosbeak and a Red-fronted Rosefinch. But by 16:00 we were back on the roof of the Homestead scanning the surrounding mountain sides. At 16:30 I picked up a Snow Leopard on

the same rocky slope as yesterday. Before long it was joined by a second Snow Leopard and we all enjoyed good views of the two as they traversed the slopes. No doubt the same adult female and cub we watched yesterday. We watched them both on and off, they were sometimes out of view behind rocks, until 17:50. The adult went behind some rocks and never reappeared and the cub walked over a high ridge and out of view. We carried on scanning until 18:30 and then gave up and went inside for a warming cup of tea!

**Thurs 2 Mar.** Again out on the roof at 07:00 scanning. We didn't see anything and by 08:00 we went in for breakfast and to pack up our belongings as we were leaving Ulley and going back to Leh.

We departed the Homestay at 08:45 but stopped a few times in the Ulley Valley and scanned for wolves, we found some relatively fresh wolf tracks in the snow but had no luck with the wolves themselves. This was a bit disappointing as the Ulley Valley is by all accounts a very good place to see wolves but that's the way it goes sometimes when wildlife watching. The rest of the journey was uneventful and we arrived back at the Mahey Retreat, Leh, at 13:00. The Snow Leopard part of our trip was over so we said our farewells and a big thank you for all the hard work to Gurmet, Dundop, our cook for the last few days and our driver. After lunch, at the Mahey Retreat, myself and Tim had a walk around Leh where we saw Black-throated and Brown Accentors, Black Kite, Brown Dipper and an Upland Buzzard. We made our way back to the hotel at 18:00. We noted however, that most of the snow had melted compared to how it was 10 days previously.



Black-throated Accentor

Tim Bourne

**Fri 3 Mar.** An 06:30 pick-up for Leh Airport for our 08:35 flight back to Delhi. In Delhi we again stayed at the Hotel Lohmod and again went to Sultanpur National Park in the afternoon. We saw much the same bird species as before along with plenty of Nilgai and Five-striped Palm Squirrels. After we left the park on the drive back at least 20 Rhesus Macaques were around the same roadside building as last time.

**Sat 4 Mar.** We said goodbye to Julia who was staying a couple of days in Delhi before going back to New Zealand. Tim and myself had a pre-arranged taxi pick-up at 10:00, as part of the tour package, for our 13:30 flight from Delhi back to London.

## **Trip List Mammals**

### **Rhesus Macaque (*Macaca mulatta*)**

A group around a building just east of Sultanpur NP seen on both occasions after visiting the NP.

### **Nilgai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*)**

Easily seen at Sultanpur NP - 6 on first visit and 15 on second visit.

### **Mid-Asian (Siberian) Ibex (*Capra sibirica alaiana*)**

2 between Nimmu and Ulley, 12-15 above Ulley Valley and at least 15 in Saspoche Vally, Ulley.

### **Ladakh Urial (*Ovis vignei*)**

4 in Hemis NP on a bare rocky mountainside between the entrance gate and Zingchen. 9 just north of Hemis NP at the confluence of the Indus and Zanskar Rivers.

### **Blue Sheep/Himalayan Bharal (*Pseudois nayaur nayaur*)**

Common in Hemis NP, seen every day of our stay there. A group of 14 also seen outside Hemis NP at the confluence of the Indus and Zanskar Rivers.

### **Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)**

Heard on 3 consecutive nights in Hemis NP and one eventually seen trotting passed our tented camp.

### **Snow Leopard (*Uncia uncia*)**

A total of 6 seen. 4 in Hemis National Park as follows: 1 for three consecutive days in Rumbak Valley between the Rumbak Village fork and Yurutse, 1 high up above our camp at the entrance to Tarbung Valley and 2 in Husing Valley. Two seen north of Hemis NP at Ulley - a female with a well grown cub above Ulley Valley seen on two consecutive days from our Homestay.

### **Mountain Weasel (*Mustela altaica*)**

A good view of 1 by the Homestay at Yurutse, Rumbak Valley.

### **Large-eared Pika (*Ochotona macrotis*)**

A colony in the Rumbak Valley about a 10 minute walk up the valley from the camp. Up to 6 seen on a number of occasions.

### **Five-Striped Palm Squirrel (*Funambulus pennantii*)**

Common in Sultanpur NP, seen on both our visits.

### **Woolly Hare (*Lepus oiostolus*)**

2 seen at the 'fields' where the Rumbak Valley forks towards Rumbak Village. In the Yurutse area of Rumbak Valley 15 - 20 seen on two consecutive days.



41	Robin Accentor	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	
42	Brown Accentor	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓
43	Black Throated Accentor			✓										✓
44	White Wagtail (2x ssp: alboides, personata)		✓											
45	Chaffinch		✓											
46	Twite			✓	✓			✓						✓
47	Plain Mountain Finch					✓		✓	✓					✓
48	Brandt's Mountain Finch		✓						✓	✓	✓			✓
49	Mongolian Finch	✓	✓	✓										
50	White Browed Rosefinch											✓		
51	Red Fronted Rosefinch											✓	✓	
52	Fire Fronted Serin	✓	✓											✓
53	White Winged Grosbeak												✓	

### Delhi/Sultanapur NP 18 Feb and 02 March (95 Species)

Grey Frankolin	Great Cormorant	Brown Hornbill
Indian Peafowl	Black Kite	Brown-Headed Barbet
Greylag Goose	Black-winged Kite	Yellow-Crowned Woodpecker
Comb Duck	Marsh Harrier	Black Rumped Flameback
Gadwall	Shikra	Common Woodshrike
Eurasian Wigeon	Great Spotted Eagle	Long-Tailed Minivet
Mallard	Booted Eagle	Long Tailed Shrike
Spot-billed Duck	Water Rail	Black Drongo
Eurasian Teal	White-breasted Waterhen	Ashy Drongo
Garganey	Purple Swamphen	Grey Treepie
Northern Pintail	Eurasian Coot	Rufous Treepie
Northern Shoveler	Common Moorhen	Jungle Crow
Ferruginous Duck	Indian Thick-knee	House Crow
Common Pochard	Black Winged Stilt	Plain Martin
Red Crested Pochard	White Tailed Lapwing	Red-Vented Bulbul
Tufted Duck	Red-wattled Lapwing	Plain Prinia
Little Grebe	Black Tailed Godwit	Yellow-browed Warbler
Black Necked Stork	Ruff	Greenish Warbler
Painted Stork	Spotted Redshank	Lesser Whitethroat
Greater Flamingo	Common Redshank	Large Grey Babbler
Black Headed Ibis	Greenshank	Jungle Babbler
Glossy Ibis	Green Sandpiper	Common Myna
Eurasian Spoonbill	Wood Sandpiper	Asian Pied Starling
Indian Pond Heron	Rock Pigeon	Tikell's Thrush
Grey Heron	Collared Dove	Oriental Magpie Robin
Purple Heron	Alexandrine Parakeet	Eastern Black Redstart

Cattle Egret  
Great White Egret  
Intermediate Egret  
Little Egret  
Darter  
Little Cormorant

Rose Ringed Parakeet  
Greater Coucal  
Spotted Owlet  
Common Hoopoe  
White-throated Kingfisher  
Green Bee-eater

Red breasted Flycatcher  
House Sparrow  
Purple Sunbird  
Citrine Wagtail  
Tawny Pipit



Robin Accentor

Tim Bourne





Solitary Snipe amongst plastic pollution along Indus Valley  
Tim Bourne



Mongolian Finch, Leh

Tim Bourne



Solitary Snipe

Tim Bourne



White-browed Tit Warbler

Tim Bourne



White-winged Redstart above, the camp Yak below. Tim Bourne





Frosty the Snowman and Bharal, Argali, Urial

John Wright





Feral Dog, Leh

Tim Bourne

**The End**