



Qinghai's Snow Leopards & Other Mammals of the Tibetan Plateau July - August 2025 Trip Report

Every summer after the annual cordyceps harvest on the Tibetan Plateau, Royle Safaris takes a small group out there to explore some of the best and least visited large mammal watching locations in all of Asia. Starting in the high altitude city of Yushu we then move around various locations looking for iconic mammal species of Central Asia, including snow leopards, Tibetan wolves, Tibetan antelopes, wild yaks and various other species. It is not just the larger species that we search for, there is a variety of smaller mammals such as various pika species which are also targeted and seen with a good success rate.

The trips here are led by expert local guides (Sid and ZZ) who have spent the last several years exploring these high altitude grasslands mountainous regions and each trip uses the latest information and locations to maximise the best chances of seeing as much as possible. Our group was 8 people strong (Oleg Rozkho, Vivienne Crossland, Warren Gilson, Roland Holz, Andrew Kyles, David Clark, Nancy Marchant & Richard Donovan) and was successful in seeing a total of 26 species of mammals.

In general trips onto the Tibetan Plateau are never an easy affair, itineraries are always vulnerable to factors far out of our hands. Meaning we have to remain flexible and the itinerary we set out to run is not always the itinerary we do run, factors such as government closures of certain areas or weather coming in and meaning some areas are impassable mean we have to change the order to itineraries or visit other areas. All changes are made with the sole purpose of maximizing wildlife watching and we have always been successful in sightings of our main targets.

The haul of 26 Tibetan Plateau mammal species that included **Snow Leopard, Eurasian Lynx, Tibetan Blue Bear, Pallas's Cat, Wild Yak, Kiang** and **Tibetan Antelope (Chiru), Tibetan Wolf** and **Tibetan Fox**, three rare and range restricted deer, **White-lipped, Sichuan (MacNeill's)** and **Alpine Musk** and, last but not least, great views of **Mountain Weasel** and the first sighting of **Tibetan dwarf hamster**.

We were a party of 8 with 3 driver guides – driven three 4x4 vehicles. Which is better for logistics and also everyone will get a window seat. Most of the driving took part on well driven dirt-tracks – sometimes a little bumpy but always within expected safety and comfort zones. Most sites were not more than 2 hour drive from the hotel and although group members were welcome to walk around when we were looking for wildlife, most stayed around vehicles where we scanned with scopes and binoculars. Average altitudes were in excess of 4000m ASL, which made hiking a little more challenging, but with a generally pleasant daytime climate (many sunny days of +20C) it was often a harsh alpine sun that became biggest irritant. Most days started at 06:00 and if no night drives were planned finished by 20:00. Since the main predator prey are diurnal Pika, and local, tent dwelling, Yak herders might take exception to groups of flashlight bearing foreigners, we kept the night drives down to a modest couple of riverside forays. A couple of nighttime visits were also made to our Tibetan Blue Bear site. Food was a combination of evening restaurant and daytime field meals – nearby shops meant items such as milk, western style soft drinks and snacks like potato crisps, biscuits/cakes and fresh fruit were also present.

It's important to note that although the locals are extremely friendly, much of Qinghai is still very sensitive to independent travel by foreign nationals, with police registration and travelling in certain directions being complicated affairs and entry into Snow Leopard areas requiring rigorous negotiation to open a checkpoint gate. However, thanks to our local guide ZZ, who should surely be nominated as chief UN negotiator, who at one stage miraculously persuaded (bribed) a team of unflinching gate-guards with small bottles of very plain drinking water to let our vehicles pass, all went pretty smoothly.

All in all, a very successful trip resulting in a great list of 26 mammal species, a large number of bird species including all of the main Tibetan targets and perhaps the real highlight of the trip was that the group were allowed access to observe a Tibetan sky burial which is a unique relict of a culture which is being stripped away from China these days and something that only a few very privileged outsiders have ever been able to see.

Once again our main location paid off big-time, Gouli Valley is our first choice for Snow Leopard watching and not only did the location give us multiple **Snow Leopard** sightings, including a night sighting at 50m, but also several views of **Eurasian Lynx**, **Pallas's Cat** and daily meetings with a **Wolf** pack that included six cubs.

We were lucky enough to be allowed to stay in the protection station buildings, dormitory accommodation, that allowed us to join the guide and other resident visitors on the early morning drives (next nearest accommodation was 80km away) – however this accommodation is now no longer available to foreign tourists so we stay in a nearby hotel.

The first morning at Gouli, at a time when we had had zero cat sightings, gave all three cats and wolf during a wildly exciting two-hour period. **Lynx** was a new species for the Royle Safari Qinghai trips, but other new species came in the form of magical little **Long-eared Jerboas** (moves like a mini kangaroo on steroids and holds world record for biggest ears in relation to body size), **Asian Badger** and the rather more mundane **Tibetan Dwarf Hamster**. But Gouli was not the only rewarding trip destination.

Yushu gave better than normal sightings after finding a new temple site, very close to the airport. Here **Glover's (Chinese Red) Pika** was close to abundant and very tame, but the site also provided the group's only views of **Alpine Musk Deer**. The trip also visited the Zhidoi, **White-lipped Deer** and a single **Argali**, and the Kekexili NNR, were, we once again had good views of **Kiang**, **Tibetan Antelope** and **Wild Yak**. As usual thermal imagers were vital in finding some of the more elusive species like the **musk deer** and **lynx**. This year the Zhidoi town rubbish dump was locked, and it wasn't possible to view the **Brown Bears**, however at Gouli two of us got thermal views, unfortunately out of spotlight range, of three animals that must have been a mother **bear** and two cubs. Finally, on the mammal front, **Tibetan Fox** was as common a site as ever, while so many **Wolves** were seen that we eventually stopped paying special attention to them.

For the birdwatchers we also got some interesting species and Gouli gave Himalayan Snowcock, Przevalski's Redstart and Przevalski's Partridge. Around Yushu we got a nice views of Ibisbill and Black-necked Crane, the Kekexili gave its specialities including Blanford's Snowfinch and Mongolian Plover, while bird of prey species like Saker and Lammergeier were commonly seen at many sites.

Road wise all was good apart from over 100km of unfinished highway construction – the G109 route to Lhasa that took us to Geermu. This was a very uncomfortable part of the trip, that will eventually improve when road building finishes. However, getting to Gouli made those hours of discomfort all worthwhile.

We have 3 places available as a near last minute booking for our July-August 2026 group departure for anyone interested and we also have 6 places available on our 2027 group tour. Anyone interested should let us know as there limited availability on this wonderful group tour to one of the best mammalwatching locations in the world. You can contact us at info@royle-safaris.co.uk and we will happily provide information and answer any questions.

Individual Species Sightings

Snow Leopard

Unlike the last two years, where this trip had employed a lot of scanning energy to get snow leopard views, the 2025 had a far easier time, with Gouli Valley giving multiple sightings. We also had two short attempts at finding at Zhidoi, where we found lots of Blue Sheep but no sightings of any cats. The Leopards seen at Gouli included a mother cat and two well grown cubs. Our first Leopard encounter were scope views of all 3 together. Totally we had four scoped sightings, and one close night sighting, where a Leopard walked within 50m of our vehicle and then up over a steep slope. It should be noted that the local guide at Gouli was excellent in his ability to find the Cats and very good at putting everyone's scopes quickly onto them. For those with cameras, but having difficulty locating the cats, he would also photograph for them – not only getting the picture but aiding them in finding the Leopards.

Pallas's Cat

Last year Zhidoi was our main site for finding Pallas's Cat, but after the two short visits that gave nothing, this year it was Gouli Valley that came up trumps with three views of a single cat – without kittens, I assume a male – that hunted in a pika rich area close to a boulder strewn stream. With many cavities and hiding holes, the boulders and stone made observations difficult, it also didn't help that pelage colour merges so well into a rocky background. Once again some of our views depended on the sharp eyes of our local guide. One very interesting observation was that of the cat playing with prey, a bird – Hume's Ground Tit. Previously I have only seen these cats hunting Plateau Pika, my first experience of seeing the species with avian prey.

Tibetan Blue Bear

Night watching on foot was discouraged at Gouli valley because of the presence of bears, and our only contact with this species came from a night drive at the site, when two of us got definite views with thermal imagers. Three bears were seen – a large animal we presumed a mother and 2 smaller that must have been cubs. Our high-end Pulsar imagers gave enough detail, in shape and movement, to make identification certain – but they were well out of spotlight range. Whether you can count a thermal image as a tickable sighting is up to debate, but the observation certainly proves their presence.

Last year we got nighttime views of multiple bears at Zhidoi rubbish dump. Unfortunately, this year it was closed – something to be expected since spectators there could easily come within 50m of the animals.

Tibetan Wolf

I hate to say this – but so many sightings of Wolf that we started to drive past them!!! Wolves were seen during drives at several sites – especially on the road from Qumerleb to the Kekexili – but Gouli Valley again gave fantastic daily sightings with a pack of around 6 adults and 5 cubs. The family was located very close to the Gouli accommodation and were an automatic sighting every time we drove to and from of the building. In the same area we found a freshly killed Gansu Red Deer – this we assumed was the work of the Wolf Pack. The carcass, with the help of griffons and other carrion eaters, was stripped of meat within a day

Tibetan Fox

Common in Pika-rich areas of the plateau, the Tibetan Fox is usually seen quickly hightailing it from approaching vehicles. However, on a few occasions, we managed to get close daylight views, that allowed for decent photos.

Red Fox

There were only a few sightings. The Red Fox on the Tibetan Plateau is the subspecies *montana*, which also goes by an alternative name, Hill Fox. Smaller than the nominate race, like other high-altitude animals, it has also evolved adaptations, like the suppression of metabolic demands, that better suite life in oxygen sparse habitats. It seems to be less specialized than the pika hunting Tibetan Fox and can be found in areas devoid of Plateau Pika colonies.

Tibetan Antelope (Chiru)

An iconic animal of the Kekexili, our two trips both gave views of small herds of male with their characteristically long and elegantly curved-back horns – mostly distant, and glimmering in a strong heat-haze, a few animals were close enough to give half decent scope-views.

Tibetan Gazelle

This ungulate species was commonly observed at various locations with the highest densities seen on the Kekexili. Here, in small herds, it's a common roadside animal, with males and females/young living separately outside the mating season.

Wild Yak

Like previous trips, on the Kekexili, we saw a lone wild Bull in with a domestic herd. July/August represents the high season for Yak mating and it's common practice to allow a wild yak bull to serve domestic stock. The wild animals are recognized by their all-black colour, huge size, massive horns and shaggy coat – they also have no ear tags or collars that come with domestics. It seems that getting more wild yak gene material into farmed animals is a breeding goal in the Qumarleb/Kekexili area –various research papers cite its production benefits. At Qumarleb, on a research farm, there was a large herd of massive, all black Yak that looked identical to wild stock, and in the Kekexili area most of the domestic animals were also of a very similar type. These animals look very different from the smaller, multi-coloured domestic Yak we see in Sichuan.

Kiang (Tibetan Wild Ass)

Another Kekexili speciality, where we commonly saw small roadside herds. We also saw one animal at Gouli and a few others on the road from Qumarleb. One of four (including the extinct European), this is the largest of the wild ass species. Early explorer accounts tell us it was formerly abundant, but yak farming and modern developments on the plateau grasslands brought a big decline. The Kekexili populations, with its herds of Kiang and other ungulate species, give an indication of how mammal rich the Tibetan grasslands must have been.

Alpine Musk Deer

Seen at a new site, a temple very close to Yushu airport. Usually well-hidden in scrubby, rocky habitats it can be very difficult to find. On this occasion, a combination of thermal imager and scope were essential in locating it, but whole-body views, and even a couple of photos, were eventually obtained. Only one sighting of this rare animal, once hunted for its prized musk glands used in Western perfumes. It took 140 musk deer to produce one kilo of perfume, which explains why these species went through such a dramatic decline. Today synthetic substitutes have replaced musk glands, but the animals are still threatened with poaching for traditional medicines.

Sichuan Deer (MacNiell's Wapati)

Currently taxonomy lists this as a subspecies of Elk, this may be the rarest animal found on the trip. A single female was found in the Kanda Shan area close to Yushu – only seen on a single trip day. Another sighting that would have been near impossible without the use of a thermal imager.

Gansu (Kansu) Red Deer

Another Wapati subspecies – seen in small herds at Guoli Valley.

White-lipped (Thorold's) Deer

Seen during two trip days – both times on the road between Zhidoi and Qumerleb. Only females seen, a morning observation gave a large herd of 50+ animals with fawns that crossed a track very close to our vehicles. A very large deer, unmistakable with its white lower jaw.

Argali (Marco Polo Sheep)

Just a single female scoped in the Zhidoi area. A red-listed species.

Blue Sheep (Bharal)

Flocks seen at many sites, that included the Kanda Mountains near Yushu, Zhidoi and Guoli valley. The presence of this animal is a good indicator to the presence its chief predator, the Snow Leopard. A brilliant climber this sheep is often seen on steep cliff faces –records from explorers talk of vast numbers. Of course, much reduced, the species is still plentiful and easily found.

Mountain (Altai) Weasel

A single animal was seen at Zhidoi, in a dry roadside culvert. After finding this animal twice, in the Yushu area, just before the arrival of the main group, and not being able to relocate, we had been looking hard in typical cavity rich habitats – stone piles and derelict walls. However, we had to wait some days, when it took a bit of quick work by a group member who corralled one inside the culvert, keeping it there until the rest of the group arrived.

Asian Badger

A single nighttime observation at Guoli Valley. Although we often see this animal on our trips to the plateau in Sichuan, this was our first Qinghai sighting. A single animal on a night drive that was first picked up by thermal. Looking very similar to European Badger the Asian Badger is a recent split.

Woolly Hare

Abundant at Guoli Valley, to the extent that they caused problems, giving so many heat sources, when using the thermal. This species must be a major food source for the Lynx, which should explain why Guoli is such a good Lynx site.

Blyth's Mountain Vole

Once again there were problems to accurately identify the mountain voles, a task made more difficult when some of the rare online photos also appear to be wrongly identified. However, like last year's trip, most of the mountain voles we saw, mainly in the Zhidoi and the Kekexili areas, appeared to be Blyth's. A larger, pale coloured mountain vole that looks very similar to a small plateau pika, it lives in colonies, often among pika colonies, but easily identified from pika by possessing a tail.

Smoky Mountain vole

A smaller grey coloured vole seen at Zhidoi must have been this species. Very different to the Blyths, but equally as shy, often just showing outside a burrow for seconds.

Tibetan Dwarf Hamster

Seen at just one location, a mountain pass, during the drive back to Yushu from Guoli Valley. Very mouse like, with rufous upperparts and contrasting white underparts, several animals were seen scurrying around a litter strewn parking place close to a mountain top shrine and food tent. A very hardy little rodent they are recorded to altitudes of up to 5,200m.

Chinese Red Pika (Glover's ssp)

Commonly seen at a monastery close to Yushu, living both on nearby rock faces and in piles of carved stones (mani stone mounds). At Zhidoi seen on a steep, cavity rich rock face.

Chinese Red Pika (nominate race)

Looking quite different from Glover's with an all rufous head rather than the grey/rufous patterning found on Glover's. Just seen one time by a single member of the group in a rocky gorge at Guoli valley.

Plateau (Black-lipped) Pika

The most common mammal of the trip – once again seen in the the thousands

Trip Birds

Again, an impressive collection of raptors, with plentiful Himalayan Griffon, Lammergeyers, Upland Buzzard and Saker. Around Yushu we found Ibisbill and on the road to Zhidoi Black-necked Crane. Gouli Valley gave 3 new species for our Qinghai trips – Himalayan Snowcock, Przewalski's Partridge and the rare and range restricted Przewalski's Redstart.



Snow Leopard



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Eurasian Lynx



Pallas's Cat



Tibetan Wolf



Tibetan Fox



Asian Badger



Mountain Weasel



Blue Sheep



Argali



MacNeil's Deer



Alpine Musk Deer



White-lipped Deer



Tibetan Antelope (Chiru)



Tibetan Gazelle



Wild Yak



Kiang



Bactrian Camel (not wild unfortunately)



Woolly Hare



Plateau Pika



Glover's Pika



Long-eared Jerboa (provisionally labelled as)



Tibetan Dwarf Hamster



Saker Falcon



Himalayan Griffon



Ibisbill