



WildWings

In Search of Snow Leopards 2017 Trip Report

By Tour Leader Dick Filby



All images by Tim Marshall



Having just returned from Ladakh for the fourth year running, I am sitting here back in England reeling and luxuriating on how well the 2017 trip went. The headlines begin to tell the story, but much of the fulfilment was in the detail and the crystal clear views in the wonderful clear air of Ladakh. The scenery was itself a major highlight. The weather was kind, with scarcely any new snow, never more than the occasional light breeze, some lovely sunny weather, and overnight lows that were, as expected, quite spring-like. After three years of successfully watching Snow Leopard in a row, I set off this year with some trepidation of group managing expectations..... but we ended up breaking our own record....

Well, we had for us an amazing eight days on which we saw Snow Leopards during the main tour and the first extension. Not all of them were found by our incredible spotters either, as Tim, one of the clients, also found one of them! Well done mate – I know that you'll be dining out on that for a few years to come. Our views of the Snow Leopards were unusual in another way this year, in-as-much as most of our sightings involved many hours watching the animals hunt by day, with, on one occasion, a Snow Leopard at full tilt and closing in on a Blue Sheep that miraculously escaped after the Snow Leopard got within 10 metres or so. A couple of days later we were spellbound again, this time watching a Snow Leopard standing majestic on the skyline of a ridge high above us in the National Park, calling for a mate, the sound echoing around the valley in the last of the afternoon sunshine. Each and every one of our first four full days in the Park gave us prolonged views of Snow Leopard, and just imagine how pleased everyone was when the very first was visible from camp itself, on the first morning, before breakfast! During the subsequent days there were several times when not only was there a Snow Leopard visible, but it was clear, sharp and showing well in the telescopes, causing repeated gasps of pleasure and delight. Close, but not so close for frame-filling photos for the big lens cameras. However, I saw some excellent digiscoping results as seen in the back of some folks cameras and phones. If that included you, please forward us your best ones!

The last few days of our time in the park were without any Snow Leopard sightings, and apparently that was the beginning of a multi-day 'drought', so next year will again run the trip with the same duration in order to ensure the best possible chance to repeat our Snow Leopard successes of every one of the past four years. Meanwhile, on the main part of the trip this year, we again saw a good cast of other mammals and some excellent birds. Blue Sheep were seen by the score, sometime offering very close views, and more than once fleeing in terror from a hunting Snow Leopard, moving at remarkable speed on precipitous slopes – well wouldn't you if you were in fear of being eaten? We had great, if brief views of Mountain Weasel on two occasions. This species was unusually hard to find this year. We enjoyed plenty of pika viewing too, sometimes at very close range whilst sitting and scanning for larger mammals. All of those seen on the main trip were apparently Large-eared Pikas. Midway through our time at camp there was a Lynx, unfortunately only seen by others whilst we were nearby, and then it or another was also seen the following day, further upvalley, but again only seen by others, so we did not repeat last year's success with this species. We saw Wolves again this year, with two of them showing pretty well on the main trip, rewarding those that had made the effort to head up into one of the higher valleys, the animals giving us prolonged scope views as they walked up a snowy ridge, pausing as they crested it before dropping out of sight into the adjacent valley. The folks who stayed lower were rewarded with another Snow Leopard sighting, close to camp! Later, on the first extension, on two occasions, single Wolves were seen, albeit far too briefly each time.

Woolly Hares were in very good numbers this year, and up-valley on the main tour we encountered several that were extremely confiding, offering everyone great photos. The good numbers of Woolly Hares was probably the reason that we saw so many eagles and vultures in that area too.

On the birding front we had many highlights, including truly fantastic views of Himalayan Snowcocks on the first afternoon in camp, as well as many further sightings, nearly all of which were considerably more distant. White-browed Tit-Warbler was another highlight bird again this year – as any bird with mauve plumage is bound to be, but I still so much prefer the old name, Stoliczka's Tit-Warbler. Wallcreepers were resident in the upper valley, but proved challenging to get good views of, whilst in the same area, new this year, were Eurasian Eagle Owls, mainly seen at dusk, but Tim did very well to find one in a daytime roost one afternoon. The Tit-Warblers proved hard to photograph, as usual, but the Himalayan Snowcocks, Tibetan Partridges and Chukars all provided great opportunities. The recently split Grey Tits were common enough, whilst flocks of black-faced (Blandford's) Mountain Finches were often found on the hillsides, with, occasionally, Tibetan Snowfinches accompanying them. The latter species was seen commonly and very well on the 2nd extension, where they were sometimes accompanied by the gorgeous looking Blandford's Snow -Finches on occasion. Both species of Choughs – Red-billed and Yellow-billed provided regular viewing opportunities, but perhaps amongst the most notable birds this year were the large raptors, in the best numbers we have ever encountered. It was not unusual to see more than 10 in the sky at once – comprising of, in descending order of abundance, Golden Eagles, Lammergeiers and Himalayan Griffon Vultures.

Birding around Leh was good – we again enjoyed success with Ibisbills, Solitary Snipe, Wallcreeper, and this year, perhaps due to the higher-than-average snow cover, a lovely flock of Mongolian Finches as well as exceptional numbers of Black-throated Thrushes. White-winged Redstarts were as numerous as usual in the Indus valley, and we saw a couple of White-capped Redstarts. For the full species list see below.

New this year was the second extension – up onto the Tibetan Plateau to Tso Kar. Half the group came and they all proclaimed it a terrific success, well worth the long drive and the basic accommodation. The early part of the drive we drove up the valley of mighty Indus River, choked with ice, carving spectacular gorges through the mountains as it heads from the Tibetan plateau northwest towards Pakistan. Leaving the valley behind, we climbed up into the hills, and were soon thrilling to great wildlife. We paused to enjoy great views of Solitary Snipe, before being treated to excellent views of a couple of groups of Tibetan Snowcocks, scores of Dark-faced Mountain Finches, Tibetan Snowfinches, stunning views of a Tibetan Fox, and, naturally, yet more stunning scenery. We were almost the only vehicle on the road – well track, so we could stop at will whenever we wanted. We crested the pass, pausing briefly at the Tibetan prayer flags, before descending into the Tso Kar basin. Kiang (Tibetan Wild Ass) is a beautiful animal, and we saw plenty, often getting excellent views. They escape from danger by running, when they present an almost comical sight with heads raised high as they create clouds of dust in a spectacular landscape. We had daily sightings of Argali, the biggest of the wild sheep, and a major target of this extension. Several more Tibetan Foxes were seen, but alas no wolves which are sometimes to be found here. We saw several pikas, but only saw a couple well enough to tentatively identify them as Plateau Pika. The birds were a treat too, with major highlights including several groups of Tibetan Sandgrouse, which we obtained good views of some. Kudos to Chris for hearing the first of them as they flew high over our lodge early on the first morning. Hume's Groundpeckers were seen in several spots, and several group members voted them one of the best birds of the trip, as they jauntily bounced around, performing at very close range on occasion. At the lodge itself, we were treated to a constant display of Tibetan Snow-Finches, Horned Larks and Great Rosefinches, whilst our wonderful cook team worked hard to provide us with three, excellent hot meals every day. Perhaps even better was that with fewer people present, some laid claim to the spare hot water bottles, in order to have not one, but two. Beyond luxury!

Ruddy Shelduck in large numbers were one of the many highlights of the return drive, at the hot springs where we had seen 40 on the way in, there were now well over 400. Spring was truly on the way! Last looks at Kiang (enjoyable to the end) as well as Argali, plus we had great views of a Plateau Pika right next to the van, as well as two more Solitary Snipe, Wallcreeper, Eastern Black Redstart and White-bellied Dippers, all before we headed down the Indus valley to Leh. Back at our hotel that evening it was a tired but exhilarated group, that, in high spirits, said thank-you and good bye to the team that had done such a sterling job of providing so well for us throughout the trip, full of boundless energy and enthusiasm to help and guide us at every turn of the way. Personally, I can't wait to see all our local staff again next year, when, for the fourth consecutive year, we will head back to Ladakh, "In Search of Snow Leopards".

SPECIES LIST

Species recorded on 2017 WildWings "In Search of Snow Leopards" tour, including extensions

2017	main	Ext1	Ext2	Common name	Scientific name
Mammals					
X	corpse			Stolizcka's Mountain Vole	<i>Alticola stoliczkanus</i>
X			x	Plateau Pika	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>
				Nubra Pika	<i>Ochotona nubrica</i>
				Ladakh (Black-lipped) Pika	<i>Ochotona ladacenis</i>
X	x			Large-eared Pika	<i>Ochotona macrotis</i>
				Royle's Pika	<i>Ochotona roylei</i>
X	x	x	x	Pika spp	<i>Ochotona spp</i>
				Cape Hare	<i>Lepus capensis tibetanus</i>
X	x	x	x	Woolly Hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>
[X]	sbo			[Lynx]	<i>Lynx lynx</i>
X	x	x		Snow Leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>
X	x	x		Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>
X	x	x	x	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
				Beech (Stone) Marten	<i>Martes foina</i>
X	x			Mountain Weasel	<i>Mustela altaica</i>
X			x	Kiang (Tibetan Wild Ass)	<i>Equus kiang</i>
X		x		Asiatic (Siberian) Ibex	<i>Capra sibirica</i>
X			x	(Tibetan) Argali	<i>Ovis aries hodgsoni</i>
X	x	x		Ladakh Urial (Red Sheep)	<i>Ovis vignei</i>
X	x		x	Blue Sheep (Bharal)	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>
Birds					
X			x	Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>

X	x			Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>
X		x	`	Eurasian Wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>
X	x	x	x	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
X	x	x	x	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>
X	x	x	x	Green-winged Teal (Eurasian)	<i>Anas crecca crecca/nimia</i>
X	x	x	x	Common Merganser (Goosander)	<i>Mergus merganser orientalis</i>
X	x	x	x	Chukar	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>
X			x	Tibetan Snowcock	<i>Tetraogallus tibetanus</i>
X	x	x		Himalayan Snowcock	<i>Tetraogallus himalayensis</i>
X	x			Tibetan Partridge	<i>Perdix hodgsoniae</i>
X	x			Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
X	x	x	x	Great Egret (Australasian)	<i>Ardea alba modesta</i>
X	x	x	x	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>
X	x	x		Himalayan Griffon	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>
X	x	x	x	Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
X	x	x		Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
X	x			Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>
X			x	Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>
X	x			Eurasian Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus chloropus</i>
X	x	x	x	Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>
X	x			Ibisbill	<i>Ibidorhyncha struthersii</i>
X	x		x	Solitary Snipe	<i>Gallinago solitaria</i>
X	x		x	Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
X	x			Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
X	x		x	Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>
X			x	Tibetan Sandgrouse	<i>Syrrhaptes tibetanus</i>
X	x	x	x	Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>
X	x	x	x	Hill Pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>

X		x		Snow Pigeon	<i>Columba leuconota leuconota</i>
X	x			Eurasian Eagle-Owl	<i>Bubo bubo hemachalanus</i>
X			x	Little Owl	<i>Athene noctua ludlowi</i>
X	x		x	Eurasian Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
X			x	Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug milvipes</i>
X	x	x	x	Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>
X	x	x	x	Red-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax</i>
X	x	x		Yellow-billed Chough	<i>Pyrrhonorax graculus</i>
X	x			Carrion Crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>
X			x	Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>
X	x	x	x	Horned Lark (Tibetan)	<i>Eremophila alpestris longirostris</i>
X	x			Eurasian Skylark (Asian)	<i>Alauda arvensis dulcivox</i>
X			x	Ground Tit	<i>Pseudopodoces humilis</i>
X	x	x		Cinereous Tit	<i>Parus cinereus</i>
X	x			White-browed Tit-Warbler	<i>Leptopoecile sophiae sophiae</i>
X	x	x	x	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>
X	x	x		Eurasian Wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
X			x	White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
X	x	x	x	Brown Dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>
X	x			Blue Whistling-Thrush (Yellow-billed)	<i>Myophonus caeruleus temminckii</i>
X	x			White-capped Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus leucocephalus</i>
X	x	x	x	White-winged Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus erythrogastrus</i>
X			x	Black Redstart (Eastern)	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros rufiventris</i>
X	x	x	x	Black-throated Thrush	<i>Turdus atrogularis</i>
X	x			European Starling	<i>Sturnus vulgaris</i>
X	x	x	x	Robin Accentor	<i>Prunella rubeculoides rubeculoides</i>
X	x	x		Brown Accentor	<i>Prunella fulvescens fulvescens</i>

X	x			Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
?	?			White Wagtail (ocularis)	<i>Motacilla alba ocularis</i>
X	x	x	x	White Wagtail (Masked)	<i>Motacilla alba personata</i>
X	x	x	x	Black-headed Mountain-Finch	<i>Leucosticte brandti haematopygia</i>
X	x	x		Mongolian Finch	<i>Bucanetes mongolicus</i>
X	x	x	x	Great Rosefinch (Spotted)	<i>Carpodacus rubicilla severtzovi</i>
X	x	x	x	Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris rufostrigata/montanella</i>
X	x			Fire-fronted Serin	<i>Serinus pusillus</i>
X		x		White-winged Grosbeak	<i>Mycerobas carnipes</i>
X	x			House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>
X	x	x	x	Tibetan Snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla henrici</i>
X			x	Blanford's Snowfinch	<i>Montifringilla blanfordi</i>

Forthcoming WildWings departures (main tour dates):

26th February – 11th March 2018
& 25th February – 10th March 2019

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