

Our return to Ladakh

3rd June to 17th June 2018

Fred Hodgson and Elizabeth.

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

Fred had been to Ladakh to see the Snow Leopards and so enjoyed the country and his hosts, Tashi and Christina at Hidden North that he wished to return along with Elizabeth. Obviously the Snow Leopards were not on the list so a later time of year would be ideal preferably before the busy hiking season got under way. But the problem was our normal annual visit up to Western Scotland in May and June produced a conflict. However nothing is impossible and where there is a will there is certainly a way. And there certainly was a **will**.

It evolved into a plan to combine both trips back to back, going to Scotland first in our car and then to Ladakh immediately thereafter. After that the logistics fell into place nicely. We would go to Scotland as usual but instead of returning home on the Ferry we would simply drive to Manchester Airport, stay overnight and leave the car there until our return two weeks later. Then just drive to the ferry and cross to Isle of Man and home. Once the outline was in place it was easy to book the ferries and flights. Book a Hotel in MAN that would 'host' our car whilst in India, get tickets to Leh in Ladakh and arrange a trip with Hidden North.

And so it came to pass.

The new Indian eVisa system on arrival works well and booking with Turkish Airlines to Delhi straightforward and my good Vinod Goswami in Delhi had us booked on a connecting flight to Leh.

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 very 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. 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. There are several brands of decent beer and of course tea is a staple. Fresh vegetables are rare as the ground freezes hard in winter.

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 we were happy to risk a night in Delhi so we took no Prophylactic.

Kit carried. I carried my Minox 10x42 Binoculars and Nikkon P900 Camera with an adequate supply of re-chargeable batteries together with the requisite charger. To me a tripod is just an encumbrance and I never carry one but both Tashi and our driver them.

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.

Sunday 3rd of June found us rising in Crianlarich, Scotland on the return south from our visit to North Uist. After a pleasant drive south we arrived at Claytons Hotel at Manchester Airport where we checked in and handed over the car keys to their safe keeping as part of a Sleep and leave the car package. I have to say that this worked very well for us. After a decent dinner, as part of the package, we retired for a good night's sleep.

Monday 4th June. We had an excellent breakfast before making our way to check in for the Turkish Airlines flight to Istanbul which left on time which was a good start but sadly this blissful state was not to continue.

We arrived on time at IST and had a reasonable lay over time of 3 and a half hours. We had a nice lunch to wait our flight onwards to Delhi and boarded on time. Then for reasons unknown we sat a while without moving and when we did move we seemed to taxi everywhere except to a runway. We were now late but our connection in DEL was not critical at just under 3 hours or so we thought.

Tuesday 5th June. A pleasant flight with some decent food and a bit of sleep until we arrived in DEL around 30 minutes late. Then again the pilot seemed unsure of where the gate was located and taxied around for what seemed ages before we could disembark. Again not critical but getting tighter. We scampered to the Immigration OK with our eVisa and were through in no time at all. Phew! Then the wheels came off. The luggage took forever if not longer. We were now in the tightest of margins as of course we had to check in for our onward flight to Leh which had been due to depart at 07.20 but had been brought forward to 06.50 and it was now 05.40 and check in would close at 06.20

Of course the luggage decided to be late and that made things even worse. Would we now make the flight at all? Once in possession of our luggage we exited the hall and headed for Check in more in hope than expectation with no margin left. BUT fate intervened in the form of our Super Hero. Mr Vinod Goswami himself was waiting with boarding cards in hand. What a man he is. Up at this hour just to see we got the connection. Better still he knew a 'quick check in' desk "through this door" and sure enough a uniformed member of Vistara staff grabbed our luggage, phoned through to the gate and got the Agent to agree to take us. We were in. Just! But even then fate dealt us a hand. We had Security to negotiate. Indian Security!! But we made it and after yet another blow when Elizabeth and I got separated on the race to the gate we got on the plane all hot and bothered. Not in the right seats but bummer that! A hint of more problems was when the Gate agent, our check in man with a different hat on, asked what was in one of our cases and had we really packed this ourselves? We had and could think of nothing that should not have been there as it had come through Manchester and Istanbul OK.

The flight to Leh was very good and the views of the Himalayas and Karakoram giants superb. The approach into Leh was 'impressive'. When at what passes for a carousel in Leh we only got one bag. Oh dear. However very helpful staff and a couple of phone calls later all was well. It would be here later today or maybe tomorrow. Then I realised the problem. Stupidly I had packed the Trailcam in the case instead of my camera bag. It is a 5 inch cube of plastic and it must easily resemble a block of Sementex. Batteries? Did I say Batteries?

But we are in Leh and there is a smiling Tashi outside to meet us. The 30 minute drive to Hidden North soon



passes and having hugged Christina and Tashi Jr, Elizabeth admits feeling the altitude and goes for a lie down, rises for lunch and then bed. Dinner and back to bed. Quite day for the lady. Fred is not too active either but manages a short walk in the village of Phyang.

Wednesday 6th June. We really just relaxed and acclimatised by taking a short drive down to the Ley Marshes and short walks along the Indus where we had some fun with a playful Mountain Weasel and Fred scored several good birds including the Ibisbill and a Blue-cheeked BeeEater. Still tired we returned to Hidden North around 16.00 and later enjoyed another of

Christina's excellent dinners in company of two other guests and Tashi and family.

Thursday 7th June. Today Tomas (sp) takes us in the car up a side valley towards Hemis National Park which was quite dramatic. At the head of the valley was a small village and many species of birds and mammals. The views along the valley to the Mountains was lovely. We had a nice picnic by the river watched closely by some Chukar and other birds. It was very barren except where the water flowed. We then made our way back down the valley to rejoin the Indus and after calling at one or two other birding spots such as Spituk marshes we arrived back at Hidden North once more. A word about about our lodgings seems appropriate. Phyang is maybe 20km west of Leh up a side river. Tashi built the place after his first one was destroyed in a disastrous flood in 2010. It is a family house and beautifully appointed with four letting rooms in the homestay tradition. If quiet you can eat in the private quarters but usually a separate room is used. Our room was lovely and comfortable with all necessary



plumbing etc. However if you stay in cold weather water is drained off as the pipes would freeze and you are supplied with a basin/bucket of hot water for washing as required. Our room had a large balcony with lovely views down the valley to the Indus and Hemis National Park beyond. In warmer times there is a sitting out area with chairs and sunscreen in the gardens which are maintained by Christina and Tashi in the growing season. There are more photos of Hidden North in the WKS Gallery under 2016. A truly superb place of Heaven on Earth. I would love to go back for more one day.

Friday 8th June. Today we packed for a two night stay away as the trip was to some ideal wildlife hotspots. First we had to check in with the Army at a roadblock as our route took us to a sensitive area. All was OK



and we wound up another steep valley getting higher and higher. We stopped at a little road side Tea Tent for lunch at the summit of Namshang La (4806m) before moving on to arrive at the beautiful blue lake at Tso moriri. Language lesson. La is Ladakhi for 'pass' and Tso means 'Lake'. Our night stop was a nice Tibetan style road house called 'Lake View'. It was comfortable

with the necessary lake view. Food was very Ladakhi but the local guests were very happy to offer advice to the strange foreigners. The area was good for birds and we added a considerable number to our growing list. Our plans to progress along the lake were frustrated due to security restrictions as the Chinese Tibetan border was only 20km away. This was a pity as there was a very tempting looking marshy 'delta' at the head of the lake. We had a good night's sleep as always and the altitude did not seem to affect us.

Saturday, 9th June. We now returned north to a turn off just before Namshang La and then drove west along the Puga Valley and over yet another pass Polo Kongo La. (4937m) Lots of Las, Shrangri La now makes sense. The Puga valley has Hot Springs and is thus a magnet for waders taking advantage of the open water. We saw quite a few species including the rare Black-necked Crane. After the pass we descended to a flat alpine type of valley that contained lakes Startsapuk and Kar. The surroundings were still very desert like but with various interesting patches of green by the lake. We slowly birded our way to our small lodging called TsoKar Eco Resort where we had a small basic Motel like cottage. After settling in we went back to the lake side and drove right around it on a very feint track. On that circuit we found a diverse number of bird species from Horned Larks and several finches to Eagles and Sandgrouse.



Mammals were represented in the form of Asian Wild Ass. On return to our lodge we had dinner and a delightful surprise was Christina, Tashi and Tashi Namgyal had driven 170km to join us.

Sunday 10th June. Next morning we packed and said goodbye to the staff and Christina and Tashi who were returning home direct whilst we would of course take in more birding and make slower progress. And that was more or less what happened although we bumped into our friends once or twice as we progressed. Our first task for the day was to ascend the Taglang La at 5328m which was extremely scenic as it approached the snow line. A highlight was when we saw Tibetan Snowcocks some distance below the summit and our guide barely hesitated



before he took off down the slopes on foot to get closer photos. Which he did and returned hardly out of breath. Better him than me and he had taken my camera with him so I got some excellent photos without the descent. Well. Somebody had to stay to look after Elizabeth and the car!! As we proceeded down the valley we stopped at a small village of Rumste for Chai and biscuits and found yet more birds for the camera. I also found a nice Smartphone that somebody had dropped by the road side. We used it to ring the owner who was delighted and made arrangements to collect it in Leh. As we approached the Indus valley we caught up with Tashi again and together we manoeuvred through a huge convoy of Indian Army trucks. Back to Phyang after a detour for more birds at Shey where we found we had a new bedroom.

Monday 11th June. We did a small drive downstream to some small villages in Lower Ladakh before ascending some side valleys where Fred had visited on his previous trip. These included many interesting

exposed bits of trail amongst high mountains and was very scenic Highlight was seeing a family of Brown Dippers. Mum and three fledglings. Also seen were some very obliging Pika. Rodents. After lunch in a small Tea House we returned along the scenic Zangskar valley to Phyang and Hidden North with even more admiration of our drivers skills.



Tuesday 12th June. Another overnight excursion. This time to the famous Nubra Valley. So after an early breakfast we set off for Tangyar and yet another pass, Wari la at 5200m. The approach to this one was much different as the road clung to smoother more open hillsides with more open aspects to the hairpins etc., Once over the top we dropped down and had lunch in a quite busy Tea House as Nubra is of course a honey pot destination for many Indians and foreigners alike. We had planned to overnight in a Homestay but they were closed so we moved on down the precipitous valley where the road had been blasted out of the rocks and in other places climbed up and over the obstacle to our B&B in Diskit. The Nubra was very busy with tourists, the main attraction being rides on Bactrian Camels. We birded some small swamps but the number of people made this difficult as Indians always want to come and see what you are doing in case they miss something from their trip. Our room was quite pleasant as was dinner. Tomorrow we head back to Phyang.

Wednesday 13th June. Today our route home takes us over the famous Khardong La. Said to be the highest motorable road in the world at 5,600 metres. To put that into perspective Kilimanjaro is only 200 metres higher and nobody drives up there. But it is actually only 5,359m so the claim is false. Maybe this is the source of the phrase La La Land? After breakfast and packing we set off back along the river side until a large junction on the right signifies we need to turn and start the ascent. The drive is more tedious than tiring but as we climb we can see the snows ahead but the road surface is fine and our young driver copes well. Traffic is fairly constant as this is an ancient trade route to Kashgar in central Asia. The Indian Army also keep it clear as their route to the disputed Siachen Glacier. The nearer we get to the summit the narrower the highway becomes and in places rockfalls restrict movement. Pause for pictures.



IndianArmy. Left. Bus and truck Right

And so after the summit, too crowded for photographs, we start the short sharp descent back down to Leh which is only 39km away but 2000 metres lower. We arrived in Phyang in warm sunshine.

Thursday 14th June. Our last day was nice and lazy. We were driven high up Phyang's own valley and then walked down again. We also visited Leh and had a typical Ladakhi lunch of MoMo dumplings. We said good bye to our young driver and returned to Hidden North for the last time to pack and prepare for the early flight tomorrow.



Friday 15th June. We rose early and left for the airport in good time. Our flight to Delhi was on time and once more we were treated to fantastic views of the surrounding area. Left is Phyang as we climbed out with sweet memories of Christina, Tashi and Ladakh. We hope to go back again. An overnight in Delhi with Vinod and 3a.m. flight to Manchester where we picked up our car and drove home on **Sunday 17th June.**