



SNOW LEOPARD CONSERVATION

A Blooms and Leopard Initiative:



**BLOOMS &
LEOPARD**



Anub Tsetan Paljor

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All Wildlife images in this report are courtesy of Mr. Morup Namgail, who is a leading wildlife photographer and movie maker from the village of Ulley, Ladakh and also runs his family's wildlife lodge called 'Shan at Ulley.'



**BLOOMS &
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Blooms & Leopard Conservation

Introduction

Ladakh, the northern most Union Territory of India has a unique landscape when compared to the rest of the country. It is the only 'semi-arid cold desert' region of India with an average elevation of above 3000 meters. The great Himalayan range, Zaskar Range, Karakoram Range and Ladakh Range are the 4 mountain ranges that encompasses Ladakh from all sides and creates a unique yet harsh geography and climate. With the Indian subcontinent plate to the south of Indus River and the Eurasian plate to its north, Ladakh is home to some of the most fascinating wildlife and birds and among these none is more famous than the *Ghost of the Mountains* – the majestic Snow Leopard.



Figure 1 A sub adult Snow Leopard in Ladakh. Pic @ Morup Namgail, Ulley.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), a global authority on the status of the natural world and biodiversity, estimates global Snow Leopard population under 7500 individuals and as such they are placed under the *Red List of Threatened Species* as '*Vulnerable*.' In India the Snow Leopard is given the highest protection status under *Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act 1972*.

Globally, the Snow Leopard resides (in wild) only in the central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Kyrgyz Republic, China, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Bhutan and Afghanistan. Out of these 12 exclusive countries, China is estimated to have the largest number of Snow Leopard individuals.

In India, the Snow Leopard is found only in 6 states; Ladakh, Sikkim, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, and Jammu & Kashmir. Since 2019, the government of India is conducting an internal exercise to determine the Snow Leopard population in the country called '*Snow Leopard Population Assessment in India*' or '*SPAI*.' This year some of the preliminary results have come out showing an estimation of around **718 individuals in the country**, out of which *Ladakh is estimated to be home of 477(+51) Snow Leopard individuals*, the highest in the country!

Snow Leopard Conservation in Ladakh

Ladakh was opened to the world by the government of India only in 1974. As such tourism and other business began in Ladakh only post 1974 and most of the population practiced farming, livestock rearing and a nomadic way of life, especially in eastern Ladakh. Sharing this landscape with the people were these amazing creatures including the *Snow Leopard, the Himalayan Wolf, the Red Fox, the Tibetan Sand Fox, Pallas's Cat, the Eurasian Lynx, and the Himalayan Brown Bear*, to name a few predators. These animals sometimes crossed paths with humans and their livestock, sometimes by design, sometimes unknowingly and this often resulted in major Human-wildlife conflict. Innocent blood was spilled up until a couple of decades ago, where people would trap/hunt these predators to protect their livestock which was their lifeline. Illegal wildlife trade was also prominent where the fur, skin, hide, bones and flesh of these animals would fetch a high price, especially before 1947, where trade across the border with Tibet (China) was prominent.

Although there has been a lot of work done to curb illegal wildlife trade in Ladakh and that too a great success, especially after the formation of the Wildlife Department in Ladakh in 1970s, there is still work to be done to curb human-wildlife conflict, especially in far off villages of Ladakh where agriculture and livestock rearing remain the primary livelihood source.

For the last three-four decades the department of Wildlife protection as well as various organisations such as Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT) have worked on promoting wildlife tourism as a means of wildlife or Snow Leopard conservation in certain villages of Ladakh. It has shown immense promise and potential. The only caveat being the success has been limited to two-three villages of Ladakh: namely Ulley, Rumbak, Gya-Meru and now expanding to a couple of more villages such as Mangyu.

However, the results, especially in Ulley and Rumbak has been nothing short of amazing. These villages now have a different source of income and that too in the winter months of Ladakh when there is no agriculture work etc. There has been an observable change in the mindset among people in these villages; where before Snow Leopard and other predators were looked upon as enemies, now thanks to the flow of money through Snow Leopard tourism, they understand it's importance and take care of all wildlife in their vicinity.

The concept of wildlife tourism directly leading to major conservation efforts is not a new phenomenon, however in Ladakh and especially in the case of Snow Leopards, the challenges to turn this into success is immense due to the elusiveness of the animal as well as the harsh terrain and climate.

Basics of successful Snow Leopard tourism

To create a sustainable Snow Leopard tourism that benefits the animal themselves (awareness & conservation) as well as the people residing with them (livelihood source) there are certain basic elements that are a must.

- i) The cat should be present (is home to) or use the sub region (traverses across their home range for hunting, mating etc.) This is not a problem in Ladakh as the region is home to the highest number of individuals in the entire country.
- ii) The locals, villagers, youth should have observed the cats and know their whereabouts in terms of mountains/cliffs/sub valleys where the leopards prefer sunbathing, hunting, sleeping etc. As such the role of locals here is crucial because without them, nobody would know where to look or spot these cats. Snow Leopards are known As such such an individual is called a 'Snow Leopard Spotter.' They must possess sharp eyes, local knowledge of valleys and mountains as well as be physically fit to track these ghosts of the mountains.
- iii) Basic infrastructure to host guests such as homestays, wildlife lodges etc. It can take days, weeks, maybe months before a snow leopard is spotted. Sightings are not guaranteed yet the tourist who come to see them know this

and still pay hefty sums, making snow leopard tourism ideal for a fragile place like Ladakh – low volume, high income.

- iv) Market linkages: Wildlife tour operators, enthusiasts, the department of Wildlife protection and other conservation organizations all need to work together to attract the right kind of tourists.

Now out of the above, perhaps the most important role is that of the Snow Leopard Spotter. For without local knowledge and insight, these elusive creatures remain hidden from the rest of the world.



Figure 2 Mr. Tsewang Norboo, one of the oldest and premier expert wildlife spotter in Ladakh, scanning for signs of Snow Leopards.

Blooms and Leopards Wildlife Spotter Training Programme: 15th – 20th February 2024

As per the latest SPAI report, Ladakh is home to the greatest number of Snow Leopard individuals in the country. Within Ladakh itself, as per the belief of many expert conservationists, wildlife enthusiasts as well as the department of Wildlife Protection, Rong Valley which lies 60km east of Leh town has the highest density of Snow Leopards within Ladakh. However, the work that has been on going in villages like Rumbak and Ulley has not been replicated in the villages of Rong Valley.

This however is changing now, where many organizations including UNDP under the SECURE Himalaya Project is focusing on Rong Valley to create the same foundation that was laid in Ulley/Rumbak decades ago to promote Snow Leopard tourism. One base of work, however, that still needs a lot of focus and attention is that of Snow Leopard Spotter training/workshops, where the locals and youth of Rong valley are trained to spot this elusive cat among other wildlife. For this purpose, a 6-day field training was organized supported wholly by Blooms and Leopards Co. under their Conservation of big cats' initiative.

The training programme was designed as follows; two wildlife enthusiast youth from Rong Valley were taken to Ulley village to spend 6 days and 6 nights with expert wildlife spotters, experienced wildlife tour operators and their guests from Europe/Americas/India. This was a field training and an exposure visit for the youth where they learned hands on from some of the most experienced snow leopard spotters in Ladakh during the daytime and had expert talks and discussions in the evening with some of Ladakh's leading wildlife tour operators, villagers as well as their foreign guests on wildlife and biodiversity conservation, climate change and its effects in Ladakh and on the Snow Leopard etc. *The two youths, both sisters hailing from Teri Village in Rong Valley* had a wonderful time in Ulley and came back enriched with knowledge, skills and a different perspective on tourism in Ladakh. The next segment below are excerpts from their experience, authored by themselves.



Figure 3: The two sisters from Rong Valley; Angmo and Wangmo

The two sisters from Teri, Rong Valley



Name: Phuntsog Angmo (F)

Resident of Teri, Rong Ladakh

6- day training on Wildlife Spotting/ Tracking in Uley:

As a resident of an area known for its fragile ecosystem, unique flora and fauna and rich cultural heritage, I am committed to preserving and protecting it from the challenges of our times. Participating in this wildlife spotting and tracking training in Ladakh has reignited my profound interest in learning about and closely observing Ladakh's unique wildlife.

Hailing from Teri village in the Rong area, where encounters with wild animals, including the elusive snow leopard, are not uncommon, I have come to recognise the untapped potential for economic benefits and livelihood opportunities for the villagers through wildlife sightings. I believe that by undergoing this training, we can help shift the mindset of livestock owners and reduce instances of retaliatory killings due to wildlife harming livestock, thereby fostering a more harmonious coexistence between humans and wildlife.

Name: Dachen Wangmo (F)

Resident of Teri, Rong Ladakh

6- day training on Wildlife Spotting/ Tracking in Uley:

Along with my family I run a beautiful eco homestay in my home village of Teri. Its called Cho House, and through this initiative I try to promote eco sustainable tourism niches. Wildlife tourism is something that I see great potential in but also realise that our village has to come a long way in order to attract the same kind of tourist that other wildlife villages of Ladakh presently do.

I have also worked with WWF and hence realise the importance of wildlife tourism translating directly into conservation efforts. When the livelihood of people are are meant, only then do they start caring about nature and other beings. On the other hand if wildlife directly threatens once source of livelihood (livestock and agriculture) then they not only hate wildlife but are constantly on the lookout to kill predators, mountain ungulates etc.

Excerpts from the 6-day training programme

-Dachen Wangmo

Day 1: Introduction to Scanning and Sighting of two Snow Leopards

Upon our arrival in Hemis Shukpachan, where the team of spotters, photographers and wildlife enthusiasts were already gathered and were diligently scanning the terrain in search of the Snow Leopard (SL). Among them, Stanzin, the youngest spotter of the team (barely 18 years old) had briefly spotted one earlier that morning in a valley nearby before it disappeared behind a ridge.

Here we met with *Ajang*¹ Tsewang Nurbu lay², the Head Spotter of Uley, Hemis Shukpachan, Yangthang, Saspotse area. He showed us how to scan a face of a mountain, particularly focusing on the one in front of us where the snow leopards was expected to be. After an hour or so, he successfully located not only but two cats napping, both close by. They were siblings we were told—about one and a half years old.

The pair of cats eventually stirred, and stood up headed up on the ridge and soon started chasing each other and jumping the terrain. As the afternoon progressed, we were treated to multiple sightings of the pair on different ridges, appearing and disappearing behind them. We got the chance to observe their graceful movements along the mountain ridge before they finally vanished behind the rugged terrain, prompting us to conclude our observation for the day.

Learnings from the day:

From *Ajang* Nurbu lay we gained valuable understanding of the behavioural science of the Snow Leopards.

- a) He told us that the mating season for Snow Leopards typically occurs in February and March, a period during which they abstain from feeding. This behaviour creates a unique dynamic in the ecosystem, as wild ungulates such as Ibexes and Urials roam more freely, aware that they are not being actively hunted by the Snow Leopards. As we absorbed these insights, it became evident that the delicate balance between predator and prey shapes the dynamics of the ecosystem, influencing the movements and behaviour of both Snow Leopards and their prey species.
- b) Furthermore, he told us about the distribution of the prey species in the region—Ibexes and Urials which are the primary prey of Snow Leopards in the area. Asiatic **Ibexes**, characterized by their heavy build, prefer solid cliffs for traversing, often occupying higher elevations. In



Figure 4: Can you spot the two Snow Leopards?

¹ Uncle in Ladakhi

² Honorific suffix equivalent to *Ji* in Hindi

contrast, Ladakh **Urials** possess a lighter frame, allowing them to navigate more easily across various terrains, including loose terrain at lower altitudes.

- c) Physical characteristic of Snow Leopards: the thick insulated **fur** helps them withstand cold temperatures; their large, furry **paws** act as natural snowshoes for traversing snowy terrain; the **long tail** is used for balance and agility on steep slopes and also helps it stay warm when wrapped like a blanket around itself and its almost the same the length as it's body; the distinctive rosette **markings on its coat** for camouflage in mountainous landscapes. And with this knowledge in mind which he narrated with so much love, we were also able to see the cat moving around clearly through the spotting scopes. It felt magical.
- d) We learned that the snow leopards prefer moving on the mountain ridges which gives them a commanding view of the valley below making it easy to spot and hunt possible prey.

Day 2: Discovering Asiatic Ibex and Following Wolves

The morning of our second day began with an orientation upon arrival at the elevated platform/field at 7:30 AM by Ajang Nurbu. From then on, meeting at this spot became a daily exercise for us before embarking on our wildlife observation during the day.

The terrain presented a stark contrast to the previous day, this was characterized by rocky landscapes that posed a challenge to our scanning efforts due to their varied textures and contours. Each scanning round lasted 2-3 hours, leaving us feeling slightly dizzy by the end. *Ajang* Nurbu, advised taking breaks to alleviate the effects of dizziness and emphasized the importance of delicately scanning such rugged terrain. Conversations with him were always enlightening, filled with anecdotes that deepened our understanding of the environment and co-existence with the with its species.

While our search for the elusive SLs yielded no success that morning, we were fortunate to witness a herd of Asiatic Ibex. Observing the striking contrast between the fully grown males, females, and younger Ibex was a captivating experience that added a new dimension to our wildlife exploration.

Later in the day, the excitement peaked again when a spotter alerted us to the presence of wolves nearby. Eagerly, we joined the team to track their movements, gaining insights into the subtle signs and clues that spotters use to follow wildlife in their natural habitat. We did not find any but our encounters with another herd of Ibexes enriched our day with a sense of discovery.

Learnings from the day:

1. Scanning:
 - a) First, you scan the ridges, then gradually descend, moving from one hillock or mountain to the next, circling around the chain of mountains. After completing the full sweep, take a break. If time allows, repeat the exercise.
 - b) Using both the lens when using a binocular to be able to scan better.
 - c) Always staying alert for movements or sounds.
2. Being able to differentiate between a fully grown Male, and a younger Asiatic Ibex. Following are the differences in size, color, and horn characteristics allow observers to distinguish between male, female, and younger Asiatic Ibexes in their natural habitat.
 - a) Male Asiatic Ibex:
 - Size: Males are generally larger and more muscular
 - Color: They often have a darker and more robust coat, with darker shades on their backs.
 - Horns: Male ibexes possess larger, thicker, and more prominently curved horns that extend further backward.

b) Female Asiatic Ibex:

Size: Females are smaller and leaner compared to males

Color: They have a lighter coloration with a more subdued coat, often displaying lighter shades overall.

Horns: Female ibexes have shorter, thinner, and less curved horns compared to males and younger ibexes.

c) Younger Asiatic Ibex:

Size: Younger ibexes are smaller than adult ibexes, both male and female.

Color: They have a similar coloration to adult females but may appear lighter due to their younger age.

Horns: Younger ibexes have smaller and less developed horns compared to adults, with horns still growing and not as pronounced



Figure 5 The Himalayan Wolf or the Tibetan Wolf, as they are commonly called now will soon be separated as two different species. The wolves found in Ladakh are Tibetan Wolves

Day 3 (17th Feb): Snow & Felt Toy Making Sessions

Waking up to a picturesque tiny village enveloped in heavy snowfall, we seized the opportunity to hone our scanning skills. Gathering at our customary meeting spot, we were joined by guests from Canada and Turkey, who were guests of our host. As we scanned the surroundings, the snow-covered terrain revealed two distinct herds of Asiatic Ibexes, allowing us to apply our knowledge from the previous day in identifying the different genders and age groups within the herds.

In the afternoon, we embarked on a leisurely stroll through the serene valley, hoping to encounter some wildlife tracks in the freshly fallen snow. Despite our efforts, distinguishing between the tracks of a Snow Leopard, a Wolf, or a Dog proved challenging as we didn't have any knowledge. Nevertheless, the calm of the mountains, coupled with the anticipation of wildlife encounters, made the stroll beautiful.

As evening descended, we gathered around the hearth with the hosts, *Ajang Nurbu lay* and his wife, *Aney³ Dolma lay*, to learn how to make the felt toys. *Ajang lay*, renowned for his skill in crafting exquisite felt toys, had already prepared his felt-making needles and some finished projects for us to see. This hands-on session provided us with a unique opportunity to immerse ourselves in learning an art from the expertise of our hosts.



Beyond being a hobby, felt toy making serves as a significant source of income for a few different villages in Ladakh, among them Uley is best known for its craft. Handcrafted felt toys have gained popularity among tourists, especially those visiting wildlife areas in Ladakh, serving as cherished souvenirs. Our participation in this session not only gave us a hands-on-training session but also helped us understand the interconnectedness between wildlife conservation and local livelihoods, highlighting the importance of preserving the natural environment.

We concluded the day's activities with a sense of fulfilment, looking forward to further exploration and cultural immersion in the days to come, including the completion of our own snow leopard key rings in a subsequent session on the 5th day.

Learnings from the day:

1. Felt Toys, an eco-friendly souvenir:
 - a) Hands-on-session of felt toy making which we later finish in the second session on the 5th day of our stay.
 - b) How is an alternate economic opportunity and an addition to the beautiful lodge that they have. And maybe with patience as it is very time consuming and with practice we might start making at least the smaller ones. This is something we can make and sell in our homestay as well in the years to come.
2. Later that even Morup, Ajang Nurbu's son, a known photographer, and Snow Leopard Expedition host at Shan at Uley (the family Lodge where we were staying) showed us pictures of the pug marks of -snow leopards and wolves. So, the next time we see a track we were expected to be able to differentiate it.

³ Aunt in Ladakhi

Day 4 (18th Feb): Mating Calls

The morning of the 18th of February we woke up the heaviest snowfall the village had witnessed in a decade or more as we heard them saying. Snowfall is considered auspicious in Tibeto-Buddhist tradition and we hoped that this auspicious sign might translate into sighting of the elusive Snow Leopards and the snow from the previous day would help in finding clear track marks is what was expected.

However, the snowfall continued in the morning making our routine morning scan impossible as the visibility was restricted to only a few hundred meters. But we later learnt that the Snow Leopards have their ways of announcing their presence as one of the spotters had heard a call of the cat. We rushed and gathered with the usual group of spotters, wildlife enthusiasts, and photographers, anticipating to hear mating calls. After a brief wait, the valley echoed with its call. The calls continued intermittently for nearly an hour and impatience began to gnaw as we could only hear the calls but were unable to spot the cat. And for the past hour or so, we've been standing in the cold, enduring the continuous snowfall.

Ajang Nurbu lay kept reminding us of the virtue of patience in our quest to catch a glimpse of these elusive creatures. Finally, we caught a fleeting glimpse of the magnificent Snow Leopard, its distinctive rosette markings on its coat blending seamlessly with the snowy landscape. Though the sighting was brief, the exhilaration of witnessing such a rare and majestic creature in its natural habitat made the wait entirely worthwhile. We were seeing a snow leopard in snow for the first time in our lives.



While we had been fortunate to glimpse one on the first day, the subsequent days had left us increasingly yearning for another sighting. We did and we heard its call as well, multiple times, it was a good day.

Additionally, amidst the fresh snow, we also identified the tracks of wolves, distinguishing between the it with that of a dog's wasn't so hard and Morup confirmed our observations. The pug mark trail was unmistakable in its clarity against the white backdrop of the snow. The crisp imprints left behind in the snow was a reminder of the rich biodiversity that thrives in these untouched landscapes.

Learnings from the Day:

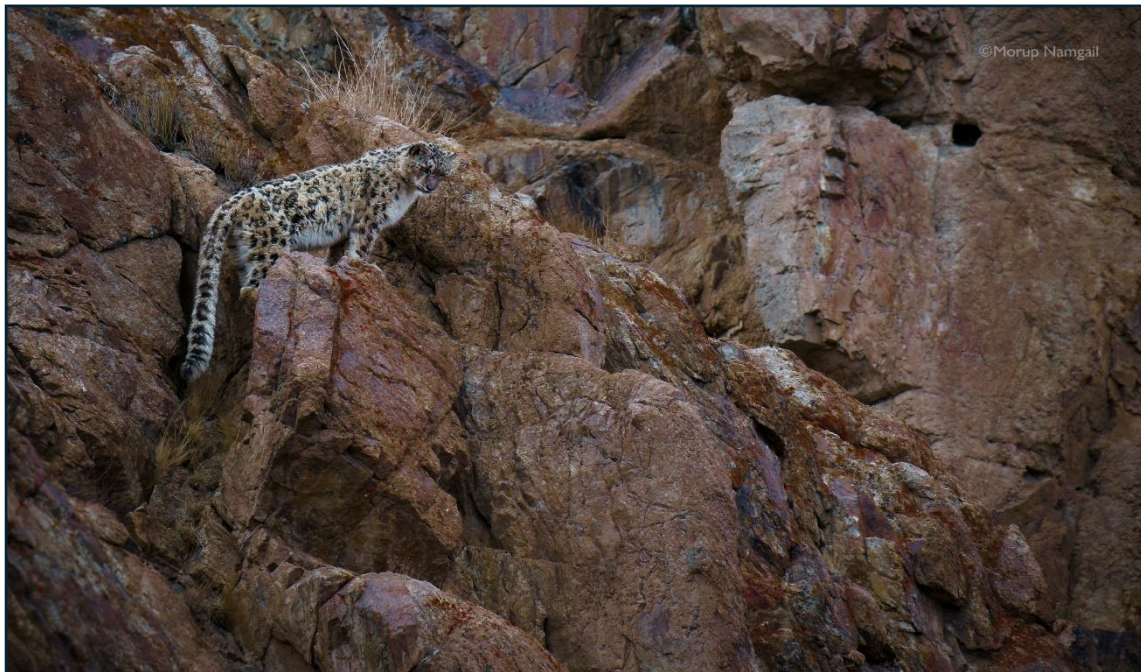
1. Patience is the key to wildlife spotting, especially of these elusive cats.
2. Mating calls- one would have imagined that the snow leopards like other big cats might growl but it more like a deep growl mixed with a high-pitched yowl (*ooownk*). It's a powerful and distinct sound that echoes through the mountains. We learnt that we hear this during the mating season when the cat is calling out for potential partner(s).
3. We could identify the pug marks of the wolves from that of a snow leopard.

Day 5 (19th Feb): Two Big Cats

The morning of the 19th of February began with our customary scan in Uley around 7:30 AM. After breakfast we headed to Saspotse village, situated approximately 8 kilometres away from our lodging. It was an eventful start as *Ajang Dorjay lay*, spotter from Saspotse, made an exciting discovery in his village—an unmistakable trail of paw prints of the cat.

Navigating through the remnants of the recent heavy snowfall proved challenging, with vehicles often skidding on the icy roads, prolonging our journey to the village. Embarking on foot in the valley where the pug marks have been seen, we ventured approximately a kilometer and a half into the valley, our senses heightened with anticipation. For the first time we were seeing the Snow Leopard pug marks a long trail that went deep into the valley. It was then that one of the spotters following the trail ascended a steep hill on the opposite side and spotted a cat resting on the side of a cliff.

With urgency, the team hastened towards the spot, driven by the hope of a close encounter. However, that seemed to have left minutes after we reached the valley, it may have sensed the approaching presence of two large groups of people, totalling about 20+ individuals.



Since the cat is largely nocturnal and prefers resting during the day, one of the spotters told us that it won't have ventured far. So, undeterred we scanned one side of the valley until about 4:40 PM, holding onto the hope that the elusive cat would return or we could spot it somewhere close by. They camouflage so well that scanning in the snow was even more difficult. Despite our hours of patience, the cat remained elusive, opting not to reveal itself once more.

However, our persistence and resilience were rewarded when one group who stopped at two different spots to scan had a remarkable encounter with not one, but two fully grown majestic snow leopards on their way back, somewhere near Yangthang. Only one of us was lucky to see that it from about 300meters of distance, which is very close for spotting a snow leopard. It was visible to naked eyes. This unforgettable experience served as a poignant reminder of the unpredictable nature of wildlife spotting, emphasizing the importance of perseverance.

Key Learnings from the day:

1. Network of Spotters: This experience underscored the invaluable role played by the network of spotters across different villages, utilizing long-range walkie-talkies to communicate in areas without cellular network coverage. With Uley and Saspotse situated in adjacent valleys and Yangthang located at the end of Uley, and Hemis Shukpachan right below Yangthang, the coordinated efforts of trained spotters from these villages form a vital network for tracking the movement of Snow Leopards. This network developed over more than a decade was now operating seamlessly!
2. Today we saw a trail of Snow Leopard pug marks clearly on the backdrop of snow. Now we are confident to difference between all three pug marks.

Day 6 (20th Feb): Last Day

The morning of the 20th of February dawned with heavy snowfall, marking the fourth consecutive day of snow in Uley. The landscape was blanketed with nearly two feet of snow by now and the fall continued, casting a serene white veil over the surroundings.



Figure 6 Record breaking Snowfalls in Ulley. The sisters had to abandon their car on their way back to Leh, post training.

Despite the inclement weather, we wanted to make the most of our final day. With some guests departing, all of us set out together towards Yangthang after breakfast. And shortly after the Ajang lay receives a message on the satellite phone from the Ajang Dorjay (Spotter from Saspotse) that he has found fresh pug marks, close to where the two grown cats from yesterday evening was last seen in Yangthang. Ajang Nurbu was confident that they are nearby. So, throughout the day, we scanned the rugged terrain alongside the spotters in that valley, patiently awaiting any sign of the cats.

We also saw two different heard of Ladakh Urials today and saw the striking difference in its horn from that of the Ibexes we had seen.



Figure 7 Ladakh Urials are endemic to Ladakh, unlike Ibex which are found across Central Asia.

As the afternoon wore on, just as our group was preparing to depart, we were rewarded with a breathtaking sight of two cats. The elusive cats made a rare appearance, gracefully traversing the skyline for a few minutes before disappearing once more into behind a hill. We then moved ahead and hoping to get a glimpse of them again, and we did. This time we saw the two cats for a longer time. And the memory of this awe-inspiring encounter will remain etched in our minds forever.

In the evening, we concluded our journey feeling a sense of achievement as we completed crafting our felt toys. These toys serve as a keepsake of our time spent in this part of the mountains, where we shared the space with its majestic big cats :)

Learnings from the day:

1. Today's events reemphasised how essential the network of spotters, especially for spotting animals like Snow Leopards. Beside the excitement of seeing them, our journey taught us a lot about finding and protecting wildlife. Over the period of one week Ajang Nurbu shared a lot of information about the wildlife in this area and we go to observe many.
2. We noticed striking difference in the horn of the Ladakh Urial and that of the Asiatic Ibexes we had seen before. The horns of Asiatic ibex tend to be larger and more robust, curving prominently backward in a distinctive arc, often with multiple twists and turns. In contrast, the horns of Ladakh urials are generally shorter and slender, curving slightly forward with a

smoother arc. Additionally, the horns of Asiatic Ibex exhibit greater variation in size and shape among individuals within the species compared to Ladakh urials. And Ladakh Urials are much smaller than the Asiatic Ibexes.

3. We completed our felt toys and intended to keep practicing and refining our skills. Perhaps in the future, we'll be able to create these eco-friendly toys on our own.

Possible Wildlife Tourism in Rong Valley

The training and exposure we received during our visit to Uley and maybe similar initiatives by various NGOs and organizations are crucial. The possible outcome is that these experiences will contribute to the development of Rong Valley along the same lines as Uley and its neighbouring areas, as:

1. Rong Valley is believed to have (*if I am not wrong*) the highest concentration of snow leopards in Ladakh, and UT Ladakh having over 65% of the country's snow leopard population, which as per recent data. Hence, higher chances of sighting.
2. Nearby villages like Shang and Rumbak already have snow leopard tourism, showing that Rong Valley could also develop similarly. This year, we found out that many wildlife enthusiasts stayed in Hemya village in Rong because there was a good sighting of the big cat nearby. So with proper development, Rong Valley could also thrive.
3. Establishing a network of spotters, similar to Uley, can begin by identifying wildlife enthusiasts in various villages who can receive basic training and having basic spotting gear like binoculars to monitor snow leopards, wolves, and other wildlife. The region also brags having the highly elusive Eurasian Lynx, probably more elusive than a snow leopard even.
4. Leveraging the already skilled local residents involved in photography, spotting, and tourism can enhance the network and aid in marketing the region.
5. Existing lodging facilities in villages surrounding Rong Valley can be upgraded and made winter-friendly to accommodate wildlife tourists who mainly visit in the winter months.
6. Regular sightings of snow leopards and other wildlife in the valley suggest economic potential. As once a few villages begin to benefit economically from tourism, more are likely to participate, fostering a positive attitude towards wildlife conservation.

These big cats hold cultural significance in the Tibeto-Buddhist belief system, being considered the "*jewel of the mountains*." This cultural reverence can further drive interest in snow leopard tourism in Rong Valley

Conclusion

Our journey left us with a deep love for nature and a strong desire to protect it for the future. We're thankful for the chance to be surrounded by such beauty and leave with precious memories and a promise to care for the wilderness.

Spotting these elusive creatures was a real challenge. We learned that sometimes, even during peak mating season, a whole week can pass without seeing a single one. It reminded us why the Snow Leopard is called the "*Ghost of the Mountains*" and showed us the ups and downs of observing wildlife in this area. Despite this, we were lucky to see 7 different cats on 4 different occasions, making us feel incredibly fortunate.

Seeing the Snow Leopards on the skyline was unforgettable. Their outline stood out sharply in their natural habitat that we'll never forget. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for us and we're committed to using the skills we've learned here to the best of our capacity to achieve meaningful results for our region.



Figure 8: Angmo and Wangmo with Mr. Morup, wildlife tour operators and guests.

Possible further interventions supported through Blooms and Leopards

- i) A continuation of the Snow Leopard Spotter training programme; a network of locals, villagers, youth need to be trained and streamlined just like in Ulley and Rumbak. Not only will this promote snow leopard tourism and directly benefit conservation efforts in Rong valley and other parts of Ladakh but will also help in changing the current trend of unsustainable tourism in Ladakh where 'selfie tourist'

venture for 5 days without any understanding or knowledge of the place and engage in activities that are harmful to the environment.

- ii) Supporting small eco homestays and wildlife lodges, such as the one owned and run by the two sisters from Rong Valley (Google/Youtube Cho House, Teri Ladakh). At the base these people are the frontline conservators of Ladakh's biodiversity and wildlife. Through engaging with like minded stakeholders, conservation activities and awareness can be spread across Ladakh.
- iii) Awareness Campaigns and workshops both online as well as offline to bring value and knowledge among the Ladakhi youth regarding pressing challenges of climate change, biodiversity loss, illegal wildlife trade, retaliatory killings etc.