

Chapter 13

A Post-Modern Introduction To Wildlife In The Indian Trans-Himalaya

J.L. Fox

The stories of William Stockley, Kinloch and other travelers of a century or more ago painted a romantic view of the hunting adventures and wildlife species encountered in the highlands of central Asia and Trans-Himalaya. The world has changed dramatically since those days and my own experience has been a curious mixture that could be termed a “post-modern” traveler’s glimpse of and the initiation of a conservation movement in the trans-Himalaya – actually, just some occasional views of these changes through a foreigner’s eyes. Following the exploits of the British and other western hunters in the last century various military actions coupled with general increases in road access and firearm technology have rendered the widespread wildlife but a remnant of its former abundance. Species of the most inaccessible areas, such as blue sheep and in places ibex, probably did not have significant population reductions in those sites. But others such as the Ladakh urial, Tibetan gazelle, Tibetan argali were heavily hunted. Today, with hunting restrictions, we are apparently seeing a recovery of some of these wild ungulate populations, for example the Ladakh urial along the Indus and both blue sheep and ibex in accessible parts of their range, as well as the return of a few gazelle in eastern Ladakh. But in general for ungulates of the open highlands, a modernising animal husbandry leaves little room for species

of the plains and open hills (such as gazelle, argali, wild yak). The conservation of these will require significant commitment on the part of government and conservation organisations in partnership with local communities. Attitudes towards these wild ungulate species have begun to change over the course of 30 years since I first began working in the Himalayan region.

During the summer of 1974, I was on vacation in the Kashmir valley, after a couple years working with Nepal’s National Parks Department, when suddenly the northern region of Ladakh opened to foreign visitors. I quickly arranged a trip to Leh and its surroundings. Mr. A.R.Wani, then an officer in the Wildlife Department in Srinagar had just provided me the necessary permits and advice for a short fishing trip I took to lakes above Sonamarg, and he now helped arrange for me to meet with Mr. Desh Paul, the Wildlife Range Officer in Leh. Desh Paul was still overseeing what was essentially a series of trans-Himalayan hunting reserves originally designated by the British, and he took pride in noting when the last argali or ibex were taken by a foreign hunter in the different reserves. Over many glasses of *chang* in his house in Leh, Desh Paul and I discussed at length the distribution and abundance of the various *ridaks* or mountain wildlife of Ladakh. Guided by local forest officers, I



took some short hikes in the mountains around Leh; I had my first taste of the central Asian highlands.

It took some time, during which I completed graduate training at universities in the US, but a little over 10 years later I had the good fortune to participate in a snow leopard survey project with the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) that involved extensive travel in India's three northwestern Himalayan states and a solid introduction to the wild ungulates of the region. That short trip to Ladakh in 1974 presaged a long involvement with wildlife research and conservation in the region, and today, as I begin to write this in Dehra Dun, WII is embarking on a new collaborative program with my university in Norway to further investigate and provide a foundation for conservation of India's mountain ungulates.

Snow leopard survey project : I remember especially vividly the arrival at our first camp for the survey project in Ladakh. After a late start from Srinagar one mid-November day we drove through the night past Kargil and up the Suru valley, finally past midnight searching for the selected site at about 4,000 m in the valley, rustling up several foxes and hares in the vehicle lights before finally settling in near a small village on a wide portion of the alluvial flats of the upper valley. The next day we drove with WII Director Mr. H.S. Panwar up to the end of the Suru valley at Pensila Pass to have a look into Zaskar proper. Now on we were left to our own devices at our basecamp near the village of Zulidok. Sathya Sinha, Raghu Chundawat, Palav Das and myself were to spend the next 9-months surveying northern Jammu & Kashmir, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh for the snow leopard and its prey. The field

camp we had searched for on the first night was a recently constructed PWD rest house, which unfortunately did not provide the best start to life in the high trans-Himalaya. We had brought with us several kerosene burning *bukhari* stoves for heating, but with the strong winds in the valley blowing down the smoke pipes, the stoves would constantly "backfire" and fill up our rooms with thick black kerosene smoke that sorely tested one's breathing ability at that elevation. So we would have to air out the place and be back to freezing temperatures again; not a pleasant task in the middle of the night. The living conditions there were quite uncomfortable, but we did get our first look at fresh snow leopard sign (tracks in the snow) and could observe herds of ibex every day. In the Ichoo nallah behind our camp we could observe a good population of nearly a hundred ibex, and by the time we left were treated each morning to the displays of rutting ibex on the slopes just adjacent to our camp. We stayed in Zulidok until the second half of December, when after the first heavy snowfall of the season, we plowed our way down-valley through the snow to be met near Panamik by Alok Chandola, who was co-ordinating the logistics for our surveys, and who had trekked up through the snow some distance to meet us.

From there, we were moved off by Chandola and his crew in COLD airy jeeps to the drier and less snow-covered Leh district, we found more suitable conditions for searching the wild ungulates and their predator the snow leopard. Mr. Chering Nurbu, Wildlife Range officer at that time in Leh, took us to the Shang valley, arranged a daring January crossing for us of the Kongmaru pass into the upper Markha valley, where we saw several hundred bharal or blue sheep and a few



more "very recent" signs of snow leopard, as well as signs of wolf and lynx. Subsequently, I was fortunate enough to take several journeys in the mountains with Mr. Nurbu and learned much from his extensive knowledge of Ladakhi wildlife in his enjoyable company.

But as we had still not seen one of these elusive snow leopards, we decided to try again among the abundant ibex of the upper Suru Valley, this time in February. Here Raghu Chundawat made his first valiant attempts at skiing. He has subsequently gotten a little more practice in Norway when we skied about 10 km into a field research cabin used as a base for studies on reindeer and their predators, but here we wanted to see if we could use these skis to travel around in the upper Suru valley in late winter when there is about 1 metre of snow on the ground. It quickly became clear that although we could negotiate the deep snowpack on our skis, any attempt to have local help in portering up needed supplies along the snow-covered trail was not practical. We abandoned our ski journey and returned to Leh. We immediately left for the Markha valley and were rewarded with our first snow leopard sighting within just a few days. At a seasonal grazing site known as Chaluk, we came across two young girls herding their goats and sheep, and observed a snow leopard kill several of their stock. Although these cats depend primarily on the abundant bharal in this area, snow leopards do take some livestock, especially during winter.

We concluded that the central Ladakh areas of the Zaskar range held the best snow leopard populations of all the areas we visited throughout northwest India. One such site, in the Rumbak catchment just southwest of Leh, was chosen for

continued work, from which Raghu Chundawat eventually received his PhD. Raghu has gone on to distinguish himself in the study of tigers in central India, but retains a keen interest and actively supports conservation in the trans-Himalaya. In the meantime a new crop of young biologists at WII and elsewhere has been inspired by this early work and studies on many aspects of wildlife and ecology have been initiated there. It has also been a pleasure to see others at WII become interested in the high Himalaya and trans-Himalaya. And with support from the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the International Snow Leopard Trust various WII faculty are endeavouring to survey a wide variety of flora and fauna and flora, thus beginning to flesh out a comprehensive view of biodiversity for Ladakh.

Today, I have the pleasure of continuing to work with both veterans and newcomers at WII in some co-operative initiatives in the mountains. Through a generous educational grant program in Norway, I was able to support the graduate education of the first Ladakhi masters student in wildlife ecology, Mr. Tsewang Namgail, who will continue to work with our co-operative program as he prepares for bigger things. Norway, through its NORAD-funded international institutional co-operation program, has just begun supporting the formalisation of continued research co-operation between my university and WII in high Himalayan and Trans-Himalayan wildlife research and conservation. And I look forward to see even more students and faculty develop an interest in the mountain regions.

India has designated a number of wildlife sanctuaries in the trans-Himalayan region of Ladakh. The area is developing rapidly,



tourism is becoming an important industry, and a modernisation of livestock husbandry is underway. Wild species of the high open rangelands will be most affected by these developments. If conservation of the wild ungulates, their predators and other species is to be a serious goal for India in this region, then appropriate measures needs to be taken.

At least in some areas of the high plains, application of tourist interest in Tibetan plateau ecosystems and wildlife, coupled with livestock development interventions appropriate to wildlife conservation can be a key to reaching this goal. We hope to help our bit in the provision of a research-based foundation for these conservation initiatives.

