



The 17th century Hanle monastery located on the ancient trade route that once linked Ladakh with Tibet



Liktsey Village

Liktsey is a corruption of the Ladakhi word *Laytsa*, which means a hamlet at the base of a pass. It lies 70kms from Leh and 110kms from Nyoma, the block headquarters. Liktsey is the first of four villages in the Rong Valley that are part of our *Himalayan Homestays* programme. It has a monastery, a high school and a hospital, and is known for its carpet weavers. There are 28 families residing here, of which six offer homestays.

In the high pastures above the village are two lakes – Tso Gongma and Tso Yogma – where you may spot migratory Ruddy Shelducks in summer. Not far is the Phuchenmo glacier, which is worth a visit. In the vicinity, you may spot blue sheep, argalis, marmots, pikas, golden eagles and lammergeier and if you're lucky, the elusive carnivores – wolves, wild dogs, Pallas's cats, red foxes and snow leopards. This is also a good habitat for otters and lynx.

Himalayan Homestays At A Glance

Himalayan Homestays have been set up in 4 villages in the Rong Valley in the Changthang region of eastern Ladakh to generate livelihoods for herders, which will help offset their livestock losses to snow leopards and other predators. This is an effort to reduce human-wildlife conflict and improve community-based conservation in the valley.

Spearheaded by the Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust (SLC-IT), the project is in collaboration with Nature Conservation Foundation (NCF) and supported by the Royal Bank of Scotland Foundation (RBS-F).

The four villages offering homestays along the banks of the River Indus are **Liktsey** (70kms SE of Leh), **Tukla** (72kms SE of Leh), **Hemya** (80kms SE of Leh) and **Kesar** (135kms SE of Leh).

Highlights include breathtaking vistas of the Rong Valley gorge through which the Indus flows, as well as lush sedge-meadows. To the east are pristine lakes and important wetlands that support a host of rare wildlife such as snow leopards, Tibetan wild ass, Tibetan gazelles and Black-necked Cranes.

Himalayan Homestays Provide You With:

- A unique opportunity to stay with local people in their traditional homes in remote villages and share their culture while trekking through the rugged habitat of the elusive and
- Boiled spring water to drink
- A chance to enjoy the rhythm of daily life in hamlets where farming & livestock herding has been a way of life for centuries
- A clean, comfortable room with a candle or solar light, furnished in Ladakhi style with clean blankets - you may wish to carry a sleeping liner
- Traditional Ladakhi meals cooked hygienically using eco-friendly methods
- A clean, traditional, dry-composting toilet
- Refreshing solar heated shower in Kesar village
- Trained nature guides in Liktsey, Tukla, Hemya and Kesar for wildlife viewing



Mahe Monastery



Tukla Village

Tukla is a picturesque village tucked away in the Rong Valley. It lies 72kms southeast of Leh and 5kms north of Liktsey with about 300 people in 28 households. Its name derives from the six mountain passes in its vicinity - *tuk* meaning “six” and *la* meaning “pass”. Since 2013, six households have joined the *Himalayan Homestays* programme. Tukla has a middle school and a hospital, and is known for its barley production and carpet weaving. The 5,310m (17,421ft) Tukla peak lies south of the village and the Gongma and Yogma lakes are nearby.

Tukla's monastery (*gonpa*) is a prototype of the famous Chemray *gonpa*, and houses the pillar of the revered Lama Stagsang within. Other sights include an ancient cave at Zongnag, five *lathos* (see entry on 'Buddhist Heritage'), the Changchub stupa (*chorten*) and two ancient Juniper trees called *stakmos*. This is a good habitat for the rare Ibex, with its beautiful scimitar-shaped horns. Look for small groups high on the mountain ridges.

Fast Facts

Best Time to Visit: The best season is summer (May-Sep), after which it gets cold. However, the best snow leopard sightings are between Jan–Mar. Contact SLC-IT for snow leopard spotting trips and winter treks led by trained naturalists.

Temperature: Summer temperatures can go up to 28–32 degrees Celsius and winter temperatures can dip down to –16 and – 25 degrees Celsius.

Altitude: Leh lies at 3,524m (11,562ft) above sea level. The average altitude of villages in the Rong Valley is 4,000m (approx. 13,000ft). Two days of proper rest and acclimatization in Leh is essential before travelling out.

Trekking Grade: Moderate to strenuous.

Gear: Day and night time temperatures vary, so both cotton and warm clothes are necessary. Carry full-sleeved t-shirts, warm jackets, good trekking shoes, *all personal medications*, camera, sun hat, warm inners, sunglasses, sunscreen, a bottle to refill water and snacks like dried apricots and nuts.

Bus Service: Buses run from Leh to Nyoma daily except sunday.

Emergency: There are medical facilities at Tukla, Liktsey, Hemya, Kesar and Chumathang. If you experience severe altitude sickness, it is best to return to Leh to the **Sonam Norbu Memorial Hospital** (01982-252360, 252014).

Permits: Foreign nationals require **protected area permits** to visit certain 'restricted/protected areas' including Nyoma, Tso Kar, Tso Moriri and all areas east of Upshi. Any registered travel agent can help you obtain a permit, usually within a day; hotel staff in Leh can also guide you. Protected area permits are only issued to groups of two people or more. To apply, you require valid ID/passport. Or, apply directly to the Deputy Commissioner/Magistrate in Leh (01982-252010). Carry your ID/passport at all times, as permits are examined and copies are to be submitted at various check posts en route.

Festivals: In Hemya and Kesar, the annual archery festival is held in January-February.



Snow Leopard Conservancy India Trust

Snow Leopard Conservancy-India Trust is a local NGO working in the Trans-Himalayan regions of Ladakh and Spiti for conservation of the highly endangered snow leopards and mountain ecosystems through a highly participatory community-based approach. It focuses on building local stewardship through community-based tourism, education, research and improved animal husbandry that are linked with snow leopard conservation. Our achievements include:

- Training over 100 families to offer *Himalayan Homestays* in Ladakh and Spiti
- Of the 800 annual visitors, 91% have rated our hosts as *excellent*
- A community-based livestock insurance scheme in Sham Valley
- Predator proofing of corrals, which have directly benefitted 600 to 700 families. The improved corrals prevent incidents of multiple livestock killings and in turn save snow leopards and other predators from being killed by angry herders
- Community-led activities including restoration of cultural sites, garbage management, ban on the sale of plastic bottles and setting aside pasture areas for wild sheep and goats



The Puga hot springs, known across Ladakh for their therapeutic properties



Hemya Village

Hemya takes its name from the word *Nya*, meaning “fish” in Ladakhi, as the layout of the village resembles the outline of a fish! It lies 80kms from Leh and 10kms from Liktsey on the banks of the River Indus. The village has 32 households, a primary school, a hospital, and a branch of J&K Bank. It is known for its basket-making, which uses strands of willow and poplar trees and grasses. Five households offer homestays under the *Himalayan Homestays* programme. Hemya has a monastery and a *latho* called Tsering Chayna on its outskirts that houses the spirit of the local deity. About 2 hours away, the Chabraling Lake at Sumdo makes a great day trip. Hemya's environs are rich in wildlife and several hikes lead out of here.

Trekking Route

Day 1 Leh to Hemya: Drive 2-3 hrs, 80kms southeast
Day 2 Hemya to Hemya Phu: Hike 3-4 hrs
Day 3 Hemya Phu to Ramatar: Hike 2-3 hrs
Day 4 Ramatar to Sumdo: Hike 2-3 hrs
Day 5 Sumdo to Tiri Phu: Hike 1 hr
Day 6 Tiri Phu to Gyumargo : Hike 2-3 hrs
Day 7 Gyumargo to Tso Kar: Hike 3-4 hrs
Day 8 Tso Kar to Leh: Drive 8-9 hrs via Tanglang La (5,336m/17,507ft)

Himalayan Homestays' Conservation Highlights

Community Conservation Fund: 10% of all homestays income goes into a community conservation fund that supports activities like garbage management, tree plantation, better animal husbandry practices and restoration of cultural and historical sites such as *mani* walls, *chortens* and sacred juniper stands.

Eco-cafes: These are tented cafes run collectively by the women's group in each village. Through a system of rotating duties, 2-3 women serve visitors each day while their household chores are done by their teammates. Emphasis is on environmentally-friendly practices including good garbage management, use of natural gas and kerosene for cooking instead of scarce firewood or yak dung and the sale of boiled and filtered water to minimize the use of plastic water bottles that litter the landscape.

Garbage: There are several initiatives to clear garbage from remote villages and send cans, bottles and similar items to Leh, Kargil or Srinagar for recycling. SLC-IT's Eco-Action programme is dedicated to managing garbage. While trekking or camping or on road-trips, you can help by carrying your garbage back with you.

Community Livestock Insurance: Families now get their livestock insured against predator-related losses. Half the insurance premium is paid from the Village Community Conservation Fund, while livestock owners, SLC-IT and others pay a minimal amount.

Predator-proof Pens: SLC-IT assists herders to build predator-proof pens or corrals to protect their livestock from snow leopards and other predators. This stops retaliatory killings by herders. It is estimated that each enclosure saves 2-3 snow leopards!

Solar Showers: For a steaming-hot, eco-friendly shower along your trek, be sure to stop at the solar shower in Kesar village.



Kesar Village

Kesar is a corruption of *Sketkar* meaning “white waist” and refers to the mountain above the village that has a white strip across its face. The village lies 135kms from Leh on the banks of the River Indus and has 17 households and a primary school. Since 2013, four houses have become part of the *Himalayan Homestays* programme. His Holiness the Karmapa visited Kesar in 2008. The environs are rich in wildlife, including one unusual carnivore – the stone marten – that is found in these parts. Also, look out for Tibetan argali in the pastures around Nyi.

Trekking Route

Day 1 Leh to Nyi: Drive 3-4 hrs
Day 2 Nyi to Sreyul: Hike 3-4 hrs, then camp
Day 3 Sreyul to Lugang La: 2-3 hrs via Lugang camp to Lugang La summer pasture
Day 4 Lugang to Azay La: 2-3 hrs via Azay La camp
Day 5 Azay La to Tso Kar: 4-5 hrs, then camp
Day 6 Tso Kar to Leh: 3-4 hrs drive via Tanglang La

Responsible Travel: Why Choose Himalayan Homestays?

By opting for a *Himalayan Homestay*, you help local communities generate income from tourism-related activities in their area. This additional income helps in many ways: offsets livestock losses to snow leopards and other predators, increases communities' stake in conserving wildlife, changes their attitudes towards wildlife from perceiving them as pests to regarding them as valuable assets, and gives them the funds to protect their cultural heritage such as *mani* walls, *chortens* and sacred juniper stands.

Himalayan Homestays has won several awards including:

- 2004 First Choice Responsible Tourism Award at the World Travel Market
- 2005 Global Vision Award for Community Outreach
- 2008 Finalists in the Geotourism Challenge by National Geographic's Centre for Sustainable Destinations and Ashoka Changemakers
- 2013 Favourite Responsible Tourism Initiative Award by Outlook Traveller magazine

How To Book

Bookings can be made in Leh through the following agencies:

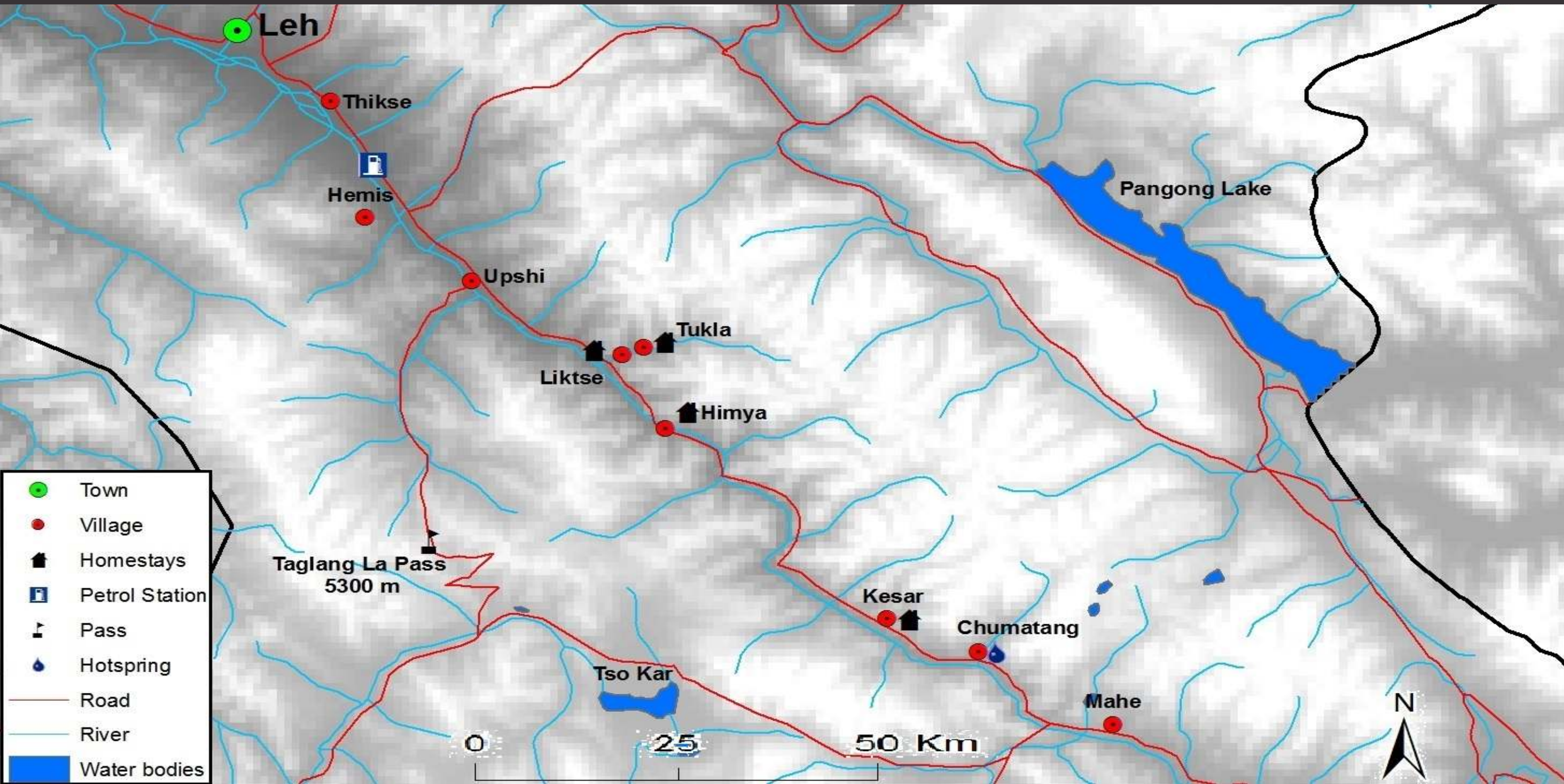
Snow Leopard Trails Hotel Kanglachen Complex, Leh
Tel +91-1982-252074, +91-9419269812
Maitreya Tours Zangsti Complex, Main Market, Leh
Tel +91-1982-251583, +91-9419176036
Golden Peak Adventure Main Changspa Road, Leh
Tel +91-1982-256379, +91-9419178806
Mountain Initiatives Chospa Hotel, Old Road, Leh
Tel +91-9419177245, +91-9797467330
Overland Escape Raku Complex, Fort Road, Leh
Tel +91-1982-250858, +91-9419178446
Ultimate Destination Himalayas Main Changspa Road, Leh
Tel +91-1982-251899, +91-9906979464
Samsara Expedition Ibex Hotel Complex, Opp. Taxi Station, Leh
Tel +91-9419178747
Ladakhi Women's Travel Company Hemis Complex, Upper Tukcha Road, Leh
Tel +91-1982-257973, +91-9469158137
Himalayan Travel Corporation Namgyal Complex, 1st Floor, Opp. J&K Bank, Leh
Tel +91-1982-255166, +91-9419983664



Himalayan HomeStays in the Rong Valley

A Glimpse into the Natural Heritage
of the Rong Valley & Greater Changthang

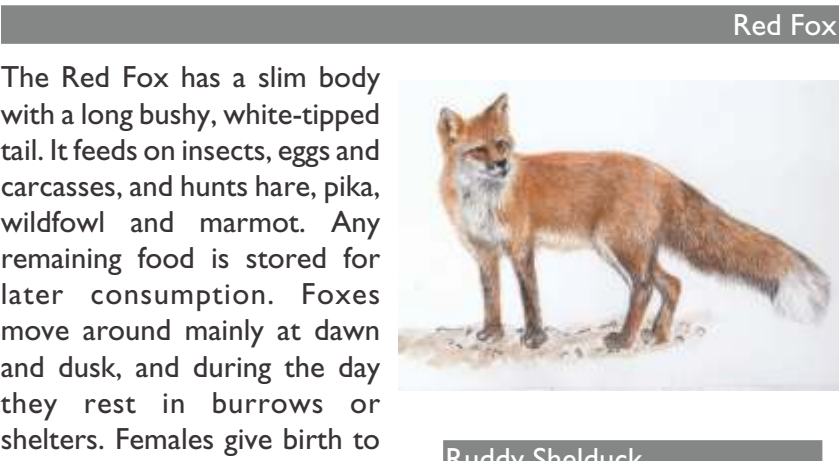
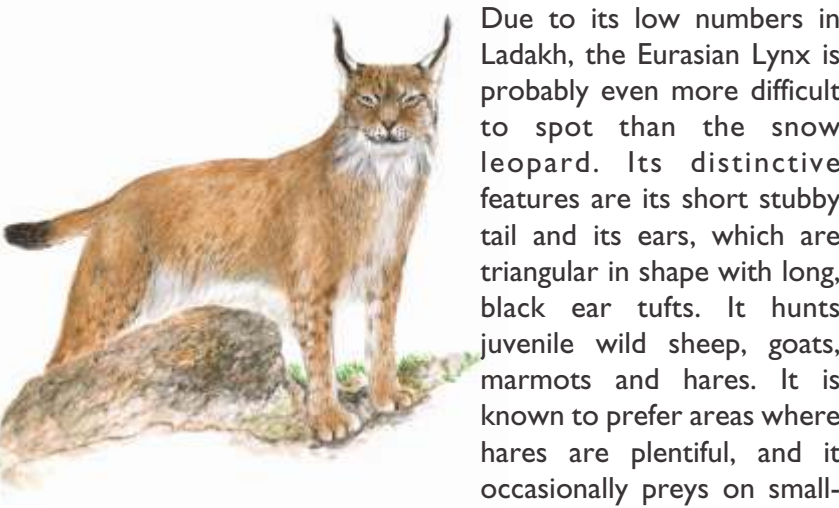




The Rong Valley & the Changthang

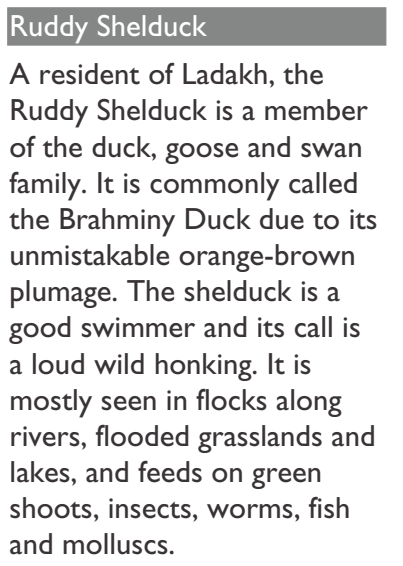
The Rong Valley represents a corridor leading to the vast high-altitude plateau known as the Changthang, which stretches from western Tibet into eastern Ladakh. The River Indus, which originates in Tibet, enters Ladakh at Demchok. It meanders through a wide valley with lush sedge-meadows bounded by mountains for about 100kms, before entering a gorge (or “*Rong*” in Ladakhi) near Mahe. The Changthang is characterized by arid conditions and extreme cold. Numerous lakes (*tsos*) and wetlands such as Tso Kar and Tso Moriri add to its beauty. The wetlands are important for migratory birds and are home to nesting pairs of rare Black-necked Cranes and Bar-headed Geese among others. The region's unique wildlife includes Tibetan gazelles, Tibetan wild ass, Tibetan argalis, snow leopards, Tibetan wolves and Tibetan sand foxes. Domestic livestock include sheep, goats, horses and yaks.

The Changthang is also home to the Changpas, a nomadic tribe who move from pasture to pasture on a seasonal basis. After the closing of the border and hence trade with Tibet, the Changpas now provide the raw material for the world's finest pashmina shawls. Their livestock compete with wild ungulates for scarce pasture-lands, which continue to push wildlife into more barren locales. The difficulty of protecting this fragile ecosystem whilst



Bar-headed Goose

Named after the two black stripes on its head, the Bar-headed Goose is one of the highest-flying birds in the world, braving the journey from India's lowlands over the Himalayas to the lakes and marshes of eastern Ladakh. They arrive around April and assemble into large colonies to breed, and are most often seen around Tso Moriri and Tso Kar, as well as meadows along the upper Indus.



Sights Around The Rong Valley

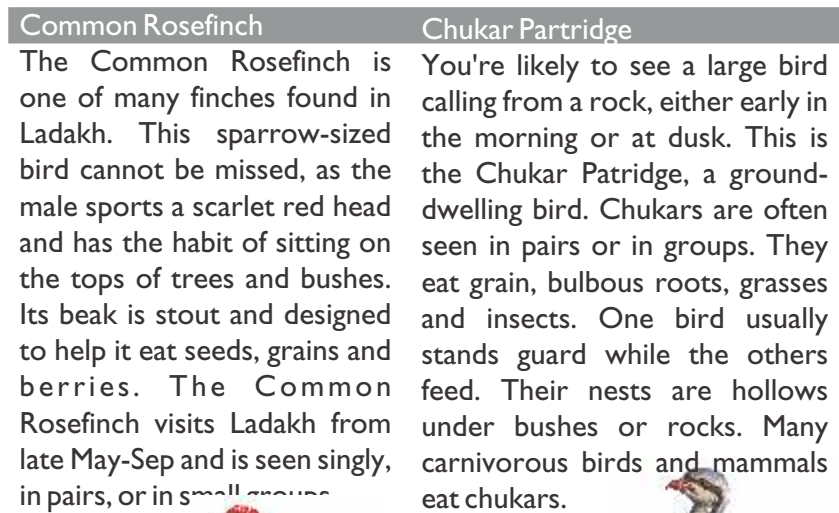
Tso Kar Lake: From Upshi, the road leads southwest and then southeast to Tso Kar, situated at 5,060m (16,600ft). Tso Kar is an important lake surrounded by wetlands and meadows that are home to many birds and form the main pastures for the Samad-Rokhen nomadic community who live in tents (*rebo*) around the lake. A shrine to Avalokiteshvara (the Buddha of Compassion) is at Thukjay.

Chumathang: Located 150kms from Leh, Chumathang is a regular lunch halt en route to Tso Moriri. It is famous for its hot springs that draw people from all over Ladakh for the treatment of various ailments. This is a good place to stay if you're visiting Tso Moriri (try *Hot Spring Holiday Resort*), as it is warmer here than at the lake and has mobile connectivity (only BSNL).

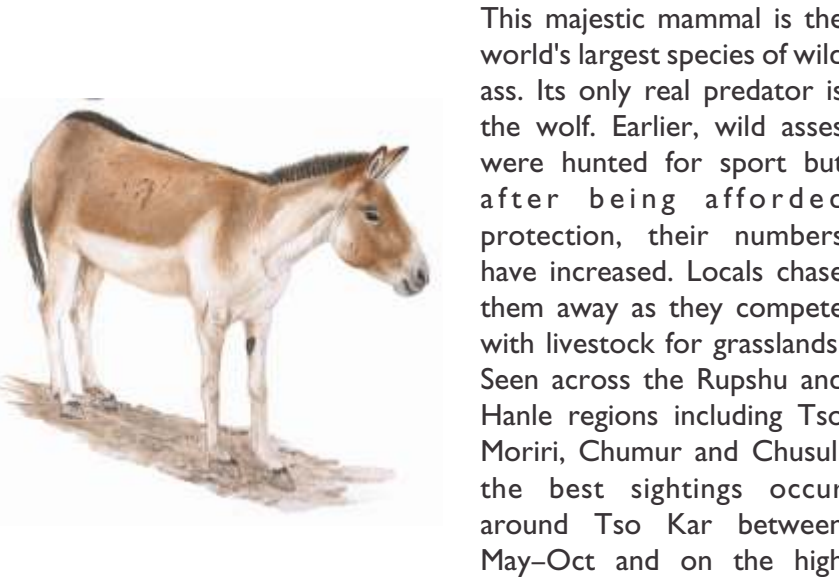
Mahe Monastery & Yaya Tso Lake: The beautiful Mahe monastery is an important *gonpa* where His Holiness the Karmapa delivers religious discourses. If you continue up the valley, you reach the *Chomoling* (nunnery). From there, a high pass takes you to the enchanting Yaya Tso Lake, a good site for Black-necked Cranes.

Tso Moriri Lake: About 215kms from Leh, Tso Moriri sits amidst barren mountains near Korzok at 4,450m (14,600ft). The lake's northern islet forms the main nesting site for Bar-headed Geese and Brown-headed Gulls. Other birds include Ruddy Shelducks, Horned Larks, Tibetan Snowfinches and endangered Black-necked Cranes. Tso Moriri is important for the Changpas, as their livestock rely on the lakeside pastures in summer. Tibetan wild ass, Tibetan argali, Tibetan wolves and Eurasian lynx live in the surrounding mountains.

Hanle: Hanle is one of the last villages on the Indian side before the China border. Located in a wide river valley ringed by mountains, it houses the Indian Astronomical Observatory (permission is required to visit). The mountains are a good habitat for the highly threatened Tibetan gazelle, as well as Tibetan wild ass, snow leopards, Tibetan wolf, Tibetan sand fox and the rare Pallas's cat that has been seen a few times by shepherds.



Tibetan Wild Ass



The Handicrafts Programme

In an effort to create sources of income for herder families in villages that face high levels of conflict with predators, residents of Liktsay, Tukla, Hemya, Tarchit, Khatpu and Kesar have been trained by SLC-IT in the technique of **dry needle-felting** to make miniature toy animals. Emphasis is on using natural dyes and locally available wool. The objective of creating a value-addition to their homestay income has been well received, with trained participants now demanding more felting needles! So far, they have made miniature snow leopards, ibexes, horses and yaks. SLC-IT sells these handcrafted miniatures at their shop in their Leh office.

Do Your Bit To Help Protect Ladakh

- Carry a water bottle and refill it with spring- or solar-boiled water where available
- Avoid buying plastic water bottles as much as possible
- Generate minimum garbage & carry it back to Srinagar, Leh & Kargil
- Keep all pollutants away from streams and lakes
- Do not drive off-road, especially near Tso Kar and Tso Moriri, as this greatly harms ground-nesting birds and mammals
- Do not disturb breeding waterbirds on the lakes & other wetlands
- Where available, use solar showers for bathing
- Refrain from smoking or making public displays of affection
- Do not wear revealing clothes like short skirts and sleeveless tops
- Do not sit on the *choktse* (low Ladakhi table mistaken for a stool)
- Ask permission before photographing people and cultural features

Black Redstart

The Black Redstart has black upperparts with gray from the middle of the head to the back of its neck. It has a distinct habit of perching on rocks, moving its tail rapidly and bobbing up and down, before suddenly darting to its prey, which are generally small insects. Black Redstarts are common summer visitors to Ladakh, and in autumn, they descend to the valleys.

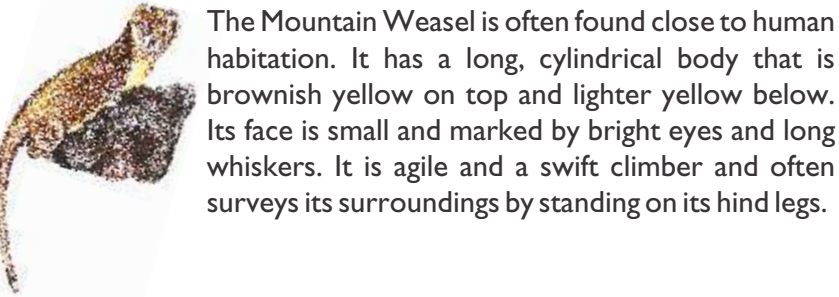


An air of mystery surrounds this magnificent big cat. It is rare, elusive and difficult to spot because of its excellent camouflage and is known to simply disappear before your very eyes! This last trait has made local people refer to it as the 'gray ghost'.

The snow leopard is well adapted to living in high and steep terrain. It has long fur and a long, bushy tail that it wraps around itself to protect against the cold. Its tail also helps it to balance as it negotiates steep cliffs. It has a large nasal cavity that helps to warm the air it breathes, which is very useful in sub-zero temperatures.

This Himalayan cat is a symbol of a healthy mountain ecosystem. Its diet includes wild sheep, goats, marmots, pika and game birds.

Mountain Weasel



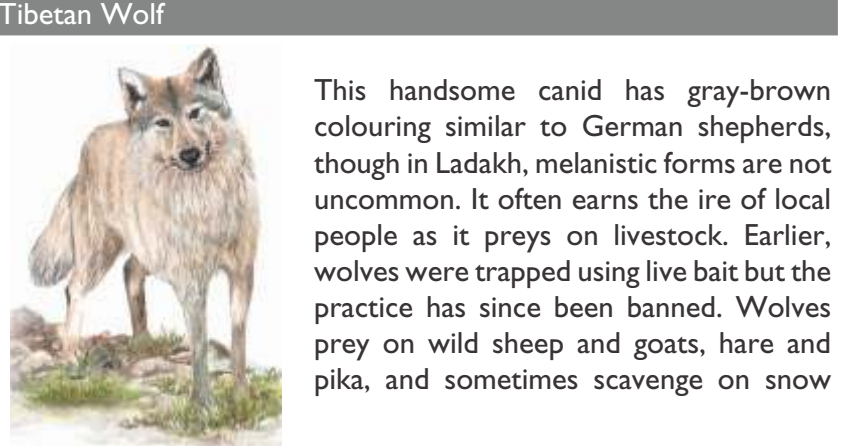
Buddhism & Buddhist Heritage

Buddhism: Though the Buddhism practised in Ladakh today resembles the Tibetan Mahayana sect, the religion entered the region from Kashmir in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD via the Kushana rulers. Prior to Buddhism, it is believed that people worshipped many gods, practised animism, shamanism (spirit worship) and ancestor worship, some tenets of which have been incorporated into the Buddhism followed today. The 'official' Buddhist doctrines are taught by the clergy, who follow a monastic order and represent all four sects of Nyingmapa, Sakyapa, Kargyudpa (Red Hat) and Gelugpa (Yellow Hat).

Chortens are Buddhist stupas that are built in eight different shapes, each depicting an event in the life of the Buddha. *Chortens* contain relics of high lamas or revered members of society. When you pass a *chorten*, ensure it is always to your right.

Mani Walls or prayer walls are long piles of stones that you see at the entrance to villages. The larger stones are inscribed with a prayer, often “*Om Mani Padme Hum*” which translates as “Hail the Jewel in the Lotus”. This is the *mantra* of Avalokiteshwara. While passing *mani* walls, always keep them to your right. It is believed that walking around a *mani* wall is the same as reciting the *mantras* inscribed on all the stones on it.

Lathos are stony structures surrounded by the horns of domestic and wild animals and adorned with prayer flags and juniper branches. They are believed to house the spirit of the local deity. *Lathos* are an enduring element of the Bon religion that was practised here prior to Buddhism.



Oriental Turtle Dove

The Oriental Turtle Dove can be distinguished by the two black and blue stripes on either side of its neck, and the scale-like patterns on its back. It feeds on grain, seeds and green shoots. You may see it singly, in pairs, or in groups near willow and poplar plantations. It is a common summer visitor to the lower wooded areas of the Rong Valley and breeds between Apr-Oct.

Stone Marten

Also called the beech marten, the stone marten is slender bodied, with an overall chocolate brown coat and white throat patch. Martens prey on small mammals, birds and reptiles, and also eat carrion and eggs. They are diurnal and very active in seeking out prey. Martens are agile and can leap from boulder to boulder or clamber up trees at great speed.

Ladakh Urial

