

Chapter 4

Mountain Ungulates of Ladakh, Jammu & Kashmir

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Ladakh – ‘the Land of Passes’ (*La-passes, dakh-land*) is the largest in area when compared to the three main regions of the Jammu & Kashmir State viz., Jammu, Kashmir and Ladakh. This region falls under the districts of Ladakh and Kargil. The most striking feature of Ladakh region is the mountain ranges that stretch from the southeast to the northeast. Although most of Ladakh is mountainous, there are many valleys lying in the lap of the mountain ranges such as the Great Himalayan range, the Zaskar range, the Ladakh range and the Karakoram Range. As like all other high altitude mountainous region, Ladakh is sparsely populated (*ca.* 1,50,000) i.e., only two persons/km². Although life is difficult at high altitudes (2,900-5,900 metres), yet both man and wildlife survive here comfortably as revealed by the rich diversity of wildlife.

The Ladakh landscape is characterized by snow-clad mountains, treeless arctic deserts and a few narrow fertile valleys, some of them breathtakingly beautiful. With the advent of summer, a miraculous change occurs when life-sustaining vegetation lends color to an otherwise bleak landscape. Ladakh is a large barren but beautiful region of intense sunlight and clear unpolluted air. The temperature in summer may rise up to 37°C, but may also drop to -40°C degrees in winter. Dras in Kargil district experiences the lowest winter temperatures. There is very low rainfall in the region is about 92 mm/annum because it is situated in the rain

shadow region of the Greater Himalayas. Most of the water source is the frozen snow or ice.

Fauna of Ladakh

The Fauna of Ladakh is a mixture of Palearctic and Oriented regions and comprises mostly of mammals and birds. Ladakh has poor representation of reptiles and amphibians. The mammalian fauna comprises mainly of ungulates, rodents and carnivores. Ladakh is well recognized for its mountain ungulate diversity. Information on the status and distribution of these mountain ungulates in Ladakh are presented below.

Wild Yak: The most notable animal of the Ladakh, Tibet and adjacent parts of central Asia is the Wild Yak. It is a large animal weighting about a ton. It has long black hair, which is tinged with gray at the muzzle. The horns are curved and long which may grow up to 75 cm in length. The wild yak, which moves in herds, spends the summer at great heights and descends to lower altitudes in winter. Prior to 1962, the Wild Yak was distributed in plang darpo and kuenlum into Tibet westwards in Ladakh. As per the local people, the animals were found near Pangong Lake, Changchenmo Valley, Tsoogsalu, Daulat Beg Olde and Chushul areas. Since then, their distribution range has drastically shrunken and number has greatly declined due to massive hunting. There were no official reports on the presence of Wild Yak in Ladakh for the last thirty years. A survey was conducted



by a team of six members in the Karakoram Range of (a corridor between India & China) Changchenmo Valley, North-East of Ladakh during July-August 1996 in order to confirm the presence of Wild Yak. About 300 km were covered during surveys of which 170 km were by vehicle and the rest on foot. One male was sighted at Satlung Yogma and herd of 47 Yaks were sighted at Satlung Parma area in the Karakoram range, Changchenmo Valley. This survey confirmed the presence of Wild Yak in this area.

Tibetan antelope: The *Chiru* or Tibetan antelope (Toros-Ladakhi) - is a valuable species that inhabits high altitudes of Ladakh. It is slender but stout looking due to the thick coat of interwoven pale-brown hair. The color varies from season to season and from individual to individual. They roam the eastern fringe of Ladakh and inhabit Aksaichin and Tibetan plateau above 5,000 metres. Their horns measure up to 70 cm and are black having knots indicating the animal's age. In case of male front legs has a strip of black or dark brownish in colour. The *Chiru* is persecuted in large numbers for the sake of under fleece-shahtoosh- from which the famous shahtoosh shawls or 'ring shawls' are made. Hardly a pound of under fleece is obtained from one animal. These shawls are the highly priced, softest and warmest quality product.

It was reported that the Tibetan antelope was extinct as no reports of sightings were made during the period 1960-1990. In 1984, the *Chiru* were reported to occur in the Aksai chin and Tibetan plateau. The *Chiru* are migratory and come in to Indian Territory in the Changchenmo valley and DBO during summer. In 1991, the Indian Army reported the presence of *Chiru* in DBO (Daulat Beg Olde) falling in the

Karakoram Wildlife Sanctuary located along the border with China. In 1994, Mr. N.A. Kitchloo, Wildlife Warden, Leh, deputed a survey team of 9 person headed by Mr. Amchuk, R.O. to DBO and reported the sighting of *Chiru*. The *Chiru* population was estimated to be between 250 and 300. In India, the *Chiru* is found in the Changchenmo DBO (Daulat Beg Olde) valley of northern Ladakh between 3,700-5,500 metres from where it crosses from Tibet through Lanak la (pass) at the head of the valley. After this survey, it was certain that the animal is not killed in the Indian Territory i.e., DBO and Changchenmo – a fact supplemented by the security forces as well. In Ladakh, the illegal trade was reportedly carried out through the border of Changthang. No trade is reported from DBO and Changchenmo valley where the animals are found at present in Ladakh, the reason being that the area is not inhabited up to at least 180 km from Phobrang village to, Changchenmo and silk head to DBO (Daulat Beg Olde).

The population of *Chiru* has declined drastically by excessive poaching and disturbance of its natural habitats in Tibet as has been reported by various agencies. These animals come into this area during summer season (May to September) and they migrate to the lower elevations across the international border to Winter. They breed there in November – December and the young ones are born in May which is followed by their migration to higher elevations. The *Chiru* is a ruminant and feeds mostly during early mornings and late evenings especially along grassy edges and glacial streams. During day, it spends resting and before resting it first digs or scraps shallow pit in sand/ gravel and lies in side for concealment.



Tibetan Argali: Another pride of Ladakh is *Nayan* or Tibetan Argali found at a height of about 4,500m. A male may weigh up to a quintal. Lt. General Moti Dar has reported their number to be around 200 in eastern Ladakh.

Ladakh Urial: A close relative of *Nayan* is *Shapo* or Ladakh Urial. It is smaller than *Nayan* a large one weighing around 80 kg. It prefers heights between 3,000 to 4,000 m.

Blue sheep: The *bharal* or Blue sheep is a strange looking creature, half-sheep and half-goat. It differs from the goat in that it doesn't have a beard. Likewise it differs from the sheep in the complete absence of glands on the face. The *Bharal* are found at an altitude of 6,000 metres. In summer, they graze in large herds on rich and abundant grass of the meadows.

Asiatic ibex: The Asiatic Ibex is the most beautiful of all mountain goats. It supports two long scimitar-shaped horns marked with bold transverse knots on the front surface. They may be over a metre long. The mature males have a long beard and weigh over a quintal. They move in herds of 10 to 16 and prefer precipitous rocks and cliffs. In winter, they descend to the lower altitudes for food and shelter.

Tibetan Gazelle and Tibetan Wild Ass: The Tibetan Gazelle (*Goa*) is a small mountain ungulate that is distributed in eastern Ladakh. The Tibetan wild ass (*Kiang*) is a relative of the wild ass of the Rann of Kutch. It has a wide distribution. Besides Ladakh it is found in Tibet, Turkistan and Mongolia. *Kiang* is shy but

an inquisitive animal. It inhabits plain and rocky grounds and can gallop at a good speed. Solitary, animals or groups of 10-12 animals can be seen. The coloring of the upper portion of the body is chestnut or red and the under parts are white. There is a dark brown dorsal stripe extended from the stiff black mane to the tuft of the tail.

Other Herbivores

Among the other herbivores of Ladakh are the Himalayan mouse hare, Tibetan woolly hare, marmot and many other rodents. Marmots are common rodents found above the tree line. They live in burrows and produce shrill ringing calls. They hibernate during winter. Marmots and the hares form important prey base for snow leopard, lynx, fox and large birds of prey.

Conservation Issues

Despite the extremely harsh environment and sparse vegetation, wildlife in Ladakh thrived well prior to India's independence. This was mainly due to the Buddhist philosophy of non-violence. Construction of roads for defence purposes and development of the region ironically provided greater opportunities for killing the wildlife. The defence personnel also had a share in the killings because of their occasional indulgence in *Shikar*, a legacy of the *Raj* days. In short, the opening up of Ladakh to the rest of the world has exposed its Wildlife. Skins of the Snow Leopard and under fleece of Tibetan antelope and gazelle fetch fabulous prices, which has rendered wildlife vulnerable to poaching.

