

## Ladakh March 10-21 2013 Trip Report by Chris Skinner and Jim Glover

This trip was planned to coincide with the optimum time for viewing Snow Leopards, the species we most wanted to see. Although winter has passed, Ladakh is still very cold during February and March. However, they are the best months for viewing Snow Leopards because:

- The snows have not yet melted, which keeps Snow Leopards at an accessible altitude for those who hope to see them;
- The breeding behaviour of Snow Leopards makes them less solitary and secretive, which also enhances the likelihood of spotting these magnificent creatures.

Later in the year, the snows have gone; the Leopards have moved to higher altitudes and dispersed over a much greater area uncovered by snow. This, together with the fact that they have also become more solitary in their behaviour, considerably reduces the chances of observing them.

### Itinerary: (arranged with Jo Thomas, Wild About Travel)

**10 March:** Early morning flight from Delhi to Leh. Beautiful – and cold! The cloud cover only just allowed tantalising views of the mountains as we landed just in front of a snow storm. (Apparently the plane would have turned back if we had been any later). After a few hours of snow, hail, rain and finally sunshine, we explored the local streets/lanes and located a mixed flock of Brown and Robin Accentors amongst a heap of building rubble. Another walk in the afternoon (we were supposed to be resting, in order to acclimatise) revealed a large flock of Yellow-billed Choughs flying overhead and we scoped a Golden Eagle on a distant ridge.

**11 March:** Another local rest day. We drove to a beautiful braided stretch of the Indus River, where we watched amazing numbers (1000+) of Guldenstadt's Redstarts using the dense scrub lining the far side of the river bank. A very obliging Ibisbill dropped down just in front of us to feed and pose for photos. We explored further, whilst the rest of our party visited a nearby monastery. Our guide, known as KC, showed us a sheltered backwater and we watched a good variety of water birds, including some Ferruginous Ducks. Unfortunately, the marshy area adjacent to this delightful spot is being destroyed to create a golf course, which we were told the locals don't want.

In the afternoon we visited the Snow leopard Conservancy just down the road from our hotel. We met the Director, Jigmet, (who was later to be our guide) and learnt something of the excellent work the Conservancy is doing for Snow Leopards through involving local communities. We then went on to do some shopping in Leh.

**12 March:** We drive to Zingchen, stopping en route to admire the views and to watch a herd of endemic Ladakh Urial and a Red Fox. Eventually, we reached the entrance to Hemis National Park, where the road became impassable for vehicles. Our luggage and all the camping gear were transferred onto Donkeys and Ponies and they set off along the stony track. We followed, carrying our day packs and walked slowly for about three hours to our base camp situated at the bottom of the Husing Valley. Apart from Chukar Partridge, Golden Eagle is the most frequently seen bird. We also saw a Peregrine Falcon, perched on a crag above the camp. The food is excellent and the tents are weatherproof which is just as well, with bitter winds and night time temperatures dropping to -10 degrees Centigrade.

**13 March:** We were up at 6:30 scanning all around and just before 7am KC started shouting Snow Leopard! After some confusion and the rest of the campers emerging in various states of dress, we watch an Adult and well grown cub, walking around the top of a ridge nearly a mile away for over an hour. Following a late breakfast, we walked a short distance up the valley to a good viewpoint and scanned all around. We found a few good birds and an excellent hot lunch was brought up to us.

Around 3:00pm Chris called out she had two Snow leopards in her scope over half a mile away. Over the next hour and a half we saw another five Snow leopards, scenting, sniffing, chasing and mating as well as watching a fairly small cub trying to keep up with its mother as she climbed effortlessly down the side of the mountain. It was amazing, we had seen seven Snow Leopards on our first full day which is apparently a record and we watched them for about two and a half hours in all. (*A detailed account of all these sightings follows the species accounts below.*)

**14 March:** We were slowly getting used to the altitude and the problem of walking and breathing at the same time. We took a short walk from camp up the valley towards Rumbak and then return. Lots of Lammergeiers' and Golden Eagles, a Himalayan Griffon Vulture and a few Blue Sheep were seen.

**15 March:** Another gentle day with a short walk along the "Leopard Highway" in the Husing Valley. We see more Golden Eagles and Himalayan Snowcock and a Woolly Hare in the willow plantation near the camp.

**16 March:** A long and steep walk (14 hours in all) up the "Snow Leopard Highway" to the livestock corral at the head of the Husing Valley and back. Walking up and over frozen streams was quite challenging, but we managed. We watched what we concluded were Large-eared Pika here but did not see much else, probably because we were preoccupied with climbing and staying upright rather than scanning. Jigmet, who was now our guide, pointed out where many of the scenes from the various Snow Leopard films he had helped to make were taken.

**17 March:** We strike camp and walk up the track to Rumbak Village, where we spent the night in a homestay. All the families that our group are staying with are very kind and friendly. It is fascinating to live as one of the family, albeit spoilt, and to see how and where they live. We see more Golden Eagles, Lammergeyers and a few small birds around the village. There were lots of Blue Sheep here.

**18 March:** We walked from Rumbuk towards the one-house village of Urutse. One of our companions was suffering with a severe altitude-related headache and Jim was finding the deep snow over a steep scree slope difficult to negotiate with his fused ankle and so they both returned to Husing Base camp. The rest of us continued to Urutse and found Wolf tracks and signs on the way; Jim found very tame Red-billed Choughs and a Woolly Hare to photograph on his way down.

**19 March:** We strike camp and leave the Husing Valley. On the way down, we walk to view some weathered boulders located on a promontory above the River Indus, carved with 2,000 year old petroglyphs. We could clearly identify images of Blue Sheep, Ibex and Snow Leopards. We then left Hemis National Park and drive to Ulley, another area where Snow Leopards have been seen. We stopped en route at the confluence of the Indus and the Zanskar for lunch. At Ulley we set up camp in the terraced garden of a house and scanning the mountains opposite, we scoped three Ibex, a female and two kids. We are welcomed into the homes of the local people for tea and to see their impressive range of handicrafts, which were for sale.

**20 March:** We walk up the valley along the “Baby Trek” to the Changmapullu Summer Pasture, in search of Ibex, Wolf and Snow Leopard. We found lots of tracks and droppings, and the freeze-dried remains of a Yak that had been killed by a wolf the year before, but the only live mammals we saw were the same three Ibex roughly in the same place as yesterday. Golden Eagles soared above us and Brown-bellied Dippers flew along the stream below us. On our return to camp we visited two neighbouring homestays and bought a charming pair of hand-felted Snow Leopards.

**21 March:** We left Ulley and drove round to the next valley known as “Ibex Valley”. Walking up the valley revealed splendid views of a herd of 19 Ibex, including some males with huge horns. We also found lots of fresh Snow Leopard signs, but alas no Snow Leopards. We had our last views of Lammergeier, Golden Eagle and Himalayan Snowcock and then returned to our vehicles, to drive back to our hotel in Leh in the afternoon. We round off the day with a final shopping expedition in Leh in the late afternoon/early evening.

**22 March:** morning flight Leh – Delhi. This time, the views from the plane as we flew along the Himalaya were spectacular; unforgettable.

### **Birds: 43 spp**

**Himalayan Snowcock:** five on Mar 13, three on Mar 15, two on Mar 16, two on Mar 17, seven on Mar 18, one on Mar 19, on Mar 20, 21.

**Chukar Partridge:** on Mar 11, c20 on Mar 12, six on Mar 15, c20 on Mar 17, 20 on Mar 18, on Mar 19, 20, 21.

**Ruddy Shelduck:** on Mar 21. In a roadside pool.

**Northern Shoveler:** on Mar 11 and ten on Mar 19. Along the Indus.

**Northern Pintail:** two on Mar 11, 10+ on Mar 19, on Mar 21. Along the Indus

**Red-crested Pochard:** one on Mar 19. Along the Indus.

**Ferruginous Duck:** three on Mar 11.

**Wigeon:** one on Mar 11, c10 on Mar 19. Along the Indus.

**Common Teal:** 20 on Mar 11, 2 on Mar 19. Along the Indus.

**Mallard:** one on Mar 11, 30+ on Mar 19, 21. Along the Indus and in a roadside pool.

**Tufted Duck:** five on Mar 11, one on Mar 21. Along the Indus and in a roadside pool.

**Gadwall:** 10 on Mar 11. Along the Indus.

**Pochard:** c10 on Mar 19. Along the Indus.

**Goosander:** a pair on Mar 19. Along the Indus.

**Great Crested Grebe:** one on Mar 19, along the Indus and one on Mar 21 in a roadside pool.

**Peregrine:** one from camp on Mar 12.

**Lammergeier:** two on Mar 12, four on Mar 5, 11 on Mar 14, two on Mar 16, two on Mar 17, on Mar 19, 20, 21.

**Himalayan Griffon Vulture:** one on Mar 13, two on Mar 14, one on Mar 16, one on Mar 18.

**Pallid Harrier:** one on Mar 11, flying over scrub along the Indus.

**Northern Goshawk:** one on Mar 11.

**Golden Eagle:** On Mar 10, seven sightings of probably three individuals on Mar 12, eight sightings of at least three individuals on Mar 13, seven sightings of four individuals (two mating) on Mar 14, six sightings of 3+ individuals on Mar 15, two on Mar 16, 3 on Mar 17, two on Mar 19, three+ on Mar 20, four+ on Mar 21.

**Eurasian Coot:** one on Mar 11, along the Indus, three on Mar 19 along the Indus, c10 on Mar 21, in a roadside pool.

**Ibisbill:** one on Mar 11, along the Indus.

**Common Buzzard:** one on Mar 11. Flying over the Indus.

**Common Greenshank:** one on Mar 11, feeding along the Indus.

**Green Sandpiper:** one on Mar 11, feeding along the Indus.

**Hill Pigeon:** c12 on Mar 12, c15 on Mar 17, c20+ on Mar 18.

**Snow Pigeon:** five on Mar 13, two on Mar 16, one on Mar 17, 15 on Mar 18.

**Rock Dove:** few on Mar 10, 11, two on Mar 18, Mar 19.

**Eurasian Magpie:** seen on every day.

**Carrion Crow:** seen on every day except Mar 18, 20, 21. Two on Mar 12.

**Red-billed Chough:** seen on every day, except Mar 10. 40+ on Mar 19.

**Alpine Chough:** 150+ flying over on Mar 10, a few on Mar 13, 15, 17.

**Great Tit:** on every day except Mar 21.

**Brown Dipper:** two on Mar 20, two on Mar 21.

**Guldenstadt's/ White-winged Redstart:** c1000 on Mar 11, 10 on Mar 19, two on Mar 20, on Mar 21.

**House Sparrow:** small flocks on Mar 10, 11.

**Alpine Accentor:** one in Leh on Mar 10.

**Robin Accentor:** a few on Mar 10, 11, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21.

**Brown Accentor:** small numbers on Mar 10, 11, 16.

**Citrine Wagtail:** on Mar 11.

**White Wagtail subspecies *Alboides*:** Mar 11, 18, four on Mar 19.

**Water Pipit:** two on Mar 11.

## **Mammals: 7 spp**

**Asiatic Ibex:** one female and two young on Mar 19, mixed herd of 19, mostly males, on Mar 20.

**Ladakh Urial:** c15 on Mar 12, c20 on Mar 21.

**Blue sheep:** 44 on Mar 12, 10 on Mar 13, 17 on Mar 14, 9 on Mar 15, 46 on Mar 17, 21 on Mar 18.

**Red Fox:** one on Mar 12.

**Snow Leopard:** Mar 13: one female and large cub am, copulating pair, single adult and one female and small cub pm.

**Woolly Hare:** one on Mar 15, one on Mar 18.

**Pika spp** (Large-eared we think): three on Mar 16, two on Mar 19.

### **Detailed Account of Snow Leopard Sightings on 13.3.2013 by Jim Glover & Chris Skinner**

Up at 6:30, scanning all around with our scopes at the snowy peaks surrounding our camp site. Just before 7.00, our guide KC started shouting: Snow Leopard! We adjusted our scopes, shouting to those who were still in their tents. After some confusion and much uproar, the rest of the campers emerged in various states of dress, to watch a Snow Leopard walking around the top of Tarbung peak (nearly three quarters of a mile away). Through our scopes we could clearly see the Snow Leopard walking in our direction down from the ridge towards a large rock; we watched it scent-wipe a cheek on the rock, turn, raise an incredibly long tail and then spray the rock. The Snow Leopard then wandered around other rocks, occasionally disappearing from our sight.

We then saw a second, slightly smaller Snow Leopard walking up the slope from the left towards the first Snow Leopard. (Our guide KC later told us that they were a mother and her well-grown cub.) Although they did not appear to interact much, they were clearly together and both were visible for some time. The mother then walked away from us and the cub, over the ridge and out of site. The cub walked off right onto the top of a snowy slope. After a while it walked 100-200m down the snow field (belly-deep in the snow) and sat on an exposed rock, watching a group of Blue Sheep several hundred meters below, feeding in the snow on the open hillside. The cub then stood, turned and slowly walked back up the hill; presumably realising they were not worth going for. The mother then reappeared and together they both wandered off out of sight away over the ridge. Both animals had been in view for about an hour and a quarter, although we didn't watch them continuously because we shared our scopes with our travelling companions. However, between the two of us we watched them for most of this time.

Following an understandably late breakfast, we walked a very short way south up the main valley towards Rumbak, then turned left into a smaller valley and climbed eastwards up a small hill, gaining good all-round views. We watched Blue Sheep, Himalayan Snowcocks, at least two pairs of Golden Eagles, four Lammergeiers and a Himalayan Griffon Vulture. An excellent hot lunch was brought up to us and we continued to scan the mountains.

At around 3:00pm, Chris called out she had two Snow leopards in her scope on the skyline to the north east, approximately half a mile away. They were only just visible, a pair of heads and necks, side by side. Our guide (KC) confirmed that they were indeed Snow Leopards and we watched them walk into full view to the edge of a rock outcrop. They then lay close to each other and appeared to mate. A third Snow Leopard, first visible 100m away to the right of the courting leopards, then walked along the edge of the same rock outcrop towards the pair. As it neared them, it went out of view behind some rocks and shortly afterwards, the female of the pair arose from under the male and moved quite quickly towards the right in the direction of the third Snow Leopard. She was soon out of our view. The remaining male stayed put for about 5-10 minutes before walking off left out of our sight.

A short while later a Snow Leopard walked into an area about 300-400m to the left of where the others were first seen and lay down, and then a second individual appeared close to it. We believe these two leopards were the same pair we originally saw. After some 5-10 minutes one of the pair ran off to the right out of sight. It did not run very fast and we guessed that it was probably chasing off the same individual as before.

A little while later a mother Snow Leopard and cub emerged in the same general area but coming in from the left. Together they made their way down the mountainside towards us. The cub was quite small with a relatively short tail and kept close to its mother when it could. It had some difficulty in keeping up when its mother climbed down steep rock faces and we watched the cub exploring different routes and choosing easier ways downwards to join its mother.

As this was happening a pair of Snow Leopards (presumably the original pair) appeared again above the skyline on a rock outcrop to the right of the last sighting; roughly in the middle of the area they had been previously seen in. They were virtually in full view and this time they were clearly seen to mate. They remained in view for about twenty minutes.

Altogether, these afternoon sightings lasted about an hour and ten minutes.

## **Discussion**

The mother and cub that we saw in the morning were quite a few miles away from the afternoon sightings, which were on top of a different mountain in the opposite direction. We are confident that the animals we observed in the afternoons were different Snow Leopards. We consider that we saw a minimum of four different Snow Leopards in the afternoon and very probably five. The question is: was the third Snow Leopard of the afternoon, which walked up to the mating pair, the same animal as the mother that was accompanied by the small cub, which we watched climbing down the mountain side towards us? Although this was possible, we believe that it was very unlikely to have been the same animal. This was because we had a clear view of the individual on a reasonably open and flat area; no cub was visible. We saw that the cub remained very close to its mother when it

could; we therefore believe that it would have also been visible in the open area if the third Snow Leopard we saw had been its mother. We also think it highly unlikely that a mother with a small cub would approach a mating pair.

This raises the interesting question as to why the female being mated, parted from its mate on two occasions, to apparently drive away another Snow Leopard, which was seen to deliberately approach them at least once. We wondered if it might have been her well-grown/mature cub which she was trying to drive away before she mated. Or perhaps it was a rival female? Who knows, but we were very pleased to see so many Snow Leopards in one day, as were the others; apparently seven Snow Leopards in one day is a record for the Camp.

All the afternoon sightings were approximately half a mile away and only just visible with binoculars but we were able to maintain good views for much of the time with the use of our two wide angle high powered zoom scopes (a Kowa 20-60x and a Swarovski 25-55x) mounted on good firm tripods with fluid heads.