

Part Two. Ladakh, the Quest for Snow Leopard.

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Trudging the high altitude expanses of the Himalaya for near two weeks, a trip of endurance seeking out the mystical Snow Leopard. A world of amazing beauty, a land harbouring mouth-watering specialities such as Ibisbill, Guldenstadt's Redstarts, exotic snowfinches and oddles more, not to forget a few classy mammals. A very nice trip it was, an adventure too.

17 October. Leh. Early morning departure for Leh, capital of Ladakh. A spectacular flight over the snow-decked Himalaya, the final drop into Leh however not one I would wish to do in poor weather, the plane passing low over a rugged mountain ridge before banking and sliding down into a rather narrow valley. And then, just when you think you are about to land, a whacking great rock with a monastery on top sits smack bang in front of the runway! Three degrees celsius on arrival, bright and sunny. Leh was to serve as base for acclimatisation, two days at this 3250 metre point before climbing over the following days. Day one acclimatisation, much to my distress, was defined as meaning staying put, no strenuous activity and no birding hikes! To my way of thinking, that was baloney, ambling around at a moderate altitude is well within reasonable limits I deemed. So, after a pleasant sojourn in the quaint front garden of our hotel, sipping coffee and enjoying the views, I gave in to my natural tendencies to slip off and begin to explore. Started off with some 'permitted' strolls, first to a small scrubby field just a stone's throw up the slope for a splendid Robin Accentor quietly feeding at the field's edge, and then a hundred metres or so in the other direction to what could best be described as Leh's version of a village pond, albeit almost devoid of water. And on this pool, there lay an a most resplendent prize - a bird of high altitude marsh, and one usually near impossible to locate on the ground, a simply stunning Solitary Snipe quietly probed the shallows of the pool, quite a wow indeed! Visually something like a cross between a Woodcock and a Great Snipe, in behaviour more like a Jack Snipe, this was an unexpected bonus indeed. Adjacent, one Green Sandpiper also paddled about. With that, and accompanied by Dale, it was time for a short hike up through the layered terraces of upper Leh, small plots surrounded by poplars and centred by a gushing stream. This must be a very productive area in spring, but by mid-October, the land is essentially in its winter sleep, plants already withered and brown, birds mostly departed for lower altitudes and a general silence engulfing all. Though the grand total of species amounted to mere fourteen, the sparkling blue skies and assortment including two more Robin Accentors, a Blue Whistling Thrush and tumbling flocks of Alpine Chough did make for a most pleasant afternoon. Best of the rest included Crag Martins, Mountain Chiffchaffs, personata White Wagtails and several Black Redstarts. So that was basically day one in the mountains, an easy affair all within a relatively short distance of the hotel. Not bad at all. 18 October. Leh.

One of the main rivers in Ladakh, the Indus is a most picturesque affair, a series of braided channels, complete with gentle rapids, shingle banks and adjacent meadows with willow groves and thickets of berry-laden bushes, the latter all decked out in autumn colours. A little after dawn, the temperature just few degrees below freezing, so we arrived aside this Indus River, day two of our acclimatization about to begin. In days previous, Ibisbill had been seen on the shingle banks at this location, so as we piled out of the minibus, all eyes were on the shallows for this almost mystical of birds. Scanning the nearby areas, White Wagtails of a couple of races darted across the sand and a few Green Sandpipers fed in quiet corners, but no sign of Ibisbill. We split up and began to wander, I following the river downchannel. All too soon, however, thoughts of Ibisbill were being waylaid - the bushes were absolutely dripping with Guldenstadt's Redstarts, right little gems. Feasting on berries, sitting atop the bushes, playing chase in the morning sun, dozens of gaudy males, lesser numbers of the more subtle females, what a treat. And in their midst, one male Streaked Rosefinch and a Black-throated Thrush.

No Ibisbill, so I walked back to the start point, the others also beginning to filter back from their explorations. Over a two-way radio, news crackled in ... 'Ibisbill upchannel, near a small bridge'. Before we had time to sort out the location though, the same or another appeared on a small channel right where we were. Superb bird, feeding with a Greenshank and Green Sandpiper, it certainly looked most dapper in the sun, a glorified pebble on legs. Perhaps an hour we stood there, not only an Ibisbill in front, but also assorted birds dropping in to drink, the spoils including two Brown Accentors,

several Robin Accentors, a few Black-throated Thrushes and the odd Mountain Chiffchaffs, a class morning indeed.

Two Pallas's Gulls flew down the river, a Black-winged Stilt appeared at the river's edge, time to return to the hotel for a late breakfast. Much of the rest of the day I again explored the upper parts of Leh town, picking a route through the small terraced meadows and stands of poplar. Similar birds to those of the day before - a single Blue Whistling Thrush, at least ten Robin Accentors, about 15 Mountain Chiffchaffs and the Solitary Snipe still on the pool, but also two most distinctive nepalensis Winter Wrens, dusky grey versions of the familiar European bird. Late afternoon, a cultural tour of hilltop monastery, can't say I actually went in, then a quick return to the Indus River - one Tickell's Thrush this afternoon, four Streaked Rosefinches, an impressive seven Ibisbill and, the first mammals of Ladakh, one Red Fox and one Nubra Pika, a slight question mark remaining over the identification of this latter mammal.

Acclimatization over, next day we would depart, a drive and a hike taking us to our destination. 19 October. The Quest for Snow Leopard, Day One. Expecting a rugged ride up rocky slopes in four-wheel drives, the first little segment of our ascent was a cushy deal - a brand new slither of asphalt winding up the mountain and taking us from Leh to the beginnings of Hemis National Park, stops on route for scenic views over the Indus river and our first Bharal (Blue Sheep). And that is where the luxury stopped! At the road's end, out we all piled, six would-be leopard spotters, one expert tracker, one cook, two assistants and one camp master extraordinaire...and humongous piles of gear! Quite a sight, especially given I usually squeeze my entire trip load into a bad small enough to go hand baggage on the airlines!

Fortunately we did not need to carry everything, Punchok vanishing off to the nearby hamlet to arrange donkeys to be the unfortunate beasts of burden. Whilst the donkeys must have been groaning at the sight of the load, Dale and I slipped off for a exploration - Hill Pigeons and Chukars co-operative, a Black Redstart flicking in scrub and ...a large cat footprint on a dusty track, the first sign of Snow Leopard! Back at the group, the donkeys were a sorrowful sight - each just four little squat legs poking out from beneath mountains of bags, a head and pair of ears at the front. I regret to confirm however my pity did not extend to opting to haul my own bags! With the donkey train setting off at impressive pace, the rest of us ambled up the valley, steep slopes on both sides, a rocky river bed our path. Red-fronted Serins flitted up on occasion, Brown Accentors too, a Golden Eagle soared overhead. The hike was actually easier than I was expecting and in barely an hour or so, we rounded a bend to find the donkeys already unloading, we had reached camp! A superb location, sandwiched between two of the best valleys for Snow Leopard, our half dozen tents were soon sprouting from the otherwise arid rocks, a kitchen tent and dining tent also pitched. Lammergeiers and Golden Eagle welcomed us in, a Saker also over a towering peak just beyond. Good news had already circulated, a local herding his horses had reported a Snow Leopard crossing the valley this very morning, we were truly in the Land of the Snow Leopard now, a feeling of excitement and optimism rippled through camp. A tristis Chiffchaff worked streamside shrubs, two absolutely stunning White-browed Tit-Warblers appeared just adjacent. All the colours of a Lilac-breasted Roller sandwiched into a midget-sized, right little crackers they are!

Camp pitched, tea already brewed and downed, it was time for our first explorations, a hike into the neighbouring Husing Valley. Fresh Snow Leopard tracks in the lower valley, Smanla then checked the Snow Leopard Conservancy camera traps higher in the valley for recent movements - some right juicy images from a couple of weeks earlier, but nothing had past the camera on the previous sixteen days. Much of the afternoon we sat upon a high ridge to gaze at the cliffs all around, a vast vista of rock faces, scree slopes and ledges that could so easily conceal a cat in a million and more nooks and crannies, the challenge before us was daunting! Lammergeiers again overhead, a small flock of Brown Accentors near a stone corral, a Mountain Chiffchaff in scrubby stuff. By 4.30 p.m., though dark was till an hour and a half away, the sun had dipped beneath the peaks, boy did it get cold quickly! Chukars chattered away, back to camp we went, optimism riding high.

First encounters with the multi-course meals that our chef was to create everyday, impressive affairs that blended everything from Chinese and Indian dishes through to local Ladakh specialities and Western additions. I am usually completely indifferent when it comes to food, but even I could not fault this! 20-22 October. The Quest, Days Two-Four. Clambering out of sub-zero tents at dawn into a lunar landscape of high altitude mountains, first port of call each morning was the breakfast tent, steaming chai awaiting, muesli and toast or pancakes. Thereafter the endurance would begin, hikes into the adjacent Husing Valley the favourite, Tarbung an alternative. Regardless of which however, long hard days in search of our Snow Leopard, moderately arduous hikes and climbs to high vantage points for umpteen hours of scanning endless rockfaces and scree slopes. With cold a constant companion and the thin airs making each additional metre of ascent a slight struggle, this was not exactly a stroll in the park! Despite acclimatisation, three persons suffered mild altitude sickness, headaches and general feelings of nausea, fortunately I was not one of them. Cracking mountains, but visiting the high Himalaya in winter doesn't exactly lend itself to a notebook creaking under the weight of birds to be stuffed in! Averaged only about 16 or 17 species daily, but for the lack of quantity, quality certainly compensated. Around the camp and in mountain gullies, regular White-browed Tit-Warblers and both Brown and Robin Accentors, whilst up on the high slopes, frequent flocks of Red-fronted Serins and occasional flocks of Brant's Mountain Finches and Tibetan Snowfinches. Also Guldenstadt's Redstarts on a couple of occasions, Wallcreepers on three and Alpine Choughs near constantly overhead, a passing flock of Snow Pigeons too. Amongst the raptor types, Golden Eagles quite common, Lammergeiers a regular feature, Himalayan Griffon Vultures from time to time and one Upland Buzzard as well.

As for the Snow Leopard however, our three days of lung-busting action, punctuated by chilly vigils on exposed ridge tops, had resulted in zilch in terms of an actual sighting. Fresh pugmarks bountiful, seemingly of at least two animals, as

well as plenty of scats and scent-marking rocks. Additionally, a conservancy camera trap revealed that a Snow Leopard had passed at 12.20 a.m. on the 21st, its pugmarks showing that it had actually passed within a couple of hundred metres of our camp whilst we slept! Tracks in all directions, up and down slopes we climbed, eyeing the Bharal with hope or simply straining eyes to look at the same rocks yet again, nothing.

Somewhere out there, a Snow Leopard surely watched down upon us, we remained optimistic, especially given the abundance of fresh tracks. 23 October. The Quest, Day Five. A change in the weather, the crisp blue skies of days previous replaced by light flurries of snow and high cloud, peaks nearing 5000 metres blanketed in snow. Tibetan prayer flags were hung over camp, incense lit at a small shrine in the mountain side, hopes that the Leopard God would smile down upon us.

With the change in conditions, a slight change in venue too - fresh Snow Leopard pugmarks led out of the Husing Valley and into the gorge heading towards the Rumbak Valley, a few kilometres to our south. Steep valley sides, high cliffs, tracking was easy, the Snow Leopard had essentially followed the donkey track up the narrow valley bottom. Wallcreeper in this valley, Brown Dippers on the gushing stream, Red-fronted Serins in small parties, one male Guldenstadt's Redstart too. Just short of the Rumbak Valley, we lost the trail of the Snow Leopard, the animal, probably a large male, had turned and climbed the high cliffs, no chance of us productively doing likewise. At the opening out of the Rumbak, we sat and scanned high slopes on all sides, a few Bharal feeding, all unfortunately most content, with no signs of alarm that might indicate a nearby cat. Lammergeiers drifted over the peaks, two Black Kites too. High on the opposite slope, a ridge offered an excellent vantage point over the cliffs, both back to the Rumbak Valley and to a deep valley beyond. Up scree slopes we scrambled, a narrow track taking us across a slightly dodgy slope, altitude 4100 metres. Out of breathe, some more so than others, we arrived on the ridge just before the bright bouncy camp staff also appeared, bringing flasks of tea and lunch, most welcome.

Golden Eagles soared, Lammergeiers active, Alpine Choughs tumbled on the breeze. With a relative abundance of Bharal grazing on slopes at various altitudes, hopes were high that a Snow Leopard might spook the animals, but nothing of it, not a hoof out of place or an alarm call to cut the mountain silence. The main group settled to begin another long spell of scanning, scanning and scanning. Spying a high peak just adjacent, I decided upon a little climb - only a couple of hundred metres higher perhaps, but puff work indeed, lungs were aching by the summit! But what a view, snowy-capped peaks soaring to over 6000 metres to the south, a vast vista of lesser mountains in all directions. Plenty of Snow Leopard scats on the summit, but of the animal naturally nothing. Some compensation however with a splendid flock of Tibetan Snowfinch flitting all round the summit, the browns and whites a treat in the afternoon sun, the skies now turning back to their blue magnificence. All our scanning to no avail, it was time to descend. A long march back to camp, a short cut taking us sliding down a scree slope.

Day five over and still no cat. With the lack of feline success, our optimistic Plan B was effectively out of the window now, there would be no option to depart and travel yonder in search of Tibetan Wild Ass et al. 24 October. The Quest, Day Six. A snow storm early on, the day initially looking like it might be a white-out with no hopes of continuing the search. By 9.00 a.m. however the snow had cleared, the tops sporting a fresh coat of white, but excellent visibility returning to the lower levels. A Snow Leopard had again passed within 150 metres of camp during the night, but the tracks didn't look too promising, the animal having long vanished up slopes prior to dawn.

Back into the Husing Valley for another long day of scanning from our now familiar ridge. Things just didn't seem promising on this day however, there were no fresh tracks leading into the actual valley, there were no Bharal anywhere in sight and by mid-morning I couldn't shake the feeling that we were flogging a dead horse. Himalayan Griffons patrolled the skies, no less than four Lammergeiers quartered, Golden Eagles numbered three and a Steppe Eagle, presumably a southbound migrant, cruised over. The sheer frustration of endless hours of scanning rocks that I felt were not going to produce anything this day was beginning to take its toll, I decided that it was time for me to slightly change my strategy - with the real possibility of missing out on the key feline, I thought it a wise move to simply start enjoying the Himalaya a little more for the simple beauty of the place. Taking a gamble, given that the multiple eyes of the group were far more likely to find a cat than me alone, I nevertheless needed to explore a little more, see some of the other valleys and do more general birding. For this day however, an adjacent slope would be sufficient - a few hundred metres higher, but affording quite different angles, it did seem a good compromise between not abandoning the group and satisfying my wanderlust. A bit of scrambling on hands and knees, rather many rests to grab a breathe here and there, and an hour or so later, up I was, sitting amongst Alpine-type vegetation watching the world beneath. An Upland Buzzard drifted down the valley, a flock of Tibetan Snowfinch flitted across the arid gravels, a Wallcreeper appeared on a rockface and four Guldenstadt's Redstarts occupied a ridge yet further up the slope. Glorious indeed it was up here, a silence unbroken and a view to kill for. No cats of course!

Neither I nor the group far below noted any sign of our quarry this day, I eventually descending again to rejoin the group. One stonking bit of compensation however - arriving back on the ridge, I was most impressed to find the group watching three stunning Himalayan Snowcock, one of the birds strutting his stuff in most royal style, the tail puffed out much like a Capercaillie at lek. Very nice indeed.

Day over, the Snow Leopard continued to live up to its mystical status, a ghost lurking out there somewhere in the

wilds! 25 October. The Quest, Day Seven.

Bright sun again, had been very cold overnight.

Return to Rumbak, tracks again suggesting the movement of a feline in that direction. Five Brown Dippers on the stream, a Wallcreeper once more in the gorge. At the confluence of rivers in the Rumbak Valley, the Snow Leopard yet again had done a bunk, our best guess being straight up the slopes to our side. A bit of indecision amongst our group - with amazing habitat in all directions and a million nooks and crannies for a Snow Leopard to sit and grin upon us, nobody really had any idea where to start the scans. With Rumbak village only a couple of kilometres away, Dale and I decided to break from the main group and explore this quaint mountain hamlet, a mere cluster of about nine or ten homesteads. Incredibly nice, a rustic settlement reachable only by foot or donkey train, it was smiles all around from the hardy locals, plus a little mecca for birdlife. With night temperatures now hitting minus twelve or fourteen and the first snows settling, most birds had long departed for lower altitudes, but in this village, it was positively buzzing - alongside House Sparrows and Magpies, there were Robin Accentors two a penny feeding in the small cattle pens and village alleys, plus Hill Pigeons and a Blanford's Snowfinch in the neighbouring stubble fields and, around a small grindstone to mill grain, several Red-fronted Serins, more Robin Accentors and a couple of Twite. News however, via children in the village, was filtering in from down the valley - a Snow Leopard had been sighted atop a high ridge. Hmm, perhaps time to leave the village! After finally relocating Dale who had vanished into a house for chai with a welcoming family, we set off back down valley to find the main group. Lots of telescopes pointing at the offending spot, a fairly distant col between jagged outcrops, but two hours had now elapsed since the sighting, a sighting that it turned out had not been of a feline performing a tango for the whole group, but rather an extremely brief glimpse by one of our fortunate team members. Kevin had been the lucky guy, a chance scan of the spot revealing a Snow Leopard silhouetted against the sky for all of ten seconds or so before vanishing, not to reappear again. Optimising angles, the team had already split into two - Mark and our top tracker Smanla climbing a small peak to the east of the stream, the others lying flat in their backs in a meadow a little further up the valley. With the cat already AWOL for over two hours, there seemed little point of joining the recliners in the meadow, so Dale and I embarked on a manic climb to absurd altitudes on the west side of the stream. In all honesty, Dale and I were climbing for pure pleasure rather than the possibility of encountering the cat, though pleasure is perhaps not the most optimum of words - for some reason we took probably the most difficult of routes up, gasping for breathe whilst trying to find foothold on slopes that offered little. Dislodged rocks tumbled away, bouncing down towards the valley far below. Looking down was not for the faint hearted, seeing where we would slip if we made a mistake added quite a sense of insanity to our venture. Little dots far below, we then noticed the main group had their scopes trained on us, no doubt thoughts of 'what idiots' running through their minds! Gasping for breathe, the altitude not assisting us, we finally reached a small ridge. A treat of amazing views all around, plus Tibetan Snowfinches tumbling through the skies and an amazing battle between two Lammergeiers playing out far below, it truly felt we were walking in the Lands of the Snow Leopard.

A little more climbing and we reached a further ridge, views now extending to the far Indus Valley many kilometres distant. We then began our descent, somehow again choosing a most dodgy of routes, one that took us straight down a slope of hard-packed gravel scree, virtually nothing to get any grip on with a slide below that would certainly take us several hundred metres. A little on the gingery side, slowly slowly we edged down, not a foot wrong. At the slope's bottom, the rest of our group having long departed, we paused to watch the sun setting, then walked back through the gorge to our camp under the light of a near full moon.

Seven days of tough searching, one brief glimpse of the cat by a single person, not looking so good. The cats were all around us, nightly tracks bringing them to within stone's throw of our camp, the Snow Leopards were playing games. We had just three days more. 26 October. The Quest, Day Eight. The team's plan was again to stake out the Husing Valley, a strategy that would once more entail many hours sitting upon the same ridge from morning to dusk scanning the now-familiar slopes. The thought of this did not appeal to me, so I opted for an alternative path this day, leaving the group and instead exploring the Tarbung Valley. With Smanla in the main group, this obviously had great potential to backfire on me, the chances of them encountering a cat far better than mine.

Within an hour or so however I would be heading back to the Husing Valley! At the very beginning of the Tarbung Valley, the sun still to rise above the crags behind me, I paused to watch a small flock of Brown Accentors, then took the opportunity to scope all the slopes in sight. A few Bharal in the Tarbung, but nothing to suggest anything amiss, so I turned my scope back towards the lower slopes of the Husing Valley still visible in the distance. It was certainly a kilometre away, perhaps even considerably more, but a few minutes scoping, then a sharp gasp, a movement on the slope. 'A cat, oh crap a Snow Leopard'. Strangely, no wave of excitement or even relief knocked me off my perch, I think simply down to the distance involved - immensely privileged I did feel however, I sitting alone sharing the secret world of this most mystical of beasts. Whilst it was basically just a shape at this distance, the features barely distinguishable, a Snow Leopard it absolutely was, moving slowly along a top section of the slope on the edge of scree but against a rockface. On two-way radio I tried to contact the group, no response. I tried again, no response. It turned out they were in a deep gully at that stage. The cat continued to move along the slope, but soon the show would be over ...the sun broke the horizon, I was looking directly into the sun, the flare killing my scope dead - the cat, the scree and the entire slope vanished into a white-out, I could see nothing. Absolutely nothing.

'Oh crap, what to do? Run like manic back to the Husing?' I tried the radio again, 'Mark, Smanla, anyone in the Husing

Valley, you've got a leopard directly above you'. The radio crackled into life, they were in contact. Giving directions when at least a kilometre apart was never going to be easy, not least that I could no longer see anything on the slope and did not know if the cat was still present. Eventually, amid much confusion over the exact spot, Smanla's local assistant came running from the Husing to my position, then radioed back the location far better than I ever could. It turned out that I had misunderstood the terrain, had completely ballsed up and was telling them to look in the wrong direction. Oops, apologies. It was now forty-five minutes since my sighting, the cat was gone.

Frustration, first that after eight days of searching, the sighting was so distant that it was little more a grey shape, apt though I suppose for an animal often referred to as the 'Grey Ghost', and secondly frustrating that I had messed up on the directions - had I not, perhaps the team might have pinpointed the animal, maybe I would even have had time to return to the Husing in time to get better views. Ah well, Red-fronted Serins fed adjacent, Brown Accentors still flitted about in the dust. As it was, when I returned to the Husing Valley, only two of the team remained on the ridge, the rest attempting to find the cat by climbing a gorge behind the slope. Radio messages had echoed back before reception was lost - they had found fresh tracks, but apparently contradictory, no obvious direction. Some hours later they returned with further news that was perhaps even more frustrating - high in the gorge, they had found the remains of a Bharal kill, Himalayan Griffon Vultures and Lammergeiers still present, a Red Fox lingering as they approached. This should have been excellent news, the finding of a kill almost certainly means the finding of a cat. Unfortunately however, the kill was three to four days old, now stripped bare of meat ...a Snow Leopard had been feasting just up the valley from us for several days! Now we understood why Himalayan Griffons had been quartering the skies a few days earlier! If only we had found that kill earlier, our quest for close quarter encounters with Snow Leopard would almost certainly have been over.

We stayed on the ridge till dusk, no return of the cat. It was now eight days gone, four of the team still with nothing, one of us with a brief glimpse and myself, though still very grateful, hardly bowled over with the views obtained. Our chances were slipping away, a third encounter on such a short trip usually just doesn't happen. Two more days to go. 27 October. The Quest, Day Nine. I don't learn from experience! With the team once again planning for a day on the ridge in the Husing Valley, I again opted for an alternative! Way beyond radio range and with no hope of knowing if they encountered a cat, I fancied a full day hike to the upper reaches of the Rumbak Valley, my basic idea being to dump my scope and walk to the area, spent a few hours birding the valley around and beneath the village, then attempt to climb to the pass at 4900 metres, hopefully finding a route over the top that would let me drop back into the gorge at the top of the Husing Valley. Smanla was sceptical that I would ever find a route through the jagged peaks that separated the valleys, I wasn't much more confident.

Most pleasant was the wander, both White-breasted and Brown Dippers active on the valley stream, a whole flock of gorgeous Guldenstadt's Redstarts prancing about a small meadow and both Alpine and Red-billed Choughs in flocks above the village. Strolling through the crumbling homesteads, again Robin Accentors proved to be just about the most numerous birds, at least 30 in the villages alleys, along with Twite once again, as well as the grey race Great Tits and bunches of House Sparrows. Crossing back towards the meadows, suddenly a dash of a bird hurtling down the valley, coveys of Chukar scattering in panic, a swirl of Hill Pigeons rising to arc across the valley, down the bird came, a stunning Sakar Falcon pushing all before it. A few powerful wingbeats and the falcon was gone, cruising off into the distance, a calm returning to the valley. A flock of 45 Hill Pigeons soon resettled to feed in the meadows, the Guldenstadt's Redstarts returned to rock tops.

Ahead the land began to rise, snowy caps beckoning, a sod of a climb undoubtedly waiting for me. As the village slowly slipped into the lands far below, my lungs again began to 'appreciate' the increasing altitude, the terrain nevertheless rather easy-going. As the altitude increased, so the frequency of birds continued to decrease - occasional Lammergeiers and Golden Eagles, but above about 4500 metres, the passerines effectively ran out, the grand total thereafter being a few Alpine Choughs, three Red-fronted Serins, about 15 Plain Mountain Finches and, best of the lot, a flock of about 40 Blanford's Snowfinches. At about 4700 metres, here I am guessing, I hit the snow line. Stunning landscapes, but not a single bird to liven the climb. Worse still, the hint of a path I had been following petered out and in front of me rose a wall of vertical rocks in all directions, I simply could not imagine being able to scale that, even less knowing which bit to try and climb over. I should also mention I was in sandals without socks, the snow was not conducive to warm tootsies! Perching myself down on a rock, I scanned the snowfields to my side, totally criss-crossed by animal tracks, closer inspection revealing most to be Bharal, but also Red Fox and, naturally enough, Snow Leopard too. 'T'was early afternoon and there was no way I was going to conduct a suicide mission to try and find the route over the top to the Husing Valley, the route back via the lower valley a far more sensible option. In a mere two hours or so, I had back-tracked almost all the way back to camp, it was now 3.30 p.m. and I was fairly shattered, quite a hike now behind me. I confess that the thought of an early return to my tent did appeal, but as I passed the opening to the Husing Valley, I just had that niggling feeling that the group had found itself a Snow Leopard, how could I go back to camp and ignore that?! So, adding extra punishment to my legs and my pace certainly slowing, I pushed myself into the Husing and sought out the group. A half hour later, still secretly wishing to retreat to my tent, I hauled myself onto the ridge, the group was there.

Nothing to report, no Snow Leopard, no fresh tracks and no signs of alarm amongst the few Bharal in the valley. My niggling feelings had been wrong! One hour later, now getting cold as the sun dipped behind the mountain, I continued my scans of the mountain, watched my watch and waited for the relief of darkness, ah how welcome that steaming cup of chai would be! 5.00 p.m., Kevin had already left the ridge, retreating to the lower valley to watch another slope, Pete had

dug himself into a hollow some way down the ridge, Mark, Dale and Gareth had set up shop just to my right patiently watching a pair of Bharal pick their way across the slope, the ever-vigilant Smanla with them. Another 20 minutes passed, chill entered my bones, 'Oo just think of that chai', I thought to myself.

The light was beginning to fade a fraction, the day would soon be over. But then something amiss, a glance at the group to my right and all seemed not as it should, a sudden intensity gripping Mark and the others. 'Bloody hell', I suddenly thought, the realisation dawning on me, they were on something, all scopes and binoculars seeming to be frantically searching the slope. Mark swivelled round, urgently indicating me to crouch. 'Bloody hell', I thought again, dropping off the back of the ridge and sneaking up behind them. The two Bharal that they'd been patiently tracking for several hours had suddenly started to alarm, turned in panic and run up the slope, stopping to look back with serious intent. It could only mean one thing, SNOW LEOPARD!!!

But where? All eyes on the slopes, scanning rocks, sweeping the scree. Suddenly Smanla was grabbing a scope, a second later, 'look, look'. A moment later, a second scope on the same spot. You could almost have wept, a mere 150 metres away, not one Snow Leopard, but two Snow Leopards!!! Oh wow, wow, wow ...two fluffy-faced Snow Leopards cuddling up against each other peering straight at us, a long bushy tail sticking out to the left. Yep, that was more like it, the distant images of the day before not a shadow on this, elation bubbling to the surface amongst us all.

There was one minor problem, Pete was not with us, nor was he even in sight. With the two Snow Leopards eyeing our every move, the chances of us managing to attract his attention without spooking the cats were minimal. Gareth edged back to try to retreat him. Moments later cat number one stood, turned round and retreated off the rock, barely a second later cat number two followed suit, the rocks were empty, the ghosts were gone.

Show over, topography and the rapidly approaching night swallowing up the felines, a cruel twist for the one member of the team.

It transpired that the two cats we had been watching were actually the near-adult cubs that had been lurking in the valley for some weeks, the mother also being there when Smanla had initially spotted them. She had already slipped off by the time I laid my eyes on them, but the image of those two cuddling cubs is one that will long remain with me. A lot of celebration that evening amongst most of us, an enormous sense of relief and an understanding of just how lucky we had been, amazing views at almost the last minute of almost the last day. 28 October. The Quest, Day Ten. An hour before dawn, our last full day in the field, one team member still to connect, total silence as we crept back towards the Husing Valley. Maybe, just maybe, the cats would still be in the area, maybe they had even made a kill. Echoes of Chukar rippled down the valley, hints of dawn began to illuminate the upper slopes. Stalling a while not to arrive too early, we were in place just as the clarity and light were sufficient for the task in hand. Brown Accentors flitted from valley shrubbery, the Chukars began their morning prowls.

As for the slopes however, nothing. The Bharal had moved on, so too the Snow Leopards, tracks suggesting the family had climbed the opposite cliff and presumably vanished somewhere towards Rumbak. After the highs of the day before, and the nine days of slog that it had taken, few of us had any real appetite to spend another day sitting on a ridge peering at rocks. By 9.00 a.m., leaving Pete with Smanla for a brave vigil over the scree, the remainder of us drifted back to camp to spend the day relaxing, birding the valley and fulfilling a promise to the camp staff ...to play a game of cricket! I am rubbish at cricket at the best of times, but playing hardened nationals of India at an altitude little short of 4000 metres did little to enhance my reputation, my crowning glory being to hit the ball for six, but in the process automatically disqualifying myself as the ball sailed over the tents to land in the river, never to be found again. Brave defense by Dale, valiant attempts by Mark, but boy was our chef a wicked player!

Some birds too. Lammergeier, Golden Eagle and Sparrowhawk provided occasional distraction, an afternoon excursion back to the Husing added little else. Unfortunately for Pete, no sign of Snow Leopard this day, the slopes remaining quiet till dusk. 29 October. The Quest, Day Eleven.

Exit day, a donkey train miraculously arriving mid-morning to bear our loads for the hike back down the valley. As the camp was dismantled, I sat and photographed Chukars and Robin Accentors, scanned the slopes around and pondered the trip, very nice it had indeed been. An absolute privilege to simply be in the wilds of Ladakh, the blue sky and stunning mountains a pleasure before even thinking about the added jewels, the White-browed Tit-Warblers, the accentors, the snow finches. And the cat. A couple of hours later we were back at the trail head, civilisation re-entered, a vehicle waiting to take us back to Leh for a final evening. Guldenstadt's Redstarts and White-breasted Kingfishers near the Indus, then a few hours to hang up the binoculars to explore the markets and streets of Leh, this leg of the trip finally over.

Next day, we would all go our separate ways, most flying back to Europe within a day or two, me heading to Rajasthan for the next part of my trip, an adventure in search of birds and the next feline on the list, the iconic Tiger. For 'Part Three' of my trip, [CLICK HERE](#) Ranthambhore and Tigers