

Chinese Snow Leopard Sighting February 2024

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Western China is rapidly becoming one of the “go to” places for Snow Leopard watching. There are now several Sichuan and Qinghai sites in the vicinity of Serxu, Sichuan and Yushu in Qinghai that give easy vehicle accessibility and are within an hour or two’s drive from western style hotel amenities (the luxuries of hot showers, sit-down toilets and a variety of restaurants). This short report is a note on a successful 2-man Snow Leopard trip that lasted 9 days and started and finished in Chengdu – a trip that used 2 days to drive to the Snow Leopard site in the vicinity of Yushu, Qinghai and 2 days to return to Chengdu, which gave 7 days of mammal/birdwatching and 2 days purely devoted to travel. The driving time to site gave reasonable time to acclimatize to altitude with Leopard sites being over 4,000m ASL. An alternative way of accessing area is by flying, with daily flights from Chengdu or Xining to Yushu airport. We found our Snow Leopard on the afternoon of day 5, after 2.5 days of scanning. This is one of many sightings made at this site.

YouTube video from trip - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o4hRAuHM9nk>

Mammal List

- 1. Rhesus Macaque** – many roadside being fed by tourists between Luhou and Garze County Town in Sichuan.
- 2. Plateau Pika** – abundant on plateau grasslands in suitable soils where they can burrow.
- 3. Pallas’s Cat** – seen twice. One of first mammals seen on day 3 – long views of a cat stalking Pika and then sitting on a small mound in the middle of a Pika colony. Second cat seen day 4 – more distant views but again just sitting on a small grassy mound in a Pika colony.
- 4. Snow Leopard** – afternoon of day 5 around 13:30. Viewing with binoculars from car, a Leopard came into view on a high ridge. Changing to scope, watched it slowly descend in our direction – walking around 100m downhill – stopping 3 or 4 times and at one point rolled over in a patch of snow, This behaviour could be indicative of territory marking but our visit also coincides with mating season and female cats often roll when in heat or just post-mating. The leopard went out of site behind a rock formation, but we moved our position and caught a further brief glimpse before the animal headed into rocks, where we lost sight. Scanning this position for about 2 hours we noticed no movement but in late afternoon two groups of Blue Sheep, feeding relatively close by, became agitated with one group sprinting away over a ridge – we assumed the Leopard caused the panic, but never got to see it again.

5. **Wolf** – several sightings at the Leopard site where on day 3 had the interesting sight of all the local canids – Wolf, Red Fox and Tibetan Fox – crossing a frozen river valley at almost same place and time. Mostly seen as singles and pairs – but in Sichuan a slightly bigger pack of 4 animals.
6. **Red Fox** – many sightings
7. **Tibetan Fox** – the most numerous canid, Specialist Pika hunter, found in all pika rich areas.
8. **Kiang** – small herds around Serxu, Sichuan.
9. **Tibetan Gazelle** – most widespread ungulate seen on plateau grasslands both in Sichuan and Qinghai
10. **Blue Sheep** – present, often in larger flocks of over 20 animals, on mountain sides and rocky, steep sided habitats – Snow Leopard prey, where you find Blue Sheep you'll also find the leopard.

Notable birds

Tibetan Bunting – an uncommon plateau endemic that's listed as endangered – seeing a flock of 40-plus wintering birds was an encouraging sight.

Lammergeier – although a common sight on the plateau seeing up to 10 birds a day was a surprise.

Trip Itinerary

Day 1 – travel day starting at 08:00 from Chengdu. 620km drive to Garze County, where there is a good selection of suitable hotels.

Day 2 – First day of mammal/birdwatching – 70km from Garze, the plateau grassland starts, and first sightings of Tibetan Fox, Tibetan Gazelles and Lammergeiers – at 4,000m Sichuan/Qinghai pass came across flock of 40+ Tibetan Bunting. Today another 600KM drive to Leopard site west of Yushu. Comfortable hotel with en suite shower and sit-down toilets.

Day 3 – Day 1 of Snow Leopard scanning – site an hour's drive from hotel. Also Red and Tibetan Fox and a Wolf crossing a frozen valley. Early morning Pallas's Cat wandering through a Pika colony. Many gazelles on grassland and Blue Sheep on mountain slopes.

Day 4 – Quiet day – no signs of leopard, Second Pallas's cat.

Day 5 – Afternoon the Snow Leopard sighting - 2 evening wolves on drive back to hotel.

Day 6 – Morning return to Snow Leopard site but no sign of yesterday's cat – afternoon drive to Yushu

Day 7 – Mammal watching around Yushu – Tibetan Foxes, Gazelles and Blue Sheep.

Day 8 – morning drive to Serxu – Kiang, Tibetan Foxes and Wolves – snow in afternoon giving tricky drive to Garze County.

Day 9 – Snow affected drive – Chengdu via Maerkang – very difficult conditions.



Rhesus Macaque



Pallas's Cat



Tibetan Fox



One of the pack of 4 Wolves seen Serxu, Sichuan



Kiang



Tibetan Gazelle



Scanning for Snow Leopards



Snow Leopard Site



Snow Leopard – same area earlier trip