

Ladakh – Birds & Mammals of the Tibetan Plateau

Naturetrek Tour Report

28 June - 12 July 2019



Common Rosefinch



Shyok River Valley



Puga Sumdo



Kiang trio in Tsokar

Report and photos compiled by Durgesh Singh



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Highlights:

On this tour we saw 70+ bird and 10 mammal species in the Ladakh region of India. On our initial visits to Indus river area we spotted Ibisbill, Mallard, Coots, Red-fronted Serin, Griffon Vulture, Common Cuckoo, Golden Oriole and Northern Raven etc. Ancient monasteries in Alchi and Thiksey provided insights into Tibetan Buddhism. We drove to Tsokar and our stay there was the wildlife highlight of the tour where we saw Black-necked Cranes, Groundpeckers, Himalayan Marmot, Upland Buzzard, Little Owls, Bearded Vulture, Mountain Voles, Plateau Pikas, Bharal, Argalis, Great Rosefinches, Desert Wheatears and Woolly Hares. A large herd of Kiang running across the plains was a memorable sighting during our visit to the Startsapuk Tso area. In Tsomoriri we saw adult & fledglings of Ruddy Shelduck and Bar-headed geese. A Long-legged Buzzard was spotted hunting very close to the road. Desert Hares, Rosefinches, Hume's Short toed Larks and Red Fox were seen during our outings in Nubra and we also got a chance to ride the Bactrian Camels in Hundar. We enjoyed a good view of the Karakoram Range from Khardungla Pass. Back in Delhi, a Tuk Tuk ride in the busy streets of Chandni Chowk was really exciting. Apart from wildlife we got a chance to sample local cuisine, see the nomadic Changspa herders and enjoy the stunning landscape of Ladakh.

Day 1

Friday 28th June

Guests left for Delhi from UK.

Day 2

Saturday 29th June

After meeting the group at the boarding counter at Delhi airport we went through security for our onward flight to Leh. Flight left Delhi at 6.45am and landed in Leh by 8am. After collecting our baggage and completing entry formalities we stepped out of the airport. Nima and the team were waiting for us and we got into our vehicles to go to Hotel Kaal where breakfast was ready for us. In the meantime, rooms were allocated to us. Being in a high altitude place like Leh, and initial rest period is very important for acclimatisation so with no further delay, we went to our rooms.

We left to visit Shanti Stupa at 4pm. Tonyot, a local culture expert, explained the significance of the Stupa and we enjoyed a bird's eye view of Leh city and the surrounding area. After visiting the Stupa we visited the market area and then came back to hotel and had our dinner.

Day 3

Sunday 30th June

After breakfast we left for Alchi. Dorjay, our wildlife spotter for the trip joined us today. We left Leh and took a small detour to Spituk bridge over the Indus. We spotted Mallards, White-browed Wagtail, Red-billed Chough, Cinerous Tit, Eurasian Hoopoe, Black Redstart, Rock Dove, Eurasian Magpie and Oriental Turtle Dove here. We continued on our way to Alchi and on the outskirts of Leh we spotted a group of six Urials feeding on hill slope.

We stopped at Sangam to enjoy the confluence of the Indus and Zaskar rivers. We saw Chukar Partridge on the way crossing the road and later a few more Urials. We also saw some petroglyphs (rock paintings/carvings) on the way to Alchi which were spotted by Tonyot. After reaching Alchi, we had our packed lunch and enjoyed some fresh apricot juice in a local restaurant as the monastery was closed for lunch break. We visited the monastery with Tonyot who explained to us the importance of the temple and all about Tibetan Buddhism. After the visit we came back to Leh.

Day 4

Monday 1st July

We started out after breakfast for a visit to the Chang La pass to see some monasteries, and of course some wildlife. We scanned the area in Sindhu Ghat for birds and spotted wagtails, Common Rosefinch, Golden Eagle etc. Around Shey Marshes we walked and spotted Mallard, Garganey, House Sparrow and Common Kestrel. On our way to Chang La we visited Thiksey Monastery and Tonyot guided us around and explained the significance of this beautiful place. We stopped at Kharu and had our packed lunch with some freshly made tea at a local restaurant.

After lunch continued towards Chang La and it took us two hours to reach the pass. On the way we stopped to look for Snowcocks and Dorjay scanned the landscape. We saw a good number of Himalayan Marmots near Zingrail. Near to Chang La we saw Guldenstadt's Redstart, Horned Lark and Brandt's Mountain Finch. We stopped at the pass for 20-25 minutes and enjoyed the view. We drove back and spent some time photographing the Himalayan Marmots. We started back for Leh and on arriving back at our hotel we did the checklist and had our dinner.

Day 5

Tuesday 2nd July

We started for Zingchan after breakfast. On the way we stopped at the Spituk bridge at Indus to scan for Ibisbill and to our pleasure we found a solitary male feeding on the river edge. Later it flew to a spot near us and offered us a very clear view, so we stayed with the bird until it flew away. We continued our journey in the Hemis National Park and drove as far as the Tarbung valley where we spotted a Brown Dipper in the stream and followed it for some time. Due to road construction in the area, the habitat looked disturbed. We started to walk back towards Zingchan and Dorjay spotted a Golden Eagle soaring above the hillside.

On our way down towards Zingchan we saw Blue Whistling Thrush, Mountain Chiffchaff and Cinerous Tit. We came back to the hotel for lunch and some rest, before meeting up again at 3.30pm to visit the Spituk bridge again, and this time we spotted two Ibisbills in the area. We drove towards Choglamsar and on the way saw Red-fronted Serin and Common Rosefinches. Near to Sashi Bridge over the Indus River we got out and explored the marshes on foot. We saw Northern Raven, Eurasian Hoopoe, Common Cuckoo, Common Redshank, Indian Pond Heron, Mallard and Yellow and Citrine Wagtails. We started back for our hotel and arrived in plenty of time for dinner.

Day 6

Wednesday 3rd July

We started by 8.30am today for Tso Kar & Tso Moriri where we were going to spend the next few days. We picked up Dorjay on the way and then continued. A brief stop was taken to photograph the picturesque Stakna

Monastery with Indus River flowing next to it. After a quick check of the permits needed at Upshi we drove towards Tso Kar. After 30 minutes we spotted a group of Bharals on the mountain side, so we stopped and watched the group. There were females & young ones coming down the mountain towards the stream flowing next to us, the young ones descending slowly with their mothers balancing themselves on the steep rocky sides. Some were feeding on the wild rose bushes on the slopes.

After watching them for some time we drove on. Near Lato village we took a stop to scan the landscape and saw a Plateau Pika under the rocky embankment of the bridge. We also saw Chukars, Bearded Vulture and a group of Red and Alpine Choughs. We enjoyed the drive through the beautiful terrain and reached Tang Lang La pass where we stopped briefly to admire the view and saw Mountain Finches in the area. We continued on and stopped at Debring for our lunch break.

After having some hot drinks and lunch we drove towards our camp in Tso Kar, and on reaching the camp we went to our rooms for some rest. We got ready at 4.30pm, had some tea and started scanning the plains and marshes. We saw Black-necked Cranes, Ruddy Shelducks, Bar-headed Geese, Desert Wheatear, Rosy Starling, Little Owl, Mountain Voles, and Woolly Hare before it started getting dark. We came back to the camp and a hot dinner was served shortly afterwards, which was very welcome. After enjoying our dinner we did our checklist for the day.

Day 7

Thursday 4th July

We awoke to a cold clear morning, and soon our spotter Dorjay spotted some Argalis on the mountain top opposite to our camp. After breakfast we drove towards Startaspuk Tso. Just after the Changspa herder settlement we saw an Upland Buzzard perched on the rocky mountain side. Opposite to it, in the marshes, we saw Voles rushing in and out of holes. A group of Kiangs were seen on the plains but on seeing our vehicles they moved further away from us. Himalayan Marmots were all over the place and their sudden alarm calls made us look up and we saw a Long-legged Buzzard taking to the skies.

We later saw a big group of Kiangs move towards mountain side. We could not scan much near to the lake as the day was quite hot by now and the heat haze made it difficult to get any image in the scope. We came back to our camp after a nice outing and had our lunch. In the afternoon we went to another side of the lake and scanned for Tibetan Sandgrouse. We saw a number of Ruddy Shelducks and Brown-headed Gulls in the stream. It got very windy close to evening, but we managed to see Common Kestrel, Little Owls, Groundpeckers, Kiang and Rosy Starling on our way back.

Day 8

Friday 5th July

We had mild drizzle in the morning today. After having our breakfast we packed and got ready to leave for Tso Moriri. We again spotted Woolly Hare and Little Owl on the way out. After leaving the plains we saw a group of four Kiangs close to the road and a couple of Bearded Vultures and some Himalayan Vultures were seen soaring. A Plateau Pika with a young one was also seen and we had a good view of them.

We crossed the pass and drove towards Puga. Blue Rock Thrush, Citrine Wagtail, Twite and Brandt's Mountain Finch were seen in the area. A little later Ruddy Shelduck, Black-necked Crane, Bar-headed Geese, Choughs and

Wagtails were seen around the hot water spring as we drove towards Puga Sumdo. We stopped for some tea briefly and saw White-tailed Rubythroat, Robin Accentor and Great Rosefinch in the area. We continued our drive towards Tso Moriri and crossed the beautiful Kyagar Tso Lake on the way. Near to the Tso Moriri Lake we spotted a group of Himalayan Marmots close to the road and we spent some time photographing them.

We reached our camp and had a late lunch. After some rest we went to explore areas around the lake. We visited a marshy area behind the lake and although it was a very windy afternoon we saw a lot of Marmot activity and a few birds. We took photographs of the lake and saw a Changspa herder with more than 300 goats & sheep moving with him close to the lake. We returned to the camp by sunset and had our dinner.

Day 9

Saturday 6th July

After having breakfast at 8am we started out for Leh. Close to the lake area we scanned for Himalayan Snowcock but unfortunately we didn't find any. Ruddy Shelducks and Bar-headed Geese were spotted near the shore with chicks. We left the lake area and stopped near to a stream feeding the lake where Blanford's Snowfinch was seen. Marmots and Mountain Finches were quite active in the area. Close to Kyagar Tso, we saw a Long-legged Buzzard feeding on something next to the road. Saker Falcon & Kiang were also seen.

We continued our drive towards Leh and in a couple of hours reached Mahe Bridge. After a brief leg stretch we drove through the beautiful canyon with the Indus alongside us. We reached Chumathang by lunch time and had our packed lunch and some rest. We spotted a Red Fox on the river side shortly after we left towards Leh. We reached Leh by 5pm and checked in to our hotel. We had dinner and did our checklist before going to bed.

Day 10

Sunday 7th July

We started for Nubra Valley after an early breakfast. We enjoyed our drive to Khardung La and we reached the top in a couple of hours. It was beginning to get crowded so we took some photos and started on our way downhill. After reaching Khardung village we stopped for some refreshments and a leg stretch, having seen Marmots and Yaks on the way.

Refreshed, we started again but after half an hour we saw a roadblock ahead. A truck had broken down on a narrow turn and vehicles from both sides were waiting for the road to be clear again. The traffic cleared after 45 minutes and we were on our way to Hundar. By lunch time we reached the resort where we had a quick lunch and went for some rest. The campsite was active with birds and Black Redstart, Common Rosefinch, Chiffchaff and Eurasian Magpie were around.

At 4pm we had some tea and left for Diskit. The magnificent statue of Maitreya Buddha overlooks the Nubra Valley. We enjoyed the view of Hundar Valley and visited the temple and then went to the plains below the Monastery and did some birding. Lot of Rosefinches were active and we saw our first Streaked Rosefinch. We drove back to Hundar through Diskit village and stopped at a highpoint over the sand dunes. We saw Bactrian Camels resting and taking tourists on their back for a ride. Dorjay and Carol spotted a Desert Hare running ahead of one of the camels. Close to sunset we came back to the camp and had our dinner. We did the checklist, decided the next day's plan and went to rest in our tents.

Day 11

Monday 8th July

Nubra Valley was warm and we had pleasant temperatures in the morning. We finished our breakfast by 7.30am and started out to explore the area. We drove towards Thoise and saw the usual birds like Redstart, Rosefinch, Magpie, Choughs etc on the way. Near to an airfield we saw a Red Fox sitting on a stone wall. After 45 minutes we reached an area with lot of Tamarisk & Sea Buckthorn bushes. We stopped and explored the area on foot. Desert Hares were everywhere running from bush to bush hiding away from us. They were feeding on wild Lavender bushes which were flowering at the moment. We also saw Hume's Short-toed Lark and plenty of Toad-headed Agamas.

When the temperature rose we left for our camp. We rested during the warmer part of the day in the camp and after lunch we started for the sand dune area of Hundar. Tracy and Lesley went for the Bactrian Camel ride while Carol, Dorjay and Durgesh went to explore the Sea Buckthorn forest. We spotted Desert Hares, Common Rosefinch, Yellow Wagtail, Bluethroat, Lesser Whitethroat and Citrine Wagtail during the walk. By evening we left for the camp.

Day 12

Tuesday 9th July

We left for Leh by 9 am after breakfast. We enjoyed the landscape and stopped at some of the beautiful viewpoints on the way. By the time we reached Khardung La, the vehicle traffic was building up. We enjoyed the view of the Karakorams from the top and continued towards Leh. Just before Leh we spotted couple of Urials close to the road so we watched them for some time before leaving for Leh. After reaching our hotel we had lunch and then in the afternoon we visited the Leh market and did some shopping. We came back and enjoyed our last dinner in Leh.

Day 13

Wednesday 10th July

We left for the airport at 9.45am and the flight left for Delhi at 12 noon. We said good bye to our friends in Leh especially to Dorjay, Stanzin and Ganesh who were with us since the beginning of the tour.

We reached our hotel in Aerocity, Delhi by 2.30pm and the rest of the day was at leisure so after a rest the group explored the Aerocity area in the evening.

Day 14

Thursday 11th July

The group boarded their flight back to the UK after a memorable holiday enjoying the sights, culture, history and wildlife of this remote part of India.

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Species Lists

Birds (✓=recorded but not counted)

	Common name	Scientific name	June/July												
			28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1	Bar-headed Goose	<i>Anser indicus</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓					
2	Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓					
3	Garganey	<i>Spatula querquedula</i>			✓										
4	Gadwall	<i>Mareca strepera</i>					✓								
5	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>		✓		✓					✓	✓			
6	Chukar Partridge	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓			
7	Great Crested Grebe	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>							✓	✓					
8	Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>				✓									
9	Bearded Vulture	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>					✓		✓				✓		
10	Himalayan Vulture	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>		✓					✓						
11	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓						
12	Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>													✓
13	Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>							✓						
14	Long-legged Buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>							✓		✓				
15	Common Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>		✓			✓								
16	Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>			✓										
17	Black-necked Crane	<i>Grus nigricollis</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓					
18	Ibisbill	<i>Ibidorhyncha struthersii</i>				✓									
19	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>				✓	✓	✓							
20	Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>						✓							
21	Brown-headed Gull	<i>Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus</i>						✓	✓	✓					
22	Rock Dove	<i>Columba livia</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	
23	Hill Pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
24	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>		✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓			
25	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>					✓	✓	✓						
26	Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>		✓	✓		✓			✓		✓			
27	Little Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>								✓					
28	Alpine Swift	<i>Tachymarptis melba</i>										✓			
29	Eurasian Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓			

	Common name	Scientific name	June/July													
			28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
30	Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>				✓										
31	Common Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓	✓			✓					✓		
32	Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>										✓				
33	Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>				✓										
34	Bank Myna	<i>Acridotheres ginginianus</i>													✓	
35	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		
36	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>		✓			✓				✓		✓	✓		
37	Alpine Chough	<i>Pyrrhocorax graculus</i>				✓	✓			✓	✓	✓				
38	Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>								✓						
39	House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>													✓	
40	Northern Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>				✓	✓	✓			✓					
41	Ground Tit	<i>Pseudopodoces humilis</i>					✓	✓								
42	Cinereous Tit	<i>Parus cinereus</i>		✓		✓							✓			
43	Brown Dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>				✓										
44	Horned Lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>			✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓					
45	Hume's Short-toed Lark	<i>Calandrella acutirostris</i>									✓	✓				
46	Pale Martin	<i>Riparia diluta</i>					✓		✓	✓						
47	Eurasian Crag Martin	<i>Ptyonoprogne rupestris</i>			✓											
48	Common House Martin	<i>Delichon urbicum</i>					✓			✓		✓				
49	Lesser Whitethroat	<i>Sylvia curruca</i>											✓			
50	Paddyfield Warbler	<i>Acrocephalus agricola</i>			✓											
51	Common Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>			✓					✓	✓	✓				
52	Mountain Chiffchaff	<i>Phylloscopus sindianus</i>				✓										
53	Bluethroat	<i>Luscinia svecica</i>			✓								✓			
54	White tailed Rubythroat	<i>Luscinia pectoralis</i>							✓							
55	Blue Whistling Thrush	<i>Myophonus caeruleus</i>				✓				✓						
56	Black Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
57	Güldenstädt's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus erythrogastus</i>			✓		✓	✓			✓					
58	Blue Rock Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>			✓				✓							
59	Desert Wheatear	<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>					✓	✓								
60	House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
61	Blanford's Snowfinch	<i>Pyrgilauda blanfordi</i>								✓						

	Common name	Scientific name	June/July													
			28	29	30	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
62	Robin Accentor	<i>Prunella rubeculoides</i>			✓					✓	✓					
63	Yellow Wagtail	<i>Motacilla flava</i>				✓										
64	Citrine Wagtail	<i>Motacilla citreola</i>			✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		
65	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>			✓											
66	White browed Wagtail	<i>Motacilla maderaspatensis</i>		✓		✓	✓				✓					
67	Plain Mountain Finch	<i>Leucosticte nemoricola</i>					✓	✓	✓							
68	Brandt's Mountain Finch	<i>Leucosticte brandti</i>			✓					✓	✓					
69	Common Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
70	Great Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus rubicilla</i>							✓	✓	✓					
71	Streaked Rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus rubicilloides</i>										✓				
72	Twite	<i>Linaria flavirostris</i>								✓	✓					
73	Red-fronted Serin	<i>Serinus pusillus</i>		✓		✓	✓				✓					

Mammals

1	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>									✓		✓			
2	Kiang	<i>Equus kiang</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓						
3	Bharal	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>					✓									
4	Argali	<i>Ovis ammon hodgsoni</i>							✓							
5	Himalayan Marmot	<i>Marmota bobak</i>			✓				✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
6	Royle's Mountain Vole (Stolitzca)	<i>Alticola stoliczkanus</i>							✓							
7	Wooly Hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>					✓			✓						
8	Urial	<i>Ovis orientalis</i>		✓										✓		
9	Plateau Pika	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>					✓			✓	✓	✓				
10	Desert Hare	<i>Lepus tibetanus</i>										✓	✓			

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