

Mongabay Series: Beyond Protected Areas

A citizen-led initiative contributes to wildlife conservation in Ladakh

by Manish Chandra Mishra on 14 November 2023

- *The Wildlife Conservation and Birds Club of Ladakh (WCBCL), a grassroots organisation comprising residents and wildlife enthusiasts, has been making dedicated efforts toward wildlife conservation.*
- *The club carries out periodic bird censuses, which has led to the discovery of several new species in the region. Elusive wildcats such as the Eurasian lynx, Pallas's cat and snow leopard have also been recorded as part of the mammals' survey.*

- *This citizen-led initiative also helps the forest department of Ladakh in wildlife rescues, and by reporting instances of rule violations.*

Stanzin Chamba, a 35-year-old resident of Leh, has been exploring Nubra Valley in Ladakh for the last five years to connect with nature.

Situated about 160 kilometres from the city of Leh, Nubra Valley has offered him encounters with various forms of wildlife. The one that captivated him the most however, is the Eurasian lynx, a medium-sized wild cat called *ee* in Ladakhi.

"While the name *ee* is well-known among the people of Ladakh, very few are fortunate enough to witness this unique creature. Over the past three years, I have spotted the Eurasian lynx on eight different occasions, with my first sighting at Lakjung (a village in Leh, Ladakh)," Chamba shared.

Chamba narrated his encounter with the Eurasian lynx in a local magazine *Jangwa*, published by the Wildlife Conservation and Birds Club of Ladakh (WCBCL), a grassroots organisation comprising wildlife enthusiasts of Ladakh, working towards conservation awareness.

The Eurasian lynx is a carnivorous cat found in the mountainous plateau of Central Asia and some parts of Ladakh. Because it is sparsely distributed, the sightings of this wildcat have been very rare.

Chamba's article helped uncover valuable insights about the lynx behaviour, which can contribute to wildlife research. In conversation with local shepherds from the village of Sumur, he learnt that the lynx occasionally feed on the berries of sea buckthorn (<https://cazienviis.nic.in/lehpdf/1.pdf>), a shrub indigenous to Ladakh and found in the high Himalayan peaks.



Stanzin Chamba, passionate wildlife guide and WCBCL member, finds joy in every moment spent observing the vibrant life of birds and mammals in their natural habitat. Photo from Stanzin Chamba.

"Azhang Tundup Tsewang, a knowledgeable herder from Sumur, enlightened me about the lynx's hunting strategy. The cat ascends the sea buckthorn bush and shakes it vigorously, causing the leaves to fall. When small animals such as rabbits come to consume these leaves, the lynx seizes the opportunity to hunt them," Chamba detailed in his article.

With all this field experience, Stanzin Chamba is now a wildlife guide. "It was earlier my hobby, and slowly, it became my profession. I am an active member of WCBCL.

Conservation becomes an automatic process once you are on the field," continued Chamba.

"Spending most of my free time is spent in nature; it gives me immense pleasure to observe the birds and mammals," he tells Mongabay-India.

Chamba's account of the Eurasian lynx is just one of the many citizen efforts to document wildlife in Ladakh.

Creating awareness in the biodiversity-rich Ladakh

Nestled at the towering heights of the Himalayas, characterised by extreme temperatures and limited rainfall, Ladakh boasts a unique biodiversity. In this challenging environment, Ladakh hosts an impressive array of wildlife, with approximately 318 bird species and 31 mammal species. However, the region is witnessing the impacts of rising temperatures and other anthropogenic pressures including tourism boom.

To safeguard the region's wildlife, the indigenous people of Ladakh formed a grassroots initiative. "Through the dedicated efforts of our members, we gather photographs, data and vital information regarding Ladakh's avian and terrestrial fauna. Our primary objective is to educate the public about these species and promote their conservation," shared Lobzang Visuddha, chairman of Wildlife Conservation and Birds Club of Ladakh (WCBCL) in an interview with Mongabay-India.

Dr. Nordan Otzer, an ENT specialist by profession, is another wildlife enthusiast who contributes to the cause. He narrated the story of an insect known as the caddisfly (<https://www.reachladakh.com/news/constituency/caddisfly-underappreciated-architect-of-ladakh>). This moth is found in pristine water sources in Nubra Valley, where its larvae construct intricate structures using pebbles, stones and plant leaves within the river. They bind these materials together with silk, creating beautiful shapes. While Dr. Otzer pursues his medical career full time, he also finds time to share stories about the local wildlife.



Caddisfly is found in pristine water sources in the Nubra Valley. Photo by Bruce Marlin/Wikimedia Commons.

WCBCCL has conducted numerous awareness programmes for wildlife conservation. Periodic bird censuses were also carried out in Ladakh, leading to the discovery of several new species in the region.

Cats such as Pallas's cat and snow leopard have also been recorded as part of the mammals' survey.

Photographers associated with the club organised several photo exhibitions in Leh, showcasing local wildlife. The club specifically targets communities who are in direct conflict with the wildlife of the region, to create awareness about wildlife behaviour. Through the awareness programmes, they also highlight the impact of stray dogs on local wildlife.

Read more: Ladakh's small cats face resource competition, intimidation by free-ranging dogs

(<https://india.mongabay.com/2023/11/ladakhs-small-cats-face-resource-competition-intimidation-by-free-ranging-dogs/>)

Wildlife rescue on the ground

Chamba has also been part of wildlife rescue operations with WCBCL. He rescued a Himalayan snowcock in Pinchimik after a feral dog attack in Nubra. He brought the injured bird to safety at his home and provided the necessary care and sustenance, which helped the bird recover quickly and fly away.

In a similar vein, 2021 witnessed a tragic incident where four red foxes and a Tibetan wolf were electrocuted in Phanjila Wanla. In response, the WCBCL members launched an investigation, uncovering an exposed electrical wire on the ground as the cause of the fatalities. This crucial information was promptly relayed to the authorities, leading to the repair of the life-threatening live wire at the site.

The organisation's members actively contribute to wildlife conservation efforts across Ladakh. Given the vast expanse of Ladakh, which covers approximately 50,000 to 60,000 square kilometres, and the limited personnel working in the forest department (estimated at around 50 employees), the involvement of residents plays a pivotal role. They not only work to protect wildlife but also collaborate with the forest department by reporting instances of rule violations.

"Ladakh's vast expanse necessitates the active involvement of local communities. We are committed to rescuing wildlife and aiding the authorities in maintaining the rule of law," emphasised Visuddha.



Eurasian lynx, a medium-sized wild cat called ee locally in Ladakhi. Chamba's account of the Eurasian lynx is just one of the many efforts to document wildlife in Ladakh. Photo by Stanzin Chamba.

The Chief Wildlife Warden of Ladakh, Pankaj Raina, emphasised the collaborative efforts of the Wildlife Department in partnership with local NGOs, tour operators, and taxi operators. Talking to Mongabay-India, he stated, "Ladakh covers a vast area, and the employees of the Forest, Ecology, and Environment Department, Ladakh, cannot effectively cover such an expansive region without the assistance of the local community. Therefore, we are actively working to raise awareness among the local people. The community's participation and contribution will significantly enhance wildlife conservation." WCBCL now plans to create an indigenous checklist of birds and animals in Ladakh, as a number of new record-sightings were made during the last few years.

Read more: Pallas's cat's sightings become more common in Ladakh
(<https://india.mongabay.com/2023/10/pallas-cats-sightings-become-more-common-in-ladakh/>)

Banner image: A lynx in a sea buckthorn shrub.
Chamba spotted the Eurasian lynx on eight
different occasions and captured several
photographs. Photo by Stanzin Chamba.

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