

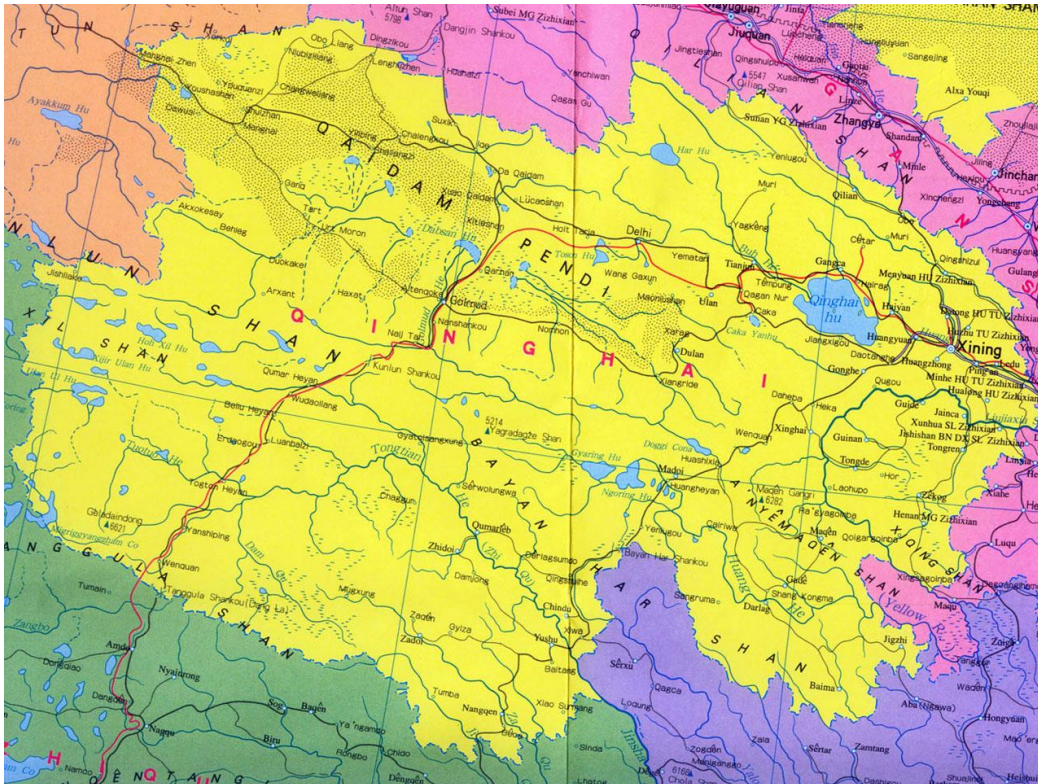
SNOW LEOPARDS FROM THE CAR

Qinghai: 27 February to 12 March 2017

Richard Webb

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Qinghai Map

INTRODUCTION

I first saw Snow Leopard in Kazakhstan in 2003, well before Ladakh became the place to see the species. Plans to visit Ladakh have twice had to be aborted for health reasons and when it became apparent that Terry Townshend, and Jean-Michel Bompar (who had travelled with Sid Francis's business partner, Roland) had both had success in southern Qinghai in 2016 I decided to give it a go with Sid Francis.

It appeared a great move when we saw two leopards from the car within four hours of reaching the first site and although we only had one further sighting in the next nine days, we also heard leopards calling on at least two days and received what appeared to be reliable reports from yak herders of two leopards being seen in another of the valleys on a regular basis.

It is unlikely that the area will ever rival Hemis in Ladakh in terms of its reliability for sightings given the number of well-trained leopard-spotters operating in that area. However the area appears to have potential with comfortable accommodation within 75 minutes' drive of the sites and would be worth further investigation. **I strongly recommend that anyone wanting to give it a try contacts Sid Francis to organise a trip at chengduuk@hotmail.com.**

We had planned to also spend several days looking for Chiru, Wild Yak and other mammals but once there I chose to concentrate on looking for leopards for the whole trip.

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LOGISTICS

Timing

The trip was planned for the start of March in part because of my and Sid's availability but also to coincide with the second half of the peak season in Ladakh. We hoped that leopards would still be mating and consequently vocal and we certainly heard leopards fairly close, briefly seeing one of these, on two days, and probably distantly on two further days.

On the downside temperatures at dawn, and to a lesser extent dusk, were extremely low although fortunately there was little wind and we were able to scan from the car when there was.

In addition it was too early in the season for a lot of smaller mammals and birds which made the full days in the field somewhat dull at times. It may prove that August and September when Terry and Jean-Michel were successful will prove more successful.

Guide

As with my 2011, 2012 and 2016 trips I used Sid Francis to organise the trip and he did a good job, working long hours and completing some long drives, most notably the 14 hour drives on the second and penultimate days. Sid charged me, as a regular client, a heavily discounted 1500 yuan per day for guiding, driving and use of his 4x4 vehicle. Normal rates would be 25% higher. This equated to £190 per day which isn't cheap but still compares favourably with a number of other well-known operators and would have been cheaper but for Britain's ridiculous decision to vote for Brexit and the subsequent crash of the exchange rate.

I paid for everything else, i.e. accommodation (including Sid's), food, petrol, tolls etc. separately and I spent roughly £60 per day for everything.

Thermal Imaging Camera

We found the first two leopards 45 minutes before dusk using my new Pulsar Quantum XQ50 thermal imaging camera. Although not a cheap piece of kit at £3k, it is an excellent bit of kit and will probably become a staple of the mammal-watchers field optics when prices come down. Although I bought it primarily for night use it is also useful during the day particularly at dawn and dusk although it should be noted that it's amazing how much heat

rocks give out even at dawn. In addition to the leopards and numerous **Blue Sheep**, one **Wolf** and a freshly-killed **Blue Sheep** were found with the camera.

Flights

British Airways annoyingly suspended their direct route to Chengdu after I had already booked so I ended up flying with Cathay Pacific via Hong Kong which added several hours travelling each way but was infinitely better than the hassle of going via Beijing or Shanghai. It was also almost £100 cheaper than the BA flight. Flights in both directions were full but the service on Cathay Pacific both at check-in and in-flight was excellent and they can be thoroughly recommended.

I had intended flying back from Yushu to Chengdu on China Eastern at a cost of £135 but decided to drive back with Sid as according to the ticket rules you could apply for a refund less 5% service charge.

Visas

The visa requirements for China are constantly changing and you currently need to supply flight details and accommodation details with your visa request. Most UK citizens now automatically receive a multi-entry visa valid for two years. I used China Visa Direct who were extremely quick and efficient as previously although slightly expensive now at £192. <http://www.chinesevisadirect.co.uk/>

Accommodation

Chengdu – As in 2016 I stayed at the Chengdu Airport Hotel which is a short shuttle bus ride or a five-minute walk from the terminal. Although convenient for the airport I did feel that it was over-priced. A large single room with breakfast cost 628 yuan (£78).

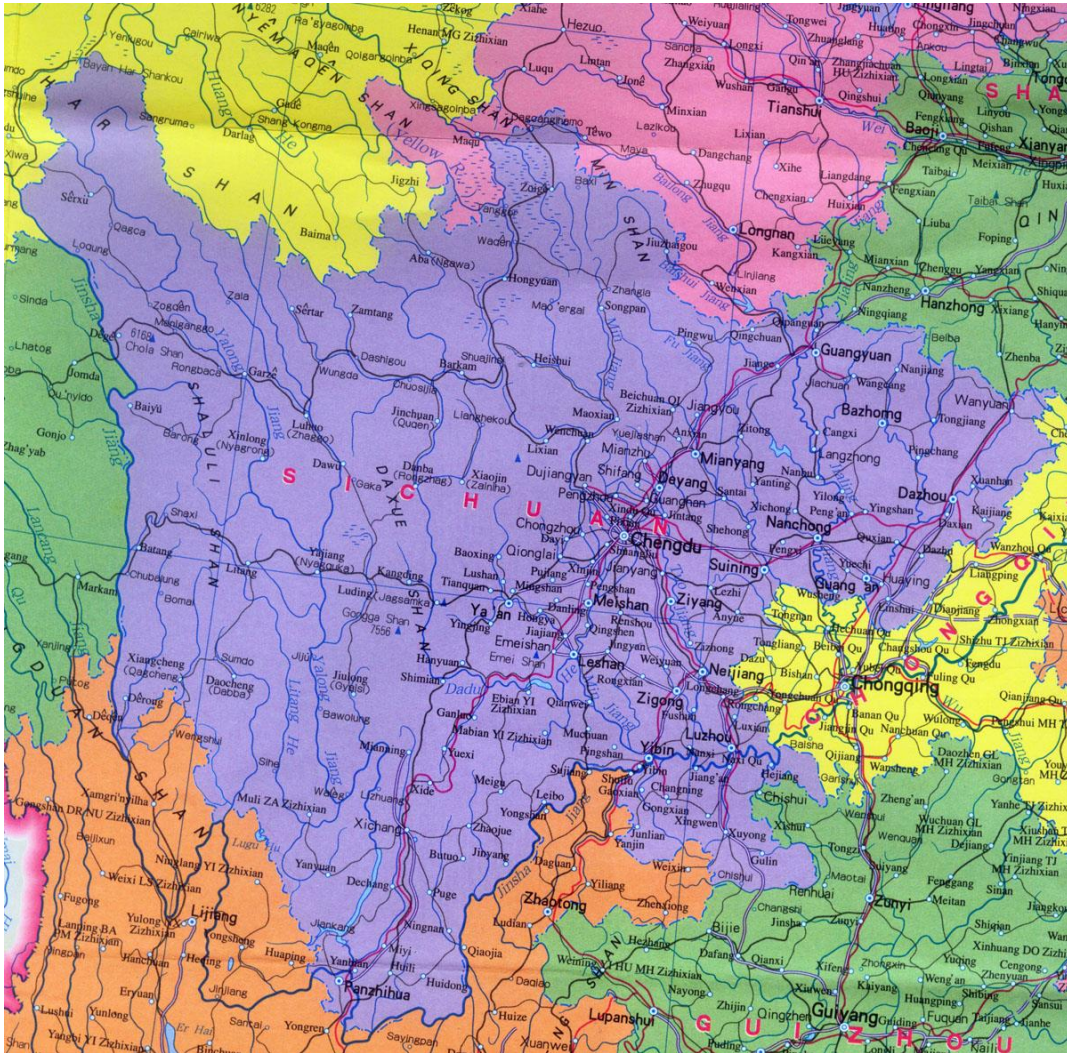
Journeys – we stayed at a couple of hotels on route, one for 130 yuan (£16) per room per night, the other in Shiqu more expensive at 366 yuan (£46) per night but after 14 hours travelling and getting stuck in snow at 15,000 feet we just stayed at the first hotel in town we found.

Yushu – we spent nine nights in the Qiang Business Guesthouse which was happy to accommodate foreign guests for 150 yuan (£19) per room per night. The rooms were adequate once I had asked to be moved from the first room that had significant plumbing problems.

ITINERARY

- 27th** Arrived Chengdu and drove north-west and then west for six-hours stopping in Barkam for night.
- 28th** Long 14-hour drive to Shiqu (Serxu) birding on route and delayed when we got stuck in a snow at a high pass at 15,000 feet, the moral to the story being not to be forced into taking the wrong route by an impatient driver behind you.
- 1st** Late start followed by slow drive looking for mammals between Shiqu and Yushu. Afternoon in Yejinimacum Valley south-west of Yushu.
- 2nd-10th** Full days in valleys south-west of Yushu. We generally left the hotel between 0600 and 0630 arriving on site for dawn, and arrived back at the hotel from 2100-2200 hours after leaving the valleys close to dark.
- 11th** Long drive from Yushu to Barkam. A frustrating drive with us being stopped, and copies of our passports being taken no fewer than seven times between Yushu and Luhuo! The outward drive had been stop free!

12th Morning drive from Barkam to Chengdu arriving at hotel early afternoon.



Sichuan Map

MAMMAL-WATCHING SITES

All the following sites lie to the south-west of Yushu in southern Qinghai. Names are taken from www.googlemaps.com unless otherwise indicated.

Note: All the sites are above 4,000 metres and time to adjust to the altitude should be built into the itinerary. The area is also extremely arid and you should make sure you remain adequately hydrated. Sid and I both had some symptoms of altitude sickness over the first 2-3 days although the cold conditions may have contributed to this.

G214 south-west of Yushu – daytime drives of this section as far as the junction with the S308 to Zadoi produced numerous **Tibetan Gazelles** and two **Tibetan Foxes**, and **Red Fox** and **Woolly Hare** at night.

Shanglaxiuxiang Valley – From the junction of the G214 and S308 60 kilometres south-west of Yushu continue on the S308 towards Zadoi and take the first obvious track on the left. This winds up over a pass that should be good for deer and then down across hills and sandy plains with **Tibetan Gazelle**, **Tibetan Fox** and **Plateau Pikas**, before returning to the G214. The pika colonies could potentially be good for weasels and badgers.

Yejinimacum Valley (name taken from Jean-Michel Bompar's) report - From the junction of the G214 and S308 60 kilometres south-west of Yushu continue south on the G214 for c.19 kilometres. Just after a school building on the left of the road, take a track on the left cross a bridge and immediately bear right. After three kilometres the concrete track becomes a dirt track which continues for another couple of kilometres at which point it splits and both tracks are probably worth investigating. **Blue Sheep** are common in this valley and we saw three different **Snow Leopards**, one or two **Wolves**, **Red Fox** and **Woolly Hare** in these valleys. Jean-Michel Bompar also saw three Snow Leopards, 'MacNeill's Red and White-lipped Deer, and Large-eared and Glover's Pika here. We saw **Glover's Pika** along the G214 1-2 kilometres south of the turn-off. The valleys are heavily disturbed with numerous yak herders and leopards may be more nocturnal here than in Ladakh although the first two we saw were 45 minutes prior to dusk within 200 metres of locals' huts and no more than 400 metres from the track.

Gaimugan Valley – From the previous site continue south along the G214 for a further 10 kilometres to Xialaxiuzhen and turn left over the river. Bear left and follow the track for 5 kilometres towards a 'convent'. The valley was good for **Blue Sheep** and the slopes viewed distantly on the right just before you reach the village held a herd of c.35 **White-lipped Deer**. At the village bear right and park up at the 'end' of the track just after the large house. You can continue on foot from here up to over 4,300 metres and SF briefly saw **Mountain Weasel** where we parked the car. Yak herders reported two Snow Leopards in this area. We also had **Woolly Hare** along the track.

La Laisongduo Valley – After crossing the river in Xialaxiuzhen bear right instead of left and then keep left in the village and bear left into a valley which runs on for several kilometres before you bear left and wind up to a pass at over 4,500 metres that potentially looks good for leopards. Dropping down the other side of the pass enters more vegetated valleys and after few kilometres you can bear right or left at a junction. We only spent a morning here and only scratched the surface but saw '**MacNeill's**' **Red Deer** on both sides of the pass.

MAMMALS

Tibetan Macaque *Macaca thibetana*

Common along the roadside c.60 kilometres north-east of Luhuo.

Woolly Hare *Lepus comus*

5th – one on journey south-west of Yushu. 6th – one Yejinimacum Valley. 8th & 10th – two Gaimugan Valley.

Plateau (Black-lipped) Pika *Ochotona curzoniae*

Common Shanglaxiuxiang Valley. Pikas at two sites near Maniganggo, south of Yushu appeared to be possible Koslov's Pikas as they had white rather than black lips but they were well outside the known range of that endangered species.

Glover's Pika *Ochotona gloveri*

One along the G214 near the entrance to Yejinimacum Valley.

Snow Leopard *Uncia uncia*

1st – two young animals in Yejinimacum Valley shortly before dusk. 4th – an adult calling frequently and then briefly seen by SF in Yejinimacum Valley. 6th – one calling frequently but unfortunately not seen, in the same area.

Wolf *Canus lupus*

28th – one on route to Shiqu at dusk. 3rd & 5th. One individual feeding on carrion in Yejinimacum Valley.

Tibetan Fox *Vulpes ferrilata*

1st - ten north of Shiqu and two south-west of Yushu. 5th & 6th – singles Shanglaxiuxiang Valley.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

Singles south-west of Yushu on 5 days.

Yellow-throated Marten *Martes flavigula*

28th - Two crossed the road on route to Luhuo from Barkam.

Mountain Weasel *Mustela altaica*

9th – One seen briefly by SF in Gaimugan Valley.

'MacNeill's' Red Deer *Cervus elaphus mcneilli*

10th – Three groups totalling 18 individuals in La Laisongduo Valley.

White-lipped Deer *Cervus albirostris*

8th – A group of c.35 in Gaimugan Valley.

Blue Sheep *Pseudois nayaur*

Very common in Yejinimacum and Gaimugan Valleys.

BIRDS

Although not a birding trip the birding was very good. Highlights included.

- Ruddy Shelduck
- White-tailed, Steppe and Golden Eagles
- Large numbers of Lammergeier and Himalayan Griffin and Saker.
- White Eared Pheasants and Tibetan Partridges in Gaimugan Valley.
- Tibetan Snowcock and Tibetan Partridges in Yejinimacum Valley.
- Six Ibisbills including a fabulous pair in Yejinimacum Valley.
- Widespread Hill Pigeons.
- Horned Lark.
- Hume's Groundpecker.
- Brown and White-throated (Black-bellied) Dipper in Yejinimacum Valley.
- Guldenstadt's Redstart.
- Robin and Brown Accentors.
- Green-backed and White-browed Tits and White-browed Tit-Warbler.
- Elliott's and Giant Laughingthrushes, and
- Tibetan Babaxes in Gaimugan Valley.
- Rufous-necked, Tibetan and White-rumped Snowfinches.
- Twite, Chinese White-browed and Pink-rumped Rosefinch.
- Godlewski's Bunting.
- Daurian Jackdaw, Red-billed and Yellow-billed Choughs.