



# Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

*Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.*

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## INDIA

**Date - October 2014**

**Duration - 18 Days**

### **Destinations**

New Delhi - Sariska Tiger Reserve - Leh - Hemis National Park - Tso Kar



## Trip Overview

India has always been one of my favourite destinations, both in terms of the amazing wildlife and the wonderful people and sights of an enchanting land that will forever hold a special place in the hearts of many Englishmen. I have no love of colonialism, indeed I was deeply disappointed that the Scots did not choose to take charge of their own destiny during the recent independence referendum, but for all the problems and trauma associated with the British Raj, there is no doubt that many positive links were indelibly forged between the two nations, particularly between individuals far removed from British autocracy and the divide and conquer policy on which Empire was so successfully built. Although there can be no doubt that the British Crown was responsible for many outrages across the globe, unlike the Spanish and Portuguese conquistadors, who simply butchered their way across an entire continent, the British understood that a country was likely to be far more productive and easier to govern with the assistance of the local people, particularly a country as vast as India. Ironically, the British government only assumed direct rule of India from the East India Company, a collection of wealthy nobles and businessmen who had controlled much of India with their own private armies for more than a century, following the 'Great Indian Mutiny' of 1857. Now known as 'India's First War of Independence', the bloody rebellion of sepoys threatened to undermine British interests in the region and immediately resulted in full British rule and the eventual dissolution of the East India Company. The British Raj was born as we know it and India was subjugated for the best part of another century until the remarkable Mahatma Gandhi defied an entire empire and led his people to independence in 1947. The story of British rule in India is a compelling if uncomfortable one and I would urge those interested in learning more to read 'Raj: The Making and Unmaking Of British India' by Lawrence James. For all the personal tales of struggle, conflict, friendship and a seething humanity, of which there are many, Raj captures the essence of the age and the inextricable relationships between both individuals and nations striving for their own identity. It always makes me smile that when I discuss the links between the two countries with Indian friends, the great literature and art, the shared language, the astounding and highly contrasting architecture and the legacy of the British infrastructure and legal system, everything that you would initially consider of major importance is eventually forgotten and we usually end up deliberating the merits or otherwise of our respective cricket teams! As you can probably tell from this piece, I have not visited India for far too long and I did not realise how much I had missed her beauty and mystery until I was preparing to travel and to meet my old friend and local representative in Delhi, as I had arranged to spend a day with him to discuss future tours and to look for wildlife during an all too brief visit to Sariska Tiger Reserve. A three-hour drive from Delhi, we would have approximately the same amount of time within the park on an afternoon drive before returning to Delhi to overnight and prepare for the early morning flight to Leh in the Ladakh region, where the main section of the tour would begin. It was a fairly insane schedule, but I had not been in Sariska for a number of years and wanted to personally assess the park for future tours, particularly given the depressing history of the reserve in recent times. In addition to the extensive poaching that eradicated the entire tiger population in 2004, illegal cattle grazing is becoming an increasingly severe problem and there have been several attacks on rangers and forest staff by local villagers and herdsman. There are also a large number of marble mines on the periphery of the reserve and confirmed reports



of illegal mining within the actual boundaries of the park and the precious habitat of the tigers that have been moved from Ranthambhore in an attempt to repopulate a reserve that was once considered essential to the continued survival of the Bengal tiger. Although I believe that the figure is likely to have been exaggerated, there are now thought to be around 1700 tigers remaining in India and sadly, certainly when considering colonial links, a succession of Indian governments have inherited British incompetence and disinterest regarding wildlife conservation. Hunting has always been prevalent in India and the elite of the Indian and British aristocracies are estimated to have slaughtered at least 80,000 tigers in the fifty-year period between 1875 and 1925. However, it is no coincidence that the last three Asiatic cheetahs in India were shot in 1947, the year of Indian independence, as the same independence that liberated a nation signalled a death knell for hundreds of thousands of India's most iconic animals. With no government restrictions in place and a great deal of money to be made, hunters flooded the country, wiping out huge populations of tigers,



elephants, lions, rhinos and many other entirely undefended animals. The Maharaja of Surguja alone, the same individual who killed the last three cheetahs, claimed to have shot over 1300 tigers and by the early 1970s there were less than 2000 of these majestic creatures remaining in the entire country. With her 'Project Tiger' and nine dedicated and protected tiger reserves, prime minister Indira Gandhi, the daughter of India's first prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, put a break on the carnage overlooked by her father and by 1984 tiger numbers had increased to a slightly more sustainable 4000. The revival lasted only as long as Indira Gandhi and when



she was assassinated by her own personal bodyguards in that same year, the hopes for a more complete recovery died with her. Concealed by a combination of massive corruption and equally overwhelming incompetence, the poaching returned and in 1993 the bones of almost 100 tigers were discovered in Delhi. Their ultimate destination was to be China, for use in the medicine industry that has annihilated literally millions of animals and taken so many species to the very brink of extinction. Still no one acted and it was not until officials at Sariska eventually admitted that every single tiger in this landmark reserve had been killed, that questions began to be raised and the world started to take notice. In 2008 the Wildlife Institute of India confirmed that the situation was even worse than initially

feared, as their extensive survey suggested a tiger population of around 1400 and although this was subsequently increased to perhaps 1700, approaching half a billion US dollars had been spent over almost 35 years and yet India had significantly fewer tigers than in 1973 when 'Project Tiger' was first instigated. A heart-breaking story of widespread corruption and almost implausible ineptitude was ultimately revealed, leading to the creation of the National Tiger Conservation Authority and a large number of additional tiger reserves. In September 2014 the same authority proudly announced that Bor Wildlife Sanctuary in Maharashtra had become India's 47th tiger reserve, but the latest tiger census is now taking place and only time will tell whether these current initiatives are any more successful than previous efforts. Meanwhile, my brief return to the catalyst of the latest tiger crisis was a pleasant one, for although I had no expectation of finding a tiger during such a fleeting visit, I was encouraged to hear that several cubs had been born earlier that year and that tigers were observed fairly regularly by the guides of the lodge I used for my afternoon drive. Unfortunately, the reserve had only been open for two days when I arrived, so the whereabouts of the tigers was not currently known, but it was still great fun to

be exploring Indian forests again and twice we heard the haunting alarm calls of both deer and peafowl, suggesting that at least one of these magnificent predators was in the vicinity. Our rather remote chances of encountering a tiger were further hindered by the fact that I was visiting on a Saturday, as Sariska is also home to an important temple, which local people are allowed to visit on Saturday and Tuesday. As such, parts of the reserve were very busy and I made a mental note that any future three-night stay should probably commence on a Wednesday. Despite the crowds, we were still able to locate a good number of sambar and spotted deer, as well as a few nilgai, an exceptional looking animal and the largest antelope species found in Asia. Southern plains grey langur and five-striped palm squirrel



were also routinely observed and I determined that I would visit Sariska again on one of the two major tours that I will be making to various parts of India within the next couple of years. Sadly, the three-hour return drive to Delhi took almost five hours and we arrived at the hotel at close to midnight, just a few hours before I had to fly to Leh, the gateway to Hemis National Park and a thrilling opportunity to search for one of the most enigmatic and striking creatures on the planet, the snow leopard. I had been planning to visit Hemis in October 2015 to try out a local operator for future tours, but the opportunity to join a group expedition presented itself a year early and I decided to accept. Unless I am leading one, I do not generally participate in group tours, as I prefer the freedom to explore alone, without the inevitable restrictions that occur when you travel with people of differing objectives and abilities. However, this trip worked particularly well for me, given that my website was due to be released and I would now hopefully have the opportunity to replace my old distant and grainy snow leopard photographs with a few of sufficient quality to use. In addition, my son James had been working for Wild Globe on a part-time basis and I thought that this would be an ideal trip for him to learn exactly how these tours work, without the pressure of having to deal with paying guests. Excluding the local operator, guides and camp staff, there







would be seven of us in all, myself and James plus Jon Hall, a vastly experienced traveller and creator of the excellent Mammal Watching website, Morten Joegensen an intrepid Antarctica and Arctic guide deeply involved in polar bear conservation, Charles Foley, a biologist working to protect elephants at Tarangire National Park in Tanzania, Kate Goldberg, a paediatrician and keen birder who has served as a ship's doctor on several wildlife cruises and Tomer Ben-Yehuda, a mechanical engineer masters student with a fetish for both rollercoasters and martens, although not necessarily in that order. It was a good mixed team and although some of the group members had other interests, and Kate and I had seen snow leopards previously, the specific aim of the tour was to find a cat that would have been considered almost impossible to encounter even five years ago. My personal aim was slightly more focused, as I had to assess the local operator and was also desperately hoping to take a decent photograph of a snow leopard at fairly close quarters, which can now be achieved, but which I knew would be a matter of chance. The tour would begin in Leh, which is not itself a



particularly attractive town, but which does host some exceptional views of the surrounding countryside and stunning local mountains. The first two days were intended to be fairly gentle, to enable us to acclimatise to the altitude, as Leh sits at 3,500m and we knew that we would be trekking at even higher altitudes when we entered Hemis. Fortunately, I have never been greatly troubled by altitude and James appears to follow in my footsteps, as he was fine throughout the majority of a trip that regularly took us to

4,300m and briefly beyond 5,300m during the latter stages. Our first day comprised a few gentle walks looking for pikas and various birds and on the second, as most of the group visited a local monastery, James and I climbed a steep adjacent hill to look for alтай or mountain weasel. We had no luck, but we both felt good and suffered no adverse effects as a result of a fairly stiff climb at the increased altitude. Later that afternoon we encountered our first mammals of the tour, when we drove several kilometres beyond Leh and Kate spotted a small herd of urial, a type of wild sheep, that we had been scanning for in the distant hills. Whilst we were not able to get particularly close, it was a great start, as we were not guaranteed to see these animals and I had not really expected to find them amidst such a vast landscape.



The evening was to get even better, as our local operator informed us that he occasionally saw wolves and foxes when driving to his village at night and we immediately suggested trying those same roads that evening with spotlights. The results were immediate and spectacular, as we had only been spotlighting for a few minutes when Tomer, who had been telling us all earlier in the day that he never has any luck with animals, caught the eyeshine of a magnificent wolf. There turned out to be a pack of four wolves and we were able to follow them on foot for some time with the aid of our lights. It is always exhilarating to watch wolves, as to me they represent the true spirit of the wild and you often find that the environments in which they occur are the most healthy in terms of other species and the ecosystem in general. Excluding the areas where encroachment has forced them to live too close to major human settlements, a wolf's presence is certainly a good indicator of the biological health of a region and these animals were in superb condition. In addition to the wolves, the evening proved to be productive in terms of a number of red fox and woolly hare sightings



and the six of us, Morten had not joined the group, returned to our hotel in Leh in exceptional spirits. Unfortunately, although I had been elated to see wolves, that was as good as things were to get for me personally over the next few days, as I suffered two setbacks



the following morning, one of which would impact my trip far more seriously than the other. Firstly, on the very day that we had to drive to Hemis to begin the trip in earnest, I woke up with my head swimming and feeling as if my throat had been cut. The timing could not have been any worse, as my body was extremely weak and I was reasonably certain that I had a virus of some kind. I cannot remember the last time that I was ill and although my condition did not actually stop me completing anything throughout the course of the tour, it hindered me for the majority of the trip and certainly made a few of the long treks harder and less enjoyable. The situation was made even worse on the penultimate day, when I

discovered that one of the group had a bagful of antibiotics and that I could have probably resolved my problem within the first two or three days. The second issue had the potential to be more serious, as the local operator informed us that a road was being built within Hemis to link one of the small villages in the park and we would not be able to camp at the usual lower campsite, an area that accesses several of the valleys where snow leopards are consistently encountered. As a travel consultant, this is the type of information that I insist on knowing in advance and was very disappointed that we had only been informed an hour or so before we were due to depart. Although I thankfully had no clients with me, there is no way that I would have joined the tour had I been aware that a road was being constructed through prime snow leopard territory, as these animals are difficult enough to observe even in perfect conditions and I was immediately concerned that this would hinder my chances of photographing a snow leopard at even reasonably close quarters. Sadly, although most of the group were happy with their eventual sightings, I believe that this did prove to be the case, as the higher campsite was in a much larger valley than the one that the guides and spotters traditionally spend much of their time searching in and the snow leopards that we were able to observe were all seen at considerable distance. The lower trails, which our guides sensibly ignored for the majority of the tour, were covered in rubble and in the evening we could hear the explosions from our higher campsite, as dynamite ripped through the mountain, blasting a path for the new road. Hardly ideal conditions in which to search for one of the rarest animals on the planet and with hindsight I wished that I had waited a year until 2015 as originally planned, as the small road will be finished in just a few months and should ultimately have little or no impact on either the leopard's movements or future tours. Happily, the trip had other major compensations and, although I would not have joined the expedition had I known the situation in advance, I saw and discovered a great deal and was ultimately glad that I participated. We had nine nights in all at Hemis and our initial, fairly loose plan, was to search for snow leopards until we were all satisfied with our views of this iconic animal and to then consider moving to an even higher campsite to look for another elusive cat, the Eurasian lynx. Although most people automatically think that Hemis forms part of the Himalayas, this area of Ladakh, which translates rather appropriately as the 'land of high passes' actually sits to the north of the main Himalayan range on the west bank of the extensive Indus River. The national park is named after the local Buddhist monastery Hemis Gompa and the park is littered with the evocative stupas and prayer flags synonymous with Buddhism, as well as several tiny villages. The incredibly hardy and largely





Buddhist inhabitants lead a subsistence lifestyle, farming barley and seasonal vegetables and tending their livestock, an unusual hybrid of domestic cattle and wild yak. The entire area is far removed from the India that most people recognise and has a quiet calm far more reminiscent of Tibet, which it borders to the north. The local people are extremely friendly and helpful and a number of comfortable homestays have been opened to accommodate the many trekkers who descend on the region during the summer months. The terrain is of course rocky and the proliferation of loose scree on the mountain slopes makes trekking far more difficult whenever



you are forced to leave one of the winding mountain paths forged by the local inhabitants over many years. The lower valleys feature scant alpine forest and, as you ascend further, the sparse trees are replaced by the low shrubs and grasslands of the alpine tundra. The mountain slopes support herbaceous vegetation, which sustain healthy populations of blue sheep, the main prey species of the snow leopard. The entire region is in the rain shadow of the Himalayas and most precipitation falls as snow during the winter months, which are regarded as the best months to look for leopards, as the blue sheep are forced to lower elevations to seek fresh grazing areas below the snowline. The landscape has a bleak and

mesmerising quality that few who gaze upon it will ever forget and as we drove towards the park we stopped to photograph the staggering views across the Indus and beyond. In the distance wolves howled and as the hairs on the back of my neck tingled, I decided that their beautiful cries were the best possible portent for the coming expedition. Despite feeling fairly rough, the walk up to our main campsite was easy enough and would have been even more exciting had it not been for my first view of the disturbance caused by the new road, which I could not help reflecting on as I traipsed over the resulting debris strewn across the trail. Although I had seen snow leopards before, I had no expertise or knowledge regarding their movements and could only hope that perhaps the inevitable disruption might force the animals to spend more time in the higher valley that we would be camping in, as opposed to completely driving them out of the area. The sight of a first herd of blue sheep was certainly a reassuring one, as they were spotted just a short distance from the main blasting area, during a break for lunch. At the same stop I photographed the first pikas of the trip,





which our guides confirmed were large-eared pikas and not the royle's pikas that are commonly recorded on visits to Hemis. We would see a lot more pikas throughout the tour and in all I was able to photograph and identify three different species. Whilst I was not confident that a Eurasian lynx was a realistic prospect, principally because I have never seen one and am currently unaware of an area in which they can be consistently observed, I was very much hoping to encounter the two mustelid species that occur in Hemis, mountain weasel and stone marten, as well as a Himalayan marmot, although I was aware that the latter could already be in hibernation. The main focus, however, would be the snow leopard and as soon as we reached camp we began the interminable process



of scanning the distant slopes and ridges in the hope of catching a first glimpse of one of these ghosts of the mountains. In addition to the camp staff who worked so tirelessly on our behalf, we had a guide and one dedicated spotter with us and in future I will probably request an additional spotter to ensure that more ground can be covered and more areas observed simultaneously. As it was, we were sharing the campsite with another group, who had a guide and two spotters with them, and several members of our party had also brought their own spotting scopes. Within a few brief hours I was regretting that I had not done so, as we were scanning immense areas at long distance and I quickly realised that my binoculars were not going to be particularly effectual. Based partly on my previous experience in Hemis, when I had not travelled a great deal further than the now redundant lower campsite, and partly on my hopes of seeing a snow leopard without a scope, I had determined that I would concentrate my efforts on the steep slopes of the narrow lower valley, where a snow leopard could easily be seen with binoculars and probably even with the naked eye. However, in this higher valley, which overlooked a vast and distant expanse, this option was clearly not going to be as effective and I knew that I was now almost certainly relying on someone else to spot a leopard for me. For someone who loves to get close to wildlife, this was far from ideal and whilst I did spend a long time scanning, and often attempted to take a vantage point that would provide the unique view of a leopard that I was hoping to achieve, in truth I was completely out of my depth in this seemingly infinite landscape and





knew that I would require an extraordinary amount of good fortune to find a leopard on my own. Sadly, I did not get it and my preoccupation with the enclosed walls of the lower valley, which is historically where the vast majority of leopard sightings occur, would ultimately cost me a view of at least one of these majestic cats and almost another two. Whilst this was fairly devastating at the time, all of my research trips are designed in order for me to learn exactly how an area works and to ensure that future guests have the optimum chance of encountering the wildlife they are hoping to see. The learning curve at Hemis was a steep one, in fact the steepest that I have experienced for a number of years, but I already know the changes that I would look to implement for subsequent trips and how to best maximise the chances of finding these elusive animals. We had no success on that first day and although I went spotlighting that evening with James and Tomer, the 'cat' that Tomer identified in his binoculars turned out to be a red fox instead of the pallas's cat that we were all about to get very excited about. A couple of fun and successful interludes with a stone marten aside, there was very little additional spotlighting, as it quickly became apparent that as soon as we lost the sun behind the towering mountain peaks at around 4pm, the temperature fell rather rapidly and by nightfall it was freezing, a fact confirmed by the frozen streams that greeted us early each morning. All of the initial days followed the



same basic pattern, with us getting up around first light and scanning the slopes for a couple of hours before taking breakfast in the communal mess tent. Our guide would then decide the plan for the rest of the day, which generally involved trekking up to a ridge to spend several hours patiently scanning the horizon. Lunch would often be delivered by our remarkable camp staff, however far and high we had walked, and we would usually return to base in time to spend the last two hours or so of daylight again scanning the area around camp. The days were long and at times ponderous, but the group was a good mix of interesting people and the many fruitless hours passed quickly in excellent company. Humour is always an important element on this type of more demanding tour and all of the party were experienced travellers with a wealth of amusing and illuminating stories. Jon Hall has observed more mammals than just about anyone on the planet and I greatly enjoyed hearing how and where he had seen various animals and Morten Joegensen, a very large Dane, who I immediately christened Olaf the Slaughterer after his undoubted Viking ancestry, took the time to carefully explain his work with polar bears and the book that he will shortly release exposing the current plight of the same animal, a story that has become somewhat overshadowed by the various arguments regarding global warming. All of the group had similarly interesting tales to tell and I think that the highlight for everyone in the first three days was probably a mountain weasel that ran into camp and spent several minutes playing hide and seek among the loose rocks in front of both tour groups and a combined audience of around twenty people. This is mammal watching at its best, when you are sitting eating pancakes and honey for breakfast and the cook tells you that one of the trip's target species has meandered into camp. It does not often happen like that, but we all took full advantage for extended views of a superb and completely relaxed creature in the best possible morning light. Although other members of the party



saw weasels again as we drifted towards our own interests in the latter stages of the tour, this was the only one that I encountered and I was thrilled to enjoy such a close and uninterrupted view. Around 24 hours later I was far less content, as everyone in the group had seen a snow leopard, Morten had seen two, except me. The situation arose partly as a result of me leaving James to sleep longer in the morning after a few fairly hard days, but more because of my own stupidity in wandering too far from our guides spotting at the top of a hill next to our camp. During the previous few days our guides had largely ignored the lower valleys, presumably because they were concerned about the disruption caused by the road construction, and had instead concentrated their efforts on the area around camp and at slightly higher elevations towards the next campsite. However, the other tour group had ventured down the valley the previous day and had immediately found the fresh tracks and scat of a snow leopard. As I waited for James, I therefore decided to explore the lower valley on my own, but obviously searched too far and for too long, for when I returned, one of the camp staff told me that a snow leopard had been seen and had already disappeared. I immediately asked in which direction James had gone, as he was no longer in his tent, and the staff member pointed up the valley in the area that we had searched the previous day. Of course my actual







request had been totally lost in translation and he was pointing me in the direction that the snow leopard had disappeared towards, which meant that I spent the next couple of hours walking completely the wrong way and returned with a fairly acute sense of humour bypass. I was later able to calculate that although I did end up trekking towards where the snow leopard had last been seen, I was probably at least 30 minutes behind it and of course leopards can walk around a mountain far quicker than I can. The entire situation was the nightmare type scenario that you hope will never happen with guests, but the fault was mine, as I should have just called James and ensured that we both stayed with the guides. Instead my son got an extra hour in a warm sleeping bag and also got to see his first ever snow leopard, which I was very upset not to share with him. While everyone else saw only one, Morten briefly glimpsed a second leopard when his attention was drawn to some blue sheep running in a totally different area. That animal was too quick for him to get a shot of, but he photographed the first leopard and the picture at the very top of this report was taken by him. My only consolation, and it was a very minor one, was that the sighting had been at distance and I knew before I left England that this time I wanted to see a snow leopard clearly with my own eyes and not through the lens of a spotting scope. I would have still taken it of course, particularly to share with James, but it was not what I travelled to Hemis for and I remained hopeful, if not now exactly confident, that I still had plenty of time to see a leopard without the aid of a scope. As it was, several members of the group had already achieved their goal with this initial sighting and began discussing the possibility of exploring further and higher into Hemis in



search of the Eurasian lynx. Whilst snow leopards can occasionally be found in the same territory and at the same elevation as the lynx, our guide informed us that they were seldom spotted in that area and that you were likely to be forgoing the opportunity of seeing snow leopard in order to look for lynx. Eventually Jon, Charles and Tomer all decided that they were happy to move on, while Kate, Morten, James and I took the view that this was predominantly a snow leopard trip and that we would stay to increase our chances of a better, or in my case first, leopard encounter. To make matters easier and to avoid having to move camp, the three people leaving would sleep at a homestay, which was around an hours walk from the next major campsite and slightly further to the best lynx area. As they would have to take a spotter with them, and this reduced our spotting expertise by 50%, I hired another local guide from a group leaving on the same morning and he stayed with us until the end of the tour. So on day six we went our separate ways and I actually enjoyed my best day at Hemis, as that morning James and I managed to get ourselves right in the middle of a very relaxed mixed herd of blue sheep and spent a fascinating hour watching them interacting and bounding gracefully across the treacherous mountain slopes. In the late afternoon, when we all took our scanning positions, I again chose to move beyond the group and to watch the entrance to the lower valley. Fortunately, this time I positioned myself and James within earshot of our guides and it was not long before I heard desperate whistles coming from the top of nearby hill. Another snow leopard had been seen and, as we ran back towards camp, our main guide rushed to meet us, frantically gesticulating that we needed to run further up the valley in order to see the leopard, which was apparently perched on a very high ridge. We of course did as instructed, but when we reached the required spot the leopard could no longer be seen and our guide now motioned that we must climb the side of a steep hill in order to secure a possible view. The rapid ascent was lung-bursting and, gasping for breath in the rarefied atmosphere, I more or less collapsed in front of a hastily arranged scope for a first view of the trip of my very own snow leopard. I was incredibly happy to at last be able to share such a wonderful creature with my son and although the leopard was a very long way away, it appears as a tiny dot in my photographs, the bonus was that there were actually two leopards resting within a few metres of each other and that we were able to watch them for well over an hour until the light began to fade. You could see both animals with binoculars, but you needed a scope to really view them in detail and I was enthralled to watch one of them standing and stretching and the second walking down the side of the mountain towards us. The quality of the sighting was not what I had initially hoped for, but after searching for six days and having



missed the previous leopard, at the time I was just relieved that I had finally seen the main target animal of the trip. On reflection I believe that there is a very good chance that these were the same two animals seen previously, as two pairs in more or less the same area is not particularly likely. It made no difference to me in any case, as I had now seen two leopards and had three full days



remaining in which to take a decent photograph of one. Encouraged by our wonderful day, that evening James and I sat up in the bitter cold and biting wind in the hope of spotting the stone marten that we knew had been coming into camp in search of scraps. It had been heard on more than one occasion and had even kindly deposited droppings in our mess tent, just to confirm that it was in the vicinity. As so often happens when things are going for you, I actually spotted the marten accidentally while taking a walk to try and warm up and we spent fifteen minutes watching it scampering furtively around camp. It was a wonderful end to a superb day and we both fell asleep exhausted but extremely happy. Fortunately, Kate and Morten had also enjoyed good views of the two leopards and the next

morning the four of us set off in the direction that they had last been seen heading towards. We had no luck with the leopards, but our trek had taken us some way towards the homestay that the other three group members were staying at and I mentioned to our guide that it would be good to visit that area, as he had previously informed me that, if they were not yet hibernating, it was easy to see Himalayan marmots there. Unfortunately, although we found plenty of marmot sized burrows, we arrived to the news that we had just missed them, as they had gone into hibernation four or five days before. If we had visited that area on day one we would have almost certainly seen them, but of course we were preoccupied with leopards at that stage and the other three group members later confirmed that they had not seen any marmots either. Nor had they seen a lynx, although they did observe two wolves, or more likely the same wolf twice, as well as a number of woolly hares and what they thought was probably a house mouse. They returned to the main camp for the final two nights and although we intensified our efforts with the group back to full strength, we were to see no further leopards at Hemis. The highlights of the last two days were encounters with the marten for Morten and Tomer, the only two who braved the elements for long enough, and a distant sighting of a lone wolf on the final evening for the entire group. Personally I had mixed feelings about leaving Hemis, as I had utterly failed to achieve what I set out to, but I had seen leopards, as well as a host of other beautiful animals, and it somehow felt like time to move on. I will return with greater knowledge and a renewed enthusiasm as soon as I get the chance, as I know that it is certainly possible to see leopards far closer than we did, as several groups have done so in recent times. However, it requires a great deal of luck, as per the French couple that I met on this trip. They had not seen a leopard when we left and indeed they had still not seen one when they exited the park at the end of their ten-day stay and began the drive back to Leh. They had only been driving a few minutes when one of their guides spotted a snow leopard on the banks of the Indus and they immediately stopped and watched the leopard swim across the river. That couple now have the only known photographs of a snow leopard swimming and a second vehicle, which followed a few minutes behind with another group, saw absolutely nothing. That is





the chance that you have to take with this animal and although I believe that encounters will be slightly more likely when the road is completed, this is one tour where you have to accept that you may see a leopard cross the road in front of you, but equally, you may see nothing at all. For now these were the least of my concerns, as I was heading back to Leh for an appointment with an extremely hot shower, an a la carte menu and one night at least in clean, crisp cotton sheets. For two of the party, Jon and Tomer, the trip was then over, but the rest of us had one last adventure remaining, three days exploring the saline and fresh water lakes of Tso Kar. Originally we had intended to visit the small village of Ullay, principally to see Siberian ibex and possibly snow leopard and wolf, but as we read more about Tso Kar, the more we liked the idea of switching and Morten and Kate were particularly enthusiastic, as they have a keen interest in birds and Tso Kar is home to the supremely elegant black-necked crane, as well as a large variety of other birds. We had already seen a great deal of birdlife at Hemis, including golden eagle, lammergeyer and Himalayan griffon, and I was also keen to see the crane, as well as the kiang and argali that we were informed we would almost certainly encounter. Both red fox and wolf were additional possibilities, as well as two species each of pika, hare and vole. To reach Tso Kar we had to drive over the



Taglangla Pass, which, at 5,328m, is said to be the second highest ‘driveable’ pass in the world. I have no idea if this is true or not, but I do know that it was bloody cold at the top and that it was a relief to descend into the valley beyond. On the way we dallied to photograph herds of domestic yak, which look exactly like wild yak, as well as just a few of the stupendous views, as every horizon presented another opportunity and we would have never arrived if we had stopped at every remarkable panorama. What quickly became apparent, regardless of the ravishing landscapes already passed, was that Tso Kar itself was the real masterpiece, as it is one of the most astonishingly beautiful areas I have visited and the shimmering afternoon light on the deep blue freshwater lake had a radiance and ethereal quality that no amount of photographs could do full justice to. We saw kiang almost immediately and I was



instantly struck by just how impressive these distinctive animals are. Their attractive two-tone appearance aside, they very much reminded me of zebra, as they have a similar gait and herding instinct and I spent a long period one afternoon watching as a dominant stallion rounded up his females. We saw large numbers of kiang throughout our stay and I was delighted to see how healthy and abundant the population was here. Their good health probably has much to do with the main predator in the area, as we saw the tracks of large packs of wolves, as well as two actual wolves out scouting in daylight on our second afternoon. Although we drove alongside







one of the running wolves for some time, I could not quite get the shot that I wanted in the moving vehicle. It was, however, wonderful to again see wolves and we had now observed these apex predators at every possible destination. Argali were also routinely encountered and the fact that we did not get quite as close as I would have liked, was more than compensated for by the tremendous



behaviour that we were able to observe, as several males clashed on the steep hills, rearing up on their hind legs and smashing their sturdy horns into each other with no real aggression or apparent ill-effect. They were clearly sparring in the way that males do, but come the mating season, the same behaviour will take on an entirely different dimension and intensity. Perhaps due to the low evening temperatures, Tso Kar is one of the windiest places I can remember, our drivers exhaustion on the first night and ours on the last, we actually only went spotlighting on the second of our three-night stay and were rewarded with good views of several red foxes and even more woolly hares. At least we assumed that they were all woolly hares until one was caught in the spotlight close to

the vehicle and Charles noticed that it was far more uniform in colour than the distinctive woolly hare and that we had actually spotted our first cape hare. We had probably seen more in fact, but as we kept dismissing hares as soon as we caught their eyeshine, it is difficult to be entirely sure how many of each species were viewed that night. Our final day was spent largely around the freshwater lake at the end of the valley, as Morten and Kate recorded the diverse birdlife, including pairs of black-necked cranes and the first flocks of Tibetan sandgrouse of the trip, and Charles, James and I, Morten later joined us, attempted to photograph various pikas and voles. We managed to find both local pika species during our brief stay, as well as one of the two possible voles, and I made a point of searching for and photographing a woolly hare in daylight. The last day also produced the first red fox viewed during the day throughout the entire tour, although it was too far to photograph effectively and I had to make do with a distant shot of it walking



across the deep blue, partially frozen lake. Whilst we scanned for Siberian ibex at a likely spot on the journey back to Leh, our final drive produced only the same vole seen previously and a few more blue sheep. No matter, it was time for another shower and a farewell meal with Morten, Kate, Charles and James, as well as the operator who organised the trip and worked so hard to accommodate all of our changes and ensure that everything ran smoothly. Although I was not happy that we were not informed regarding the situation with the road, I would not hesitate to use the same local outfit again, with perhaps a few minor adjustments, as everyone worked ceaselessly on our behalf and the entire tour was organised without any significant problems. In fact, I will now work on a more extensive trip to the same region, which will also take in the village of Ullay for the Siberian ibex, as well as Dachigam National Park, which lies a few kilometres from Srinagar in the Kashmir Valley and can be easily reached from Leh. Dachigam, at the right time of year at least, is one of the best places to see Asiatic black bear in all of Asia and is also home to brown bear, leopard, yellow-throated marten, markhor and Himalayan goral. Kishtwar National Park is another possibility, as this reserve is even closer to Leh and protects brown bear, markhor, Himalayan goral and also the Himalayan serow, another wild goat species. There is certainly a great deal of fascinating and accessible wildlife in the region and, although I would definitely still focus any prospective tour around the chances of seeing snow leopards, I would also like to schedule some time to explore the higher elevations



of Hemis in search of the Eurasian lynx, as an extended tour featuring two such rare cats could be very special. Meanwhile, I have neglected the rest of India for far too long and will rectify this over the next two years, as I have additional tours arranged in both February 2016 and 2017, which will incorporate some of the best tiger reserves and general wildlife destinations in the country. Whilst this trip was not always an easy one, particularly when I was feeling so rough at Hemis, it was a great experience for both myself and James. We had a lot of fun and made good friends that I hope we will be able to travel with again. Certainly I learnt a great deal personally, and not only that you never leave your guide when searching for one of the rarest animals on earth, and cannot wait to return to such an inspiring and magical land.











No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Snow Leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>	Two sightings of possibly the same two animals at Hemis.
2	Grey Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>	Four seen spotlighting outside of Leh, two or three at Hemis and two more at Tso Kar.
3	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Several beyond Leh and at Tso Kar and one at Hemis.
4	Stone Marten	<i>Martes foina</i>	One around camp at Hemis.
5	Altai Weasel	<i>Mustela altaica</i>	One seen by me at Hemis and several others by group members.
6	Kiang	<i>Equus kiang</i>	Over 500 at Tso Kar.
7	Nilgai	<i>Boselaphus tragocamelus</i>	Around eight at Sariska.
8	Argali	<i>Ovis ammon</i>	Several small herds at Tso Kar.
9	Urial	<i>Ovis orientalis</i>	Herd of 24 outside of Leh.
10	Blue Sheep	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>	Several hundred across several days at Hemis.
11	Sambar Deer	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>	Several small groups and a few lone males at Sariska.
12	Spotted Deer	<i>Axis axis</i>	Common at Sariska.
13	Southern Plains Grey Langur	<i>Semnopithecus dussumieri</i>	Large numbers at Sariska.
14	Woolly Hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>	Viewed beyond Leh, at Hemis and at Tso Kar.
15	Cape Hare	<i>Lepus capensis</i>	At least one seen at night at Tso Kar.
16	Large-eared Pika	<i>Ochotona macrotis</i>	Common at Hemis.
17	Ladak Pika	<i>Ochotona ladacensis</i>	One individual seen on the approach to Tso Kar.
18	Plateau Pika	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>	Several in the Tso Kar valley.
19	Five-striped Palm Squirrel	<i>Funambulus pennantii</i>	Seen at Sariska and on the drive to and from.
20	Stoliczka's Mountain Vole	<i>Alticola stoliczkanus</i>	Around a dozen individuals seen at Tso Kar.













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