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LADAKH: In Search of Snow Leopards



The multiplicity of sightings of Snow Leopards on our 2023 tour were the best of any WildWings trip to Ladakh © Dick Filby

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LADAKH

In Search of Snow Leopards

Main tour: 28 February - 14 March 2023

Extension: 14 - 19 March 2023

Leader: Dick Filby

Introduction

It has been 10 years since I started going to Ladakh in search of Snow Leopards and it seems to get easier every year! Yes, I have never failed to see them, and this year's sightings were many and prolonged. Also, the trip gets more and more comfortable, and dramatically so this year with the new, tall, lined, heated tents with beds – a real game changer.

Our team of spotters, guides and camp crew were as amazing as ever. Best of all though, were prolonged views of Snow Leopards, which we had on seven of the first ten days of this year's trip! And for many of those days, we watched them for hours on end.

Following the main trip, this year we pioneered a new extension especially in search of Pallas's Cats and we were fortunate enough to find one, which was then joined by a second, and they were in view for almost eight hours hunting voles.

Add to that a Lynx, many sightings of Wolves, some Tibetan Gazelles and Tibetan Argali, Ladakh Urial, Tibetan Fox – it was terrific.

Plus, a host of iconic birds including Ibisbill, Wallcreeper, Tibetan Sandgrouse, Tibetan Partridge, Himalayan and Tibetan Snowcocks, Solitary Snipe, Tibetan Lark, Blanford's Snowfinch - all in the most amazing landscapes with absolutely wonderful local guides and staff. I simply cannot wait to go back and do it all again next year.

Trip Diary: Main Tour

1 March

Fine weather greeted everyone on arrival at Leh airport and after brief formalities and a short transfer we were soon ensconced in our comfortable hotel, enjoying breakfast, and starting to acclimatise.

Over the years we have always been successful in ensuring that everyone copes well with the altitude by ensuring that we follow the tried and trusted regime of a very restful first two days, with minimal exercise of any sort. Hence, after breakfast everyone retired to their rooms, or the hotel grounds for a rest until lunch. Cinereous Tits made repeated visits and

ensured that we were aware of their presence by frequently vocalising in a typical parus fashion.

The plan for the afternoon was to drive down to the river Indus and look for the extraordinary Ibisbill, a monotypic species that occurs only on the mountain rivers of east central Asia. In the past, we have often seen them from the vehicle, or by walking just a few yards: very little exercise involved. Well, best made plans and all that.. I knocked on doors and encouraged everyone to come to lunch with the news that instead of a drive to look for roadside Ibisbills, we were instead driving to look for roadside Snow Leopards! And just an hour and a half after setting off, we were doing just that! It was a thrilling few hours, as we watched the two Snow Leopards, a male and a female, at eye level across the stream, giving us great views including the ultimate in voyeurism.



Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier) © Dick Filby

A magnificent adult Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier) was relegated to “distraction” status, as was a sub-adult Golden Eagle! Fortunately, we saw both of these magnificent birds on virtually every subsequent day. All too soon it was getting dark and reluctantly we bade farewell to the Snow Leopard couple and set off back to the hotel.

2 March

After breakfast we drove down to the River Indus in search of Ibisbill, the iconic, monotypic denizen of Central and East Asian stony rivers from Kazakhstan to China. We headed to a quiet part of the river that we have often found to be favoured by Ibisbills and within minutes, and very close to the vehicle, we had located one!



Ibisbill © Dick Filby

We watched it at leisure for the next hour as it fed in front of us, giving superb views, with a backdrop of scores of colourful *Güldenstädt's Redstarts* festooning the riverside bushes like Christmas decorations.



White Wagtail (masked form) © Dick Filby

A Citrine Wagtail flew over calling loudly, and we were charmed to see and photograph the dramatic Masked form of White Wagtail, with which we would become quite familiar throughout the trip. A female Goosander fed along the river, and in the nearby fields we encountered our first Shore (Horned) Larks of the

trip, of the Tibetan race *longirostris*, that occurs only in the Himalayas from NE Pakistan and Kashmir east to Sikkim. Two Northern Shovelers were a write-in and a new bird for the tour!

We explored other parts of the valley, driving a few miles upstream where we especially enjoyed finding another write-in, a Red-throated Thrush amongst 20 or more Black-throated Thrushes, lots more *Güldenstädt's Redstarts*, two Blue Whistling Thrushes, and several Brown Accentors.

We paused to take photos of the dramatic Thiksey monastery, saving the opportunity to visit it properly until later. However, we had no joy in our quest for Solitary Snipe. Not yet.

Back at the hotel we could not relocate the male Tibetan Blackbird that Kevin spotted and only some of us saw. It was a new bird for the tour. Another write-in!

The morning had also been very successful in another way, in performing the role of gentle acclimatisation with almost no exercise, and everyone was feeling good. After lunch, it was an easy decision to drive back to yesterday's Snow Leopard site, as we had heard that at least one of the pair was still showing.

Well, when we got there it still was, and were very privileged to watch him again. Him? Yes it was the male of the pair, and shortly after we arrived, he set off to stalk a group of eight Ladakh Urial that were slowly approaching from below. The expectancy of the situation filled us with the nervous energy that accompanies any hunt. We watched, transfixed as he moved around trying to get into the best position from which to launch his attack, pausing to roll in the dust in order to disguise his scent and further adapt his incredible camouflage.

Meanwhile the Urial, blissfully unaware, continued their painfully slow approach, feeding some tens of metres below his position, constantly on the lookout for danger, but not aware of the predator lying in wait above.

We waited for the moment that seemed inevitable, willing him to make the headlong charge down the steep hillside. However, the Urial seemed to be living a charmed existence, not moving into range, and after enjoying the tension for what seemed an age, we finally left as dusk gathered, thrilled that we had been privileged to not only see Snow Leopard again, and for a prolonged view, but to also witness a hunting situation.

An excellent distraction during all this was a group of around 20 Asiatic Ibex, that included four adult males with large horn and very pale saddles.

3 March

Time to leave Leh and head to our Snow Leopard camp in Hemis National Park! Everybody had acclimatised well with the restful first couple of days but, nevertheless, there was a palpably upbeat reception to the news that we would not need to walk more than 50 metres to camp. We would not need to hike the last few kilometres as the track had been upgraded and was passable for vehicles with good ground clearance.

Kevin and Lori chose to stay a couple of extra days in Leh, whilst the rest of us set off in high spirits after breakfast.

The mood was soon to be further elevated when we paused on the outskirts of Leh to search for Solitary Snipe and were dutifully rewarded with excellent scope views.

We crossed the Indus over a bridge laden with so many prayer flags that one could not see the river from the bridge itself, but stopped just beyond and enjoyed three more Ibisbills, and some lovely photo opportunities of the bridge with the nearby monastery as a backdrop. A little further on Dennis spotted the only Moorhen of the trip, and we duly reversed a few metres in order that we all saw it.

Heading up into the National Park, we stopped for our guides to make offerings at a Buddhist shrine perched on a dramatic bluff atop the Indus Gorge, in order that we may have good luck in our visit.

We continued our drive and within a few kilometres left the Indus behind and were heading up the Rumbak Valley towards our camp. The entire drive was filled with dramatic and ever-changing scenery, and after several photo stops, we reached our camp before lunch.

The new, tall, lined, and heated tents were a welcome sight, as was our first camp lunch, which was quite a feast, like all the subsequent meals. Our cook and his team did a truly fantastic job.

We spent the afternoon watching the hills and valleys from our watchpoint just a few metres from our camp. Using our telescopes to scan, sitting on our camp stools, and sipping hot drinks and biscuits, it was a reassuring introduction to the main part of our quest, and would be how we planned to start every day.

A five-minute stroll from the tents enabled us to scan a massive area, looking south, up the valley towards Urutse junction, east across the Rumbak stream and the hillsides above, north, down the valley to the Rumbak gorge and the Indus, from whence we had arrived, and to the east, up the Rumbak valley and all the associated hillsides.

We found at least 30 Blue Sheep or Bharal as they are called locally, which was reassuring because Blue Sheep are the main prey of Snow Leopard, and we normally see them in good numbers here. We saw similar or indeed larger numbers of Blue Sheep every day that we were in Hemis, with a peak of at least 80 on day six of the trip.

Blue Sheep, like Snow Leopards, merge almost imperceptibly into the landscape unless, as was not infrequent, they were on the skyline. Usually feeding in small groups, there is usually at least one or more individual that is keeping watch and, occasionally, they would run in a panic, that always elicited excitement in our group as we searched the hillside near to the sheep for any sign of a Snow Leopard, Wolf or other predator. We would conclude that it was probably just a paranoia-induced flight of fear, and we would settle back into our scanning routine with the Blue Sheep settling down too.

We were distracted by an adult Goshawk perched atop a rocky outcrop, and by Himalayan Snowcocks calling high on a ridge, the latter species we would become very familiar with as we would have daily sightings of up to fifteen individuals whilst in Hemis National Park. Chukars were frequently encountered throughout our visit, delightful when seen well, and often located when calling their name. Meanwhile, we had a couple of sightings of Hill Pigeon, which look quite dramatic in flight when they display their white central tailband, contrasting with the black terminal band, grey base and white rump. We saw them most days, either just flying by, or sometimes, such as in Rumbak village, showing very well at close range.

Sighting of the day award probably goes to Andrew, who spotted a Wallcreeper on a very distant crag. I managed to get onto it, but just as I did, it flew, and was not relocated. We

had to wait until the extension for a proper look when, fortunately, one showed far better: much closer, for much longer, and to all present.

Dinner, like lunch, was a welcome feast, to be repeated daily. We retired afterwards to the comfort of our warm and cosy tents, looking forward to our first full day in Hemis.

4 March

After our morning watch from the observation point by camp, we breakfasted before strolling up to Rumbak village and beyond. The village is remote by any standards, and has only very recently become accessible by jeep, enabling the village to have much more ready access to health facilities. Also, they now have mains power, instead of having to rely on a generator.

Almost all the houses are old, traditional Ladakhi homes, on three levels, with the first level reserved for livestock, above that the main living area, and higher up there are sleeping rooms, with the flat roof being a place for storage for wood for the stove, and for animal fodder, safely out of reach!

The fields around the village were still partly covered in snow, but in the shelter of one terraced wall, we had our first sightings of delightful and intricately patterned Tibetan Partridges – we recorded 35 during the day, and took very many photographs. Definitely one of the birds of the trip, and a species that we saw on almost every day in Hemis, often from, or close to our watchpoint.



Tibetan Partridge © Dick Filby

A Goshawk flew past us and landed with some partially plucked prey that we could not identify, but from the size, we felt that it was likely a Chukar or Tibetan Partridge. Also near the village, we saw our first Woolly Hare, dashing this way and that, but doubtless hoping that it did not attract the attentions of a Golden Eagle or Lynx. Plenty of Robin Accentors today, mainly around the village. We saw them on a few other days whilst in Hemis, and every day on the extension.

Big drama played out at the watchpoint in the afternoon, when a Lynx was spotted on a distant hillside. Initially it was walking, but not everyone saw it at that point, and had to wait until it started walking again. Although rather distant, it was possible to see it quite well in the clear late afternoon light.

We saw our first Himalayan Griffon Vultures of the trip over the valley today, magnificent birds that we would see occasionally whilst in Hemis.

Meanwhile, Kevin and Lori were still in Leh and he saw a Solitary Snipe. Later, after dinner a Red Fox heard after lights-out, and Andrew heard a Eurasian Eagle Owl also after dark. It was heard again by several of us on the night of the 7th, but it was not until the extension that we saw one – at a daytime roost, and that one offered us great ‘scope views.

5 March

We awoke to find that, unusually, there had been a light dusting of snow overnight. The dawn temperature was -11C so it was dry and fluffy, and our team was already at work clearing it in front of our tents even whilst they delivered the obligatory “bed tea” (coffee and biscuits too).

We geared into action, each at their own speed, but what a start we had! The first down to the watchpoint were rewarded with being present at the early morning discovery that there was already a Snow Leopard to be seen! It was sauntering slowly up a ridge to the west, in the snow, pausing frequently, and mainly, although not always in view.

Everyone else in camp was summoned without delay and all arrived in good time to watch it for at least 20 minutes or more, with iconic images being etched every moment as it strolled up the ridge, moving effortlessly whether it was in waist deep snow or scaling an outcrop. Very special would be an understatement!!

We eventually lost it behind a boulder, not knowing if it had sloped off over the other side of the ridge. We waited some time before deciding that it was probably not coming back into view in the short term, and thus could turn our attention to the breakfast that had followed us down to the watchpoint, tables, chairs and all.

We spent all morning at the watchpoint, basking in the sun and enjoying the warmth of the day, hoping that the Snow Leopard would reappear. It did not.

A very distant flock of snowfinches were likely Black-winged Snowfinches and worked their way across the hillside to the west. They were the only ones we saw in Hemis, but we saw plenty on the extension where we got great views.

Kevin and Lori joined us, and not long after, the Snow Leopard reappeared on the ridge. However, the light was now against us, so whilst the morning views had been with the light over our shoulders, we were now looking into the light. It was still a magnificent sight, but with the distance, and the near-silhouette views, we all decided it was below-par. We had definitely already been spoilt by the views on the first two days!!

6 March

The dawn temperature was only slightly lower at -13C, but in the extremely low humidity and almost total lack of any breeze, it did not even feel chilly. I have spent many much colder-feeling days in the humidity and wind on the north Norfolk coast!!

We spent pre-breakfast at the watchpoint, supping hot tea and enjoying Blue Sheep, Himalayan Snowcocks and Red-billed Choughs, and, exceptionally, two flocks of Ruddy Shelduck heading north, one group of around 65 and another of about 25. Very much a sign of Spring, although no more were seen until the extension when we saw them daily on wetland areas. There were also nine Tibetan Partridge in the fields just below, much to Kevin's delight.

After breakfast, we set off up the valley towards Urutse, aiming to have lunch where two the valleys join, and hoping to relocate the tracks of a female Snow Leopard and her two well grown cubs that one of the spotters had found earlier. He had not seen the animals themselves, but there must be a chance, and besides, it would be wonderful to see the tracks if we could find them.



Himalayan Snowcock © Dick Filby

The walk was easy going as we followed a mule track along the braided stream, with very little gain in altitude. In less than a kilometre, we paused in the area we had been told about, and after a few minutes searching, sure enough, there they were, large tracks, still clear in the remains of yesterday's fresh snow. The youngsters pug marks were nearly as big as mum, so they will likely have been two and a half years old. It seemed that the threesome had walked down the valley, towards our camp, so naturally we scanned every hillside and crag but alas, to no avail.

We continued up the valley for another kilometre or so, and found a comfortable spot for lunch, from where we could scan two valleys. A small flock of around 45 Brandt's Mountain Finches were working the area roaming the old fields and flatter areas in the valley floor. These were the only ones we saw in Hemis, but later in the trip on the extension, we had excellent and close views of many more. Dennis found an Alpine Chough today.

7 March

A gorgeous crisp morning and at dawn it was our joint coldest of our time in Hemis at -13C. However, it was easy to deal with as with a down jacket, gloves and handwarmers, it felt nice and cosy at the watchpoint before breakfast, as we enjoyed the usual cast whilst seeking the next Snow Leopard.

After breakfast, we made the wise decision to explore down the valley, ostensibly in search of pikas, but also because we had tried up the valley the previous day and had already visited the village and its surrounds a couple of days back.

It was only 500 metres or so to the mouth of the gorge, and we paused to scan. There was nothing other than Blue Sheep, so we continued and almost immediately one of the best birds of the trip came flitting past us – a stunning blue, purple and turquoise male White-browed Tit-warbler. Andrew, Steve and I followed it for a few yards up the valley and we got great views and even some photos. This is not easy for this species, as the birds are typically very active and keep on the move. Some years we see several, but this was to be the only one of the trip.



White-browed Tit-warbler © Dick Filby

We continued slowly down the track but try as we might, we could not find any pikas which really should have been out basking in the warm sunshine. Golden Eagle, Lammergeier and a pair of Great Rosefinches were, however, all very welcome.

White Wagtails of the masked form *personata* were now in, and from today on they were recorded daily. Insect eaters! Another sign of spring!

Lunch arrived and we enjoyed a hot, three course, in-the-field feast. Some of the group took the opportunity of a lift back to camp, whilst the rest of us decided that a walk back up the track was the best idea. Right move! As we were nearly back to the pika spot, where our spotter awaited us, a small bird was flitting high overhead around the crags. It appeared to be a Wallcreeper, so we stared long and hard, manoeuvring this way and that but it failed to show itself.

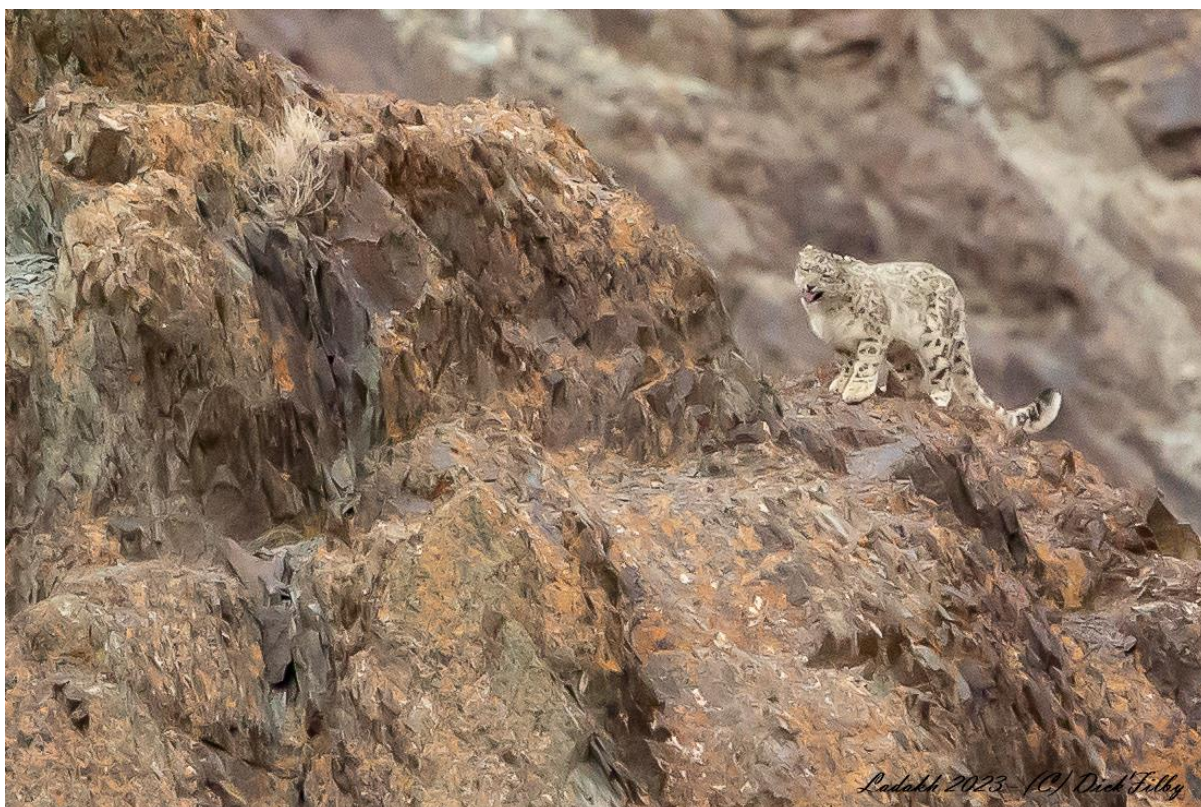
We were almost up to the spotter and told him what we had found. He was not having any joy finding pikas, so he moved a few yards further up the track, staring up at the crags. He suddenly 'shouted' in a hoarse whisper "CALLING, CALLING". I took this to mean he could hear the Wallcreeper. We stopped moving but could not hear a single bird but instead could hear a very clear and very audible, loud, clipped "miaow" that echoed around the cliffs above us. BAM! A calling Snow Leopard!! Just above us someplace... wow, wow, and wow again.

We scanned frantically, necks craning this way and that. We moved a few metres, and the Snow Leopard called frequently, teasing and thrilling us at the same time, from a ledge unseen just above. Our spotter said that we should go further up the track and look back. We scurried, the calls continued. We were now spread out over a couple of hundred metres, scanning, listening, full of anticipation, joy, and frustration all at the same time. It was agonising or thrilling, or both.

Then Andrew uttered the magic words "I've got it, I've got it". We all arrived at his side in seconds but it had disappeared around the back of pillar that it was calling from. Surely, we could not miss it now? Agony. Frustration. The following seconds seemed like minutes, and then it did what we all were earnestly hoping for and strolled back into full view. Confidently, majestically, and decidedly purposeful, it set about calling again with an echo that reverberated around the gorge.

It is hard to put words to the joy that we were experiencing. Could this get any better? We were thrilling to the experience, the joy was already quite overwhelming when our spotter, never one to rest, suddenly announced – "second one, second one!". Sure enough, there was more than just an echo! And Smanla had already spotted it, on the ridge above us, calling back across to the first animal.

This one was darker, especially about the face, but somewhat less animated. It seemed quite relaxed, lounging languidly and studying the scene. The first Snow Leopard meanwhile continued calling apace, more loudly and more frequently than this one on our side of the stream, indeed it seemed that it was becoming somewhat agitated.



Snow Leopard © Dick Filby

The rest of camp showed up, summoned by the radio. It took only a few minutes for them to scurry downhill to join us and we were all enjoying this now. Snow Leopard #1 was now descending, coming down towards us, obviously intent on meeting up with the other one. Were they competing males, or a pair in the making, or even competing females? We could not tell. #1 came lower still, disappearing from view before reappearing ever closer. It was now below us, less than 150 metres away.

Still calling, it paused as it reached the stream, pacing this way and then that, but seemingly unwilling to cross. We thrilled to the views and the drama.

Dusk was gathering, so we left them and headed back to camp, wondering what the night would bring for the two cats. For us, we knew it would be a joyous evening of celebration, especially so for Andrew, as he was the first person to set eyes on a Snow Leopard today. Finder's kudos. A great badge of honour and pride. Unforgettable – forever.

8 March

The spotters set off before dawn and we soon learned that both Snow Leopards were on view, so we joined them within minutes and were thrilled to again be watching a mating pair of Snow Leopards for the second time this trip. They were both together on the opposite side of the stream, close to the place where the first one was when we first saw her.

Her, because we now knew that the paler and slightly smaller individual that had been calling so incessantly, insistently even, all late afternoon yesterday was the female. In the field, it is

rarely possible to determine the sex of a lone Snow Leopard, whereas it is straightforward in mating season, during the few moments of the act at least.

We were set up perfectly to watch them without disturbance, viewing them pretty much at eye level, but on the opposite side of the stream. The view in the scopes were truly excellent, so much so that our spotter decided that he needed to go back to Leh to borrow a high-end camera and lens in order to video them. At the end of our trip, I was entrusted to 'courier' that footage back to the UK and delivered it to a BBC production team for possible use in a forthcoming documentary.

Breakfast was delivered right to us, and thus we were again "breakfasting with Snow Leopard" for the second time in days! Basking in the warm morning sun, mug of tea in one hand, bowl of porridge, plate of eggs and toast by our side, and with eyes glued to the scope every time there was some action. And there was a fair bit of action too, as these two Snow Leopards were obviously serious about ensuring future generations, mating at least once every hour.

In between, the male kept a watchful and attentive eye on the female, waiting for the sign that she was receptive. Several times it would seem that he was about to advance, and then he realised that the signals were "no, not right now Mr", so he respectfully lay down again and resumed his patient attentiveness.



Robin Accentor © Dick Filby

The blue sky of early morning turned into a partly cloudy day, and after several hours of thrilling at the Snow Leopards, some of us decided it would be nice to go for a short walk, so we headed up to the village for some gentle exercise and more Robin Accentors before returning to camp for lunch, and thence back to watch the Snow Leopards again for the rest of the day, until dusk.

Steve and Andrew wanted to stay with the Snow Leopards, so they did, and I organised lunch delivered to them. What a privilege, to be able to soak up and luxuriate in watching two Snow Leopards 'all day'. When might you ever be able to do that again?

Would they still be around tomorrow? And visible again? We dared hope so, as they normally stay together for two to three days when mating, and we knew when this pair met, within a few hours at least, because we were “in” on the drama of the pre-meeting!

9 March

Well, it did not take long to relocate the pair of Snow Leopards this morning. They had scarcely changed position overnight, so we were again watching them well before breakfast, and once again, they were pretty active. Today, we needed to hike a little up the hill to watch them, as they had moved a little, so we were on the hillside some 50 metres above the track. We found a comfortable spot and settled in.



Snow Leopards © Dick Filby

The sun came over the hill and our camp crew came in search of us, summoned by radio, and so it was that we “breakfasted with Snow Leopard” for the third time this trip!

Other wildlife today was, so to speak, the “also-rans” and included two Brown Accentors close to camp, which were the only ones that we saw in Hemis and nearby, a party of ten Tibetan Partridges that showed little fear of us. It was again an unbelievably special day and we felt very privileged. It is hard to describe in words how fantastic it was!!

10 March

The first spotters to look in the morning were unable to find the two Snow Leopards and thus it seemed that they had likely departed overnight. We scanned the hillsides, ridgelines, gullies and outcrops. We found Blue Sheep a plenty, regaled in the morning calls of the Himalayan Snowcock, before we joyously received the news before breakfast that a nimble spotter had relocated our Snow Leopards. They had simply descended a few metres into the gully below their previous position, and we could see them by climbing a little higher!

So that is what we did, and before breakfast were again treated to the amazing spectacle. A closer viewing ridge was scouted whilst we ate yet another breakfast in the field, and it was determined that significantly closer views were possible, from a spot where I had previously watched a mum and a cub, whilst the BBC filmed them.

We crossed a stream and made our way slowly up to the new viewpoint. The Snow Leopards, by now well-accustomed to us, paid scant attention and remained on view at eye level. The views were terrific. Mating occurred occasionally and decidedly less frequently than on the previous days. Both animals spent long periods snoozing but ever attentive.

Our lunch arrived, and then afternoon tea. The slight heat shimmer of the middle of the day diminished. The Snow Leopards moved a few metres to a spot where the icefall of the stream was the backdrop. This was surely the best yet and we watched with renewed interest and took yet more pictures. Who could resist, and besides, we needed them to be totally insufferable to all our friends when we got home.



Snow Leopard © Dick Filby

The male stood up once again, looked briefly at the female as she lay a few metres away, turned his back and walked up the near edge of the icefall in a slow but deliberate fashion. Was he leaving? It looked like he might be. With the consummate ease of a mammal that is the master of the terrain, he scarcely paused, climbed the boulders, crossed the ice, disappeared behind an outcrop to reappear further uphill.

Once he was up on the ridgeline, at least half a kilometre away, he paused, staring intently over and away. Meanwhile, the female called plaintively several times as she stared uphill. He surely could hear her as they have excellent hearing. He changed the angle of his head,

looking left a little, right a little, but never over his shoulder back towards her. He paused awhile before he continued up the ridge. He really was leaving.

She realised it, and set off herself, a little more slowly than he had, pausing here and there on the way up the sides of the icefall. Her intent was soon obvious, she was not following him! Instead, she was heading some 90 degrees to his right, she called again. No response it seems, and so she continued on her chosen direction and out of view from us.

It was now late afternoon, and it had been a little over 72 hours since Andrew had first spotted her on her way to her first, and probably last, meeting with her mate.

We had been privileged to witness the whole event, from hearing her calls echoing around the gorge above our heads, the three days of them being together, and the poignant final parting. It was an emotional time for us all. We made our way back to camp with a mixture of feelings, of joy, of elation, of pride that we had managed to watch, yet not disturb.

11 March

Well, we had watched Snow Leopards for prolonged durations on an incredible seven of our first ten days and there was no sense of disappointment at the watchpoint before breakfast when this morning we were not rewarded with Snow Leopard views. Indeed, we took an early breakfast in camp and set off on a gentle stroll up-valley, with our destination being the highest outlying house in the entire district.



WildWings Snow Leopards camp © Dick Filby

We took our time, pausing frequently to scan and soak up the scenery on yet another delightful blue-sky, sunny, and warm day. We reached the residence by midday but found nobody home. That was not an issue as such, but it would have been nice to have had a tour of the house and enjoyed its rooftop observation possibilities. Their dog, reassuringly chained, did give us an appropriately noisy welcome.

We chose to sit at a viewpoint by the chorten that was a few metres past the house, scanning the hillsides and sky, whilst the team unpacked the three-course hot lunch. One the hillside opposite, I spotted a Woolly Hare, motionless near a small bush, eager no doubt to avoid the attentions of the midday raptors that were crowding the sky. Golden Eagles, Bearded

Vultures and Himalayan Vultures too, all of them eager for a meal, soaring almost effortlessly in search.

Indeed, upstream there had been some hunter success, with at least a dozen Golden Eagles vying for the remains of some mammal, that could have been a Woolly Hare, or perhaps the last of a bigger animal such a Blue Sheep.

Meanwhile, I had commented that the fields just below the house had a couple of new buildings at their edge, and the shape of these structures suggested they were toilets. It was explained to us that they were indeed just that. For the past two summers, perhaps for the first time in living memory, the stream had not enough water to irrigate the fields. Furthermore, this was the trekking route that people took over a nearby pass, and that the campground higher up was now totally dry, and there was no flowing water in the stream up there in the summer. The owners of the house, unable to grow crops, had decided to turn their fields into a campground, and hope that the limited water resource would be enough for the trekkers. Apparently, it had been so far, but we knew that they must have been praying that it would continue that way.



Views close to WildWings Snow Leopards camp © Dick Filby

Looking uphill, there was no reassuring evidence of a great winter snowpack, so we wondered if the stream might keep flowing through the summer down here. This same story is being repeated throughout the region, and seeing the effect was a humbling first-hand reminder of how this rapidly changing world affects people in different ways. With less water in the hills, it will affect all the wildlife too.

Jim and Andrew had spotted a couple of mammals approaching though the boulders above us, heading towards the compound with the calves. The dog was again barking wildly, and with better cause this time – to protect the livestock from the inbound Tibetan Wolves! One

of them melted away very quickly once it realised that it had been spotted by humans, but the other remained on view as it too retreated over the hill.

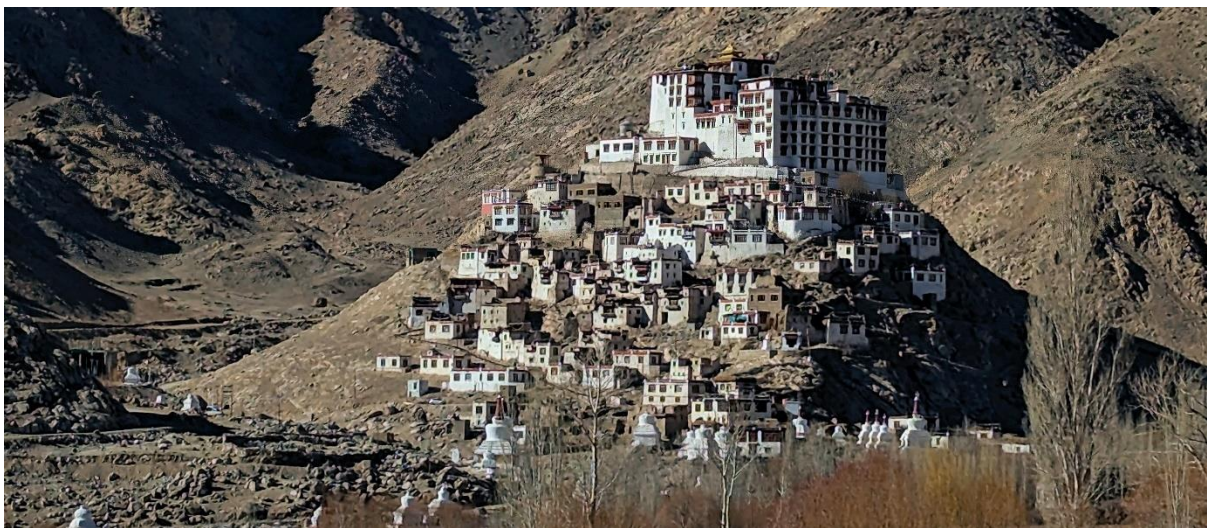
Andrew and Steve ventured a little further up the valley toward the by-now-dissipating group of Golden Eagles. One of the eagles carried the remains of the carcass closer to us all, but by now it seemed there was not much left to be had. Several of the eagles gave us magnificent fly-by views as they headed down the valley and we too soon decided that it was time to head that way.

The homeward walk was a very easy gentle downhill stroll, one on which “Team Ireland” encountered a small group of Red-fronted Serins, a lovely species that the rest of us had to wait until we saw a flock on the last day of the extension, a flock that included several boldly marked males.

12 March

After our last camp breakfast, and some team photos, we bade farewell to camp, leaving the team packing up the tents, kitchen, and all. They were heading off to the extension ahead of us, whilst we had the luxury of a night in Leh to look forward to.

Driving back to Leh, we again enjoyed splendid views of the Indus Gorge, and chose not to divert in search of Urial and Ibex as we had seen them already on day 2, but we did see our only Gadwall of trip. We dropped off Lori and Paige in order they could take advantage of some sightseeing whilst the rest of us continued past town and up into the “hills” in search of good views of both species of Snowcock.



Ladakhi village © Dick Filby

Once we were up in the hills, this time to the north of the Indus, our first thrill was a prolonged look at another Tibetan Wolf, this one seemingly hunting small mammals in a rock field.

Further up the pass, we were able to find a dispersed party of about a dozen Himalayan Snowcock from the roadside, and only about 150 metres away, which gave us great views in the telescopes as they fed seemingly unconcerned at our presence.

Heading over to another pass nearby, we were eventually able to get splendid views of two Tibetan Snowcock, even closer to the van than the Himalayans had been. The birds were quietly feeding just a few metres away, with a splendid backdrop of the snow-covered peaks and north-facing slopes of Hemis National Park in the distance on the other side of the also now distant Indus valley far below us.



Tibetan Snowcock © Dick Filby

There was almost no traffic at all on this remote road, so we were able to watch this pair of splendid birds totally undisturbed. On the descent, we saw several Woolly Hares, including one that lingered just a few metres from the van before it bolted. Other birds included our only Black Kite of the trip, a male Great Rosefinch and a flock of around 40 Brandt's Mountain Finches.

Back in town, we luxuriated at the hotel and had a farewell dinner for "Team Ireland" (ie Dennis and Jim) and for Paige, who were leaving us the following morning at the end of the main trip.

Trip Diary: Extension

13 March

Carry on up the Indus! Those of us on the newly redesigned extension set off in great spirits and it was not long before an eagle-eyed PT spotted a flock of small passerines near the road, which turned out to be, as hoped for, a flock of Mongolian Finches. We piled out of the van and had some decent looks, estimating about 55 birds, before they moved on and around a bluff below us.

PT further excelled from the front passenger seat when he spotted some Ladakh Urial behind us as we negotiated a hairpin bend. There was enough room for us to safely pull off, and we duly got great views of around 25 individuals including some males with good-sized horns.

Continuing upriver towards Tibet and amidst wonderful scenery, we spotted at least three Great Cormorants in the Indus River before our first Kiang (Tibetan Wild Ass). Befittingly for this splendidly marked, localised mammal, it was close to the road and gave us excellent views and photos. We were to see some hundred more today, with many again every day on the extension.

Two Streaked Rosefinches were a nice bonus at a photographic stop, and two Barn Swallows flew along the Indus. Spring was definitely in the offing.

We picked up our lunch from our team and continued on towards the Tibetan border, passing through a checkpoint where we had excellent views of several Black-winged Snowfinches. Soon arriving in the area that we would search for Pallas's Cat, we picked up a local guide and set about dutifully scanning and rescanning the plains from favoured vantage points, moving along to cover as many spots as possible.

It was not long before we were rewarded with an apparently sleeping Tibetan Fox. Bam! Great tick of this little observed mammal. Within a few minutes, however, it became very alert, not at our presence for sure, as it was glancing nervously off to the right, and within a minute or two, it set off in a well-paced straight-line trot, to the left.

It was leaving, and for a reason that would soon become apparent. We continued scanning, hoping for a Pallas's Cat, as they are regularly seen from this spot we were told. No sign, but, a full quarter of an hour later, a pack of four Tibetan Wolves appeared from the direction that the Tibetan Fox had been glancing.

They were on the move, hunting as a pack and the lead mammal was the largest, the stockiest, and showed signs of having been in some violent altercation at some time in its past. It had lost the distal third of its tail, perhaps in the battle for supremacy of the pack, or in taking down a prey animal, in any event its tail was proportionately only about two thirds or so of the length of the other three wolves. What we would have given to know why. They worked their way inexorably across the plain, soon covering the ground up to where the Tibetan Fox had been, but seemingly they did not pick up its scent and we felt that it must have escaped their attentions on this occasion. The dusk gathered and we called it a day.

I should not forget to mention that we saw the first Ground Tit of the trip in the afternoon, as well as at least three Upland Buzzards, and several Brown Accentors. We had seen very few of them thus far, but we were to see them daily until end of the trip. Best bird in some ways was a Merlin which was a write-in, with another on 16th. Scores of Twite were our first of trip, and we were to see plenty more in the coming days.

14 March

The morning's search for Pallas's Cat started with a stop where the highlight was not the hoped for mammal but an excellent bird species, and a new one for the trip: Tibetan Lark. We saw about ten, song flighting and calling but always tantalisingly out of camera range.

Kiang were omnipresent near the Indus. We continued our search for Pallas's Cat and were rewarded with not one but two Tibetan Foxes – it seems this species is not always hard to see!



Pallas's Cat habitat © Dick Filby

We got news that another guide had found a Pallas's Cat, at a spot that we had been at yesterday afternoon, so we scurried along but, unfortunately, it had already headed out of view, presumably to its daytime resting den.

We waited a while before deciding to head up higher for a while, in search of other specialities, and planned to return to the plain mid-afternoon when hopefully a Pallas's Cat would reemerge.

Before long, the track took us up into the high rolling hills and we were scanning for India's only population of Tibetan Gazelle. Nice to be driving around such an empty place, and we scarcely saw another vehicle or any people. However, it was very arid with almost no vegetation so we had to cover a few miles until we found our first Gazelles, eventually seeing fourteen.

Whilst the Kiang population has recovered well in recent years, it seems that Tibetan Gazelles have not, and thus always take a little effort to find. Well worth it.

We found another Ground Tit, and continued to drive higher, getting to over 17,000 feet at one point, before descending a little as we continued in search of the world's largest sheep – Tibetan Argali, which can attain a weight of 185kg.

Our scanning was not producing results and it was past lunchtime and chilly with a slight breeze. Ahead, we could see the three tents of a summer camp of nomad goat herders, and

eager to see what birds might be around the compounds, we headed over there finding around 20 Black-winged Snowfinches.

The sole occupant of the tent camp was a 74-year-old man and we were invited to eat our lunch inside one of his tents. He was most hospitable and naturally we had enough food to share. It was pleasantly warm inside, heated by a small stove in the middle and it was hard to tell who was more bemused – us as we wondered about his life, or he, as he doubtless wondered about ours. It was a great privilege and a genuine off-the-cuff visit totally off the beaten track.

We left him with more food by way of thanks, warmly shook his wrinkled walnut-coloured hand and set off again onto the expansive rolling hills of the Tibetan Plateau, thoroughly enriched by the encounter. Light snow showers littered the landscape, reducing visibility as they passed, but it was not long before we found our quarry, and scopes were soon set up.

Despite our excellent driver's willingness to seemingly take the minibus "anywhere", we chose not to attempt to get closer, so instead drove back the way we had come, well, initially at least. This was a wise choice, as before descending back to the plain, we were thrilled to find a flock of around 80 Tibetan Sandgrouse that allowed fairly close approach, and everyone had good views.

Indeed, Andrew and I walked around the flock, causing them to walk towards the minibus. Our driver knew a shorter 'route' back, and we headed down a rarely travelled ridge to arrive back on the plain in the late afternoon. We met up with one of our spotters who we had left behind, but he had been unsuccessful in relocating the Pallas's Cat, so we redoubled our efforts in favoured locations, but without success. We reflected that we had scarcely been here 24 hours, so still had plenty of time.

Other great birds during the day included two Saker Falcons, and lest we forget, another write-in : at least two Common Chaffinches close to our homestay. They were presumably of the widespread nominate subspecies *coelebs* which breeds across much of continental Europe into central Asia, extending in winter just as far as the Himalayan region (note that in the UK the subspecies is *gengleri*). A fox species spotted by Jim and Andrew on the way home at dusk was thought to probably be a Red Fox.

15 March

We set off before dawn to give ourselves maximum time in the best areas. An early sighting of a Tibetan Fox was inspiring, but, rather shamefully, they were beginning to become old-hat! Plenty of Tibetan Larks too, but again, not the desired species. No sign of Pallas's Cat at the overlook where there had been one the previous morning, so we moved on, stopping and scanning, until we got to one of the first spots we had visited two afternoons ago. No sign here either. Most of us strolled down the road away from the minibus, widening the search whilst PT headed in the opposite direction and climbed a few metres above the road to scan.

By now, it was mid-morning and the day was warming up quickly, and we wondered if a Pallas's Cat would even still be out and about. Our driver appeared on the road on the other side of the van and appeared to be waving us back up the road. That seemed to be the case, and those of us closest to him started heading that way.

It did not seem to be the kind of wave for mid-morning tea either and we shouted down the road to Andrew and Steve. The driver jumped in the van and came hurtling down the road, pausing to splutter that PT had a Pallas's Cat and that he would continue down the road to pick up Andrew and Steve. Go quickly - bye!

We hastened the pace and I soon arrived by PT's side. He had indeed seen a Pallas's Cat, just a few minutes ago, and had tried to stay on it, but it had disappeared. Swear words.....

Kevin and Lori arrived, scope setting up, and Steve and Andrew were on their way too. PT describing intimately where he saw it, and what he thought it might do. No sign. More swear words and then I relocated it – yet more swear words!!! “The PALLAS'S CAT is in my scope!!”

Pandemonium ensued but we were all soon onto it, all scopes deployed and celebrations underway. It was out and about, in full daylight, actively hunting. Occasionally it would pause, and even less frequently it would pounce, but we are not sure if it was ever actually successful. A vole, which is the only mammal that we were seeing in the immediate vicinity, would be just a 'snack', so it may well have simply swallowed one, or more.

We settled in and watched it at leisure from a vantage point. Morning tea was produced, and we continued watching it move back and forth across a fairly discreet area of the plain. After about three hours or so, we took a short break and drove to a spot where we were told there was a Eurasian Eagle Owl viewable in a cave. It was there! We got great views in the scope, and also saw several Great Rosefinches nearby, before returning to rejoin the spotters.

The Pallas's Cat was still out in the same area, and it was possible to drive to a spot to try for closer views. So we did. And we did!

We swiftly relocated the cat, and it was considerably closer, and still active. We got our scopes on it and whilst we were enjoying much better views, the driver chimed in with “there's two” and sure enough, there was.

We watched them both on and off for an hour or so, until we lost one and then the other, but it seemed they might be heading back towards our original position, where one of the spotters still was positioned and they confirmed that seemed to be the case. We drove around and sure enough, as dusk gathered, here came one of the Pallas's Cats towards us. We stayed in the minibus watching as it scurried along, passing us about 100m away and disappearing from view into the rocks and probably to a den.

It was an exhilarating end to a truly great day. Or so we thought.. We set off in the minibus back towards the homestay, and within a couple of minutes came to a screeching halt as there were two Tibetan Wolves silhouetted against the ice of a pool just by the road. Incredible....

16 March

Following the success of yesterday, it was going to be hard to follow, but we would try. We packed our lunch feast into the minibus to go to the dramatic inter-montane Tso Kar Lake.

Kiang were visible from the road in several places from the start of the drive, and at the hot springs, there were 250 or more Ruddy Shelduck which gave excellent views.

We continued up towards the pass, pausing at a nomad winter camp that was still occupied and had lots of finches around it. Most numerous were Brandt's Mountain Finches, of which we recorded over 1,000 during the day, as well as lots of Black-winged Snowfinches with at least 100 at this and another camp later, whilst at the top of the pass, our first Blanford's Snowfinches of this trip. These were delightful birds and much appreciated by all with their striking black and white face pattern and peachy shoulder patches.

Down at the edge of the lake, we finally found our first pikas of the trip, with good views of several Ladakh Pika at a traditional spot where I have often seen them previously. They were fairly relaxed with our presence, so long as we did not approach too closely, and gave outstanding views in the scopes, as well as some half-decent photos too.

Nearby, at a recently vacated winter camp, there were lots of Brandt's Mountain Finches and Black-winged and Blanford's Snowfinches, as well as an abandoned dog with a limp. Behind us, there were four rather distant Tibetan Argali on the hills above, and out on the plains were several Kiang.

Huge herds of sheep and goats spend the winter in this area because it is where many nomads have their winter camps and are likely putting significant pressure on the Kiang and other wildlife. On a positive note, we saw at least 20 Ground Tits during the day, the majority of them up near the top of the pass, with others down nearer to the lake. Splendid little birds. Personally, I much prefer their former name when they were known as Hume's Groundpeckers. Oooops, there I go again.

On the way back down towards the Indus, we had our closest views yet of a single Tibetan Wolf, that was approaching the track through the boulders as we drove down. A hasty stop was ensured as I yelled "Wolf - 10 o'clock. Very close" and although, as was to be expected, it moved directly away, it did not go more than another 30 metres before it turned to look at us. To our surprise, and delight, it then turned around to face us staying in full view for several minutes.

This was followed by a splendid eastern form Black Redstart and then a Wallcreeper that performed around the crags just above the road for a quarter of an hour or more, even allowing everyone to get scope views.

17 March

We packed up and left the homestay straight after breakfast, but before we started our journey back to Leh, we spent a good hour birding around the village. We spotted several

Rosefinches and whilst some were hard to get proper views of, at least two were Streaked Rosefinches, and we considered that they may well have all been that species.



Brown Accentor © Dick Filby

It was nice to see Robin and Brown Accentors posing nicely, but the top-drawer bird was a lovely Rock Bunting – a great find by Andrew.

As we headed back to Leh along the by now familiar Indus valley, we enjoyed nice views of several Kiang, our last of the trip, and we made a few stops. One of our main target birds, Solitary Snipe, was well spotted by Kevin as the

rest of us were concentrating on a lovely White-throated Dipper (of the form *leucogaster*).

The snipe gave us prolonged and excellent views. Later on, and closer to Leh, we stopped to look for Brown Dipper, finding two, with the bonus of a lovely feeding group of Red-fronted Serins, including some striking males.



Solitary Snipe © Dick Filby

The surprise bonus was a real Indian rarity – European Greenfinch! Kevin again – what a great find, but shame it was not a more desirable species for us all, although our Ladakhi friends were beside themselves!

Next stop Leh and a farewell dinner, followed by a good night's sleep.

18 March

A leisurely breakfast, transfer to the airport, and final goodbyes before taking the late morning flight to Delhi.

What a wonderfully successful trip it had been, so many great sightings of Snow Leopards, Pallas's Cats and much more, great birds and excellent weather.

The new tents were a huge improvement with heaters and the comfort of beds and being able to stand up inside and, as ever, a great team looking after our every need. I for one cannot wait to go back next year.....



Woolly Hare © Dick Filby