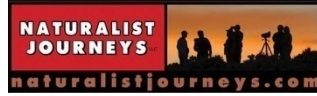


# Big Cats & Breathtaking Birds of India | Feb. 24 – Mar. 13, 2025 | Pallas's Cat Extension: Mar. 13-19, 2025

## Trip Report by Tina Greenawalt & Avijit Sarkhel



**Guides Avijit (Avi) Sarkhel and Tina Greenawalt with 7 participants: Robert, Christa, John, Daryl, Laurie, Melina, and Nancy**



### **Mon., Feb. 24: Arrivals in New Delhi**

Everyone arrived with the exception of Laurie and Melina, who had a very unfortunate detour to Rome due to a bomb threat. The rest of the group met for dinner and enjoyed a lovely spread at the Andaz. We then got ready for an early morning departure tomorrow to begin our adventure!

### **Tues., Feb. 25: New Delhi | Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve**

We departed early at 5:00 AM and flew to Nagpur. On arrival we met our drivers and headed to Tadoba, which took about 3 hours. At the lodge we were greeted by Ranjit and Nandita, the managers of Svasara Jungle Lodge, and Bhautik, our naturalist from the lodge. We had a quick lunch, a selection of nicely prepared Indian food, and



then we headed to our rooms. Before settling in our rooms, we had our first birds – a pair of Black-naped Monarch and White-browed Fantails. A few minutes later, Tina picked up an Orange-headed Thrush!

Our afternoon safari was to the Kolara zone (Tadoba has core zones – Kolara, Moharli, Kolsa and Khutwanda; and several buffer zones – Belara, Mamla, Alizanaza, and more). Wildlife sightings are excellent in both core and buffer zones. We entered our zone in two jeeps and after a short drive through scrub forest, we had our first tigress, a Junabai female sleeping in the shade. She had two cubs, but they were not with her. We moved on and started birding and quickly found some good birds including Indian Roller, Indian Robin, Pied Bushchat, Black-headed Ibis, Eastern Cattle-Egret, Medium Egret, and a few more. We also saw our first Gaur and Nilgai. While we scanned for birds, our driver got a message of a leopard nearby, so we scooted out to reach the area. Soon we could see the leopard walking on a partially dry streambed, moving through sunlight and shadow with grace and stealth! Both jeeps managed to see the leopard well and we resumed our birding with a plan to wait by the waterhole to see if we were lucky enough to see the tigress up and moving.

Within a few minutes we got a message regarding the tigress, so we moved quickly and reached the area with a few cars in front of us. Bhautik and his group were right in the front while Avi's group got a few glimpses from further back. Meanwhile, as we maneuvered the car to get a better glimpse, Avi noticed something move above him and he looked up to see a scared male adult leopard ten feet above him. The tigress had chased him up the tree!! What a sighting! We moved back a bit and enjoyed the view as the other vehicles moved away and we finally managed to get good views of the tigress, too. She was in no mood to leave and was keen to get rid of the leopard. With two cubs, a male leopard was surely a threat for her!

Our safari time was now over and we left with trepidation on the fate of the leopard – we hoped he survived. Back at the lodge, the staff had snacks and tea/coffee/cold drinks ready for us that we enjoyed. Then it was time to clean up for dinner at 7:30 PM. Our dinners were in a lovely open space with a tiled roof cover and had a wonderful selection of Indian food for everyone to enjoy.

### **Wed., Feb. 26: Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve | Safari Drives**

We left at 6:00 AM to head to the Kolara core area. Daryl stayed back as she suspected a stomach bug and wanted to play it safe. We also got exciting news that Laurie and Melina would arrive at the lodge in time for lunch and the afternoon safari. It was chilly in the morning, but a nice break from the afternoon heat. Heading into the Kolara area for our safari, we soon started birding. Tina spotted a pair of Indian Gray Hornbills and Avi noticed a few raptors - mostly Oriental Honey-Buzzards and Crested Serpent-Eagles. We had nice views of a Spotted Deer herd and saw an occasional lone Sambar Deer. We also had a noisy pair of Gray-headed Fish-Eagles that were fascinating to watch as they greeted each other very loudly.





It was a bit hot compared to the expected temperatures for this time of year. We managed to find an Indian Paradise-Flycatcher, a few Black-naped Monarchs, Brown Shrike, and a number of Orange-headed Thrush. As we approached the Pandharpaur area, Avi noticed fresh bear scat. We followed the marks, but could not find anything. The bear must have heard us way before we were close to it. We did find the endemic Gray Junglefowl - what a handsome bird the way the light bounced off his very colorful feathers. We heard some alarm calls shortly afterward that were promising, but did not come across any carnivores.

We returned to the lodge and, shortly afterward, Melina and Laurie arrived at last. Tina and Avi met them and found them in great spirits despite a rough few days. Everyone enjoyed a delicious lunch and were eager to hear about the crazy ordeal that Melina and Laurie had gone through, but we decided to save that for the evening social hour. Later in the afternoon we headed back to the Kolara core zone. We birded a bit and looked for mammals, finding Sambar, Chital, and Gaur, and then reached a point where around 15 cars were ahead of us. Everyone was patiently waiting as the resident tigress of the area, Choti Tara, was fast asleep on the main road. She was visible and once in a while her ears twitched, but no movement happened for a good 20 minutes! We eventually started moving when she finally left the road and we could pass through. The forest department managed the long line very well as we moved slowly and reached the area where she had been sleeping. A beautiful surprise awaited us- her two 10 month old cubs were both there. One was on the road and the other on a termite mound. We positioned ourselves and watched the cubs for around 20 minutes. Both cars had prime views of the cubs as they moved, walked, tried to hunt, and then snuggled up with each other! After that great show, we continued birding. We managed a few interesting birds including Black-rumped Flameback, Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, Tickell's Thrush, Indian Paradise-Flycatcher, as well as a few raptors like Short-toed Snake-Eagle, Crested Serpent-Eagle, and White-eyed Buzzard.

We returned to the lodge with time to relax and clean up. After the nightly checklist, we got together and enjoyed some wine and beer while Melina and Laurie recounted the interesting story of a bomb threat to their plane.

## **Thurs., Feb. 27: Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve | Safari Drives**

We spent today in the Kolara core zone again and it was the morning of the Sloth Bears! We first had one that crossed the road just before we arrived, but got great views as it moved through the undergrowth. Shortly after that, we heard very strong alarm calls for a tiger, but it did not come out. On our way to the breakfast point, we met a mother Sloth Bear with two sub-adult cubs. We had really great views as we were the only cars there and watched the cubs bound in front of the mother. After watching them for a bit, we searched for tigers with no luck. Then it was time for breakfast! We enjoyed coffee and tea and a nice breakfast selection in the pavilion. Afterward, we headed back to the bears and then to the lodge for a break and lunch. A few of us went birding



around the lodge and found Brown-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, Yellow-eyed Babbler, Purple Sunbird, and great views of Tickell's Blue Flycatcher.

The afternoon safari was a bit quiet. We searched for Indian Wild Dogs, which were sighted by others, but they eluded us. We had nice, close views of an Indian Roller that posed for us and then watched an interesting situation where two troupes of Southern Plain Langurs acted aggressively toward each other. A mother with a young baby was being pushed out of the troupe and two males were aggressively attacking each other. After leaving the langurs, we found a few Black-tailed Godwits, Asian Openbills, Black-winged Stilts, Lesser Whistling-Ducks, and some Gray-headed Swamphens. We also managed to find a Marsh Crocodile close to the shore. Back at the lodge we discussed safari stories over drinks. Dinner was another lovely spread of regional cuisine.

### **Fri., Feb. 28: Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve | Safari Drives**

Today we enjoyed both of our safaris in the buffer areas of the park. Unlike other tiger reserves, the buffer zones of Tadoba are still busy areas for tigers. We headed to the Alizanza gate in the morning, which offered us some evergreen patches and a number of *Terminalia sp.* and *Syzygium sp.* trees. They offered refuge to numerous interesting birds like Indian Silverbills, Orange-headed Thrush, Tickell's Blue Flycatcher, Sulphur-bellied Warbler, Greenish Warbler, and a pair of Indian Paradise-Flycatchers. Despite our efforts, we did not come across a tiger or leopard. We were able to add a few new species this morning including: Yellow-footed Green-Pigeons, a few Black-headed Ibises, Red-naped Ibis, Eurasian Spoonbill, and a couple of Painted Storks. After a break at the lodge, we headed to the Belara buffer zone. The landscape in this area was more rocky and strewn with sandstone and basalt rock. It also contained a nice wetland area and large lake that provided a number of good birds including Little Grebe, Gadwall, Green-winged Teal, Northern Pintail, Ruff, Common Redshank, Little Ringed Plover, Pied Kingfisher, Common Kingfisher, Taiga Flycatcher, and a nice Ashy Prinia. On our way to a different area of the lake, Avi spotted several adorably plump Jungle Bush-Quails that were well hidden in the grass. We waited a bit and finally saw movement and watched several of them scurry away.

Birding was suddenly interrupted when we heard alarm calls! We headed to a nearby waterhole, but no luck. We stopped for an afternoon coffee break and then resumed birding. Tina's group found a group of Indian Gray Hornbills when we had a second alert for a tiger. This time it was the resident queen of the area, Veera. She had 15-day old cubs, but, of course, they were too young to be with her. She was drinking at the waterhole and we had wonderful views as she finished drinking and walked right past us and then relaxed in the grassland. It was the perfect end to a great stay that started with a tiger and leopard together and ended with a tiger. We now had two big cats in our bag and now needed the lion and snow leopard!



## **Sat., Mar. 1: Tadoba Andhari Tiger Reserve | Velavadar Grasslands**

We had a very early start at 3:30 AM to drive 2 hours to the Nagpur airport. On the way, Avi spotted a Golden Jackal on the side of the road, which Tina and Nancy also got to see. After dealing with the airport chaos and getting through security, we flew to Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Upon landing, we started our drive to the grasslands in Velavadar with a snack stop enroute. On the way we had some new birds including a group of around twenty Great White Pelicans, Glossy Ibis, and a large flock of over seventy Painted Storks. As we transitioned into the semi-arid landscape, larks and other species started appearing on the wires. We reached Velavadar, which is home to a good population of Indian Gray Wolf, Striped Hyena, and Jungle Cat as well as a large population of Blackbuck (also called Indian Antelope). A large number of raptors migrate from Eastern Europe to Central Asia and we expected to see Pallid Harrier, Montagu's Harrier, Western Marsh Harrier, Black-winged Kite, Tawny Eagle, Short-toed Eagle, and White-eyed Buzzard.

We checked in at the very nice Blackbuck Safari Lodge and enjoyed a lovely lunch where we spotted a Lesser Whitethroat and a White-eared Bulbul just outside the dining room. Afterward, we headed out for an afternoon safari with our enthusiastic and experienced naturalists, Vishwajeet and Girish. We entered the wetland section first, which is not exactly a true wetland, but has a lake with some wetland areas. As we entered the park, Christa noticed a possible bird and when Avi checked, it was a Short-eared Owl! This was our first owl species of the trip and we had great views through the scope.

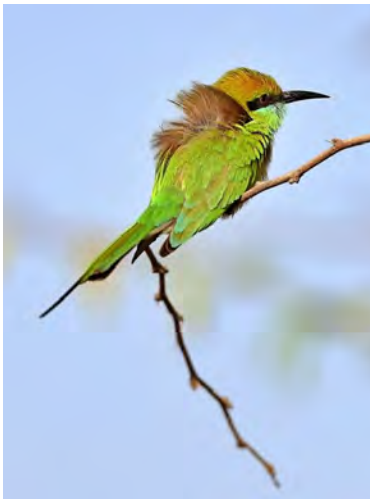
Shortly after the owl, we got our first views of the many Blackbucks we would see here. As we headed further into the park, we soon began to see additional new bird species including a few Pied Avocet, Rufous-tailed and Crested Lark, Ashy-crowned Sparrow-Lark, Common Crane, Siberian Stonechat, and a few others. In the lake area we had Green-winged Teals, Northern Shoveler, Northern Pintail, Gadwall, Eurasian Wigeon, and Eurasian Moorhen. After leaving the wetland section, we crossed the road and entered the grassland section where Christa soon spotted a Jungle Cat - our third wild cat! Then we had a Striped Hyena mother with four young pups and we watched the pups waiting to greet the mother and then suckle as soon as she settled down. It was truly a surreal experience. We also had very good views of all three Harriers - Pallid, Montagu's, and Western Marsh.

We headed back to the lodge and after an early dinner we called it a night to get some rest after a long, but rewarding day.

## **Sun., Mar. 2: Velavadar Grasslands**

We were supposed to head to Gir today, but the honorable Prime Minister Modi had decided to visit Gir National Park for World Wildlife Day, which coincided with our visit and meant we had no lodging or safaris. The





PMO (Prime Minister's Office) had taken over the park and surrounding area due to security reasons so we decided to spend an extra night at the Blackbuck Safari Lodge. Everyone was enjoying the very nice lodge and grounds, so this was not a hard decision. We did a morning safari and added a few species like Steppe Eagle, Greater Spotted Eagle, and even better views of Jungle Cat and Striped Hyena. We looked for Asiatic Gray Wolf, but no luck. It was surprising how much the wolf population had gone down compared to last year. After heading back to the lodge, we enjoyed lunch and a nice break before an optional afternoon safari or birding walk.

Avi, Tina, Nancy, John, and Daryl participated in the afternoon safari while Robert, Christa, Melina, and Laurie stayed on the lodge grounds for a nature and birding walk. Those on the safari enjoyed seeing Greater Flamingos and great views of a Short-eared Owl, while those on the walk found prints of Golden Jackal and Striped Hyena, along with new bird sightings of Spotted Owlet and White-tailed Iora. They also got to visit the organic garden and learned the history of the lodge.

We reconvened at the lodge and had a delicious Kathiyawadi thali dinner that everyone immensely enjoyed.

### **Mon., Mar. 3: Velavadar | Gir Lion Sanctuary**

After a nice breakfast at the lodge, where some indulged in chocolate waffles, we did a short birding walk on the property. We managed to find Clamorous Reed Warbler, Syke's Warbler, and Ashy Prinia, before boarding our bus for the drive to Gir National Park. Along the way, we picked up a few more species including Wire-tailed Swallow, Red-headed Bunting, and Baya Weaver.

We had lunch at a nice little café on the way to our lodge while we waited for the Prime Minister to leave the area. We checked into our alternate lodge, Gir Birding Lodge, which was a bit simpler than the Gir Serai, but had nice grounds and comfortable rooms and a great location close to the park entrance gate. Shortly after settling into our rooms, we headed out for our afternoon safari. This park was much busier than the previous parks we visited and, therefore, it took some time to get our permits and vehicles in order; likely due to the Prime Minister's visit.

The landscape of Gir National Park is 60% teak, which makes it a dry deciduous forest and, since summer had just started, it was very dry and mostly brown. Laurie, Robert, Christa, Daryl, and John ended up with route 2 and saw four owl species - Mottled Wood-Owl, Brown Fish-Owl, Indian Scops-Owl, and the more common Spotted Owlet. They also had great views of eight lions and a leopard. The other vehicle with Avi, Tina, Nancy, and Melina was with route 5 and, although they did not have any new birds, they had a beautiful sighting of two male lions and a female with a small cub. The male walked roaring, with a bit of a limp, and then another male



followed. The female and young cub watched them from a distance and it was a beautiful sighting with just two other vehicles there. As the sun went down, we were treated to hundreds of Indian Flying Foxes taking to the sky for the night. It was quite the sight!

Back at the lodge, we had an early dinner of simple, but delicious Indian fare, then called it a night.

### **Tues., Mar. 4: Gir Lion Sanctuary**

We were in the same vehicles today for both safaris, which were very rewarding. On the way into our routes, both jeeps had views of Indian Nightjar, as it was still a bit dark out. Other nightjars were heard calling. There were multiple sightings of Asiatic Lions (two males and a lioness with cubs). In the afternoon safari, both jeeps met at one point and Laurie had found a leopard! The other vehicle reached it in time to see a failed hunt. Although the lions were not very active, they provided great views along with many bird species we saw. We headed back to the lodge for dinner and had another simple, but well-cooked meal.

### **Wed., Mar. 5: Gir | Rajkot | Delhi**

This morning, we had one last safari. Avi's jeep was in route 2 and saw the four owl species that the other group saw on the first safari. They also had two male lions walking straight toward the jeep, which provided some excitement. We added Yellow-crowned Woodpecker and had good views of multiple other species including Common Tailorbird, White-browed Fantail, and Tickell's Blue Flycatcher. The other jeep had a lioness on her own.

After breakfast, we headed to Rajkot for the flight to New Delhi. On the way, we saw miles of trucks lined up carrying bags of chilis. We also stopped for a lovely lunch of a Gujarati thali with several curries and sweet dishes. We had an uneventful flight to New Delhi and it was back to the Andaz for the night.

### **Thurs., Mar. 6: New Delhi | Leh**

We left the Andaz at 5:30 AM with packed breakfasts and headed back to the airport for our flight to Leh and our pursuit of our fourth big cat in the cold, mountainous landscape of Ladakh!

The flight was fantastic and flew over the snow-clad Himalayas with amazing views. We landed at the airport where it was 10<sup>0</sup> Celcius, quite a difference in temperature than we had experienced until then. Our hotel, the Rewa Ladakh, was a short drive away and we settled in to rest and hydrate in order to acclimate to the high altitude.

### **Fri., Mar. 7: Leh**





Avi had mild AMS symptoms and after a brief early morning visit to the well-organized hospital to receive a saline drip, he met the others who were all feeling fine. After breakfast, the group (minus Avi who stayed back to rest) went with local guide, Stanzin, for some birding. There are a few thousand Stanzins in Ladakh! Here, there are first names only, no surnames. Stanzin (meaning “holder of Bhudda Dharma”) is the name given from His Holiness the Dalai Lama, so there are many Stanzins, both male and female.

We birded along the river for a bit and quickly found an Ibisbill as well as the first of many White-winged Redstarts that we would see. We took a short walk through a field and found Black-headed Mountain Finch, Eurasian Wren, and a few lucky people saw a Red-throated Thrush. We searched for White-browed Tit-Warbler, and although unsuccessful, we did find several Brown Accentors. After some great birding, we headed to the Thiksey Monastery. Everyone made it to the top of the 12-story complex and we enjoyed nice views as well as the beautiful Buddhist art housed there.

We had returned to the hotel for lunch when we received news that a mother Snow Leopard and cub had been spotted in Hemis National Park, about an hour away. Everyone agreed to take the chance to try and see them. Avi stayed back to continue recovery and Tina and the others left with Stanzin. We made it to the stop and trudged up a steep, slippery hill. One unnamed person even made a snow angel. Though the Snow Leopard was quite a distance away, we had nice views through the scopes. Success! We enjoyed tea and cookies and, once it got colder, we headed back down to the cars. On the way back, we stopped and saw a herd of Urial on the mountain slope, just above the road. We also had a viewing of a ‘wolf’ that hilariously turned out to be a feral dog.

We were back at the hotel by early evening and luckily Avi was feeling a bit better. We had a nice, but enormous, dinner at the hotel - we thought the starters were the entire meal. Everyone was stuffed and we had to say no to more food, but not before enjoying some delicious carrot cake and apple pie that Avi picked up at a local bakery.

## **Sat., Mar. 8:      Leh | Uley**

Today was exciting because not only was it Laurie’s birthday, but we got news of another Snow Leopard sighting! We left the hotel in Leh around 8:30 AM. Avi had received news of two different sightings and had to make the tough choice of which set of leopards to try for. A rare problem to have, the decision was between a mother with three cubs and a mating male and female that were about 30 km apart. Avi went with the sighting that was easier to approach, which was the mother and three cubs.





We headed towards Khaltse on a winding uphill road. We reached it in about 2 hours and then went into the folds of the mountains toward the village of Skindiyang and were met by the spotters. Vehicles were parked and the team set up scopes and within minutes we were watching a Snow Leopard with three 9-month old cubs. Initially, we could only see the cubs, but as we looked in disbelief, we saw the mother. She had made a kill of a Urial and the cubs were feeding on it. For the next three hours we were treated to some Snow Leopard drama with the cubs taking turns to feed, sibling arguments, the mother joining them and growling at the cubs, then walking off. It was surreal. Just when being surrounded by the amazing snowy scenery and watching Snow Leopards couldn't get any better, a warm lunch arrived. We enjoyed hot rice, lentils, egg curry, and chocolate bars while watching the three young Snow Leopards polish off the Urial while the mother sat and watched. Unfortunately, Christa was having AMS symptoms, so she and Robert headed back down to a lower elevation in Leh. The rest of the group, except for Avi and Tina, headed to the lodge around 4 PM. The drive to Uley was a bit scary with winding switchbacks and steep drop offs. Avi and Tina spent a little more time with the Snow Leopards and arrived at the lodge around 7 PM. On the way, Morup spotted a Woolly Hare that ran on the road ahead of us for quite a while.

We checked into our rooms and had dinner at 7:30 PM, which was wonderful. We then headed to our rooms where most of us enjoyed a warm sleep after a long, but amazing day.

## **Sun., Mar. 9: Uley | Yangthang**

Our spotters were up early on the vantage point, but there were no sightings in the area. So, we had a slow start to the day with an easy bird walk after breakfast. The weather was cloudy, though, and bird activity was low. A couple of Himalayan Ibexes were spotted up near the ridge as well as a lone Blue Sheep (or Bharal). We managed to find White-winged Redstart, Robin Accentor, Chukar, Asian Tit, and Eurasian Magpie. We also had good views of a Bearded Vulture and a Golden Eagle. We then got in the vehicles and drove down the road a bit and had a sighting of 4 Himalayan Ibexes that were closer than the ones we saw earlier. While relaxing and watching them, Robert and Christa showed up and had seen a Himalayan Wolf on the way back from Leh! We were very happy for them as it was a fairly close sighting.

After time with the Ibex, we drove down to Yangthang and back to the lodge for lunch. We took a break in the afternoon and everyone relaxed. The lodge showed an excellent documentary on the leopards at 6:30 PM, which was followed by another great dinner at 7:30 PM. Then it was time to turn in for bed.



## **Mon., Mar. 10: Uley | Tsermanchan La | Hemis Shukpachan**

We had a leisurely breakfast of delicious porridge, pancakes with honey, fresh fruit, and Indian bread with tea/coffee. We decided to wait a bit and see if we could get a Snow Leopard in the ridgeline of Uley, but that was not to be. It was snowing a bit on and off. Avi had washed some clothes and put them outside to dry and they instead froze in no time! He made better use of the heater in the room.

We went for a bird walk and saw many of the same species as yesterday. We looked again for White-browed Tit-Warbler, but came up empty. Avi had a single Great Rosefinch fly over, but it kept going. Since there was no news of leopards, we moved further down to check the lower pass. We had Nurboo, the owner of the Shan at Uley lodge, with us. The spotters started scanning at the pass and found a Himalayan Wolf. Scopes were put on it and then a second one appeared not too long after. We positioned ourselves, with expert guidance from Nurboo, and waited. We were aptly rewarded for our patience as one wolf walked in our direction and came really close, offering fabulous views. The second wolf went up the mountain and kept watching us from a distance after the other one had disappeared. We watched them through scopes while enjoying tea and coffee. We then headed back to the lodge for a wonderful lunch with Ladakhi options like Chutagi, Gyathuk, and Momos.

After a bit of rest, we went up to the roof as a Red Fox had been spotted and was in the scope. While watching the fox, news came in about a pair of Snow Leopards in the village of Hemis Shukpachan. Avi, Tina, Nancy, Daryl, and John immediately got ready and left for the village while the others decided to stay back. We took a quick, exhilarating, curvy, downhill drive just in time for the drama to unfold. There was quite the crowd already there with scopes and cameras set up. A mother and sub-adult cub were up the hill on a ridge. The mother was definitely seeking rest, but the cub got up after a very elaborate cleaning process (licking paws and underbelly- a clear sign that a kill was finished recently). It started walking and nudged the mother to get up, too. Both walked, stopping occasionally to watch us, for the next 15-20 minutes. They went to the other side of the mountain and we were able to see just one glimpse of them sitting together on the peak before we headed back to the lodge. It was a surreal moment to see Snow Leopards within just two days of arrival at the lodge. The sightings were not in, but nearby, the village, and it showed how a bit of conservation effort and awareness can allow cats and people to cohabitate in a peaceful way.

We returned to the lodge and enjoyed snow leopard conversations over a nice dinner.

## **Tues., Mar. 11: Uley | Hemis Shukpachan**

The weather was cloudy again today with heavy snowfall in the surrounding areas. Visibility was very poor and there was no point in driving out to look for anything, so we relaxed at the lodge and waited for better weather.





After lunch, we headed to Hemis Shukpachan to explore the Juniper grove and look for birds. Birding was a bit slow, but we found Horned Larks, Brown Accentors, Eurasian Wrens, and a lone Golden Eagle. After some coffee and tea in the village, we headed back to the lodge for another lovely dinner.

### **Wed., Mar. 12: Uley | Leh**

The weather was cloudy and appeared it would not clear anytime soon so we decided to head back to Leh. We left after breakfast, driving slowly and birding along the way. We found a large flock of Mongolian Finch, Plain Mountain Finch, a few Great Rosefinch, Twite, Horned Lark, and what possibly were some Greater Short-toed Larks. Golden Eagles also flew by, but very high up. We arrived back in Leh at the Rewa Ladakh and settled into our rooms and rested a bit.

After lunch, Avi, Tina, Laurie, and John decided to go birding while others went shopping. The birders headed to marshes in Spitok and it was very windy! Our main target was White-browed Tit-Warbler, a small but very colorful bird that had thus far eluded us. As we approached the riverside, a few birds flew in and Tina called out “that’s a Tit-Warbler!” The birds were initially shy, but they eventually gave us great views and everyone was happy to finally get this species in the bag. It was getting really windy, so we left and headed back to the lodge and met up with the shopping group for dinner.

### **Thurs., Mar. 13: Leh | Main Tour Departures**

Our main trip ended today and we had to say goodbye to Laurie, Melina, and Nancy. They headed to the airport for their flight to Delhi and the rest of the group continued to Hanle in eastern Ladakh for the Pallas’s Cat extension. This area is colder and higher than Leh, but the drive from Leh to Hanle is possibly one of the most spectacular drives in Ladakh.

## **Pallas’s Cat Extension: March 13-19, 2025**

**Guides Avijit (Avi) Sarkhel and Tina Greenawalt with 4 participants:**

**Robert, Christa, John, Daryl**

### **Thurs., Mar. 13: Leh | Main Tour Departures | Hanle**

Our main trip ended today and we had to say goodbye to Laurie, Melina, and Nancy. They headed to the airport for their flight to Delhi and the rest of the group continued to Hanle in eastern Ladakh for the Pallas’s Cat extension. This area is colder and higher than Leh, but the drive from Leh to Hanle is possibly one of the most spectacular drives in Ladakh.



We drove from Leh to Kairi, where we had a coffee/tea break with some delicious samosas. We then continued on to Chumathang and had lunch by the sulphur hot spring before entering into Mahe where our permits were checked. We then started our journey to Loma and Nyoma and eventually arriving in Hanle. On the way, we picked up a pair of Bearded Vultures (possibly mating), a few Upland Buzzards, many Horned Larks, a few Tibetan Larks, and a number of Tibetan Wild Ass (also known as Kiang). We also saw some Ruddy Shelducks, a few Bar-headed Geese that must have just arrived after their flight above the Himalayas, and some Common Mergansers that were playfully diving in and out of the cold water.

We finally reached our very simple lodge as it was getting dark and found that it was much colder than expected and the lodge was not prepared for that. Extra heaters and blankets were put in each room and Avi put his heater in Robert and Christa's room. We had an early dinner and retired to our rooms to try and stay warm.

### **Fri., Mar. 14: Hanle**

We were up early and after a quick breakfast, we headed out to look for Pallas's Cat around the village. After also checking for the Tibetan Sand Fox and Tibetan Wolf without any luck, we drove about an hour to an area where Pallas's Cat were expected. The haze was very high and we could not find a cat. We did see a few Tibetan Larks, Ground Tit (previously known as Hume's Groundpecker), and Upland Buzzards. We also found a Bearded Vulture on a Tibetan Wild Ass kill. We scanned through the morning, but still no cat. Robert and Christa decided to head back to Leh where it was warmer. The rest of us - Avi, Tina, John, and Daryl - continued on.

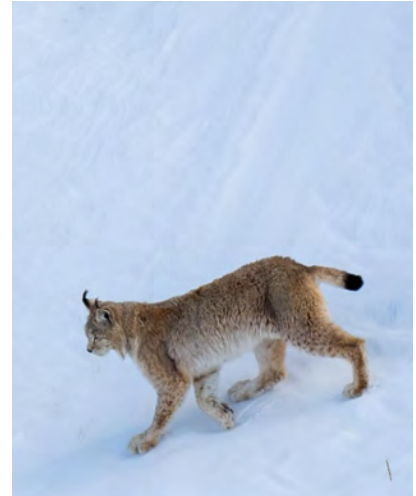
In the afternoon, not too far from the lodge, we saw a pair of wolves. They had failed on a Wild Ass hunt and were now regrouping. We saw them really well later when we returned to the lodge. Afterward, we had a pair of Tibetan Sand Foxes and saw the male well. We watched through the scope as it hunted voles. Back at the lodge, we had a nice, hot dinner and then turned in for the night.

### **Sat., Mar. 15: Hanle | Leh**

We were up early again and John and Daryl had decided to head to Leh today. After a quick check on John's preferences for sightings, we headed high up on a spectacular drive to Norbu La pass (17,328 feet). The drive was amazing and we saw a small herd of Goa (or Tibetan Gazelle) as well as over 100 Tibetan Sandgrouse. We stopped for a nice breakfast of hot porridge, toast, and coffee/tea, which was probably the highest altitude breakfast most of us had experienced! Our team, led by Nawang and super guide Namgyal Raja, kept us happy. We were well looked after, thanks to them.

We reached Norbu La where a Woolly Hare welcomed us. Incidentally, we were next to China and the mountains we were looking at were in China. We spent some time at the pass and then headed back downhill.





We had great views at a Plateau Pika on the way. We then reached the lodge, packed up, and headed back to Leh. We met up with Robert and Christa for dinner.

### **Sun., Mar. 16: Leh | Shang Valley**

We had a nice breakfast at the hotel and left for the Shang Valley, a spectacular area where the Eurasian plate met the Gondwana plate and the mountains go almost vertically up with a dark pink color and high deposit of Jasper in them. It was a great area for Robert in particular, who has always been interested in geology and rocks. He was very happy to be in an area he had read about, but never visited. He shared his knowledge of the various rocks by picking up specimens and we were all very happy to learn from him.

Our main goal in this area was the very colorful Tibetan Partridge and we were extremely happy when Raja picked up a number of them in Gya, one of the oldest villages in Ladakh. This village was present before the Namgyal dynasty ruled Ladakh and we saw some very old houses there. Besides the partridge, we had great views of Black-headed Mountain Finch and Black-winged Snowfinch along with distant views of Argali and some up-close views of Blue Sheep.

We then headed to Camp Kharu, a really nice café on the Indus River, for a delicious lunch. We then headed for a special surprise, for Robert in particular. Avi was able to get the Rock Museum opened (run by Phunchok Angchok), so we were all treated to nice examples of the rocks and minerals of Ladakh. Phunchok walked us around and after that special visit we headed back to the hotel.

### **Mon., Mar. 17: Leh | Wari La**

We enjoyed a leisurely morning at the hotel, then the group would head to a nearby restaurant for lunch and then on to Wari La, a famous pass that connects Leh to Nubra Valley, while awaiting news. In the last few days, a Eurasian Lynx family had made this area even more famous. A male, female, and three cubs had been in the area for more than two weeks and sightings of this incredibly rare cat had become possible. After lunch experiencing street food in Karu, we then received the news of the Lynx sighting and rushed up to the area. When we arrived, there were other cars and people there and we quickly found the Lynx happily sleeping on a rock. We had great views through the scope. It was hard to believe our luck in seeing this rare cat! It then got up and walked not far from us and disappeared into a gully. Tina, who wasn't feeling well earlier, met us and was lucky to see it just in time when it was up and walking. We enjoyed great views before it disappeared again. How exciting!



We headed back to the hotel and enjoyed some local wine with our dinner of rice, lentils, and chicken curry. Avi had a plan for the next day – a quick day trip to Hanle to try again for the Pallas's Cat. Avi was keen to have everyone see it and John and Tina agreed to the plan. So off to bed we went to prepare for a very early departure the next morning!

## **Tues., Mar. 18:    Leh | Hanle**

At the stroke of 3:00 AM, our fearless driver, Nawang, guide Raja, Avi, Tina, and John left Leh. A speedy drive to Hanle meant we arrived around 6:15 AM. Avi started scanning and by 7:00 AM he found one! It was fantastic with no haze and a clear view of the cat. We were the only people there. Meanwhile, Nawang heard possibly the first Black-necked Crane that had even come in that morning from Bhutan and later got nice views of one. After some time with the Pallas's Cat, we moved on and Raja quickly found a second cat! This one was a bit further back and younger. Two Pallas's Cats in 45 minutes! Nawang then saw four wolves. He has great eyes! One of the wolves was partially melanistic. We had had a great time and turned to head back for Leh, but not before adding Great Rosefinch, Twite, and Nubra Pika. We had a late breakfast at Nyoma village and continued to Leh with a stop near Kesar for a group of Ladakh Urial right off the road. Closer to Leh, news of the Lynx came in, so we detoured back toward Wari La and had great views of the Lynx polishing off a Woolly Hare (it's favorite food). We finally headed back to the hotel and joined the group for a final celebratory dinner with a great Ladakhi dinner.

## **Wed., Mar. 19:    Leh | New Delhi**

After breakfast, we found out we were on an earlier flight and had to leave earlier than expected for the airport. We quickly gathered our belongings and headed out. We landed in Delhi around 1 PM. Robert and Christa headed to the Holiday Inn at the airport while John and Daryl went to the Pride Plaza in Aerocity. Tina went to Avi's house and enjoyed a delicious lunch prepared by Avi's wife, Monika, before heading back to the airport around 6:30 PM. This concluded an absolutely epic trip!

*Photos: Asiatic Lion (Nancy Siepman - NS), Jungle Cat (Tina Greenawalt - TG), Indian Peafowl (NS), Tiger (NS), Brown Fish Owl (NS), Tiger (NS), Langur (NS), Leopard (TG), Indian Roller (TG), Oriental Honey-buzzard (NS), Ruddy Mongoose (TG), Purple-rumped Sunbird (NS), Rose-ringed Parakeet (NS), Gray Francolin (NS), Striped Hyena (TG), Asian Green Bee-eater (NS), Spotted Owlet (NS), Wolf (TG), Snow Leopard (TG), Tibetan Sandgrouse (TG), Lynx (TG), Ibex (NS), Pika (TG), Blue Sheep (TG), Lynx (TG), Pallas' Cat (TG)*