



*Our first Snow Leopard, doing what cats do best, relaxing! (Gus Mills)*

## **SNOW LEOPARD SPECIAL: LADAKH**

**1 – 14 MARCH 2018**

**LEADERS: MICHAEL MILLS & JIGMET DADUL**

Our sixth visit to the mountains of Ladakh in search of Snow Leopard was another success and resulted in three sightings of four different cats. Although all were fairly distant, we obtained whisker-detailed views of these fine felids with the aid of scopes. Other mammalian highlights included two sightings of Grey (or Tibetan) Wolf, Siberian Ibex, Urial, Ladakh's endemic 'red sheep', Blue Sheep (or Bharal), the Snow Leopard's favourite prey, and other hardy alpine inhabitants such as Woolly Hare and (Tibetan) Red Fox. Billed as a joint Birdquest/Wild Images tour, our birders were happy with a good selection of old favourite Himalayan specialities including Himalayan Snowcock, Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffon Vulture, Golden Eagle, Ibisbill, Solitary Snipe, Hill Pigeon, Eurasian Eagle Owl, Red-billed and Alpine Choughs, fine views of Wallcreeper, Güldenstädt's Redstart, Brown Dipper, Robin, Black-throated and Brown Accentors, Streaked and Great Rosefinches, Twite and Red-fronted Serin. We had three write-ins in the form of Mongolian Finch, Red-throated Thrush and Citrine Wagtail. As if all this was not enough Ladakh's jaw-dropping high altitude mountain desert scenery took our breath away (as well as the lack of oxygen up there!) and once again the truly delightful Ladakhis themselves made our stay another once-in-a-lifetime pleasant experience for our group. They are still front-runners for the title 'nicest people in the world'!



*Military and religion are two conspicuous but contrasting elements of Ladakh (Gus Mills)*

Landing at Leh in the Indus Valley, surrounded on all sides by high mountains, you are immediately struck by how little oxygen there is at 3500m altitude; even putting on a jacket leaves one out of breath. There are signs in the airport that all visitors should rest for at least 24 hours on arrival, and everyone usually feels some adverse effects of the high altitude for the first few days in the form of mild headache, disturbed sleep and breathlessness. The one last-minute arrival in the group demonstrated why acclimatisation is so important, which for most people took 2-3 days, although I can't say being at that altitude felt normal even after two weeks.

Ladakh is connected to India by two main highways and to Pakistan by another. However, all of these routes become blocked by snow, making it effectively a winter island. A frantic period of stocking up everything from petrol to foodstuffs takes place before the first snows of autumn, although fresh fruit and vegetables are flown in daily during the winter. As you can imagine these luxury supplies are therefore expensive, but thankfully there is a scheme whereby local folks are guaranteed affordable vegetables at a special government operated market in Leh. The town's population is more than 27,500 and this number is swelled by tourists during the spring and summer, and particularly during religious festivals such as the Dalai Lama's occasional visits, one of which was planned for several weeks after our visit. During our time in Ladakh we saw only a smattering of other visitors, and most of the hotels in town were still boarded up for the winter period. Besides the religious and touristic importance of Ladakh, since partition and owing to the friction between India and its sibling rival Pakistan (and also the looming threat of China), this border region has become a militarized hotspot with obtrusive army installations almost everywhere. Happily though, it is still possible to 'get away from it all' not too far into the mountain valleys.

An added benefit for those who arrived early (in addition to the importance of having time to acclimatize before the trip commenced) was the opportunity to explore the surrounds of Leh! Fortunately almost all of our folks heeded this advice and those who arrived early were able to do some easy walks in the Indus Valley. The valley is the warmest, most productive part of the region, and therefore provides the biggest



Ibisbill and Tibetan Partridge (pre-tour) were some of the top birds seen at the start of the trip (Gus Mils)

diversity of birdlife here, albeit still poor in comparison to lands south of the mountains. Quite a few birds were seen by almost everyone immediately pre-tour, including Solitary Snipe, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, Red-crested Pochard and Large-billed Crow. We also took the opportunity to explore slightly further afield in search of Tibetan Partridge, with an incredibly 50 found in the fields of a single village!

We woke up to cold but sunny conditions on the first official morning of the tour. After breakfast and Cinereous Tit in the hotel garden, we commenced with a walk in Indus Valley besides Spituk Monastery, just to the west of Leh, one of several incredible hilltop monasteries in the region. In the little cultivated fields with their buckthorn hedges and stands of poplars and willows were several Black-throated Thrush and Güldenstädt's Redstart, Eurasian Magpie, Fire-fronted Serin (by all accounts far more abundant this year than during any of our previous tours), Masked Wagtail (White Wagtail of the Asian form *personata*), Brown Accentor, Blue Whistling Thrush and the only Streaked Rosefinch of the trip, fortunately including a male, although they didn't stay long.

Our next stop, slightly further upstream, was Choglamsar Bridge, which was rather busy with traffic this morning. Still, a pair of the peculiar Ibisbill were feeding on the rocky river margin just downstream of the bridge in bright morning sunlight, giving excellent views. This monotypic shorebird is one of the most enigmatic birds of the Himalayas and is unusual in having purple legs when breeding (as our birds did) and also lacks a hind toe. Eurasian Teal and Common Merganser were also present, but we opted to head for a much quieter location a little further east, namely Shashi Bridge, another prayer flag-strewn crossing of the Indus River. Here we could not re-find the pair (to the amusement of the mammologists) of Solitary Snipe seen the day before, but we did find a small flock of Black-throated Accentors on the edge of a field before enjoying a traditional Ladakhi lunch at a nearby homestead.

Refuelled and warmed, we continued our quest after lunch with a visit to Thiksey Monastery. We paused at the bottom of the valley to get our first photos of the monastery in the surrounding landscape, and it was here that Jigmet received a phone call that altered the course of our afternoon. Apparently there was a Snow Leopard on a kill at Saspotse Village, some two hours to the west of where we stood. A quick census of opinions indicated that it was a no-brainer – we should forgo Shey Marshes with its ducks (seen by almost everyone the afternoon before) and try for the leopard. So it was back in the vehicles and headed west for exactly two hours. Although it was only a short walk from the cars most of us were still acclimatising, so we huffed and puffed the couple of hundred metres to where a small group of leopard watchers were gathered. And there it was, our first Snow Leopard! Fairly high up on a rocky ledge was the head and paws of our main target. Incredibly, for Grant who had arrived in Leh that morning, it was the first species of mammal he had seen in Asia, ever! Once the initial excitement had died down we took it in turns to watch through the scope,



*Blue Sheep were a daily delight in Hemis National Park (Gus Mills)*

and at 70x magnification the detail was excellent, with even the whiskers studied. As is typical of large cats it expended no more energy than absolutely necessary, and during the two hours we spent with it, it stood up once, briefly, sat up a couple of times and cleaned its sizeable paws for a while, but otherwise just gazed out over the landscape. As sunset approached the temperature dropped and we scurried back to the cars that would take us back to Leh for a late dinner and the last warm bed for the next two weeks. We couldn't believe our luck; what a start!

Our programme for the next 12 days was split between two locations, namely Stock Valley in Hemis National Park and Ulley Valley. For the second year running we opted for the slightly lower (at this altitude every metre counts) Hemis National Park first. As we approached the trailhead where we would meet our pony man it became apparent that there was much less snow lying in the foothills than the same time last year. This meant that tracking Snow Leopards would be more challenging, and it also seemed that birds were less concentrated in the lowlands. We made our way up the valley for about two hours, walking past lots of Chukar Partridges. Upon reaching camp we had some time to settle in – our ground crew had certainly gone to a lot of trouble to make us as comfortable as possible – before enjoying our first of many delicious field meals. In the late afternoon we walked up to the view point above camp where we acquainted ourselves with Blue Sheep.

We had four full days in Stock Valley, and quickly set into a daily routine of an early morning watch near camp (skipped on the last day) followed by breakfast, before heading further up Stock Valley in search of wildlife. On our first night a Snow Leopard had passed by our camp, calling, and the next morning the fresh tracks were visible in the iced-up river just below camp. As we climbed up the valley our team of spotters pointed our various signs – footprints, scrapes, scats – and kept a close track of where the animal had moved. By lunch time we'd moved some way up the valley to a major junction, and while we enjoyed a hot meal brought up by our camp crew the spotters headed off in various directions to continue the search. We



*Ibex replaced Blue Sheep at Ulley Valley as the dominant large mammal (Gus Mills)*

were half way through digesting our lunches when a call came through on the radio. They'd found a cat and the sprint was on! We pushed higher, the fleet-footed leading the way and the sure-footed bringing up the rear, until we were all gathered below a tall bare ridge, the tops of the heads of two cats just visible above the skyline. We climbed a bit higher until we could see their entire heads, and here we settled in for a two hour watch. The mother and large cub were clearly in no rush to go anywhere, but they did occasionally sit up to give us better looks. As we waited a light snow storm approached, and a pair of Himalayan Snowcock were spotted nearby to complete the picture. The scopes were swinging from one side to the other, generally focussed on the snowcocks but rapidly swinging back as soon as the cats stirred in the slightest. Finally we had to leave to make it back to camp before dark.

With three cats seen in three days we were beginning to think that it was easy, but alas this was our last cat sighting in Stock Valley despite some distance walked each day. Other wildlife was thin on the ground, although we did see Blue Sheep every day and enjoyed one superb encounter at about 40 m distance. The only other mammals seen here were a couple of delightful Large-eared Pikas, which darted between the rocks but paused long enough for us to admire them in the scopes, and a Red Fox that visited our camp at night. Birds were in scarce supply too. Lammergeier and Golden Eagle were constant companions, a pair of Eurasian Magpies were resident around the camp, Rock Dove was seen daily, Himalayan Snowcock was sighted on several occasions, although usually at a distance, Eurasian Wren was fairly common and we saw some Fire-fronted Serins every day. Otherwise, Michael flushed a Solitary Snipe, Angela spotted a lovely male Great Rosefinch on the snow, Grant found an adult Himalayan Vulture, Hill Pigeon was seen once, we twice saw Eurasian Eagle-Owl on its day roost, and a hunting Eurasian Sparrowhawk disturbed a large group of Red-billed Choughs in front of us.

I think I can say that we were all relieved when the final night of camping was over and the pony man was back in camp loading up our gear. Despite hot water bottles every night and such meticulous attention from



*Urial prefer the drier, less rocky areas (Gus Mills)*

our attentive and friendly ground crew, getting dressed in -15 °C to head out in the morning (or worse still, getting up in that temperature to visit the loo in the middle of the night) was tough even for our hardy bunch.

We happily made our way back to Stock Village where a distant Urial was in the scopes on our arrival. Robin Accentors were conspicuous around the village and Michael spotted some House Sparrows, although we soon moved on down the Indus Valley. Near Magnetic Hill we found a group of Urial, and those with some energy walked several hundred metres in their direction for better views. We paused for tea in Nimmu, then a short walk on the barren plains before Lekir where Woolly Hare, Horned Lark, Mongolian Finch and a single Tibetan Snowfinch (there may have been more) were spotted, and finally for lunch in Lekir. After lunch we made the slow, winding climb to Ulley Valley, settling into our much warmer homestay (nobody could wipe the smiles off their faces at the sight of heaters in the rooms) before a short scanning session with our first Asiatic/Siberian Ibex. Better views would come later.

The six days to follow were all spent in the vicinity of Ulley, and we explored the valleys of Ulley, Spango and Akyar, and the settlements of Ulley and Hemis Shukpachan during this time. Some of the usual suspects were in residence – Himalayan Snowcock, Güldenstädt's Redstart, Golden Eagle, Eurasian Wren, Lammergeier and Eurasian Magpie – but diversity was higher than at Stock and we saw quite a few new birds. Several pairs of Brown Dipper frequented the gushing waters of the Ulley River. A juvenile Himalayan Vulture was spotted twice in one day. A Eurasian Sparrowhawk was seen snatching a Fire-fronted Serin off the ground. A couple of large flocks of Alpine Chough were seen in addition to Red-billed Chough. Twite, usually scarce, was seen in large numbers, but, interestingly Brandt's Mountain Finch which was abundant in previous years seemed to be entirely absent! Plain Mountain Finch was seen twice. Both Robin and Brown Accentors were common around the villages. An out-of-range Red-throated Thrush, the biggest surprise, was seen alongside Black-throated Thrush at the juniper forest at Hemis Shukpachan. And best of all was three separate sightings of Wallcreeper, the last of a bird watched for half an hour below eye level.

On the mammal front we enjoyed some good views of Asiatic Ibex and one superb encounter with Urial, saw a few more Woolly Hares and some of the group spotted some distant Grey Wolves. As for Snow Leopard, even signs were scant. Although tracks and scrapes (usually a few days old) indicated that they were



*We had to wait until the final day for a good sighting of wolf! (Gus Mills)*

around, despite constant scanning and tracking by our team of dedicated spotters we never really got the feeling that we were about to get lucky. Shortly after lunch on Day 11, a week having passed since our last sighting, we got news that some wolves were visiting a carcass in Akyar Valley. Since this was the mammal we now most wanted to see we sped off in haste. At the base of the valley several cars were parked, and people started to speculate that there may be a cat present too. We had no idea how far we had to climb up the valley, and as we set off we could already feel the biggest climb of the trip, completed that morning (up to 4360 m), in our legs. As we neared each bend in the valley our hopes would rise that we were there, but around every corner there was more nothingness. Finally, as we cleared the last corner of the valley, we spotted a group of people in the distance. Both relieved and exhausted we trudged up to them, only to learn that there had been two wolves, but they had gone. And there was a Snow Leopard, but it was behind a rock and out of view. An icy wind blew up the valley so we sheltered behind a large rock to wait. About half an hour passed and I was looking at an empty rock face through the scope when suddenly a group of Chukar Partridge flew in and landed on the ledge exactly where the leopard was supposed to be. And suddenly a head appeared, and then the whole body! Unfortunately this didn't last long, as the cat quickly plonked itself down on the ledge from where it peered down at us. Again we waited as long as possible, admiring it through the scopes. It did at least get up and climb slightly higher, but it seemed that it had little interest in its kill and we left just in time to get back to the cars with the last light of the day, with the cat not having budged of its high perch. Still, having started so well with three leopards in three days we'd become a bit overconfident, and we all appreciated this sighting massively after such a long absence. The next morning we returned to Akyar in hope that the leopard or wolves would still be around. While inspecting the carcass of a large male ibex, of which there was little left, some of the group obtained distant views of a pair of Grey Wolf, but those that had slogged up to the kill were left without a glimpse.

Finally our time in the mountains had come to an end, and we packed for our return to Leh. Several stops en route produced some noteworthy sightings, the first of a group of 100+ Mongolian Finches next to the



*Spectacular scenery was the order of the day wherever we went in Ladakh (Gus Mills)*

road, with a single Himalayan Snowfinch with them (there may have been more). And best of all we all enjoyed good views of three rather rufous Grey Wolves near Lekir. Although they were slightly wary of our presence we managed to walk a long way towards them and we all enjoyed very satisfactory views through the scopes.

On arrival back in Leh most of the group opted for a leisurely afternoon of showers and central heating, although a hardy few made the tip to Thiksey to complete some unfinished business from Day 1. Even for those not culturally inclined it was a very worthwhile visit. The intricate artwork and splendour of the 12 meter tall Buddha were worth every stair climbed, not to mention the stupendous views afforded up and down the Indus Valley.

## SYSTEMATIC LIST OF BIRD SPECIES RECORDED DURING THE TOUR

The species names and taxonomy used in the report mostly follows Gill, F & D Donsker (Eds). IOC World Bird Names.

This list is updated several times annually and is available at <http://www.worldbirdnames.org>.

Species marked with the diamond symbol (◊) are either endemic to the country or local region or considered ‘special’ birds for some other reason (e.g. it is only seen on one or two BirdQuest tours; it is difficult to see across all or most of its range; the local form is endemic or restricted-range and may in future be treated as a full species).

**Gadwall** *Mareca strepera* Several pre-tour at Shey Marshes.

**Eurasian Wigeon** *Mareca penelope* Two pre-tour at Shey Marshes.

**Mallard** *Anas platyrhynchos* Several seen at Shey Marshes.

**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta* One male pre-tour at Shashi Bridge.

**Eurasian Teal** *Anas crecca* One at Chogmalsar Bridge and one on the Indus River near Nemmu.

**Red-crested Pochard** ◊ *Netta rufina* Two males at Shey Marshes, pre-tour.

**Common Merganser (Goosander)** *Mergus merganser* Several at various points along the Indus River.

**Himalayan Snowcock** ◊ *Tetraogallus himalayensis* Seen most days in the mountains, with great views at Hemis.

**Chukar Partridge (Chukar)** *Alectoris chukar* Seen regularly, with >200 in the fallow fields at Hemis Shukpachan.

**Tibetan Partridge** ◊ *Perdix hodgsoniae* More than 50 seen at Gya Village, pre-tour.

**Grey Heron** *Ardea cinerea* One pre-tour at Chogmalsar Bridge.

**Bearded Vulture (Lammergeier)** *Gypaetus barbatus* Seen almost daily in small numbers.

**Himalayan Vulture (H Griffon V)** *Gyps himalayensis* One adult at Hemis and one juvenile seen twice around Ulley.

**Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos* Seen almost daily.

**Eurasian Sparrowhawk** *Accipiter nisus* Three. The best at Hemis Shukpachan where one caught a Fire-fronted Serin.

**Common Moorhen** *Gallinula chloropus* Several scattered sightings.

**Eurasian Coot (Common C)** *Fulica atra* Seen at Shey Marshes.

**Ibisbill** ◊ *Ibidorhyncha struthersii* Super views at Chogmalsar Brige.

**Solitary Snipe** ◊ *Gallinago solitaria* A pair pre-tour at Shashi Bridge and one flushed by Michael in Stock Valley.

**Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus* A few along the Indus River.

**Common Redshank** *Tringa totanus* Seen pre-tour along the Indus River.

**Common Greenshank** *Tringa nebularia* Seen pre-tour along the Indus River.

**Rock Dove (R Pigeon)** *Columba livia* Seen regularly.

**Hill Pigeon** ◊ *Columba rupestris* Seen at Stock Valley.

**Eurasian Eagle-Owl** *Bubo bubo* Seen twice on a day roost at Stock Valley.

**Common Kestrel** *Falco tinnunculus* Distant views of a pair at Ulley Valley.

**Eurasian Magpie** *Pica pica* Seen daily.

**Red-billed Chough** *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* Seen daily at Stock Valley.

**Alpine Chough (Yellow-billed C)** *Pyrrhocorax graculus* Good views in the Ulley area.

**Large-billed Crow** *Corvus macrorhynchos* One pre-tour at Shey Marshes.

**Cinereous Tit (Grey T)** *Parus cinereus* Pairs were seen at several sites.

**Horned Lark (Shore L)** *Eremophila alpestris* Seen on the Lekir Plains and at Hemis Shukpachan.

**Eurasian Wren** *Troglodytes troglodytes* Seen on most days.

**Wallcreeper** *Tichodroma muraria* Three sightings in the Ulley area, the last of which was superb.

**Black-throated Thrush** *Turdus atrogularis* Seen at Spituk and Hemis Shukpachan.

**Red-throated Thrush** *Turdus ruficollis* One male alongside the previous sp at Hemis Shukpachan was a write-in.

**Blue Whistling Thrush** *Myophonus caeruleus* One at Spituk.

**Güldenstädt's Redstart** ♀ (White-winged R) *Phoenicurus erythrogaster* Common in the valleys.

**Brown Dipper** *Cinclus pallasii* Several seen well along the Ulley River.

**House Sparrow** *Passer domesticus* Seen at Stock Village and Hemis Shukpachan.

**Black-winged Snowfinch** ♀ *Montifringilla adamsi* Two brief sightings in the Lekir area.

**Robin Accentor** ♀ *Prunella rubeculoides* Common around upland villages.

**Brown Accentor** ♀ *Prunella fulvescens* Common at Ulley.

**Black-throated Accentor** ♀ *Prunella atrogularis* A group of about 7 seen at Shashi Bridge.

**Citrine Wagtail** *Motacilla citreola* One male pre-tour at Chogmalsar Bridge. Ssp *calcarata*.

**White Wagtail (Masked W)** *Motacilla [alba] personata* Rather common.

**Mongolian Finch** *Bucanetes mongolicus* Two flocks seen in the Lekir area.

**Plain Mountain Finch** ♀ *Leucosticte nemoricola* One at Basgo and another at Hemis Shukpachan (LO).

**Streaked Rosefinch** ♀ (Eastern Great R) *Carpodacus rubicilloides* A pair at Spituk didn't stay long.

**Great Rosefinch** ♀ (Spotted G R) *Carpodacus [rubicilla] severtzovi* One male at Stock Valley and a pair at Ulley.

**Twite** *Linaria flavirostris* Large numbers in the Ulley area.

**Red-fronted Serin** ♀ (Fire-fronted S) *Serinus pusillus* Seen almost daily, with hundreds at Hemis Shukpachan.

## Mammals

**Woolly Hare** *Lepus oiostolus* Three near Lekir and four at Hemis Shukpachan.

**Lage-eared Pika** *Ochotona macrotis* Two sightings at Stock Valley.

**Snow Leopard** *Panthera uncia* Three sightings involving four cats, on Days 1, 3 and 13!

**Gray Wolf (Wolf)** *Canis lupus* Two distantly for some at Akyar Valley, and three near Lekir on our return to Leh.

**Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes* One at night at our camp at Stock Valley.

**Siberian Ibex** *Capra sibirica* Seen daily in the Ulley area, with our best views in Akyar Valley.

**Mouflon** *Ovis orientalis* Locally called Urial. Four encounters, the best near Ulley.

**Bharal (Blue Sheep)** *Pseudois nayaur* Seen daily in Stock Valley, with one excellent encounter.



Wallcreeper was one of the top birds seen (Gus Mills)

Some of the highlights from Ladakh - Eurasian Eagle-Owl, Solitary Snipe and three of our four Snow Leopards (Michael Mills)



## TAXONOMIC NOTES

### BIRDS

**Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*** Many authors use the name Common Teal for this species, but it has been renamed following the splitting off of the North American form *carolinensis* under the name Green-winged Teal.

**Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica*** Some authors use the name Black-billed or Common Magpie for this species, but following the splitting off of the North American form *hudsonia* (Black-billed or American Magpie), the residual *P. pica* is best called Eurasian Magpie.

**Cinereous (or Grey) Tit *Parus cinereus*** Many authors lump this form in Great Tit *P. major*, but the complex is increasingly treated as three species: Great Tit *P. major* (Europe to Siberia), Japanese Tit *P. minor* (Eastern Tibetan Plateau east to Japan) and Cinereous (or Grey Tit) *P. cinereus* (E Iran to SE Asia).

**Masked Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] personata* & Himalayan Wagtail *Motacilla [alba] alboides*** The IOC and most authors lump this form in White Wagtail *M. alba*. Recently, some authors have proposed that the various forms in the White Wagtail *M. alba* complex should be split off as separate species. Whilst we have not totally adopted this treatment, we have treated each of the proposed splits as 'allospecies'. Each allospecies has a distinct English name (most of which were already in widespread colloquial use) and is identified in its scientific name by a trinomial with the superspecies name preceding it in square brackets. We have adopted this treatment to facilitate the accurate recording of the forms encountered.

**Spotted Great Rosefinch *Carpodacus severtzovi*** This form was formerly lumped in Caucasian Great Rosefinch *C. rubicilla*, with the name Great Rosefinch being used for the enlarged species.