

I know China a bit since I have been there for business reasons a couple of times per year over the last 20 years but it was only in the very industrial and crowded areas of the country between Beijing and Shanghai or in some of the historical touristic places like the terracotta army in Xi'an or the Great Wall. I wanted to see something else of China and after reading some great reports on the Mammalwatching website about tours in Sichuan or Qinghai and since Royle Safaris (www.royle-safaris.co.uk) was proposing a brand new tour in Sichuan, I decided to contact Martin, the owner, to know more about the itinerary he was proposing. It did not take me long to decide to book with him and in April 2019, we were thus arriving in Chengdu with my wife and my uncle, ready for a new wildlife watching adventure in this huge country.

Everything was organized by Martin who was our guide for the whole trip. I'm sure he will write as usual for all his trips a very detailed and thorough trip report but I wanted to make mine to give some of my feedback and add some pictures of the animals we could see there because Martin is not a photographer. To guide us in addition to Martin, we also had Sid Francis I'm sure many of you know already since he guided many previous trips in the area and knows perfectly Ruogai we visited during this tour. Unfortunately, he was only available for the first days of the trip and afterwards we had a local Chinese driver and guide, which was very convenient since most of the Chinese don't speak English in the areas we visited.

In Sichuan, we visited Ruogai, areas around Wolong, Tangjiahe and Foping (actually in Shaanxi).

A few words about logistics: I was pleasantly surprised by the hotels booked by Martin during this trip. They were all clean and very comfortable, even in the most remote places. The food was on the other hand quite average to my standards unless you like rice for breakfast, lunch and dinner ☺ To be fair, it was good enough most of the time but fruits for dessert and fruit juice for breakfast were missing but we could buy some in shops during the road transfer, which turned out to be a good solution. The cars used for the whole trip were large and comfortable although I found not very convenient for the night drives. The travel distances between the various places we visited were not so long in kilometers but turned out to be very long in time and exhausting due to traffic jams (like everywhere else I know in china), many roadworks and unsafe driving from most Chinese. As a consequence, our average speed was more around 50 km/h than anything else. On a side note, I found the busy road in the main valley driving us from Chengdu to Ruogai to be close to an ecological disaster given all the tunnels dug in the mountains, the huge railway bridge constructions and the use of the river as a quarry for all those constructions. A sad sighting given how beautiful this valley must have been in the past...

The trip organization from Martin was excellent and I liked the flexibility we could have to stay longer or shorter to some extent than initially planned depending on what we were experiencing in the various locations. Martin was very pleasant and fun to discuss with, always showed positive attitude and worked very hard to scan grasslands or mountains to search for the animals we were looking for. He was also always ready for long night drives. I can say the same for Sid Francis who perfectly knew the Ruogai area. I'd definitely recommend Royle Safaris for mammal watching considering how well Martin organizes his trips (it was the second time I used his services) and the fact that a fair amount of time spent on night drives / spotlighting sessions is included, which is not always the case for other agencies.

We were lucky regarding weather since for this period of the year, we only had 1 ½ days of rain at the end of our trip and the rest was mostly sunny and warm. Maybe too warm for certain mammal activity?

Now, let's talk about the mammal watching part itself for this trip in Sichuan. Globally speaking, I have a mixed feeling about it. Indeed, although I must admit we had some great and memorable sightings during this trip and I even think we were extremely lucky sometimes (I will explain why into more details later), we had on the other hand a couple of major disappointments hurting my feelings. The first one I was not really expecting considering all the nice stories and pictures I could read on several Sichuan trip reports is that I found most of the animals we observed very skittish and hard to take decent photos of. I know mammal watching is not only about pictures but I personally prefer to have some nice photo souvenirs of the animals I see rather than glimpse or distant scope observations. The second disappointment we had is that Foping seems to be now closed for the golden snub-nosed monkeys, which was really a bad surprise since a previous group held by Royle Safaris could get there only 3 weeks before but there was no information about any imminent closure. I'm afraid this seems to be definitive but Martin and Sid will enquire about it. More that the park closure itself that we can try to understand even if we regret it, the major issue is that there was absolutely no warning given to us to find alternatives and therefore we lost 2 days for nothing that we could have spent visiting another park, Labahe for instance as an example...

Anyway, hereafter are the main takeaways and major sightings we had by location.

Foping: well, nothing much to add since it was closed when we arrived and moreover, it was pouring rain.

Tangjiahe: a very lovely and scenic park with this nice river flowing in a deep and narrow valley. It is well maintained, with a good main road and many trails we can hike along the mountain slopes and it hosts an amazingly large and comfortable hotel. Amazing to find such a hotel in a park! During the day, there are not much animals to see except for takins or Reeves' muntjacs that are everywhere as well as some cool birds. On the other hand, wildlife becomes incredibly richer at night. We had one amazing night drive with animals literally in every corners of the road, including a close observation of an Asian black bear. Wonderful! Surprisingly, it was very hard to see Chinese serows during our stay there as we only saw one distant animal during the 4 night drives we could have in the park...

Ruogai is not a park per se but a nice area to roam around and very rich of wildlife. Sid knows the place very well and where to go to see Pallas's and Chinese mountain cats. We saw both of them well but the Pallas's cat (we saw twice the same individual) was very shy and very tough to get nice pictures of. To me, we were luckier with the Chinese mountain cats as we saw several individuals, most of them at nights but one cool, though distant, observation during the day in one quarry. The most amazing experience we had there was with wolves. We indeed saw eleven wolves on one day:

seven in the morning along the road and four more during the consecutive night drive. Unbelievable!! I'm not mentioning the hundreds of plateau pikas and marmots we saw there as well as many Tibetan foxes but again all very shy.

The last place we visited was in the **Wolong / Qionglai Mountains area** and was to me the most beautiful and scenic area we saw added to the fact that the weather was very warm and sunny. Hiking along the trails in these valleys of dense forests full of lichens and bamboos, surrounded by high and white mountains full of snow was definitely very enjoyable and a great experience. During these hikes, we saw many birds but not so many mammals. During 2 night drives we did along the main roads we actually saw zero animal whereas the group before us saw plenty. That's nature: not a single day is the same... However, the highlights there were numerous and impressive! First, we could observe very well 5 different red pandas at close range, they are such cuties. Second, while we were scanning the mountains with scopes looking for anything that could show up, we had an ecstatic observation of a mother giant panda with her young. Incredible! There were very far away but we could see them superbly as they were resting on a big trunk in an open area in the forest. We could observe them during a full hour resting, toileting and interacting before they disappeared in the forest... I could not imagine we could see such a species so well. How lucky we were! Third, once we found the giant pandas, Martin ran back to the car to tell our Chinese driver to come up and have a look to the animals with us. While he was running to the car, he saw a cat that probably frightened quickly escaped into the thick forest but Martin had enough time to clearly identify it was an Asian golden cat!! Only Martin could see the cat but man, what a place full of promises it seems to be!!

All in all, after this 2-week trip to Sichuan we were able to observe 27 species of mammals, which is not too bad but not too great either and we sadly missed the golden snub-nosed monkeys that were supposed to be a no brainer, because of the closure of Foping.

Below is the list of mammals observed during this trip in Sichuan (lifers in red):

Mammals with photos or well seen				
Species	Espèces	Latin Name	Where seen	Pic
Tibetan macaque	Macaque du Tibet	<i>Macaca thibetana</i>	A group observed very well for a long time one day in Tangjiahe	X
Perny's long-nosed squirrel	Ecureuil à long nez de Perny	<i>Dremomys pernyi</i>	One briefly seen in the Wolong area	
Himalayan marmot	Marmotte de l'Himalaya	<i>Marmota himalayana</i>	Common with dozens seen in Ruogai	X
Pere David's rock squirrel	Ecureuil du Père David	<i>Sciurotamias davidianus</i>	Common in Tangjiahe	X
Plateau pika	Pika à lèvres noires	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>	Common with hundreds seen in Ruogai	X
Moupin pika	Pika de Moupin	<i>Ochotona thibetana</i>	One individual seen in the Wolong area	X
Woolly hare	Lièvre laineux	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>	Several observed during night drives in Ruogai	X
Long-nosed mole	Taupe à long museau	<i>Euroscaptor longirostris</i>	One individual observed in Tangjiahe	X
Chinese mountain cat	Chat de Biet	<i>Felis bieti</i>	Several cats observed in Ruogai: 3 different individuals during spotlighting and 2 others in late evenings	X
Pallas's cat	Chat de Pallas	<i>Felis manul</i>	One individual seen twice quite well but far in a quarry in Ruogai	X
Masked palm civet	Civette masquée	<i>Paguma larvata</i>	Several observed at night in Tangjiahe	X
Tibetan Wolf	Loup	<i>Canis lupus</i>	11 seen one day in Ruogai! A superb observation and one of the highlights of the trip	X
Tibetan fox	Renard du Tibet	<i>Vulpes ferrilata</i>	Several observations days and nights in Ruogai	X
Red fox	Renard roux	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	A few seen in Ruogai	X
Giant panda	Panda géant	<i>Ailuropoda melanoleuca</i>	THE highlight of the trip. One magic observation in the Wolong area of a mother and young early morning and a third lone panda hidden in the thick bamboos poorly seen another day	X
Asiatic black bear	Ours à collier	<i>Ursus thibetanus</i>	Another highlight of the trip with a superb observation of one individual during our first night drive in Tangjiahe	X
Hog badger	Blaireau à gorge blanche	<i>Arctonyx collaris</i>	One excellent observation of an individual passing by us during one of our hikes in the day at Tangjiahe + a few more seen from the car during night drives	X
Asian badger	Blaireau asiatique	<i>Meles leucurus</i>	1 seen very well at night in Ruogai	X
Red panda	Panda roux	<i>Ailurus fulgens</i>	5 beautiful individuals seen in the trees at close range in the Wolong area	X
Eurasian wild pig	Sanglier	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Commonly observed night & day in Tangjiahe	X
Siberian roe deer	Chevreuril d'Asie	<i>Capreolus pygargus</i>	5 seen in the distance during one night drive in Ruogai	
Tufted deer	Cerf huppé	<i>Elaphodus cephalophus</i>	1 observed in the Wolong area during the day and a couple more observed at night in Tangjiahe	X
Reeve's muntjac	Muntjac de Reeves	<i>Munticus reevesi</i>	Commonly observed night & day in Tangjiahe	X
Tibetan gazelle	Gazelle du Tibet	<i>Procapra picticaudata</i>	A few skittish animals observed twice during the day in Ruogai	X
Sichuan takin	Takin	<i>Budorcas thibetana</i>	Commonly observed night & day in Tangjiahe	X

Chinese serow	Saro d'Indochine	<i>Capricornis milneedwardsii</i>	Surprisingly only one observation of this species in the distance during on night drive in Tangjiahe	X
Chinese goral	Goral gris	<i>Naemorphedus griseus</i>	Commonly observed night & day in Tangjiahe	X
Total Species Recorded = 27				

Below are a few other mammals that we saw during this trip but that I don't really count since I either saw only a glimpse of them or because we saw them dead...

Species	Espèces	Latin Name	Where seen
Northern leopard cat	Chat léopard du Bengale	<i>Prionailurus bengalensis</i>	I could only see one tail disappearing in the thick bushes from an animal spotted by Martin during a night drive in Tangjiahe.
Chinese ferret badger	Blaireau-furet de Chine	<i>Melogale mochata</i>	1 quickly seen running in front of the car when leaving Tangjiahe on the last day
Malayan porcupine	Porc-épic de Malaisie	<i>Hystrix brachyura</i>	1 dead animal seen on the road in the Wolong area
Unidentified bat			1 seen flying around the car during a night drive in Tangjiahe

I'm adding to this report some pictures of the most iconic species we observed during that trip and/or those new to me:



Pallas's cat



Chinese mountain cat



Tibetan wolf



Tibetan fox



Asian badger



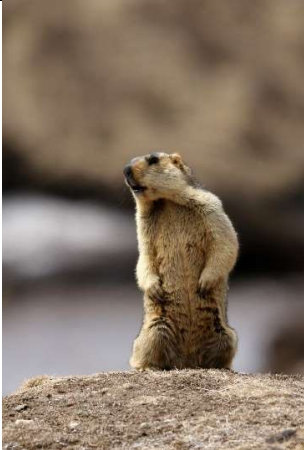
Woolly hare



Plateau pika



Moupine pika



Himalayan marmot



Masked palm civet



Sichuan takin



Pere David's rock squirrel



Asiatic black bear (photo extract from Martin's video)



Red panda



Hog badger



Tibetan macaque



Tibetan gazelles



Reeve's muntjac



Chinese goral



Tufted deer



Chinese serow



Giant Pandas