

Kingdom of the Snow Leopard plus Corbett & Gir Extensions

Destination: North West India **Duration:** 16 Days **Dates:** 24th Nov – 10th Dec



Spotting 3 snow leopards during the tour



Close up encounters of 2 foraging stone martens by spotlight in camp



Enjoying spectacular mountain views on the flight into Leh, Ladakh



Hiking around Hemis National Park in search of Snow Leopards



Two great sightings of mountain weasels in Hemis National Park



Having great views of numerous golden eagles and Lammergeiers



Tracking with the scientist Jigmet Dadu of the Snow Leopard Conservancy



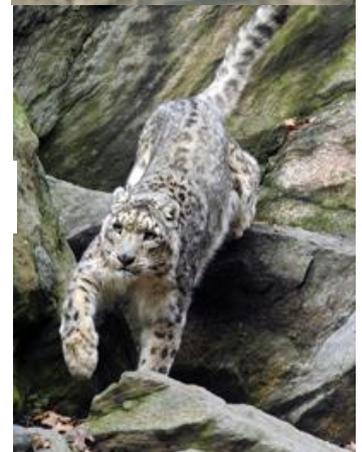
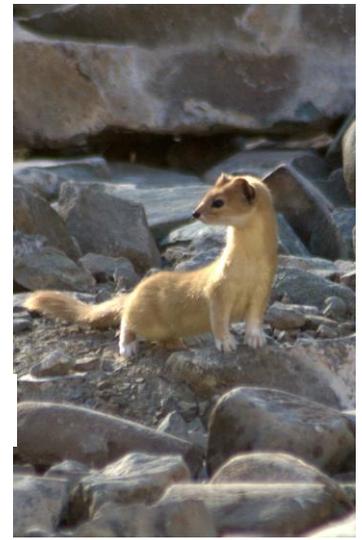
Seeing the beginnings of a Snow Leopard hunt on a group of Asiatic Ibex



Seeing 4 Himalayan Griffon Vultures back in the mountains for over 10 years



Exploring a new location (Ullay Valley) and spotting 2 Snow Leopard here



Tour Leader / Guides

Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)
Nawang Tsering (Naturalist Guide in Ladakh)
Jigmet Dadu (Snow Leopard Conservancy Guide)
Tashi Wangchuk (Snow Leopard Conservancy Guide)

Participants

Ms. Lesley Cupitt

Overview

Day 1: Delhi

Days 2-4: Leh

Days 5-12: Hemis NP

Days 13-14: Ullay Valley

Day 15: Leh

Day 16: Delhi

Day 17: Home





Day by Day Breakdown

Overview

India is one of the best countries in the world for watching cats, there is a wide variety of species which live in very different habitats. From the Asiatic lions and leopards of the dry Teak forests and arid deserts of Gujurat to the famous and beautiful tigers of the central Sal forests. However one species tops these in terms of adventure, true wilderness and elusiveness. This species is of course the Grey Ghost; otherwise known as the snow leopard.

And this tour is focused on trying to find this magical animal. Although this is a difficult task we travelled to some of the best places at the best times of year to help our cause. Starting in the autonomous state of Ladakh in north west India we headed into the large Himalayan national park of Hemis. With the expert help of our local Ladakhi naturalist guide Nawang Tsering as well as scientists which work for the ground breaking Snow Leopard Conservancy (Tashi Wangchuk and Jigmet Dadu) we set off each day into the various valleys around the Rumbak river. This area is home to a small population of well studied snow leopards and during the winter season offers the best chances of seeing snow leopards anywhere currently known in the world. However as we found out this does not mean that they are easy to see by any stretch of the imagination. Anytime between November and March are good times but the very best would come in February – March when these cats enter their mating season and the movement of animals is far higher. As the males move far and wide in search of females as they enter their short oestrous cycle.

During our stay in Hemis we hiked the Tarbung, Hysin, Karlung and Rumbak valleys numerous times to try and find signs of or spot this elusive cat. As we were finding this area difficult (just one spotted at night above camp), Jigmet decided to take us and another group who were sharing the valley to Ullay Valley; where there is another population of snow leopards although they are harder to find. As it happened we managed to find two, with the expert help of our guides and of course Noorboo whose home-stay we were staying at during our time in Ullay Valley.

This trip report documents on a day by day account the highlights of the tour as well as including a sightings log of all the species seen and identified.



Day 1 **Delhi**

Arrival

As the flight into Delhi was not until early in the morning the night before, today was a laid back day with just a trip into the shopping and back packers hub of Delhi; the Paran Ganj. After buying a couple of bags and changing money we stopped for lunch at the hidden away Metropolis Restaurant. Later that day we met with Arun my ground agent in India and discussed the tour and possibility of spotting this king of the Himalayas.

Day 2 **Leh**

Travel & Acclimatization

This morning we rose very early and headed to the domestic airport whilst hoping that fog held off long enough for the flight to take off. Luckily the flight got off pretty much on time and after a very spectacular descent into the mountainous town of Leh we arrived at the small airport. The mountain views on the approach are stunning and with a view which takes in Pakistan, Afganistan, Krygystan and Tibet the natural beauty of this part of the world is there for everyone to appreciate. As we landed the pilot said that the temperature was -7°C which was a good way to prepare for the colder temperatures in store for us as we head into the mountains in the coming days.

After being transferred to the hotel and settling in we headed to the market for a short acclimatization walk and some shopping. Later on we dined in the hotel where as usual a huge amount of food was provided.



Day 3 **Leh**

Acclimatization & Sightseeing

After breakfast we headed up the 150m towards the largest stupa in Leh, the Gomang Stupa. This is a great way to get used to walking and particularly climbing at altitude. The views from the stupa are beautiful and with a clear blue sky we were able to look over the first hill range to see the far side of the Rumbak valley in the distance where we would be camping in our quest to find Snow Leopards. After Gomang Stupa we drove up to Leh Monastery



(which is a further 200m higher than Gomang Stupa) and the slightly lower Leh Palace. Unfortunately at this time of year most of the sights are closed for the winter, so we had a walk around but were not allowed inside. Afterwards on our way back to the hotel we stopped off to by some playing cards. Then just before dinner we met Nawang Tsering; our naturalist guide for Hemis and he agreed the time and place for meeting tomorrow where we would visit Shey Marshes for some bird watching.

Day 4 **Leh**

Acclimatization & Bird Watching

This morning after breakfast we met with Sam and Nawang and were taken to Shey Marshes. These marshes are a haven for migrating birds in the summer. The Indus River flows through the marshes and at this time of year is pretty much ice free; the ice will solidify the river in a month or so. Despite their not too many species of birds around at this time of year there are certainly plenty of birds. The White-capped Water Redstarts here are in vast numbers and are one of only a few resident birds all year around. We also saw a Solitary Sandpiper as well as a Eurasian Sparrowhawk before we left back for Leh and the hotel. Tomorrow we would start our journey into the mountains.

Day 5 **Hemis National Park**

Wildlife Watching

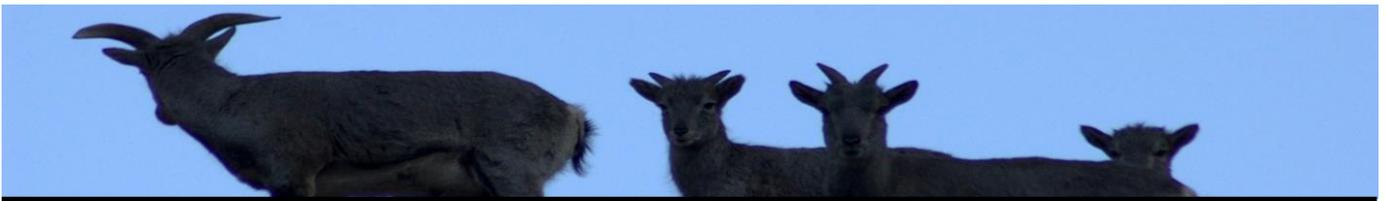
During the mid morning we loaded up the jeep and started on the winding road along the Indus Valley road towards the entrance of Hemis National Park and the small village of Zinchen. This is the last point accessible by vehicle and the rest of the way had to be completed by hiking. The walk is not a particularly long one and with a couple of stops for spotting among the scree slopes and ridge lines the pace was slow and easy. Once we arrived in the camp we had a hot cup of tea and coffee as our camp cook (Dorje) and assistant (Gyalpo) completed our camp and made lunch. As we waited for lunch we had our first view of some Himalayan wildlife here as a large flock of Chukkar foraged around the camp and before we went to Hysin for the first spotting session we got a distant view of a Lammergeier. After lunch we went to the Hysin Valley which is at the south eastern end of the Rumbak Valley. Here we climbed a ridge and began our first session of spotting along the ridge lines and ledges. We saw several flocks of Bharal. This primitive sheep-goat is the most common mammal here during the winter and the main food source of Snow Leopards. We also found a very brave and frantic Pale-grey Shrew which darted past us and under a rock. We got some great close up views of the Shrew before it carried on its way down the slope.

Later in the evening back at camp we ate dinner and retired to our tents. But shortly afterwards the shine of spotlights made me get up and see what was being seen. High above our camp on the western cliff the tell tale blue eyes of a cat were shining. The probable Snow Leopard was not visible for long and by the time I had told Lesley that there was a spotlight the animal had disappeared behind a ridge. The only animal to be found was a lone Red Fox perched on a ledge about 10m above our camp. The Red Foxes are common around the camp and regularly feed off kitchen scraps.

Day 6 **Hemis National Park**

Wildlife Watching

This morning we left for the Tarbung Valley, Nawang had done an early morning reconnaissance into the Hysin to see if there were any fresh prints, scats or scrapes. He didn't find anything so the Tarbung was our chosen valley today. We walked a good way along the valley and spotted along the way. Only a handful of Bharal were seen all day and we had a good view of an immature Lammergeier above the highest point on the Tarbung. We found no signs of Snow Leopards and in the late afternoon we moved our attention to the Hysin Valley (being at the confluence of the Karlung, Rumbak and Hysin Valleys), but again there was no sign of the big cat. After dark a brief spotlighting showed a pair of Red Foxes waiting for everyone to go to sleep so they can feed on the kitchen scraps.



Day 7 **Hemis National Park**

Wildlife Watching

In the morning Nawang scouted the Tarbung and once again there was no fresh sign so we headed into the Hysin and this time a second ridge around 100m further away from the first ridge we had spotted from. We saw a scrape from around 1 week ago along a popular pathway used by Snow Leopards. This was the first evidence of recent Snow Leopard activity. The rest of the day was very quiet with only a small number of Bharal flocks (most of them pretty far off on the Tarbung Valley). We did however meet Tashi who is a naturalist guide for another group as well as a scientist who has worked on several studies of the Snow Leopards here. Tashi coupled with Nawang gave us extra confidence that if there was a Snow Leopard within the valleys that we would probably see it. The rest of the afternoon was quiet and no Snow Leopard were seen, despite a couple of false alarms.



Day 8 Hemis National Park

Rest & Wildlife Watching

This morning Nawang checked the Tarbung and Tashi went into the Hysin to check for Snow Leopard activity here. Once again there was no discernable activity from the night before so after breakfast we left for the Rumbak Valley via the Karlung Valley. Along the way we stopped to see the old Lammergeier nest, this huge stick nest is perched somehow defying gravity high on the vertical cliff side. There is also a frozen waterfall (extra testimony to the cold temperatures at night here). As we continued the walk along the shaded Karlung Valley until we reached the very different landscape of the Rumbak Valley. The rounded hilltops and large open valleys make a refreshing change from the sharp, vertical rock faces of the valleys around camp. We also heard from a couple of the local pony-men that they had seen a couple of Snow Leopards on one of the ridges a couple of days ago. Nawang and Tashi headed up the slope towards the backend of the Tarbung Valley in pursuit of one of these Snow Leopards if they were still in the area. After half an hour or so we decided to follow them up the slope. There were two sets of prints along the slope from the last 24 hours. One set heading up the slope in the direction we were heading and one heading down the slope and into the valley floor. The last direction the Snow Leopard walked was anyone's guess, unless there were two and they moved off in different directions. Either way we followed the trail upwards to a ridge which led to the other end of the Tarbung. After spotting down into this new valley for an hour or two we left and headed back to the entrance to the Rumbak village. Here we saw fresh tracks from Tibetan Wolves from the last night, the Wolves are more common around these wider valleys and they regularly walk through the village and are responsible for over 60% of all livestock predation. We also spotted a Himalayan Griffon Vulture soaring over the rounded hill tops. Vultures are now a rare sight in the Indian Subcontinent and it is refreshing to see them beginning to come back to this area. Later on our return to the camp and after dinner we had another Red Fox visit us.

Day 9 Hemis National Park

Wildlife Watching

This morning Nawang looked in the Tarbung Valley and Tashi explored the Hysin for fresh sign. Once again there was no sign (we were beginning to think that maybe the Snow Leopards were staying too high along the ridges and were too high to see). But we decided that the Tarbung was the best bet for today. We didn't see anything new at during a morning spotting session in the Tarbung, so we came back to the camp for lunch. On our way back to the camp for lunch we met a colleague of Tashi the more senior researcher here and a prominent member of the Snow Leopard Conservancy (Jigmet) who was coming to take over from Tashi. He asked us if we had had any luck with the Snow Leopards and after we explained that we hadn't, he pointed out a couple of different sets of prints along the valley floor from the last 4/5 days as well as spray sites and scrape marks. After lunch we headed up to the Hysin Valley where we only saw a group of 14 Bharal walking across the impossibly steep slopes opposite. As we were up the Hysin, Nawang explored a short section of the Karlung and found a fresh scrape and prints from this morning. This was the best sign we had found of Snow Leopard presence in the area and gave us a renewed sense of expectation for the next day.



Day 10 Hemis National Park

Wildlife Watching

This morning Nawang went into the Tarbung and saw no sign, Jigmet had a little luck in the Hysin so we went through the Karlung and into the Rumbak to spot today. Along the way down the Karlung we spotted both the White-throated Dipper and the Brown Dipper foraging along the half frozen river as well as having a very brave and beautiful golden coloured Mountain Weasel run right on past us on the pathway. That would turn out to be the best wildlife sighting of the day as we stayed around the entrance to the Rumbak Village and Nawang and Jigmet left to track any Snow Leopards along the entire length of the Tarbung Valley. Starting at the Rumbak end of the valley and meeting us back in the camp later that afternoon. When we all met back up later that day we found out that there had been no kill or fresh signs of Snow Leopards across the entire Tarbung Valley. Just a large flock of Bharal at the confluence of the Hysin and Karlung Valleys was the only major mammal life in the afternoon.

Day 11 Hemis National Park

Wildlife Watching

Early this morning Jigmet and Nawang explored the Hysin and Tarbung respectively and Jigmet found 2 fresh sets of prints, one leaving the Hysin and heading towards the Karlung and one heading the opposite direction. The sets of prints were lost as they headed into the Karlung so we decided to send Stenzin (the pony-man) to keep an eye on the Karlung / Rumbak Valley confluence whilst we all went to the furthest ridge in the Hysin Valley to spot all day. Nawang and Jigmet carried on searching further into the Hysin to check for a fresh kill and the possibility of fresh signs. On our return down from the Hysin we clearly saw the fresh tracks heading in the same direction as well as



smelling a fresh scent marked rock. There are a handful of rocks with overhanging edges which the Snow Leopards use frequently to scent mark as snow doesn't collect on the underside and the smell will stay around for much longer. The scent markings were so fresh that there were even some hairs present on the rock, these are left from the cheeks of the Snow Leopard after they have rubbed their cheeks against the rock in the same manner domestic cats rub their faces against objects. Later in the afternoon we went back to the camp and set spotters up all along the camp valley. To the best of our knowledge and the latest tracks we estimated that the Snow Leopard had to be on the east side of the camp or on the Karlung / Hysin confluence. But once again there was no sign of a Snow Leopard.



Day 12 Hemis National Park

Wildlife Watching

Before breakfast Nawang went to spot in the Tarbung and Jigmet into the Hysin, when Nawang came back with no fresh sign from the first section of the Tarbung and Jigmet came back with no evidence that the same Snow Leopard from yesterday had returned to the area we decided that for the rest of the morning it would be best for Lesley to stay in the camp and spot from there whilst Nawang and I headed further up and into the Tarbung to see if any Snow Leopards had come around from the far side of the Tarbung overnight. We didn't see a Snow Leopard in the Tarbung but we did see a very large flock of Bharal (some 27 strong) feeding on one of the rocky meadows. The males were begin to lick and suck their own penis's as well as sniffing aggressively around the females which are both precursors to mating.

On our return to the camp for lunch Lesley mentioned that Jigmet and the other group were thinking of a trip to another area (called Ullay) where there are a similar number of Snow Leopards although they tend to be seen less often. But as there didn't seem to be any around here we thought it would defiantly be worth giving it a try. So the plans were made that night to leave for Ullay tomorrow and spend the last couple of nights there in a homestay and see what we could see. That night in the camp we were visited by two Stone Martens near the camp as they came to feed on kitchen scraps. The Stone Martens coming within a couple of meters of us and allowing for some excellent close up pictures of this usually very difficult to see mammal.

Day 13 Hemis National Park

Wildlife Watching

This morning after breakfast Nawang arrived back from his home in Rumbak village (where he went to make arrangements for the trip to Ullay) and we began to pack up the camp and prepare to leave. Once we were all packed up we headed to Zinchen and waited for our jeep to arrive. During the wait for the vehicle we had two fantastic mammal encounters. Firstly a Royle's Pika ran in between Nawang's legs, underneath Jigmet's car and up the rocky slope on the otherside of the wall. It then proceeded to dive into a small hole in between the loose rocks and disappear. It wasn't long after this when a Mountain Weasel appeared and followed almost the exact same path as the Pika up the rocks looking for the opening of the Pika's burrow. The Weasel then continued to forage around the path for the next 10 minutes or so and we were able to get some excellent close up views of this amazing little predator.

We then loaded up the jeep and drove the 3-4 hours towards the very small village of Ullay. The 4 houses in the village are spread out across the narrow valley which ends with great views across three ridges which are excellent for spotting Snow Leopards. A recent camera trap study in this valley system found at least 8-9 individual Snow Leopards in the area, including a mother and cub. In fact the owner of the homestay we stayed at, Norboo had seen at least one Snow Leopard in every month of this year which raises the possibility of this area becoming a new hotspot for this rare cat. Also here are the impressive Asiatic Ibex, these mountain goats are found here in large numbers but are absent from the slightly lower slopes of Hemis National Park, the other difference in fauna is that the usually coming Bharal are absent here. We were not here for very long when we got our first glimpse of a Snow Leopard. Nawang spotted a suspicious looking shape on a distance rock. Whilst it looked the right colour and there was little else it could have been, it didn't move for a while so were unsure and would have to have a look tomorrow and see if the shape was still there or not. If it had moved I think it would have been a Snow Leopard. However it wasn't long after this when Norboo spotted a Snow Leopard running swiftly down another slope in the direction of a group of Ibex. Unfortunately with it moving fast and then disappearing behind a ridge and no one could find it again in a scope. But with one spotted and one very possible one sighted (although poorly) everyone seemed more confident on what the last day would hold.



Day 14 Hemis National Park

Wildlife Watching

Before sunrise this morning we headed up to the ridge we spotted from last night and the first thing we did was to have a look at the Snow Leopard shape on the rock which Nawang had spotted the day before. The shape was not there and it looked very much like it was a Snow Leopard from yesterday. The major sighting of the early morning was an immature Lammergeier which flew at eye level around the valley before heading out of sight and up into the clouds. We continued our spotting for the rest of the morning and slowly made our way further up the valley towards the far ridgeline. This was because Jigmet wanted to check the top ridge for tracks to see if the Snow Leopard we saw yesterday running down the slope had moved across to the other side of the valley or whether spotting was best served on the same slope as yesterday. We saw plenty of Ibex including some very large males of which a couple were fighting by ramming their huge scimitar shaped horns against each other. After lunch we took a drive down to the other side of the Ullay Valley and have a look around there. On the face of it the valley looked ideal for a cat, the orientation of the valley meant that the sun shone directly into the valley and continued to until late in the afternoon. So you would imagine that any big cat in the area would choose to sunbath and warm up here on the cold winter days. But alas there were no more sightings here and even when we headed back to the homestay we didn't see any sign of Snow Leopards, just some more fighting male Ibex.

Day 15 Leh

Travelling & Rest

Today was fairly uneventful with an early drive back to Leh and the rest of the day dedicated to catching up on emails, laundry and in general getting warm with piping hot water, central heating and plenty of blankets.

Day 16 Delhi

Travelling & Rest

Late this morning we left for a flight back to Delhi. The weather was not too bad and we still got good views over the mountains once we reached a cruising altitude. Once we arrived back in Delhi we made the arrangements for the time of departure to Corbett tomorrow and had the rest of the day to relax.



Day 17 Corbett National Park

Travelling & Wildlife Watching

Around 07:30am we left Delhi and fought through the traffic to get to Corbett National Park around 7 hours north in Uttarakhand. The drive up was relatively straight forward with few traffic jams and little fog in the morning. Once we arrived at the Villas we settled in and then headed straight into the park for an afternoon jeep safari. The trip was around the buffer zone area and the wildlife spotting was ok. We saw a good overview of the herbivores in the park, with Chital, Sambar, Barking Deer, Wild Boar and Rhesus Macaques all seen pretty well. After dinner we arranged a night drive along the Ramnagar Rd which skirts some of the buffer zone. At around 08:00pm we left and drove for a couple of hours up and down the Ramnagar Rd. We spotted lots of Chital, a handful of Sambar and Barking Deer as well as a couple of unidentified animals in deep bush, one looked most likely to be a genet or civet and the second probably a Black-naped Hare.

Day 18 Corbett National Park

Wildlife Watching

After breakfast at around 10:30am we left Leela Villas in the buffer zone of the park and headed into the core zone and to the resort built on the banks of the Dikhala dam. The drive to Dikhala took a couple of hours and is through the park so a pretty good game drive. Other than the usual Chital, Barking Deer, Sambar, Rhesus Macaques, Northern Plains Langurs and Wild Boar we found a large male Gharial basking on the banks of the Ramnagar River as well as three Mugger Crocodiles. We also spotted some good birds including 4 different species of Kingfisher (Eurasian, Pied, White-throated and Crested) as well as both Pallas's Fish Eagles and Grey-headed Fish Eagles.

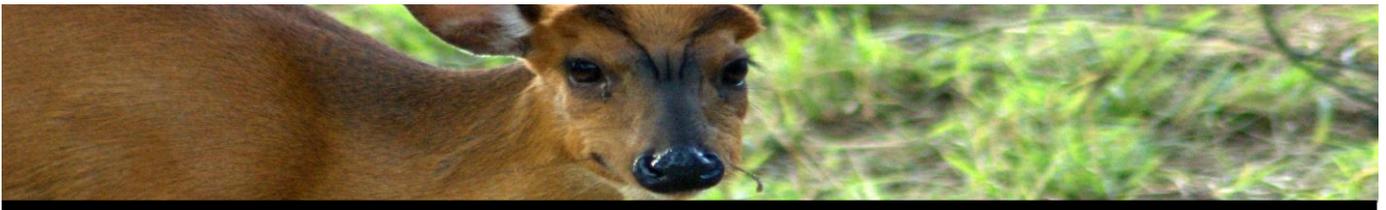


After we arrived at Dikhala and had lunch we went out on an afternoon jeep safari. We went out into the grasslands and Sal forests predominantly today and along with a good size herd of Asiatic Elephants (around 17 individuals) we also stumbled across a Tiger. We had recently left the Elephants and were on the other side of this section of grassland when we heard some branches cracking in the long grass. We all assumed that the noise was caused by the Elephants and even as we first glanced I thought I saw a trunk waving above a fallen tree. However it quickly became apparent that the trunk was the tail of the Tiger as it perched precariously on the tree, which was struggling to support its weight. We did however get a couple of great views of the Tiger as it climbed on the tree and stared straight at us. We also got a good taster of some of the birds here in Corbett. Home to over 350 species we saw some fantastic species including Great Hornbills, Plum-headed Parakeets, Black-headed Orioles, Grey-slaty Woodpeckers, White-rumped Vultures and Red-headed Vultures.

Day 19 **Corbett National Park**

Wildlife Watching

Early this morning Lesley completed her first Elephant-back safari around the grassland. The grassland is full of Chital as well as a pack of Golden Jackals close to the resort and walking through the misty grassland on Elephant back is a brilliant experience. Then after lunch we went out on a jeep safari, we explored some of the riverine forests today in search of Leopards. We didn't come across anymore cats but did come across a fairly feisty adolescent male Elephant who showed us he wasn't in a playful mood but there was no malice involved. Just a nice interaction with an animal capable of flipping our jeep if he choose to. We also got some great sightings of an Asian Barred Owlet, Brown Fish Eagle, two Kalij Pheasants a group of Pin-tailed Green Pigeons as well as a variety of Woodpecker species. We also found the male Gharial in almost the exact same place and position as the previous sighting (evidently a very good hauling out point). Gharials are the most aquatically adapted of all the crocodilians and large adults have such small and weak limbs that they find walking on land very difficult and most will only haul out a foot or two from the river.



Day 20 **Corbett National Park**

Wildlife Watching

This morning started with a jeep safari and once again we headed towards the riverine forests for Leopards. In the early morning we stopped in a couple of promising locations for big cats including a couple of dry riverbanks in the early morning mist. We saw fresh Tiger prints from the night before but there was no fresh Leopard tracks anywhere. We did however come across a couple of Yellow-throated Martens as they did their morning patrol of their territory. We just sat in the jeep and watched as the two large mustelids walked right on past us. We also saw a pair of beautiful Emerald Doves and a handful of Blue-whistling Thrushes. We also drove into one of the densest parts of the forest in search of Leopards but only came across a very noisy troop of Rhesus Macaques as they moved through the tree tops far above us. Then as we approached the resort for breakfast we ran into the same pack of four Golden Jackals which Lesley saw from Elephant back yesterday. Once again they were around the resort and probably make a good living there feeding off the kitchen scraps.

During the afternoon jeep safari the highlight was a good sighting of a large Asiatic Elephant herd which were crossing the road and had set up two road blocks. Two elephants had positioned themselves strategically either side of the herd on the road and allowed the younger Elephants to walk through undisturbed from the many jeeps and buses transporting tourists through the jungle. The female Elephant we had in front of us showed us that she wasn't to be messed with a couple of times. Once of which was a nice little charge towards us. The 'charge' was very half hearted and was purely a means of saying that she has the power in this situation and she was just making sure that we knew that and would wait patiently for her herd to cross first. On the other side a male Elephant was performing the same duty with equal aplomb. This is the last full day for us in Corbett and probably our last chance to see one of the smaller species of cat that live here. Leopard Cats (of which one was spotted at another resort inside the park yesterday morning), Fishing Cats, Jungle Cats and Rusty-spotted Cats (which have only recently been found here).



Day 21 **Delhi**

Wildlife Watching & Travelling

Before breakfast this morning Lesley completed her last trip into the park via Elephant back. Her mahout took her through the grassland and into the Sal forests, in one last attempt to find some of the more elusive mammals. Especially cats, they did find numerous fresh Tiger tracks from the night before and got the sense that they were being watched on a couple of occasions. Other than the fresh tracks they didn't see much other wildlife.

After breakfast we returned through the park towards Ramnagar and Leela Villas, we then met our driver Sanjay once again and began the long drive back to Delhi. We arrived back in Delhi pretty late after some normally bad traffic.

Day 22 **Sasan Gir National Park**

Travelling

Today we rose very early to begin our journey from Delhi to Sasan Gir National Park in Gujarat. Once we arrived in Gujarat's capital Ahmedabad we met our new driver Gopal and left for the 8 hours drive to the park. Along the way we saw many species of birds in large numbers. Amongst the most impressive species were Black-shouldered Kites, Black Ibises, Blue-tailed Bee-eaters and Brahminy Starlings. When we arrived at the lodge we had dinner and met a British wildlife photographer who was leaving the next day, but he said that in the week he had here he had 7 different sightings of Leopard. This just whetted our appetite for the next three days here; we were also told of a Lion which paid the lodge garden a visit last Saturday night. This is probably a regular event as the lodge shares a boundary with the park and with an increasing population the Lions here will be a more common sight in and around the villages of the buffer zone.



Day 23 **Sasan Gir National Park**

Wildlife Watching

Today we went into the park for the first time and driving along the roads you quickly realise that the Lions here are very numerous. There are dozens of prints along almost all the roads. What else is quickly evident is the close proximity that the Lions live with the local tribal people. There are a few villages in the park and they live in almost harmony with the Lions here. The only problems coming with the amount of livestock which the Lions take. This is increasing and at the moment around 30% of all the Lions kills is livestock. Most of the morning was spent driving through the very dry Teak forests searching for big cats and only finding numerous Chital (there are around 45-50,000 in the park), the occasional Sambar and lots of birds. It wasn't until we stopped at a hole to look for a Spotted Owlet that we got our break. As we were waiting to see if the Owlet would pop its head out of the hole we nearly didn't notice the two Lionesses walking across the road about 15m in front of us. We followed the pair for about 5 minutes as they walked purposefully down the road before they separated and headed into the dense bush in a classic pincer movement. Presumably they had heard or smelt a previously undetected prey animal in the bush and went for a hunt. As soon as they disappeared we moved on as they were not going to come back out with the way they moved into the bush, they were well and truly on a mission this morning. We also spotted an Indian Grey Mongoose hunting a small flock of Black Ibis, we actually disturbed the hunt before we realised what the Mongoose was up to. But all in all the first safari of Sasan Gir was pretty successful.

After lunch we headed back out into the park and this time we were determined to find Leopard so we were going to search the riverine forests more than the typical Lion habitat. As we looked for one of the two species of big cats in the park we came across a large male Nilgai, lots of Chital and Sambar as well as a troop of Southern Plains Langurs and 2 Mugger Crocodiles. Then we found a small group of vehicles around a adolescent male Lion. He was resting on the side of the road and allowed for great views as he sunbathed and then treated us to an impressive roaring display. In addition to this we also got a good sighting of a resting Collared Scops Owl and a Changeable Hawk Eagle with its crest fully erect.

Day 24 **Sasan Gir National Park**

Wildlife Watching

This morning we found Leopard tracks from the night before and so focused our efforts on a couple of roads which looked very promising. As we drove these couple of roads we came across another adult bull Nilgai and a Crested Serpent Eagle. Then as we continued we came across very fresh Leopard prints from the last couple of hours as it was only 08:30am and the tracks were on top of jeep tracks from the morning. So we stayed around this area for a few minutes and tried to spot the Leopard but it had probably moved off to a more secluded area as the sun was



beginning to get quite high and the activity of Indian Leopards decreases dramatically during daylight hours. Other sightings this morning included a nice Indian Grey Mongoose and two very good sightings of Shikras. During the afternoon the wildlife was fairly quiet before we spotted a Mugger Crocodile basking next to a Red-crowned Roofed Turtle (the largest freshwater turtle in the Indian Subcontinent). Shortly afterwards we heard the Chital alarm call coming from close by where we were. We stopped and waited for some time, there was 3 or 4 Chital alarming and we could clearly see where they were looking but we couldn't find the reason for the alarming at all. Eventually the alarming stopped and some of the Chital (as well as a Sambar fawn, which was nearby) began to feed again so we moved on. On the way out of the park for the final time we came across a male lion (a similar size and age to the one we saw on the first day here) lying next to the road. We stopped and watched as he got up and limped (his right foreleg was injured) past us on his way to find a quieter spot no doubt. When we got back to the accommodation we found out that at least two different Leopards during the morning safari.



Day 25 **Sasan Gir National Park**

Wildlife Watching

This morning we entered the park for the second to last time, however this morning was very quiet without any noticeable sightings (other than the prey animals and birds which are usually seen). During the afternoon we were back on the search for a Leopard and an hour or so into the safari we heard from another jeep that a couple of different Leopards had been spotted close by, our local guide managed to get permission to leave our designated route to try and find the Leopards where they were seen. We arrived at the place where we assumed one of the Leopards would appear (assuming that the Leopard continued its path through the forest) however we only found a herd of Chital and a troop of Southern Plains Langur foraging. They didn't seem at all alarmed and so we left and continued on our designated routes so that our local guide and driver didn't get into trouble for bending the rules anymore. The rest of the safari was fairly uneventful, a couple of female Nilgai with a juvenile and one bull were the highlights and towards the end we heard a lion roaring far off. So we headed back to the lodge for our evening meal and prepare for our long journey back to Delhi tomorrow.

Day 26 **Delhi**

Travelling

After breakfast we left with our driver Gopal for Ahmedabad. Once again the drive was a long one and the birdlife along the way prolific, but with a flight to catch we couldn't stop to fully appreciate any of the birds. The flight was delayed (which is an unfortunate occurrence at this time of year with flights coming into and out of Delhi), but we eventually made it back to Delhi. However problems with hotel bookings and lost luggage meant that by the time we made it back to the hotel it was very late and with Lesley's flight the next morning we called it a night and brought the month long pursuit of India's big cats to an end.

