



Giant Panda Expedition China

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Lennart Verheuvél

www.naturebylennart.com



Introduction

There is no country like China that's for sure. This trip was my first visit to China and it was extraordinary in many ways. The people, the food, the many omnipresent security camera's... It was all different from what I've seen anywhere else. The best reason to go too China is the nature though. I can't speak for the other parts since I've only been to Sichuan, but I've not been to many places that show such consistent nice scenery for hours driving. I really liked all the forested mountains. For a mammalwatcher it's more what hides in those forests though. And the number one mammal needs no introduction: Giant Panda!

After the business of tracking Giant Panda's with local help in Foping shut down in 2011 it was long quiet on the Giant Panda front. No foreigner seemed to see Giant Panda's anymore. Then in 2019 the first trip reports trickled in speaking about 'Place X': a place where Giant Panda's were seen again. The trick seemed to be to wait and watch the trees and eventually a Giant Panda would climb up in one. It certainly had my interest, but then Covid came and China shut down. It remained unclear if the people that saw them in 2019 had had a lucky break with a cooperating mom and cub or if Giant Panda really was a reliable species to go for again.

I didn't have any serious plans to travel to China myself until Jan Kelchtermans from Belgium posted in the summer of 2023 on mammalwatching.com a request to join him for a trip around Christmas with the specific goal of seeing Giant Panda. Jan is the founder of www.europesbig5.com and has been guiding for years in Europe, taking people successfully out to see its most special carnivores, in particular Iberian and Eurasian Lynx, bears, canids and mustelids. He also guides trips outside of Europe. This trip was going to be more of a shared effort however with all of us taking care of our own part. It is in any case recommend to make a trip like this with not more persons than can fit into a 4x4. We still appreciated to eggs and coffee for breakfast though Jan :).

It didn't take long for me to decide to join. Daniel Dahan from the USA was also keen to join. Daniel is also very interested in photography like me and you can find more of his work on <https://adventureartwork.com/>. He is also very good at turning pictures into paintings! Keep an eye out for his upcoming Youtube-channel :).

I like spending more time in one area myself because it's usually then when you get the special moments. I knew Giant Panda wouldn't be easy, but I hoped in two weeks of dedicated searching we might get a sighting of one closer than a couple of hundred meters away in a tree. Furthermore I knew we would have a really good chance of seeing Red Panda which was also a much desired species for me. Finally I wanted to take the time to search for Chinese Mountain Cat because that was the one endemic cat I need (and still need...) from China.

So just before Christmas we all finally met in the city of Chengdu and headed out for two weeks of dedicated panda searching. Our driver was ZZ with whom many other mammalwatchers have also explored Sichuan. ZZ has a good 4x4 which was a real asset for us. It was all arranged through Sid Francis although Sid didn't join us himself. Jan had already been there that same year and had scouted some of the area and we followed our own strategy when we were there.

ZZ is a really good driver to have for a mammalwatcher. He likes to see the animals himself too, so he puts in the effort and he is an excellent driver. He also knows a fair amount of birds which comes in handy if mammals are not the only animals you are looking for.

We had a fabulous trip and I want to thank Jan and Daniel for making it with me. For those of you interested in more background and many more pictures I refer to my website. Read in more detail about the Giant Panda sighting and also about the many Red Panda sightings. Since I like to take pictures I also like sharing them and as I've done with previous reports I have shared a species list with record shots when I have them for that species. If I know a subspecies I will add it as well. Feel free to comment if you think a mammal is misidentified. Also feel free to ask me any other questions about the trip. You can reach me through my website or just post a question on the forum of mammalwatching.com. I hope you enjoy!

Schedule

December 22	Departure from Amsterdam
December 23	Arrival in Chengdu
December 24	Making the trip to the Giant Panda area. We stayed in the same hotel for two weeks.
December 25 – January 5	Giant Panda searching. Alternating between Place X, Place Y and Place Z. Some nights we spotlighted for an hour or so by driving the road from our hotel to Place X.
January 6	Drive back to Chengdu and on to Ruoergai
January 7 and 8	Full day searching for Chinese Mountain Cat
January 9	Drive back to Chengdu
January 10	Flight home

A bit about the areas

A large part of this tripreport is going to be a bit cryptic since I avoid sharing any information that might give away the location of the Giant Panda or where we searched for is. This is to avoid ruining the chances of any other persons wanting to see a Giant Panda as well and I know there are quite a few groups that want to go do just that this year. I will go into detail a bit since I hope it will make sense to the ones actually going there and might help them with making decisions on which areas to focus. ZZ and Sid know where the locations are so if you arrange your trip with Sid you should have no problem getting there.

Place X

Place X is exactly the same place as you might have read about in the tripreports of Manuel and Sophie Baumgartner, Samuel Marlin and Martin Royle. This is the place where a mom and a cub or just a cub alone were seen in a tree. We heard that others had seen a Giant Panda walking far away in 2023, but they were short and bad sightings as we understood. One person we knew off was supposed to have seen one also in a tree quite high up a slope in 2023 as we understood. So naturally this was the place we initially focused on. All the sightings pretty much cluster on one place which can be reached by following a pretty good trail from the parking lot. Scanning the trees is best done early in the morning or late in the afternoon because then the light is not against you.

There are some other trails that give a view on other parts of the mountain, but they were less good in our opinion. This place is really good for Red Panda. Especially the area down around the parking lot or the trails on the same level as the parking lot are not to be ignored as we've had our best sightings there. We did not find a single trace of Giant Panda here though.

Place Y

This is a new place. Thanks to a tip of someone else we were pointed in the direction of this place. It is within a reasonable driving distance from Place X. Once we had properly scouted both places we decided to scan Place Y in the morning and Place X in the afternoon. Place Y is a much more disturbed area with much cattle, but it offers a very good view of the forested slopes. It has very little bamboo. There is at least one group of Golden Snub-nosed Monkeys hanging around there and we actually saw quite a bit of wildlife here. Tufted Deers are quite common in both places. This is where we finally saw our Giant Panda also. So it's a very interesting area. To fully benefit from it you need a 4x4.

Place Z

Had just enough letters left in the alphabet to share this one. We only visited this place on our final two days. I'm not sure how accessible it will be for others as we had to pass a checkpoint to visit it. ZZ knew the right people. It was by far the most unspoiled place we've seen which thick bamboo forests and the scenery was really nice. It looked like a pristine nature reserve, much more so than the other places. It has about a 20km road next to a river and at every corner you expect to bump into a Giant Panda. The snow allowed us to notice many fresh foot prints of different Giant Panda's and it looked very exciting. The Giant Panda has to be on the road though because it will be invisible in the forest.

Tibetan Plateau

This area is no secret and it is very far away from the Giant Panda areas. Many others have seen Chinese Mountain Cat near the city of Ruergai and this was also our plan. However we sadly failed. Our chances were less good than they've been for others in the past since pretty much only one good spot for them seemed to remain. The spot where others have reported Pallas' Cats has been completely destroyed. Also much of the area has been fenced. It was sad to see, but I think chances of Chinese Mountain Cat shouldn't be that bad still. We were just not lucky in our two days of searching. We saw many Tibetan Foxes and many Tibetan Gazelles though.

Practical tip

Install Astrill as a vpn before you go. Its not cheap, but it works like a charm. You will be able to Whatsapp and to all the things you could do before you went behind the Great Chinese Firewall.

List of observed species

1. Tibetan Macaque (*Macaca thibetana*)

We found a habituated group along the road from Chengdu to the Giant Panda area. Also non-habituated ones at Place Y.



2. Golden Snub-nosed Monkey (*Rhinopithecus roxellana*)

At place Y there is a nice group of about 15 individuals. This group can split up into sub groups and there are probably more groups around since we found a single male on arrival at quite a distance from where we have seen the others. The group spend the day every day at another place, but with the telescope we could usually find them. Once on a morning they were on the road, but quickly went down when they saw us.





3. Plateau Pika (*Ochotona curzoniae*)

Many near Ruergai. Probably some other Pika as well there as I've read in other reports, but I didn't bother to check. I wouldn't have minded had they all stayed one species.



4. Northern Chinese Flying Squirrel (*Aeretes melanopterus* ssp *szechuanensis*)

Seen on one night near Place X on top of the tree next to the road. I'm not sure how this subspecies looks different than the other one, but within this range it must be this subspecies (if I have the species correct).



5. Swinhoe's Striped Squirrel (*Tamiops swinhoei*)

Quite common at all places where we have search for Giant Panda.



6. Southeast Asian Shrew (*Crocidura fuliginosa*)

I think it's this one, but feel free to comment. One seen bouncing across the snow at Place Y. The habitat was pine forest with patches of bamboo at 2500m.



7. Mainland Leopard Cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*)

A nice one for myself as I hadn't been able to get pictures of this species before and also hadn't seen more of it than just the hind legs. The first sighting was the best, but I didn't get pictures. Seen while driving back from Place X at nightfall. Second one was seen while spotlighting from Place X to our hotel quite far away on a slope.



8. Masked Palm Civet (*Paguma larvata*)

One seen on a night drive from our hotel to Place X.

9. Tibetan Fox (*Vulpes ferrilata*)

Seen many near Ruorgai. Especially at night easy to find. Not easy to approach.





10. Red Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)

This species is way too common.



11. Giant Panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*)

The star of the trip obviously! We used the same strategy as other have before us and scanned many, many, many trees. Initially our efforts focused more on Place X, but later it was more 50/50 with Place Y. At Place X we never found a trace of them. At Place Y we were very excited to find quite fresh Giant Panda scat, but this winded down after days of nothing after that. We began to feel quite hopeless when we went into our second and final week. But then!

On the second day of the new year and our 10th day in China this all changed with a glorious moment when a large male Giant Panda stood next to the road! We were actually descending around noon after a morning of fruitless searching and to say we didn't expect this encounter would be an understatement. What I remember most is how white the bear looked. The black was not very striking to me at first. It stood there for quite a few seconds, long enough for me to poke my lens out of the car window and getting some pictures. Then it walked down around the corner. On foot we were able to see it one final time standing on the edge of a slope and after that it went down into the bamboo. These sightings make it all worth it!

For a full story go to [my website](#).





12. Red Panda (*Ailurus fulgens styani*)

We had less sightings than I thought we would have based on what I heard from others, but what we perhaps lacked in quantity we made up in quality. We had at least 7 different sightings. Most we have seen at Place X, actually not far from the parking lot. The first one we had at our lunch spot. My favorite sighting was from two animals in one tree, right when we had our first snow and it started snowing again. Just magical. At Place Y we only found tracks of Red Panda. At Place Z we had a really fun encounter on our last morning with an animal that came out of the bushes and actually hopped towards us. It stopped only at a few meters and then ran into the nearest bush where we could still see it quite well. Well, you can guess the rest from the pictures.

For more pictures and stories on the Red Panda go [to my website](#).















13. Yellow-throated Marten (*Martes flavigula*)

We saw two animals together at Place Z on the other side of the river. Not a good sighting and my pictures were too bad to show.

14. Wild Boar (*Sus scrofa*)

One seen on our final morning along the road on the way back from the Giant Panda area to Chengdu. For one moment we thought it was an Asiatic black bear...

15. Chinese Forest Musk Deer (*Moschus berezovskii*)

Quite a good mammal to see I understand. It was on the road on our first night spotlighting from our hotel to Place X. I messed up the pictures sadly.



16. Tufted Deer (*Elaphodus cephalophus*)

Quite a common animal. We saw the most at Place Y, but also quite regularly on the path at Place X.



17. Sambar (*Rusa unicolor*)

Quite regularly encountered at night while spotlighting from our hotel to Place X.



18. Chinese Serow (*Capricornis milneedwardsii*)

Only seen at Place X. Very skittish and I never got a good look at them. We only saw them near the parking lot.

19. Chinese Goral (*Naemorhedus griseus*)

One individual seen at Place Y on a morning while it was grazing on an open patch of grass between the trees. Seen with the telescope.

20. Tibetan Gazelle (*Procapra picticaudata*)

Surprisingly common. After I had to put in much effort to see one in India really far away I hadn't expected this. Very common near Ruergai with several groups easy to see.



21. Blue Sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*)

Some individuals seen at Place Z far up on a slope with the telescope.

