

Qinghai and Sichuan. Valley of the Cats

13 Nights. 4th - 17th October 2018

Ewan Davies



Participants: Ewan Davies, Steve Holloway, Pete Wheeler

Guide: Sid Francis

Following on from Wild Wings successful 2017 trip to Sichuan, several of the participants arranged with Sid Francis to organise a private trip to Qinghai, primarily to look for Snow Leopards in the “Valley of the Cats”. Our plans took time to come together but Sid was able to organise access permits through ShanShui NGO and Terry Townshend.

Access to the area is strictly prohibited without permits, but once obtained, accommodation and local guides are provided. Accommodation was homestay and was fairly basic though our hosts were welcoming and food plentiful. Although not usually allowed we were also able to obtain permission to use our own vehicle. This may seem harsh but in fact the roads within the valley are potentially very difficult and it would be unwise for anyone without significant experience of driving in such conditions to attempt to travel on them.

Note also that spotlighting is not permitted in the valley.

We travelled via KLM, which allowed us to all fly from local airports and meet in Amsterdam before flying on to Chengdu. We did not take the option to fly straight on to Yushu, as doing so would have meant going straight to 4000 meters. Instead we took the still difficult option of driving the 1000 km over 2 days and acclimatising more slowly.

<https://valleyofthecats.org/>

Day 1. 04/10/18 - Arrived in Chengdu mid-afternoon packed up the car and were on our way. We had all flown from local airports via KLM to Amsterdam and then on to Chengdu. Meaning that this was our first chance to meet up and reacquaint ourselves. We had opted to drive rather than fly to Yushu. Although this would involve 2 days of travelling (approx 1000 extra kilometers) this meant that we would have more time to acclimatize to altitude but meant that the first day contained little in the way of interesting wildlife. We drove through the afternoon and evening gaining height as we did so and stopped at a hotel in a small town after dark. Dinner was the first outing of the trip for Sid's grill and we slept four in one room.

Day 2. 05/10/18 - We set off again at dawn, and as the morning progressed we began to see some wildlife. Birds at first, with choughs, hill pigeons, buzzards and vultures becoming apparent as we travelled a long distance. A number of ibis bills were seen in the fast flowing rivers, one of the iconic birds of that environment. The afternoon brought us onto the plateau and species we were used to from Rourogai last year. **Black-lipped (plateau) pikas** began to spot the plain and our first **Tibetan fox** put in an appearance.



Tibetan Fox (SH)

We pushed on through the afternoon, stopping briefly to look at mammals and birds including **Tibetan gazelles** and a nice Lamagier on the ground, while we pushed on to reach Yushu before nightfall. We were eventually stopped after dark by bad weather over a high pass, and had to stop around 100k short of Yushu in the town of Sexu and spent the night in a hotel there.

Day 3. 06/10/18 -Off again at first light, and immediately we ran into a problem, the car was having difficulties changing gear while travelling. While we tried to ascertain the nature of the problem, we made sure we noticed two **Red foxes** in the dawn light. With the car just about working we limped on to Yushu and found a garage.

Having started the day with such bad luck, things improved and the garage were able to fix the problems in only a couple hours, aided by the translation services provided by Sid's wife. We used the spare time to clean up in a hotel down the road and were on our way just after lunch.

As we moved towards the valley of the cats, the already beautiful scenery become more spectacular and one could really believe snow leopards were present. We topped out somewhere around 4,800M and entered the valley, picking up our local guides and extra fuel along the way. Driving down towards our homestay, we passed many flocks of **Blue sheep**, and surprisingly approachable white eared pheasant. The sun was out and our first **Himalayan marmot** put in an appearance as did a large number of **Wooly hares**, in what looked to be excellent habitat for lynx. Passing down the river valley through alpine meadows, past spectacularly eroded red sandstone mesas below high snowy peaks we eventually reached our destination.



Blue Sheep



Himalayan Marmot

Our home for the next week was a large blue tent for the four of us, next to the yaks and heated by a stove. Unfortunately Sid's grill would not run without tripping the electrics in our host's home, so for our stay hot food was just the local diet (plus cuppa-soup). Movement around the valley after dark is discouraged and spotlighting prohibited so our nights were generally early to make the most of the days.

Day 4. 07/10/18 -Our hunt for the snow leopard began in earnest today as we headed up the steep valleys to scan for them, and hopefully bump into a party of film makers also in the valley (guided by Sid's brother in law) who could hopefully advise on where would be good to look. As we drove out passing numerous hares again, we saw our first **white-lipped deer**, a large stag caught in the narrow cliffside road in front of us. Due to the lack of passing places it had to back-up the better part of a kilometer to get out our way, before joining several more. We met the other group later than morning, and having spoken to them, headed for an area where they had seen leopards but were not currently looking. Several hours scanning with telescopes did not produce any leopards but did find many blue sheep and our first **Alpine musk deer**. Notable new birds for the morning include tibetan partridge, Tibetan snowcock and golden eagle. Red fox was seen by our guides but not us.



The afternoon proved similar, although a stop to photograph white eared pheasants found us our first **Glover's pikas** on a scree hillside, and good weather in the afternoon brought out plenty of marmots.



White Eared Pheasant



Glover's Pika

Day 5. 08/10/18 -Undeterred by our initial failure, we headed back to the previous days haunts and higher still. Sheep, deer and hares proved common, and the commoner birds, redstarts, ascentors, vultures, lamagiers and eagles gave us something to photograph to break up the scanning of hillsides and skylines.

Around lunchtime Sid took our main vehicle to go back to the village for fuel, leaving us with our 2 guides. We scanned for half an hour before stopping for lunch. After, we split

into 2 groups with Pete and I heading a few hundred yards down from Steve and the guides. After just a couple of minutes Pete gestured me towards his scope and suggested I take a look. There on the ridge was a **Snow leopard** against the skyline. I immediately called the guides via the radio and Steve rushed down, only to find the animal (believed to be a male based on size and shape) had gone. Disappointed, he scanned the hillside himself and was pleased to pick it up again shortly after. It stayed in view for several minutes more before we lost it over the horizon. The local farmers then invited us all in for tea (or hot water) and a chance to warm up. We moved back down the valley as the snow set in and met with Sid on his way back late afternoon, all pleased with the day's sightings.



White-lipped Deer (SH)



Alpine Musk Deer

Day 6. 09/10/18 -An early start was somewhat hampered by frozen brakes, but we still got underway at a reasonable hour and drove back to where we had been previously. Stopping in a steep sided valley to check on some circling vultures hinted that another leopard might be around. While I was busy looking at pikas on one side of the road, Pete again came up with a Snow leopard across the valley. Initially at around 800 meters we were able to drive up to around 700 meters and the animal gave good views through the scope. Judging by the vultures we assumed it was resting after feeding, and we were able to watch it clean, stretch and relax for around 3 hours. Eventually we were joined by the film crew before the leopard disappeared from view.

Later in the afternoon we thought we may have found a third cat, judging by the behaviour of sheep, vultures and magpie, but we couldn't get an angle on where it appeared to be. 3 hours of snow leopard would have to do for the day. On returning to our homestay, we stopped to photograph an endemic bird, the Tibetan babax coming to feed by our tent. Our host also informed that a snow leopard had also been seen that day, on the ridge behind the farm.



Snow leopard (PW)

Day 7. 10/10/18 -Knowing snow leopards were nearby we decided to go the other way from the farm for the day and the road took an unexpected turn to a high pass quite close by. The road we drove up was covered in snow leopard tracks including what appeared to be a mother and infant(s). Other tracks near the top included wolf and what we were told was lynx. The views at the top were incredible, we scanned there for a time before dropping back down to good vantage points where we could scan for miles. The wildlife was plentiful but nothing new, a marmot doing a very good impression of a pallas's cat as it ran almost fooled us. The highlight of the morning being an aerial battle between a saker falcon and golden eagle fighting over prey. Back up to the top after lunch where we scared a **Tibetan wolf** on the road. An amazingly close view, but it did not hang around for photos.

Day 8. 11/10/18 -This would be our last full day in the valley as we chose to change our itinerary to allow more time on the way back in case of bad weather or other difficulties. Also this would give us time to try to pick up a few more species on the way back. Steve was unwell and spent the morning asleep in the car mostly. Sid again had to do a fuel run, and we spent the day scanning and photographing in this wonderful wilderness. We didn't see any more leopards though but the commoner wildlife was on display as always.

Day 9. 12/10/18 -Up early to go to the high pass before leaving. Up high the weather was bad, and despite a brief possible sighting that vanished before we got the scope on it, there were to be no more snow leopards. We drove back, paid our hosts and made our way back towards Yushu.

Much of the territory between the valley and Yushu is excellent habitat, and you could undoubtedly spotlight for Pallas's and mountain cat there. We saw vast numbers of pikas up there, plus multiple Tibetan fox, red fox and gazelle. Before Yushu we took a detour to look for **MacNeil's deer**, eventually finding a single doe, before rejoining the road to Yushu. This final stretch produced white-lipped deer on a high snowfield more foxes, and one wolf sleeping out on the plain.

Day 10. 13/10/18 -We planned to drive out on a different road today, where one month before (See report by J. Wright) there had been plentiful Kiang. This was a species we all wanted to see so we had built a day into the itinerary to look. In the intervening month the weather had worsened considerably and the ground was snow covered. Foxes, pikas and gazelles were everywhere, but Kiang were not easy to find. One group of 3 eventually appeared to be captive, but our morning was fruitless though some nice birds, such as Bar headed goose and black necked crane were added to the list. After lunch we did eventually find 3 single **Kiang** at various distances out on the plain, but haze made photography difficult.

Day 11. 14/10/18 -A travel day today with little expectation of good mammals, although we were passing through good habitat. Expectations were out the window almost immediately when a charming **Mountain weasel** crossed the road in front of us and stayed to listen to a squeaker for 10 minutes while we photographed it. This awesome view was followed up by a group of 3 wolves who ran in parallel with the car at a distance for some time along a fence line. Two stopped but the third, thought to be the parent, can close and crossed the road just behind our vehicle. Another great extended view and rare chance to photograph a wolf.



Mountain Weasel



Grey Wolf

We paused for lunch to look for long eared pika, which we didn't find, but had to explain what we were doing to an awful lot of monks. We stopped late at a hotel to find the boot catch on the car had broken and spent the evening devising ways to keep it shut.

Day 12. 15/10/18 -Our jury rigged boot closing system using paracord held until we could get to a garage (cost to fix approx £5) and the good time we made on the journey back allowed for us to take a bonus night in Labahe. This hadn't been on our itinerary but as we'd done well there the previous year, we were all keen to have another look, extend the trip list and take some photos. For myself I was keen to get some spotlighting. We weren't disappointed. Driving up the valleys we encountered several troupes of **Tibetan macaques** before we arrived at our hotel. After a quick dinner we got back in the car and headed out with the spotlights, so rain was falling and the mist was settling in so we were not sure how we would do. We headed up the road first to pools where Chinese myotis bats had been recently seen but none were identified. Shortly after turning round we came across the first of 3 **Himalayan palm civets**, something not seen at Labahe the previous year. The inevitable **Sambar** soon followed as did **Red and white giant flying squirrel** and **Chinese goral**, all giving good views. Further along we found a **particoloured flying squirrel** licking salt from the concrete in a similar position to where one was seen in 2017 (although it had been recorded as grey headed at the time). The highlight of the evening though was surely a **Malay porcupine** feeding along the culvert beside the road. This animal was oblivious to us and we watched it for a good 15 minutes before it disappeared into vegetation. Satisfied, we turned in for the night as the weather deteriorated further.



Chinese Goral (SH)



Particoloured Flying Squirrel



Malay Porcupine (SH)



Himalayan Palm Civet (SH)

Day 13. 16/10/18 -Our last day in the field and to make the most of it we took up the spotlights again and headed out at 5AM. Conditions were very misty and visibility was

low. There was much less activity than the night before, although Sambar, goral and flying squirrels were again seen. After an hour we stopped for a comfort break, and while Steve and I shone the torches back up the road, eyeshine was seen crossing the road. Quick work to get binoculars on showed a **Mainland leopard cat** crossing the path. A bonus cat for me. One more for the trip was a **Reeve's muntjac** unexpectedly gazing down at us from the hillside, again a species not seen here on our previous visit,

After breakfast we made a quick journey up the mountain, we only had a couple of hours to kill before we had to head back and sadly this did not prove long enough to add red panda to the trip list. This would have been nice but was a species we'd all seen well the previous trip. The morning was not wasted though, as well as **Swinhoe's striped squirrel** and the (non-countable) introduced red deer, we were pleased to see a **Siberian weasel** cross the road as we walked down it. This time the weasel was carrying prey and would not come in for the squeaker. The bird list also picked up a number of new species including Lady Amherst's pheasant, Red billed blue magpie and Chestnut thrush.

Happy with our lot we returned to the hotel, packed up and made our way back to Chengdu, where Sid departed and we spent the night before returning home the following day.

Species list

1. Red and white giant squirrel (*Petaurista alborufus*)
2. Particoloured flying squirrel (*Hylopetes alboniger*)
3. Swinhoe's striped squirrel (*Tamiops swinhoei*)
4. Himalayan Marmot (*Marmota himalayana*)
5. Malay porcupine (*Hystrix brachyura*)
6. Woolly hare (*Lepus oiostolus*)
7. Black-lipped pika (*Ochotona curzoniae*)
8. Glover's pika (*Ochotona gloveri*)
9. Tibetan Macaque (*Macaca thibetana*)
10. Japanese pipistrelle bat (*Pipistrellus abramus*)
11. Snow leopard (*Panthera uncia*)
12. Mainland leopard cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*)
13. Himalayan palm civet (*Paguma larvata*)
14. Red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*)
15. Tibetan fox (*Vulpes ferrilata*)
16. Grey wolf (*Canis lupus filchneri*)

17. Altai weasel (*Mustela altaica*)
18. Siberian weasel (*Mustela sibirica*)
19. Blue sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*)
20. Chinese goral (*Naemorhedus griseus*)
21. Tibetan gazelle (*Procapra picticaudata*)
22. Alpine musk deer (*Moschus chrysogaster*)
23. White lipped deer (*Cervus albirostris*)
24. Macneil's deer (*Cervus canadensis macneilli*)
25. Sambar (*Rusa unicolor*)
26. Reeve's muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesi*)
27. Kiang (*Equus kiang*)

As this was a mammal trip I've not included a full bird list here but I can provide one if required.

Thanks to: Sid and his family for organising and support both before and during the trip.

Our hosts and guides in the valley, Terry Townshend, ShanShui NGO and everyone involved in the valley of the cats project.

Wild Wings for the previous years trip Sichuan and to Richard Webb in particular for his general support of my endeavours.

All photos other than my own are credited with initials.





Lady Amherst's Pheasant (SH)



Tibetan Babax (SH)



Lamagier



Golden Eagle



Mountain weasel (PW)