

In search of the ibisbill

In Leh, this 'altitudinal migrant', so good at camouflage, finally shows up

By Sujatha Padmanabhan

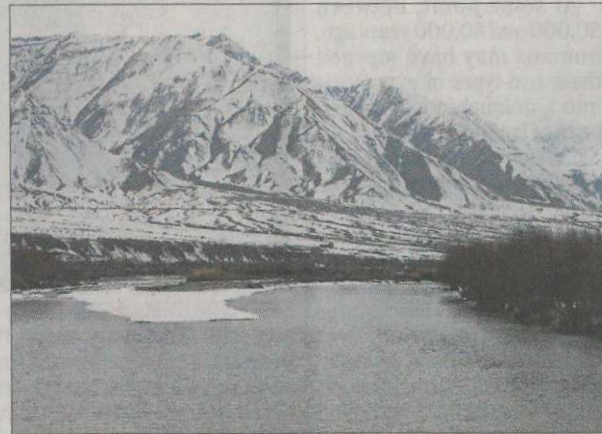
We scanned the icy landscape around us. Not a sign of movement, except for the water of the Indus that continued to flow, seemingly unperturbed by the weather. I clung to my pair of binoculars with difficulty. The cold winds cut through my woollen gloves, and a small part of me longed for the warm comfort of my hotel room. I was in Leh in the month of February, and at minimum temperatures of minus 12 degrees or so, it was freezing cold. "Try January then," my Ladakhi friends would taunt me, reminding me that peak winter was over.

We were at Sindhu Darshan not far from Leh town, a place along the Indus River that attracts a number of tourists during the summer months. At this time of the year, however, it was only us, I and my colleagues from the Snow Leopard Conservancy-India Trust (SLC-IT). We were searching for the ibisbill, a bird that I had longed to see for many years. This was my

umpteenth trip to Ladakh, and while I had been lucky in spotting many of Ladakh's unique wild birds and mammals (amongst them in particular the Tibetan snowcock, the snow leopard and even the more elusive Eurasian lynx), the ibisbill had evaded me!

Snowy mountains

We had driven along stretches of the Indus River outside Leh town looking for the bird. The landscape was spectacular. The



The towering mountains by the Indus River. PHOTOS: AUTHOR



snowy mountains that formed a stunning backdrop to the river looked unreal at times, almost as if cardboard sets with mountains painted on them had been placed at vantage points along the river! The river was a sheet of ice along the edges. The canvas of white was broken only by the brown of branches of willow and poplar trees and sea buckthorn shrubs along the river.

At Sindhu Darshan, we trained our binoculars on the river scanning every bit of it for

the ibisbill. No luck and the only sign of life that we could see was the little white-capped redstart, a lovely Himalayan bird that is found along streams and rivers. Soon Jigmet Dadul, the coordinator of programmes at the SLC-IT, decided to set up the spotting scope which is a small and portable telescope often used for bird-watching trips.

Jigmet is known for his prowess at spotting elusive snow leopards in these mountains, a remarkable feat given the camouflage that the animal displays. I was lucky to have trekked with him in the past,

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The elusive ibisbill in Ladakh.

when he spotted one in the mountain in front of our camping site. I hoped that his skill would extend to birds as well as he turned the scope in different directions.

First glimpse

In a few minutes, an excited Jigmet murmured under his icy breath, "Oh there it is!" We all took turns to have our first glimpse of the ibisbill through the spotting scope and then quickly moved closer to the bird to be able to see it first with our binoculars and then with our naked eyes!

There it was, a greyish bird that so beautifully camouflaged with the small grey boulders along the river's edge! I could have easily missed spotting this bird, despite its long red bill that curves downwards. We watched it for a while as it was unaware of our presence as we hid behind a pile of rocks. It was walking slowly through the water, probing the river bed for aquatic organisms with its bill.

Shingle river beds

I marvelled at how everything in nature is so finely planned. Here was a bird superbly adapt-

ed to high altitude rivers and streams. Its body colouration makes it difficult to spot on shingle river beds. It is an altitudinal migrant, which means that in the winter months it comes down to lower altitudes in the mountains and in summer it flies up to higher areas.

I was lost in thought as I struggled to keep the ibisbill in sight through my pair of binoculars. My hands were becoming numb with the cold despite a pair of thick gloves. Suddenly a grey boulder to the left of this bird moved. Here was another ibisbill! None of us had noticed

it as it sat quietly amidst the rocks. It soon joined its mate and they walked about quietly, searching for food. We decided to edge closer, since by now all of us had had a good long look at the birds. But soon they became aware of our presence and started walking away from us. Then all of a sudden, both took flight. I turned in their direction and watched them as they gracefully flew downstream till they became specks in the distant horizon. I had finally seen the ibisbill, and honestly it thrilled me as much as my sighting of the snow leopard.