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Snow Leopard Expedition

Spiti Valley

Jan - Mar 2020





Field report of stay in Spiti Valley to spot, photograph and cater to our guests for the Grey Ghost!

Satisfaction!

There is no better feeling than having your guests listen to the encouragement and making the effort to brave the cold and the hike in hostile conditions and getting their target species!

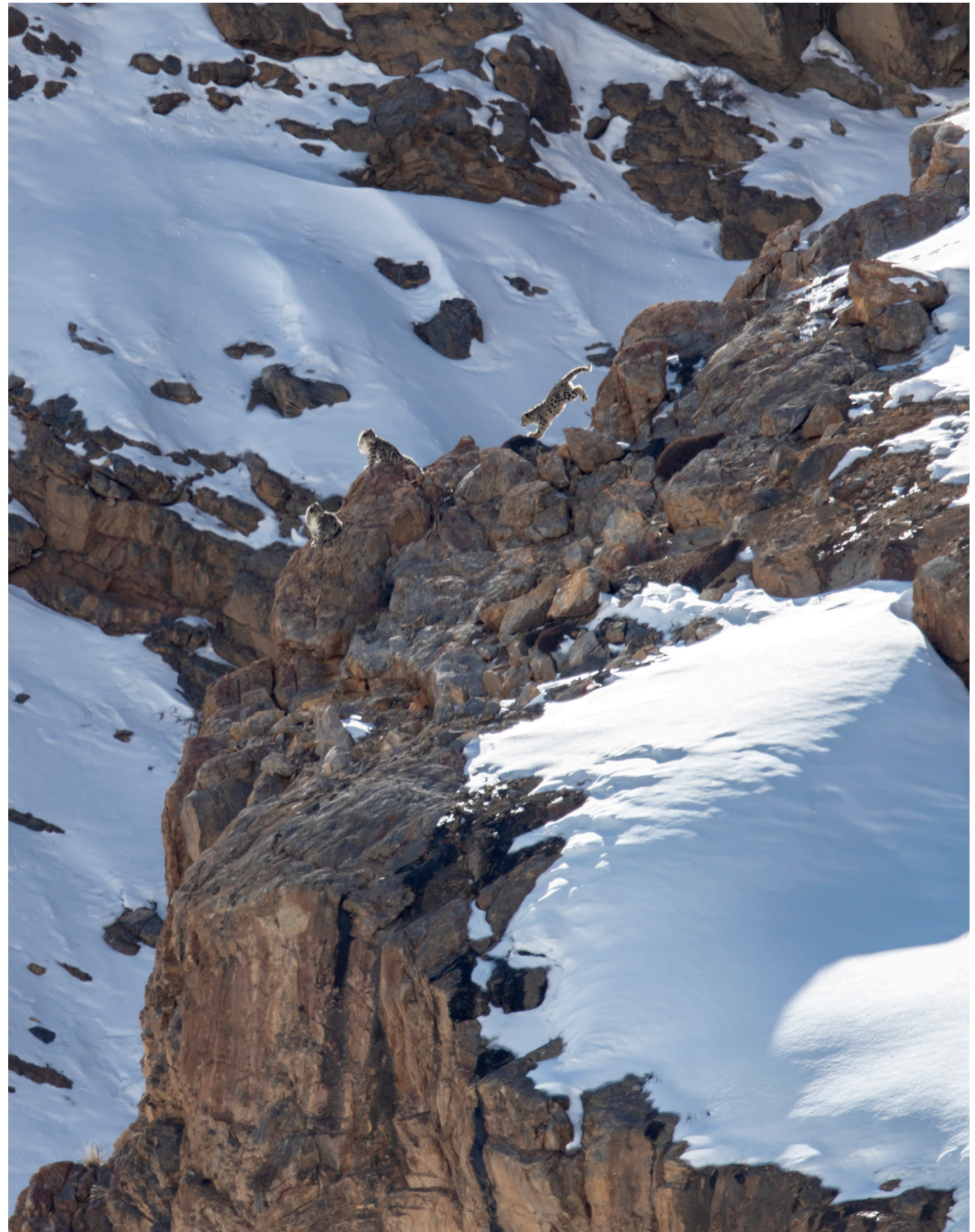
The feeling about the trip!

The anxiety, nervousness, excitement, apprehension, expectation, survival, are some of feelings one experiences when pursuing this expedition! I, being a nature and wildlife photographer as well, have experienced all these feelings up there!

As the popularity of Spiti Valley winter trips started picking up, I had to prepare in a certain way to maintain socially responsible and financially viable tourism for our company as well as the guests & the locals who work with us and their families. Even the village where we stay needs to have a feeling of appreciation and monetary help! With such thoughts in mind, one hopes that the season goes well.

Luckily, Spiti Valley has a long and wide network of conservation efforts from a few well known Non Government organisations and the Forest department of the state. This has led to young trained spotters knowing wide range of the terrain and discovering the wildlife's favourite spots! To find a Snow Leopard can many times be like finding a needle in a hay stack!

One has to be aware of so many issues that people expect to be taken care of! The uniqueness of the image, the distance from the wildlife, the sunrise & sunset, the field trip duration, the fitness & the cold!





Every year, I go a few days ahead before the guests arrive in Spiti so all the arrangements for the 2 or 3 months are completed as once the trips begin, it is very hard to take care of the issues on the spot. Each year, the prediction of the snowfall or avalanches falls apart and one has to reorganise right away. Therefore, if one doesn't have all the issues and back up of the facilities arranged from the start, it becomes very difficult to arrange anything! Remember, each way is 2 days plus from a big city!

From having guests where in a group, the average age is 70 years to having a photography workshop group, one has to learn to cater accordingly. All have to be satisfied for the humongous effort and courage put up by the guests. From age to finances to health and competitiveness, I have to be sincere and satisfying in my services while giving enough distance to their group leader to carry out his or her duties!



One especially notable was this 87 year old 5 feet tall Japanese lady who had come with her son. The son was a photography tour operator and was very well traveled in the world. He wasn't particularly worried about her and I could see why! She would do everything on her own in the home stay! We were amazed at her will power and energy! When she was out in the field, she would ask the porter to carry her as she didn't want to miss out on the sighting! And with her determination and good luck, she got a sighting from the road!! Isn't that amazing for her and the organisers!?

There were some guests who said that they had to save for some time to afford this trip while others had to rent equipment to make this trip a memorable one! In the end, the discussion is that no matter who your guest is, they have to be given a 100% value as it is not an easy situation for anyone!

Some of our guests are very well known personalities in the wildlife circle who mesmerised the rest in the group with their stories and knowledge. Such people when they join us up there, is twice the pleasure of hospitality! It is even more satisfying when they compliment you on your whole setup!

Then there are some who fall sick. High altitude & upset stomach are common issues faced by some. Even though one is advised to have Diamox before the commencement of the trip, some don't take or take a reduced dose and either are ok or get a little lightheaded! I have to then make sure that their Oxygen saturation is maintained and oxygen cylinder is full and near them! Make sure that a vehicle is close by in case one has to be taken to a lower altitude city! In case of an upset stomach, I have to make sure that ORS is available for fluid rehydration and medicines are available to control the condition! Sometimes guests get sprains and bruises and one has to prepare accordingly!

Another issue is the food preference! While some are very easy going, many people have personal and religious preferences and don't eat enough on this tough expedition which is not what an organiser wants! We speak with the group leader ahead of time in case such issue is there so when they arrive at the home stay, adequate arrangements are made for the guests' meal preferences (to the best of our abilities in that remote location). Many are happy to try local food and fall in love with it!



Another problem which is actually a major problem is the disposal of plastic water bottles. It is accepted that many people have a personal choice of only trusting sealed water bottles. One can't just force them to have boiled and filtered local water when they can bring their own or buy plastic water bottles. What we can do is insist on giving or them bringing reusable hard bottles so we can refill for them in the home stay and not let any plastic bottle get out! The locals either reuse the bottles for their own needs or sell it as recycle to the local collector! Being very strict about no use of plastic bottles and the guest feeling that he or she will get sick from drinking local water is a blame no one will accept or understand! So we came to this solution! It is satisfying for me that at least we are not causing any permanent damage to the surroundings!

The groups are co-ordinated in such a way that when one group comes in the previous group leaves a day earlier. This keeps all the local lads and women busy throughout the month! Breaking the rhythm lowers the daily habit of going in the field and spotting the Snow leopard or at least try spotting it as well as other species! Many days when Snow leopard is not seen, one has to show the other species so the guests are always occupied with something to do!

Another interesting event there is that when someone gets sick in the group or there is no Snow leopard sighting, the Devta ji (local healer) is called upon to come offer prayer and wish for the group to have better chances to spot the Snow leopard. Now I am not a pure believer of any cosmic traditions but he has never been wrong in all these years! It changes one's perspective on how the world works! Also one helps the local community as the offerings by us goes to the trust that he runs for the village!

There is also a village trust that each guest's package has a share of and it is used for betterment of the villagers and the village. It ends up as a substantial amount at the end of the season.

The Forest department also charges for camera use and we are happy to support them as whatever encouragement they can get, we must be a part of it!

In the end, I want to share is that for years, people talked about very hostile conditions to see the Grey Ghost but now with better connectivity and infrastructure, comfortable and secure way has come about to strike off an important event in your bucket list!

Each year comes with its own challenges and this year we have the mother of all challenges, the PANDEMIC! As the world grasps with this with more knowledge and procedures are implemented, we look forward to a super **Snow Leopard Season 2021!**

