

Adventurer Gavin Lautenbach took on the biting cold of the Himalayas in search of one of the rarest wildlife sightings in the world: the snow leopard.

Searching for the Himalayan Ghost

Our journey to discover the snow leopard, one of the planet's most elusive animals, began in Delhi, India, home to the second-largest urban area on Earth with a population of 26 million – a stark contrast to the remoteness of our next stop in the Himalayas.

The flight North to Leh takes just over an hour and is spectacular, offering views of the vast peaks of K2, Nanga Parbat, Gasherbrum, and the Nun Kun massif. The old-worldliness of the destination suggests that one might well have travelled a century back in time. Gone is the Delhi chaos of modernity, and this quaint town with its incredible mountainous backdrop quite literally took my breath away.

At an altitude of some 3,524 m above sea level, this settlement provides the ideal place to acclimatise to the rarefied air of the Northern Indian mountains – and acclimatise one must, as soon the journey takes one even higher into the foothills of the Himalayas. Leh is also relatively mild (using the word mild with tongue firmly in a chilly cheek) as temperatures here dip to just below zero – nothing compared to what we were venturing into.

After a day in Leh exploring the temple-lined streets of this predominantly Buddhist settlement, the level of excitement was palpable to begin the actual search to find that ghost – the elusive snow leopard. The gentle exploratory strolling around the village was surprisingly fatiguing, and I was reminded of the need for a decent level of fitness for this expedition.

Thankfully, the amazing Himalayan packhorses tasked with transporting the gear ensured that the effort of walking was all we needed to worry about as the party ventured further north the following day.

The one thing that certainly requires serious preparation, both mentally and with regards to your choice of equipment, is the cold. This is Himalayan cold – at night, everything freezes, from your toothpaste to your toilet paper. Keeping warm in the small tents is difficult, but critical.

Back to our ghost search, it was to the rocky mountains that the spotting

scopes were aimed every day, following the movements of the blue sheep (bharal) and ibex. Heavy snows push these two prey species further down the mountain slopes, and this weather happenstance provides a much increased chance of spotting the rare cat on the hunt on the lower rocky slopes.

The smoky grey snow leopards are slightly smaller than their African counterparts, typically weighing between 35 kg and 55 kg, with the male cats considerably larger than the females. The elusive cats are found in the mountains across much of central Asia, with an estimated population of between 4,000 and 6,500 roaming these high-altitude mountains.

These beautiful creatures have thick fur coats, enabling them to survive the cold conditions of their mountainous home, and an exceptionally long tail, which aids in balance. They also use their tails like a scarf to keep their face warm during snowstorms. These leopards have large paws, which act like snowshoes, distributing their weight and helping them to skilfully traverse the powder and ice. The stocky feline's short, strong legs – a distinguishing feature – aid with their leaping. Like all leopards, these cats are very agile and can easily clear a 20-foot gap in a single leap.

A starting point for the search for the rarely sighted snow leopard is the realisation that one may spend seven cold and somewhat uncomfortable days without so much as glimpsing a cat. As with all wilderness experiences, there is no guarantee of ultimate success, but the journey and the search is a success all of its own – something to be relished and celebrated, too.

In order to make the most of a trip to the Himalayas to spot a snow leopard, one needs to ensure that one has all the proper equipment – everything from the warmest of clothes to a quality spotting scope. And, of course, a decent camera to capture the special moments.

Spotting one of these cats is a life-changing experience, a truly "lump-in-throat" moment and, no matter how many of these gorgeous animals you are fortunate enough to spot, it will never replicate the

excitement of that first sighting. They blend so incredibly well into their environment that it takes a bit of blinking to be sure that what you are looking at is indeed the ghost – the snow leopard, one of the rarest wildlife sightings in the world.

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Accommodation
During the Search

I led a Mammoth Safaris expedition for a week to spot a snow leopard. The tents are small and of the "crawl in" design and are thus quite cramped, but provide much-needed shelter from the biting winds and gently falling snow. Any bigger and the loss of heat would be too significant. Comfortable mattresses and a welcoming hot water bottle make them a very pleasant place to retire to after a busy day of spotting and hiking. The encampment is a cluster of these tents, all pitched closely together – the closeness provides further communal protection against the elements. The facilities and ablutions, while very basic, are more than adequate for a fairly comfortable stay. Given the altitude, biting cold, and sometimes relentless snow, one shouldn't expect to be comfortable all the time – there is an expected amount of discomfort to be endured to enjoy the privilege of glimpsing one of the rarest sights in the natural world amidst some of the most incredible scenery. For more information on how to book your Mammoth Safari to search for wilderness, adventure, and that elusive snow leopard, contact info@mammothsafaris.com and visit www.mammothsafaris.com for more information.