

Ladakh 25 February – 14 March 2020

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We went to Ladakh especially for the snow leopard, and in winter because was said that is the best period to see the animal.

Practicalities

We (Marco and Paola) generally take “last minute” decisions for our travels and also this time we began searching the web in December for a local company. We found Exotic Travel (Phunchok Tzering, www.Exoticladakh.com) in Leh; there were good comments in the web about the company, we took contact and in less than 2 weeks everything was organized, and at a reasonable price. At this point we want to comment about prices and the using of foreign companies. Has been more than 30 years that we travel around the world, especially for birding, always using local companies or even contacting directly local guides, and we never had bad experiences. Through other birders or mammal-watchers’ trip reports (www.mammalwatching.com) is now quite easy to gather comments on local guides and local companies and so finding a reliable one. If you are able to arrive by your own at the destination (this time Leh), from there you can use the local company, saving good money and being freer. Anyway, foreign companies often relay on local companies for the final organisation in loco. Many young people could not afford the price of a foreign company but could using the local one! If you are just two, or travelling with known friends, you can also be more flexible and still adapt the itinerary as the trip unrolls. In our case, we could easily reduce the time in Rumbak/Hemis NP having already seen the important mammals after 5 days and instead add more time in Tso Kar. Again at the end of the trip, our return flight having been cancelled due to the Coronavirus problem, Phunchok could organise us two extra days in Ullay. We flew Air India Milano – Dehli, Dehli – Leh. It’s good to have the same company and the two flights connected, and also the baggage rules (2 pieces x 23 kg each) valid for international flights apply for domestic flights too!

Day schedule

24 February: flight Milano – Dehli

25 February: Dehli (hotel near the airport: www.hoteldehliaerocity.com, if you have enough time visit Sultanpur NP for birdwatching, ca. 1 h. drive by taxi)

26 February: early flight Dehli – Leh, relax at the good Mahey Retreat (www.maheyretreat.com)

27 February: altitude acclimatization and easy birding - mammalwatching around Leh

28 February: drive to Hemis NP barrier and hike along the deeply-frozen river to Rumbak campsite. Accommodation in a tent provided by Exotic Travel. Starting to discover the local fauna (Chukar, Magpie, Hill Pigeon and Fire-fronted Serin right in the camp) and the excellent food prepared by our professional cook Tundu. First spotting for snow leopards from the view point, just 5 min from camp.

29 – 4 February: day program: morning tea at 7.00 am, spotting from viewpoint, excellent breakfast at 8.30 am, spotting and wandering in different side valleys in search of Bluesheep, Lynx, Wolf, Woolly Hare, foxes, Pika, Himalayan Snowcock, Golden Eagle, Lammergeier, Tibetan Partridge, Red-billed Chaugh,.. Lunch,... - Dinner and go to bed with a very welcome hot water bottle!

5 February: travel back to Leh for a much needed and appreciated hot shower and sleep in a warm room! According to programme we should stay in Rumbak two more days, but considering that we saw all the important species we reduced or visit to 7-day.

6 February: transfer to Tso Kar Lake with guide, cook and driver. Being the shorter Leh-Manali road closed for snowy winter conditions, it took us most of the day to drive the alternative way via Chumathang, with a few stops for birding, lunch and discovering the landscape. Tso Kar Resort, as everything else in Tso Kar, was closed for the winter but Phunchok got the key and again “our staff” was marvellous to make us at ease even with the freezing cold temperatures!

7 – 8 February: discovering Tso Kar Lake region by car and walking. Luck smiled at us right the first morning, finding a Palla’s Cat already before breakfast! Tibetan Sandgrouse was nowhere to

be seen, despite searching for it, as well as the Tibetan Snowcock. But we cannot have everything! Argali, Kiang/Tibetan Wild Ass, voles, Tibetan Fox, Little Owl, Golden Eagle, Horned Lark, Hume's Groundpecker Mountain Finch, Snowfinch, Rosefinch,... and lots of cold weather!

9 February: back to Leh to discover that our flight to Milano has been cancelled due to the Coronavirus epidemic and postponed to the 13 February. Phunchok organized at the spot 2 extra days in Ullay, the other "village" (max 10 houses) known for Snow Leopard sightings, with accommodation in homestay.

10 – 11 February: Ullay. New mammals : Urial and Himalayan Ibex, lots of Chukars but no new birds. Different scenery from Rumbak, though we preferred Rumbak for more opportunities to walk.

12 February: Leh, our flight again cancelled, we had to organize a new ticket with Swiss to Zurich. Birding around Leh with some new specie (Ducks, Dipper, ...).

13 February: Leaving Leh for Dehli, long waiting hours at the airport and final departure for Zurich.

14 February: arrival in Zurich and train back home. Just on time before travelling became impossible due to the Coronavirus epidemic...

Birds (51 species):

L=Leh, R=Rumbak, T=Tso Kar (on the way and Lake); bold = local speciality

<p>Greyleg Goose (L) Common Merganser (L, T) Ruddy Shelduck (T) Red-crested Pochard (L) Gadwall (L) Eurasian Wigeon (L) Garganey (L) Common Pochard (L) Mallard (L) Common Teal (L) Northern Pintail (L) Great Cormorant (L, T) Himalayan Snowcock (R) Chukar Partridge (L, R, T) Tibetan Partridge (R) Hill Pigeon (R, T) Rock Pigeon (L) Common Coot (L)</p>	<p>Ibisbill (L) Solitary Snipe (T) Common Greenshank (L) Green Sandpiper (L) Bearded Vulture/Lammergeier (R) Himalayan Griffon (L, R) Golden Eagle (R, T) Northern Goshawk (R) Upland Buzzard (L) Little Owl (T) Common Kestrel (T) Peregrine Falcon (T) Red-billed Chough (R, T) Yellow-billed Chough (R) Carrion Crown (L) Black billed Magpie (L, R, T) Hume's Groundpecker (T) Common Raven (L)</p>	<p>Brown Dipper (L) White throated Dipper (T) Dark-throated Thrush (L) White-winged Redstart (L) Great Tit (L, R) Winter Wren (L, R) Horned Lark (L, R, T) Plain-backed Snowfinch (T) White Wagtail (R) Robin Accentor (R, T) Brown Accentor (T) Red-fronted Serin (L, R) Twite (R, T) Brand's Mountain Finch (T) Great Rosefinch (T)</p>
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Commented mammal list (13 species)

Shan/Snow Leopard: 8 individuals in total (twice 1 female with 2 young). Rumbak and Ullay. From what we saw, you have to be very lucky to get a "close" (less than 300 m) look of the animal. Not being photographers we are very satisfied anyway, but wishing to take good pictures can be a frustrating experience.

Red fox: several in Tso Kar lake.

Tibetan Fox: Tso Kar Lake

Himalayan Wolf: 2 in Rumbak

Eurasian Lynx: 1 in Rumbak at more than 4000 m, hunting Pikas. A very special sighting for us Europeans.

Manul/Pallas's Cat: Tso Kar Lake. Very good view. Discovered at more than 1 km and then slowly approached. Shy and elusive, can quickly disappear in a slit. Only animal that we could get a good picture with the Phone.

Wooly Hare: lots at Rumbak

Large-eared Pika: in Rumbak. You have to look hard for them.
Blyth's Vole: Tso Lar Lake (many holes, but animal difficult to see)
Non-identified vole: Campsite Rumbak
Kiang/Tibetan Wild Ass: many at Tso Kar Lake.
Ladakh Urial: in Ullay and around Leh
Himalayan Ibex: many in Ullay
Tibetan Argali: Tso Kar Lake, more than 40
Bharal/ Blue Sheep: many big groups (>20 individuals) in Rumbak.



We are much satisfied by our trip, the viewing were great (with also some luck) and the organization perfect. Phunchok and his team made all very easy and took good care of us. Only point that we want to make clear, for people not liking cold weather this trip is not an easy walk on the beach! If you need more information please contact us.