



Snow leopard – Rumbak valley, India

Northern India

Hemis NP – Hanle - Eaglenest – Manas NP

4 – 24 March 2023

Introduction

Three weeks in northern India with two main targets.

- Photograph Snow leopard from a fairly close distance
- To See Asiatic golden cat in Eaglenest – Arunachal Pradesh

For a long time I've had a nagging feeling of not having a photo of a Snow leopard despite having seen one in Mongolia some years ago. It was a bad sighting, far away and at nighttime. I really needed to get a proper look at this “mountain ghost” and Ladakh, India would be my choice for it.

This was also my second try at Eaglenest for the Asiatic golden cat.

As an add on I ended my trip in Manas NP – Assam to pick up some lifers.

Once again it was all arranged by www.wildworldindia.com and the schedule was like this:

10 nights Ladakh for Snow leopard

6 nights Eaglenest for Golden cat (1 night Lama camp & 5 nights Bompou camp)

4 nights Manas NP

I did this with two fellow mammalwatchers Lennart Verheuveel who joined for the first two parts and Janco Van Gelderen who joined for Eaglenest. Manas NP I did by myself.

Thanx alot guys for a great time and cool memories!



Our guide Wangial Kaya scanning for Snow leopard – Rumbak valley

After some initial discussion with Vikram Singh at wildworldindia where to go for Snow leopard we ended up in the famous Rumbak Valley. There is several valleys to choose from these days in Ladakh with great chances for Snow Leopard but Rumbak is still one of the best as far as I know.

We stayed in a homestay in the small village instead of tents at the campsite. Which was very basic but also a little more comfortable. Where we could easily charge electronics and be served food in the kitchen.



Homestay in Rumbak valley

In the end we were so satisfied with the Snow leopard sightings that we left Rumbak valley earlier than planned and headed for Hanle wetlands close to Tibetan border.

This newly (to foreigners) open area attracted us with Pallas cat and other high altitude species.

The bad thing about Hanle though is that for the moment you are not allowed to stay overnight there. The closest town you can stay is Nyoma and that is some 1½ hour drive away. Which means you have to drive 3 hours every day for a return trip to get to this high altitude wetlands at around 4200m.

The good thing is that it is a great area for wildlife and extraordinary beautiful! 😊

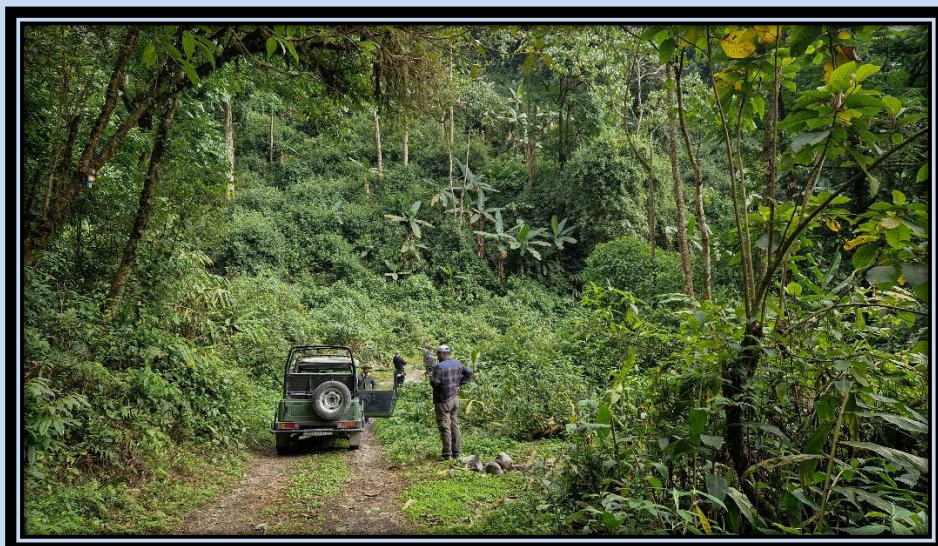


Me scanning for Pallas cat at Hanle wetlands

At Eaglenest – Arunachal Pradesh we once again brought in a Gypsy from Kaziranga with four seats in the back for the best way to explore this area.

Once again there was some rain, fog and cold weather in this slopes of Himalaya that god seems to have forgotten...

I have spent 12 nights in total here during two trips and can easily count on the fingers of one hand how many minutes I have seen the sun...



Lush forest of Eaglenest and our Gypsy

After 16 days with high altitude, cold weather and very basic accommodation I ended my trip in the lowlands at Manas NP with a stop enroute from Eaglenest at Brahmaputra river for Ganges river dolphin.

I stayed at Musa jungle retreat www.musa.co.in very close to the entrance gate. A nice lodge with great food.

As usual there is morning and afternoon safari and one afternoon I did an excursion to Kakoijana forest reserve for Gee's golden langur. Some 1½ hour drive from Manas NP.



Manas NP at sunset

The Kaliabhomora bridge over Brahmaputra river close to Tezpur is a hot spot for Ganges river dolphin. There is boats leaving from here to take you to see the dolphins just some 15 minutes away down river.



Brahmaputra river

In the end I saw **36 species** of mammals of which **10 were lifers** and this is the story about them...

My species list

1. Snow leopard --- Already on our acclimatization day in Leh we got an “alarm call” from a nearby valley (Sham valley) that a Snow leopard has been seen close to a village and was asked if we wanted to go there...

Of course we went there and immediately could see a Snow leopard at a distance of around 500m.

The real tour hadn't really started yet but already we had a Snow leopard in our bag which was great!

The coming days in Rumbak valley was extraordinary good with a sighting as close as around 150m and where we could follow a mating pair for 10 hours straight.

Finally I had a proper look at the “ghost of the mountain” and the photos I wanted!

All in all we were so happy with the sightings after 3 days in Rumbak valley that we left for Hanle wetlands.

When did it become so easy to see Snow leopards that you get tired of them and have to leave? 😊

That is of course not entirely true and we were told that it had been no good sighting for 5 days before we arrived.



Amazing sighting with eye level Snow leopard. The tail is simply stunning!



Snow leopard searching for a partner...



Mating pair which we followed for 10 hours straight one day

2. Blue sheep --- By far the most numerous mammal in Rumbak valley. A healthy population and a good source of food for the Snow leopard.



3. Woolly hare --- Common in Rumbak valley. Seen around the village late afternoon, early morning.



4. Gray wolf --- Seen on road between Leh – Hanle. Pack of 3 along the main road and 2 others on the ice of Tso Kar lake.



5. Pallas cat --- At least 3 different individuals seen in Hanle wetlands. The method was to scan the grassland with scopes and binoculars and then try to sneak on them.



Managed to get very close to this Pallas cat in the late morning (already hefty heat haze). He was busy hunting Voles and forgot about us...



Pallas cat just discovered us and fled across the ice

6. Red fox --- Not only Pallas cat on the Hanle wetlands hunting for Voles. Red fox also present.



7. Stoliczka's mountain vole --- (Lifer) The guy who drives the ecosystem on this wetlands.



8. Kiang --- (Lifer) Tibetan wild ass, native to the Tibetan plateau. Common in Hanle area. We saw them everywhere.



9. Tibetan gazelle --- One of only two places in India to see this species. Population is confined to just 100-150 sq. km in the Kalak Tartar plateau of the Hanle valley. Only around 50 individuals remains in India and it's on the brink of local extinction. We found only one male at 4800m. Very skittish, impossible to get close and with heat haze it's a very bad picture.



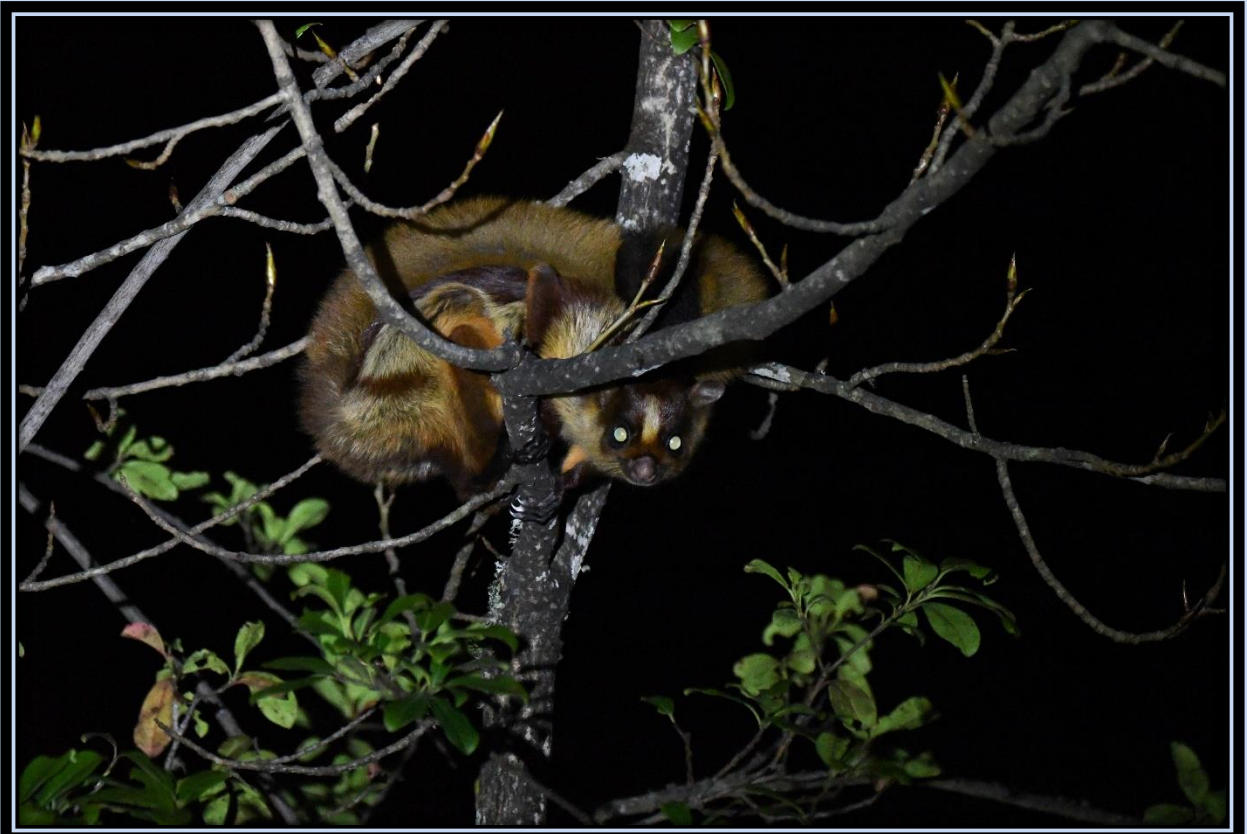
10. Masked palm civet --- Seen at Eaglenest. If you go downhill from Bompu camp they are common.



11. Yellow throated marten --- (Lifer) Seen at Eaglenest. Finally our paths crossed and my boogey mammal is finally no more! At last I got to see this widely distributed species. They are common at Eaglenest.



12. Bhutan giant flying squirrel --- Very common at Eaglenest and seen every night. Often multiple sightings each night. A very attractive flying squirrel.



- 13. Spotted giant flying squirrel (Grey-headed giant flying squirrel)** --- Very common at Eaglenest and seen more or less every night.



- 14. Particolored flying squirrel** --- The third very common flying squirrel at Eaglenest. Multiple sightings. The hardest to photograph as they are a bit shy (and small). This one was very cooperative though.



15. Himalayan striped squirrel --- Seen at Eaglenest where they run around energetically in the trees. Also seen at Manas NP.



16. Pallas squirrel --- (Lifer) One seen at Eaglenest. Below Bompu camp at a slightly lower altitude.



17. Black giant squirrel --- Seen at Manas NP where they are very common. They told me that for every year they increase in numbers for some reason.



18. Hoary-bellied squirrel (Irrawaddy squirrel) --- (Lifer) A couple of them seen at Manas NP and one of my targets here.



19. Indian rhino --- Easy to see in Manas NP. Today Manas is inhabited by around 60 Rhinos and they increasing every year. A strong comeback after being entirely wiped out a few decades ago.



They are a bit aggressive and don't like vehicles...



Mother with calf

20. Asian elephant --- Very common in Manas NP. We also encountered one Elephant at Eaglenest. In the summer they come to the hillsides from the lowlands. This is a bit of a problem at Eaglenest as it is steep next to the narrow road and it becomes a sort of “chicken race” between the car and the Elephant. Who will give way to the other? Another car was stuck for several hours along the road...

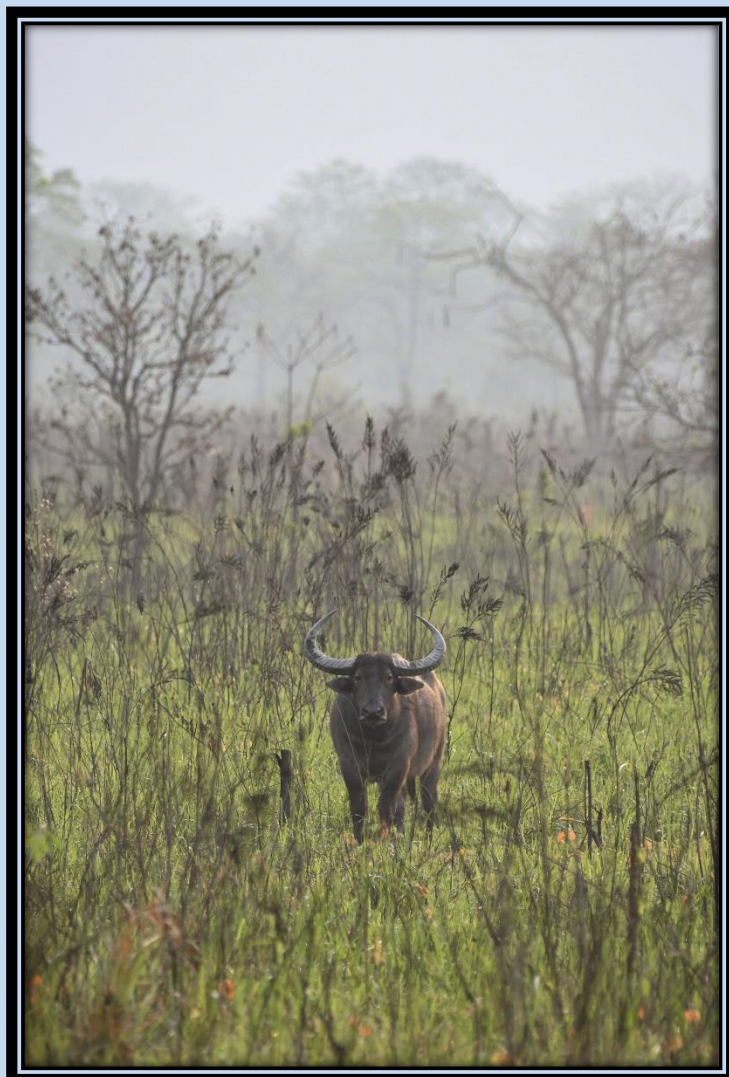


Elephants in Manas NP

21. Gaur --- Another mega size mammal in Manas NP who is easy to see here. Not as easy to photograph though because of the constantly high grass and bushes which forms the park.



22. Wild water buffalo --- The fourth mega size mammal in Manas NP. Also easy to see. Endangered species with only around 3400 individuals left on earth and 90% of them in the state of Assam, India.



23. Sambar deer --- A few seen in Manas NP



24. Barasingha (Swamp deer) --- Vulnerable species who lives in very fragmented populations at the Indian continent. Around 120 Barasinghas live in Manas. I only saw them one time in late afternoon.



25. Northern red muntjac --- Common in Manas NP where they thrive in the thick undergrowth and dense forest. Also a few seen at Eaglenest at night.



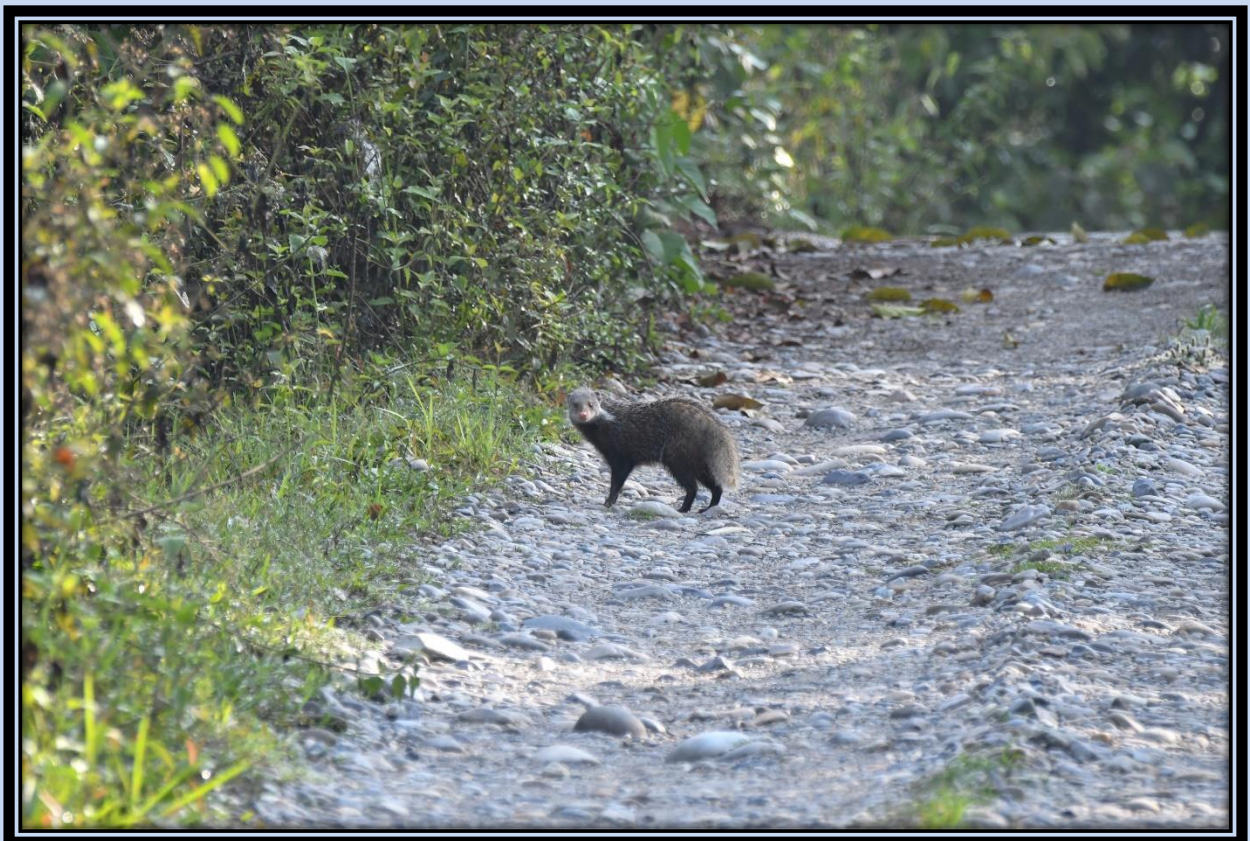
26. Hog deer --- (Lifer) Another target in Manas NP for me and another species who is on the rise and doing a great comeback in Manas.



27. Wild boar --- Common in Manas NP and easily seen.



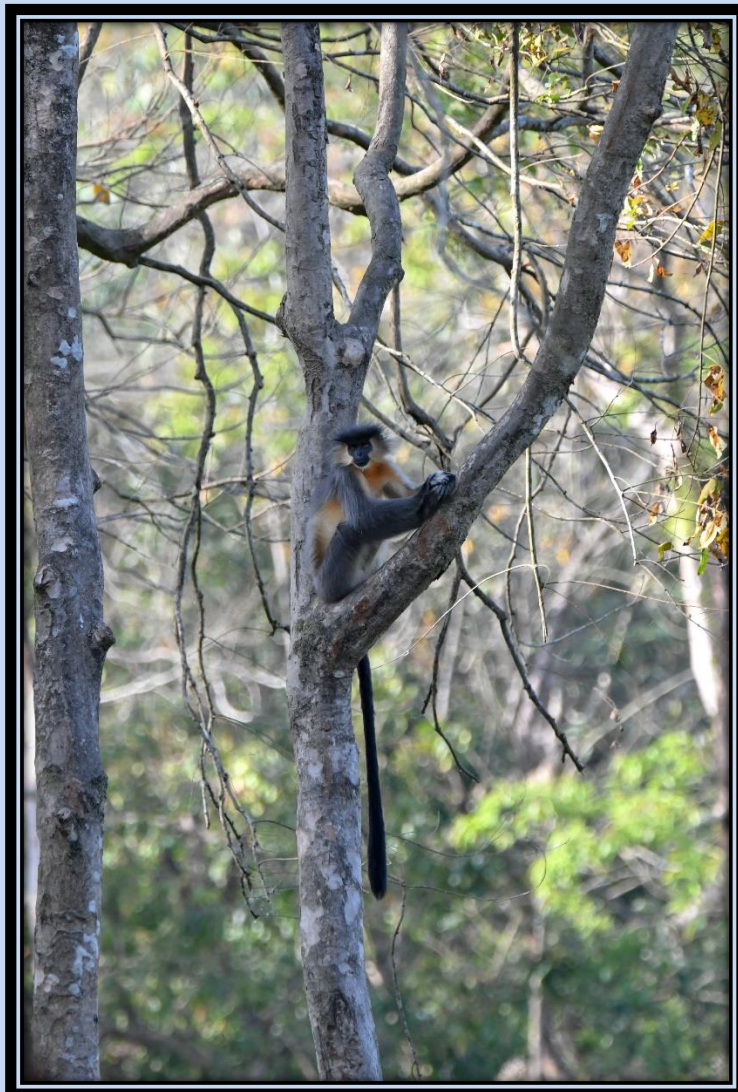
28. Crab-eating mongoose --- (Lifer) The highlight for me in Manas NP and a species I really wanted to see here. Pay attention close to streams and rivers where they like to hang around. I saw 3 different individuals.



29. Rhesus macaque --- Seen in Manas NP and along the road in the state of Assam.



30. Capped langur --- Easily seen in Manas NP where they are common. Beautiful primate.



31. Gee's golden langur --- (Lifer) An afternoon trip from Manas to Kakoijana forest reserve where this endangered and very range restricted species now have a sanctuary. Protected by the villages. The reserve is 1½ hour drive from Manas.



A guarantee sighting in Kakoijana forest



Family portrait

32. Ganges river dolphin --- (Lifer) Take a boat trip at the Kaliabhomora bridge over Brahmaputra river close to Tezpur, Assam. It's a game to try to photograph them as you have no idea where they will pop up and when they do you have 1.3 seconds to take the photo...



This was the best I could do... sorry for this 😊

33. Arunachal macaque --- (Lifer) One misty afternoon at Eaglenest we saw a distant shape of this species on 2600m.

34. Orange-bellied squirrel --- First afternoon at Lama Camp – Eaglenest there was some squirrels running around in the trees. According to the size it must be this species and last time I was here they were very common around Lama Camp.

35. Siberian Ibex --- Distant scope view in Sham valley – Ladakh, where we saw our first Snow leopard.

36. Tibetan fox --- Distant scope view on Hanle wetlands.

Also some unidentified bats flying around at night on +2000 meters at Eaglenest and a couple of rodents along the Eaglenest road and at Bompu camp.

Stuff I missed

Of my targets the most notable miss was the **Asian golden cat**. Despite being at Eaglenest for a total of 12 nights on two different trips I have yet to see any feline here...

Others have been lucky and two different Golden cats who were together were seen during our stay. At 13:00 in the middle of the day at Sundarview point.

I think I will try another area for this elusive cat for my next try. The question is where?

Another big miss was **Ladakh Urial** in Ladakh. We tried and scan for them on different viewpoints along the road but failed. No sign of **Mountain weasel** in Rumbak valley either.

There is a slim chance of **Eurasian Lynx** deeper in the Rumbak valley and we walked one day in this area but nothing. Our guide told us that there is only one Lynx here at the moment.

No **Tiger** or **Leopard** in Manas NP for me. Both of them are however very doable.

Himalayan brown goral, who was common on my last trip to Eaglenest along the steep cliffs was nowhere to be seen this time.

All in all 10 new lifers for me with top four sightings of **Snow leopard**, **Pallas cat**, **Yellow throated marten** and **Gee's golden langur**.

Random photos from my time in northern India



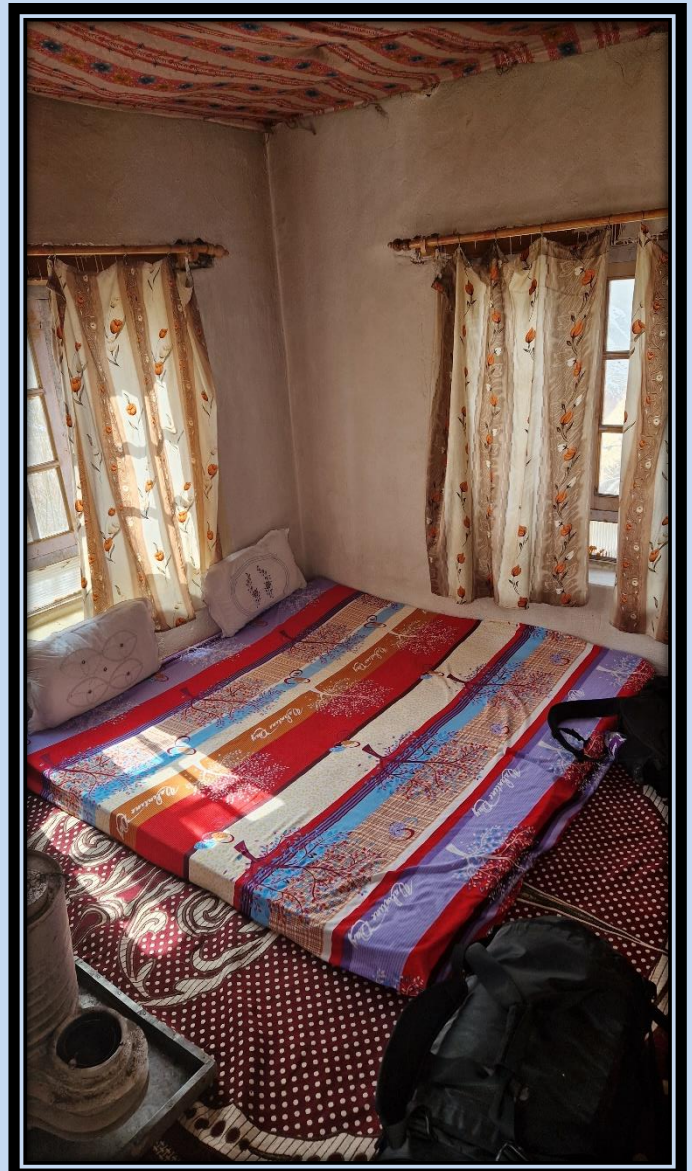
Lammergeier – Hanle wetlands



Me scanning for snow leopard in Rumbak valley



Fantastic sunset in Hanle. Glowing mountain!



My homestay bed in Rumbak valley



Beautiful roads in Hanle, Ladakh



Spectacular landscape – Hanle, Ladakh



*Kalak tartar plateau – Hanle valley
Altitude 4800m In search of
Tibetan gazelle*



Kiangs on a cold morning in Hanle wetlands



Taglang La pass 5328m enroute between Hanle – Leh in Ladakh. High altitude pass and the 12th highest motorable pass in the world



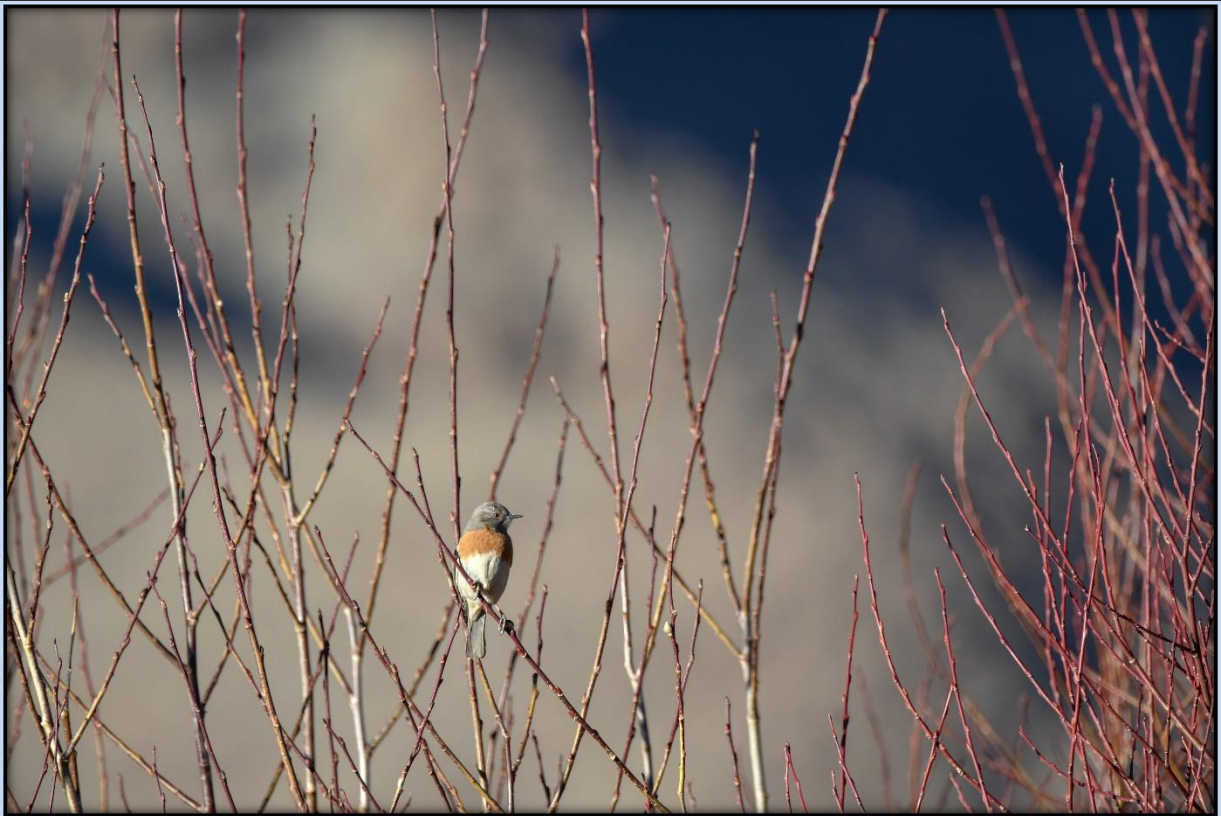
The place where the sun never shines... Eaglenest. Foggy, rainy and cold. Of my totally 12 nights in this place most of them have been looking like this. No wonder this forest is left alone from humans...



Solitary snipe – Leh, Ladakh. despite very good camouflage, he could not escape my thermal camera



Ibisbill – another sought after bird in Leh, Ladakh



Robin accentor – Nyoma, Ladakh. In the town where we stayed during our visit to Hanle. High altitude species



Indian peafowl – Manas NP



Himalayan vulture – Manas NP



Great hornbill – Manas NP. Fantastic bird



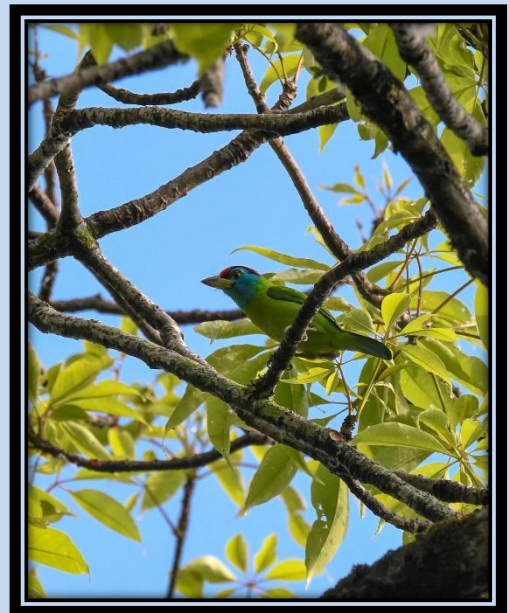
Siberian stonechat with breakfast – Manas NP



Bengal florican – Manas NP. Restricted to tiny fragments of grasslands in south and southeast asia, it is the worlds rarest bustard. Fewer than 1000 individuals were estimated to be alive as of 2017. Critically endangered and Manas is probably the best place on earth to see them.



Long-tailed broadbill – Manas NP



Blue-throated barbet – Manas NP



Bengal monitor lizard – Manas NP

Big thank you from me to...

Our guide Wangial Kaya in Ladakh and Hanle for a great time!

Guide Jintu and the driver in Eaglenest for the effort for Golden cat.

My guide in Manas NP , Samson Lugun.

Last but not least to Lennart and Janco who teamed up on different parts.

Species list – Ladakh

Snow leopard
Gray wolf
Red fox
Blue sheep
Siberian ibex
Woolly hare
Tibetan fox
Pallas cat
Kiang
Tibetan gazelle
Stoliczka's mountain vole

Species list – Eaglenest

Asian elephant
Northern red muntjac
Orange bellied squirrel
Bhutan giant flying squirrel
Spotted giant flying squirrel
Himalayan striped squirrel
Pallas squirrel
Particolored flying squirrel
Yellow throated marten
Masked palm civet
Arunachal macaque

Species list – Manas NP/Brahmaputra/Kakoijana reserve

Asian Elephant
Wild water buffalo
Indian rhino
Gaur
Sambar deer
Hog deer
Barasingha
Hoary-bellied squirrel
Black giant squirrel
Capped langur
Rhesus macaque
Wild boar
Crab-eating mongoose
Gee's golden langur
Ganges river dolphin
Northern red muntjac

Andreas Jonsson

Contact: andreas_19@hotmail.com