

## Snow leopard trip in Ladakh 2022 (20<sup>th</sup> feb to 10<sup>th</sup> march).

One more time, I went to Ladakh last February march 2022. My wife and I visited the Hemis national park in the Himalaya range thanks to Exotic Ladakh, the tourism agency leaded by Phunchok Tsering in the town of Leh. <https://exoticladdakh.com>



The goal was to see, of course, the elusive snow leopard but also all the other mammals and birds in the area.

We brought our spotting scope, tripod, binoculars and cameras with us. Phunchok, our guide, brought also his very good Swarovski scope and tripod.

We arrived in Leh the 15<sup>th</sup> of February for starting our acclimatization. Then we did some walks around and visited some Buddhist temples.

**February 20<sup>th</sup>:** The real wildlife trip started the 20<sup>th</sup> of February. We arrived in the Hemis national park by car after a drive on an unpaved road. For reaching the little hamlet where we were supposed to sleep for the following days, we walked 3 hours. We took our time while we were watching a group of urials and several species of birds (wallcreepers, golden eagle, larks, etc).

Once we arrived in the hamlet, there were already some guides trying to find the snow leopard. In fact, he had been seen the same morning on a mountain slope and he disappeared behind a rock after 15 minutes. So, everybody was waiting for him.

During the whole afternoon, I was watching a herd of blue sheep grazing on the same slope. Bird watching was good too with several species (snow finches, robin accentors, fire-fronted serins, horned larks...)

About 1 and half hour before sunset, the snow leopard appeared! He was more than a kilometre away but with our 60 power spotting scopes that was not a problem. It was actually very easy to see him as the mountain was covered by snow. We could watch his grey silhouette moving slowly toward the blue sheep. Then, he disappeared in a crack. We were very alert as we knew that an attack will happen very soon. And suddenly, all the blue sheep jumped away! The leopard was running after them. But after a few seconds, he gave up. This time, the blue-sheeps were too fast.

First day, first snow leopard! “Are you kidding me!!??” I asked to Phunchok. Our guide told us that we were in the best place in the world for watching them. But still, we were obviously lucky.

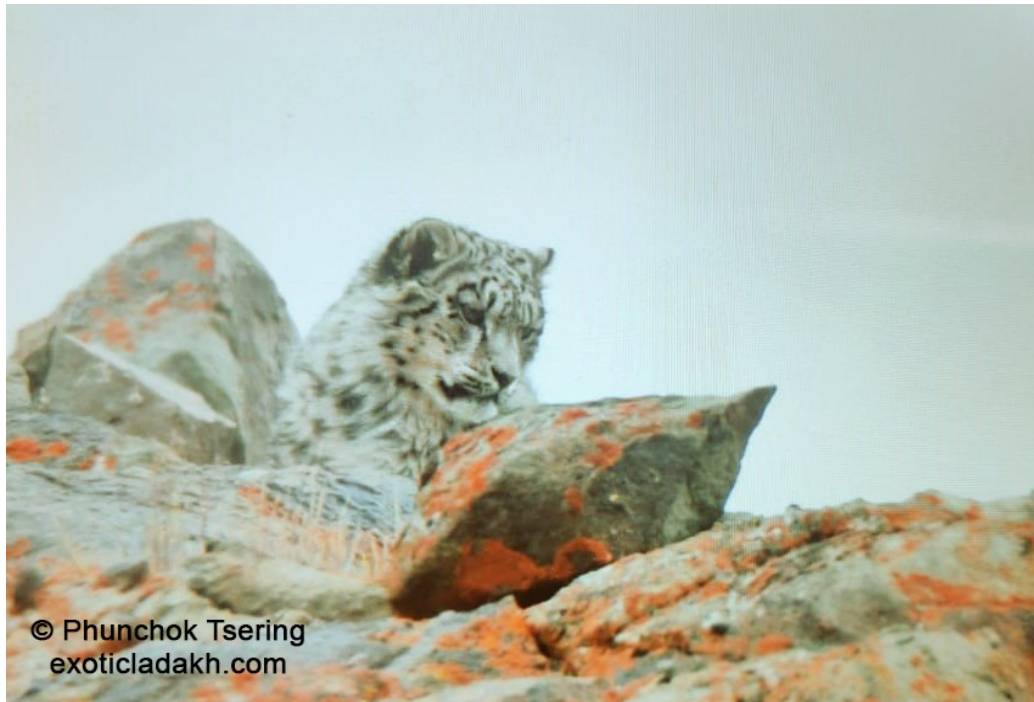


**February 21<sup>st</sup>:** wake up before sunrise. It is freezing, about -20°C. Looking for wildlife need to be very dedicated in these conditions. Even with the gloves, my hands are very cold when I touch the tripod or the scope. We watch a lot of blue sheeps, some woolly hares and many birds again. But this morning, no snow leopard in the scope.

The afternoon, we go for a walk along the frozen river. We see our first lynx. Quietly, he walks until the top of the mountain and disappears behind the skyline. Above us, 2 lammergeiers, 3 himalayan vultures and 1 golden eagle are soaring. That's it for today. Not bad.

**February 22<sup>nd</sup>:** The same routine: wake up very early and check every piece of mountain for finding the Himalayan ghost. This time, he appears again! He is much closer than the last time, maybe 400 meters. Thanks to the scope, I can see all the details of his body. He walks for 10 minutes and disappears among the rocks. We decide to stay here all day long because he will move from these rocks at least before the evening. 1 hour before sunset, we see him 200 meters away from where we lost him the morning. We enjoy this gift for 20 minutes at least.





**February 23<sup>rd</sup>:** No leopard the morning, but 1 the evening. Maybe the same we saw yesterday said Phunchok. We have also enjoyed 2 lynx, some wolly hares and the blue sheep. I remember that I was not sure to see the snow leopard even if I was coming here. I cannot believe that I saw already several of them.

**February 24<sup>th</sup>:** We saw again nearly all the animals we saw before less the snow leopard.

**February 25<sup>th</sup>:** Lots of birds and blue sheep but that's it.



**February 26<sup>th</sup>:** 2 lynx, but no leopard. Phunchok tells me that they might have moved on the other side of the mountain. They can stay there for a few days. We have to be patient.



**February 27<sup>th</sup>**: Our first Tibetan wolves! 3 of them. They are 700 meters away approximately. They don't see us and look like very quiet. They walk, they lie down, they walk again. We watch these amazing creatures for half an hour. No leopard but what a day!



**February 28<sup>th</sup>**: Early the morning, a snow leopard walks in front of us on the slope. We can see him during 40 minutes. He lies down on a visible spot for 5 minutes and disappears behind the skyline. Every time, I feel an electric choc when I see him! The evening, we find 1 again. Maybe the same, and then we figure out that a second snow leopard is following him! The first one urinates on a rock before disappearing. The second follows him. We saw also 2 lynx about 2 kilometers away at the end of this afternoon.

**March 1<sup>st</sup>**: No leopard this day, but 1 red fox, blue sheeps as every day and lots of birds. A golden eagle is eating a woolly hare.

**March 2<sup>nd</sup>**: We leave this incredible valley around noon. We didn't see any leopard the morning. We walk down the trail until the car. We drive a few hours until our next spot further north. Once we arrive in our new house, very remote in the mountain, we go for a walk. We see a lot of birds and a big herd of 25 ibex. The old males have incredible horns.



**March 3<sup>rd</sup>**: We drive along the narrow trail. We make stops and scan the surrounding with our scopes. No leopard but a group of 10 Tibetan wolves! Unforgettable! We also see hundreds of yellow-billed chough soaring above the peaks.

**March 4<sup>th</sup>**: 3 snow leopards have been seen this morning a few kilometers away. It is a female with her 2 young. We got the information from another guide by radio. So, we immediately go there. We can't drive fast because the trail along the cliff is narrow and dangerous. After nearly 1 hour, we finally reach the right place. It's 1PM. The 3 snow leopards are very close: less than 200 meters. They watch us but don't escape. They must be confident thanks to their camouflage. We stay all the afternoon on the spot, the eye in the scope. Until the night, we watch them and take pictures. And when it becomes dark enough, the 3 leopards move away. For sure, I will never forget this day.

**March 5<sup>th</sup>**: We see 1 red fox hunting among the rocks and plenty of birds.



**March 6<sup>th</sup>**: After a morning walk while we saw a group of ibex, we take the car and move to the last place of our journey. We drive for several hours until a wonderful lake surrounded by snowy peaks. Phunchok says that if we are lucky, we might see the Pallas cat, Tibetan wolves and the snow leopard again. The afternoon, we just see a few pikas and mainly water birds.

**March 7<sup>th</sup>**: We are ready before sunrise as every morning. And after 1 hour, Phunchok spots a Pallas cat walking in the grass. This one is hunting and we see him catching some mice or pika. He is at about 400 meters away. With the 60 power scope, we can enjoy him very well. This cat has a very particular head. One of my favourite actually! Phunchok takes some picture of this rare cat. We watch him until he hide himself among the rocks. Later, we see 2 wolves crossing the mountain. They see us and walk away. Sometime, they stop and look at us straight in the eyes. Their irises are yellow. Incredible moment! On the way back, we see the same water birds like yesterday.

**March 8<sup>th</sup>**: We walk all day long and see again the Pallas cat. This one is nearby a rock and takes a rest for a few minutes before leaving. We see also a few pikas, main food for the Pallas cat.

**March 9<sup>th</sup>**: Lot of birds as every day, blue sheeps, pikas but no more mammals.





**March 10<sup>th</sup>:** Our very last day in the wilderness. We walk until noon and see 1 red fox, the same birds as the last days, some pikas but no other mammals. We leave the place and arrive in Leh a few hours later.

So, we saw during this incredible trip several snow leopards, including a female with her 2 youngs, many Tibetan wolves, lynx, red foxes, Pallas cat, blue sheep, urials, ibex, wooly hares and plenty of birds.

I put mainly here the pictures of Phunchok as his camera has a better zoom than mine.

For more information, you can contact Phunchok Tsering on <https://exoticladdakh.com>

Jerry Swift.

<https://meetwildanimals.com>