

Into the Land of the Snow Leopard

Contributed by Jos

Last Updated Sunday, 25 November 2012

The Grey Ghost of the Himalaya, the Snow Leopard is a feline of almost mystical status. Rare, elusive, restricted to the some of the world's highest and most remote locations, this truly is the Holy Grail of the big cats. Hiking into the high altitudes of Ladakh, this report outlines our attempts in October 2012 to find the cat, a journey into stunning landscapes and memorable wildlife encounters.

Two years earlier I had read in awe of a mid-winter trip to the remote mountains of Kyrgyzstan, target the mystical Snow Leopard, a feline just oozing an aura to fire up the imagination. A trip of amazing hardship and endurance, it harked back to the travels of bygone eras, battling temperatures of minus 25, vehicles lost in washed out roads and living conditions that challenged even the hardiest of folks. They failed to see the elusive cat, but what an amazing trip it was, I was impressed! Fast forward to April 2012, a message arrived in my inbox, 'Planning an expedition to Ladakh to look for Snow Leopard, interested?'. 'Ooo er, not half', thought I, also thinking 'Gee, this will be expensive!' In my little mental map, I had placed Ladakh somewhere on the Tibetan side of the Himalaya, the mere flights thereby costing an arm and leg. Ladakh is actually in India, albeit in just about the most remote corner of the country. It took me all of ten minutes to decide this trip was for me, perhaps a whole day to commit myself to the endeavour.

Fast forward another six months, it was early winter in the Himalaya and the team was assembled, all the preparations done - six hardy souls ready to brave altitude sickness, possibilities of snow and temperatures likely to hit minus 15 or below. A thirteen-day expedition, the basic plan was to acclimatise at 3520 metres for a couple of days in Leh, also allowing us to do a little birding in the Indus Valley, then hike into the remote Hemis region, camping for ten days at an altitude a little short of 4000 metres. From the camp, a rugged patch of terrain at the base of valleys known to harbour the cat, we would hike out each day to reach high vantage points to scan the vast desolate landscapes, peaks rising to 6000 metres towering around us. Somewhere out there, in this land of the Snow Leopard, the magical animal would surely see us. Whether we saw the cat however, was quite a different matter - a couple of years earlier at this locality, it had taken one film crew fourteen weeks to see their first Snow Leopard. We had just ten days.

The Team:

- Mark Andrews, UK national, global birder and organiser of this trip.

- Myself, UK national, Lithuania-based.

- Gareth Knass, Kevin Bryan and Pete Coe, all UK nationals.

- Dale Forbes, Head of Marketing, Swarovski Optiks, based in Austria. Two weeks earlier, Dale had kindly sent top of the range Swarovski gear to each of us by courier. At least if we failed to find Snow Leopard, we wouldn't be able to blame our optics - between us, we had just about the best sweep of scopes and binoculars available anywhere in the world!

Ground Operations:

Expertly conducted by the very amicable Phunchok Tsering and his Ladakh-based company, Exotic Travels. Not only did he provide all the tents and logistics to get us in to the region, including vehicles and donkey trains, he also assembled us a top-class team that included Ladakh's foremost tracker of Snow Leopards, the amazing sharp-eyed Smanla. Additional members of the ground team included a master extrodinaire of the camp, always a smile, even at 6.00 a.m. when delivering tea to we freezing souls in our tents; a chief with miraculous abilities to conjure up the most incredible of meals from a tent half way up the Himalaya mountains, cordon-blue indeed; along with two assistants to the chief, also responsible for helping to deliver a piping hot meal to wherever we had wandered to during the day! All in all, incredible service. Basic Itinerary

Due to inconvenient flight times from eastern Europe, I would have struggled to catch the internal flight from Delhi to Leh, so I decided to add a little appetiser to my trip, a few days in the excellent wetlands of Bharatpur, a locality that basked at a pleasant 35 C and was absolutely packed with breeding waterbirds, a pleasant start indeed. Likewise, after the main event, I delayed my departure from India and travelled across to Ranthambhore in Rajasthan, a locality good for birds and also the other of India's iconic felines, the Tiger.

Ever the optimists, we also had a 'Plan B' should we be lucky enough to encounter a Snow Leopard in the first few days - this would entail a drive and hike to another extremely remote locality high on the Tibetan Plateau, an area with salt lakes and the chances Tibetan Wild Ass, Wolf and Black-necked Crane. The Report: For ease of reading, this report is divided into three parts: Part One. Bharatpur & Surrounds. Four days at the Keoladeo Bird Sanctuary, along with the River Yumina aside the Taj Mahal in Agra. [CLICK HERE](#) to read Part Two. The Quest for the Snow Leopard. Two weeks in the wilds of Ladakh, a true adventure at altitude. [CLICK HERE](#) to read. Part Three. Ranthambhore and Tigers. A few days in

and around Ranthambhore National Park in Rajasthan. [CLICK HERE](#) to read.