

Ladakh: Hemis National Park trip report

February 6 to 14, 2019

*With Phunchok Tsering and Smanla
from Exotic Travel
www.exoticlada.kh.com*



Snow Leopard (*Uncia Uncia*)

Introduction

My wife and I planned a trip in India to try to complete the decade of annual holidays spent on a list of “bigger cats”, having previously seen the Puma and Jaguar in Bolivia, the Cheetah, Leopard and Lion in Tanzania and the Sunda Clouded Leopard in Borneo. The Snow Leopard was perhaps the animal that got us into mammal watching initially, so it was a very significant trip for us.

She made an excellent choice by selecting Exotic Travel, the agency of Phunchok Tsering. We spent 8 days in the Rumbak Camp, with our objective being mostly mammals, but we did some birding as well.

Here are the mammals we saw:

- **Snow Leopard:** we saw 3 releases of collared individuals and one wild sighting;
- **Eurasian Lynx:** we had 5 sightings, two of which were in pairs;
- **Blue Sheep:** daily sightings of dozens or more;
- **Large-eared Pika:** 1 close sighting;
- **Woolly Hare:** 4 sightings, one which was less than 5m away;



Detailed daily accounts

- February 4, 2019 -

We arrived in Leh by plane and we met Stanzin, of Exotic Travel, who introduced us to our Belgian trip companion. We were surprised to hear that he and Phunchok were fluent in French as well as English.

We spent the first day at the Mahey Retreat hotel, without any activities in order to get accustomed to the altitude. We mostly talked about Ladakh, our objectives and our previous trips.



Stanzin and I close to where we saw the **Ibisbill**

- February 5, 2019 -

We set out around 10:30 AM to look for birds around Leh with Stanzin. We saw the **Ibisbill** (multiple good sightings), the **Solitary Snipe** and a **Common Kingfisher**. In the afternoon, we set out to visit a monastery, which allowed us to test our ability to climb multiple steps in this altitude.



Ibisbill



Common Kingfisher

- February 6, 2019 -

We left for Hemis National Park right after breakfast. It took about an hour and a half by road to get to the entrance, after which we trekked until the beginning of the afternoon in order to get to the Rumbak Camp, which was composed of our sleeping tents, the kitchen tent, two bigger tents used for dining and latrines.

On our way to the camp, we learned from our guide, Smanla, that a male **Snow Leopard** had been captured as part of a program to collar individuals with GPS trackers. Unfortunately, the one they caught already had a collar. We thus set out to the location of the release, which provided a great photo opportunity. The leopard ran quite high up in front of us and rested there for a while, before he disappeared over the ridge.



Where's Waldo?

We later spent the afternoon on what we called “the outpost”, a location very close to camp that provides a great view of the surrounding slopes. We learned that we would spend most of our time here, with binoculars and spotting scopes.

Although all guides have spotting scopes (Smanla had an incredible Swarovski binocular combined with a scope), I highly recommend that you bring your own in order to occupy these many hours and avoid relying entirely on the guide.

On our very first day, Smanla spotted two **Eurasian Lynx** with his scope. They were sitting far off in the distance. We also saw many **Blue Sheep**, and 3 species of birds: **Golden Eagle**, **Chukars** and 2 **Himalayan Snowcocks**.



Eurasian Lynx (Sorry for the bad quality. This was taken through the scope.)

- February 7, 2019 -

We spent the whole day at the outpost and we saw **Blue Sheep**, a **Lammergeier (Bearded Vulture)** and an **Eurasian Lynx**. The Lynx sighting was about 250m away and was the highlight of the day. Unfortunately, in the evening, my wife and I got sick, so we decided to spend the next day recovering.

- February 8 and 9, 2019 -

We spent the day at the camp, resting. Our guide was at the outpost and would call us if something important was sighted. On the upside, the weather improved.

In the evening of the second day of rest came the best moment of the trip. We went to the outpost and the sun started to sink behind the slopes when we heard Smanla's walkie-talkie: a leopard was seen on the opposite side of the slope we were watching, so it could come up on our side at any moment. Everyone at the outpost was silent and tension was rising.

Finally, the **Snow Leopard** was spotted near the top of the slope, sitting and watching its surroundings. After about 2 minutes, it got up and descended farther, until it disappeared. The whole sightings lasted about 5 minutes, providing an incredible view in the scope. We didn't try to take pictures, as it was very far away.

- February 10, 2019 -

Having seen the Snow Leopard and the Eurasian Lynx, our net target was the Tibetan Wolf. We walked for a good part of the day near the gorge, which was an incredible landscape. Unfortunately, we only saw the wolf's tracks in the snow. We saw many birds, including the **Griffon Vulture**, and we ended the day at the outpost.

- February 11, 2019 -

During breakfast, we left off quickly in direction of the gorge, as news reached us that a **Snow Leopard** had been captured near the gorge. Unfortunately, it seemed that it was the same individual that was caught on our first day. It provided another good opportunity for pictures, but we couldn't help feeling a bit sad for the Leopard.



The released Snow Leopard

- February 12, 2019 -

We spent the day looking for the Tibetan Wolf, but we only saw its tracks. It eluded us the whole trip. As we looked for it, we saw many birds of prey up close and we have very good opportunities to photograph the **Tibetan Partridge**.



Blue Sheep

- February 13, 2019 -

We walked to the Rumbak Village and spent many hours in the surrounding fields looking at wolf tracks. This might have been our favourite spot, with great scenery and lots of different tracks.

We saw many **Blue Sheep** on the surrounding slopes. Smanla spotted a **Woolly Hare** that was quite close, but too quick to allow photographs.

I saw a shadow creeping fast under a bush and as I walked closer, we saw that it was a **Long-Eared Pika**. We followed its movements, which allowed a nice sighting of about 5 minutes.

Finally, we saw another **Woolly Hare**, which sprang away and hid in a bush. As I searched for it, I ended up a meter away and then it ran and disappeared for good.



Blue Sheep

- February 14, 2019 -

On the last morning, as we were eating breakfast, we planned to go slowly back to the park entrance and then back to Leh, when Smanla came saying that they captured yet another **Snow Leopard**. We rushed down near the park's entrance, which provided one last look before we left.



Snow Leopard

- Conclusion -

Back in Leh, we met with Phunchok and had a nice long talk about Ladakh's ecosystem and its future. We met up with some other tourists who got sick, left the Rumbak camp with Phunchok and ended up seeing the Snow Leopard near Hemis village.



**The team, posing on the last day at Rumbak Camp
(Smanla is absent, as he was taking the picture)**

Phunchok's team gave us an incredible experience, despite the harsh cold and a few days of sickness. They were very helpful and attentive. We were eating like kings and the tents were very comfortable. Of course, such a trip requires very good winter equipment and 3-4 layers of clothes in order to be comfortable, and I strongly suggest that you bring your own spotting scope.

I would highly recommend Exotic Travel to anyone wishing to see Snow Leopards.

Report by: Laurent Morin & Émilie Day Cayer
Photo credits: Émilie Day Cayer & Laurent Morin

