

In Search of the Elusive Snow Leopard & Tiger Safari Extension

Trip Report

By Marta Curti

24 December, 2016 - 10 January, 2017



A beautiful male snow leopard we observed in Hozing Valley, Hemis National Park.

Leh, Ladakh, is located in the northern Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. Known as "Little Tibet," the region is steeped in Buddhist culture. Prayer wheels, stupas, prayer flags and monasteries abound. The locals are warm and friendly and will greet you with a smile and "Jullay" which means "hello," "goodbye," and "thank you," in Ladakhi. Leh is also the gateway to Hemis National Parkhome to a surprisingly wide variety of wildlife. One of the most sought after of these, of course, is the Snow Leopard. On this trip, we were extremely lucky. We saw not just one, but two snow leopards, as well as some amazing birds such as Golden Eagles and Bearded Vultures, and other wildlife - including large numbers of Blue Sheep.

A percentage of the profits from this tour have been donated directly to **Snow Leopard Trust** - one of the leading organizations working to protect Snow Leopards "in partnership with the communities that share its habitat." We are proud to support this excellent organization.

Highlights of the trip

There were so many amazing moments on this trip, it is impossible to list them all, but following are just a few of our favorites:

- 1. Visiting the Indus River, where we were able to spot several waterbirds, including the much sought-after **Ibisbill** and **Solitary Snipe**
- 2. The thrill of knowing that a **Snow Leopard** had made a kill just a few hundred meters from our camp and getting to observe this amazing individual for five days in a row
- 3. Spending the night at a home-stay in Yurutse Valley where we were able to see a number of wolf tracks and get up close with a flock of **Tibetan Grouse** just outside our lodgings.
- 4. Observing herds of **Blue Sheep** that showed no fear of humans. We were able to get very close to them and take some great photos.
- 5. Being able to see **Golden Eagles** and **Bearded Vultures** almost every day of our tour. We even saw a Golden Eagle with prey on at least two different occasions.
- 6. Watching an enormous male **Siberian Ibex** cross the road right in front of us while in Ule Valley
- 7. Taking in the amazing views of the unique landscape on our drive to Rumtse
- 8. Learning about Ladakhi culture and the history of the Buddhist monasteries that dot this region of India
- 9. Seeing a female Bengal Tiger as she sat in the grass in Bandhavgarh National Park
- 10. Having the unexpected surprise of being able to watch a **Jungle Cat** in the rain, just after spotting a **Jungle Owlet** and a **Crested Serpent Eagle**.



Monasteries, mountains and prayer flags as seen from the Indus River

Itinerary

Tour Leader: Marta Curti

Local Crew Leader: Targes Thukjay



The confluence of the Indus and Zanskar Rivers

Day 1 - 24 December

This tour begins with an exciting plane ride from Delhi to Leh. Leaving India's capital before sunrise, we greet the dawn from the sky. The sun comes up just as we begin to pass over the majestic Himalayas. The first morning light brings these jagged, snow-dotted mountains into view. You can make out rapidly flowing rivers that course, like veins, through the otherwise stark, monochrome landscape. But as the sun rises higher in the sky, the colors start to come alive. Snow-capped peaks look pink and orange in the dawn light and mountains appear, as if by magic, as far as the eye can see.

After touch down in Leh, the crew announces the outside temperature (on the day I arrive it is -15C) and relay tips on how to acclimate to the high elevation - 3,500m - lots of liquids and lots of rest!.

Since the first 24 hours are crucial to adjusting to the high altitudes and because jet lag quickly sets in after the long journey to Leh from Europe and North America, we head directly to our hotel where we enjoy a warm cup of chai and biscuits, and a hearty breakfast. Then, everyone settles in to their hotel rooms. Today, we exert as little energy as possible, relaxing at the comfortable hotel and enjoying delicious, savory Indian cuisine. Welcome to Leh!

Day 2 - 25 December

Enjoying a little bit more time to sleep in and rest, we have a nice, relaxed breakfast at the hotel before heading out to do some birding in the area. After about a twenty minute drive, we pass over the Choclamsar Bridge. Covered in prayer flags, the narrow bridge crosses over the icy Indus River - our first stop.

Immediately upon arrival we spot a **Common Greenshank**. As we survey the river, we take the opportunity to get in some nice views of **White-winged Redstarts** - both male and female, that dot the trees and river banks like ornaments. We see around 20 or so in total. While we are birding, we spot a **Mountain Weasel** running along the bank. Not everyone in the group gets to see it before it scurries off into the bushes. We slowly make our way back to the bridge and scan the river from there. Carlos immediately sees two **Ibisbills** walking in the river accompanied by two **Common Redshanks**. After observing for a while, Carlos again notices a bird walking along the shore. It is a beautiful **Solitary Snipe!** Though usually very shy, this bird spends quite a bit of time in view, foraging in the water and then resting along the bank.

We then head to Shey Marsh for birding around some open grassy areas and ponds. Just below the Shey Palace, we see a **Eurasian Curlew** walking in the grass. We also spot **Indian Pond Heron**, **Black-throated Thrush** and **Blue Whistling Thrush**, among other species.

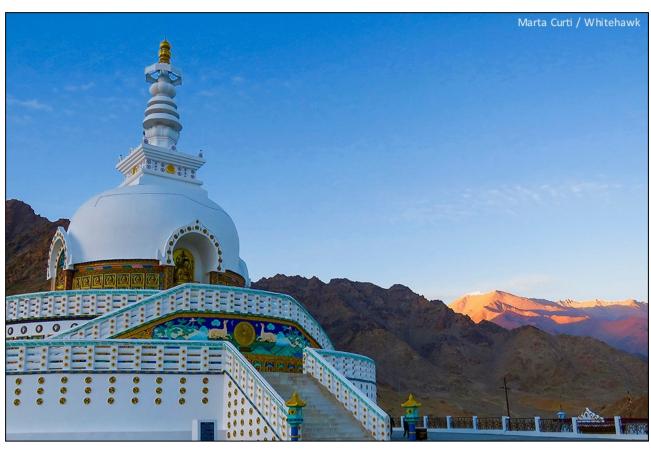


Ibisbill, observed foraging in the Indus River.

After about 3 hours of some nice birding, we head to the Thiksey Monastery, a beautiful "Gompa" decorated in colorful murals, located just a few miles away. After lunch, we continue our cultural tour of Leh with a visit to the Shanti Stupa and an evening stroll through the main market where vendors sell beautiful scarves and singing bowls for tourists and down a small street - pots and pans, dried fruit and other goods for the locals.

Day 3 - 26 December

After breakfast, we begin our week-long journey into Hemis National Park. On our way, we stop at a prayer-flag-covered bridge to do some more birding along the Indus River. It is a quiet morning



Shanti (Peace) Stupa, in Leh, Ladakh.

yet we manage to spot a pair of **Common Mergansers** swimming in the cold water and at least 5 **White-winged Redstarts** are flitting about in the bushes. After about 20 minutes or so, we continue our journey. We drive for another hour out of Leh over beautiful bridges and around winding roads - the blue-tinged Indus River flowing beneath the steep drop-offs and sharp curves of the very narrow highway leading in to the park. On route, our guide, Stanzin, spots a herd of **Ladakh Urials** grazing not far from the road.

When we arrive at the entrance to the park, a local man and his horses are waiting to take our gear into camp. They go on ahead and we continue the hour-long hike on foot. Our first real hike in this high altitude terrain proves a bit tough and all of our hearts are beating furiously. But, we take it slowly and the incredible scenery - frozen streams, colorful, angular mountains, surprisingly colorful plants holding on through the winter - helps us quickly forget the uphill climb.

At camp, our wonderful chef, Loptzng, and his assistant, Londup, greet us with warm chai. As we get settled into our tent camp - which will be our home for the next 7 days - we can smell the delicious aroma of lunch being prepared. After lunch, Stanzin and our other guide, Gilson, lead us on a short climb to a key observation point near our camp in Hozing Valley. We spend several hours scanning the hillside. We see a number of **Bharals** (also known as Blue Sheep for the bluish tinge of the fur on their legs) nearby. A **Golden Eagle** and a beautiful **Bearded Vulture** soar overhead. It is cold, but beautiful.

At around 5:30 p.m. - as it starts to get dark - we make our way back to camp where a heated tent and a scrumptious dinner await. We are all pretty tired and decide to go to bed early, but not before taking a few moments to gaze at the amazing star-lit sky.

Day 4 - 27 December

We are woken up early today with a knock on our tents and a hot cup of tea. After breakfast, we head up a ridge close to camp. Armed with binoculars and telescopes, Stanzin and Gilson scan the surrounding mountains for signs of Snow Leopards. As we sip more tea and help our guides search, we enjoy observing Blue Sheep on the nearby ridges. They seem very unconcerned with our presence and walk within just a few feet of us. We also observe several bird species - **Golden Eagle, Bearded Vulture, Himalayan Griffon** and **Brown Accentor**.

After a few hours of tirelessly looking through the scope, Stanzin suddenly becomes very excited and calls us over. We run to the scope and spot what appeared to be a snow leopard standing on the ridge line. However, after a few minutes, when the cat didn't move, we began to suspect that we had been photographing a rock outcropping that looked suspiciously like a leopard. We joke about finding a new species, called the "stone leopard" and continue our search. Though we wouldn't get lucky on this day, little did we know what the next day had in store for us!



Male Blue Sheep watching us as we watch him

Day 5 - 28 December

After another early morning and a delicious breakfast, our group heads out on a short hike up a fairly steep mountain to once again scan for the elusive leopard. It was only our third day, and often times, groups must wait until the very end of their trip (if ever) to spot one of these cats. As we observe our surroundings, we notice a dead Blue Sheep in a small grassy area, not far from camp. Did it die of natural causes? Could it be a Snow Leopard kill? We weren't sure, but we would soon have our answer.

Before lunch, word came in from other trackers who were on their way out of the park: they had seen fresh Snow Leopard tracks heading in the direction of the dead sheep. We decide to wait it out to see if the **Snow Leopard** would appear. And, at around 12:30 p.m. it did! At first, we could just see its head, as it was sleeping right along the ridge line. We watch it for the rest of the day,



Male Snow Leopard, the morning after it made its kill

during which time it mostly just slept... until dusk, that is. Just as it was getting dark, we watch this beautiful cat quickly make its way down the mountainside. Though it is almost too dark to see, we can just make out the cat pulling its prey out of sight! When it gets too dark, we pack up our gear and walk the short distance back to camp. As we enjoy dinner and then snuggle into our sleeping bags, I think we all were amazed to know that a Snow Leopard was only several hundred feet away - feeding on a Blue Sheep!

Day 6 - 29 December

Today, we all wake up earlier than usual - excited to see if the Snow Leopard is still around. Gilson climbs the hill behind our camp to see if he can spot the cat or its prey while the rest of us walk to a frozen waterfall next to a rocky slope - where **Large-eared Pika** are often seen. We manage to catch glimpses of these adorable critters as they scurry in and out of the rock piles. At the waterfall, Stanzin hangs more prayer flags and burns incense, while we observe flocks of **Yellow-billed Choughs** flying overhead and a pair of **White-browed Warblers** flitting among the bushes.

We then walk the 20 minutes or so back to camp. By that time, Gilson had spotted the remains of the Blue Sheep from yesterday, and it had been only partially eaten so there was a great chance the Snow Leopard would be back to feed. We didn't have to wait long before we see it! It is asleep on a ledge and we can only make out the spotted fur of its haunches, but Stanzin's sharp eye has easily picked out the cat amongst all the similarly marked rocks. After a long while, it eventually moves a bit and we are able to enjoy watching it sleep, preen, yawn and sleep some more. We went to bed feeling very happy (and lucky), but we had no idea what was in store for us tomorrow.

Day 7 - 30 December

Today, we have the best views ever of the Snow Leopard. We get lucky when a few **Eurasian Magpies** discover the dead Blue Sheep and begin feeding on it. It seems the Snow Leopard didn't like anyone messing with its food. We watch it maneuver deftly down the rocky slope to defend its prey! We observe it the entire morning as it tries futilely to chase off the pesky magpies. However,



One of the many wolf tracks we spotted on our hike

it soon grows tired, or simply decides the magpies aren't worth the trouble, and it walks back up the mountain and goes to sleep on a ledge, out of our view.

While the Snow Leopard is sleeping, we return to camp for lunch and then leave Hozing Valley to explore other areas of Hemis National Park. We head to our home stay in Yuruste Valley - a 2-3 hour walk from camp. The hike is beautiful - **wolf tracks** are everywhere and the scenery - the frozen river we cross a number of times, the pagodas in the distance, the prayer flags gracing the mountains - is breathtaking! We arrive at what would be our home for the evening and are given a warm welcome by the family living there. It is already quite late in the day, so we can't do too much scanning for wildlife. We do find a group of **Tibetan Partridges** nearby, but otherwise things are quiet. As the sun goes down, we all huddle around the wood burning stove and enjoy a lovely dinner before going to bed.

Day 8 - 31 December

We wake up bright and early to a warm breakfast served by our friendly host family. We do some early morning birding and scanning - a lynx had been seen in the area a few days before our arrival and, though we don't get a chance to see one, we definitely enjoy the views and get some close up pictures of a fairly large flock of **Tibetan Partridges** in the fields just beside our homestay. On our hike back, we observe a Eurasian Magpie feeding on the remains of a Red Fox, but otherwise, the day is quiet. We make a slight detour to stop in Rumbak Village, where we see a large number of **Chukars** and **Robin Accentors**. Some of the group also spot a **Wallcreeper** on a nearby outcropping.

Day 9 - 1 January

We would be hard pressed to think of a better way to start a New Year than by observing a **Snow Leopard**. We were able to spend the first morning of 2017 in just this way. Once again, we observe the male cat preening and sleeping. After a few hours, it slowly rises and walks up the hillside. It hasn't gone far before it discovers a sun-drenched ledge and curls up and goes to sleep, out of sight. If there is ever a good time to leave a Snow Leopard, this is it. With mixed feelings sad to leave the cat, but excited to visit a new area - we make the short hike out of the park and head straight to Ule Valley.

The ride to Ule Valley takes about 3 hours and is a true feast for the eyes. Giant boulders dot the sparse landscape. If it weren't for the prayer flags, we could have imagined we were on the moon. On one occasion we see a female lbex peering down at us from behind one of these immense outcroppings. We stop and take pictures and then continue on our way. After a few hours, we make it to our homestay. We settle into our rooms and then join Stanzin as he scans for lbex, wolves and Snow Leopards. In the evening, we manage to spot a herd of **lbex** on the mountain-side across from our lodgings. Far off in the distance, the snow-dotted Himalayas are covered in dark clouds. A snow storm is coming!



Tibetan Partidges in Yurutse Valley

Day 10 - 2 January

We awake to a cold, windy day. At one point, temperatures reach -31C! Perhaps due to the chill in the air or the wind, today is a very slow day for wildlife. At one point, we spot a few snow cocks flying in the distance. We quickly jump in our vehicle and drive to the area where the birds had been seen, but we are unable to find them again. We did observe Golden Eagles, Bearded Vultures and Yellow-billed Choughs, though. Just as we are ready to call it a day, Stanzin miraculously sees ANOTHER **Snow Leopard** high up on the far off ridge. It stays long enough for

everyone in the group to see it before it slinks away down the other side of the ridge. We had now seen a Snow Leopard six days in a row! This was not a bad way to end the day.

Day 11 - 3 January

We wake up this morning to a snow covered ground! It is beautiful, so we decide to walk about 45 minutes to the area where we had observed the snowcocks the day before. Despite the falling snow and wind, we are able to hear the snowcocks calling. Following the sound of their calls we eventually get a view of 3 **Himalayan Snowcocks** foraging for food along the hillside. We could never get close enough for a decent picture, however, and the falling snow certainly didn't help in that regard! As a few in the group continue to watch the snowcocks, someone points out the snow flakes - which look exactly like paper cut-outs. I had never seen such perfect snow flakes!

We then return for breakfast and a short break before driving to a riverine valley nearby. Though we don't see much wildlife, once again our breath is taken away by the stunning landscapes of frozen rivers, giant boulders and bright blue skies. After a few hours of scanning we return to our home stay. From the lookout point near our lodging, we see a **Golden Eagle** fly in with a Chukar in its talons. The eagle lands across the valley from us, but are able to see it clearly through the scope. As it feeds, **Eurasian Magpies** hop around nearby - hoping to get a turn, or at least to pick up a few scraps the eagle might leave behind.

Day 12 - 4 January

Today we visit nearby Hemis Sukpachen Village. On the way, we observe a large male **Siberian Ibex** standing above the road. We stop the car and get out to see if we can get closer. The Ibex moves quickly and crosses the road right in front of us, before heading down the slope on the other side of the road. Later, when we looked at our photos, we noticed that it was blind in one eye. After the exciting close-up view of the Ibex, we continue on our way, stopping at a lovely overlook, where we observe a flock of about 20 **Horned Larks** before we descend into the village.

Once in Hemis, we scan the surrounding mountains from a monastery beneath a gigantic golden Buddha. From there, we watch the snow fall in giant flakes as we continue our search for wolves and snow leopards, and anything else we might find. From our vantage point, we see a large flock of **Hill Pigeons**, accompanied by one lovely **Snow Pigeon**.

At around lunch time, we realize it is way too cold and windy to try to eat our packed lunch outside. So, we visit the house of a local tracker and his family. We share our delicious pasta with them and they serve us a traditional drink - yak-butter tea, which is quite salty and tastes more like soup than tea! But, it is nice just the same. As we eat, we watch the family cat cuddle up by the small wood stove in the middle of the eating area, while huge snow flakes fall down outside.

As we were leaving, we thought we might have to put chains on our vehicle, but decided we didn't need them. We drive slowly up the windy (and now icy/snow covered) road and made it back to our homestay safely.

Day 13 - 5 January

We enjoy our last morning in Ule Valley by watching a **Red Fox** clambering across some stones and through some open fields just below us. After a morning of final scanning, we make the drive back to Leh where we will enjoy a nice, hot shower and a visit to the local market to buy some gifts for friends and family. Here, wool socks and hats, prayer flags, dried fruits, jams, scarves and many other items can be found. We enjoy a wonderful Indian meal at our hotel and get a good night's sleep.

Day 14 - 6 January

On the last day of the tour, we visit the village of Rumptse. About 140 km from Leh, it is a stunning drive. We get to see the confluence of the Indus and Zanskar Rivers (where we walked out on the ice field the day before). We continue the drive and see beautiful tundra-looking habitat with expansive views, and mountains of all colors including red and purple. Though wolves abound here, we don't have luck seeing any on this trip. We get more good views of Tibetan Partridge and Himalayan Griffon as well as at least 4 different Bearded Vultures flying together.

After a long, but wonderful day, we return to our hotel and enjoy our last dinner together as a group.

Day 15 - 7 January

For those continuing on the tiger safari extension, our original plan was to fly from Leh this morning, catch a connecting flight in Delhi and then make the 3 hour drive to Bandhavgarh National Park, where we would have two full days of tiger safaris in the park. Things being as they are, however, Air India made several changes to their flight schedules in the week following up to our departure, and one final change the day before, that caused us to miss our connection.

We ended up spending an unplanned night in Delhi. Taking advantage of the situation, we headed out into the city to enjoy the Red Fort and see the market place - which gives a whole new meaning to the term "hustle and bustle." Car horns blaring, bicycles and rickshaws passing within inches of us, people shouting about their wares, aromas from the different food carts mingling with aromas from less pleasant sources, all combined to give us an amazing experience of Delhi's old



The monastery from where we scanned for wildlife in Hemis Sukpachen

market. Escaping a bit of the chaos, we enjoyed spending some time watching the **Rose-ringed Parakeets** flying around and perching on the Red Fort.

Day 16 - 8 January

We wake up early and head to the Delhi airport to catch our 8:30 a.m. flight to Jabalpur. We are anxious about the flight, as due to delays, we would already miss our morning safari. We have to make it to the park gate by 4 p.m. or we won't make the afternoon safari either. We have consolidated all of our luggage into carry-ons, so we don't need to wait for luggage. After disembarking from the plane we immediately go outside and find our driver waiting for us. He informs us that the main road is closed (of course!) because some VIPS have also arrived on the same flight. I tell him we hope to make the afternoon safari, if at all possible. Thanks to him and his fast, skilled driving, we make it with time to spare. And it was very lucky, too. That evening, we are able to get very nice views of an adult female **Bengal Tiger** sitting in the grass! We also see two other mammals: **Spotted Deer** and **Sambar Deer**, as well as a number of beautiful birds including great looks at **Crested Serpent Eagle** and **Indian Roller**.



Female Bengal Tiger, Bandhavgarh National Park, India

Day 17 - 9 January

On our last day of the tour, we take a jeep ride to a 2,000 year old temple that sits atop a high overlook. Feeling a bit like we are in an Indiana Jones movie, we explore the vine-covered stone ruins while enjoying the surrounding wildlife - including **Malabar Pied Hornbill**, two **Jungle Owlets**, **Jackals**, **Indian Bison** and a nice surprise as a way to end the day, a beautiful **Jungle Cat** that stays still long enough for us to get some nice photos and just enjoy observing it. After our safari, we return to our hotel, enjoy a nice dinner and get a good night's sleep.

Day 18 - 10 January

We wake up early to catch our flight back to Delhi. We enjoy the 3 hour drive back to the airport taking in the final sights of India before returning home.

Thanks!

We want to thank all the participants for their enthusiasm, patience, good humor and team work! Thanks for being a part of this tour. Also, we owe a debt of gratitude to our local team, led by Targes, and our expert tracker, Stanzin, who always went beyond his obligations in order to provide our group with the best possible experience.

Wildlife Observation List - Snow Leopard Tour

Birds

1	Mallard	Anas platyrhynchos	
2	Common Pochard	Aythya ferina	
3	Common Merganser	Mergus merganser	
4	Chukar	Alectoris chukar	
5	Himalayan Snowcock	Tetraogallus himalayensis	
6	Tibetan Partridge	Perdix hodgsoniae	
7	Great Egret	Ardea alba	
8	Indian Pond-Heron	Ardeola grayii	Easily seen in Shey Ponds
9	Lammergeier	Gypaetus barbatus	Seen most days during our trip in Hemis NP, Ule Valley and Rumptse
10	Himalayan Griffon	Gyps himalayensis	
11	Golden Eagle	Aquila chrysaetos	
12	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	Accipiter nisus	
13	Eurasian Coot	Fulica atra	
14	Ibisbill	Ibidorhyncha struthersii	Two individuals observed in the Indus River near Leh
15	Eurasian Curlew	Numenius arquata	
16	Solitary Snipe	Gallinago solitaria	Seen in the Indus River near Leh
17	Green Sandpiper	Tringa ochropus	
18	Common Greenshank	Tringa nebularia	
19	Common Redshank	Tringa totanus	
20	Rock Pigeon	Columba livia	
21	Hill Pigeon	Columba rupestris	

22	Snow Pigeon	Columba leuconota	
23	Eurasian Magpie	Pica pica	
24	Red-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax	
25	Yellow-billed Chough	Pyrrhocorax graculus	
26	Carrion Crow	Corvus corone	
27	Horned Lark	Eremophila alpestris	
28	Oriental Skylark	Alauda gulgula	
29	White-browed Tit-Warbler	Leptopoecile sophiae	
30	Wallcreeper	Tichodroma muraria	
31	Eurasian Wren	Troglodytes troglodytes	
32	White-throated Dipper	Cinclus cinclus	Seen in the river on the road to Rumptse
33	Brown Dipper	Cinclus pallasii	Seen in the river on the road to Rumptse
34	Blue Whistling-Thrush	Myophonus caeruleus	
35	White-winged Redstart	Phoenicurus erythrogastrus	
36	Black-throated Thrush	Turdus atrogularis	
37	Robin Accentor	Prunella rubeculoides	
38	Brown Accentor	Prunella fulvescens	
39	Streaked Rosefinch	Carpodacus rubicilloides	

Mammals

1	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	
2	Snow Leopard	Panthera uncia	
3	Mountain Weasel*	Mustela altaica	
4	Royle's Mountain Vole*	Alticola roylei	Seen most days during our trip in Hemis NP, Ule Valley and Rumptse
5	Large-eared Pika	Ochotona macrotis	Easily seen in Shey Ponds
6	Royle's Pika*	Ochotona roylei	
7	Wooly Hare	Lepus oiostolus	
8	Siberian Ibex	Capra sibirica	
9	Ladakh Urial	Ovis orientalis vignei	
10	Bharal	Pseudois nayaur	

^{*} Not seen by all members of the group

- MAMMALS SEEN DURING THE TIGER EXTENSION SAFARI -

1	Rhesus Macaque	Macaca mulatta
2	Southern Plains Gray Langur	Semnopithecus dussumieri
3	Indian Jackal	Canis aureus indicus
4	Jungle Cat	Felis chaos
5	Bengal Tiger	Pantera tigris tigris
6	Spotted Deer	Axis axis
7	Sambar Deer	Cervus unicolor
8	Nilgai	Boselaphus tragocamelus