

PEREGRINE BIRD TOURS

SNOW LEOPARD EXPEDITION

5th - 15th September 2011

TOUR REPORT

LEADERS: Chris Doughty and Smanla Tsering

Simply put, this was a marvellous and highly successful tour, we saw all the bird specialities that we were hoping for and more and we also saw all the mammal specialities, which were many. The main aim of the tour was to see Snow Leopard and this was achieved on three separate occasions. We also saw many other very interesting animals which unfortunately, many of which are now highly endangered. Highlights amongst the birds included Black-necked Crane, Tibetan Snowgrouse, Ibisbill, White-winged Redstart, Wallcreeper, Robin and Brown Accentors, Plain and Brand's Mountain-Finches and Plain-backed and Black-winged Snowfinches. Vagrants always add spice to any tour; and while birding along the Indus River we observed an Indian Pond-Heron, which is a very uncommon vagrant to Ladakh and we also found the first ever Eastern Orphean Warbler, seen in Ladakh.

The long flight from Australia to Delhi, in India, via Bangkok, in Thailand, was long and tiring, but uneventful. Early the following morning we took the short flight from Delhi to Leh, where we were met by the local ground operator and transferred to the very comfortable Hotel Omasila, which had spectacular views of the snow-clad Himalayan peaks. While relaxing on the large terrace of the hotel, drinking tea, coffee and ice cold soft drinks, we enjoyed our first bird sightings; there were the usual Feral Pigeons as well as a couple of Oriental Turtle-Doves, several Mountain Chiffchaffs and a single Eurasian Magpie, which were all seen very well. In the afternoon we had a quite walk through the dusty streets and bazaars of Leh. We enjoyed clear blue skies and a great deal of sunshine, it was very hot, somewhat surprising for the month of September.

The following morning we drove to nearby Trisul Lake, to do some real birding. We were not to be disappointed; on the lake itself we found a large flock of 10 or so Garganey, a few Northern Shovelers, half a dozen or so Northern Pintails, a solitary Common Moorhen, half a dozen Eurasian Coots, a single Black-winged Stilt, a single Lesser Sandplover in non-breeding plumage, a single Wood Sandpiper and an immature Whiskered Tern. In the scrub surrounding the lake we added a Common Hoopoe, a Tree Pipit and a rather skulking Bluethroat. We spent the rest of the morning birding along the various channels of the Indus River. Here new birds included a Common Greenshank, a couple of Green Sandpipers, large numbers, 40 plus of both Citrine and White Wagtails and a solitary female Black Redstart. By far the best bird that occurs along the Indus in these parts, is the highly localised Ibisbill, but it is a very uncommon bird here. Therefore, we were very pleased to observe a solitary bird at very close quarters, as it was feeding in a very shallow stretch of the river. It was unusually tame. We then found a very occasional visitor to this area, an immature Indian Pond-Heron, a very good find in this area. With the temperature nudging 30 degrees Celsius in the shade, and there was no shade, it was hard going and it was not the sort of weather we had been expecting. Suddenly, a small warbler popped into view and we watched it

catching small insects for a little while. It was a first winter Eastern Orphean Warbler, a bird that has not previously been recorded in Ladakh, however, it is a common passage migrant throughout adjoining Kashmir, just a little to the west.

Following a picnic lunch, we visited the Shey Marshes, where the only new bird, was a flock of a dozen or so Temminck's Stints, some were still in full breeding plumage, what a super day.

The following day was mainly taken up by the long and very bumpy drive to Tso Kar Lake. We made many birding stops along the way. Close to Choglamsar we saw a couple of Northern House Martins. Close to Karu, we had great looks at a very confident Chukar. Close to Upshi, we observed a fine pair of Blue Rock-Thrushes and then made a surprise find of a single Plain-backed Snowfinch, which is an uncommon and extremely range restricted species. In and around Lato, new birds included beautiful Hill Pigeons, a Common Cuckoo, we found a small breeding colony of Eurasian Crag Martins, a pair of Rosy Pipits, a confident female Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush, an immature Indian Golden Oriole, a flock of a dozen or more Rosy Starlings, unfortunately all immatures and a few Red-billed Choughs. While enjoying a picnic lunch, close to Rumtre, we watched 10 or so Himalayan Griffins, a few Lammergeiers, several exquisite White-winged Redstarts, a delightful pair of Sulphur-bellied Warblers and a Robin Accentor feeding a fledgeling. We made a brief stop at Tang Lang La Pass, at 5,359 metres, it is one of the highest motorable (only just,) roads in the world. New birds here included Common Kestrel, Brown Accentor and a huge flock of Brandt's Mountain-Finches. On arriving at Tso Kar Lake, where our tents had already been put up for us, an hour or so's birding produced Bar-headed Goose, Ruddy Shelduck, Brown-headed Gull and Horned and Hume's Short-toed Larks. We were also fortunate to find a pair of Black-necked Cranes with a large offspring, this is one of the most endangered birds in the world. Even more surprisingly, we found a flock of 14 Tibetan Sandgrouse, which we were able to watch feeding on the ground. We were also very pleased to see large numbers of Tibetan Asses and a colony of Stoliczka's Mountain Voles.

We spent half the following morning birding along the edge of the very large and very saline Tso Kar Lake. New birds came thick and fast. We found all three species of grebes that occur in this part of the world Little, Black-necked and Great Crested. There was also Grey Heron, Gadwall, Red-crested Pochard, Common Redshank, Little Stint, Common Tern, European Roller, a very occasional bird in this part of the world and Common Raven. Amazingly, we found five Grey Wolves along the edge of the lake, which we were able to see very well, for a long period of time. There was also one very brave Red Fox, tailing the pack, at a reasonable distance, at his own discretion. The rest of the day was spent driving back along the murderous road to Leh. The journey was rather uneventful, apart from a large flock of Blue Sheep, feeding on a rocky scree slope.

Following breakfast we were driven to the Zingchen entrance of Hemis National Park. Where we began our quest for the Snow Leopard. From here we hiked for an hour up the Rumbak Valley to our camp site. During the hike we were greeted by our first Great Tit of the tour. After lunch at the camp site, a short walk up the trail, produced Hume's Leaf-Warbler and Blue Whistling-Thrush. We also enjoyed very close looks at a party of six Blue Sheep, the favourite food of Snow Leopards!

The following day was our first full day in Hemis National Park, and our first full day looking for Snow Leopard. We spent the whole day exploring the Tarbung Valley. It was tough going, but we were rewarded with four new birds for the trip; a stunning Wallcreeper, numerous Fire-fronted Serins, a few Streaked Great Rosefinches and several Alpine Choughs, but alas, no Snow Leopard. We returned to camp by mid-afternoon, very tired with a greater appreciation of the difficulty of

observing the mythical Snow Leopard.

The following day we spent the whole day searching the Husing Valley. We found a small flock of perched Common Rosefinches in the Rose-hip bushes and a couple of very skulking Eurasian Wrens. We also came across a couple of female Spotted Great Rosefinches, also in the Rose-hip bushes. While having lunch at the head of the Husing Valley, our local guide Smanla managed to put a pair of very distant Himalayan Snowcocks in the scope. Although we tried very hard we failed to find Snow Leopard, although we did find very fresh pug marks, in some soft mud. It was a beautiful sunny day today and the scenery was simply spectacular and we also got very close to large numbers of very tame Blue Sheep. We enjoyed dinner in the dining tent and just as we finished, our Snow Leopard Guide Smanla, called out 'Snow Leopard'. In the distance a Snow Leopard was sat on the top of a cliff looking down at us. In no time at all we had it in the scope, the light was fading, but we could clearly see the head of the animal quite well. It was a sighting, not a good sighting, but it was a good start.

Smanla scouted the two near valleys the following morning and found pug marks of a small Snow Leopard at the beginning of the Husing Valley heading towards the Tarbung Valley. So we decided to visit this valley once again, as there was the very real possibility that there were two Snow Leopards in the valley. We walked and scanned in the valley all day, but with no luck, and with the temperature well above 30 Celsius, we headed back to camp, by mid-afternoon. However, all was not lost; new birds for the tour included two sightings of Eurasian Sparrowhawk, both of whom flew very close to us, we saw a rather distant Golden Eagle and we also enjoyed good close looks at a very obliging Grey Wagtail.

The following day we trekked to Urutse at 12,500 feet. Where we stayed in a very pleasant homestay. In the morning we added two new species of birds; we found the diminutive Goldcrest gleaning from the leaves of a group of trees. Later in the morning we enjoyed a very good sighting of a Brown Dipper, in the Rumbak River.

In the afternoon we enjoyed super close looks at a couple of Himalayan Marmots and later in the afternoon, we enjoyed a real treat, when a young Mountain Weasel used the dining tent as his personal playground. It was fascinating to watch the young weasel running round and round the tent and running around outside the tent. A little later in the afternoon we watched an adult Mountain Weasel, as it was hunting.

The following day we hiked from our homestay at Urutse, at 12,500 feet to Kandala Pass, at 16,500 feet and then back to our base camp in the Rumbak Valley at 12,000 feet. It was a very tough day physically, but it was a great birding day. We added three new birds to our ever growing trip list; they were Tickell's Leaf-Warbler, Black-winged Snowfinch and Twite, all where seen very well. We also saw two new species of mammals, Woolly Hare and the endangered Tibetan Argali, a species of wild goat. We were a very weary bunch when we arrived back at camp.

Our last full day of the tour. We planned not to do very much today and not to work too hard, as we were still recovering from the excesses of yesterday's activities. However, we had seen new birds every day of the tour, and this was our goal for today. We really wanted to find at least one new bird today, which would mean that we had seen a new bird on every day of the tour. However, we thought it highly unlikely that we would find a new bird today. After breakfast we set off to do some birding around the village of Rumbak, which we had not previously visited. On the way in a narrow gorge of the Rumbak Valley, we started the day off very well, with super close looks at a beautiful Wallcreeper, a bird which only I had seen earlier in the tour. As we reached Rumbak,

Smanla, our Snow Leopard tracker, spotted a Snow Leopard on the mountainside. We spent the whole of the morning playing hide and seek with a magnificent Snow Leopard. We enjoyed several excellent sightings of the big cat, walking uphill, sitting still, sleeping on a rock ledge and best of all walking across a barren hillside, showing us a full side on profile, we even saw it attempt to take a Blue Sheep, but it was unsuccessful.

We ate a very pleasant lunch, it tasted even better after we had been watching a Snow Leopard for all of four hours. After lunch we walked the short distance to Rumbak Village, a very pleasant Tibetan style village, complete with its own small monastery. It had been a super morning, but we had still not added a new bird for the day. We checked every bird we found around Rumbak Village and to our surprise, we found not one, but three new birds for the tour. The first was a Eurasian Hobby, which flew past us and up the valley. We then found a few immature Plain Mountain-Finches amongst the House Sparrows in the village and feeding in the fallow fields, we found three Olive-backed Pipits, which pass through Ladakh in very small numbers. In the evening as the light was fading, an adult Snow Leopard, walked very quickly past our camp site, no more than 20 metres away from us. This had been a very special day.

On our last day of the tour, just as we were driving out of Hemis National Park, our guide Smanla spotted three Ladakh Urals, an endangered species of wild sheep, which were on the side of a cliff. We promptly stopped the vehicle and jumped out so that we could admire this very rare animal.

It had been a privilege to visit the high altitude desert of Ladakh, it is a wonderful part of the world, it was simply breathtaking, literally. We saw all the hoped for bird specialities of the region and all of the special mammals, including no less than three separate sightings of the incredible Snow Leopard, which was the main reason for visiting Ladakh. None of this would have been possible without the tireless and expert guidance of our local Snow Leopard guide Smanla Tsering, to whom we owe a great debt of gratitude.

SYSTEMATIC LIST

PODICIPEDIDAE

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* Small numbers present on Tso Kar Lake. This species is a vagrant to Ladakh, we did well to find them.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus* A few were present on Tso Kar Lake. This species is a fairly common summer visitor to high-altitude lakes of eastern Ladakh, situated above 4,300 metres.

Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis* Small numbers of this species were also present on Tso Kar Lake. This species is a rare vagrant during summer and autumn to the high altitude lakes of eastern Ladakh. So it would appear that we were fortunate to see them.

ARDEIDAE

Grey Heron *Ardea cinerea* Up to half a dozen birds were observed around the edge of Tso Kar Lake. This species is a fairly common autumn passage migrant through the high altitude plains of eastern Ladakh.

Indian Pond-Heron *Ardeola grayii* We saw an immature bird along one of the tributaries of the Indus River, not far from Leh. This species is a rare summer visitor to Ladakh, so we were extremely fortunate to observe one.

ANATIDAE

Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus* We encountered several small flocks at Tso Kar Lake. This species is a common breeding bird on the high altitude plains of eastern Ladakh, between 4,000 and 4,700 metres.

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea* We observed small groups scattered around Tso Kar Lake. This species is a common breeding bird on the high altitude plains of eastern Ladakh, between 4,000 and 5,000 metres.

Gadwall *Anas strepera* A pair of this species was scoped along the edge of Tso Kar Lake. This species is a very uncommon autumn migrant, passing through the high altitude lakes of central and eastern Ladakh, between 3,400 and 4,700 metres.

Northern Shoveler *Anas clypeata* A small number were present at Trisul Lake, at Leh, with larger numbers present at Tso Kar Lake. This species is a common passage migrant throughout Ladakh, in both spring and autumn.

Northern Pintail *Anas acuta* A few birds were present at Trisul Lake, at Leh, with larger numbers present at Tso Kar Lake. This is also a common passage migrant throughout Ladakh, in both spring and autumn.

Garganey *Anas querquedula* A flock of up to a dozen birds was present on Trisul Lake, at Leh, with larger numbers present at Tso Kar Lake. This is also a common passage migrant throughout Ladakh, in both spring and particularly, in the autumn.

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina* Michael pointed out a pair of these birds at Tso Kar Lake. This species is a rare autumn passage migrant through Ladakh. So well done Michael, for finding it in the scope.

ACCIPITRIDAE

Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* We observed a few birds, all immatures and sub-adults at Tang Lang La Pass, on our way to Tso Kar Lake. We also saw a few more sub-adults at Kandala Pass, in Hemis National Park. This species is a fairly common high-altitude resident throughout Ladakh.

Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis* We observed up to a dozen or so birds, including some very nice adults, at Tang Land La Pass, on our way to Tso Kar Lake. There were also a few

birds of this species soaring above Kandala Pass, in Hemis National Park. The Himalayan Griffon is a fairly common resident throughout Ladakh, frequenting areas of 5,000 metres and above, during the summer months.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* We observed two different Eurasian Sparrowhawks on the same day, while exploring the Tarbung Valley, in Hemis National Park. Both birds were in flight, fortunately, they both flew very close to us. This species is an uncommon summer visitor to the lower valley bottoms of Ladakh. In autumn the numbers of this species increase dramatically when on passage through Ladakh. The two birds we saw would have been on migration southwards, heading for wintering grounds in peninsular India.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* Somewhat surprisingly, we only saw this species on one occasion, a distant bird was observed soaring above the Tarbung Valley, in Hemis National Park. This species is an uncommon resident throughout Ladakh, frequenting areas of 5,000 metres and above during the summer months.

FALCONIDAE

Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* We enjoyed scattered sightings of this species throughout the tour. The Common Kestrel is a common summer visitor throughout Ladakh. Only small numbers are noted on passage.

Eurasian Hobby *Falco subbuteo* One bird observed in flight, close to Rumbak Village. The Eurasian Hobby is an uncommon summer visitor to Hemis National Park, numbers increase markedly in the park, during autumn migration.

PHASIANIDAE

Chukar *Alectoris chukar* Frequently encountered as we drove to and from Tso Kar Lake and then it became absolutely abundant in Hemis National Park, where huge numbers of immature birds were observed. This species is a common resident throughout the whole of Ladakh.

Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis* A pair of birds were observed through the scope on one of the high ridges in the Husing Valley, of Hemis National Park. It became common, around Kandala Pass, where we enjoyed flocks of birds flying past us and enjoyed scope views of birds feeding on the ground. This species is an uncommon high-altitude resident of central and western Ladakh, occurring between 3,500 metres and 5,500 metres, depending upon the season and the amount of snow cover.

GRUIDAE

Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis* We were very fortunate to observe a pair of adults with a well grown juvenile, along the edge of Tso Kar Lake. There are approximately 12 breeding pairs of this species which migrate to clearly defined breeding areas in far eastern Ladakh, during the month of April. They breed close to high altitude lakes situated between 4,100 and 4,700 metres, the cranes leave Ladakh for their wintering grounds in southern China and Bhutan, in late October. This species is classified as vulnerable in 'Threatened Birds of the World'. It has a population of approximately 6,000 birds and is declining. The main threats to this species are the drainage of wetlands, changing agricultural practices and increased human activity on its breeding and wintering grounds.

RALLIDAE

Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* Small numbers were present at a number of wetlands

close to Leh. These included Trisul Lake, along the Indus River and in the Shey Marshes. This species is a fairly common autumn passage migrant throughout Ladakh. During this time, adults, sub-adults and juveniles can all be seen in the wetlands around Leh. This species has never been known to breed in Ladakh, even the juveniles we saw, were on migration.

Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* There were also small numbers of this species present on a number of wetlands close to Leh. These included Trisul Lake, along the Indus River and in the Shey Marshes. This species is a common autumn passage migrant throughout Ladakh. During this time, adults, sub-adults and juveniles can all be seen in the wetlands around Leh. This species has never been known to breed in Ladakh, even the juveniles we saw, were on migration.

IBIDORHYNCHIDAE

Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii* We were very fortunate to find one of these rare birds feeding in one of the shallow tributaries of the Indus River, close to Leh. It proved to be surprisingly tame and we were able to observe it very well indeed. This species is a rare resident and summer visitor in Ladakh, wintering in neighbouring Kashmir.

RECURVIROSTRIDAE

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus* We observed a single juvenile bird at Trisul Lake, we also saw a second juvenile bird, along the Indus River, close to Leh. In Ladakh this species is an uncommon autumn passage migrant, which stops briefly at high altitude wetlands, before migrating over the high mountain passes of the Himalayas. There are no breeding records of this species for Ladakh.

CHARADRIIDAE

Lesser Sandplover *Charadrius mongolus* We observed an adult bird in non-breeding plumage, very well indeed at Trisul Lake, on the outskirts of Leh. Later in the tour, we found large numbers at Tso Kar Lake, where many of the birds were still in breeding plumage. This species is a common summer visitor to Ladakh, where it breeds on high-altitude lakes, situated between 3,900 and 5,500 metres.

SCOLOPACIIDE

Green Sandpiper *Tringa ochropus* A few birds were observed along the Indus River, close to Leh and there were also a few birds present at the Shey Marshes. Small numbers were also present along the edge of Tso Kar Lake. This species is a common summer visitor and common passage migrant in autumn, throughout Ladakh.

Common Greenshank *Tringa nebularia* A single bird was observed along the Indus River, close to Leh. This species is a rare summer visitor to Ladakh and a fairly common passage migrant, during autumn.

Wood Sandpiper *Tringa glareola* A single bird was observed at Trisul Lake, on the outskirts of Leh, and then up to a dozen birds were observed at the Shey Marshes. This species is an uncommon summer visitor to the high-altitude lakes of Ladakh and a fairly common passage migrant in autumn.

Common Redshank *Tringa totanus* Good numbers of this species were observed along the edge of Tso Kar Lake. This species is a common summer visitor to its breeding grounds in high altitude wetlands throughout Ladakh, situated between 4,000 and 5,000 metres. It is also a common passage migrant in autumn.

Little Stint *Calidris minuta* Michael picked out a single Little Stint amongst a flock of Temminck's Stints, at Tso Kar Lake. In autumn, this species is an uncommon passage

migrant, which is recorded in the high-altitude wetlands of Ladakh.

Temminck's Stint *Calidris temminckii* A flock of a dozen or so birds were observed at close quarters in the Shey Marshes, close to Leh. Small flocks numbering up to a 100 or so birds, were also present at Tso Kar Lake. This species is a common passage migrant throughout Ladakh, in autumn. Coenraad Jacob Temminck (1778-1858) was a Dutch ornithologist, illustrator and collector. He was appointed the first Director of the Rijksmuseum van Natuurlijke Historie, in Leiden, in 1820 and held that post until his death. He was a wealthy man who had a very large collection of specimens and live birds. His first task as an ornithologist was to catalogue his father's very extensive collection. His father was Jacob Temminck, for whom Le Vaillant collected specimens.

LARIDAE

Brown-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus* Good numbers were present around the edge of Tso Kar Lake. This species is a common summer visitor to the high-altitude wetlands of eastern Ladakh.

STERNIDAE

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida* A single adult in non-breeding plumage was observed very well at Trisul Lake, on the outskirts of Leh. The Whiskered Tern is a rare summer visitor to the high altitude wetlands of the eastern region of Ladakh. It is also a rare passage migrant through Ladakh in autumn.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* Small numbers were observed breeding around Tso Kar Lake. This species is a common summer visitor to the high altitude wetlands of Ladakh and it is also a common passage migrant in autumn.

PTEROCLIDAE

Tibetan Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes tibetanus* We observed a flock of 14 birds at Tso Kar Lake, on two separate occasions. This is the rarest species of sandgrouse in the world. This species is an uncommon high-altitude resident, mainly in eastern Ladakh. During summer it is found at altitudes between 4,000 and 5,500 metres, descending as low as 3,500 metres in winter.

COLUMBIDAE

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia* Commonly encountered in and around Leh. Even in the remote parts of Hemis National Park, this species was observed near villages. However, we did see a few birds which were genuine wild Rock Pigeons, during our time in Hemis National Park.

Hill Pigeon *Columba rupestris* We saw good numbers of this very attractive species at Tang Lang La Pass. We also saw it on a daily basis in Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident throughout northern Ladakh, occurring between 4,000 and 5,500 metres.

Oriental Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia orientalis* We first observed this very attractive species in the grounds of our hotel, at Leh. We then observed it on a daily basis, during our time in Hemis National Park. This species is a common summer visitor to the wooded valleys of western and central Ladakh. In autumn, the local breeding population is augmented by large numbers of passage migrants.

CUCULIDAE

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus* A solitary bird was observed very well, close to the village of

Lato, during the drive from Leh to Tso Kar Lake. This species is an uncommon summer visitor to the lower reaches of western Ladakh. The bird we saw was a passage migrant, which occur in the central and high-altitude plains of eastern Ladakh, occurring up to 4,300 metres.

CORACIIDAE

European Roller *Coracias garrulus* We very much enjoyed watching a single bird of this attractive species, at Tso Kar Lake. This species is a rare passage migrant anywhere in Ladakh, so we were very fortunate to find one.

UPUPIDAE

Common Hoopoe *Upupa epops* We saw this species on many occasions; around Leh, Tso Kar Lake and in Hemis National Park. It is a common summer visitor to the whole of Ladakh, occurring up to altitudes of 5,500 metres. In autumn it becomes locally abundant at high altitudes when the breeding population is augmented by large numbers of passage migrants.

ALAUDIDAE

Hume's Short-toed Lark *Calandrella acutirostris* We observed large flocks in the vicinity of Tso Kar Lake. This species is an abundant summer visitor to the high-altitude plains of eastern and southern Ladakh, mainly occurring between 4,100 and 4,800 metres. From mid September onwards birds assemble in huge flocks, before migrating to wintering grounds in north central India, in early October. Allan Octavian Hume CB (1829-1912) was a famous Theosophist and poet, and also a writer on Indian birds. He was born in London to a Radical Member of parliament Joseph Hume. Allan Hume joined the Bengal Civil Service at the age of 20. He wrote 'The Game Birds of India' and 'Indian Oology and Ornithology'. After his retirement he was co-founder of the Indian National Congress in 1885, and became its General Secretary until 1906.

Horned Lark *Eremophila alpestris* We found large numbers around Tso Kar Lake and we also found small number of birds around Kandala Pass, in Hemis National Park. This species is an abundant resident of the open high-altitude sandy plains and slopes throughout Ladakh, occurring between 4,000 and 5,300 meters.

HIRUNDINIDAE

Eurasian Crag-Martin *Ptyonoprogne rupestris* First observed at a rocky outcrop close to Tang Lang La Pass and then on a daily basis in Hemis National Park. This species is a common summer visitor throughout Ladakh, occurring in rocky areas up to 4,800 metre. It winters in western peninsular India.

Northern House-Martin *Delichon urbicum* I saw a couple of these birds as we drove through the village of Choglamsar, not far from Leh. Unfortunately, we failed to find any more. This species is a common summer visitor throughout Ladakh. The wintering grounds of this particular race are unknown, although they have been observed passing through the Western Ghats and there is the odd record of wintering birds in the Maldives.

MOTACILLIDAE

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola* Large numbers present in all the wetland areas around Leh.

We also found a flock of 10 or so birds feeding in farmland at Rumbak Village, in Hemis National Park. This species is a common summer visitor throughout northern Ladakh and its numbers are augmented by considerable numbers of passage migrants in both spring and autumn. Breeding birds from Ladakh winter in northern peninsular India.

Grey Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea* A few birds were observed along the Rumbak River, in Hemis National Park. This species is an uncommon summer visitor to the valleys of western and central Ladakh and a very uncommon summer visitor to the valleys of eastern Ladakh, including Hemis National Park, it winters throughout peninsular India.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* Huge numbers present along the wetlands around Leh, with smaller numbers along the streams in Hemis National Park. This species is a common summer visitor throughout Ladakh and it is also a common passage migrant in both spring and autumn, it winters throughout peninsular India.

Rosy Pipit *Anthus roseatus* A pair of birds was observed close to the village of Lato, during the drive from Leh to Tso Kar Lake. This species is an uncommon passage migrant through eastern and central areas of Ladakh, in autumn. It winters at lower elevations in northern India, a little to the south of Ladakh.

Tree Pipit *Anthus trivialis* A single bird was observed at Trisul Lake, close to Leh and a second bird was observed in farmland in Rumbak Village, in Hemis National Park. This species is an uncommon passage migrant through central and eastern Ladakh and winters in peninsular India.

Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni* We observed a small flock of three birds feeding in farmland, in Rumbak Village, in Hemis National Park. According to *Birds and Mammals of Ladakh* by Otto Pfister this species has not previously been observed in Ladakh. It is a fairly common breeding bird throughout the Himalayas to the east of Ladakh and huge numbers of birds winter throughout peninsular India.

REGULIDAE

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* We enjoyed a very good sighting of a single bird close to our campsite in Hemis National Park. This species is a rare vagrant, with only a handful of records for Ladakh.

CINCLIDAE

Brown Dipper *Cinclus pallasii* We observed this species along the Rumbak River. This species is a scarce breeding resident in central and eastern Ladakh. The population increases during the summer months, when there is an influx of summer visitors.

TROGLODYTIDAE

Eurasian Wren *Troglodytes troglodytes* A couple of birds were observed in the Husing Valley, of Hemis National Park. This species is an uncommon resident throughout the north of Ladakh.

PRUNELLIDAE

Robin Accentor *Prunella rubeculoides* First observed close to Tang Lang La Pass and then it became common in Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident throughout the higher elevations of Ladakh.

Brown Accentor *Prunella fulvescens* This species was also observed close to Tang Land La Pass and then it became common in Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident throughout eastern Ladakh.

TURDIDAE

Rufous-tailed Rock-Thrush *Monticola saxatilis* We observed a few females of this species close

to the village of Lato, on both occasions that we passed through this area. This species is an uncommon autumn passage migrant throughout Ladakh. We just happened to be in the right place, at the right time of year. Surprisingly, all races of this species winter in Africa, including birds which breed in central Asia, they winter from Ethiopia to Tanzania.

Blue Rock-Thrush *Monticola solitarius* We enjoyed a good look at a pair of these birds close to the village of Upshi, during the drive from Leh to Tso Kar Lake. A fairly common summer visitor to areas of central Ladakh, wintering in peninsular India.

Blue Whistling-Thrush *Myophonus caeruleus* Good numbers present along the Rumbak River, in Hemis National Park. This species is an uncommon summer visitor to eastern Ladakh and winters a little to the south of its breeding range.

SYLVIIDAE

Mountain Chiffchaff *Phylloscopus sindianus* Recorded on almost every day of the tour. This species is a common summer visitor throughout Ladakh. This race winters in the far south of Pakistan.

Tickell's Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus affinis* Frequently encountered amongst the small shrubs on the higher open hillsides of Hemis National Park. This species is a common summer visitor throughout Ladakh, mostly occurring between 4,000 and 4,400 metres. It winters a little to the south in northern India. Colonel Samuel Richard Tickell (1811-1875) was a British army officer, artist and ornithologist in India and Burma. He made important early contributions to Indian ornithology while observing and collecting both bird and mammal specimens, in the states of Bihar, Orissa, Darjeeling and Tenasserim.

Sulphur-bellied Warbler *Phylloscopus griseolus* First observed close to the village of Rumtre, during the drive from Leh to Tso Kar Lake. We then observed good numbers in the valley bottoms of Hemis National Park. This species of *phylloscopus* warbler, behaves very differently from any others. It climbs along branches and even rock faces, just like a nuthatch or a sittella. This species is an uncommon summer visitor to the lower valley bottoms and hillsides of eastern Ladakh. Its wintering grounds are in central India.

Hume's Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus humei* Small numbers were present in the lower areas of Hemis National Park. This species is an uncommon autumn passage migrant throughout central and eastern Ladakh, wintering a little further to the south in India.

Eastern Orphean Warbler *Sylvia crassirostris* A first winter bird was observed extremely well, along the Indus River, not far from Leh. This species has never before been recorded in Ladakh. However, this species breeds a little to the west of Ladakh from Kashmir north through northeastern Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Wintering throughout the western peninsular of India.

MUSCICAPIDAE

Bluethroat *Luscinia svecica* A skulking bird on its wintering grounds, we observed a single bird at Trisul Lake, close to Leh and we found a second bird along the Indus River, again, not far from Leh. This species is a fairly common summer visitor throughout Ladakh and its numbers increase vastly in autumn, with birds on passage. This species winters further south in India.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros* By far the commonest bird in Ladakh, recorded on every single day of the tour. In Hemis National Park, we were observing up to 50 individuals every day. This species is a common summer visitor throughout Ladakh. During autumn the numbers increase due to an influx of passage migrants. This species winters throughout the Indian peninsular.

White-winged Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus* A small flock of approximately half a dozen

birds was observed very well close to the village of Rumtre, during the drive from Leh to Tso Kar Lake. This is a very beautiful species, it is a common autumn passage migrant and an abundant winter visitor to Ladakh. This species breeds a little further to the north in the Himalayas.

PARIDAE

Great Tit *Parus major* Small numbers present in the lower areas of Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident throughout Ladakh.

TICHIDROMIDAE

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria* This stunningly attractive species was observed very well on two separate occasions, during our time in Hemis National Park. This species is an uncommon summer visitor throughout Ladakh. It winters a little further to the south, in the lower Himalayas.

ORIOLIDAE

Indian Golden Oriole *Oriolus kundoo* We observed a solitary immature bird of this species, close to the village of Lato, during the drive from Leh to Tso Kar Lake. This species is a fairly common summer visitor to Ladakh. It winters in peninsular India.

CORVIDAE

Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica* This is a very common species in Ladakh, which we saw on almost every day of the tour. It is a common resident throughout Ladakh.

Red-billed Chough *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax* First recorded in and around the Tang Lang La Pass and then it was recorded on a daily basis in Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident throughout Ladakh.

Alpine Chough *Pyrrhocorax graculus* Small numbers recorded daily in Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident throughout the high-altitude areas of Ladakh.

Common Raven *Corvus corax* A few birds of this species were present at Tso Kar Lake. This species is a fairly common resident throughout the high-altitude plains of Ladakh.

STURNIDAE

Rosy Starling *Pastor roseus* A flock of 10 or so Rosy Starlings, was observed close to the village of Lato, during the drive from Leh to Tso Kar Lake. Unfortunately, all of the birds were immatures, none were in the beautiful breeding plumage that this species has become famous for. The Rosy Starling is an uncommon autumn passage migrant in Ladakh, wintering in southern India.

PASSERIDAE

House Sparrow *Passer domesticus* We observed it whenever there was human habitation; it was even present in the smallest of villages in Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident throughout the towns and villages of Ladakh.

Black-winged Snowfinch *Montifringilla adamsi* We enjoyed watching a small flock of this species at Kandala Pass, in Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident amongst the high-altitude plains and slopes throughout Ladakh, occurring mainly between 4,000 and 5,500 metres.

Plain-backed Snowfinch *Montifringilla blanfordi* A single adult was observed by myself, close to the village of Upshi, during the drive from Leh to Tso Kar Lake. This species is a rare, little-known resident of high-altitude plains in eastern, and to a lesser extent, central

Ladakh; occurring between 4,100 and 5,500 metres. It only occurs on the Tibetan Plateau and is known to associate with pikas and voles. The nest is placed in a rock hole or more frequently, in the burrow of a small mammal, particularly Brandt's Vole.

FRINGILLIDAE

Plain Mountain-Finch *Leucosticte nemoricola* Three individuals were observed amongst a large flock of House Sparrows in farmland, at Rumbak Village, in Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident throughout Ladakh, mostly occurring between 4,000 and 5,500 metres.

Brandt's Mountain-Finch *Leucosticte brandti* We observed this species in large flocks at Tang Lang La Pass. We also recorded smaller flocks in the Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident throughout Ladakh, occurring between 4,000 and 5,500 metres. Johann Friedrich von Brandt (1802-1879) was a German zoologist who explored Siberia. He became head of the Zoological Museum in St. Petersburg and described several birds from the western United States, including the Cormorant which is named after him. Brandt also wrote the first descriptions of the Red-legged Kittiwake and the Spectacled Eider. He is also commemorated in Brandt's Bat and other animals as diverse as a woodlouse and a piranha.

Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus* We observed small flocks throughout Hemis National Park. This species is an uncommon summer visitor to central and eastern Ladakh, which winters throughout peninsular India.

Streaked Great Rosefinch *Carpodacus rubicilloides* Large flocks of this species were observed during our time in Hemis National Park. A fairly common resident of Ladakh, occurring mainly between 4,000 and 4,700 metres.

Spotted Great Rosefinch *Carpodacus rubicilla* Smaller flocks of this species were also observed in Hemis National Park. This species is an uncommon resident in Ladakh.

Twite *Carduelis flavirostris* We recorded a few small flocks of this species in the higher-altitude areas of Hemis National Park. This species is a fairly common resident of the high altitude plains of Ladakh, frequenting areas up to 4,900 metres.

Fire-fronted Serin *Serinus pusillus* Recorded daily in the lower areas of Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident of the valley bottoms and slopes, mainly of central Ladakh, frequenting areas from 3,300 to 4,400 metres.

MAMMALS

Large-eared Pika *Ochotona macrotis* We enjoyed several good sightings of this species during our time in Hemis National Park. It is a fairly common resident of central Ladakh, occurring mainly between 3,100 and 4,200 metres.

Stoliczka's Mountain Vole *Alticola stoliczkanus* We enjoyed watching a small colony of this species at a small alpine lake, not far from Tso Kar Lake. This species is a common resident of northern Ladakh, occurring mainly between 4,000 and 5,500 metres.

Woolly Hare *Lepus olostolus* We enjoyed a few good looks at this huge species of hare, in the higher altitudes of Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident of Ladakh, occurring mainly between 4,000 and 5,400 metres.

Himalayan Marmot *Marmota himalayana* We enjoyed watching these huge rodents, in the higher altitudes of Hemis National Park. This species is a common resident of the mountain slopes of Ladakh, occurring between 4,000 and 5,000 metres.

Snow Leopard *Panthera uncia* We enjoyed no less than three separate sightings of Snow Leopard during the tour. One sighting, lasting for four hours, was unbelievable. This is a very special mammal. It is a rare resident of Ladakh, occurring mainly between 3,000 and 5,000 metres. The altitudinal range relates closely to the movement of prey species between their summer and winter haunts.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* Our first sighting occurred at Trisul Lake and then we enjoyed a second sighting of a single animal following a group of Grey Wolves, at Tso Kar Lake. This species is a fairly common resident throughout Ladakh, occurring from the valley bottoms, up to 5,000 metres.

Grey Wolf *Canis lupus* We very much enjoyed watching a pack of five wolves at Tso Kar Lake. We were more than happy to watch them from the safety of our four wheel drive vehicle. The Grey Wolf is an uncommon resident of Ladakh, occurring mainly between 3,000 and 5,000 metres. It is estimated that the population within Ladakh does not exceed 350 individuals.

Mountain Weasel *Mustela altaica* We very much enjoyed the antics of a very young Mountain Weasel, at a campsite in Hemis National Park. It was dashing around a dining tent, running in and out of a bag of rubbish and generally having a good time. Later, on the same day, we watched an adult hunting. This species is an uncommon resident of eastern Ladakh which occurs from the valley bottoms, up to 5,100 metres.

Tibetan Argali *Ovis ammon* Following a great deal of effort I staggered to the top of Kandala Pass and was told if I staggered another couple of hundred metres, I would almost certainly be able to see the very rare Tibetan Argali. So I staggered the next couple of hundred metres and enjoyed great scope views of three of these animals, sitting down on a grassy slope. This species is a rare resident of Ladakh, occurring between 4,200 and 5,500 metres. It is estimated that there are between 200 to 300 individuals remaining in Ladakh.

Ladakh Urial *Ovis vignei* We enjoyed watching a few of these rare mammals on the edge of Hemis National Park. This species is an uncommon resident of Ladakh, occurring mainly between 3,000 and 4,000 metres. The total population in Ladakh is estimated to be around 1,500 individuals.

Blue Sheep *Pseudois nayaur* This is the favourite prey of Snow Leopard and we very much enjoyed watching large groups, at very close quarters, during our time in Hemis National Park. This species is a fairly common resident throughout Ladakh, occurring mainly between 3,500 and 5,100 metres. It is estimated that in Ladakh the population is approximately 11,000 individuals.

Tibetan Ass *Equus kiang* This species is now separated from the Wild Ass that occurs in Gujarat, in India. We saw many groups around Tso Kar Lake, it was great to see them. This species is a fairly common resident throughout eastern and northern Ladakh, occurring between 4,000 and 5,200 metres. The animals constantly move backwards and forwards across the Tibetan border, these movements are often related to human disturbance. It is estimated that there are approximately 2,000 of these mammals remaining in Ladakh.