

TRACKS SAFARIS

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14 NIGHT SNOW LEOPARD AND BROWN BEARS LEH, DRAS AND ULLEY



An Introduction Wildlife in the Upper Himalayas

Ladakh which is part of Jammu & Kashmir is home to exceptional wildlife. This diversity is a result of the unique landscape and the weather conditions in the region. The fauna of Ladakh has much in common with that of Central Asia in general and that of the Tibetan Plateau in particular.

Exceptions to this are the birds, many of which migrate from the warmer parts of India to spend the summer in Ladakh. For such an arid area, Ladakh has a great diversity of birds — a total of 225 species have been recorded. Many species of finches, robins, redstarts and the hoopoe are common in summer. The brown-headed gull is seen in summer on the river Indus and on some lakes of the Changthang. Resident water-birds include the Brahminy duck and the bar-headed goose. The black-necked crane, a rare species found scattered in the Tibetan plateau, is also found in parts of Ladakh. Other birds include the raven, Eurasian magpie, red-billed chough, Tibetan snowcock, and chukar. The lammergeyer and the golden eagle are common raptors here.

Some key mammals to look out for in the region are the snow leopard, brown bear, Tibetan wolf, Eurasian lynx, weasels, Tibetan fox, ibex, blue sheep and yak to name a few. During the time of this expedition in winter key wildlife to look for in are as follows:

Mammals: Brown Bear, Snow Leopard, Eurasian Lynx, Pallas Cat, Himalayan Wolf, Himalayan Fox, Ibex, Ladakh Uriel, Blue Sheep, Weasel, Marmot and the Woolly Hare.

Birds: Golden Eagle, Lammergeier, Yellow-billed Chough, Red-billed Chough, Eurasian Magpie, Himalayan Snowcock, Chukar Partridge, White-capped Redstart, Horned Lark, Alpine Accentor, Robin Accentor and Ibis Bill.



DAY ONE

On arrival into Delhi International Airport you are met by Tracks Safaris representatives and assisted to check-in at your hotel (Check-in 1400 hrs). Rest of the day is at leisure.

Overnight in Delhi at The Pride, Aerocity.

DAY TWO

This morning you will transfer back to the airport and take a flight to Leh in Ladakh.

Ladakh was the largest district in the country and a part of the state of Jammu and Kashmir, however it has now been separated from Jammu and Kashmir and has become a Union Territory. Leh was the capital of the Himalayan kingdom of Ladakh, the seat of which was in the Leh Palace, the former mansion of the royal family of Ladakh, built in the same style and about the same time as the Potala Palace in Tibet - the chief residence of the Dalai Lama until the 14th Dalai Lama fled to Dharamshala, India.

Since the city of Leh lies at an altitude of 11,562ft above sea level, one needs to acclimatize to the high altitude. The region is a high-altitude desert and thus a lack of trees also contributes to low oxygen levels which the body needs to adapt to. Thus days 2 and most part of day 3 are at leisure in order to acclimatise.

Overnight will be at The Grand Dragon Hotel, Leh (or similar)



DAY THREE

Spend the day acclimatizing. Should you feel up to it we will organize local sightseeing around Leh. This normally includes a visit to Leh market, Shanti Stupa and a visit to a Buddhist monastery. In the evening we have planned an interaction at the hotel with the Snow Leopard Conservancy, during which one can learn about the big cat and other wildlife of the region, the landscape, people that inhabit the landscape and the various challenges faced by wildlife of the region along with the conservation work that is taking place in the region to protect the wildlife.

Overnight will be at The Grand Dragon Hotel, Leh (or similar)

DAY FOUR

Acclimatised and well rested this morning we make our way to Dras. The entire region is scenic thus the long drive (6hrs) can be broken up by making various stops for birding, landscape photography and for short breaks in villages that we may pass through. Enroute visit Munshi Aziz Bhat Museum of Central Asian and Kargil Trade Artefacts. Continue onwards to your remote lodge. Remainder of the evening is at leisure to rest or to explore the surround areas around the lodge.

Overnight will be at a homestay – Himalayan Brown Bear Lodge near Dras.

DAY FIVE

The valley of Dras lies in the western extreme of Ladakh, just short of the rise towards Zoji La Pass. Despite the destruction caused by the war in the summer of 1999 and the constant mechanisation and development brought in by the army, the lush green hills of Dras still make for a majestic view. Rows of flower beds, a good variety of bird life, streams originating from snow melt and nomadic herders walking the high pastures with their flock are some of the sights that one tends to take away from Dras. This is also a stark contrast to the barren slopes of eastern Ladakh. This change in habitat and precipitation has also led to some unique wildlife taking over the mantle in the western reaches of Ladakh. Apart from the animals that occur in eastern Ladakh, the grassy slopes of Dras are home to specials like the Long-tailed Marmot, the Himalayan Fox (a recent split from the Red Fox) and most importantly, the largest land carnivore in India, the Himalayan Brown Bear.

In India, these Brown Bears occupy the high-altitude pasture and shrub land, avoiding dense forests in most cases. They are rarely seen in the lower reaches of the hills, except when they are in search of food. These



bears hibernate every year from December to late march, right through the biting cold winter months. This is also the time when the pregnant females give birth. When they emerge from their slumber in March, most of them are famished and desperate to feed themselves and their little ones. This is when they approach human habitation in search of scraps, and this is also when most of the conflict occurs. We spend the day exploring the region in search for the Brown Bear and other wildlife.

The usual plan for exploration is as follows:

Early starts to go looking for Brown Bears (usually between 5am) and other exciting wildlife around Dras with your spotter and tour Leader. You will be on foot to reach the vantage points at the top (40 mins -1 hour climb – gentle slope – mules and porters can be arranged) or drive scanning the slopes for movement of bears. The bears are generally active till around 9am after which we return. (the guests can also stay on the hill for the whole day with their spotter if they wish to and on those days, a hot lunch will be brought up to the guest)



Small packed breakfast goes with the guests on the morning expedition and once back in the house, a larger breakfast/brunch is served. Post lunch/brunch, head out on your vehicle with the tour leader to take in some places of interest around Kargil and Dras such as:

War Memorial (20 mins) - The War Memorial at Dras is set right at the foothill of Tololing, the feature where a large chunk of the battle for Kargil was fought. The memorial features some of the smaller unsaid stories and will give the visitor, a deep understanding of the extent of fighting and damage caused to the area during those days and also bring about an appreciation towards the ability of the people and the landscape to bounce back in such a short time. **Suru Valley (3 hours)** - Suru valley is two hours from Drass (passing Kargil town) , and extends all the way to Pensi La. Visits to the ruins of Kartsekar Fort, the pre-Tibetan Buddha at Trespone and the views of Nun-Kun peaks (highest peaks in the Zaskar range) from Pannikar are some of the highlights of the drive into this green valley.



Hundarman Museum (40 mins) - Hundarman, a tiny hamlet, west of Kargil is a 500 year old Balti village; close to the international border with Pakistan. The village came under the territory of India post 1971 Indo-Pak conflict and most of the villagers fled with the Pakistani army leaving behind their homes and lives; never to return.

The doors of Hundarman village opened after 45 years; only to find memories of people scattered all over. The village is silent as if someone is hiding, holding their breath and walking slow steps; leading us to discover what people have left behind. A container of French coffee, medicines from USA, books from Lahore, currency from East Pakistan, shoe polish from Central Asia and countless other items of daily use. There are also tools for farming, fishing and hunting. Roots Collective, a local NGO along with the INDUS University, Ahmedabad have documented the entire settlement consisting of 25 households, including more than 100 special articles found in these houses.

Drive to Umba La Pass - The road to Umba La was constructed during the war so that vehicles and personnel can move between Kargil and Drass without touching the highway that lay right below the war front. The pass is at one of the highest points in Drass and provides one with great views of the green valleys, good birding and a top down view of the sites of war, including bunkers, trenches, bomb sites etc.(both of India

and Pakistan). In the summer months, this road also brings us in contact with the Bakkarwals and their camps, the nomadic herders of the Himalaya.

Overnight will be at a homestay – Himalayan Brown Bear Lodge near Dras.



DAYS SIX AND SEVEN

Continue exploring the region from brown bears and other wildlife that inhabit the region.

Overnight will be at a homestay – Himalayan Brown Bear Lodge near Dras.

DAY EIGHT

This morning post breakfast we make our way to Ulley. The drive to Ulley takes about 6.5hrs, however we have planned a few interesting stops to make the journey interesting such as Hundarman village on the Indo-Pak border and continue onwards via Indus River gorge passing the Brokpa (Aryan) settlements and will stop to see the Petroglyphs at Domkhar before reaching Ulley.

Overnight will be at the Snow Leopard Lodge, Ulley.



DAY NINE

The Snow Leopard Lodge is the only dedicated wildlife lodge in Ladakh. It began originally as a homestay owned by one of Ladakh's top snow leopard trackers – T Chewang Norbu – under the auspices of a program initiated by the Snow Leopard Conservancy designed to use tourism as a conservation tool for the preservation of snow leopards and their ecosystem by putting tourism revenue directly into local community.

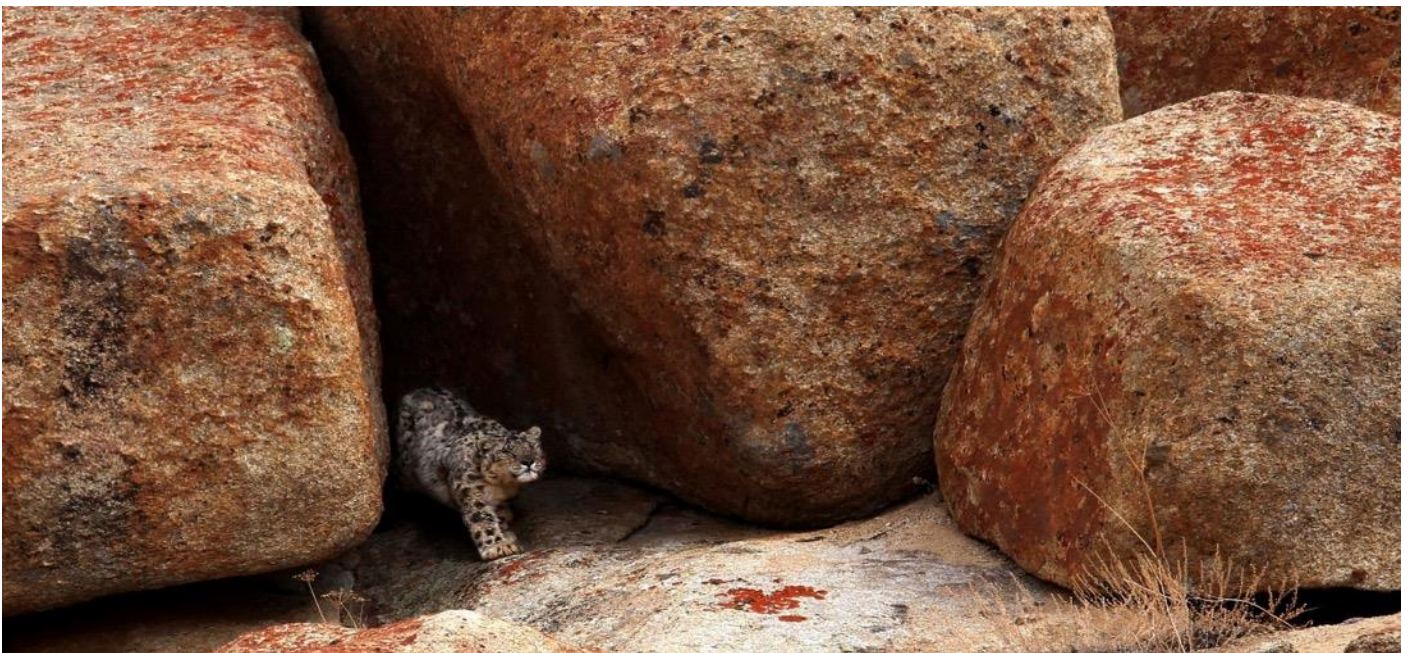
The Lodge is located in the village of Ulley in West Ladakh, north of the Indus River, at an altitude of about 13,000 feet. Ulley itself is a hamlet of just 7 houses beyond which are the high summer pastures. This is excellent Ibex country and an area that has only recently been developed for Snow Leopard tracking. It has quickly gained a reputation not just for the high numbers of Snow Leopards but as one of the best areas to see Ibex, Urial, Wolf, Red Fox, Bearded and Himalayan Griffon Vultures and Golden Eagles. We will explore the hills around the lodge on foot or will drive to nearby valleys tracking the wildlife.

Overnight will be at Snow Leopard Lodge – a homestay.

DAYS TEN AND ELEVEN

Continue exploring the valleys and mountains around Ulley in search of wildlife. Please note the idea is not trekking but searching for wildlife so all travel happens at the pace you will be comfortable with. The lodge will provide trackers and naturalists to accompany you on these excursions. All meals will be at the lodge unless you decide to trek the whole day – in which case a packed meal can be carried with the team.

Overnight will be at Snow Leopard Lodge – a homestay.



DAY TWELVE

After spending the morning searching for the snow leopard, after lunch we make our way back to Leh. Hopefully by now you have managed to see the wildlife you came to see and experienced the untouched landscape that they call home. Enroute we can stop at Alchi Monastery. The evening is at leisure.

Overnight will be at The Grand Dragon Hotel, Leh (or similar)

DAY FOURTEEN

This morning you take a flight back to Delhi. You have the day at leisure. Alternately you can explore the city.

DAY FIFTEEN

This morning transfer to the airport and catch your flight back home.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION:

Weather: The ideal time to find both the Brown Bear and the Snow Leopard is mid-October to mid-November or March-end till mid-April. This is when winters become severe and the brown bear goes into hibernation or when warmer weather approaches and the bear comes out of hibernation.

Temperature during this period will range from 5°C to -10°C depending on how the season progresses each year.

Searching for Wildlife: All exploration is done on foot therefore one needs to be carrying clothing for such terrain and weather.

Clothing: It is ideal to wear layers as opposed to wearing one heavy piece of clothing as one can keep adding or removing layers. The sun can be harsh so one can remove a layer and if cloud cover comes in the temperature can dip very quickly so layers need to be added. Some things that you should consider packing are:

- Gloves
- Woollen caps / Balaclava
- Woollen & water-proof socks as one might have to trek through snow.
- Warm inners.
- Shoes – bring comfortable, water-proof and shoes that protects your feet from extreme temperatures.
- Sunglasses – the sun is bright and if there is snow the glare can cause sun-blindness.
- Sun-screen, lip balm and moisturizers are quite helpful.
- Hot-water bottles are quite handy.
- Toiletries: Please do carry your own toiletries as you will be staying in very basic accommodations. Only Grand Dragon in Leh and your Delhi hotel will provide towels and toiletries.
- Sleeping bags – although not a part of clothing, this is something that you may want to consider. As you feel much colder than you usually would in other developed destinations as there is not central heating anywhere. Although blankets and quilts will be provided, sometime guests prefer to carry their own

Other things you may want to pack:

Camera Gear:

- Wide angle lenses will be very handy. You will have many opportunities to capture the stunning Himalayan landscapes.
- Long focal lengths: Since wildlife in the region is usually quite a distance away from you, please do carry the longest focal lengths that you can. Super-zoom point & shoot cameras too are great in the region. The area has no tree cover thus the wildlife sees you coming from very far away.
- Tripods/Monopods: These are necessary since you will be using long focal lengths thus stabilization will be required.
- Carry extra batteries. Cold weather drains the batteries much quicker and in these remote regions you will not find camera batteries.
- Carry extra memory cards.
- Although the team at snow leopard lodge and brown bear lodge do carry a wildlife scope, it is best to carry a pair of binoculars which will help you scan the rock outcrops – a favourite place for snow leopards.

Medicine: Do carry any medication advised by your doctor be it for a specific illness or general medication. We usually carry a first-aid kit with us which usually includes:

- AMS
 - Oxygen cylinder / cans
 - Diamoxs
 - Instrument to check SpO2 levels
- Paracetamol
- Imodium
- Medicine for motion sickness
- Domstal
- Medicine for pain relief – Voveran – tablet & spray along with a crepe bandage. Leh city has hospitals that can address more serious medical problems.



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