

# Rumbak and Hanley, Ladakh, India Trip Report

Dec 25 2023 - Jan 4 2024

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## Summary

My family and I (myself, my wife, daughter age 14, son age 12) traveled to Ladakh with the hopes of seeing Snow Leopard and Pallas's Cat in December 2023. We had a phenomenally successful trip, with one very close (50m) and long duration view (4-5 hours) of a Snow Leopard on our first day in the Rumbak Valley, and we had multiple sightings of Pallas's Cat including one relatively close (100-150m) for about 30 minutes.

A huge thanks goes to Phunchok Tsering (aka PT) of Exotic Ladakh ([www.exoticladakh.com](http://www.exoticladakh.com), [ptladakh@gmail.com](mailto:ptladakh@gmail.com), WhatsApp: +91 94191 78682) who organized the trip. His organization was impeccable, the itinerary was completely flexible, and the mammals were incredibly cooperative - for the entire trip it seemed like we just showed up to the appropriate habitat and the target animal would appear. It got to the point that we laughed about how good our luck was, but its also because Phunchok knows where to find the animals! We also were able to mix in trekking, a great homestay in Rumbak, and some birding too. I couldn't recommend him highly enough.

## Day-by-Day Account

### 12/25

Departed Delhi for Leh. Met PT at the airport and went to our hotel. Had lunch in the main market in town at a Tibetan restaurant and went birding where we got Ibisbill and Brown Dipper pretty quickly. Stayed at Hotel Gawaling.

### 12/26

Acclimation day. PT took us to do a walk at the Thiksey Monastery which was beautiful, and we all got an education on Buddhism. We walked from there for a few kilometers birding and just stretching the legs. We then drove up into the hills to find **Urial** and quickly found a herd of 36.



**12/27**

We left the hotel around 9am and drove towards Rumbak (about a 45 min drive if you do it without stops). Along the way, we saw many **Urial**. As the canyon narrowed, and we approached Rumbak, we got out and walked and there were fresh (within last 24 hrs) **snow leopard tracks** in the dust of the road heading down. As the valley began to open, my son called down from the road up ahead that a **snow leopard** had been spotted! It was perched high up in rocks above the road. Not even 11:30am and we had found a snow leopard on our first morning of looking!!!! It was snoozing on a rock, shifting position every 45 min or so. We got our small camp chairs and set up on the roadside to wait for it to move...likely not until evening.

It shifted and re-positioned itself and even moved a bit - sometimes behind rocks - but would re-emerge and occasionally look at us or around the valley. We moved up the hill opposite the snow leopard to get a better view on a somewhat precarious, loose and steep hillside. As the sun set over the ridge, the snow leopard became more active and finally started walking downhill towards us! We had excellent views of it making its way down to the valley, and took many pictures and videos. Finally it disappeared down a small valley that would exit onto the road, so we scampered down to the car and got in. We arrived at the small valley outlet and the leopard was just 30-40m away! It turned around and took a seat 50-60m away. It was fading light but we got incredible views of the cat until the light faded and then we left.

We went to our homestay - a traditional Tibetan style house, and enjoyed a great dinner of rice, dahl, and cooked vegetables. Then slept in our warm huge sleeping bags in our cold rooms. What an incredible first day - we all feel so lucky that we got a snow leopard view on the first day.





**12/28**

We got up around 8, had omelets and fresh bread for breakfast and then walked up the valley towards Yurutse which is the best area for Lynx sightings as it is home to many Wooly Hares. Along the way we saw many **blue sheep** and we even found one **wooly hare** in the scope, but no Lynx or leopards. Our spotter saw a wolf or some wolves early in the morning but they retreated away. Our cook brought us a late hot lunch at 2 on the trail - amazing! Our total hike was 7mi round trip and from 13,000' where we are sleeping to 14,300' where we stopped.

We decided that since we saw the snow leopard so well, we will indeed go to Hanle to try for Pallas Cat - so exciting! PT and I had determined before the trip that we would have the flexibility for a Hanle trip if we saw the snow leopard early in the trip. It was awesome to have this flexibility.



*Pics of the hike up to Yurtse and a bit of scanning for Lynx.*

**12/29**

I woke up early and joined our spotter and PT scanning on a hillside above the campground area (just down the road from town). Nothing was moving. Hiked up valley from Rumbak to around 14,100' where we scanned for animals. Not much - some distant **blue sheep**, distant **yaks**, and very distant **Himalayan Snowcocks**. My wife and Son continued on and got to the Stok La Pass at 16,010'. My daughter was tired today and not feeling like hiking so she, PT and I stayed at 14,100 scanning for the 2-3 hrs that it took the others to climb the pass and return. One of the spotters all the way down in Rumbak even reported on the radio that he saw my wife and son on the pass!

**12/30**

I got up and walked around Rumbak for birds in the morning. There were always **Chukar, Eurasian Magpie, Hill Pigeon, Fire-fronted Serin** in town. Also joined PT and our spotter on the hillside above the campground for scanning. After breakfast, we left Rumbak via walking around 10:30am. We walked about 6mi downhill past Zingchen and were picked up by PT in the car at the sign marking the entrance to Hemis NP. Saw **golden eagle, blue sheep** and a **large-eared pika** on the way down, not much else.

Had lunch in Leh at a good restaurant called Lavendra (I think). Then back to same hotel for showers (yay!!).



*Chukar in Rumbak.*

**12/31**

Departed for Hanley around 8:30. The drive was long (5-6 hrs direct) and really winding for the first 3-4 hours. Stopped for food a couple times. Saw some **brown dippers, mallards, mergansers** along the way. We tried for white-throated dipper and solitary snipe but didn't get them.

As the road approaches Hanley, it opens up significantly to big planes in a valley between mountains (vs the first half or 2/3 of the trip which was in a narrow canyon of the Indus River). About 40km before Hanley we went through the last of several checkpoints and saw **Great Rose Finches** in the trees while waiting for them to check our papers.

We drove through Hanley upon arrival and went straight to the wetlands beyond town where PT promptly found a distant **Pallas's Cat**! We observed it for about an hour and a half while it was hunting, but it didn't come closer to us. We also saw many **Tibetan Wild Asses**, a pack of 7ish **Tibetan Wolves** in the distance, and a **Red Fox** in the distance. Aside from the asses, the sightings were all pretty distant so we are hoping for better in the coming days.

It's frigid up here! We're all in full down pants, expedition jackets, hats, foot warmers, etc. we're hoping for a lower/no breeze and stronger sun (it was partly cloudy today, so sun energy was low).



1/1

Woke up at 6:45, met for quick tea and crackers at 7, departed around 7:30 to go look for Pallas cats, etc. We started the morning with a nice view of a **Red Fox**. We then found a **Pallas's Cat** in nearly the same location as yesterday afternoon! We had a nice, but distant again, view. Then kept going and found **Tibetan Sandgrouse** flock and a **Woolly Hare**. From there we carried on and found **Ground Tit**. Then PT found a **Tibetan Sand Fox**! It was a ways away, but we all got scope views. While crossing a small frozen river, our minibus got stuck! We had to walk the rest of the way back - only 1km or less. Breakfast was at 11am. Driving around seeing all the wildlife really felt like an African Safari in Tibet.



Immediately after breakfast, we went for a family walk out to the Pallas's Cat area on our own. We were stopped by very polite police who asked for our papers, which we didn't have, so they called PT and everything was fine. PT met us in the minibus - which was extracted by an army truck - at around 1 and we went and he found the **Eurasian Eagle Owl** for us. Then we had some good new birds like **Black-Winged Snowfinch** and **Twite** on the way back to lunch at 2.

We can see a bunch of development in the area - I'm concerned that in 10 years the wildlife may be severely reduced here.

Afternoon drive/watch scheduled for 3:30. We went out and got pretty much skunked. No cats, no foxes, no wolves.

1/2

Breakfast at 7:30, then departed in the minibus. Didn't see anything of note on the way out. We drove up to Nurbula Pass - about 2 hrs way up a valley outside of Hanley on dirt track, including steep switchbacks up the last 1,000 vertical feet. Simply incredible views! The pass is at 17,400'!! At the pass we saw a herd of about a dozen **Tibetan Gazelle** which were really cool. Long fluffy necks and big eyes made them more reminiscent of alpaca than African gazelles. We then drove down a valley and found a herd of **Tibetan Argali**, and another larger herd of **Tibetan Gazelle**. There were also the ubiquitous **Tibetan Wild Asses** up at the pass, and a herd of domestic yak. We also saw several **Blanford's Snowfinches**. Our targets having been bagged and everyone feeling the altitude a bit (no headaches though - just spacey and out of breath), went back down to the Hanley area and ate lunch that Kunga had packed for us which was great as usual. We then went back through the Pallas's Cat area but saw nothing so went back to the hotel for a little rest, arriving around 2:30.

Sarah and I went for a walk for an hour and the kids chilled. We then left at 3:30 with the goal of getting a better view of Pallas's Cat. We got out to the wetlands area and got a call from our spotter - he had seen a Pallas Cat 10 minutes before and also a pack of wolves! We found the **Tibetan Wolves** and observed the pack of ~10 for a bit distantly in our scopes. It was a better view than before, but still distant, yet quite satisfying. Then we repositioned ourselves and searched for the cat. After 10 min, the **Pallas's Cat** came out and walked into a hole in the rock facing the sun and groomed itself and sat in the sun for a bit, affording us excellent views. When the sun began to dip behind the hills, the cat repositioned itself on the other side of the rocks away from us. Then when we found it again, it again went away from us. We decided to leave it.

We went to try to see the wolves again and we saw them distantly chasing a herd of **Tibetan Wild Asses**. The Asses won this round, but may lose tonight. We then left and returned to the hotel at 5:30. What an excellent day! So glad we got good views of the Pallas's Cat ... bummed my camera is broken but satisfied with our excellent sighting and digiscope videos and pics.



*Argali, Gazelle and a Pallas's Cat*

### 1/3

Breakfast at 7:30. We then went looking for Tibetan Sand Fox - really the only animal we hadn't gotten a good view of yet. We found two **Tibetan Sand Fox** in the first 30 min of our outing and while they were a couple hundred yards away, we did all see their wider face well. We then checked for Pallas Cat and wolf but saw neither. Then we started the very long drive back to Leh. Had lunch at a "hot springs resort" on the way which was good - better than the place we stopped on the way there. Sarah and I went for a walk for an hour, then we had dinner with PT and his wife. Tomorrow, we decided not to go up to the Tibetan & Himalayan Snowcock area as it is a 3 hr drive from Leh each way. Instead we are going on a 4-5hr trek nearby which should be nice.

### 1/4

We went for a hike outside of Leh - just a 20-30 minute drive from the hotel. Our goal for the day was to see Asian Ibex. We hiked up to a 14,500' pass, and a **Asian Ibex** appeared on a nearby pass and walked right towards us. It only diverted its track to us at about 20m, and we all got excellent views. Another case on this trip of just appearing in the habitat and seeing the animal! We had an excellent lunch that Kunga brought at a slightly higher pass, and then proceeded down to our waiting car in another valley. It was an excellent and beautiful day. From there, we spent one more night in the hotel in Leh and then departed the next day.



## **Other Notes**

### ***Accommodations***

In Rumbak Valley, we stayed in a traditional Tibetan Homestay. We really enjoyed this homestay. There was a large, warm common room / kitchen that we had all of our meals in, and generally was the place to hang out. At night, we slept in two rooms that each had two mats on the floor with rugs on top of them. We brought our own -20F sleeping bags, and everyone was comfortable. Each room had a small wood burning stove that was lit around bedtime, and then allowed to burn out. We were never cold or uncomfortable. The place was great.

In Hanley, we stayed at the Padma Homestay in a single room with four cots and an attached (very unpleasantly scented) bathroom. The bathroom didn't have running water due to pipes being frozen for the winter. Meals were in a small kitchen/dining room in a separate building.

### ***Cold***

We're from the mountains of Colorado, and didn't find it too cold in December at all. During the day in Rumbak, it was about 25F (-3C) but sunny and hiking was quite comfortable. In Hanley it was colder - on our last morning it was about -13F/-25C. The key was having a large "expedition" down jacket for everyone, down pants, insulated hiking boots, hand and foot warmers and sufficient layers underneath. Even the kids were never very cold, and the temperature never impeded our activities.

### ***Altitude***

We live at ~2500m (8,400') in Colorado. Altitude wasn't an issue for us on the trip at all. We spent two nights in Leh at 11,300' when we arrived, then three nights in Rumbak at 13,000', then a night in Leh again, then three nights in Hanle at ~14,300'. In Rumbak, my wife and son hiked to 16,000' without anything but some shortness of breath. In Hanle, we visited a pass at 17,400' and walked around without any issues but shortness of breath.

### ***Photos***

Due to nobody's fault but my own, my camera lens broke on the day after our snow leopard sighting. My photos and videos for the rest of the trip were relegated to digiscoping, so please excuse the quality of the photos - they're not indicative of the exceptional quality of our sightings. I did put some digiscoped videos on my Facebook page if you'd like to find and see them.

### ***Food***

We had absolutely amazing food prepared by Kunga (I apologize if I've misspelled his name). Nobody had any issues with the food throughout our trip, and we all loved the cuisine and had great variety daily including vegetables, fruits, traditional foods and more familiar foods like pasta. Excellent variety and preparation by Kunga.



**Mammals Seen**

	<b>Around Leh (2 days)</b>	<b>Rumbak Valley (3 days)</b>	<b>Hanley (3 days)</b>
1. Snow leopard	tracks	1 (between 350 and 50m)	
2. Pallas's Cat			3 (2 distant, 1 ~100m)
3. Tibetan Wolves			2 (both distant)
4. Red Fox			3 (1 very close, 2 medium distance)
5. Tibetan Sand Fox			3 (all three fairly distant - the Sand foxes are distant here)
6. Tibetan/Ladakh Urial	3 (~50m)		
7. Blue Sheep		many (as close as 50m)	
8. Asian Ibex	2 (1 20m, 1 distant)		
9. Tibetan Argali			1 (distant)
10. Tibetan Gazelle			2 (medium distance to close)
11. Tibetan Wild Ass			Ubiquitous & close
12. Large-eared pika		1 (~75m)	
13. Woolly hare		1 (~100m)	2 (1 close, 1 distant)

**Birds Seen**

You can see my eBird checklists for locations and quantities of these sightings.

1. Common Merganser
2. Himalayan Snowcock
3. Chukar
4. Rock Pigeon
5. Hill Pigeon
6. Tibetan Sandgrouse
7. Eurasian Moorhen
8. Ibisbill
9. Solitary Snipe
10. Bearded Vulture
11. Himalayan Griffon
12. Golden Eagle
13. Himalayan Buzzard
14. Upland Buzzard
15. Eurasian Eagle-Owl
16. Eurasian Kestrel
17. Eurasian Magpie
18. Red-billed Chough
19. Carrion Crow
20. Common Raven
21. Ground Tit
22. Cinereous Tit
23. Horned Lark
24. Eurasian Wren
25. Brown Dipper
26. Black-throated Thrush
27. Blue Whistling-Thrush
28. White-winged Redstart
29. Robin Accentor
30. Brown Accentor
31. House Sparrow
32. Black-winged Snowfinch
33. Blanford's Snowfinch
34. Gray Wagtail
35. Great Rosefinch
36. Twite
37. Fire-fronted Serin