

Snow leopard trip to Ladakh – September/October 2010

Our aim was to see snow leopards in their natural habitat – in this case in the Hemis National Park in Ladakh (originally an independent kingdom but now part of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir).

Our base was a campsite (at 3656m) about two hours walk south of Zingchen, and the areas searched were the Husing, Tarbung, Kharlung and Rumbak valleys together with the main river valley upstream between Zingchen and Rumbak.

The participants were myself (Peter Pilbeam), Christine Stewart and Rob Gosling. The guides were Smanla Tsering (a Hemis National Park guide) and Hari Lama (particularly for the birds, and known to me from a previous trip elsewhere in India). The campsite was run by a cook and two general helpers.

Daily log of Hemis activities (after two days of acclimatisation in Leh – 3505m):

Thursday 23 September

We started with birding by the Indus river before we even left Leh – citrine wagtail, white winged redstart, mountain chiffchaff, coot, Indian moorhen, possible female gadwall, great tit, a tern. This was followed by the Sheh Palace and the biggest monastery in Ladakh, where we saw large billed crow and yellow-billed and possible red-billed croucher, possible hobby, lots of magpies, white wagtails. Note – hay drying on roofs of ‘cottages’ on top of dung stored for winter fuel.

After morning tea we drove off to just south of Zingchen. Note – haymaking in microscopic fields. We walked (from where the car got us to) to basecamp – c2 hours. On the way we got lammergeyer within minutes, fire-fronted serin, 3 groups of blue sheep (bharal) – 10/12/5. Bharal are the primary prey species of snow leopard. Lunch at the campsite.

We took a late afternoon walk – immediately 2 adult chukar and about 10 small chicks. Lots of snow leopard scrapes – newest about one week old. 1 mouse. Small skinks. Plus some rain - even though Ladakh has the same rainfall as the Sahara most of it seemed to have landed on us – certainly during the evening, and we got a short but violent thunderstorm overnight. Otherwise crag martin, rock pigeon. Enormous 3-course dinner with a tablecloth. Hot water bottles. Porters with our stuff were ponies (about 8) - that stuff included an enormous metal trunk about 3 feet long by 18 inches square and a Honda E650K generator, and a PortaPotti. Highest point reached during that first trip was 3750m.

Friday 24 September

Hari and I saw blue whistling thrush while getting ready to go out. Firstly we went up the Husing valley where Rob was the only member of the team to see a snow leopard across in the Tarbung valley through the telescope after it had been spotted by Smanla, but it had gone from the view and wasn't found again before either of the other two of us could look. We saw 2 groups of blue sheep, 2 lammergeier, many more crag martins, yellow-billed croucher, a very small gecko and a hobby. We went up along the Tarbung valley for about an hours' walk to try and find the snow leopard we glimpsed – we didn't find it, but we did find a golden eagle and two groups of blue sheep (one of 11 and one of 6). In fact, no sign of the leopard at all despite 4 hours sitting on a windy hillside in the cold. Lunchtime - I had been told I wouldn't have to carry my own lunch. This was true, but it was more than that – a hot packed lunch was delivered by one of the camp staff at lunchtime. Lots of chukar again. Highest point reached during the day was 3757m.

Saturday 25 September

A little rain and snow overnight and ice on the tents in the morning. Went back to the Tarbung valley and went much further up it. Snow showers in the morning and an increasingly sunny afternoon. We saw 1 limping blue sheep, chukar and chicks, 2 lammergeier, one big group of 30 or so croucher, blue whistling thrush, female black redstart and a golden eagle. Much more walking today – we had lunch (again delivered by one of the camp staff) sitting in the middle of a stream. We found a snow leopard rubbing-point with hair on a strip of double-sided sticky tape used by people tracking snow leopards, and we saw several sites where camera traps had been set, a 2/3 day old scrape and snow leopard dung. Also Himalayan snowcock and 'grouse' droppings, and merlin. A cave for sheep herders and a sheep corral built into the hillside. Sun was hot but the wind was cold, so continually taking clothes on and off all day. Rhubarb plants, redcurrant plants (fruits a little bitter), lots of rosehips, white mint. Highest point reached – 3954m.

Sunday 26 September

Very good stars (and the milky way) overnight. Very long walk into and up the Husing valley again. No rain or snow overnight for a change. It was sunny and warm lower down but still cold at the top. Some blue sheep visible from the camp – 2 singletons and a group of c5. During the day lots of snow leopard scrapes, some 2/3 day old scat (smelt, and some was on the end of my walking pole for a while), pugmarks, more rubbing points and scent marks (all photographed and smelt as appropriate – not very distinctive or obvious, but then there were no obvious snow leopards either). One group of 15 blue sheep. 1 lammergeier at very low altitude plus 1 juvenile. Sulphur-bellied warbler, lots of fire fronted serins, very tiny chukar chicks, 2 skinks, black redstart and lots of crag martins. Also a wire mesh-covered sheep pen (corral) at the highest point we reached – wired to stop snow leopards jumping in. Generally speaking a much lusher valley than the Tarbung valley – had long grass and moss carpets on the stream edges. Lunch at 4103m. Heard chough but none seen. Highest point reached by me – 4185m.

Monday 27 September

Cloudless sky first thing after a very cold night – didn't get any ice. 2 small groups of blue sheep visible from the camp. Back to the Husing valley but only halfway up today (for a short day in fact). 2 lammergeier, group of quite a few chough, very good view of blue whistling thrush, male black redstart, tree pipit, crag martins, red fox scat, several groups of blue sheep including one lot running over high cliffs and one group quite close (perhaps 50m). Pizza for lunch – got overfed and got back early, did lots of washing and stuff – lovely and warm at camp in the sun until about 3.30pm when it dropped below the mountains and it suddenly got cold. Drank lots of tea. Very very impressive stars and the milky way at night in a perfectly clear sky. Saw Jupiter during the day but couldn't locate it at night. Otherwise we saw chukar, skink, 2 butterflies (one white Apollo-like and one orange/brown fritillary-like), a couple of tiny grasshoppers and very bold flies. Highest point reached in the day – 3964m.

Tuesday 28 September

Got up early for breakfast at 6.30am – cold overnight as usual. In fact we didn't leave until 7.45am which was a bit later than we intended. We walked upstream to the Rumbak parachute cafe at 3785m for tea before tackling a series of sheep track traverses to the Kharlung valley. Very rickety bridge on the way to Rumbak. Got 2 golden eagle nests plus a juvenile golden eagle interacting with a lammergeier. Chough sp in a group – very good views of red-billed chough next to the parachute cafe. Chukar with chicks, hill pigeons, 1 kestrel, a greenish warbler. 2 large herds of blue sheep during the day – one at least 35 and one a few more than 20 plus some other groups also with reasonable numbers. A yak and some zos (cow/yak crosses - the same as sarliks in Russia). Red fox scat and pugmarks. We spent several very cold hours on a saddle at the start of the Kharlung valley – saw very little. Warm evening in contrast – on the way back saw 2 brown dippers. We met a couple of groups of fellow trekkers. Saw Rumbak village in the distance, passed a Buddhist shrine. Rumbak village actually grows barley in terraces – pictures taken – a water mill next to the river. The parachute cafe (run by the local women's co-operative) was interesting – had a selection of goods for sale including rum and soft toys. Highest point reached on the saddle was 4035m.

Wednesday 29 September

Relatively warm clear night – very good stars again. Went back to Husing valley – immediately we found lots of recent snow leopard signs (pugmarks and scrapes) from last night or this morning. We went very fast up the hills as a result in hot pursuit – we were all breathing hard and worn out by the pace, and the snow leopard stayed hiding. Possibly the warm sun we were enjoying forced him/her into a cool shady hiding place? We did see fire fronted serins, crag martins, lots of red-billed chough, lammergeiers, one herd of around 30 blue sheep including a number of big males (which were spooked into running down into the valley and up the other side). Lots of chukar, Himalayan snowcock was heard (very noisy) but not seen. We also saw Ladakh pika, mountain weasel, 2 kestrels (one with prey in its claws), a robin accentor, black redstart, grasshoppers, and a wagtail. Highest point reached – 4262m.

Thursday 30 September

Another sunny day – quite hot in the sun. Back to the Husing valley – almost to the top this time but still no snow leopard. We found more signs near the top – obviously we didn't go high enough yesterday. We did see one pika, one skink, a couple of kestrels, red-billed choughs, chukar with chicks, crag martins, fire fronted serins,

various groups of blue sheep (one with a number of big males), greenish warbler, black redstart, lots of grasshoppers, red fox pugmark, snow leopard pugmark at 4364m and a merlin. Highest point reached - 4364m.

Friday 1 October

Another starry relatively warm night. Hari and Smanla went out early morning tracking and decided to go back to the Husing valley. Pugmarks all the way up showed one snow leopard (the one we saw perhaps?) came out of the Tarbung valley and walked up the Husing valley. Another came over the pass from the Rumbak valley and up the other side. So there were 2 leopards in the Husing valley in the last day or two but we still couldn't see them. Didn't go all the way up today – stopped at the point where the leopards' tracks left the path. Cloudy today with a cold wind – quite chilly after lunch. From the camp before going we saw golden eagle and great tit. In the Husing valley we saw kestrel, lammergeier, golden eagle, fire fronted serin, chough sp, black redstart, brown accentor, 1 wallcreeper, 1 very photogenic group of blue sheep, 1 disembodied blue sheep head on a ridge, 1 group of blue sheep with 3 big males, 1 group of blue sheep running off high on the opposite slopes, and a pika. Highest point reached today – 4250m.

Saturday 2 October

Darker night as the moon was waning – relatively mild very starry night. The camp was shifted to Rumbak today at about 215m higher at 3873m. All our stuff was moved during the morning by the Himalayan Mountain Land Rovers (aka donkeys – about 8 or 10). Too warm again for leopards so spent the middle of the day relaxing at the new campsite. At about 3pm went up to a high ridge overlooking it until the end of the day – no luck with the leopards and we nearly froze. But, during the day we did see a wallcreeper (better view than last time), 1 kestrel, red-billed chough, hill pigeon, chukar, Himalayan snowcock in the distance, a group of 7 blue sheep just across the river from the camp. Another group of blue sheep high on the ridge opposite and some geeps (goat/sheep crosses). Had black tea in the parachute cafe again. Highest point reached – 3937m.

Sunday 3 October

Colder at the higher altitude and less-sheltered location – ice in standing water in the morning and a wet flannel was frozen solid, but no frost (no humidity in the air to make it). Very starry night again – even better with a minimal moon and a magnificent Orion at 1.30am. We heard an owl overnight. We saw hill pigeons, rock pigeons, white wagtails, chukar (including a dozen flying in), chough sp, black redstart. Went back to the Kharlung valley – properly into it this time – very hot – saw about 8 Himalayan snowcock, 1 kestrel, ravens, 2 groups of blue sheep (1 group very close and running away), grasshoppers with red underwings. Eventually we gave up and came home for lunch and lolled around in the afternoon eating too much. Went up and climbed the ridge again at dusk – all I got was 1 eagle. Highest point reached – 4171m.

Monday 4 October

Even colder morning but clear and sunny. We were up earlier than normal but left later than planned – intending to go off at 7am but actually left at c7.45am. We walked through Rumbak village -it has 60 residents in 9 families and every house seemed to be a homestay (local bed and breakfast). Very steep climb from the far side of the village to a high ridge – a new height record for the trip – 4400m. We spent a very cold hour at the top in a biting wind. Found droppings of woolly hare. Then an equally scary descent on the other side on a soil-like surface into the Husing valley just below the corral. We then climbed back up that valley to the corral area where we had lunch but found no sign of leopards except female pugmarks descending probably yesterday. We saw chough sp, robin accentor, brown accentor, 2 groups of blue sheep (one of which had a number of very big males) and one of us saw a skink. Highest point reached – 4400m. We came down to a new campsite - not far from the first - at 3625m. Complete with Buddhist shrine on the edge of the site. Late that evening a red fox came into the campsite.

Tuesday 5 October

Very mild night again but wind made the tents quite noisy. Started a new regime today – we were up early for tea at 6am and then straight out up to the Tarbung valley. Breakfast should have joined us at about 8am but didn't come until about 9am. We climbed up to a good vantage point but no leopards – only blue sheep. Got back to camp at the middle of the day very hot. We haven't been at such a low altitude at lunchtime before. It was much much warmer than it should have been. We saw fire fronted serin, greenish warbler, golden eagle, kestrel, lammergeier, various groups of blue sheep including one of about 26, mountain chiffchaff, skink back at

the camp, chough sp, chukar with many chicks. We headed off to Husing at 3.30pm until dinner – very quiet. Highest point reached was 3852m.

Wednesday 6 October

An even milder night last night though quite windy again. We were up early at 5.30 for breakfast at 6 – actually came at 6.30. Then back to the Husing valley – uneventful walk except we found a very fresh scrape at around 4050m. All eyes glued to the surrounding cliffs but no sign of the leopard. Lunch by the corral again and we spent all the afternoon very quietly on a high set of slopes above the valley more or less on the path back to Rumbak which we came from the other day. No sign of a leopard. Drama on the way up – we had to hide beneath an overhanging rock to protect ourselves from falling rocks knocked down by a bunch of blue sheep above. Was this them getting their own back for us disturbing them? We saw winter wren, robin accentor, mountain chiffchaff, lammergeier (which was very close overhead and did the entire sky with no flap of the wings at all), black redstart, red- and yellow-billed chough, 1 skink, lots of chukar, lots of groups of blue sheep including 8 juveniles very close during the afternoon playing about on the slopes. Highest point reached – 4152m.

Thursday 7 October

Another mild starry night – we had a lie-in - breakfast at 7! Hari and Smanla left choice to us – we opted to go all the way to the end of the Husing valley. We saw red fox within 50m of leaving the camp, chukar (several groups including fly-by), 1 pika, 1 wallcreeper, 1 lammergeier, lots of chough (red- and yellow-billed), Himalayan snowcock (c 8), possible sparrowhawk with prey – possibly a chukar chick, lots of blue sheep including two males doing a bit of fighting plus a group that ran across the slope and ran back again to cross the valley by the corral, black redstart, mountain chiffchaff. Sulphur-bellied warbler was heard. Highest lunch to date at 4352m. Then headed to the end of the valley and up to the final ridge to look down into the Rumbak valley where the ‘hamlet’ of Urutse (one house) could be seen, and we could see the peaks around Stok-la and 3 more big male blue sheep even higher than us. Highest point reached was 4550m.

Friday 8 October

An even milder night but a cloudier start to the day which brightened up while we had a few flakes of snow (it came to nothing). Went to Tarbung first thing – found pugmarks leading down and out of the valley and followed them until the trail vanished – observed the area for leopards but no sign. Went back past the camp, stopped for tea, then set off for the Husing valley to catch up with Hari who’d gone out to check in advance, but we met him coming down again – he’d seen nothing. Went back to the camp for lunch and set out again to Husing lookout point at about 3pm. Very quiet though - we called it a day at 5.30pm and went home for dinner. Overall during the day we saw a chukar with some chicks, lots of blue sheep including one group right above the camp raining rocks onto the road next to us. There were some chough sp (not sure which), possible kestrel, a pika, spotted forktail (not fully plumaged), one skink in the camp tent, a black redstart, and some magpies.

Saturday 9 October

Final day in the National Park – earlyish breakfast followed by packing up! This took a little while and included waiting for our four-legged porters to arrive from Rumbak. Returning to Leh was really just a reverse of our arrival from Leh – a walk followed by a car ride. Except that quite soon after transferring to the car a group of Ladakh urial (secondary snow leopard prey species) were spotted on the opposite side of the gorge. Great species to see last!

The main aim was to see snow leopards – so from that perspective I failed. However, it was great to see fresh tracks and signs, so at least we knew they were around. On this occasion the weather was just too nice. Everything else went very well. Logistically – a difficult trip, but from my point of view it was all seamless – the transfers, the hotel bookings, moving campsites, etc, all dovetailed together ‘as it said on the tin’.

You do need to be physically fit, as the days can be quite demanding to say the least. I’ve already got my name down for next year on the same trip, and I’m recommending the trip and Wild about Travel to anyone who even suggests they’re interested!

Peter Pilbeam. November 2010.