



## Tajikistan, winter 2018-2019

A winter trip to Tajikistan's remote border area with Afghanistan.

Trip report of a 10 day trip to Tajikistan from December 26<sup>th</sup> 2018 to January 5<sup>th</sup> 2019.

### Day 1 – Wednesday December 26<sup>th</sup>

After a 3 week visit in August, doing different trekkings and exploring the Darwaz, Wakhan and Pamir areas, we have decided to organize a snow leopard expedition to the remote Darwaz mountains on the border with Afghanistan.



We will spend 8 days looking for this elusive species in and around the M-Sayod community based conservation area.

Right after the last Christmas festivities, we set off on this trip, driving to Amsterdam, catching a first flight to Istanbul and then off to Dushanbe from thereon.

One thing is clear: it will be challenging, but we are ready for the adventure!

## Day 2 – Thursday December 27<sup>th</sup>

Very early morning arrival in Dushanbe: waiting for the luggage is a nerve breaking game here. We are picked up by Mustofo and Gholib. Few minutes later, we are on the way to an ATM and then start the 5 hour drive to Zigar with driver Fahrid, leaving Dushanbe behind us with the stunning mountain scenery of the Zarafshan range in the background. We drive past the Nurek reservoir and into the steppe landscape between Dangara and Kulob. Some short stops on the way result in a group of **18 bean geese, upland buzzard** and various impressive mixed groups of **corn bunting, tree sparrow, sky- and crested larks**. We have a late breakfast in Kulob and then proceed to Zigar while making a stop right after the Shuroaboad pass, enjoying great views of **4 golden eagles, 2 griffon vultures, 2 lammergeiers and 2 black vultures**. As we near Zigar, **griffon** as well as **Himalayan vultures** are seen almost constantly. A first indicator of the healthy populations of wild ungulates in the region.



We meet up with the team and, after a short rest, lunch and some birdwatching around the house (resulting in many raptors, **blue whistling thrush and streaked laughing thrush**) drive further towards Zigar to scan the mountains from the road. We see **two large male markhors** from one place and later some more males from another. Great start!



### Day 3 – Friday December 28<sup>th</sup>

As we don't know the place that well, we decide to split up in two groups with Lieven, Sander, Odil and Mir exploring an interesting valley with several signs of snow leopard activity. Frans climbs the ridge behind the guesthouse together with Davlatchan and Ruzi to check another hidden valley where a snow leopard had caught an ibex three days ago.

The ibex carcass is still there with different vultures around. **5 lammergeiers, 2 griffon vultures, 3 Himalayan vultures and 1 black vulture** are around as well as at least **3 golden eagles**. Quite a spectacle. It gets really fascinating when a young lammergeier picks up the carcass and flies off with the complete ibex, flying through the valley and dropping the carcass from a high altitude on some rocks. What an impressive sight.

Down in the valley, **2 different groups of Siberian ibex** are around including some impressive males. Davlatchan and Ruzi light a fire and prepare a mini barbecue.



As the evening falls, **three large male markhors** appear nearby and we watch them for a long time before it gets time to head down with the impressive snow-covered mountains of Afghanistan right in front of us.

Sander climbs higher on a slope together with Odil, resulting in some great observations of **markhor**. In the valley also **1 large ibex** is seen visiting one of the known salt caves and Lieven adds **red fronted serin and Eastern rock nuthatch**, while enjoying continuous views of **markhors**. High numbers of **vultures, chukars and a golden eagle** are observed as well.





The evening light casts a mysterious red gloom on the surrounding mountains...









#### Day 4 - Saturday December 29<sup>th</sup>

Sander and Frans do a walk across some steep terrain along the border with Afghanistan, southwest of the guesthouse. The views are fantastic and under various overhanging rocks, different recent tracks of snow leopard are found.



**A large male ibex** as well as a group of **5 female and young markhors** and various **lammergeyers, griffon and Himalayan vultures and golden eagles** are seen. A very nice walk ...



The views over Afghanistan are pretty amazing.



In the meantime, Lieven scans the same area of yesterday and sees **different groups of markhors**. It is clear that all markhors and ibexes are constantly on the lookout for snow leopards as they move across the landscape, constantly on the move.



The paths can be steep in these mountains...





We meet up for lunch at the guesthouse. On below picture you can see the position of the guesthouse. The right side of the river the Pyanj is Afghanistan.



In the afternoon, we scan different ridges from the road, resulting in **many more markhors**. No snow leopard yet...



## Day 5 – Sunday December 30<sup>th</sup>

It started snowing today which should increase the chances of an observation. We scan from different locations along the main road in the morning and see **different groups of markhors**. All seems quite calm, maybe also because we can't see anything beyond 50 meters.

Apart from a very close **lammergeier**!



**Three brown accentors** are clearly also wishing for better weather.



As we spend the day scanning from various locations, many more different vultures fly by and we see how a **golden eagle** catches a small mammal on a nearby hillside and eats it completely within two minutes.

## Day 6 – Monday December 31<sup>st</sup>

The last day of the year! We spend the morning scanning which results in **different groups of markhors and some ibexes.**



After lunch, Lieven keeps on scanning a wide valley with some of the rangers as Sander, Frans, Odil and Ruzi head up to the other viewpoint where a snow leopard had caught an ibex a week ago. Many raptors show up, with **5 golden eagles in one view, another 14 Himalayan vultures, 4 griffon vultures a sparrowhawk and a kestrel**, we keep on being surprised by the number that can be seen here. From the viewpoint, we see a large group of about **16 ibexes** including some large males as well as **4 markhors**. Very far away, we see **3 Himalayan snowcocks** making their way up on an icy ridge, fantastic birds...

As we head down in the dark, we notice that, deep below on the valley, the barbecue has been lit for the New Year's celebration. The staff even got us some vodka and beers they got from Kulob city...

A New Year's evening in a remote part of Tajikistan, under a brilliant Milky Way and the vague silhouettes of the impressive Afghan mountains - one never to forget!





### Day 7 – Tuesday January 1<sup>st</sup>

We start early, scanning in multiple teams from different locations. A viewpoint from Zigar village turns out to be excellent with some distant views from a group of about **30 markhors** as well as **two more Himalayan snowcocks**.

In the afternoon, we make a walk in the Zigar canyon. Zigar turns out to be a lovely village, very much alive with children playing in the streets after school and the cattle finding its way home. Further up the valley, walking along the river, we find **brown as well as white throated dipper, the very beautiful little forktails and white-capped redstart**.

Another unexpected bird is a **solitary snipe** that flies up from a muddy patch along the river. Some more **blue whistling thrushes** make this a very nice birding spot.

We drive back to A viewpoint near Zigar to scan for wildlife in the evening, but apart from **a young golden eagle and some distant chukars**, all seems very quiet.





## Day 8 – Wednesday January 2<sup>nd</sup>

Rain hits the window as the alarm goes off. The good thing is that the rain is snow on the higher altitudes and during the morning scanning session, we see **more than 100 markhors** from 4 different viewpoints. It seems like they have all descended. Lieven is assisted by the people from the local army post, who say they frequently see snow leopards just walking by their camp.

We scan until lunch and proceed in the afternoon, which also results in a **Himalayan snowcock**, **many chukars**, a **wallcreeper** and some **very close markhors**.



## Day 9 – Thursday January 3<sup>rd</sup>

A morning with good weather as we head out early to scan from three positions.

From one place, Lieven sees **more than 100 markhors**. Also Sander sees **impressive groups of markhors** from a different viewpoint, some seemingly nervous. A huge convoy of armed vehicles on the way back from joint manoeuvres along the border with China slowly drives through the impressive landscape, adding to mysterious atmosphere of this place.

Frans overviews a large area with **few groups of markhors** scattered across the terrain as they move up from the lower areas. All seems quiet, apart from an Afghan on the other side of the river, making his way down along a steep path while singing joyful tunes. After this short distraction, very welcome after two hours of non-stop scanning in the freezing cold, the scanning goes on. Suddenly there it is: in the middle of the scope it is hard to believe that a **snow leopard** just walks into the view. But there it is, out of nothing. For fifteen minutes, the snow leopard makes its way up the slope, marking its territory on different locations, finally to disappear in a small canyon. As silent as it had made its appearance, it was gone again. Unnoticed by the different groups of markhors around.





Sander and Lieven arrive later and we are not able to relocate the leopard, although it seems highly unlikely that there is actually an exit to the narrow canyon, which consists of perfectly vertical walls.

Scanning the place in the evening does not result in an additional observation.

No matter how incredibly beautiful the observation, it is one with mixed feelings as we have all been putting a huge amount of energy in this over the last week...

### **Day 10 – Friday January 4<sup>th</sup>**

Our last morning as we give it a final try before leaving to the airport. Lieven and Sander scan the location of the previous observation as we expect that, with good number of **markhors** around and great opportunities to hide, he might still be around. Frans scans from a different location.

It starts snowing again, some brave **streaked laughing thrushes, rock buntings and a couple of tree sparrows** proceed looking for food around the ranger station.

Mist and snow are heavy as we decide to head down from the viewpoints to return to the camp. As we say goodbye to the full staff of M-Sayod, the long awaited snow is now falling slowly, covering the impressive valley under a white blanket. It would have greatly helped the search if it had come a few days earlier, and that's how it goes with these trips... A **white-winged woodpecker** shows well at the house.

On the way back, we make a short stop at another conservancy, Kisht, which is also home to about 450 markhors, to say hi to some good friends we made in August earlier this year.



As we drive back over the Shuroabood pass, different cars are struggling heavily, simply gliding down the ice- and snow-covered roads. Our excellent driver Fahrid does not seem to mind, driving with great focus without any error, explaining that he once drove a large truck all the way to China in the middle of winter.



At the top of the pass, several large groups of **horned and crested larks** are present. Must be very hard to survive here. Down the pass, in a snow-free field, an impressive group of **more than 300 bramblings** is a nice surprise.





We stop for a small snack in Kulob, proceeding to Dushanbe the dark with snow, mist so dense it is sometimes impossible to see further than 2 meters in front of the car (!) and snow. Fahrid again does not really mind.

We arrive in Dushanbe at 9, finalising the last practicalities and getting some food before we go to bed for a short two hours.

### **Day 11 –Saturday January 5<sup>th</sup>**

Flight from Dushanbe to Istanbul with a long waiting time of 7 hours before the flight to Brussels.

Thinking back on the past 10 days, we consider the trip as a success. Even if not everyone has seen snow leopard, at departure we considered it as a first try to see whether Tajikistan has the potential to become a snow leopard watcher's hotspot. And we believe it actually might for the following reasons:

- We have never seen such densities of wild ungulates which are not very shy and which can be observed from fairly easily accessible points
- snow leopards are not hunted here due to strict follow-up of H&CAT staff as well as very professional local rangers. The terrain is also very difficult to access by poachers and constantly monitored by the M-Sayod staff
- H&CAT camera traps have proven that the densities of snow leopard are in line with the amount of ungulates
- The (incredibly dramatic) terrain is very rough and sometimes hard to scan completely because of that. However, some good viewpoints do not require any physical effort to go to and altitude is not a problem as it might be in other areas apart from Mongolia.
- The amounts of vultures and golden eagles we have seen is unprecedented - we link this to the amounts of wild ungulates and predators in the area
- It's not that far away - a drive of 5 hours from Dushanbe, which can easily be reached with different flights over Istanbul or Moscow
- It's something else: the people, culture, landscapes and nature of Tajikistan are just incredible.

A big thanks to the team of M-Sayod: Davlatchan, Akram and Isho, Sufi, Ruzi, Odil, Mir, Dodi, Yusuf, Ayyub and Sayod.

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In case of questions, feel free to mail to [frans.ds@gmail.com](mailto:frans.ds@gmail.com)

## Species observed

### Birds

1	Himalayan snowcock	Several seen at higher altitudes
2	Chukar	Common
3	Bean Goose	Group of 18 seen between Dangara and Kulob
4	Barbary falcon	One seen by Lieven near Zigar
5	Saker falcon	One seen by Lieven near Zigar
6	Kestrel	Several seen along the road Dushanbe-Zigar
7	Lammergeier	Common
8	Himalayan griffon	Common
9	Eurasian griffon	Several seen in and around the M-Sayod area
10	Cinereous vulture	Several observations, not common
11	Eurasian sparrowhawk	At least two observations
12	Common buzzard	Several seen along the road Dushanbe-Zigar
13	Upland buzzard	1 seen near Kulob
14	Golden eagle	Common
15	Northern lapwing	1 group seen on a field near Kulob
16	Solitary snipe	1 seen in Darshai valley
17	Rock dove	Common
18	Eurasian collared dove	Several seen from the car
19	Laughing dove	Common in villages and towns
20	White-winged woodpecker	1 seen in Zigar
21	Common magpie	Common
22	Yellow-billed chough	Common
23	Carrion crow	Common
24	Common raven	Common
25	Eurasian jackdaw	Common
26	Turkestan tit	Several observations around Kisht and Zigar
27	Crested lark	Common in plains between Dushanbe and Zigar
28	Eurasian skylark	Common in plains between Dushanbe and Zigar
29	Horned lark	Several groups around the Shuroaboat pass
30	Streaked laughingthrush	Common
31	Wallcreeper	Several observations along the road near Zigar
32	Eastern rock nuthatch	Common
33	Winter wren	1 observation
34	Common myna	Common
35	Common starling	Common
36	Blue whistling thrush	Several observations around the M-Sayod reserve
37	Eurasian blackbird	Locally common, e.g. in Zigar village
38	Güldenstadt's redstart	2 seen from the road near Zigar
39	White-capped redstart	2 in the Zigar gorge
40	Little forkfail	2 in the Zigar gorge
41	Eurasian tree sparrow	Several groups
42	Brown accentor	Low numbers in the Zigar valley
43	White-throated dipper	Zigar gorge
44	Brown dipper	Zigar gorge
45	White wagtail	1 near the gas station in Kisht
46	Brambling	One group of 300+ birds down the Shuroaboat pass
47	Red-fronted serin	Small groups present around Zigar
48	Hawfinch	Present in garden of guesthouse



49	Pine bunting	Several seen in and around the M-Sayod area
50	Rock bunting	Locally common
51	Corn bunting	Common in plains between Dushanbe and Zigar

Mammals		
1	Markhor	High numbers observed around M-Sayod reserve on a daily basis
2	Siberian ibex	Different groups observed at higher altitudes on several dates
3	Snow leopard	One seen for 15 minutes on the morning of January the 4th.

Thanks for reading!





