

WildWings

“In Search of Snow Leopards”

2016 Tour report

By Dick Filby, WildWings Tour Leader



Summary

Following on from the successes of 2014 and 2015, the 2016 trip proved to be another very successful “In search of Snow Leopards” trip, and without doubt an epic adventure. It was nothing short of thrilling to get not just one, but several views of one of the most-difficult-to-see animals in the world. We watched Snow Leopards on no less than five days on the main camping portion of the trip, and later missed seeing one that walked right past our house on the extension whilst others watched it from a neighbouring house. Finally, some of us saw another one, right at (well just after) the very end of the trip, near Leh, after our flight back to Delhi was delayed by snow. Overall the trip ran very well again, and everyone in the group thought it very worthwhile.

Not only did we see Snow Leopards on so many days (five!), but we were able to watch them mating, hunting, chasing prey, and sleeping! We also had good sightings of several birds and other excellent mammals including Wolf on the main trip and on the extension too, plus a Eurasian Lynx, Mountain Weasel, Woolly Hares and more. We had our great Ladakhi team looking after us admirably once again, and a varied and eager group of participants. With plenty of scopes, and lots of diligent searching, we certainly did a lot of scouring of the hillsides and I know that we saw more because of that. Well done everyone!

Once again the average age was about 60 (63), a rather fit 63 I hasten to add, and you all did really well! Also, I think we all got along very well, and it was a very convivial and sociable group. Whilst I am sure that everyone was worried if they might be fit enough, actually the walking was not such a challenge for anyone with a sense of balance, decent boots and healthy knees and a working set of lungs. Some just took it a bit slower than others. We took the uphill bits nice and slow (and I mean slow), rejoiced when the kitchen porter arrived with the hot tea and biscuits, and spent lots of time looking and scanning.

The brand new, top quality, sleeping tents, complete with insulating inner groundsheets, and the new dining tent and chairs, were all much appreciated and made for a significantly more comfortable camp.

The landscapes were stunningly wild and bleak, and this year only the higher terrain above us received any fresh snow. We didn't receive any measurable snow at camp, and the temperatures were decidedly 'a bit milder' – OK not quite so cold! The lowest temperature in camp was about -12C, and daytime temps were over 10C some days.

I am certainly looking forward to repeating this trip next year, when it will again be for the same duration, thus giving us the best possible chance of rewarding our efforts with sightings of this near-mythical big cat. Next year we will also be offering the chance to look for Kiang (Tibetan Wild Ass) as well as other mammals and birds, as we will have two extensions on offer.

Around Leh

Our journeys to Leh were uneventful, with a couple of folks deciding to come in a day early, giving even longer to acclimatise to the altitude. We all met up at breakfast at the hotel on the first morning. Initially we had two leisurely days trying to avoid any exercise beyond very gentle walks in the Indus Valley, to ensure the best possible acclimatisation to the 12,500 ft (3,800m) altitude. We saw many birds, and most notable amongst them were several Ibisbills, a major icon of the Himalayan region. They inhabit the braided river banks, and we found them in a couple of favoured spots. Nearby, in bushy areas along the river banks were large numbers of Gldenstdt's (White-winged) Redstarts, and after some diligent searching we found another of the iconic regional birds - Solitary Snipe, of which we all had good views. Raymond spotted a new bird for the tour, a Black-eared Kite that flew up and circled, offering good scope views, albeit somewhat distant for the cameras, and remarkably, we saw some Urial (Red Sheep) close to Shey Marshes. Well spotted from the back of the minibus Yves!

At the hotel an occasional Red-fronted Serins flew over, whilst in the garden we found both of the wintering accentors: Robin and Brown. Overhead, occasional Lammergeiers and Golden Eagles were joined by Choughs – Red-billed and Yellow-billed. The first White Wagtails of summer had arrived, and as usual the early ones were of the grey-backed form "personata". Mostly however, these two days were about doing as little physical exercise as possible in order to give ourselves the best chance to acclimatise to the altitude. The views of Hemis National Park from the hotel are gorgeous, especially at sunrise.

Hemis National Park - camping

Day 3 (first day in the park): We drove out of Leh and headed up to our camp in Hemis National Park, setting off early as we had heard that two Snow Leopards had been seen the previous day and, to coin the optimistic expression, "they could still be in the area". Pausing near the entrance to the Hemis National Park near to the Indus River we saw a fine group of Urials, mostly males with splendid horns. Sheelagh was especially pleased given that she had chosen to stay at the hotel the previous afternoon and had thus missed the first ones. Driving on, we were soon looking down on the Indus River from on high, down the gorge towards the confluence with the Zaskar, and passing the Buddhist shrine where our guides had earlier stopped and made offerings for our good fortune. We then turned south to head deeper into the park and to the best area to find Snow Leopards. We spotted another couple of Urial (Red Sheep) and also our first Blue Sheep. We soon came to the end of the road and got out of the vehicles at the trailhead, donned scopes and daypacks (or gave them to our personal porters – for those of us who had gone for this option) and started the walk to camp. Our main bags were to follow us on mules and horses. They soon overtook us, bound for camp at a good pace. For us, even though the gradient was gentle and we had already spent two days acclimatising at this altitude (we were no higher than the hotel at this point), it took some getting used to walking at slow speed to avoid getting out of breath. The first bit was easier, as the path had been upgraded to a bigger track, but then it was just a mule track, narrow and with steeper sections.

There were occasional distractions to cause us to pause, such as the unoccupied Himalayan Griffon Vulture nest, Great Tits calling, a passing Lammergeier, stopping to take photos and soaking up the views. However as the end of the walk neared, those in front were accosted with news that the pair of Snow Leopards were still around, up amongst the rocks, and visible from "further on". We watched a

local guide scrambling up a death-defying gulley. I mentally vowed we were never going up that – and we didn't! A bit further on, the more practical solution was presented – and in due course, and with guides and porters' assistance, we all made our way up to a vantage point from where we could view the scene. Total joy: Two Snow Leopards, basking in the early afternoon sun, were soon in everyone's telescopes. It was simply amazing – after last year's eight days of searching before seeing one, here we were, on day one and still not at camp, and we were watching not one, but two Snow Leopards!

Mostly they were lying in full view, but occasionally one of the Snow Leopards would get up and wander a few feet, eyeing up the other. We would all be glued to our eyepieces, watching and marvelling, our eyes soaking up the patterned coats, the huge, thick, long tails and the languid gait. At one point a Wallcreeper flew by, and Lammergeiers and Golden Eagles were also seen. Blue Sheep wandered steep slopes and crags, blissfully unaware of their main predator not far away. Nice to watch, but mere distractions to the main show! Finally, after some hours, and after we had feasted on a delivered lunch "in the field", we were all treated to viewing their ultimate act, as the male sunk his teeth into her hindneck and they mated. It didn't take very long, and it certainly didn't look comfortable for her, but the voyeurs (us) were delighted. Everyone knew why they had brought (or had a porter bring) their own scope. Those few seconds will certainly be etched on my memory for a very long time. Dusk was nigh, so we slowly we made our way back down into the valley and the final few hundred yards to camp. Everything was ready, tents already pitched, dining tent with hot flasks on the table, cook tent with an amazing dinner well under way, and even the hot water bottles waiting to be filled after dinner. In this remote and starkly beautiful place, we had a cosy evening to look forward to, the first of many to follow.

The next day (day 2 in the park) our guides set off at first light to check on the Snow Leopards, whilst we took it "easy" with hot drinks delivered to the tent door at first light, followed by an hour or so of scanning from close to camp, then hot water for a face wash (or more), and a hearty breakfast. News that the Snow Leopards hadn't moved was the cue to head back to yesterday's vantage point and pick up where we had left off! We settled in to watch their activities – which admittedly consisted mainly of them sleeping – but occasionally we were rewarded with yet more views of stretching, yawning, walking around and eventually, mating late afternoon again. Fantastic views in the 'scopes – again. What a great day, and it was good for us to rest after yesterday's exertions.

Day 3 in the park: The Snow Leopards are still there! However, the guides recommended that we spent the morning walking in the opposite direction, as the Snow Leopards would likely spend most of the middle of the day asleep. Sounded like a good plan to look elsewhere first, so we duly headed upvalley, finding some fresh Wolf tracks, and seeing lots of Red-fronted Serins and Twites, before returning to camp for lunch then yet more Snow Leopard viewing. The afternoon viewing session was very worthwhile, most especially as it ended up with the male leaving first, then the female walking off the other way – towards us! Picking her way through the rocks, and often out of view, she eventually crested the hill opposite us and dropped out of view into the next valley. It was terrific to watch her move, purposefully, but with consummate ease in the imposing, majestic terrain. It seemed that she climbed the hill effortlessly, indeed it probably was, but now that we knew what these hills entailed, we were truly impressed. During all of this, Chris had spotted another Wallcreeper, but correctly decided that we'd be better off watching Snow Leopards! So, with both of our Snow Leopards now out of view, and dusk not far off, we headed back towards camp, pausing to scan into the valley where she had gone. After half-an-hour or so, I spotted her heading back towards the mating spot, but she was only on view for a few seconds, and no-one else was able to get onto her before she again disappeared from view. Thank goodness that was not our first view of Snow Leopard!

Day 4 in the park: There was no sign of "our" two Snow Leopards so we were free to explore! We decided to head up to the nearby village after breakfast. Not only was the village full of birds - many Hill Pigeons, Red-fronted Serins, Robin Accentors, and a few female Great Rosefinches, but it was of course very interesting culturally. Not only had one of our porters grown up there, but his widowed mum still lived there. She invited us all in for tea – both "normal" tea and churned Ladakhi tea, and biscuits. Brian commented that the Ladakhi tea was much less strong tasting than the Tibetan version that he had previously experienced. Several of us were happy to take a second cup! It was fascinating to see inside her traditional, hundred year old house, with its amazing plethora of cooking pots, large open living room, and huge poster of Lhasa on the wall. Some of us even got to use the traditional loo.

After leaving the village we headed up-valley we were able to watch our first Woolly Hare of the trip, the first of several. Woolly Hares are a favourite meal of both Lynx and Golden Eagles, and with little cover on the hillside, they must have a tough life, with a major part of their survival strategy being to stay perfectly still for long periods of time. I give full credit to everyone who spotted one!

The following days saw us enjoy a variety of walks and many successes. Eurasian Lynx on Day 5, showing well in the scopes for five minutes or more, as it powered its way uphill at a leisurely pace, up to its belly in snow at times. Two distant Wolves and two more sightings of Snow Leopard, all on Day 6 – one of the Snow Leopards stalked and then ran at a group of Blue Sheep at high speed – but alas, unsuccessfully. Day 7 in camp started with a Snow Leopard on the ridge behind camp before everyone was out of the tents! After breakfast we walked upvalley and watched her from closer for several hours, resting in a gully on the other side of the frozen stream, before she strolled effortlessly, parallel to us, uphill and over the ridge. As she paused on the brow, she presented a magnificent profile, wonderfully captured by Yves. Thanks for sharing that and all your other pictures!

After last year's trip, where it had seemed an eternity (well, it was - eight days) before we saw a single Snow Leopard, this year was completely the opposite. OK last year we wound up seeing seven individuals, but only on two days – one of which was on the extension. This year we had seen leopards on five of the first seven days in camp! The fact that only two individuals were involved seems a little irrelevant, especially given the views, and activities observed. Whichever way we look at it – the bar is set even higher for future trips!

We settled into a daily routine. Tea and coffee brought to the tent at first light, followed by an easy stroll to a vantage point a 100 yards away for a prolonged examination of all the surrounding hillsides. Return to camp after an hour or so, just as the morning sun reached the valley floor and we enjoyed a bowl of hot washing water each. Breakfast, then out for the day, with a hot meal delivered to us at lunchtime and later, afternoon tea and biscuits. Late afternoons we were often back at camp for a last look from our vantage point. Birds and Blue Sheep were our expected wildlife at every stop. Most days we saw scores of Blue Sheep, and they would often provide quite a prolonged show as they pondered a route across seemingly impossible precipitous terrain, only to confound all our predictions of doom and then pause to feed on some unseen scrap of dried vegetation. Brown and Robin Accentors inhabited the bushes by the frozen stream or the surroundings of the few houses that we encountered. One Robin Accentor was found inside the watermill hut, doubtless finding the occasional leftover grain.

Lammergeiers and Golden Eagles soared on high, and everywhere the fractured and lichen covered rocks conspired to hide a Snow Leopard in full view, or so we felt. We stopped and searched, walked on, stopping to scan yet again. Every turn in the trail revealed new gullies and crags, patterned rocks to turn the 'scopes onto, focus on, and express exasperation of being fooled again, but in truth, smug that we had already seen Snow Leopard so early in the trip this year. Once again it was the guides or porters who spotted nearly everything – Wolf, Lynx, Snow Leopards

At camp, the male Himalayan Snowcock gave their wailing territorial cries from high ridges at dawn and dusk, and we often awakened to the rush of air over their wings as a pair skimmed low over camp to feed on the hillside just behind us. Chukars, native here, were frequently encountered, and if we weren't watching them, we'd hear their staccato calls, audible over great distance – in this thin and often silent air, all sounds are very carrying. Great Tits, much less green and yellow than their European cousins, and sounding different too, roamed the bushes in the valley floor, and were occasionally joined by the outrageously purple, chestnut and grey White-browed Tit-warblers, forever on the move and never lingering for the stunning photos that their amazing colours deserve. We reflected how much more romantic was the former name of this species: Stoliczka's Tit-warbler, originally named for the Moravian (Czech) geologist and palaeontologist Ferdinand Stoliczka who described the species in the mid 19th century whilst working for the British Government's Geological Survey of India. Oh, and Magpies, yes the same species as back in the UK, were everywhere, even at the highest altitudes – what a hardy bird! However, despite our best attempts, we had no sign of any Tibetan Partridges this year – unlike last year when we saw them, and Tibetan Snowfinches, often.

I finally saw a great many Tibetan Snowfinches at the very end of the trip, when I went on a successful recon for next year's second extension in search of Kiang (Tibetan Wild Ass). More on that later in this report.

LEH (one night)

After ten nights in camp, we headed back to Leh to enjoy hot showers and the hotel facilities, and seeing as the internet was working, we had a chance to tell everyone of our success, of how 'warm' it had been – not below about -12C, and to find out what had been going on in the outside world. Not a lot! Then, seeing as everyone was on the extension, it was early to bed, and after breakfast the following morning we set off for the next part of our adventure – three nights in a remote homestay at over 14,000 feet.

The extension - Homestay (Days 11-13)

Having paused for photos, and a brief break en-route we arrived at our homestay at lunchtime, to be welcomed by our kitchen team and a hot meal. It was a nice change to be eating inside a house, not in a tent! In the afternoon we started our search for Asiatic Ibex, and we walked the up the valley to the next house (the last house – indeed there are only five houses here). Tea and biscuits followed us up, but it was a bit chilly in the breeze, so the guides suggested to the homeowner that he let us use his living room. No problem, and within a few minutes we were yet again enjoying the splendid Ladakhi hospitality. I think he was thrilled too, as his kids had left home, his wife was in Leh for a few days, and the house was quiet – until we arrived! Our guides and he chatted long and vociferously. Suitably refreshed, we stepped back outside and it wasn't long before Chris K spotted our first Asiatic Ibex as it crested the ridge – well done Chris. With the scopes we got good views of a decent sized group – we counted 29, with many mature males amongst them. A splendid conclusion to the day!

The following day we spotted several more Ibex before breakfast, before heading off to a nearby village where several Wolves had been seen at the carcass of a horse. Unfortunately we only arrived just in time to see the last one disappear – and not all of us managed to get onto it as the views were brief and somewhat distant. However, it was still an excellent outing, and eating lunch inside yet another local house in a large communal room at the same time as the family was once again fascinating and enriching. We arrived back "home" after several scanning stops, and some of us spent the last hour scanning the ridges and hillsides. Ibex, yes, but no more wolf sightings.

On our third day, several of us scanned for an hour or so from the low ridge behind the house, before breakfast. We saw Asiatic Ibex, Golden Eagles, Lammergeiers, Himalayan Snowcock, Chukars, Twite, Red-fronted Serins. We set off again upvalley after breakfast – more Ibex, Robin and Brown Accentors, but no Wolves or Snow Leopards. Back to the homestay for lunch, followed more scanning in the afternoon for some, and a nap for others. A flock of 250 or more Yellow-billed Choughs that toured the valley was quite the spectacle, wheeling, diving down to feed, then soon off again, all the while calling noisily. Accentors, Golden Eagles, Lammergeiers, Hill Pigeons, Chukars, Himalayan Snowcock.. it was a familiar avifauna! A cool northerly breeze made us grateful for the fire in the living room. There followed a cloudless night and outside the temperature plummeted to below -18C. There was frost inside the windows, and those of us who elected to camp were pleased that we had excellent sleeping bags and comfortable mattresses. Nobody was cold. Next morning we scanned from the ridge again before breakfast. It was a beautiful crisp morning, adorned with some fresh snow on the higher terrain, plus Asiatic Ibex, and most of the other by-now-familiar suspects. Stepping back outside after breakfast we were greeted with the news that our "neighbours" across the valley had seen a Snow Leopard walk right past us – above the house, and on, up over the ridge and out of sight! DARN ! We stared up the hill in disbelief, but all too soon it was time to leave and head back to Leh. We were disappointed – but only a bit. After all, we had already watched Snow Leopards for many hours on five different days in the past two weeks! Not a bad result.

Back at Leh

After lunch at the hotel, we enjoyed a very pleasant and tranquil visit to the Thikse Monastery before heading back to the hotel where we were joined by virtually our whole team of guides, porters and kitchen crew for a celebration. Thanks again to you all – you did us proud! Next morning most of the group headed for the airport and flights back to Delhi, whilst Yves, Chris, Margaret and Brian stayed on for a day's relaxation and an extra night.

Recce for next year's longer extension

Meanwhile, after seeing the departing folk off, I headed off to scout another site with the view of offering it as part of next year's extension. I only had one night to do it, and I didn't leave Leh until later in the day, so much of my two days were spent driving, but it was very worthwhile even so. The scenery was very different, and the Kiang (Tibetan Wild Ass) which were the major target, were seen well, and with their dramatic coats they made for great photos! Tibetan and Blanford's Snowfinches, and stunning male Great Rosefinches all showed very well too. Seeing the nomads at their winter camps was quite the experience – what hardy folk they are! Next year we will have three nights, giving us two full days on site, thus maximising our chances of finding even more of the resident Tibetan specialities, such as Argali, Tibetan Sandgrouse and Tibetan Snowcock.

Postscript

On my return to Leh from my overnight recce, I found all four of the remaining group members had been "stranded" by cancelled flights – due to snow and poor visibility. Our ground agent's team had looked after them of course, but it was of course frustrating all-round. The following morning, it was déjà-vu all over again - all the flights were cancelled due to snow/poor visibility again! Yves and Chris wanted to spend the afternoon in town, but Brian, Margaret and I chose to look for wildlife – so with our agent's help we headed some way out of town for a relaxed afternoon in the fields and marshes of the Indus valley. White-winged Redstarts are gorgeous birds and we watched many, but we were totally unprepared for the last hour. A passing vehicle spotted our guide, and stopped to tell us about a Snow Leopard at his village, 40mins away, that had killed a cow. It had left the kill and retreated to the hills this morning, but it was likely still nearby. It was in totally the opposite direction to the hotel – itself some 40 minutes away. A snap decision was made – we'd give it a go! We jumped into the car and, as daylight faded, made our way to the village, picking up a local on the way to help us find the locality. We got out of the car to the sound of several dogs barking.. it sounded hopeful. A couple of Magpies pointed the way, but it was the swift and altruistic action of a householder that got us into the best position. We were soon to be rewarded with good looks of the Snow Leopard*. What an amazing piece of luck! It was long after dark when we got back to the hotel, and Yves and Chris had to put up with our enthusiastic burbling and apologies, but were patently not amused. The following morning, on news that it was still there, Chris was able to get back to the spot and see it. The rest of us were on a different airline and finally left for Delhi.

Back home we are sharing lots of great memories via 'dropbox' – many thanks to all contributors!

I am certainly looking forward to doing it all over again next year – if you are still reading this and are tempted – then do join me for what will be a totally amazing trip!

Dick Filby

WildWings Tour Leader

Mammals recorded on the 2016 "in Search of Snow Leopards" tour

Large-eared Pika

Ochotona macrotis

Woolly Hare

Lepus oiostolus

Wolf

Canis lupus

Red Fox (heard, scat, tracks)

Vulpes vulpes

Snow Leopard

Panthera uncia

Lynx

Lynx lynx

Mountain Weasel

Mustela altaica

Asiatic (Siberian) Ibex

Capra sibirica

Ladakh Urial (Red Sheep)

Ovis vignei

Blue Sheep (Bharal)

Pseudois nayaur



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*This animal was seen by Dick and a few others only, after the tour had 'officially finished'.

Birds recorded on the 2016 "in Search of Snow Leopards" tour

Himalayan Snowcock

Tetraogallus himalayensis

Chukar

Alectoris chukar

Ruddy Shelduck

Tadorna ferruginea

Gadwall

Anas strepera

Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

Northern Pintail

Anas acuta

Common Teal

Anas crecca

Goosander

Mergus merganser

Rock Dove

Columba livia

Hill Pigeon

Columba rupestris

Common Coot

Fulica atra

Solitary Snipe

Gallinago solitaria

Common Snipe

Gallinago gallinago

Common Redshank

Tringa totanus

Common Greenshank

Tringa nebularia

Green Sandpiper

Tringa ochropus

Ibisbill

Ibidorhyncha struthersii

Brown-headed Gull

Larus brunnicephalus

Black-eared Kite

Milvus lineatus

Lammergeier

Gypaetus barbatus

Himalayan Griffon

Gyps himalayensis

Eurasian Sparrowhawk

Accipiter nisus

Northern Goshawk

Accipiter gentilis

Buzzard spp

Buteo spp

Golden Eagle

Aquila chrysaetos

Peregrine

Falco peregrinus

Grey Heron

Ardea cinerea

Common (Eurasian)

Magpie

Pica pica

Red-billed Chough

Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax

Yellow-billed Chough

Pyrrhocorax graculus

Carrion Crow

Corvus corone

Common Raven

Corvus corax

White-throated Dipper

Cinclus cinclus

Brown Dipper

Cinclus pallasii

Blue Whistling-thrush

Myophonus caeruleus

Black-throated Thrush

Turdus atrogularis

White-winged Redstart

Phoenicurus erythrogasterus

Common (Eurasian) Starling

Sturnus vulgaris

Wallcreeper

Tichodroma muraria

Eurasian Wren

Troglodytes troglodytes

Great Tit

Parus major

White-browed Tit-Warbler

Leptopoeile sophiae

Horned (Shore) Lark

Eremophila alpestris

House Sparrow

Passer domesticus

White Wagtail

Motacilla alba

Citrine Wagtail

Motacilla citreola

Grey Wagtail

Motacilla cinerea

Water Pipit

Anthus spinoletta

Robin Accentor

Prunella rubeculoides

Brown Accentor

Prunella fulvescens

Red-fronted Serin

Serinus pusillus

Brandt's Mountain-finch

Leucosticte brandti

Great Rosefinch

Carpodacus rubicilla

Not Included

Birds/mammals only seen on the "Kiang" recce