

In search of the Grey Ghosts of the mountains.

7th March to 23rd March 2016.

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Preliminary information etc., Or how it came about:-

Having seen most Big Cats in the wild, two still eluded me. I had long put off trying for Snow Leopard as this involved cold temperatures and high altitudes neither of which really fit my preferred life style of modest exercise followed by a warm bed at night. Whilst I was sure that the culture of the lands of the Himalayas would be fascinating, a tent in sub-zero temperatures at any altitude was so not me! So, despite doing some research I had so far eschewed all temptations to seek the Grey Ghosts.

And then, in October 2015, I got an Email from **Bellingham Safaris**. (Who they?) It seems I must have enquired of them some months/years earlier and passed at the time for the usual reasons. So why should I not do so again? Well, Elizabeth pointed out that I was not getting any younger and was reaching the stage where, like it or not, I would have to write off Snow Leopards from my must see list due to being too decrepit to even try. More or less "Go now or forever hold my peace!"

Well, put like that, I promptly sent off for more details and those nice people at **Bellingham** said "welcome aboard"!

The new Indian eVisa system on arrival was no handicap to travel so before I knew it I had a plane ticket to Delhi and my good friend Vinod Goswami in Delhi had me booked on a connecting flight to Leh. I was committed.

India is usually four and a half hours ahead of GMT. Local currency is the Indian Rupee with a convenient exchange rate of approximately IR100/Pound Sterling.

Leh is the capital of the ancient kingdom of **Ladakh** in the disputed state of Kashmir/Jammu and hemmed in between the Chinese occupied country of Tibet to the east and Pakistan to the north and west. Both countries are much close and somewhat unfriendly neighbours with the borders often only a few kilometres away. It is now possible to visit for tourism purposes but permits are required by "foreigners" for certain sensitive areas.

Getting there, back and around. New Delhi is the capital and the traffic is not for the fainthearted but to minimise the risk of a missed connection I decided to avail myself of Vinod's services by getting a few hours' sleep on arrival and taking two nights in Delhi at the end when I thought to do a bit of local birding.

I also arranged to arrive in Leh two days before the other 'guests' to acclimatise better and to take a look at this fascinating place. Acclimatisation is necessary as Leh is at 3500 metres (11,500feet) amsl. "Mountain sickness" is a real possibility.

Food & Drink. In Leh it is a charming conjunction of Chinese and Indian cuisine with some traditional Ladakhi specialities such as Momo (stuffed Dumplings) too. I cannot speak for drinks other than Green, Black and Ginger tea of which I consumed considerable quantities. I abstained from Alcohol from getting off the plane in Delhi to returning home. How good was that?

Bugs, Beasts n Bowels. Hygiene standards appeared high and no adverse reactions were encountered. Indeed I returned in a healthier internal state than for many years. Water was either boiled (flat) or bottled. No mossies at that altitude and being winter in Delhi the malarial risk was so low I took no Prophylactic.

Accommodations. For my private stay in Leh I took up some lovely hospitality with a Homestay at "Hidden North". Christina and Tashi were excellent and considerate hosts and I loved the place. www.hiddennorth.com Tashi was also a great guide and friend during the two days I spent with him looking for wildlife. India has a unique type of electric three pin socket on 220volts. I had a matching plug so battery charging was not a problem had I needed it.

Up in Snow Leopard country of course we were in small tents and more basic facilities although I did take advantage of another Homestay in Rumbak at the end.

The main group HQ in Leh, prior to and following the trek, was in the excellent "Grand Dragon Hotel" with its western rooms and decor. Value for money and very nice but hardly authentic Ladakhi.

www.thegrandidragonladakh.com . It had nice grounds but was hardly conducive to sitting out in the sun at zero Centigrade although no doubt more beneficial once spring arrives.

In Delhi I stayed at the new **Atrio Eco Hotel** which was handy for the airport and set in nice grounds. www.atriohotels.com/

Kit carried. I carried my Minox 10x42 Binoculars and Fuji HX30 Camera with an adequate supply of rechargeable batteries together with the requisite charger. To me a tripod is just an encumbrance and I never carry one. However both Tashi and the group guides carried some for spotting the elusive cat.

Books? "Birds of India" (Princeton Version is better with distribution maps on the same pages as the subject.) I had a Map of Ladakh for interest purposes but carried no other literature.

So to the trip itself.

March 7th – 9th Best described as "In Transit" but with some birds. Following Goodbyes at the IOM airport I boarded the Stobart flight, late again, to Manchester where I was booked in to Clayton's as usual. Next morning I boarded the 7.55 KLM flight to Amsterdam where after a two hour connection I took my seat on the 747 to Delhi to arrive at 01.00 on the morning of the 9th. I was supposed to take a few hours rest in "The Plaza" before my connection to Leh but there was a mess up in the booking and as Check In opened for my flight at 3.30 I declined to pay good money for a couple of hours so just went to Departures for the Jet Air flight at 06.30. I had booked a window seat so had impressive views of the Himalayas en route as well as equally 'impressive' views of the somewhat interesting descent and landing into Leh. I kept my eyes open even at some critical points so was able to get some pictures of wing tips and jagged peaks in close proximity. After landing and admitting to being a foreigner (hard to hide that as I was almost a foot taller than and not as suntanned as everyone else.) I was given my permit and met outside by Tashi's driver. The plan was to go to Hidden North and settle in and rest after the journey as well as get used to the altitude. So I was driven there, made welcome and shown to my lovely room. I put my head down and tried for a nap before lunch. I failed as I was told that Tashi had phoned to say he was looking at some Ibisbill on the river and would I care to join him? He said lunch could wait so who was I to argue with my host? So it was back in the car and down the valley where I saw and photo'd my first Chukar. I would not have bothered had I known that this was probably the most common bird I would see during my stay in Ladakh. Then we met Tashi and walked to the river, the mighty Indus so I ticked off another famous river, and after a brief search we came upon the Ibisbills. And Red and Greenshanks and a whole lot more. Lunch was late despite Christina telephoning to say it was ready. The rest of the day is a blur. I think we went to Shey marshes and saw some waterfowl. We also walked up the valley from Hidden North looking for Dippers without success but seeing my first Robin Accentors and Guldenstat's Redstart. I remember a very nice dinner with the family in the evening and turning in to a very warm bed complete with Hot Water bottle and lots of blankets. Temperatures were sub-zero outside.

March 10th. I had booked another day with Tashi and we drove north down the valley and then up some very hairy hairpin 'roads' to reach Uley at 4,150 metres. We met a small group scoping and hoping for Snow Leopard and did the same. We saw Blue Sheep and Ladakh Urial and a single Ibex plus several Golden Eagles and great views of a Lammergeier. Red-billed Choughs too although we have these at home. This was where I first experienced picnic lunch Ladakhi style. Not for them a lunch box of chicken and bread. Out came the Primus and on went the soup, followed by toast, veggie stew and eggs washed down by black tea. Somehow I had knocked over my camera and when I replaced it I must have hit the video button as when I looked through my photos later I seem to have recorded my lunch. After lunch we did a short walk up this valley and saw Woolly Hare, Eagles and Brown Accentors. We then heard of Wolves on a kill in the next village but by the time we got there, over more beautiful mountain passes, they had finished and made themselves scarce.

So it was now time to go to Leh and a night at the Grand dragon and meet the rest of the group for dinner. Bed again by 21.30 as I was quite tired. Hotel was OK but I would rather have been at Hidden North.

March 11th. I had booked another day with Tashi as the 'group activity' was said to be Monastery visits and other tourist things. We spent our time working our way down the Indus in stages with the car catching us up at intervals. Gadwalls and Pintails plus Goosanders on the river as well as various waders plus Streaky Rosefinch, Black-throated Thrushes, Tibetan Blackbird. Our search of one spot for Mountain Weasel was unproductive but we did get fine views of a Buzzard plus male and female Sparrowhawks. Odd to see so many Magpies and other birds I know from home. Tashi seemed not to respect fences and simply clambered over them and so I did the same. Our finest was at the end when trying to regain the main road which was securely fenced off. Or so the authorities thought. My best climb of the day and even Tashi said I did very well for my age. Hmmm! We then spent time at Mallard Point where the Indus speeds up to enter a gorge.

There were a few mallard but lots more Teal which all flew off when a large dust devil arrived. The tick list had done well and after saying my good byes I was dropped off again at the Grand Dragon in time to wash and change for dinner with the others. To bed in good time and to rest before the trek into Hemis in the morning. Breakfast to be at 7 with luggage outside room.

March 12th. Well I was up and packed as agreed but this is a group trip and there is always at least one who cannot comply. They filtered down eventually and after much faffing about we got in the car and set off. Only to stop for fuel!! Why the heck can people not get the essentials done before their guests are on board? One of life's permanent mysteries but abated by seeing a fine display of a Black-eared Kite. We then set off over the Indus and cling to the edge of some sheer drops into the gorge until we come to the valley into the Hemis National Park. We followed this valley upwards until the road petered out and we got out. Luggage is off loaded and as if by magic a team of sturdy ponies arrive. We leave the loading to the 'pony man' and set off up the track which winds along the frozen Rumbak stream. I used the term 'up' literally as well as directionally. I estimate we have around 420 metres (1300 feet) of vertical ascent ahead of us. The altimeter on my watch reads 11,700 feet so I reckon it will read close to 13,000 feet when we reach camp. I can do this! The fitter/younger ones draw ahead but whilst the altitude does cause a shortness of breath, I don't do badly. OK, so the bloody ponies pass me with my luggage but they have four legs to do it with. The river is frozen solid and the rapids look really beautiful in the sunlight where it penetrates the gorge we are in. I even have time to watch a Wren and an Eagle but no mammals as we wend our way up. The track underfoot is relatively good with just a few rocky and tricky bits especially where the trail crosses over the river on log bridges caked with ice. I am glad I did not put on my fleece as despite the ice I am quite warm in my sweater. We eventually leave the gorge and enter a broader valley and about a mile ahead I can see some tents. As we reach them my watch reads 12,980 feet so my guess was 20 feet out. I pick a tent near the top and unpack. The tents are a bit on the small side and the front cover makes access and exit a bit of a trial. Still it is my home for the time being. Some welcome tea is provided before we ascend to a raised plateau to start looking for our quarry. Dinner was remarkable in quality and quantity for such rustic facilities and it has to be said this standard was kept up throughout our stay. After dinner it was into our tents with hot water bottles for our first night in the wilds.

March 13th to 19th. Up at first light to warm tea in the mess tent and then up to the plateau for scanning. This was to be the daily routine before breakfast at 8 to 8.30 when the leader decided which valley we would trek to in the hope of seeing Snow Leopard. As this was very much a lottery I felt there was as much chance near the camp where Leopards had often been seen as elsewhere so told James I would decide on the day whether to hang around camp, take short birding walks or accompany him further afield. My feelings were that constant scanning had as much chance of success as a party of people tramping along.

So this first day they set off up the Rumbak valley and after some local birding (Chukars, Hill Pigeons and Tibetan Partridge but no Tit Warblers) I followed in their footsteps. We caught up briefly the far side of Rumbak village but as they were pressing on I left them to it and returned to camp and more Chukars but with good views of Robin Accentors and Fire-fronted Serins plus a mystery finch in the village. Photos later showed these to be Red mantled Rosefinch which was nice.

I was sitting enjoying the sunshine when there was a shout from the plateau and having seen others grabbing telescopes and running I joined them. Evidently there were not one but three Snow Leopards on the skyline opposite. I was directed on to them and yes, I could see them clearly particularly when the two cubs decided to move and play. Way too far for a photograph, but I did try. We also radioed our party to get back to see this. After a while the female moved and started to come down the cliff in full view. I had a scope on her and it was beautiful to behold as she moved so deliberately and gracefully down rocks we would pale at. At one point she was looking directly into my eyepiece and this is a sight that will remain with me forever. Just what

I had come to see! Happily the others got the message and had found a viewpoint too so that was all the group in contact. What a great first day!

Sadly that was all we would see while up here despite our hardworking and enthusiastic scouts doing their best for us. We really needed fresh snow to bring the prey lower which the cats would follow.

Next morning our wish was granted.



The daily routine continued with me doing some local walks but not straying too far and the others going off on longer treks. I also got quite fond of Rumbak village and towards the end of the week I was invited to use a Homestay there rather than the tent. This was really nice and gave a better insight into Himalayan Valley life. My hostess, Dorma, was an excellent cook and made my stay really comfortable. It was really friendly to eat *en famille*, even take lunch outside in the sunshine, and I have suggested to Bellingham that this opportunity would be a nice break from tents for some nights if included in the itinerary.

And so the week in Hemis came to an end and it was time to pack for the trek back.

I deferred a decision on outer wear until I saw what the weather was like in the morning as I did not want to be lumbered with heavy outdoor clothing which was really only brought along for sitting around in. When walking I was quite comfortable in a sleeveless body warmer over a sweater.

March 20th. The morning was fine and sunny if a little crisp underfoot so having packed the heavy coat for the ponies to carry on their back I said my goodbyes to Dorma and her husband and set off down the valley.



We made good progress despite the ice underfoot at higher levels and soon we were at the site where Ladakhi Pica are to be found. Two individuals were seen and photographed and as we left the gorge a party of blue sheep were observed on the sheer cliffs. Then as the ponies arrived we all got on the minibus but instead of the planned return to Leh we diverted to where recent reports gave the chance of a Snow Leopard.

Sure enough we came up on it after a short climb. It was sleeping off its meal on what looked like a small calf. We all had good views even though it was somewhat obscured with only head and paws really clear. Its head went up as a magpie came to close and again when a splendid Lammergeier flew

by. Eventually as the day wore on it did actually get to its feet for a stretch giving better chances of a photograph which we all took advantage of.

Tashi even has a video on his website. See Hidden North above. Photo below courtesy of James Kydd our leader.

Then back to the Grand Dragon for a final group meal before we disperse in the morning.

March 21st. Today I was scheduled on the early flight to Delhi where I had arranged to go to Sultanpur for some birding. However as weather caused disruption to incoming flights we were delayed 3 hours and by the time I got to Delhi there was little point in driving to Sultanpur. So we just went to Atrios and I let the driver go for the day.

March 22nd. We could not go to Sultanpur today as they were closed



so went as planned to Delhi Zoo. I don't go to zoos as a rule but had heard the birding was good so why not? Entrance was only IRP200 and the grounds were quite nice in an old fort. Birds seen mounted up with Brown-headed Barbet, Spot billed Duck, Cormorants, Egrets and Moorhens. And I took the opportunity of seeing their White Tiger despite being jostled by the usual crowd of selfie takers. I took pity on the Jaguars and other cats although the Wolf pack performed well. After a few hours it was back to the Atrios to pack for the journey home. Again care was taken to have cold weather clothes readily available near the top of the case. Checked in Online through to AMS and after dinner turned in for my last sleep. Taxi due just after midnight.

March 23rd. The car came and we got to the airport where for the first time I got stung. The driver got a trolley to which a porter seemed to be attached. I declined but it seemed impossible to shift him and the

driver had vanished. Then after pushing my trolley to the entrance the blighter demanded 600 Rupees. I demurred at first but he was intent on making a fuss as this seemed to be a standard charge although I had never paid before. So I paid up. It was only £6 but I was quite cross for falling for it. Progress through security, immigration, security again was swift and I made my way to the gate. I knew my 9A seat was by the entrance door so watched everyone else push and shove despite the Gate Staff trying to get them into some order for boarding. Then when they had all gone I walked on to take my seat to the dismay of those in 9B&C who thought they had scored an empty seat. The flight took off on time and after a snack I got my head down for some sleep only waking about two hours out from AMS.

Transfer in AMS was a different layout with immediate security on disembarking but at least they have got rid of Gate Security. Onto the next plane on time and thus to Manchester where I had a couple more hours to wait before my final flight home where Elizabeth met me. Good to be back.

A great trip that was very successful but I don't think group trips are my style. I don't think India is either so I am very much looking forward to Africa again soon.

Total Birdlist was relatively small at 63 species (27 new for India and 13 lifers) but FOUR Grey ghosts made it all worthwhile.