











## Kingdom of the Snow Leopard

**Destination:** North West India    **Duration:** 16 Days    **Dates:** 1<sup>st</sup> Feb – 17<sup>th</sup> Feb

-  Spotting 5 individual snow leopards during the tour
-  Spotlighting a very nimble red fox along the mountainsides near camp
-  Enjoying spectacular mountain views on the flight into Leh, Ladakh
-  Hiking around Hemis National Park in search of snow leopards
-  Finding a snow leopard mother and 2 cubs above our camp one morning
-  Having great views of numerous golden eagles and Lammergeiers
-  Helping contribute towards the work done by the Snow Leopard Conservancy
-  Watching a male snow leopard plough through the snow and spray for 20 minutes
-  Seeing 6 Himalayan griffon vultures as they come back from the brink
-  Watching two rutting Asiatic ibex as the violently clash horns for dominance

### Tour Leader / Guides

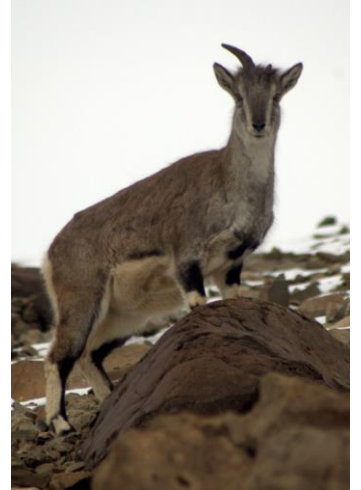
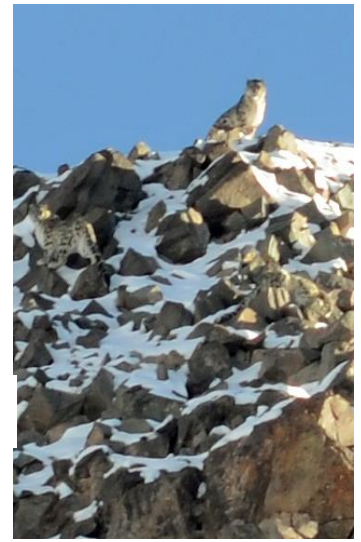
Martin Royle (Royle Safaris Tour Leader)  
 Nawang Tsering (Naturalist Guide in Ladakh)  
 Stenzin Rinzin (Assistant Naturalist Guide in Ladakh)  
 Diru (Delhi Sightseeing Guide)

### Participants

Mr. Gary Bennett  
 Mr. Phil Davison  
 Mr. Roy (Samuel) Leigh  
 Mr. Robert (Andrew) Logan  
 Ms. Stacey Perna  
 Mr. Chris Scharf

### 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 finding and watching wild 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 Gujrat to the famous and beautiful tigers of the central Indian 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. Over the last few years this species is beginning to be seen more and more regularly (albeit not easily or commonly) in a very special location in the remote north west corner of India.

It is this region of Himalayas where this tour will be focused in our quest to try and find this magical and almost mythical animal. Although this is a very physically demanding task we remained positive as we travelled to the best place in the world at the best time of year to aid our chances. 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 guides Nawang Tsering and Stanzin Rinzin; 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 the high snow fall and prey movements produce the best chances of seeing wild 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 and it is definitely true that you earn a sighting of a snow leopard. The reason winter is a good time to see this big cat is that the high snow fall forces the plentiful populations of blue sheep (bharal) down the mountainsides. Bharal make up the majority of the snow leopard's diet during winter and thus they follow the bharal down into the valleys and to an easier altitude that we can explore. So anytime between November and March are considered good times but the very best would come in February and March, as this is when snow leopards enter their mating season and the movement of animals is far higher and males move further and for longer in search of potential mates.

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. After a few days here and some great sightings we decided to leave the Hemis National Park and explore Ulley Valley. This is the location of another population of snow leopards although they are harder to find the valley does offer the chance of seeing the impressive Asiatic ibex. At this stage the group split up due to health issues but at least the overall objective of the trip had been achieved and everyone would leave having joined the exclusive group of people who have seen a wild snow leopard in the Himalayas.

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*

Today four of the guests would be arriving at the same time (with Stacey arriving in the early hours of tomorrow morning and Chris meeting us in Leh) so once Phil, Roy, Gary and Andy had arrived at Delhi we headed direct to the hotel and after a while to get settled in, showered and rested we made the short trip to the bustling tourist district near the New Delhi Railway Station and a fantastic restaurant Martin had found in previous trips here. The Metropolis offers one of the best tandoori ovens in Delhi and after a couple of cold beers the group began to get to know each other. We then went into the Paranganj and bought some supplies and changed some money. After returning back to the hotel we met up in the reception to walk a around the corner towards a good local restaurant with live Indian style music for dinner. From here Phil, Roy, Gary and Andy went back to the hotel for the night whilst Martin waited to go to the airport in time to meet Stacey.

At around 01:00am Martin left the hotel and went to meet Stacey, luckily the flight was pretty much on time (by Indian standards) and we made decent time getting back to the hotel. As we entered Karol Bagh (the area where the hotel is located) Martin spotted a barn owl hunting along the narrow streets above us. However it was very late and after a long flight from the UK we decided against pursuing the owl and heading directly to hotel for a good nights rest.

---

## Day 2 **Delhi**

### *Bird Watching*

Today Martin, Phil, Roy, Gary and Andy had decided to hit a local bird watching site across the city, Stacey decided to get some rest and explore the local area in her own time later on in the day. We would all meet up at the hotel in the afternoon. So at around 10:00am we met in the reception and learned that Phil had already been out for an



early morning birding session to Central Ridge and had seen an Indian grey mongoose alongside some of the more common north Indian bird species. So once we had arranged the vehicle we set off to visit Kalindi Bird Sanctuary near Okhla on the banks of the Yamuna River. Well that was the intention but as it turned out it became harder to find than we had anticipated. When we did eventually get there it was nearly time for Martin to get back to meet Stacey at the hotel (as arranged). However we did all enjoy half an hour of birding before Martin (joined by Gary) headed back to the hotel for some lunch and to meet Stacey and brief her on the rest of the trip. The sanctuary is based around a spit of land that juts out into the Yamuna and forms a sheltered lagoon as well as ample river bank for nests and roosts. Even during the short time we all spent there we spotted some great aquatic and terrestrial species such as moorhens, spot-billed ducks, greylag goose, purple herons, great cormorants, red-breasted flycatchers and citrine wagtails we even watched as a very unconcerned small Indian mongoose walked along the wall and further down the spit. Later when we all met back up at the hotel we found out that they had also seen a paddyfield warbler, greater flamingos, Eurasian sparrowhawk, common tailorbirds and glossy ibis. All in all a very good birding session for the centre of one of the world's largest, busiest and most polluted cities.

After we were all back at the hotel we met Stacey and after repacking our bags so that we had our warm clothes ready to wear tomorrow, we left for dinner. After some great food and a good atmosphere last night we decided to go to the same restaurant as last night and prepare for our arrival in the very different city of Leh tomorrow morning.



### **Day 3      Leh (4,276m)**

### ***Leh, Acclimatization & Sightseeing***

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. We breakfasted here and luckily the flight got off pretty much on time, we first stopped off in Jammu and stayed onboard whilst new passengers boarded and off we went to Leh. As we got closer to Leh the amazing and stunning view of the Himalayas broke through the clouds and then we all enjoyed the spectacular descent through the mountainous and into Leh. 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 only -4°C which is very mild for this time of year. But whilst the temperature was not really cold enough to prepare us for the temperatures in Hemis over the next couple of weeks the incredible mountain views that surrounded us was a great welcome to the Himalayas. We then made it through the small airport and after meeting Sam (Martin's friend and the go-to man for camping and exploring all of the wilderness areas in Ladakh) we were transferred to the hotel for lunch. During the winter town of Leh almost shuts down and the tourist facilities are all basic, but we made the most of the hot running water and central heating (both rarities in Leh at the moment). We then met in the dining room where Chris met us, his flight from Delhi was due to arrive an hour before us but as he was leaving from a different terminal in the airport he was delayed in favour of getting international flights off the ground first and so we arrived a couple of hours late but no worse for wear. So we all lunched together and got to know each other as now the group was complete for the first time. As the flights from Delhi to Leh had been rearranged and we had one less day to acclimatise we decided to climb up the Shanti Stupa at the back of our hotel. This is the largest stupa in Ladakh and stands at 4,276m dominating the skyline of Leh. 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 mountain 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. The snow fall in recent days meant that there as an incredible blanket of white carpeting the entire park that we would be exploring. Whilst climbing up the stupa we saw our first Himalayan wildlife with a soaring golden eagle and a playful flock of yellow-billed choughs swooped and dived around the cliff faces higher up the mountains. We then came back to the hotel for our evening meal and our first night in the Himalayas.

---

### **Day 4      Leh (4,600m)**

### ***Acclimatization & Bird Watching***

This morning after breakfast we met with Nawang Tsering and Stanzin Rinzin who would be our snow leopard spotters when in Hemis. We then loaded into a couple of jeeps and headed up to Leh Monastery (which is a further 200m higher than Shanti Stupa) and on the other side of town. On the way we stopped at the impressive looking Leh Palace. This fortress was based on the incredible Potala Palace in Tibet and acted as the Royal family's refuge during the numerous conflicts that have afflicted Leh over the years. 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. However the views out over the city and Hemis beyond are stunning from every angle and on the way back to the jeeps Roy and Andy spotted a wallcreeper hopping along the rocks below the Palace. We then began the descent towards the Indus River and a good bird watching location, Shey Marshes. These marshes are a haven for migrating birds in the summer and in winter become the home to a huge number of Guldenstadt's redstarts. The Indus River flows through the marshes and at this time of year the river is usually frozen solid here with ice blanketing the marshes. However it was quite





warm when we arrived and most of the water was ice free. Despite their not too many species of birds around at this time of year there are certainly plenty of birds with the beautiful Guldenstadt's redstarts perched on every tree and bush. We also saw green sandpipers, a couple of common sandpipers, white wagtails, red-throated thrushes and even a huge lammergeyer soaring above us. We then arrived back to the hotel for dinner and prepared for camping in the park and tracking snow leopards tomorrow.

---

## **Day 5 Hemis National Park (4,300m)**

### ***Wildlife Watching***

During the mid morning (after waiting for the snow and ice to melt from the roads) we loaded up the vehicle and started along the winding road along the Indus Valley road towards the entrance of Hemis National Park and the small village of Zinchen. Even before we arrived in the park we had seen our first snow leopard tracks walking towards the camp and as we found out later were from the night before. Once we arrived we met the final members of the team, Dorje our cook, Nyamgul the camp's assistant and Stenzin the pony-man. We loaded the ponies up with our equipment and began the walk to the base camp valley. 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. As we entered the park and walking along the frozen river we spotted a Himalayan griffon flying low down inside the valley, this sighting was quickly followed by a juvenile lammergeyer also quite low down. Presumably we spooked these roosting birds as the weather was quite overcast they were probably perched on a cliff ledge waiting for the thermals to start and take them high into the sky. It was incredible to see these two huge birds so close and a very good sign that the griffons are coming back here strong and recovering from the near extinction they suffered at the hands of the drug diclafenic. Once we arrived in the camp we had a hot cup of tea and coffee as our camp cook (Dorje) and assistant (Nyamgul) completed our camp and made lunch. As we waited for lunch we had our first view of some Himalayan wildlife here as we explored camp valley and one of the large resident flocks of chukkar foraged around the camp and Phil spotted some bharal on the Karlung valley entrance. After lunch we went to the Hysin Valley which is at the south eastern end of the Rumbak Valley, this is a very heavily used snow leopard highway and there are two main ridges where we base ourselves when spotting for them. Martin calls them Hysin 1 and Hysin 2, Hysin 1 overlooks our camp and Hysin 2 is a further 30 minutes away and has a great field of view. Long the way to Hysin 2 we stopped to check a scent marking rock, there were some hairs from the snow leopard stuck to the rock. Like all cats they rub their cheeks on the rocks as well as leaving the pungent scent on prominent rock such as this one. You could smell the scent, although it was a few days old we could just detect the scent, however to another snow leopard this is a beacon of information. We continued up and arrived at the ridge where we settled in for our first session of spotting. It was very quiet this afternoon and we didn't even spot a bharal from this ridge. The weather was also against us as the snow began to fall, the clouds around us looked ominous and heavy with snow. As the snow began to fall heavier and the temperature drop significantly we left to return to the camp where we ate dinner got warm around the heater. Briefly before we went to bed we left some food scraps out for the resident stone martens (although with the weather as bad as it was we didn't fancy our chances of seeing one) and we had a short spotlighting session around the camp grounds. The only animal around was a solitary red fox scurrying along the opposite ridge, nimbly running along near vertical slopes with ease. The red foxes are common around the camp and regularly feed off kitchen scraps and is probably the reason we failed with the stone martens but all of the food scraps we left were eaten very quickly.

---

## **Day 6 Hemis National Park (4,300m)**

### ***Wildlife Watching***

This morning we woke to a fresh covering of snow all over. The snow had fallen all night and this morning we had very bad visibility as the snow continued to fall and we were enveloped in the cloud. Early this morning Nawang had scouted out the Hysin whilst Stanzin had gone to the Tarlung to check for any fresh prints, scats or scrapes. He didn't find anything and with the visibility as bad as it was we decided to stay around the camp this morning. The only sighting of note from this morning was a small flock of bharal on the valley around 200m north of the camp. We walked along the opposite ridge to where they were and watched as the 5 animals slowly moved up the ridge and towards the camp. The group was made up of 2 adult females, 2 adolescent males and a yearling, it is not unusual for mixed flocks at this time of year as the rutting season is just about to start many of the adult males are in bachelor flocks establishing their dominance hierarchy before mating with the females. The bharal is by far the most common mammal in the park during winter and Ladakh has a population of several thousand. This primitive sheep-goat is the most common mammal here during the winter and the main food source of snow leopards. So it was reliving to see the bharal so low down the mountains and this close to camp as the hope is that the snow leopards will begin to follow them and hopefully right into our camp valley. A little after this sighting we spotted another group of bharal including 4 sub-adult females and a yearling, it was becoming apparent that the cold and snowy weather in the last couple of days was beginning to push all the wildlife down. The past few weeks had been unusually warm for this time of year and maybe the true winter was just starting now.

After lunch the snow began to clear up and there were some small patches of blue sky breaking through the grey clouds so we headed up to Hysin 2 again, without much fresh activity in the area this is the best default ridge to spot from as it has so many possible trails and territory boundaries within view. Along the way up to the ridge we spotted a perched golden eagle high on the ridge line and Phil spotted a white-browed tit warbler in the nearby wooden area, this small patch of vegetation is a grazing area for the local goat and sheep farmers during the summer



months. During the winter it becomes one of the only refuges for the resident birds such as robin accentors, white-browed tit warblers, magpies and brown accentors (all of which are common around the camp). When we got to the Hysin 2 ridge the snow began to fall again and as a result visibility was significantly reduced. All we spotted as we sat in the snow were 6 more bharal on a nearby ridge before going back to camp and warming up. We left some more scraps out and within 20 minutes a red fox had consumed the lot, so we gave up and went to bed. Despite the bad weather for the last couple of days the snow fall is potentially very good (once it stops) as it allows for much better tracking of snow leopards, they stand out better against the white snow and the increased amount of snow on the ground will force them lower and lower. So we all went to bed praying for a clear sky in the morning.



## **Day 7 Hemis National Park (4,500m)**

### ***Wildlife Watching***

In the morning Nawang and Stanzin scouted the Hysin and Tarlung valleys and once again there was no fresh sign so we headed into the Hysin 2 ridge after breakfast. Last night was much colder than the night before and the temperatures dipped below  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  but the sun was out and there was no threat of snow in the air. In the early morning we had very good views of bharal above us and opposite us, with the clear weather with had our first great views of this slate-grey robust ungulate. For the next couple of hours there was not too much else to see and then Nawang called out 'SNOW LEOPARD!' He trained the scope on the area and by the time Martin got to the scope there as just enough time to see the big cat running down the slope and jumping out of view as it headed down the Karlung valley towards Rumbak. The whole sighting was only about 5 seconds and only Nawang and Martin got a view. The speed that the animal was moving was impressive, with the tail held straight out behind him for balance as he headed diagonally down the slope. We spotted the area for a few minutes more before deciding that we could try the Rumbak valley. As a general rule we do not chase snow leopard that we have briefly seen as they cover the ground so quickly by the time we get up a small ridge they are long gone. However if this individual followed their usual movement pattern it would walk along the Karlung towards the Rumbak, which is a wide open valley (not the usually narrow 'V' shaped valley but a wider rolling 'U' shaped valley. The hope is that by the time we arrived here the snow leopard would still be in view as the visibility would be greater here. So we quickly packed up our spotting and photography gear and headed directly down the Hysin and onto the Karlung towards the Rumbak. We stopped briefly to spot in a couple of good spots along the way, but with no joy so continued onwards. Around on third of the way through Roy decided to head back to camp, the altitude affecting him a little worse than other people and so Martin escorted him back to camp to rest and take it easy. The rest of the group arrived in the Rumbak valley and spent the afternoon (lunch was diligently brought to them by the ever busy Nyamgul). When they arrived they spotted fresh tracks walking along a steep hillside and heading back towards the backside of the Karlung valley (that eventually meets the Tarlung valley). Stanzin climbed the hillside to see where the snow leopard had gone, unfortunately at the back side of the hill there is a near sheer drop off and we would be unable to follow a snow leopard to this valley. As the group waited for Stanzin and Nawang spotted the rest of the valley a Himalayan griffon soared in the skies high above. When Stanzin did arrive he said that the tracks continued around the valley and down the drop and probably out of the area that is safe for us to trek to. So everyone returned to the camp for dinner and another chilly night in the tent.

## **Day 8 Hemis National Park (4,300m)**

### ***Wildlife Watching***

This morning Nawang checked the Tarlung and Stanzin the Hysin and once again there was no fresh sign, so after breakfast we travelled to the Hysin 2 and began our day of spotting. As always with an elusive animal the longer you go without a sighting the more and more convinced you are that you won't see one! The excitement of spotting one briefly yesterday was tainted by the long slog to try and follow it. But it was a good sign, they were in the area and we still remained confident. Plus if you manage to see a snow leopard all of the effort and long cold hours of spotting on an exposed ridge are more than worth it. Along the way to Hysin 2 we saw many fresh tracks of woolly hare and bharal but no snow leopards. Once we began spotting it was very quiet in the morning with only chukkar, robin accentors, 2 juvenile lammergeyers and a golden eagle perched high above us entertaining us for the first few hours. As the day wore on we had lunch on the ridge and a group of 7 sub-adult males bharal were spotted as well as 2 golden eagles and another juvenile lammergeyer circling the mountain tops. A group of bharal moved down from close to us to the meadow beneath us. This broke the day up and Chris went in pursuit of the bharal in the meadow for a close up shot, but they proved to shy to approach closely. When they are above you and they are on a steep slope they are approachable to quite a close distance but when they are on level ground they feel vulnerable. There are only two bharal predators in the park, firstly the snow leopard who typically hunts from above the bharal and the wolves that are far quicker than the bharal on the flat and thus when the bharal are on the flat or they are beneath another large animal they are very nervous.



After lunch the spotting carried on and it seemed like today would be another blank, then Dorje (the guide of an Indian wildlife photographer, who was here at the same time as us) shouted 'SNOW LEOPARD!' This time we all had time to get to the telescopes, Dorje, Nawang and Stanzin trained all the scopes on the snow leopard and we all took it in turns to watch the amazing spectacle. What we were all so engrossed in was a large male snow leopard walking upwards towards the highest peak on the Tarlung valley. He was quite distant to us (probably 1km away) but the view through the telescope was incredible, the sun was setting and the shadows of the ridges and snow leopard elongated against the pristine white snow was stunning to see. Through the scopes we could even see the pattern on the body and tail and watch as he ploughed through the snow. The snow coming up in huge plumes in front of him showed us just how hard it is for a snow leopard (or any animal) to move around here. It also begged the question why is a snow leopard (or any animal) moving upwards, towards an exposed peak in around 80cm of snow just before night fall! For around 20 minutes we watched as he climbed higher and higher along the explored slope, stopping every now and again to scan the area. He even seemed to stop and stare at us, whether he could make us out (he probably heard us) we will never know but it seemed that he was acutely aware of our presence. As we began to head out of sight of us and around behind the entrance to the Tarlung valley (that would block our view of him) he reached a couple of snow free rocks. These kind of overhanging rocks are ideal for scent marking (very similar to the one that we smelt on the first full day in Hemis) as they do not collect snow underneath them and thus any spray and urine remains for longer here. We then watched as he turned his back to the first rock, raised his huge tail over his head and sprayed the rocks (even at 1km away the scopes were good enough and clear enough to make out this incredible and seldom seen behaviour). He then walked on to the next rock and repeated this before disappearing behind a ridge. What an end to a long couple of days here and it certainly raised everyone's spirits. With some local rum to warm us up and celebrate once we got back to the camp we slept easier tonight and couldn't wait for more sightings in the next few days. Before bed we also set out some more scraps and once again only got a red fox hanging around.

---

## **Day 9 Hemis National Park (4,700m)**

## ***Wildlife Watching***

This morning the decision was made to try the Tarlung valley and see if we would come across the male as he came down from the ridge we saw him climbing yesterday. The Tarlung valley is very narrow and we went deep into the valley and climbed up one of the slopes to get a better view. As well as the chances of seeing the male from yesterday there is also the chance that the snow leopard we saw briefly a couple of days ago would carry on around from the Karlung and reach this section of valley as well. Unfortunately there were no fresh signs of snow leopards and the only sighting was a very good close view of a woolly hare. So when we returned to the camp we decided that we would break up the cold nights in tents and visit Rumbak village tonight to stay in a homestay. After lunch we departed for the village, entering the shaded Karlung Valley, past the old lammergeyers nest and frozen waterfall and onwards. Then around 20 minutes into the trek we saw very fresh prints of a snow leopard coming down from Hysin side of the valley across the frozen river and up the opposite cliff side towards the Tarlung. We spotted for a while here and then a little further on we saw more tracks coming back down the Tarlung side of the valley and across the river again and back up the other side. The prints were perfectly formed in the snow and ice and it showed the ease at which they can climb up near vertical snow covered rock faces. It also showed that we missed this snow leopard crossing by only a couple of hours. The main reason for knowing this time scale is that this valley doesn't get much direct sunlight and the sun deforms tracks quickly as the edges melt, this was not evident at all and as the sun had already come through this part of the valley today we knew they were not made last night, but from this morning onwards. So we stopped and spotted periodically along the way until we reached the end of the Karlung valley and to a very different landscape of the Rumbak Valley. Today we walked further than the other day when we came here and explored the rounded hilltops and large open valleys further. Around the entrance to the Rumbak village valley we saw tracks of wolves. They much prefer this terrain as it is more open and flatter and better suited to their style of hunting than the snow leopard. It is the wolf that causes the problem with the local people and are responsible for over 60% of all livestock predation. It is this livestock predation that is the main cause of conflict between people and animals here and results in the capture and killing of snow leopards and wolves. This is being countered by the great work completed by the Snow Leopard Conservancy. One of the simple things that they have done is to start homestays and this increases the local people's income and comes from people wanting to see the wildlife (particularly snow leopards) and thus makes the local people realise the importance of a thriving population of snow leopards.

We arrived at the village and after some tea and biscuits and warming by the yak-fired stove we were all allocated rooms and left to get some rest, wash up and enjoy being in a brick structure. We met back up for dinner in Nawang's house, the homely, warm and cosy style of the houses is uniquely Tibetan Buddhist and the welcoming attitude from all of the people here is wonderful after days in the freezing cold and sleeping in tents. So we all enjoyed the dinner and local buck-wheat beer (chang) before heading our separate ways for the night.







## Day 10 Hemis National Park (4,500m)

### Wildlife Watching

This morning we all head breakfast in our individual homestays and then met in Nawang's house as we readied to depart. On leaving the village we saw fresh wolf tracks and fresh urine in the snow from the entrance to the valley, it looked like a pair of wolves that had moved through the valley last night. 2-3 wolves is the standard pack size in Ladakh and it looked like this pair were on the move at some pace. The wolves here never stay still and are always on the lookout for a meal. We spotted all the way back to camp and when walking the opposite way down the Karlung valley we noticed scent marking from the snow leopard had crossed the frozen river twice the day before. Just by approaching the tracks from a different angle showed us the cats purpose as he walked along the trail for around 50m and sprayed and urinated underneath a couple of small overhanging rocks. When we arrived back in camp we had some lunch and then left for Hysin 1, this higher ridge offers a good view of the Tarlung as well as camp valley. The whole day was quite quiet and we only had 4 bharal and a distant soaring golden eagle to entertain us until later on in the afternoon when a larger group of bharal appeared including a large adult male, his large downward turned horns, slate-blue colouration and prominent black flank and leg stripes making him a very regal looking animal. With the lack of fresh signs around here and the promise of at least 2 large groups of people arriving tomorrow we decided to leave Hemis National Park tomorrow morning after breakfast and try our luck in Ulley where we would see the Asiatic ibex if nothing else.



## Day 11 Hemis National Park / Leh (4,300m)

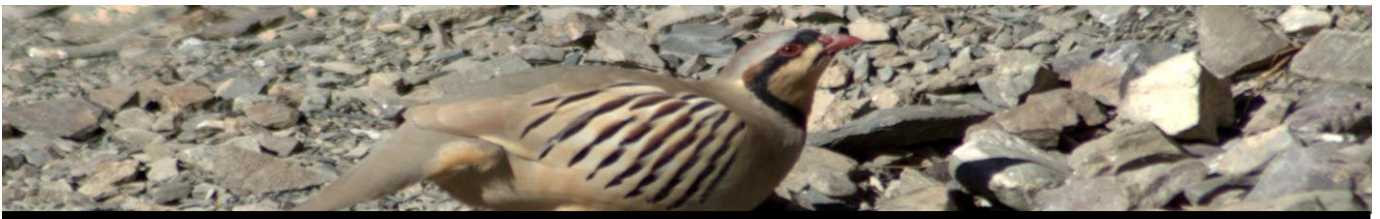
### Wildlife Watching & Travelling

Well today's plan was well and truly changed due to one of the greatest sightings in Royle Safaris history. Our original plan was to leave the camp after breakfast at around 8-8:30am and travel direct to Ulley valley (around 4 hours away) and have the afternoon spotting there. However when we all finished breakfast, Stacey went out to pack the last of her things in her tent and came back into the breakfast tent and said 'I think they (referring to a new group that had arrived yesterday afternoon) shouted snow leopard and some people are waving', well Martin then said get over there, in fact everyone should get over there now. So in a mad scramble we grabbed cameras, scopes and binoculars and raced the short way up the valley to where a row of scopes were positioned all fixed on one location above our camp. We set our scopes up quickly and within a few seconds had a beautiful adult snow leopard slap bang in the middle of the scope sunning herself in the morning sun. She has sat there staring down at us, the suns morning glow shining off her exquisite fur. We watched as she just sat and surveyed her domain for a few minutes when one of the spotters behind us cried, 'There's a second one...just below the first'. Well we couldn't quite believe that at first and then started exploring the rocks directly beneath her. Martin had got the suspected cub in his scope and watched as it lie perfectly still onto of a rock in a stalking position, until movement just above this second snow leopard attracted him to a third one! As no one else was commenting on the movement of this new individual, Martin realised that the one he had found (thinking it was the second one spotted) was in fact undiscovered by the other guides. So Martin alerted everyone else to this third (yes third) snow leopard and it became very apparent that it was a mother and her cubs. Jigmet (the head of the Snow Leopard Conservancy) had arrived yesterday afternoon and he confirmed that he had tracked and got pictures of a mother and two cubs from this area last year. The cubs were around 90% of the mother (from what we could see) and this estimate would work for ageing the cubs as the same cubs the Snow Leopard Conservancy knew about. It would appear that they had walked up there to walk down and along the commonly used snow leopard trail that leads down into the camp valley, however as soon as they got there they will have heard and seen all the human commotion down below and decided against continuing. But as the mother decided her next move we were treated to incredible views of the three of them as she sunbathed, one of the cubs just lie down and one moved around the rocks below the mother. As we watched for longer we rearranged our departure for after lunch (or whenever this sighting ended) and as all continued to rotate around the scopes and take photographs we noticed that all three of the snow leopards began to stare intently in one direction, we then started to look in that direction and found a lone bharal. This bharal seemed to be injured and as we watched for longer we noticed it had a broken (or severely injured leg). This seemed far too good to be true, were we about to see a snow leopard hunt above your camp! After a few more minutes the mother stood up, stretched and moved off behind the ridge to the other side of valley and out of sight. At first neither of the cubs moved at all and carried on staring at the bharal, then the highest up cub began to call, whilst we couldn't hear the call the mouth was clearly visible through the scope. Then hearing the reply from the mother this cub moved off and out of sight in the same direction that the mother had departed. All of our attention then became focused on the last snow leopard, that started to move along the rocks, bounding in the direction of the bharal but still a good distance away (and the behaviour of the bharal suggested that it had no idea about the presence of the snow



leopards). The incredible way that the cub moved along the rocks, its huge paws gripping the rocks and the enormous tail (as long as the head and body length) swaying from side to side for balance, was magical to behold. But one of the most amazing things about this sighting was that once the cub stopped moving, even for a second, it disappeared into the rocks. The camouflage of the snow leopard is truly incredible and then as soon as it began to move again seemed to appear as if by magic. This whole sighting may have only lasted 20-30 minutes but to be in the presence of three wild snow leopards is absolutely incredible. We are unsure but it is very probable that the people we were with and our group are the only people to get photographs of three free living wild snow leopards in the same frame. During the sighting Chris, Stacey and Phil decided to try their luck on the Hysin ridge (this was the general direction of their movement and it may offer better pictures opportunities). As it turned out the snow leopards disappeared from view (even the last cub moved behind a ridge and out of sight) and they didn't have any better view really. However they did hear that a few people who had positioned themselves on the ridge before the three snow leopards had been seen, but they were treated to a fourth snow leopard as it walked the commonly used trail through the Hysin and away beyond the mountains. Today we had spectacular views of three snow leopards and if that wasn't enough there was a fourth spotted this morning too.

Once all of the snow leopards had moved away we waited for around 15-20 minutes and they did not return so we packed up, had lunch and left to walk back to Zinchen. Along the way we spotted a small group of 6 bharal just on the side of the valley, as they had the quick escape of the valley slope available to them they were quite relaxed and allowed us to get quite close for photographs. We then got to Zinchen, loaded the vehicle up, said bye to Stenzin the pony-man and left for Leh. As we were leaving later than planned we couldn't make the drive all the way to Ulley in one go as the road is not safe after dark. Travelling along the road back to Leh we followed the magnificent Indus River, this major river system flows on and into Pakistan and is the life support for over one hundred million people. Along the way we spotted a couple of flocks of Ladakh urial, this wild sheep species was the original sheep. This is the same species that was first domesticated and the animal that all of our sheep breeds come from (in the same way the wolf is the origin of the domestic dog). But to look at the urial is to look at a skinny, long-legged reddish animal with large spiralling horns (in the males) and thinner more malformed horns in females. All in all they do not look very much like our domesticated sheep we use for wool, however a chihuahua bears very little resemblance to a wolf either. The first group was a small group that didn't hang around very long before swiftly running off. The second group was much larger and included a large male, they too ran on quickly but did allow for some photography. We then arrived at a new hotel in Leh and after washing with hot water and getting into some clean clothes we ate and made plans for the next 2 nights. For the last few days Andy had been struggling with snow blindness and his eyes were very sore, we had managed to get him some sunglasses from Rumbak and he was spending most of his time inside but he decided that it would be best to stay in Leh and rest his eyes. Martin, Nawang and Stanzin took him to the local eye doctor and he gave his advice. So the plan was for Andy to stay in Leh, Roy and Gary (as members of the same party) also decided to stay, as Martin and Nawang were the only Royle Safaris representatives on the tour and Nawang is much better at spotting than Martin, so Martin decided to stay with Andy, Roy and Gary and make sure Andy's situation didn't get any worse. This meant that tomorrow Chris, Phil and Stacey would leave for Ulley and try their luck over there. As nothing much happened in Leh (other than visiting the new and very informative Snow Leopard Conservancy offices and a couple of trips up to the top of Shanti Stupa) the rest of the trip report is based on the notes made by Phil.



## Day 12 **Ulley Valley (4,800m)**

## *Wildlife Watching*

This morning Stacey, Phil and Chris were picked up by the same camping team as we had in Hemis, Nawang, Stanzin, Dorje and Nyamgul and taken along the winding roads north-west towards the small village of Ulley. Along the way the very narrow and winding road took us deeper and deeper into the mountains and we spotted a brown dipper, this hardy bird making a living off the few aquatic insects that survive the freezing temperatures here over winter. Other birds spotted included magpies, yellow and red-billed choughs, Guldenstadts redstarts and chukkar. Once we arrived at the village (consisting of only 4 houses, around 15 people and their livestock), robin accentors, chukkar and many snow leopard tracks dotted the area. The afternoon was spent around the village where a couple of groups of Asiatic ibex were spotted, including a large group of 29. This large group contained several large males, their incredible ridged horns rising and curving to a massive length (sometimes up to 1.3m long). Whilst watching this group a couple of the males began to rut, this is slightly unusual for this time of year. The rutting season in Ladakh is in January so it is not completely unheard of to see in February. But unusual or not watching a huge ibex launch itself on its hind legs and clashing headfirst into another male is a spectacular sight. Their specially designed horns, thickened skulls and reinforced neck vertebrae allow them to withstand huge G-forces and impacts that would kill almost any other animal. As we spotted for more snow leopards the other notable sighting of the afternoon was a flock of Himalayan snowcocks flying overhead. These large partridge relatives are





very impressive bird and are fed by Tibetan monks in numerous monasteries and so their numbers are increasing in the high Himalayas. As the sun began to set we returned to the homestay (that had the most incredible view of the valley and the mountains beyond) and get a good nights sleep.

---

### **Day 13 Ulley Valley (4,800m)**

### ***Wildlife Watching***

Today we tried the nearby Spango-La valley, the snow leopards around here regularly use this valley to travel through as well as hunt. Whilst we didn't see any snow leopards today we did see lots of recent snow leopard activity in the form of prints. There were also wolf prints, all of which was a few days old. It was encouraging to see so much recent activity but we failed to spot any in the area. We also came across a yak carcass which was several months old, this was a snow leopard kill that Jigmet (of the Snow Leopard Conservancy) staked out when it was fresh. Building a hide very close to the kill and getting some incredible shots of a blood-stained and feeding snow leopard. But this was the major mammal related sighting of the day, there were however some nice bird sightings including an immature lammergeyer, golden eagle and Himalayan griffon as well as a nice flock of fire-fronted serin. We then headed back to the village for dinner and the night. Tomorrow would be our last day in the field and we hoped for one more sighting of the Grey Ghost before we started the long journey back to the hustle and bustle of Delhi.



---

### **Day 14 Ulley Valley (4,800m)**

### ***Wildlife Watching***

Today we decided to walk up from the village to the back end of the Ulley valley, following the little pathway upwards and past a few stupas in various stages of disrepair. Along the way there are various locations up here that offer great panoramic views of all of the ridges here and we spotted along the way. Unfortunately we didn't spot any snow leopards or even see any recent activity, the large group of ibex from the other day had disappeared and had been replaced by a group of 3 off in the distance. The only other wildlife we saw included great rosefinches, robin accentors, chukkar, great tits, magpie and Guldenstadt's redstarts. We then walked back down to the homestay, ate some lunch and began walking down the road towards the river at the base of the valley. This was the beginning of the long journey back, but due to the icy conditions of the narrow winding road we decided it would be best to walk down the road and load into the vehicle where the road was less risky. Along the way we did spot a couple of brown dippers, wallcreepers, both species of choughs and a golden eagle. Chris who was walking slightly behind Stacey and Phil spotted a large-eared pika on the road and managed to get a good picture of this very difficult to photograph species. We then boarded the vehicle and headed back to Leh, spotting another small flock (of 3) Ladakh urial along the way as well as a couple of horned larks. Once we arrived back in Leh we met up with everyone else and caught up on the sightings and what had happened in the last couple of days. Then with some much needed Fanta and home cooked chips we relaxed and prepared to head back to Delhi early tomorrow morning.

---

### **Day 15 Delhi**

### ***Travelling & Rest***

Today we rose early and caught the first flight back to Delhi, the weather cooperated and the flight was only marginally delayed. Once we arrived in Delhi we headed direct to the hotel which meant hot showers, clean clothes and a comfortable bed. The rest of the day was left free and everyone relaxed and rested in their own way until we met up to eat dinner at the Metropolis restaurant in the Paranganj. We then went to a nearby bar for well deserved snow leopard celebratory drinks before returning to the hotel for a very good nights sleep.

---

### **Day 16 Delhi**

### ***Sightseeing***

This morning Phil, Roy, Andy and Gary decided to join Martin and enjoy some sightseeing around Old Delhi. Old Delhi was the walled city of Delhi constructed by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (constructor of the famous Taj Mahal) in 1639. It was made the capital of the Empire and over took Agra as a result. The city was once filled with opulent mansions and elegant gardens but now most of these have disappeared and the manic craziness of the rest of Delhi has invaded. This all adds its own charm to the place and certainly gives you a 'Indian city experience' whilst exploring some of the most beautiful and culturally significant monuments in India. We first arrived at the Jama Masjid, this is India's largest mosque and one of the largest in the world. Also constructed during Shah Jahan the mosque is capable of supporting up to 25,000 worshippers. Luckily we arrived on a Saturday and the mosque was not over crowded with worshippers. We explored the outside courtyard and inside the prayer hall, we then climbed one of the minarets, this huge tower stretches 41m into the Delhi skyline and offers incredible views out over the sprawling city. It was quite windy and hazy today and the view was not as good as possible but we could



make out the Lotus Temple, Feroz Shah Kotla Cricket Stadium and the new Akshardham Hindu temple complex. After climbing down the 130 steps twisting inside the narrow minaret we walked the old market streets of Chandni Chowk. This market is one of the busiest areas in Delhi and an experience in its self, we also found a small side street here with some exquisite Jain temples, the intricate carving into solid marble is incredible to behold; but the most startling aspect of this small row of temples was the instant calm and tranquillity that hit you once you stepped off the narrow and busy market street and into the Jain temples. We then continued walking until we came to the Sikh Gurdwara Sis Ganj Sahib, this is one of the most historical and impressive Gurdwaras in Delhi. Established in 1783 to commemorate the martyrdom of the 9<sup>th</sup> Sikh Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur. We were first briefed on the history of the Gurdwara and then entered the prayer room with the singing priests and the holy book. We then visited the enormous kitchen here; one of the best aspects of Sikhism is their encompassing of all religions and races in their belief of providing food and accommodation to anyone of any background for free. It is very inspiring to see people giving up their time to work hard in the kitchens for free in order to provide food for over 70,000 people per week! We then continued our walk down the Chandni Chowk towards the imposing Red Fort, this section of road is one of the most religiously tolerant in the world, in a very short distance we passed a Muslim Mosque, Sikh Gurdwara, Hindu Kovli, Jain Temple, Christian Church and Buddhist temple all of which are used daily with no tension or hate evoked. Then arriving at the huge Red Fort we had a walk around, first visiting the museum filled with artefacts, weapons, papers, painting and clothes from the Mughal occupation of the city and fort. We then continued into the old market street, Royal court and the private chambers of the Emperor and his concubines. After an hour or so of exploring this 254 acre residence built in 1648, we left and went to a more modern but no less important monument; Raj Ghat. This is the final resting place of the father of modern, independent India Mahatma Gandhi. This is just about the most quiet and relaxing area in Delhi and a place of reflection and contemplation. The rest of the day we spent at the hotel and dinner here, Chris's return flight home was for late tonight so he left after dinner and with Stacey and Phil departing together early the next morning we had an early dinner so that everyone could eat together and get enough sleep before the long journey home.

---

## Day 17    **Home**

## *Departure*

This morning Stacey and Phil were taken to the airport in the morning and Roy, Andy and Gary were transferred to the airport at midday in order to catch their flights home.





12	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
13	Purple heron	<i>Ardea purpurea</i>
14	Indian pond heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>
15	Cattle egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
16	Great rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus rubicilla</i>
17	Brown Dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>
18	Rock (Feral) Pigeon	<i>Colomba livia</i>
19	Hill Pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>
20	Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
21	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>
22	Rufous treepie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>
23	Horned lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
24	Red-breasted flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>
25	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
26	Common moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
27	Grandala	<i>Grandala coelicolor</i>
28	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>
29	Himalayan Griffon	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>
30	Black-winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>
31	White-browed tit warbler	<i>Leptopoecile sophiae</i>
32	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>
33	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
34	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
35	Tibetan snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla admasi</i>
36	Citrine wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>
37	Blue Whistling Thrush	<i>Myophonus caeruleus</i>
38	Common tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>
39	Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>
40	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
41	Indian peafowl	<i>Pavo cristatus</i>
42	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
43	Greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>
44	Guldenstadt's redstart	<i>Phoenicurus erythrogastrus</i>
45	Common Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
46	Glossy ibis	<i>Plegadis falcinellus</i>
47	Purple swamphen	<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>
48	Plain prinia	<i>Prinia inornata</i>
49	Brown accentor	<i>Prunella fulvescens</i>

			3				2	1	4		4			1	1			
	1																	
	1															1		
																6	4	
															2			
					2								1		2			
100's	100's	100's	100's	100's							7	100's	100's	100's	100's	100's	100's	
						5												
				1				1		1	2							
~100	100's	8														100's	100's	
	~5																	
															2			
	1																	
	32																	
	4																	
														1				
		1	1	2	3		4		3	4			1					
				1		1		2					1	1				
	~10																	
						3				1								
	1																	
~50	13																~30	100's
			1															
									1									
	1																	
	2																	
		3	3		3	4	2		3	3			1	6				
			1	8								3				~50	~50	
	1																	
	3																	
	~70																	
			~60	~20								~5		5				
		2	9	7	6	6	2	3	6	9	19	6	8					
	~50																	
	1																	
	1																	2
					3									2				

50	Robin accentor	<i>Prunella rubeculoides</i>
51	Alexandrine parakeet	<i>Psittacula europtria</i>
52	Rose-ringed parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>
53	Yellow-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>
54	Red-billed chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>
55	Fire-fronted serin	<i>Serinus pusillus</i>
56	Himalayan snowcock	<i>Tetraogallus himalayensis</i>
57	Tibetan snowcock	<i>Tetraogallus tibetanus</i>
58	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>
59	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
60	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
61	Jungle babbler	<i>Turdoides striata</i>
62	Red-throated thrush	<i>Turdus ruficollis</i>
63	Red-wattled lapwing	<i>Vanellus indica</i>

						4	3	1	23	26	4	6	5	5		
															1	8
4															4	23
		-50	6	-20	29	12	2	~10			~190	~100	200+			
			3		6	2	8		5	4	4	~10	~10			
							4					10				
							1				7		*			
								1								
			1		1									1		
			5													
		2	1											2		
		~15														
			3													
	3															2

**Reptiles** (\* = heard or signs only)

	Common Name	Binominal Name
1	Jammu bent-toed gecko	<i>Cyrtodactylus mansarulus</i>

February															
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
													1		