

TRIP REPORT CHINA

22 FEBRUARY – 15 MARCH 2026

Royle Safari's Sichuan trip, with 2 primate extensions



INTRODUCTION

About me

My name is Wouter Pieters, a Belgian living in France.

In 2022, after nearly ten years in the zoo world as a veterinarian and curator, I returned to private practice. The adjustment took time, but I eventually realised I did not need wildlife medicine to be happy—only wildlife itself. Since then, I have travelled much more for wildlife, with this website and community as a constant source of inspiration and information.

I am fascinated by animals of all kinds, but my main passion is hoofstock—especially antelopes—and primates. Influenced by my zoo career and strongly drawn to Africa and Asia, I have set myself the goal of seeing and photographing as many Afro-Asian ungulate and primate species and subspecies as possible.

Why China

This was my first trip with Royle Safari, and after this experience it certainly will not be my last. I had two main reasons for joining a group of mammal watchers.

Until recently, I usually travelled alone, or occasionally with a partner. But solo travel has one obvious drawback: you are alone. There is no one to share the experience with, apart from the occasional guide or driver, and evenings in a tent or hotel room can feel lonely. I wanted to find out whether group travel would change that, despite the uncertainty of not knowing the other participants.

My second reason was practical. Some destinations are difficult to organise independently: certain species are nearly impossible to find alone, some countries are challenging to travel in, and without the right local contacts a trip may fall short.

Last year I began discussing options with Martin Royle. We explored several ideas, and my first interests were Sulawesi and the Javan rhino trip. We agreed that Asia and West/Central Africa should be my priority, as wildlife in those regions is under severe pressure and may not remain accessible for much longer.

I must have mentioned in passing that China was something to plan for later, as I considered it a relatively “safe” destination with no immediate threat to its key wildlife. Martin’s response changed my plans completely. Panda politics in China are complex and sensitive. In recent years, the authorities have linked the panda reserves into one large Giant Panda National Park (GPNP). Given their history of restricting access to reserves for domestic and international visitors—as happened at Foping NP—there is real concern that the same could happen here.

He also raised the issue of the Tibetan Plateau. The Dalai Lama is ageing, and his succession could prove complicated. It is possible that, after his death, there will be two rival successors: one recognised by Tibetan Buddhism and one appointed by the Chinese state. There is concern that the region could then be closed to foreign visitors to limit outside influence and control the narrative.

Those two points convinced me to bring forward my plans to visit both Sichuan and the Tibetan Plateau. Most people go to Sichuan hoping to see a giant panda, but for me the real appeal lays in its endemic hoofstock and primates: takin, goral, golden snub-nosed monkey, tufted deer, and more.

The decision was quickly made.

ITINERARY

Royle Safari's Sichuan trip focuses on finding the giant panda, with one week set aside for that goal. The second week is divided between Ruoergai, in search of the Chinese mountain cat, and Tangjiahe NP, to see what else we could find. The itinerary is flexible and can be adjusted if target species are found quickly. That is exactly what we did, shortening our time in panda habitat to spend extra days at the other two locations.

As it is not every day that you find yourself in China, I also wanted to add a few extra primates to the trip. Inspired by Jon Hall's and Cheryl Antonucci's reports, I arranged an extension through Sid and Meggie. With several unique species to choose from, I settled on François's langur and the Yunnan snub-nosed monkey. The extension involved a lot of driving and flying and added a full week to my itinerary.

Date	activities	accommodation
22/02	Flight from Brussels to Lijiang (+1), via Peking	plane
23/02	Afternoon arrival in Lijiang and drop-off at hotel	Nanyu Xixiang Lane Boutique Inn, Lijiang
24/02	Visit to Tacheng snub-nosed monkey park	
25/02	Full day in Lijiang, visit to Heilongtan park Late night return flight to Chengdu	Joyhub Cheer hotel, TFU airport
26/02	Drive to Chongqing & PM visit to Francois's langur area	Tianshanping Canyon Resort Hotel, Miaoba
27/02	Full day visit to Francois's langur area	
28/02	AM langur visit & return drive to Chengdu in the afternoon	Hello Panda Hotel, Chengdu
01/03	Meet the others & 6h drive to Giant Panda NP	Local hotel, GPNP
02-05/03	4 full days in panda territory	
06/03	AM looking for Golden snub-nosed monkeys PM drive to Chengdu	Thinking Land Lingyan Forest Hotel, Dujiangyan
07/03	Full day drive to Zoige, Ruoergai	Tianbianhuahai Grand Hotel, Zoige
08-10/03	3 full days in Ruoergai	
11/03	Full day drive to Tangjiahe	Hotel in qingxizhen
12-13/03	2 full days in Tangjiahe NP	
14/03	Morning drive in Tangjiahe NP & return drive to Chengdu	Holiday Inn, Chengdu
15/03	Flight Chengdu to Brussels	

PRACTICAL INFO

Transport

The start and ending point of the trip is Chengdu, which most people probably reach after a layover in Peking. There are 2 airports in Chengdu: Shuangliu (CTU) is much closer to downtown Chengdu and now serves as the main hub for domestic flights. In contrast, Tianfu (TFU) is farther out but handles the bulk of international travel.

Transportation on the ground was handled with three 4x4 cars. Each car had a Chinese driver, one of which was ZZ the Tour guide, a master animal spotter, and 3 guests.



Visa

China has offered visa-free entry to citizens from dozens of countries in recent years as part of efforts to woo foreign visitors. This scheme covers most European countries as well as Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea and several nations in South America and the Gulf region. The United States, Canada and Great Britain are **not** part of the scheme.

Under the policy, visitors from eligible countries can enter China for business, tourism, family visits, or transit for up to 30 days without a visa. The only prerequisite is filling an arrival card form or entry declaration form. It looked like this can be done on arrival, but it is easier to organise this online before your departure:

<https://s.nia.gov.cn/ArrivalCardFillingPC/entry-registration-home>

Weather

Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov
Winter Winter is typically bitterly cold, but with less rainfall than the rest of the year.			Spring Spring is one of the best times of the year to visit as temperatures are warm, with little rainfall.			Summer This is the hottest and wettest time of the year with temperatures soaring to around 35 degrees Celsius.			Autumn Cooler temperatures with reduced rainfall. Autumn is usually one of the best times to visit.		
										Best time to see red panda in the wild	

The table below (taken from wildlifeworldwide.com) shows the dominant weather patterns for China month by month. February-March is the transition period from winter to spring, but you can count on cold and wet/snowy weather on higher altitudes. My primate extensions were blessed with mostly clear skies and sunny days, but fog in the valleys is something to take into account. The Zoige grasslands were bitter cold, but it stayed dry. The giant panda habitat was a mix of clear skies and snowy days, perfect for the purpose of our visit. Only in Tangjiahe we were confronted with rain, luckily more of a drizzle than real downpours. So, all in all, the weather conditions on this this trip were very favourable for wildlife watching and photography.

Money

In China mobile pay is king. Money is generally accepted everywhere, but proper change is not guaranteed. Cards will help you out in big cities but are useless on the countryside. There are several apps available, and I used Alipay without any problem. This site explains all you need to know:

<https://uk.trip.com/guide/info/how-to-pay-in-china.html>

Mobile internet

China is incredibly advanced but digitally, it operates on a different system. Globally known as the “Great Firewall” it has put filters in place that block most Western services: Google, Gmail, Instagram, Facebook, X, WhatsApp, and many international news outlets.

The best options for foreigners to avoid these restrictions is to install a VPN before leaving, or to purchase an eSIM. I've used an eSIM from Saily without a problem. This site explains all you need to know:

<https://www.chinatours.com/china-travel-insights/travellers-guide-access-internet-china/>

Group members

Our group was composed of myself and 8 others: Adam Middleton, Paul Leader, Karen Czekalski, Pamela Krüger, Jonathan Helstad, and Tomo Akiyama and his 2 Japanese clients, Hiro and Mammo.

TACHENG SNUB-NOSED MONKEY NATIONAL PARK



Target species: Yunnan snub-nosed monkey

After almost 30 hours of travel, I finally arrived in Lijiang, the starting point for my visit to Tacheng Snub-nosed Monkey National Park. I had landed late the previous evening, where a driver met me at the airport and took me to my hotel—or rather to the edge of Lijiang Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site with no car access. After a 15-minute walk with a luggage trolley, I could finally go to sleep.



The next morning, we left early, setting off at 4:50AM for the four-hour drive to the reserve. At the visitor centre, you transfer to a small electric bus that climbs the mountain to a central point from where the trails radiate. I took the first bus up at 9:00AM, and ten minutes later we set off on a short ranger-led walk to wherever the habituated troop had been located. This troop is free to move as they please but are treated every day with a supplementary portion of their favourite food: lichens.

The **Yunnan, or black-and-white, snub-nosed monkey** is one of four snub-nosed monkey species in China. Only 17 groups remain in north-west Yunnan, with a total population of fewer than 1,700 animals living in the coniferous and deciduous forests along the northern Sino-Myanmar border. I spent two hours surrounded by a troop of more than 50 monkeys of all ages, watching them eat, groom, play, and mate—well worth the four-hour drive.

(Sorry for the photo overload, but they are gorgeous, aren't they?)





LIJIANG OLD TOWN

China is not a country people usually associate with wildlife watching. It is better known for its long history and culture: the Ming dynasty, the Great Wall, the Terracotta Army, and the Forbidden City in Beijing. This trip, however, was entirely focused on wildlife, and while preparing I gave little thought to China's cultural side. At one point I did consider visiting Beijing in between flights, but that idea did not make the final itinerary.

As it turned out, Chinese culture was impossible to avoid, even when I was not looking for it. The first surprise came on the flight to Beijing: by pure luck, as the plane began its descent, I looked out of the window and saw the Great Wall of China below.



The second surprise was Lijiang Old Town. I had considered it only as a convenient overnight stop on the way to the snub-nosed monkeys, but it turned out to be a highlight in its own right. My return flight to Chengdu had originally been scheduled for 14:00, but several timetable changes in the months before departure left me with no option but the 22:30 flight. As a result, I unexpectedly had an evening and a full day to explore the town.

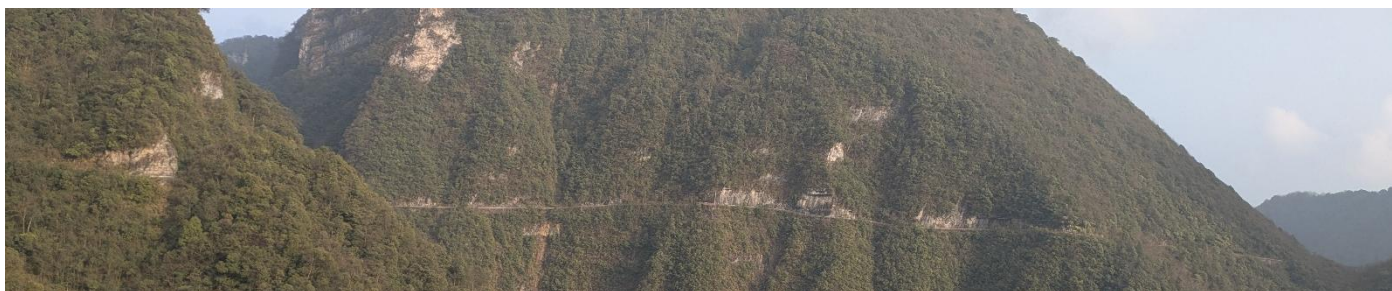
Imagine Bruges or Venice, but transplanted into the world of Kung Fu Panda: colours, spices, paper lanterns, and cobbled streets everywhere. It was undeniably kitsch and touristy, but still deeply impressive. I happily wandered around for hours and ate some excellent food, including wild mushroom hotpot and Snow Mountain fish stew.



I even managed to fit in some mammal watching. iNaturalist suggested that Hei Long Tan Park offered a chance of seeing Pallas's squirrel, Pery's long-nosed squirrel, and common tree shrew. I missed the latter two, but I did find plenty of **Pallas's squirrels** and even saw a **brown rat** swimming in the lake.



CHONGQING JINFOSHAN NATIONAL NATURE RESERVE



Target species: *Francois's langur*, *red-and-white giant flying squirrel*, *Pallas's squirrel*, *red-hipped squirrel*

Day 1

The night before, I had arrived at Chengdu TFU airport around midnight, where Meggie had arranged a room for me at the Joyhub Cheer Hotel, conveniently located inside the airport. Chengdu has two airports—CTU on the south-western edge of the city and TFU about an hour to the south-east—which can be confusing, especially when you have connecting flights on different airports. Coming from Lijiang, TFU was my only possible option, but it worked out well. The next morning, my driver picked me up at 8:00 and we headed south-east towards Chongqing province.



After a six-hour drive from Chengdu, we reached our hotel in Miaoba, a small tourist village in a deep canyon on the edge of Chongqing Jinfoshan National Nature Reserve. Wooden statues of the local flagship species, *François's langur*, greeted us everywhere—always a good sign when a community is proud of its natural heritage. It was still winter and very much the off-season: the hotel was empty apart from my driver and me, the central heating was off, the temperature stayed below 10°C, and I only had a small heater and an electric blanket for some (illusory) comfort. No pain, no gain—so there had better be monkeys.



After checking in, we drove straight into the hills and spent the afternoon at a bird hide. Activity was slow at first, not surprisingly so with the hide owner constantly talking on his phone, smoking and watching loud video clips, but things eventually picked up. We saw between five and ten **red-hipped squirrels**—hard to count when they were leaping around constantly—and three much larger **Pallas's squirrels**. Birds included red-billed leiothrix, a wave of black-throated tits, a few golden pheasants, and finally a female Temminck's tragopan.



By 16:30 I had seen enough squirrels and wanted to use the last 90 minutes of daylight to look for langurs. A short drive to the other side of the valley was all it took: within half an hour we had found a troop of more than ten **François's langurs** in the trees above us. They were difficult to photograph and rather skittish when we got out of the car, but with patience we were able to watch them from close range as they prepared to settle for the night. In those final moments of daylight, we saw them licking salt and minerals from the cliffs while youngsters chased each other through the treetops—a fitting end to the first day.



Day 2

I had survived the night. The room was every bit as cold as I had feared, though the electric blanket worked wonders. Attempting a shower, however, was a step too far.

The whole valley was shrouded in clouds this morning, which made looking for the langurs, who typically live high up on the cliffs, impossible. We tried anyway, and the outcome was predictable. Back to the bird hide for plan B. The **red-hipped squirrels** were back in force, along with a single **Pallas's squirrel**. Within half an hour, a male Temminck's tragopan appeared and stayed for two hours, later joined by a female and two golden pheasants.



The weather never improved, but we tried for the langurs anyway. We drove the cliff road up and down with visibility limited to 20–50 metres. At one point we startled a small group high in a tree at eye level because of the steep slope, but they vanished before I could take a photo. We tried again in the afternoon and found a larger family group, also at eye level, feeding unconcernedly despite our presence. The fog and drizzle made photography difficult, so I simply enjoyed the sighting.



Day 3



The next morning gave us one final chance to see the langurs before driving back to Chengdu, and we found them in exactly the same place as on the first evening. I recognised the cliffs from Cheryl Antonucci's report, so this appears to be a very reliable site. It seems to be a safe sleeping spot used regularly by this particular family troop.

After an early lunch, we began the six-hour drive back to Chengdu. This time we had to cross the city itself, which gave me my first taste of China's urban traffic jams. To their credit, though, electric cars are far more common there than at home, so the assault on the lungs and ears is less severe than it might once have been.

GIANT PANDA NATIONAL PARK



Target species: giant panda, red panda, golden snub-nosed monkey

Day 1

That morning we collected the other eight guests from their hotel for the main part of the trip and set off west in a three-car convoy towards giant panda habitat. Somewhere along the road we saw our first **Tibetan macaques**, begging for food on the side of the road. A little later we were involved in a car accident. While driving up a winding road in a valley, the front car of our convoy got hit by a car descending way too fast, taking a turn while driving in the middle of the road. That car got totalled and ended up against a tree. Our car escaped the worst, and nobody got injured, but the left side mirror, both doorhandles and the wheel cases were gone. Impossible to continue the next 2 weeks like this so everybody squeezed in the 2 remaining cars to continue the rest of the drive to the hotel, while ZZ returned to the next big town to sort out a replacement car.



We reached the hotel around 4PM, and settled in, eagerly awaiting ZZ's return. We managed to squeeze in a short afternoon drive in the hills surrounding the hotel before the sunset and we saw 2 bearded vultures and 2 Himalayan griffon vultures. Two lifers for me and thus completing my list of old-world vultures.



Day 2

Today is our first real day in panda habitat, of a total of 7 days reserved for finding us a panda. The hotel is only a 15-minute drive from the NP's entrance, followed by another 15 minutes through a densely forested valley to the parking spot where we would start our days. On our way in, Paul caught something in a tree in his thermal view. We had a fleeting glimpse of a small mammal with a striped back, could only be a **Swinhoe's striped squirrel**.

From the parking spot to the panda spotting point is a steep 2-km hike.

There are 2 ways to find a panda here, and both are based on patience, a lot of patience. On a day with clear skies, we'd hike up a mountain trail, find a spot with a clear view of the opposite side of the valley, and start scanning with thermals, binos and scopes. On a snowy day, we just follow the trails in the forest as silently as possible and hope to come across a panda or see one in a tree. Anyway, mammalwatching is slow here ... 1 mammal a day is a good day.



We did not see a giant panda today, but we did have another amazing panda experience. Going up the hill that morning, following the narrow trail, Paul stopped in front of a tree and said, "last time I was here I saw a red panda in this tree", and lo and behold, up climbs a **Chinese red panda** in the tree, and installs for a nap right in front of us.



Day 3

Snowy morning, with the whole valley completely covered in clouds, making scanning in the panda valley impossible. Instead, we decided to walk in the bamboo on a track parallel with the road. Giant panda have been reported here in the recent past. We surprised another **red panda** coming out of his/her den in a hollow tree. He quickly made his escape, but not before we snapped some pictures. The morning hike was completed with an assortment of smaller passerines: tits, finches, tree creepers and nuthatches.



The afternoon was more promising, with clear skies, so we quickly made our way up the trail to a viewing point. Late in the afternoon, around 4PM, it was snowing ..., we were freezing ..., when suddenly silent excitement amongst the spotters ... there it was, on the other side of the valley ... a **giant panda**. It took a while before everybody had located the animal, around 250-300m across the valley. You need a lot of imagination to describe a particular tree/rock/bush to guide someone's gaze to a particular spot in a sea of trees/rocks/bamboo bushes. We could follow it for around 30 minutes, slowly making its way through the opposite forest, and finally settling down to start munching on some bamboo. Conditions far from ideal for great pictures, but what an experience.



Through the thermal scope we could see 2 animals, but one stayed hidden in the bushes. Snow kept getting worse and when it approached near blizzard conditions we called it a day and made our way back to the cars, all excited. To some that evening, the celebratory beers probably never felt so tasty, for we had entered the select club of lucky people who have seen this animal in the wild.



Day 4

Pandas usually don't travel far in a day so with yesterday's experience in mind, we were pretty confident the pandas would still be in the valley. We decided to spend the full day in the park and have our picnic there instead of going back to the hotel for lunch. The morning everything was covered in snow, the afternoon we were basking in the sun, but what a day ... we had 4 giant panda sightings and 1 red panda.

Around 9AM, we heard the sound of pandas fighting, very vocally, and soon located 2 **giant pandas**. One was visible in the bamboo and the other was only seen with the thermal scope. Not much later we found a 3rd **giant panda**, eating more or less in the open. It seems there were at least 3 in the valley, which is exceptional since these are solitary creatures. It is the breeding season, so we believe it is a female who lives in the valley who is being visited by 2 interested males. The fighting must either have been the 2 males fighting it out, or a male who got rejected by the female.

Between 11AM and 4PM, not much happened, just 1 **red panda** seen in a tree on the opposite side of the valley, but around 4PM the spotters had found another **giant panda** a little further down the valley; eating, moving, eating, moving. When he eventually crossed an open field, we had the most satisfying views.



Day 5

This morning we decided to focus on finding golden snub-nosed monkeys. Since the Pingwu site with a habituated group is no longer accessible, this area should be our best chance to see them. The road between the park's entrance and our parking spot is supposed to be a good place to see them, but we've taken that journey 10 times already, and no luck. We walked the whole road, scanning the trees along the river and on the opposite valley, but no monkeys. We did see plenty of birds: white-eared pheasant, grandala, vultures, woodpeckers and many more.



Two **wild boar** and a **Swinhoe's striped squirrel** were the only mammals we saw, luckily the squirrel showed very well this time. According to ZZ, wild hoofstock density in the area is relatively low because of the competition with the domestic grazers walking freely in the park. Indeed, we would see large numbers of domestic yak/cattle hybrids, horses and goats every day.



The afternoon we returned to our panda stake-out spot, but a **tufted deer** was the only animal we spotted. Got me really excited though.

That evening we decided to leave GPNP the next day. We didn't think we would be able to top yesterday's giant panda experience and leaving early would give us 1 extra day in Ruoergai (3 instead of 2 full days) and 1 extra day in Tangjiahe (2 instead of 1 full day), increasing our chances of seeing Chinese mountain cat and leopard cat/Sichuan takin respectively.

RUOERGAI GRASSLANDS



Target species: Tibetan gazelle, Tibetan fox, Chinese mountain cat, pika, blue sheep, roe deer, Tibetan wolf

We tried an alternative spot for snub-nosed monkeys this morning, but without success. After a final lunch at the hotel, we intended to drive North towards Zoige in the afternoon, but a massive police/army check point in front of the hotel made us decide otherwise. They even took our passports for a moment and probably wondered what to do with us. Turns out the annual Communist Party conference was in full swing AND an important Tibetan holiday or anniversary was coming up. Everything Tibetan is politically sensitive in China, and this combination was making the politicians very jumpy. Driving north would have been the shortest road, but it would have taken us closer to the Tibetan border. The drivers and ZZ wanted to avoid checkpoints (what are a bunch of white guys doing near Tibet with this Tibetan celebration coming up???) and potential roadblocks up ahead, and decided to take the longer road South, return to Chengdu, stay there for the night, and continue the next morning to Ruogai, If we would even be able to get there.

So that's what we did. We spent the night in the Thinking Land Lingyan Forest Hotel, a fancy hotel in Dujiangyan, Northwest of Chengdu and continued the journey the next morning. We said goodbye to Paul that morning, he was only with us for the panda leg of the trip. Today's drive was a full day, uneventful, and mammal-less ... a second day in a row without mammals, a day to forget.

Day 1

The accommodations here are limited, and we are staying in a hotel in Zoige, a 1-hour drive from our target area. The early morning drive is not entirely boring with many **plateau pikas** in the meadows and their obligatory predators: **Tibetan foxes** and many raptors: steppe eagle, martial eagle, black kite.



As soon as we leave the highway and drive into the wild grasslands, we are greeted by wildlife. We quickly saw our first **Tibetan gazelle**, followed by many more that day, with probably over a 100 seen. The grass is littered with little dirt heaps, the result of the digging of countless **plateau pika**, which you see dashing everywhere from mount to mount. Larger burrows are seen everywhere and must be made by the marmots currently still in

hibernation. Two more **Tibetan foxes** were seen and one hare running up a hill and quickly disappearing, most likely a **woolly hare**.



The **gazelles** were very skittish, and impossible to approach without alarming them. A sign of hunting pressure? A short breakfast picnic in front of a set of rocky outcrops, which would become our standard picnic spot, did not reveal any cats, but was very prolific in birdlife: snow finch, little owl, saker falcon, upland buzzard, white-winged redstart, robin accentor, horned lark, red-billed chough, ruddy shelduck, ...

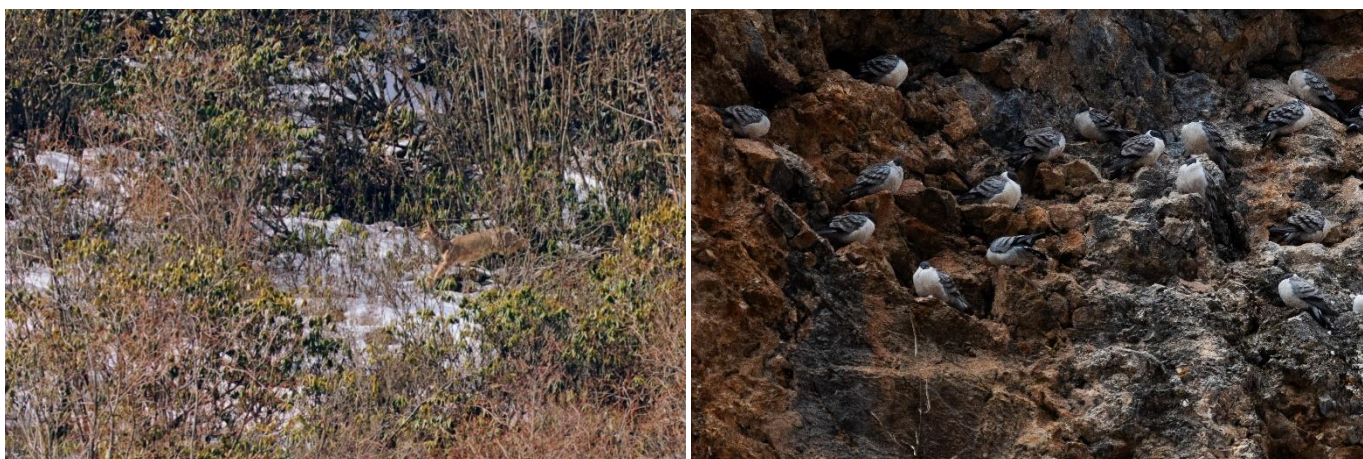


Next stop was on a ridge facing many hills, cliffs, mountains and alpine meadows. Far away we could see 2 herds of **blue sheep** and many vultures in the air, with some bearded vultures in between. We were at 3726 meters altitude, and we weren't even on a mountain peak but "just" on a high-altitude plateau. Temperature is around the freezing point, and the altitude makes breathing sometimes challenging. Scanning did not deliver any extras so after an hour we drove down the cliff into the valleys.





The landscape and atmosphere of the park is just amazing: rolling grasslands where antelopes graze and foxes hunt the many rodents, massive gorges and cliffs where vultures and eagles soar, alpine meadows where blue sheep jump around the rocks, and thick pine forests deeper in the valleys.



We surprised 2 **eastern roe deer**, who disappeared in the forest, and Tomo saw a fleeting **sika deer** stag. Definitely a place to come back to later. More vultures were seen down here, soaring through the valley, along with hill pigeons and snow pigeons. Around noon the heat haze made photography complicated, and we made our way back to Zoige for lunch and siesta in anticipation of a night drive. On the way out, many more **gazelles**, **pikas** and a few more **Tibetan foxes**.

The night drive lasted from 9 to 11PM, to which you must add the 1-hour there and back again. The temperature had dropped to below -6°C which made driving around with opened windows seem like a stupid idea. But it was all worth it: we saw several **Tibetan gazelles**, 1 **wild boar**, 1 **Asian badger**, 5 **Tibetan foxes** and 1 **red fox**.



But the absolute highlight was of course the **Chinese mountain cat**. ZZ, driving the first car, spotted him in his thermal at 50m away and mistook it for a Tibetan fox. But I caught it in my torch beam and the crawling gate belonged unmistakably to a feline. Adam and I yelled out simultaneously "THAT IS NOT A CAT" and basically jumped out of the slow rolling car. The cat played hide and seek in some long grass, we got a few record shots before he disappeared in the distance and 10 minutes later, we got back in our cars, frozen but excited.



The experience tasted all the better knowing that today was the extra day in Ruorgai we gained by leaving the GPNP earlier. Definitely the right decision. (photocredit@AdamMiddleton for the night pictures)

Day 2

The second day was a copy of the first in its routine: early 6:30AM departure, crossing the grasslands, scanning the mountains from the clifftop and exploration of the valleys and pine forests. Some of us installed themselves belly down in a **pika** colony for some close-up pictures.



The mammalwatching was not as excellent as yesterday. Many **gazelles** again on the grassy plains, but no foxes. **Blue sheep** again from the mountain viewpoint, and griffon and black vultures squabbling over a hidden carcass far in the distance. No deer in the forests in the valleys, but we did see a blue-eared pheasant and black kite (photocredit@PamelaKrüger). The return trip to town finally yielded 3 **Tibetan foxes**.



After a long midday break, we return around 6PM with a packed dinner to maximise our time in the field. But the spotlighting was very calm, and almost nothing appeared in the heat scopes. In the end we only saw a few **foxes** and **gazelles** (photocredit@AdamMiddleton), and a very distant **Asian badger**.



Day 3

Last day in Ruergai, same routine, but this time we saw at least 15 **Tibetan foxes**, half of which we saw on the drive to the target site (photocredit@PamelaKrüger). Furthermore, the usual suspects: **Tibetan gazelles**, **plateau pika** and **blue sheep**, with the addition of a second **woolly hare**.



We drove for an hour in the forested canyons looking for deer, any deer: musk-, roe-, sika-, ... but nothing. In the end it was the driver of my car who saved the day by spotting 0.3 **Sichuan sika deer**, half hidden in the trees. New species for the trip, and new species for me.

For the night drive, we reorganised the cars a bit to optimise our chances. Yesterday's drive was quite chaotic and frustrating. This time we put the 2 thermals in the front car and the 2 best torches in the second car, and coordinated lighting up the heat-scoped animals via walky-talky. The reorganisation worked like a charm because we saw a ridiculous amount of **foxes**, both

Tibetan and **red**, plus good views of an **Asian badger**. We were sure to have spotted another **Chinese mountain cat** but he remained too far and too well hidden for pictures. He was showing the same behaviour as the one from our first sighting: not running away but hiding in the tall grass and popping up its head from time to time to keep an eye on us. On the picture you can also recognise the pointy ear of a cat.



All considered, a very satisfying 3 days in Ruergai, but the mammeling here is hard work. Long travel times to get to the grasslands every day, ice cold temperatures, and long episodes of not seeing any mammals.

Travel Day

Today was a travel day from Ruoergai to Tangjiahe NP, a beautiful drive through forests, valleys and over mountain chains, reaching the highest point of the trip; 3987m ASL. We made several wildlife stops along the way. The first one was a known blue-eared pheasant site, and yes, we saw at least 5 pheasants. When a big truck drove passed, 3 **roe deer** were chased out of some bushes and disappeared in the forest.

A little further we made another stop, but what was supposed to be one of my highlights of the trip turned into disaster. It all started so well. I jumped out of the car after seeing a **tufted deer** on the side of the road and started following it when it made its way through some fields. I got my dream pictures of my favourite small deer and quickly filled my memory card. But when I wanted to change the card, I couldn't find my box with spare cards and batteries. I remember having it put in the side door compartment the previous night. When we got out during the night drive and I grabbed my frontal lamp from that compartment, I heard a distinct thud. Looking down I saw my phone under my seat, which must have slipped out of my pocket, not realising that the sound must have been my case falling out of the car. A Tibetan fox is probably walking around now with my prized possession in his mouth. The pictures of the first half of my trip were in that box. I felt like shit and was crying like a baby. Luckily, I had made regular downloads on my phone, so at least I had something to show for this trip.



Because of all the stops, we would not make it in time to enter Tangjiahe NP that evening and stay at the hotel in the middle of the NP, so we had to stay in Qinxizhen for the night, a small town 20 minutes from the NP. The hotel was nice, the food was good, nobody complained.



TANGJIAHE NATIONAL PARK



Target species: Sichuan takin, tufted deer, Tibetan macaque, Golden snub-nosed monkey, leopard cat, serow

Day 1

We arrived at the entry gates before opening, no mammals in sight but the birding was nice: white-browed laughingthrush, light-vented bulbul, brown dipper, crested kingfisher.

Once inside, we slowly made our way up the road towards the hotel in the middle of the NP, this road being the only one accessible to visitors, so you basically patrol that road day and night. In succession we saw the following mammals:

- 2 troops of **Tibetan macaque** in the trees,
- A lone male **Sichuan takin** on the hill on the opposite side of the river,
- A **tufted deer** on the riverbank,
- A family group of 4-5 **takin** laying in the high grass up a hill, well hidden from view,
- Several pairs of **Reeves's muntjacs**,
- A **takin** mother with a tiny calf on the opposite side of the river,
- 3 **Tibetan macaques** approaching the road, that quickly turned into a massive troop of monkeys making their way through the forest and across the road,
- A lone **muntjac** just before arriving at the hotel.

A great start of the day.





After lunch we returned to the spot where we had seen the herd of takin resting in the grass. They were out in the open and relatively close to the road, maybe we would get lucky. And boy did we ... What we had seen before was just the tip of the iceberg. Once we got to the spot, we were surrounded by 30+ **Sichuan takins** of all ages and sexes. This was my moment to lose my shit, probably my most anticipated animal from this trip.





We saw several more takin and muntjac that afternoon, and our first **wild boar**, but nothing could tip our experience from earlier that afternoon. That was just mindblowing.

That evening we went on a night drive from 6:30PM to 23:30PM, and Tangjiahe just kept on giving: too many **muntjac** to count, several **Chinese gorals**, a few **tufted deer**, a big **wild boar** family (photocredit @AdamMiddleton), at least 5 **masked palm civets** (photocredit@KarenCzekalski), and 2 **Malayan porcupines** (photocredit@KarenCzekalski).



But the absolute highlight of the night, other than our first views of goral obviously, was a **mainland leopard cat**, slowly making its way up the rocks, next to the road, at eyelevel, not shy at all (photocredit@KarenCzekalski).



Again, we were not supposed to be in Tangjiahe today. This day was the extra day we gained by cutting short our time in the GPNP. What a great decision that proved to be.

Day 2

Today would be our last wildlife watching day of this trip. We had a short pre-breakfast morning drive in the dark, which resulted in a few **muntjac**, **takin** and **goral**.



After breakfast we slowly travelled the road all the way down to the main entrance, and then up again. The mammal watching was very rewarding again, with a big **wild boar** family on the opposite side of the river, a nice **Pere David's rock squirrel** dashing over the river boulders, several **tufted deer** out in the open, and again ... several small groups of **takin** on several locations.



The biggest surprise of the morning was when we got out of the car to take pictures of a tawny fish owl. And just by sheer luck, we saw a **Chinese serow** (photocredit@TomoAkiyama) climbing up the cliff behind the owl. Without stopping for a bird, we would never have seen him.



The afternoon drive saw more of the same, **takin** and **muntjac**. But we were all surprised when ZZ suddenly called out “otter”. The animal was going downstreams, pretty quick considering all the rapids, and was clearly hunting because he disappeared out of view regularly for longer periods. We tried following it downstreams for a few kilometers, trying to anticipate where he would show up again and position ourselves strategically to catch him in the open, in which we eventually succeeded.

Nice surprise seeing a **Eurasian otter** (photocredit@KarenCzekalski), not a regular sight here according to ZZ.



On our second night drive, we saw more of the usual suspects: **goral**, **takin**, **muntjac**, **wild boar**, and 1 more **masked palm civet**.

The next morning, on our drive towards the exit of the parc, we finally saw a **goral** in daylight. And that would be our final sighting of the trip. After that we made our way back to Chengdu and had a final diner with many celebratory drinks on a very successful trip.



STUFF WE MISSED & CONCLUSION

We did not linger too long on the stuff we missed this trip. The giant panda sightings were amazing, and the other main targets were also seen: red panda, Chinese mountain cat, mainland leopard cat, and Sichuan takin. Some sightings better than the others, but we could all live with that.

The one big miss however was the golden snub-nosed monkey. We were the first group not having made it to the Pingwu habituated troop, and despite all our lucky encounters we missed this species in both GPNP and Tangjiahe NP. Hopefully on my next visit to China. At least I had the Yunnan snub-nosed monkeys to make up for it. Another big miss was musk deer, neither forest (Tangjiahe) nor alpine (Ruoergai) musk deer seen.

A few other surprising misses were rhesus macaque (seems to be rare on these trips), Tibetan wolf (most groups manage to see it in Ruoergai), northern hog badger (a regular in Tangjiahe) and red-and-white giant flying squirrel (Francois's langur site).

We knew the chances were low from the beginning, but there was always hope to see an Asiatic black bear in Tangjiahe. And we had heard the reliable Pallas's cat family in Ruoergai had not been seen since the railroad construction in the area.

All in all, China, you have been good to me these past 3 weeks. Your food was excellent, your people were super friendly, your landscapes were breathtaking and your wildlife was just amazing. I've had many unique experiences and met new travel buddies for future trips. I forgive you for stealing a few 1000 pictures of mine. See you next time in Xinghai, the Tibetan plateau, for more amazing wildlife encounters.

To summarize the trip in a few numbers:

- 24,500km travelled in 22 days
- a total of 7 flights
- 3 Chinese provinces visited
- 30 mammal species seen, of which 27 were new species to me
- 11 of those species are endemic to China
- 83 bird species seen
- 9 very happy group members

MAMMAL LIST: 30 species

Common name	Scientific name
Old World Monkeys (Cercopithecidae)	
Sichuan Tibetan Macaque	<i>Macaca thibetana thibetana</i>
Yunnan Snub-nosed Monkey	<i>Rhinopithecus bieti</i>
François's Langur	<i>Trachypithecus francoisi</i>
Hares and Rabbits (Leporidae)	
Woolly Hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>
Pikas (Ochotonidae)	
Plateau Pika	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>
Old World Porcupines (Hystricidae)	
Malayan Porcupine	<i>Hystrix brachyura subcristata</i>
Squirrels (Sciuridae)	
Pallas's Squirrel	<i>Callosciurus erythraeus</i>
Red-hipped Squirrel	<i>Dremomys pyrrhomerus pyrrhomerus</i>
Swinhoe's Striped Squirrel	<i>Tamiops swinhoei swinhoei</i>
Pere David's Rock Squirrel	<i>Sciurotamias davidianus</i>
Old World Mice and Rats (Muridae)	
Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>
Red Pandas (Ailuridae)	
Eastern/Chinese Red Panda	<i>Ailurus styani</i>
Mustelids (Mustelidae)	
Eurasian/Chinese Otter	<i>Lutra lutra chinensis</i>
Asian Badger	<i>Meles leucurus</i>
Bears (Ursidae)	
Giant Panda	<i>Ailuropoda melanoleuca</i>
Canids (Canidae)	
Tibetan Fox	<i>Vulpes ferrilata</i>
Himalayan red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes montana</i>
Felids (Felidae)	
Chinese Mountain Cat	<i>Felis bieti</i>
Mainland/Indochinese Leopard Cat	<i>Prionailurus bengalensis bengalensis</i>
Civets, Genets, and Oyans (Viverridae)	
Masked Palm Civet	<i>Paguma larvata larvata</i>
Bovids (Bovidae)	
Tibetan Gazelle	<i>Procapra picticaudata</i>
Sichuan Takin	<i>Budorcas tibetana tibetana</i>
Himalayan blue Sheep	<i>Pseudois nayaur nayaur</i>
White-Maned/mainland Serow	<i>Capricornis sumatraensis milneedwardsii</i>
Chinese Goral	<i>Naemorhedus griseus griseus</i>
Deer (Cervidae)	
Eastern Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus pygargus tianshanicus</i>
Sichuan Sika Deer	<i>Cervus nippon sichuanicus</i>
Western Tufted Deer	<i>Elaphodus cephalophus cephalophus</i>
Chinese Reeves's Muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesi sinensis</i>
Suids (Suidae)	
Eurasian Wild Pig	<i>Sus scrofa</i>

BIRD LIST: 83 species

Common name	Scientific name
Ducks, Geese, and Waterfowl (Anatidae)	
Ruddy Shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos</i>
Pheasants, Grouse, and Allies (Phasianidae)	
Temminck's Tragopan	<i>Tragopan temminckii</i>
Golden Pheasant (Endemic)	<i>Chrysolophus pictus</i>
Common Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus suehschanensis</i>
White Eared-Pheasant	<i>Crossoptilon crossoptilon crossoptilon</i>
Blue Eared-Pheasant (Endemic)	<i>Crossoptilon auritum</i>
Pigeons and Doves (Columbidae)	
Rock Dove (Wild type)	<i>Columba livia nigricans</i>
Hill Pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>
Snow Pigeon	<i>Columba leuconota gradaria</i>
Spotted Dove (Eastern)	<i>Spilopelia chinensis chinensis</i>
Rails, Gallinules, and Coots (Rallidae)	
Eurasian Coot	<i>Fulica atra atra</i>
Grebes (Podicipedidae)	
Little Grebe (Little)	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis [ruficollis Group]</i>
Cormorants and Shags (Phalacrocoracidae)	
Great Cormorant (Continental)	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis</i>
Hérons, Egrets, and Bitterns (Ardeidae)	
Little Egret (Western)	<i>Egretta garzetta garzetta</i>
Hawks, Eagles, and Kites (Accipitridae)	
Bearded Vulture (Eurasian)	<i>Gypaetus barbatus barbatus</i>
Black Vulture	<i>Aegypius monachus</i>
Himalayan Griffon	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>
Steppe Eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis nipalensis</i>
Imperial Eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Eurasian Goshawk	<i>Astur gentilis schvedowi</i>
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>
White-tailed Eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>
Upland Buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>
Eastern Buzzard	<i>Buteo japonicus japonicus</i>
Owls (Strigidae)	
Tawny Fish-Owl	<i>Ketupa flavipes</i>
Little Owl (Little)	<i>Athene noctua [noctua Group]</i>
Hoopoes (Upupidae)	
Common Hoopoe (Eurasian)	<i>Upupa epops saturata</i>
Kingfishers (Alcedinidae)	
Crested Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle lugubris guttulata</i>
Woodpeckers (Picidae)	
Darjeeling Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos darjellensis darjellensis</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker (cabanisi/stresemanni)	<i>Dendrocopos major cabanisi/stresemanni</i>
Crimson-naped Woodpecker	<i>Dryobates cathpharius cathpharius</i>
Falcons and Caracaras (Falconidae)	
Common Kestrel (Common)	<i>Falco tinnunculus [tinnunculus Group]</i>
Saker Falcon	<i>Falco cherrug hendersoni</i>
Crows, Jays, and Magpies (Corvidae)	

Royle Safari's Sichuan trip 2026, with 2 primate extensions

Azure-winged Magpie (Azure-winged)	<i>Cyanopica cyanus swinhoei</i>
Red-billed Blue-Magpie	<i>Urocissa erythroryncha erythroryncha</i>
Black-rumped Magpie	<i>Pica bottanensis</i>
Oriental Magpie	<i>Pica serica</i>
Red-billed Chough (Red-billed)	<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax brachypus</i>
Long-billed Crow	<i>Corvus validus</i>
Collared Crow	<i>Corvus torquatus</i>
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax tibetanus</i>
Tits, Chickadees, and Titmice (Paridae)	
Yellow-browed Tit	<i>Sylviparus modestus modestus</i>
Rufous-vented Tit	<i>Periparus rubidiventris beavani</i>
Grey-crested Tit	<i>Lophophanes dichrous</i>
Ground Tit	<i>Pseudopodoces humilis</i>
Green-backed Tit	<i>Parus monticolus yunnanensis</i>
Larks (Alaudidae)	
Shore Lark (Tibetan)	<i>Eremophila alpestris [longirostris Group]</i>
Swallows (Hirundinidae)	
Asian House Martin	<i>Delichon dasypus cashmeriense</i>
Bulbuls (Pycnonotidae)	
Collared Finchbill	<i>Spizixos semitorques semitorques</i>
Brown-breasted Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus xanthorrhous andersoni</i>
Light-vented Bulbul (sinensis)	<i>Pycnonotus sinensis sinensis</i>
Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer stanfordi</i>
Long-tailed Tits (Aegithalidae)	
Black-throated Tit (Black-throated)	<i>Aegithalos concinnus [concinnus Group]</i>
Black-browed Tit (Black-browed)	<i>Aegithalos iouschistos bonvaloti</i>
White-eyes, Yuhinas, and Allies (Zosteropidae)	
Rufous-vented Yuhina	<i>Yuhina occipitalis obscurior</i>
Laughingthrushes and Allies (Leiothrichidae)	
Elliot's Laughingthrush	<i>Trochalopteron elliotii elliotii</i>
Red-billed Leiothrix	<i>Leiothrix lutea lutea</i>
Spotted Laughingthrush (Black-headed)	<i>Ianthocincla ocellata artemisiae</i>
Barred Laughingthrush (Endemic)	<i>Ianthocincla lunulata</i>
White-browed Laughingthrush	<i>Pterorhinus sannio oblectans</i>
Pere David's Laughingthrush	<i>Pterorhinus davidi concolor</i>
Nuthatches (Sittidae)	
Chestnut-vented Nuthatch	<i>Sitta nagaensis montium</i>
Treecreepers (Certhiidae)	
Hodgson's Treecreeper	<i>Certhia hodgsoni khamensis</i>
Dippers (Cinclidae)	
White-throated Dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus przewalskii</i>
Brown Dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii pallasii</i>
Thrushes and Allies (Turdidae)	
Grandala	<i>Grandala coelicolor</i>
Chinese Blackbird	<i>Turdus mandarinus sowerbyi</i>
Old World Flycatchers (Muscicapidae)	
Blue Whistling-Thrush (Black-billed)	<i>Myophonus caeruleus caeruleus</i>
Little Forktail	<i>Enicurus scouleri scouleri</i>
Plumbeous Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus fuliginosus fuliginosus</i>
White-capped Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus leucocephalus</i>
Hodgson's Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus hodgsoni</i>
White-winged Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus erythrogastrus grandis</i>
Accentors (Prunellidae)	
Robin Accentor	<i>Prunella rubeculoides</i>

Royle Safari's Sichuan trip 2026, with 2 primate extensions

Brown Accentor	<i>Prunella fulvescens</i>
Old World Sparrows (Passeridae)	
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>
White-rumped Snowfinch	<i>Onychostruthus taczanowskii</i>
Wagtails and Pipits (Motacillidae)	
White Wagtail (Chinese)	<i>Motacilla alba leucopsis</i>
Finches, Euphonias, and Allies (Fringillidae)	
Yellow-billed Grosbeak	<i>Eophona migratoria</i>
Grey-headed Bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula erythaca erythaca</i>
Plain Mountain Finch	<i>Leucosticte nemoricola</i>