

QINGHAI MAMMALS TOUR TRIP REPORT
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Spot the (four) Pallas' cats



Qinghai, located on the Tibetan Plateau is probably the best and certainly the easiest location to see some of the unique and rare high-altitude mammals found in the high Himalayas. Unlike many places in Asia, the conservation conditions have improved over the last 20 years with gun control, migration from rural areas to

the cities and strict law enforcement contributing to the recovery of wildlife populations decimated by over hunting and trading during the 80's and 90's. There is nowhere else in Asia where Alpine musk deer, Wild yak and Tibetan antelope can be found in such large numbers and where carnivores such as Snow leopard, Tibetan wolf and Tibetan sand fox are virtually guaranteed even in the short Tibetan summer. Qinghai is a must-do trip for Asian mammal enthusiasts. The trip was organized by Royale Safaris.

Day 1 - Arrival in Yushu

Located at 3700m, Yushu is a modern Tibetan town which was the starting point for the trip. Everyone arrived on the lunchtime flight from Chengdu and even though there was plenty of daylight left, we decided to rest for the remainder of the day in order to acclimatize. Sid and Zen Zang (our in-country tour leaders) organized a welcome dinner and gave a briefing on the rest of the tour.

Day 2 - Yushu to Kanda mountain

We started at 6 am and headed out into the grasslands. Soon after we spotted the first **Tibetan gazelle** in small herds within a couple of hundred meters from the road. In the same area the first **Tibetan sand fox** was spotted which unfortunately didn't pose for the cameras but still represented a lifer for many in on trip. As it got warmer, large colonies of **Plateau pika** were seen along the roadside. After an hour, we crossed a high pass (approx. 4,500 m) and then turned off the main road and drove along a track towards a convent located in this steep sided and spectacular valley. Highland meadows were in full flower and were interspersed with majestic rock formations. In the grasslands **Himalayan marmots** were common as were **Blue sheep** in the high alpine meadows. Stopping to spot every time an area showed particular promise our guides soon found a small herd of **Mc Neil's deer** (is this Cervus Wallichii or a sub spp of elk?) in an area of scrub. We were lucky to spot a solitary **Glover's pika** perched on a steep roadside rockface which proved to be the only one of the day and a lifer for all. We added **Tibetan woolly**

hare to the mammal count for the day. We ate breakfast and lunch out of the back of the cars to maximize our time in the field in what has to be one of the most spectacular sites in Qinghai.

Tibetan sand fox



Day 3-7 – Yushu to the Valley of the Cats

The drive to the Valley of the Cats took all day as we stopped frequently to scan for wildlife. Within the first ten minutes we came upon a large flock of Griffon vultures which were feeding on a yak carcass which looked like it had been killed by wolves. After another hour we stopped for breakfast on a roadside track and again we were surrounded by pastures heaving with **Plateau pika**. So much food for carnivores must surely attract something.

Plateau pika



Unbelievable as we were leaving a **Steppe polecat** ran out with a pika in its jaws. For those who missed the first photo opportunity, it reappeared after 5 minutes and we were all able to get great photos of this stunning animal.

Steppe polecat



At Angsai we were met by the guides/drivers to take us into the Valley of the Cats which took approx 3-4 hours as we stopped to scan this stunning landscape. The Valley of the Cats is a series of interconnected and sparsely forested valleys. Compared to the landscape around Yushu trees were abundant. The guides spotted an **Alpine Musk deer** on the opposite valley in a scrubby grassland. Fantastic. We also had repeat sightings of **Blue sheep**, **Himalayan marmot**, **Glover's pika** and **Wooly hare**.

Glover's pika



On the second day, we were on the road by 7am and headed up one of valleys to the highest point of 4,600m. The landscape continued to surprise with high altitude meadows surrounded by rock pinnacles and juniper forests. We saw three **Alpine musk deer** throughout the day and were treated to a couple of male **Blue sheep** silhouetted against a blue sky high up on their rock buttress. We had scanned a couple of locations known for Eurasian lynx and searched the high peaks for snow leopards or wolves but today was not the day. On the return, and just before dark, a small herd of **White-lipped deer** appeared on a high meadow on the opposite site of the river. Another lifer for all and a great way to end the day.

Alpine musk deer



Over the next couple of days we continued to drive up a series of high altitude valleys and scan this awe inspiring landscape for its unique wildlife. The abundance of herbivores especially **Blue sheep**, **Himalayan marmot** and **Woolly hare** was impressive. However, it was the frequency of encounters with **Alpine musk deer** that was without parallel. Over two days we had nine separate encounters and sometimes at very close range. I am not aware of any other site in Asia which has such an abundance of musk deer and is a very good indicator of successful protection of this highly valuable and ruthlessly hunted animal.

Valley of the Cats



On the final day, the carnivores stole the show. The morning began with a **Red fox** testing a flock of **Blue sheep** to see if there was a chance of snatching one of the young. Although this played out on a high grassland we watched the drama unfold until eventually, the fox decided it wasn't his day. During lunch in a river valley where **Tibetan blue bear** had been seen earlier, a **Himalayan mountain weasel** was successfully "squeaked" out of a rocky area and seen by two members of the group.

As the day progressed, and the witching hour approached, we had yet to see a cat. Hopes were fading fast when our local guides frantically waved with a level of excitement we hadn't previously seen. A **snow leopard** was walking on a ridge and silhouetted on the skyline. For the next 30 minutes we maneuvered to get a better view as this majestic cat surveyed its domain. A summer sighting of a snow leopard gives hope for those who are adverse to the bitter cold of Hemis National Park in winter!

The day was not over, over dinner in the nearby town of Zadoi, we were told that **Tibetan blue bears** could be seen at night at the town dump. Not a great backdrop for a photo and it was disturbing to see the packs of feral dogs barking and baying but sure enough, two large bears was spotlighted in the grassland behind the dump.

Day 8 – Zadoi to Yushu

We used the day explore the area between Zadoi and Yushu. An abundance of **Plateau pika** and a number of **Tibetan sand fox** were seen on route.

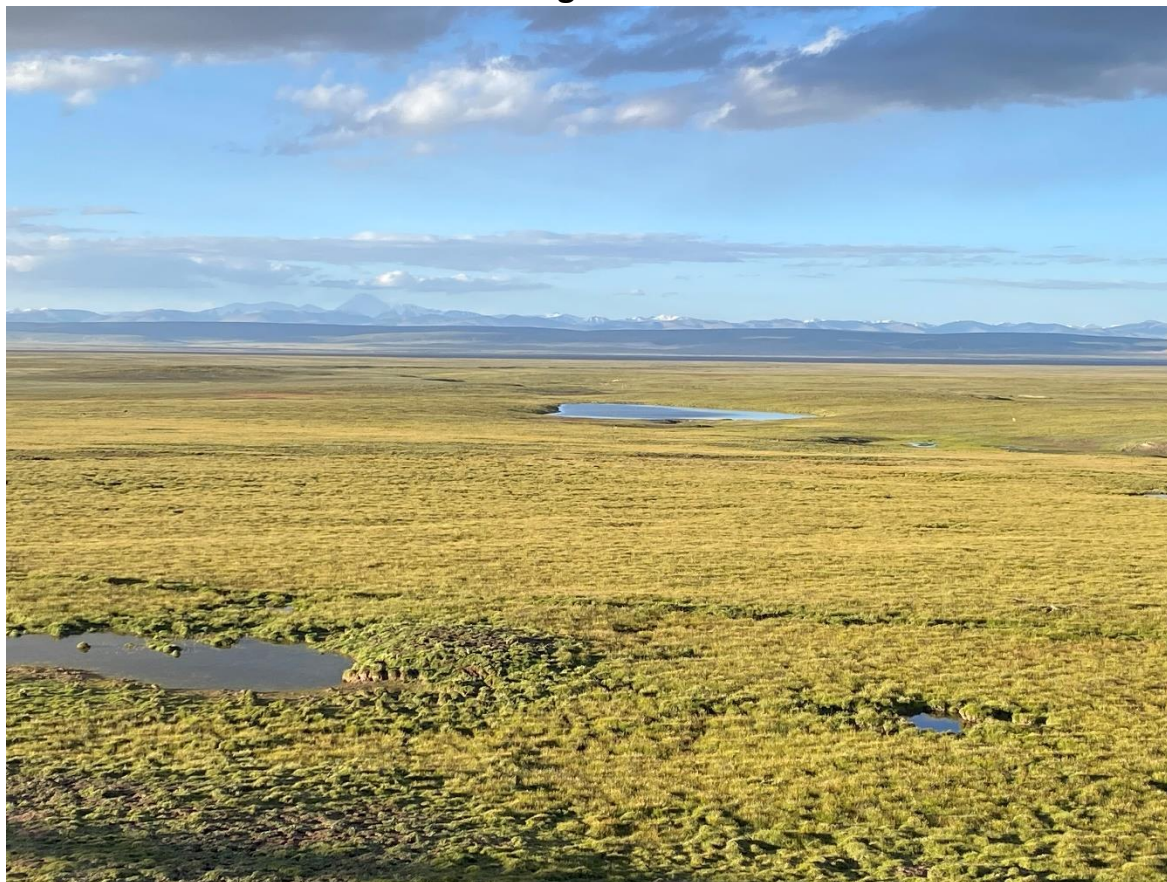
Day 9 – Yushu to Zhidoi

The morning was spent driving between Yushu and Zhidoi with rain keeping both mammals and mammal watchers out of sight. After a very long police assisted check-in at the hotel we heading out to scan nearby valleys for mammals. The rain persisted and out best efforts (including a short night drive) were not rewarded. The rain won the day and we headed back to the hotel as we had a 6 am start the next day to Kekekili.

Day 10 - Zhidoi to Kekexili State Nature Reserve

Tibetan mammals day ! Although the morning got off to an unexpected start with a two hour road detour we did see a number of **Tibetan gazelle** and the omnipresent **Tibetan sand fox** on route to Kekexili. Kekexili Nature Reserve is inextricably linked to the slaughter of the Tibetan antelope or Chiru in the 1990's for their wool used in the making of Shatoosh shawls. A film by the same name "Kekexili – mountain patrol" captures the true story of Tibetan volunteers who pay the ultimate price for attempting to protect the Chiru. The conservation of the Chiru is a success story with an increasing population estimated at between 100,000 to 150,000 animals today. As soon as we entered the reserve, we started to see small herds of **Kiang (Tibetan wild ass)**. Within a few minutes a large herd of **Chiru** came into view on the horizon. As we drove deeper into the reserve a bachelor herd of **Chiru** with their long elegant horns were spotted much closer to the road. Although herds of domestic Yak were in the buffer zone of the reserve a very large, solitary possible **Wild yak** was seen on the very edge of our binocular vision. As we reached our turnaround point for the day, our guide spotted a very pale and large Canid. This turned out to be a spectacular "blonde" **Tibetan wolf** gracefully moving across the plains. It really was a stunning animal.

Kekexili grasslands



Tibetan wolf



The grasslands are covered with large colonies of **Plateau pika** which are the foundation of the carnivore prey base. As we walked across the grasslands we noticed colonies of a very small rodent which we believe to be



Irene mountain vole. As the sun began to set we then drove to Qumalai, which would be our base for the next couple of days.

Day 11 – Qumalai to Mount Kunlun (Wild Yak Valley)

We set off at 6 am for what was a 9 hour drive to Wild Yak Valley. Even though we were driving through the vast grasslands of the plateau, we didn't stop for Tibetan gazelle, fox, or wild ass to maximise our time in the valley. Wild Yak Valley is also a geological park, the lush grasslands of Kekexili were now replaced with rocky, arid mountains. On the edge of the valley, the first **Argali sheep** of the trip were spotted by Sid through the telescope as we scanned the landscape looking for large black shapes which could be Wild Yak. Finally, we were rewarded. Deep inside the valley, on high alpine meadows the distinctive features of the **Wild yak** were visible. Three members of the group stayed to hike up to get better pictures with the remainder beginning the long drive back. As we drove through Kekexili we were treated to multiple and incredibly close encounters with **Tibetan antelope**. Viewing these animals 10 meters from the road was startling evidence of the conservation turnaround of this species.

Day 12 – Qumalai to Zhidoi

We left later than usual due to the previous late night. On route to Zhidoi we searched a few valleys for mammals. In one location, three separate **Mountain weasels** were seen (and this time by all members of the group!). Fantastic to see this small carnivore hunting pika after spending so many hours in its habitat. After arriving in Zhidoi we drove out to an area that had potential for Pallas cat. As soon as it got dark, eyeshine belonging to **Tibetan sand fox** and **Red fox** was picked up. As the group descended the side of the hill, eyeshine and the outline of a probable **Pallas cat** was seen by Sid and two members of the group. Despite efforts to relocate the cat, we left the site with only some of the group having seen it. It didn't matter. Within 24 hours everyone had an exceptional Pallas cat encounter.

Mountain weasel



Day 13 – Qumalai to Three Rivers National Park

The source of the Yangtze, Yellow and Mekong river are located in the Three Rivers National Park. Impressive rock formations, rolling grasslands and rocky outcrops abound. Most of the day was spent exploring the zone between 4600 and 4800 m in search of the elusive Pallas cat and Eurasian lynx. In the morning we found what we thought were a colony of **Plateau voles** (*Neodon fuscus* to be confirmed) which added a potential new mammal to the list.

Three Rivers National Park



Plateau vole



By lunch, some members of the group decided to return to the hotel in preparation for the night drive whilst four members of the group decided to spend a couple more hours searching for cats. Within 10 minutes of splitting up, the cat group, spotted a **Pallas cat** on a rocky cliff. Then another. And another. And then one more. In one photo frame, and at a distance of 100 m we had a female and three near fully grown kittens. Zen Zang

quickly drove off to get a phone signal to call the others back (which he managed to do) and we all spent the next hour watching the antics of this truly unique and stunning sighting. We spent the next few hours scanning this extraordinary park in the hope of another (final?) wildlife encounter. We were rewarded with a **Tibetan wolf** carrying a piece of yak meat back towards its den. Clearly the wolf knew we were watching and eventually dropped its load and disappeared into a ravine. What an end to the day!

Day 14 – Qumalai to Yushu

On route to Yushu we took a diversion to a viewpoint overlooking the Yangtze river. A distant **Alpine musk deer** and several **Blue sheep** and **Tibetan sand fox** were seen

Day 15 – Yushu departure to home

Tibetan wild ass: Kekexili National Park



SUMMARY:

In total we saw 23 mammal species of which 8 were carnivores. The landscapes are extraordinary. Sometimes mind-blowing. The ecology of the plateau is underpinned by the vast colonies of Plateau pika. I've never seen small mammal mass on such a scale which are both ecosystem engineers by aerating and fertilizing the soil and providing the prey base for both mammal and bird predators. The ultimate conservation litmus test has to be the visibility and approachability of mammals highly sought after in illegal trade. Musk deer and Tibetan antelope have been decimated by poachers over the last few decades, yet both species were visible, didn't run at the sight of a car and were seen without effort. The trip was memorable for many reasons but without doubt the diversity of carnivores was exceptional for the Asia region and illustrated the current conservation efforts which have maintained the fragile and unique ecology of the Tibetan plateau.

Blue sheep: Valley of the Cats



The Qinghai mammal watchers



MAMMAL LIST

Species	Scientific Name	Kanda mountain	Valley of the Cats	Kekexili	Wild Yak Valley	Zhidoi	Three rivers National Park
Snow leopard	<i>Panthera uncia</i>		X				
Pallas' cat	<i>Felis manul</i>						X
Tibetan wolf	<i>Canis lupus chanco</i>			X			X
Tibetan sand fox	<i>Vulpes ferrilata</i>	X	X	X	X	X	X
Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>		X			X	

Tibetan blue bear	Ursus arctos pruinosus					X Zadoi town	
Steppe polecat	Mustela eversmanii		X on route				
Mountain weasel	Mustela altaica					X on route	
Wild yak	Bos mutus			X	X		
Kiang	Equus kiang			X			
Alpine musk deer	Moschus chrysogaster		X				X
Blue sheep	Psuedo nayaur	X	X				X
Argali	Ovis ammon				X on route		
Tibetan gazelle	Procapra picticaudata			X			
Tibetan antelope	Pantholops hodgsonii			X			
White-lipped deer	Przewalskium albirostris		X				
Mc Neil's deer	Cervus wallichi	X					
Woolly hare	Lepus oiostolus	X	X				
Glover's pika	Ochotana gloveri	X	X				
Plateau pika	Ochotana curzoniae	X	X	X	X	X	X
Irene mountain vole	Neodon irene			X			
Plateau vole	Neodon fuscus						X
Himalayan marmot	Marmota himalayana	X	X	X		X	X