



## Ladakh

February 21 to March 6 2022

*By Brecht Verhelst*

This report describes a wildly successful trip to Ladakh by myself and my friend Amalia in the early spring of 2022, just after restrictions on travel to India linked to the Omicron variant of COVID-19 had been lifted. Our main target was the snow leopard, but on the spot we decided to add on a four day trip to Hanle, a site close to the Chinese border that had recently opened to foreigners. According to Phunchok, we were only the second group of foreigners who visited this area. Most birders opt to add Tso Kar as an extension to their snow leopard trip, but the results of our visit suggest that Hanle might be an even better option.

### **Organization and logistics**

All logistics, permits and guides were organized by Phunchok Tsering of Exotic Travel Ladakh, who can be contacted at [ptladakh@gmail.com](mailto:ptladakh@gmail.com), or via phone/whatsapp: +91 94191 78682. Since we were the only tourists visiting this spring (except for an Indian group who was present during the first four days of our stay), we could benefit from a high level of flexibility, which is likely to be different in a normal year. Phunchok joined us from day 5, which resulted in a markedly different approach. Phunchok is a very keen mammal watcher and had only recently started to get more into birds. While he obviously has seen loads of snow leopards, he was very motivated to find new spots for the other mammals and birds, and even scored a few lifers himself on the trip. This made it feel more like birding with a friend than being guided around. Phunchok's approach to searching for mammals is fast and efficient, but he

was also happy to slow down when I told him the pace was starting to stress me out a little. Dorjay joined us for the entire trip, a great guy with sharp eyes and a hard worker who found us a lot of good stuff. He is not much of a birder but has an amazing skill to spot mammals at insane distances. He was always ready to help and we thoroughly enjoyed his company. On the first four days, we had Stenzin with us, a really friendly guy who helps Phunchok manage the tours. Despite not being much of a naturalist himself, he diligently put in his share of scanning for snow leopard. Our team of four was a lot smaller than usual (for groups, Phunchok normally brings a cook and several spotters), but we felt we were surrounded by the right people and the size of our group did not significantly diminish our chances. The accommodation Phunchok arranged for us was always nice and comfortable, ranging from an excellent hotel in Leh to authentic homestays in Rumbak and Hanle.



### **Leh area**

Because the flight from Delhi to Ladakh takes you straight away to an altitude of 3256m, one or more days of acclimatization are essential before moving up to even greater elevations. You should not consider these as a waste of time though, because great birding is available inside and around the city. Out of respect for Phunchok's hard work to scout locations I will not give exact spots here, but you can take inspiration from the observations on eBird. A small creek in the city gave us excellent views of a Solitary snipe and a Brown Dipper. Down in the river valley, White-winged Redstarts are omnipresent. A particularly good area is located below Thiksey Monastery, where we found a flock of Ibisbill and a few Goosander. Another great place is located past Phey, where springs trickle down the slopes towards the Indus river, creating a mosaic of swampy meadows, willow bushes and sea buckthorn scrub. This was very productive, and we quickly found several Great Rosefinches, a mixed flock of Red and Black-throated Thrushes, a Blue Whistling-trush and a few Brown Accentors. The star bird

of the area, White-browed Tit-warbler, proved a bit more tricky but eventually we got good views of a female and a rather distant male. A nice surprise was a little flock of Mongolian Finches that came down to drink from one of the creeks. We also had Ladakh Urial in this area.







### **The snow leopard experience**

Because of quarantine requirements that had ended only a week before our visit we were the only visitors looking for snow leopard in February and had the Rumbak valley to ourselves. As Stenzin told us, peak season usually sees at least 30 mammal watchers in the area. The absence of crowds certainly made the experience more authentic, but we could not benefit from the large number of eyes that would be looking for leopards in a normal year, which meant we had to work harder. Given that we were only two, we stayed at a homestay rather than the tent camp that is usually set up for larger groups. This was an amazing experience – the family made us feel extremely welcome, we could spend the evenings in the kitchen around the fire and we had a beautiful room and rooftop terrace overlooking the mountains. After installing ourselves and a cup of tea, we set out to a viewpoint just outside the village. Incredibly, we found a sleeping snow leopard after no more than 10 minutes of scanning! It was rather close to the road, but very far away from the point we were standing. It was already late in the afternoon though, meaning it was likely to get up and start moving very soon. We therefore approached just a few hundred meters on foot. It did start to move it shortly afterwards and we soon lost it in the valley. In hindsight, we probably should have jumped in the car and driven up a lot closer, but the whole experience caught us quite by surprise.



This successful but rather brief and very distant sighting was followed by four days of intensive searching. Every morning and afternoon we would spend on an elevated viewpoint, often in strong winds and biting cold, thoroughly scanning the slopes. Unfortunately, this did not result in finding anything, except for a couple of wolves and the omnipresent blue sheep. We did enjoy the birding in and around the village a lot though. Very tame Tibetan Partridges and Chukars roamed through the streets and below our homestay a flock of Brandt's Mountain Finches would come to roost in the evenings. Hill Pigeons fooled around on the roofs and Robin Accentors were everywhere. In the sky, Himalayan and Bearded Vultures were regulars, along with Golden Eagles. Other nice finds included Himalayan Snowcocks and Red-fronted Serins.







After four days of scrutinizing the same areas with zero trace of snow leopards, we became a bit unhappy with the approach. Their ranges are huge and it seemed that none was currently present in the area, but surely there must be other suitable areas nearby that we could check? Because our options for communication with Phunchok were very limited in this remote valley, we decided to return to Leh and discuss an alternative plan with him. He quite quickly understood that we needed to change tactics and decided to return to the Rumbak valley with us, in order to explore some alternative locations that Dorjay and Stenzin were less familiar with. This paid off almost immediately, and the next morning we found a female snow leopard with two cubs resting on a distant ridge. It was still morning when we found them, so we could be confident that they would stick around all day. That allowed Amalia and me to climb up a ridge behind them, from where we had truly amazing views of the cubs playing around. An incredible experience!





### **Hanle**

We had not really considered adding on the classic extension to Tso Kar, because some species like Black-necked Crane are not present in winter. However, once in Ladakh we started chatting with Phunchok about possible extras, and we quickly realized that many of the goodies like Tibetan Sandgrouse, Blanford's and Tibetan Snowfinch, Groundpecker, Argali and potentially even Pallas's Cat were around even at this time of the year. For some, like the

Sandgrouse, this season is actually really good. However, the drive to Tso Kar is much longer than in summer (250 vs 140km), due to a mountain pass being closed, and logistics are quite challenging since there are no accommodation options available at this time of the year. He therefore suggested another site, Hanle, which was a bit uncertain as it had just opened to foreigners and overnight stays might not be possible. Hanle is a small village surrounded by a vast marsh created by an inland river delta, in the middle of which are a number of rocky outcrops. It promised some additional species though: Tibetan Lark and Tibetan Gazelle, along with slightly better chances for Pallas' cat and Tibetan Sand Fox. Compared to Tso Kar, the only ones missing here are Argali and Blanford's Snow Finch (or so we thought!). It took a little time to arrange the permits for Hanle but we eventually got them and to our relief they did not mention any restrictions on spending the night there.







We left in the early morning for the 247km drive, which we completed in about 6 hours including minimal stops, mainly to deal with several police checkpoints and enjoy a quick noodle soup. About halfway the route, the first herds of the amazing Kiang or Tibetan Wild Ass started to appear. They are very numerous on the Hanle plains. 20km before Hanle, we made a stop at a fenced parcel of grassland. Searching for birds was rather difficult here because of the strong heat haze, which would prove quite a nuisance in the coming days, even in temperatures barely reaching above zero. Nevertheless, I managed to just make out the first bird of note - a Tibetan Lark! This species of the Tibetan plateau just reaches into India in the Hanle area. Unfortunately, it was very distant and quickly disappeared. Thinking they would be quite common around Hanle, we did not try to get closer and continued our way. Once we arrived in Hanle we settled into our homestay and had lunch and tea. Phunchok had arranged the Padma homestay for us, a quite comfortable and authentic place run by a lovely family. Obviously, food standards here are more basic, especially in winter, because the air supply hub of Leh is quite far away. The man of the house, Sonam, appears to be the mammal specialist of the area. Because of a rotating system to allocate guides, he was unable to guide us but still provided us with pretty good advice. Earlier that day, wolves had killed a kiang just 100m from the homestay and around 3pm one of them paid a visit to the carcass. The village dogs did not like that though and chased it back into the hills. Through the scope, we watched how it rejoined the pack and observed the playing and fighting that followed. We decided to drive a little closer, but they were very wary and took off as soon as we had left the car to climb a hill and get photos. The pack turned out to contain no less than fifteen individuals! After that great experience, we rushed on in order to check out a couple of known Pallas' cat hangouts before sunset, when they are reputed to be most active. The spot where we parked seemed perfect, overlooking a great swathe of the frozen Hanle marshes from the south. It did not take long for us to strike gold - a Tibetan Sand Fox was resting just below us!

Soon enough, a second one joined it. We watched them play hide-and-seek for a couple of minutes until they decided to run off together. What a first day in Hanle!



The next morning started a routine that we would follow over the next days: driving around to sites where Pallas' cat had been seen in the past in the hope of crossing one's path. This includes a rocky outcrop in the middle of the marshes and some cliffs on the edge. Red Foxes were rather common in these areas, but no cats. Kiang were omnipresent and gave stunning views. We came across a few flocks of Tibetan Sandgrouses, one of which let us approach behind a wall down to 10 meters! Around a farm, we found a nice mixed flock of Brandt's Mountain Finch and Tibetan and Blanford's Snowfinch. The presumed absence of the latter from the area seemed due to misidentification, because Sonam showed us a picture of the species later that evening. We spent the day driving around the Hanle marshes and enjoying the stunning landscapes. Strangely, Groundpeckers were nowhere to be seen, despite Phunchok's assurances that they are very common in the area. So were Tibetan Larks, which the locals told us were 'in the middle of the marsh'. Having reached the middle of the marsh, we could confirm they were not there. We did come across ten wolves trying to hunt down a kiang though, presumably part of yesterday's pack. Straight out of an Attenborough movie!





On our second morning in Hanle, we started to get a little bit worried about the elusive Pallas' cat. This would be our last full day to search the area. By now, we had visited all corners of the marsh and stationed ourselves at each of the most promising spots two or three times. Hopes to find the manul started to fade. So we braved the freezing cold again and arrived at the first site, as the sun started to warm the rocks. A 20 minute scan yielded nothing. We turned around to check a second site. And suddenly – there it was! Pallas' cat, basking in the sun on a rock! Unfortunately, it did not stick around for long (presumably due to our presence) and it slowly started to walk away. We split up to try and find it from the other side of the rock. This worked out well and we found it again, having prolonged although distant views of the cat. It eventually slipped away into one of the many holes that dot the rocky outcrop. We were super elated to have finally found our holy grail, although a bit disappointed by the poor views. For the afternoon, Phunchok had another treat in store. Just like the lark, Tibetan gazelles have a tiny range in India, occurring only in far east Ladakh. They appear to spend the entire year on grasslands at incredible altitudes, at around 5000m. Leaving Hanle, we drove to the southeast and continued to climb, up and up. Two wolves crossed our path, likely different individuals from the pack that we had encountered before. We passed a number of shepherd encampments offering some of the most barren living conditions I have ever witnessed. Soon we picked up the first Groundpecker. We kept going until we reach 5292 meters, which surprisingly did not pose any major challenges for our car engine! We descended slightly to reach the grassy slopes, where a few sheep flocks were present. It did not take long before we spotted a small herd of gazelles: one male and three females. They are incredibly beautiful and offer a weird combination of elegance and adaptation to extreme cold, with thick fur and large nasal cavities. Driving along the military road, we found a surprising level of bird activity up here. Groundpeckers were incredibly numerous. Apparently, they come down to Hanle in summer, which is a bit unusual for a mountain bird. Among the mountain finches we found a female-type rosefinch that we struggled to identify and I still have not been able to figure out what it is. Driving back we encountered more gazelles, about 30 in all. We got back in time to scan for more foxes and cats but drew a blank.







The mystery rosefinch...

On our last morning we would have a couple more hours to check out our stakeouts before embarking on the long drive back to Leh. And we were lucky – at the first site I spotted a very distant Pallas' cat moving through the frozen marsh! Since approaching on foot is rather tricky

in this open habitat, we decided to drive around to the other side of the marsh, in the hope of finding it back closer and in better light. That actually worked, and when we got there it was still busy hunting, at a reasonable distance. Unfortunately, the heat haze was very strong so the pictures are less amazing than the experience itself. We watched it doing its thing for about an hour, stalking voles or pikas, jumping into holes, sitting up and looking at us seemingly unbothered. Its hunt did not seem very successful though... After this magnificent moment we said goodbye to Padma homestay and Hanle and left for Leh. A last highlight of the trip was the stop at the grassland enclosure, where we managed to approach the Tibetan Larks down to a few meters and get some great shots. Back in Leh, Phunchok invited us to stay at his place, and we gladly accepted the offer to celebrate our lifers with sublime Ladakhi food!



