

Winter in Labahe and Gouli

Jan 2026



The travel bug bites differently, sometimes with gentle persuasion and other times with hard obsession.

After my trip last year in February with AbsolutePanda covering Sichuan and Qinghai in China, I knew I had to revisit portions of the trip to uncover more of the hidden secrets in these magical places. Thankfully it is reasonably easy for me to get to China from Singapore, and this time I took two groups in January, one for a more relaxed quest to find red pandas at Labahe Nature Reserve, and the other for a more demanding expedition to find the Tibetan red dhole in the Kunlun Mountain Range. The latter has become my personal obsession after having seen a picture taken by another photographer on the trip last year, of a canid with a mane so thick it barely resembled the effable Asiatic wild dogs of South and South-east Asia.

Labahe Nature Reserve



The objective of the three-night trip to Labahe was to find the red panda, preferably with a background of heavy snow. As luck would have it however, we had bright sunny skies throughout the entire trip, which came after an unseasonably warm fortnight in midwinter. There was almost no snow left on the mountain, which offered somewhat (better) pictures of the red pandas. No snow, but after seeing how intricately patterned the moss-laden branches of the trees are, I'm not complaining!



We saw a total of four **red pandas**, which was fortunate hearing how groups have gone for five days without seeing any. The boisterous **Tibetan macaques** were still running their food-grabbing mafia operation, and **sambar deer** populations were still healthy, concentrating around the salt licks near the hotel.



Night drives were more fruitful this trip, in part due to good weather and perhaps in part due to the fact that we starting looking slightly later in the night at 10pm. New species for me included the **forest musk deer**, **northern hog badger**, **small-toothed ferret badger**, and a fleeting glimpse of a **mainland leopard cat** which contrary to the many reports here seem so difficult to find and photograph!



Sightings of red pandas are dependent on luck, and in one sighting bolstered using thermal imaging. The other three red pandas were spotted on the bus ride up from the ticketing booth to the cable car station. The drivers didn't seem to mind stopping midway up the mountain for us to alight and were happy to provide intel on the previous days' sightings.

Kunlun Mountain Range



The mystical valley of Gouli in the Kunlun Mountain Range was still as spellbinding as the previous trip, although surprisingly there was barely any snow cover at all. In the three full days, there were sightings of healthy populations of prey animals including the **bharal** and the **plateau pika**. A herd of **kiangs** appeared on the ridgeline on a sunny afternoon.



The carnivore sightings were also spectacular. This included daily sightings of the **Tibetan wolf** and **Pallas's cat** – to the point that we became very selective of the photographs that were taken, if that is an indicator of how frequently they were spotted. Interestingly sightings of the **Tibetan fox** were less common.



On one afternoon, high on the ridgeline by the rest station, a **snow leopard** made a fleeting appearance. Just enough time for a blurry photograph to be captured – not one that was worth posting but one worth remembering how exhilarating that unexpected sighting was.

The highlight of the trip was a sighting of a family of **Eurasian lynx** at dusk: a mother and her three year-old cubs. They were habituated the presence of vehicles (there were four) which granted us a wondrous moment with them.



Regrettably we missed the Tibetan dhole by a couple of days. One of the photographers shared a picture of three resting on the snow at approximately 5000m asl, and I was told a pack of 11 had fought over a bharal carcass with a snow leopard in end December. Whether lore, myth or fact, this was enticing enough for me to plan another attempt next year.

Afterall, impossible animal targets are the best reason to repeat a trip!

Carnivora

1. Tibetan wolf (*Canis lupus*)
2. Tibetan fox (*Vulpes ferrilata*)
3. Red panda (*Ailurus fulgens*)
4. Leopard cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*)
5. Snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*)
6. Pallas's cat (*Otocolobus manul*)
7. European lynx (*Lynx lynx*)
8. Northern hog badger (*Arctonyx albogularis*)
9. Small-toothed ferret badger (*Melogale moschata*)

Ungulates

10. Goitered gazelle (*Gazella subgutturosa*)
11. Tibetan gazelle (*Procapra picticaudata*)
12. Bharal (*Pseudois nayaur*)
13. Chinese goral (*Naemorhedus griseus*)
14. Reeve's muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesi*)
15. Forest musk deer (*Moschus berezovskii*)
16. Sambar (*Rusa unicolor*)
17. Red deer (*Cervus canadensis*)
18. Asiatic wild ass (*Equus hemionus*)

Primates

19. Tibetan macaque (*Macaca thibetana*)

Lagomorpha

20. Plateau pika (*Ochotona curzoniae*)
21. Desert hare (*Lepus tibetanus*)