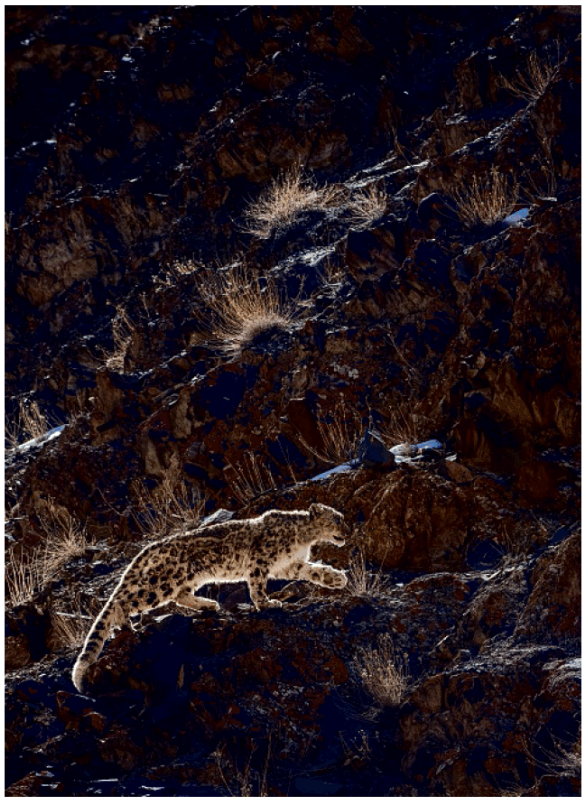
LADAKH: IN THE LEOPARD'S LAIR

In north India, an American wildlife photographer and BBC tracker lead expeditions in search of the region's mythical grey ghost. **Minty Clinch** pounces. Photography by **Behzad J Larry**



Left: Hemis National Park is believed to have the world's densest population of snow leopards. Opposite: rugged peaks loom over Ladakh's Tso Moriri lake

In the eye of the telescope, the silent assassin basked in a rocky crevice in blazing sunshine. One side of his face was streaked with blood, but it was three days old. As dusk approached, he needed to eat. Rising reluctantly and crouching low, he moved up the ridge to assess his prospects. Here in the Hemis National Park outside Leh, the historic capital of Ladakh, his main target is the Himalayan blue sheep. Technically speaking, the caprid bharal are neither blue nor sheep, but they are tasty and abundant. Also sure-footed and strong.

They too stake out the ridges, on red alert to bolt at the slightest movement. The snow leopard must stalk undetected until he is close enough to pounce, but as a cat weighing around 30kg-45kg attacking an animal that averages over 50kg, the odds are against him. Getting it right means putting enough meat in the larder for a week or more. Getting it wrong means hurtling down the mountain, missing the prey and risking grave injury on the rocks below. Then finding the energy to set up again. With a kill rate of 10 per cent, it takes skill and courage to survive. My snow leopard – we wildlife tourists are very possessive about our prey – bobbed up and down on the skyline, then slipped into the next valley. I found myself wishing him luck.

It was my great good fortune to see the mythical "grey ghost" in its natural, extremely hostile habitat on my first day of searching. As we'd negotiated the hairpins on the barren route to Hemis, my host, Behzad Larry, had been uncharacteristically nervous. "There have been no non-sightings since I set up Voygr Expeditions in 2013, but I'm always just one trip away from failure," he said. That's not something the 33-year-old American – dedicated to sourcing the best Speyside malts for his guests – is accustomed to. He was brought up as an only child with

Clockwise from top: the village of Rangdum. Snow leopards can take down urial, Asiatic ibex, bharal and even wild yak. The author rides to Rumbak

four dachshunds in Madhya Pradesh by a Parsi father and a Muslim mother. When he was 15, he and his mother moved to New York City. In his new urban environment, Behzad retained his love of animals, augmented by a growing passion for making a career out of photographing them in the wild. An intrepid traveller, he already organises tiger expeditions in Ranthambore National Park in Rajasthan, and plans to add the Siberian tigers and Amur leopards in the north of Vladivostok to his big cat repertory next year.

I'd been nervous too. At worst, no snow leopard; at best, a spotter pointing out a lean grey beast with black rosettes designed for camouflage on a distant peak – "There, just there, under the rock to the right, you can see it move" – except I wouldn't because it would be both perfectly disguised and far away. My lengthy initial sighting was a game-changer: now we could all relax and enjoy the ride. In my case, literally – I mounted my sturdy 13-hand pony and headed up the hill.

With the Himalayan passes closed until Ladakh's May-to-September high season, winter expeditions start with a morning flight from Delhi to Leh (the only airport shuts down in the afternoons due to the wind blowing in dust from the high-altitude desert). Unlike most of its competitive set, which cater for the Buddhist temple summer circuit, the Grand Dragon Ladakh hotel welcomes intrepid hunters year-round. Owned by brothers Ghulam Mohiuddin and Ghulam Mustafa, the ornately decorated building is a direct legacy of the first hippie tourists to arrive in Ladakh in 1974. "They came in a bus from Srinagar," Mohiuddin recalled. "Sixty pink and yellow people with long hair. As the word spread, my friend said we should bunk off school to follow them. They were probably looking for a toilet, but we never let them out of our sight."

Back at home, his parents took note, bought beds and turned their house into the Dragon Guesthouse in time for the 1975 arrivals. When the 82-room Grand Dragon opened in 2007, it heralded a market for richer visitors after years of backpacker domination. Today the siblings send their own sons to Les Roches Hospitality Management Schools in Crans-Montana and Marbella, and live in splendour in the "OP" opposite the Grand Dragon portico – "Observation post," said Mohiuddin, smiling broadly. Mustafa is the artistic brother – his intricate drawings of Ladakhi characters are showcased in the lobby – but Mohiuddin, like all the best hoteliers, keeps his eye on his guests.

January temperatures can go as low as -40°C, so Behzad applies an impressive eye for detail to every aspect of his guests' comfort. The thick canvas tents are lined with felt, large enough to stand up in and furnished with beds, tables and rugs. The double-layer full-down sleeping bags are army surplus, designed for outdoor midwinter use by the massed troops guarding sensitive borders with Pakistan and China. Propane heaters and hot-water bottles guarantee a toasty night. Hemis issues a maximum of 50 permits a day for this area, so there may be less fortunate campers sleeping on the ground nearby; the canvas-averse take advantage of homestays in Rumbak, an eight-house village 20 minutes up the valley.

In the main tent, prayer flags flutter and lampshades provide subtle shadows. Ladakhi dishes – delicately spiced soups and curries – are impeccably prepared and there is an open bar. If the American billionaires had said in advance that they wanted Cheval Blanc instead of Indian Sula red, Behzad would have put it in place, regardless of any disappointment the damage to palate a jolting pony trek at 4,000m might cause. After dinner, a hand of cribbage, a game of Scrabble, a single malt and a not-so-early night.

The spotters rise at dawn to seek out tracks while guests enjoy French-press coffee and pomegranate juice ahead of a hard day on the hill. Behzad has a few set departure dates, but most of his groups are private, predominantly from the US, the UK and Australia. The majority are dedicated hikers, but trophy wildlife images are the primary incentive. British birders add another dimension, staking out the Field of Dreams to spot the white-browed tit-warbler and the partridge-style Tibetan snowcock. Golden eagle and lammergeier swoop imperiously overhead, primed to pick any available carcasses clean.

In the interests of conservation, the Jammu & Kashmir Wildlife Protection Department, which runs Hemis, has launched a project to monitor snow leopards around the clock. In addition to 650 hidden cameras, they set up snares in a catchment area around Rumbak in early 2019. By placing the disguised traps near rocks where the animals rub themselves and urinate to establish territorial rights, they planned to capture four males and two breeding females.

By April, they were receiving invaluable lifestyle data from three males they'd trapped, sedated, fitted with high-tech collars and released.

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Day one of any Voygr expedition is spent resting to acclimatise to a very rapid rise to 3,500m. No alcohol, and oxygen cylinders as required. The second day allows for a gentle stroll around town in preparation for the core business the next morning. Top of many shopping lists is a pashmina, Ladakh's second world-class luxury commodity (after snow leopards). The hair cut from the throat and underbelly of the Changthangi goat makes shawls that run freely through the slimmest of rings.

Currently there are an estimated 3,000 to 6,000 snow leopards in 12 central Asian countries between Uzbekistan and China. Hemis National Park is believed to have the densest population, making it the go-to destination when *Planet Earth* and *Hostile Planet* need headline footage. Founded by the Indian government in 1981, it expanded gradually along the south of the Indus to 4,400sq km. Now the largest park in south Asia, it incorporates 19 agricultural villages and some of the harshest high-altitude desert terrain in the world. In summer, the wildlife moves upwards to 6,000m, but come November, snow drives predator and quarry alike off the mountaintops and the winter sighting season begins.

"The snow leopard is the most mysterious of big cats," says Khenrab Phuntsog, our head spotter, wildlife conservationist and BBC aide in Hemis for going on 20 years. "Look it in the eye and you see deep into its soul. I love the romance of the quest. It's like going to the casino – never certainty, but intense expectation." That first evening in camp, we sipped hot cider spiced with rum in the Voygr mess tent just below Field of Dreams, a plateau named by a British naturalist for its high head count. With four crumbling stupas for karma, snow leopards share the area with Tibetan wolves and lynx, prime rivals for prey. Their joint menu includes Ladakhi urial (wild horned sheep) and Asiatic ibex as well as bharal. A snow leopard can also take down a wild yak, but it needs all its agility to subdue the big beast before it rolls and crushes it.

In each case, the animal had tightened the snare by pulling back, then waited passively for the wardens to fit the collar and set it free. The only female to trigger the trap paused, saw a way to loosen the snare and trotted off. Scientifically frustrating; but snow leopards are solitary, so a female must kill for her cubs for two years. With so much responsibility, an ill-considered reaction is not an option.

Even before I finished my first coffee, the phone buzzed with essential intel: the fourth male was in the bag. I quickly mounted up, and my pony and I picked our way eagerly through rocks and streams in time to see Khenrab, standing tall, long-barrelled gun in hand. With a sigh, the dart found its target and the captive slumped to the ground. Unlike other big cats, snow leopards don't have the vocal chords to roar. Instead, this second leopard chuffed softly, a guttural feline purr that it uses in mating games, as I reached cautiously for its hind quarters. Its coat was long and dense, its paws disproportionately large to cope with snow, the workmanlike fur on the pads designed to increase traction on rocks. The sinewy rope of tail, as long as its body, lay thunked down on the ground. In action, it provides critical ballast for balance; in rest, a protective cocoon of warmth.

Within minutes, the collar was on. When the project ends, all collars will be released remotely. Meanwhile, Khenrab administered the antidote and the leopard came to. Humans are not part of its food chain – but that doesn't mean it likes them. Instantly alert, it sprang on to the rocks, flowed regally up the mountain and disappeared over the crest. Would there be a plump incautious bharal on the other side? On the evidence of my leopard karma, that should be a given. ✦

Minty Clinch travelled as a guest of Voygr Expeditions (01316-080 049; voygr.com) whose next fixed-departure Snow Leopard Tour is February 16-29 2020 (max eight persons), £5,781pp. Snow Leopard Filming with Duncan Parker, the BBC's senior wildlife cameraman, is March 1-14 2020 (max four persons), £30,746pp. Private expeditions are also available.