

THE 'GREY GHOST' ON THE MOUNTAIN

The writer spots the snow leopard in Ladakh and is spellbound



By Sharmila Deo

It was a very cold night. We camped in the Markha valley on our way to the Hemis National Park in Ladakh. As we unwillingly clambered out of our sleeping bags and tents early in the morning, Jigmet, our local friend and guide had already made piping hot tea for us. There were three other Ladakhis accompanying us. We washed in the icy cold stream nearby and settled

down to enjoy our tea and admire the panoramic view. In Ladakh, you cannot escape the mountains. There are ranges all around, criss-crossing one another. Some are rocky, some are jagged and some resemble huge sand dunes. The mountains are grey, brown or purple with greenish or pinkish streaks. The snow-peaked ones are bare with almost no vegetation.

Looking at the mountains, one begins to ponder over the formation of the Himalayan ranges and how they must have risen from the sea millions of



Snow leopard. PHOTO: JIGMET DADUL.



The urial. PHOTO: SUJATHA PADMANABHAN.



Snow-capped terrain in Ladakh. PHOTO: SUJATHA PADMANABHAN.

years ago. How much wildlife diversity these mountains support. The flora and fauna adapt ingeniously in order to survive the harsh conditions of the cold desert of Ladakh.

I spotted the majestic golden eagle, the lammergeier (a large vulture which is known to drop big bones from a height to break them in order to feed on the marrow), the omnipresent black-billed magpie and the migratory rosefinch. There are four kinds of ungulates here – the ibex, blue sheep, argali and urial – along with other herbi-

vores like the marmot.

And at the top of the food pyramid is the magnificent snow leopard, locally known as 'shaan'.

Before I left for Hemis, my son Mihir had asked me on the phone, "Ma, are you going to see a snow leopard in Ladakh?" I had laughed and told him that it was unlikely that I would see one, but promised to tell him about the other animals I would spot. While we sipped our tea, Jigmet, who is a keen wildlife observer, was scanning the mountain opposite our

camping site with his binoculars. Suddenly, he shouted excitedly, "Snow leopard!", and scrambled to his tent to bring his spotting scope.

Clutching our binoculars, we ran towards him where he had set up the spotting scope.

Suddenly I saw the beautiful animal. The snow leopard was on top of the mountain, and was slowly descending along the ridge. My heart beat faster as I watched it move with its head held high. I could see its strong legs and furry paws.

Known to be the smallest of

the big cats in India, the snow leopard has a thick long tail, almost as long as its body. It uses its tail to maintain balance on the treacherous slopes, and also to wrap it around itself in winter to fight the extreme cold. It has a lovely radiant greyish coat of fur with rosettes on it. It stood still now, gauging its surroundings.

We thought the animal was hungry and on the prowl, trying to see if there was any prey around. It descended further, and sat near a rock. Even as I watched, I suddenly lost sight

of it. After searching for it frantically, I spotted it again after a few minutes.

This happened a few times. I realised why it is called the 'grey ghost' by the locals. The leopard's camouflage is so perfect that even while you look at the animal, it blends with the background and appears to disappear into thin air, as though engulfed by the mountain!

The snow leopard had now descended almost three-fourths of the mountain before settling down in a huge shallow depression. We waited for a

while hoping to see it again. Soon we realised it had given us the slip again, and had vanished right before our very eyes!

We were speechless as we went over every movement of the snow leopard in our minds.

I couldn't wait to call Mihir and say, "I saw the rare snow leopard!"

My memories of Ladakh will always carry the time when I spotted the undisputed Lord of the Mountains.

(This series is coordinated with Kalpvriksh.)