

Our journey started in the high expanses of a secluded valley, Tsaba, located close to Tanglang la near Rumste village. Its long and undulating valleys seem like a land lost in time.



Beauty in Diversity

A Journey through Ladakh's Hidden Gems

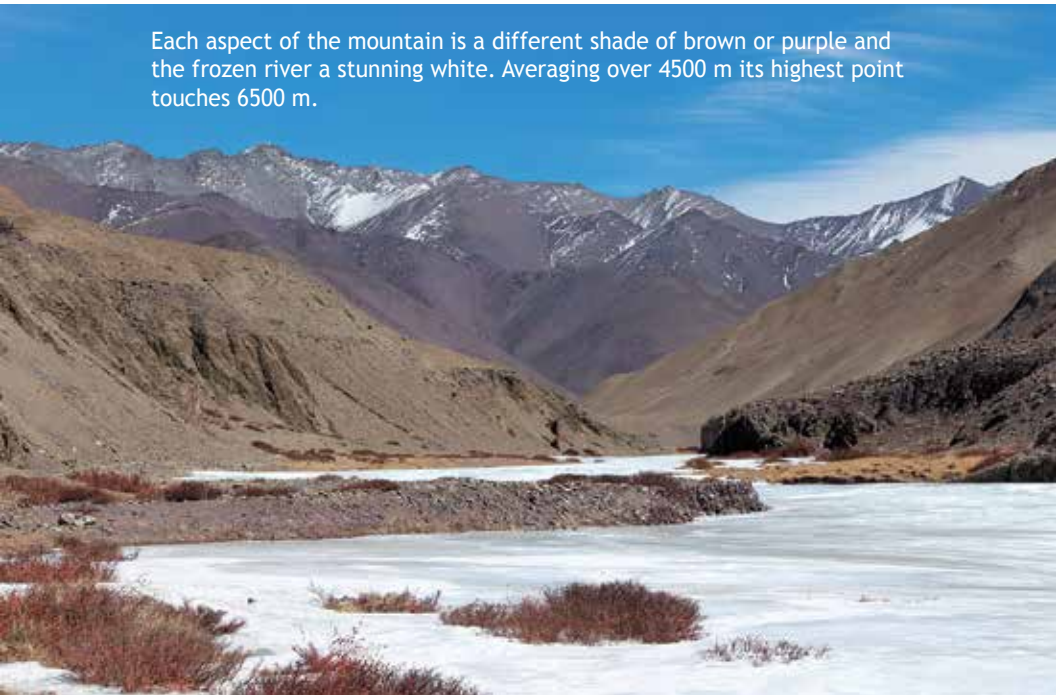
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Few birds can fly as high as the Himalayan Griffon. It cleans up the dead and decaying bodies of other creatures. The cold and hypoxic high Himalayan environment isn't the best for decomposition of material.

Spectacularly jagged and infinitely spread, the arid landscape of Ladakh is visually stunning and very diverse. Ladakh is a sum of its parts, each one a distinct entity. The western region, closer to Kargil district called Shyam, though at a lower elevation, is as rugged a region as the higher Himalayas. The eastern part is the seemingly never ending Changthang plateau, a flat barren extension of the Tibetan plateau into Indian territory.

On our recent expedition across three areas in Ladakh (upper Shyam region between Likir and Khaltse, Chushul-Demjok and Tsaba-Puyul valleys) surveying wildlife, we got to experience this diversity first hand.

Each aspect of the mountain is a different shade of brown or purple and the frozen river a stunning white. Averaging over 4500 m its highest point touches 6500 m.





Tsaba is visited by 13 nomadic herders from the Gya-Miru region during the winters. Even though the winters are harsh here, the grass is extremely nutritious. They live in traditional yak wool *rebos* (tents). It is believed that *rebos* should have an opening on the top to let the frigid air come in. They say otherwise the herders won't have the motivation to get out of the warm tents in mornings to face -30°C !

This is the frozen Tsaba river. It freezes so thick that one can literally slide one's way up or down its meanders, saving time and effort.



Tsaba valley is the winter home and breeding ground for nearly 100 Argalis, the world's biggest wild sheep. At full size, Argalis males can have horns that spiral around to a length of nearly six feet. Pictured here is a beautiful female. Ladakh is thought to have roughly 300-400 Argalis, therefore Tsaba is critical for their survival.





Locally known as *Ridakhs* or 'Mountain Monarchs' (as Dr. George Schaller named them), the Blue Sheep are one of the several mountain ungulates that have made Ladakh their home. Seen here are all males in the Dadlung region of the Puyul valley, near Miru village. The Blue Sheep are a very important source of food for their rare and elusive predator, the Snow Leopard.

The herder tents are basic yet resourceful. Made from stones wedged together to make an unshakable wall, they double up as platforms to keep utensils and other valuables.. Everything is well protected against strong winds, blizzards or dust devils.





At just above 5200 m, Kongta la is the doorway to the Chushul-Demjok region. Adjacent to this pass is the Aar valley, home to both the wild and the domestic horse! Seen here is a herd of Kiang (Tibetan Wild Ass) scampering away while a herd of livestock graze the arid slopes in the background. Chushul's vast, undulating and at times flat pastures are ideal Kiang habitat.

With their long slender legs and streamlined bodies, wolves are master predators of the Changthang plateau. Often operating in packs, they are known to traverse distances of several hundred kilometres in search of meals.





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In the Upper Shyam region, we spotted the endemic and magnificent Ladakh Urial. Like the Argali, the Urial are a species of wild mountain sheep. Much smaller in size than the Argali, the Urial have a highly restricted range. They are mainly found along the main Indus river valley between Khaltse and Upshi.





Locals are always willing to provide a warm cup of *chai* and long conversations. Few will hesitate to offer a place to retire for the night. They share what they had despite living a few hundred kilometres from the nearest market.

About the Authors

Munib is a research scholar with Nature Conservation Foundation's High Altitude Program and studies factors that affect populations of wild mountain ungulates.

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