

Trip to the Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary to see the elusive Snow Leopard Kibber in Himachal Pradesh, India

I had the opportunity to visit the Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary in February/March 2020, just before the covid pandemic. This remote place is well known from the BBC documentary "Big Cats" and other movies. It is one of the best places on earth to observe Snow Leopards. When I was there, I saw an adult male, an adult female and three offsprings. Tanzin Dorje (91 90 1541 8368, E-Mail: tandorje695@gmail.com) was my guide and he accompanied me to all these beautiful places. He is a very trustworthy person. It was a real pleasure to have him with me. We had a lot of good discussions and a great time together. My photo mentors on this trip were Samyak Kaninde ([Samyak Photography \(samyakkaninde.com\)](http://samyakkaninde.com)) and Manish Lakhani ([Home - Manish Lakhani \(withmanish.com\)](http://withmanish.com)) and I have booked the trip for me and my brother with [Snow Leopard Photography Tour in Spiti Valley in Winter \(darter.in\)](http://darter.in). Besides being great persons and top photographers, Samyak is also very good in birding and Manish is a great organiser.

I prepared for this trip quite a long time before I flew to India. Because of the high altitude in the Himalaya, I spent two weeks in Engadin in Switzerland on about 1'800 m altitude to prepare for this. My brother and I flew to New Delhi and continued travelling to Chandigarh. We drove to Shimla (about 2'300 m altitude) and spent a week there. It was great to acclimatize even more and meanwhile to learn about the Indian culture. The journey to the Spiti valley is quite adventurous. The valleys always get deeper and the mountains higher. We followed up the river Sutley and passed Kalpa/Rekong Peo to the junction to the river Spiti. During the drive I was always looking outside, because Sam was telling me that it is possible to see the bird Ibisbill (*Ibidorhyncha struthersii*). Unfortunately, I didn't see it but instead, I saw a Grey Wolf coming. Because it was already very dark, I could not take a picture. Sam confirmed me that there were even two of them. We had an overnight stay in Mane, a village in a side valley from Spiti. On our first trip in high altitude and the freezing cold we saw already a Red Fox and Barhals (also known as Blue Sheeps). Once arrived in Kipper you are facing the cold desert climate. The temperature can drop down to - 30° Celsius - but during the day with sunshine it is possible that the temperature rises up to + 10° Celsius. We were already on the way up to Kipper when we had to stop because of a Snow Leopard sighting. My first Snow Leopard! It was a great feeling to see this beautiful animal in the wild! We spent several hours to observe this male. That was a great start for the week. We also visited the village of Chicham, which has only been accessible by cars for a few years. They built a huge bridge over the valley which replaced the old cable car. During the week in Kibber Wildlife Sanctuary you have the chance to observe a lot more mammals and birds. My (incomplete) list with what I saw:

Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*), 1 male, 1 female, 3 juveniles
Himalayan Wolf (*Canis lupus chanco*), no photo but confirmed from the guide (2 individuals)
Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)
Siberian ibex (*Capra sibirica*)
Bharal (*Pseudois nayaur*)

Himalayan vulture (*Gyps himalayensis*)
Bearded vulture (*Gypaetus barbatus*)
Golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)
Chukar partridge (*Alectoris chukar*)
Himalayan snowcock (*Tetraogallus himalayensis*)
Yellow-billed chough (*Pyrrhocorax graculus*)
Red-billed chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*)

Common magpie (*Pica pica*)
Robin accentor (*Prunella rubeculoides*)
Spotted rosefinch (*Carpodacus rubicilla severtzovi*)
Tibetan snowfinch (*Montifringilla adamsi*)

After my trip there was an article in National Geographic about Snow Leopards in Kibber from Peter Gwin and Prasenjeet Yadav:

[Himalaya snow leopards are finally coming into view \(nationalgeographic.com\)](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/asia/snow-leopards-kibber/)

In the last paragraph it says:

“This year every tourist who came to Kibber saw a snow leopard. But in the days after the old male died, no one saw one. Still, the female and her cubs were somewhere, and Prasenjeet planned to find them (Gwin, 2020).”

As we were there at about the same time, we heard also about the death of the old male Snow Leopard. But already the next day, the female and the three cubs arrived in the territory. I wrote a letter to the German National Geographic and my words were printed in the next magazine. In this text also Tanzin Dorje is mentioned.

„Phantom auf der Klippe“, Juli 2020

EMOTIONAL

Simon Steiner, Boll (Schweiz)

Danke für diesen tollen Artikel und die schönen Bilder. Auch ich hatte die Gelegenheit, zu jener Zeit, als der alte Schneeleopard starb, in Kibber zu sein. Ich zitiere hier die letzten Sätze des Artikels:

„Dieses Jahr hatte jeder Tourist, der nach Kibber gereist war, einen Schneeleoparden gesehen. Nach dem Tod des alten Männchens sah zunächst niemand mehr einen. Aber das Weibchen und ihre Jungen mussten irgendwo sein. Prasenjeet nahm sich vor, sie zu finden.“

Wir kamen in Kibber einige Tage nach der letzten Jagd durch das alte Schneeleopardenmännchen an. Wir sahen ihn fast jeden Tag, und er versuchte wieder zu jagen. Eines Tages wurde er nicht gefunden oder er war zu weit weg, kein Tourist sah ihn. Am Tag darauf planten mein Bruder und ich, weiter oben im Tal Vögel zu beobachten. Es war ein anstrengender Treck mit unseren beiden Führern talaufwärts an einen Ort, an dem sich ein Steinadlernest befand. Neben dem Steinadler (einem Erwachsenen mit Jungtier) sahen wir den Bartgeier, den Himalaya-Geier sowie Schneefinken und Schneehühner, wenn auch in weiter Entfernung. Es war großartig, an einem Ort in völliger Stille zu sein. Mit unseren Führern Tanzin und Tashi führten wir viele interessante Gespräche. Plötzlich zeigte einer von ihnen auf die Wand: Dort lief das Schneeleopardenmännchen auf der gegenüberliegenden Seite des Tals in den fast senkrechten Felswänden.

Dieser unerwartete Anblick war für uns einer der emotionalsten Momente.

Der Tag, an dem die Information über den Tod des Männchens kam, war wie ein Schock für das Dorf Kibber. An diesem Morgen ging niemand hinaus. Am nächsten Tag liefen wir in einem anderen Tal zum Ort Langza. Plötzlich traf die Information ein, dass das Weibchen und die drei Jungen weiter oben im Tal bei Kibber gesichtet worden waren. Wir sprangen in unser Auto und kehrten nach Kibber zurück. Von dort aus liefen wir talaufwärts. Als wir oben ankamen, war nur das Weibchen zu sehen.

Später am Nachmittag mussten wir packen – und hörten plötzlich, dass die Jungen da seien. Sie liefen in Richtung der Mutter, um sie zu finden und zu begrüßen. Was für ein Moment! Als wir am nächsten Tag an die Stelle zurückkehrten, lagen die vier noch immer da. Es begann heftig zu schneien, und wir mussten aufbrechen, doch wir hatten das Weibchen und ihre Jungen gefunden.

Bald nachdem wir Kibber verlassen hatten, kam der Lockdown. Hoffentlich ist dies auch eine Chance für die Natur und die Schneeleoparden. Vielen Dank für Ihre großartige Arbeit bei NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC!

Eines der allerletzten Bilder des alten Schneeleopardenmännchens am Tag vor seinem Tod. Unser Leser Simon Steiner war kurz nach dem Reporter Peter Gwin in Kibber.



FOTO: SIMON STEINER

SEPTEMBER 2020 7

Translation of the text above in the German National Geographic:

Emotional

Thank you for this great article and the beautiful pictures. I also had the opportunity to be in Kibber at that time when the old snow leopard died, and I mention here the last sentences of the article:

"This year every tourist who came to Kibber saw a snow leopard. But in the days after the old male died, no one saw one. Still, the female and her cubs were somewhere, and Prasenjeet planned to find them."

We arrived in Kibber a few days after the last kill by the old male snow leopard. We saw him almost every day, and he tried to hunt again. One day he was not found or he was too far away, no tourist saw him. The day after, my brother and I planned to go bird watching further up the valley. It was a strenuous trek with our two guides up the valley to a site where a golden eagle nest was located. In addition to the golden eagle (adult and juvenile), we saw the bearded vulture and the Himalayan vulture as well as snowfinches and ptarmigan (very, very far away...). It was great to be in a place in complete silence. We had many interesting conversations with our guides Tanzin and Tashi. Suddenly one of them pointed to the wall. The male snow leopard was walking on the opposite side of the valley in the almost vertical rock walls. For us, seeing this so unexpectedly was one of the most emotional moments.

The day when the information about the death of the male came was like a shock for the whole village of Kibber. That day, no one went out in the morning. The other day we went to the village of Langza in another valley. Suddenly the information arrived that the female and the three cubs were spotted at the place further up the valley near Kibber. We jumped in our car and drove back to Kibber and from there we walked up the valley. It was pretty fun keeping up with the locals. When we got up there, there was only the female to be seen. Later that afternoon we had to pack up to go back down, and then someone said the cubs were there. They ran towards the mother to find her and greet her. What a moment to watch. The next day we went back to that spot, and the four of them lay around all day. It started to snow heavily and we had to leave, but we found the female and her cubs. This was great news for the village and the people. Soon after we left Kibber, the lockdown came. Hopefully this is also a chance for nature and the snow leopards.

Thank you for your great work at National Geographics.



Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*). Last picture of the old male Snow Leopard alive



Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*). Female Snow Leopard with three cubs



Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*)



Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*)



Snow Leopard (*Panthera uncia*)



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