

2019 Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau Mammal watching trip report

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Duration: 20 days

Route: Xining-Huashixia-Yushu-Zaduo(In Sanjiangyuan Reserve)-Qumalai-Budongquan(In Kekexili Reserve)-Golmud-Dulan-Qinghai Lake-Xining

Targets: Snow Leopard, Tibetan Antelope(Chiru) , Tibetan fox, Tibetan Gazelle, Kiang, Przewalski's Gazelle, Yak, Pallas's Cat, White-lipped Deer, Red Deer, Argali, Blue sheep, Red Fox, Alpine Musk Deer, Himalayan Marmot, Goitered Gazelle, Wolf, Lynx, Woolly Hare, and Picas. Etc.

Birds: Black-necked crane, Greater neck-laced Chukar, Blood pheasants, Himalayan griffon, Upland buzzard, Saker falcon, Tibetan partridge, Red-billed chough, Mongolian ground-jay, Hume's ground-pecker, White-rumped snowfinch, Rufous-necked snowfinch, Tibetan snowfinch, Tibetan Babax, etc.

Climate: Typical high plateau climate in winter, 0°C to -15°C.

Elevation: start from 2200m in Xining. Highest 4800m, most of time 3500-4200m.

Accommodation: from extremely yak herder home stay in the valley to comfortable hotel in town. Food supply with no problem.

Traffic: most time on the good national highway, some tough road in the valleys. Tough 4*4 is necessary

About season: Sept to Nov is very good for mammals, and they're at much lower elevation and close to the road. July to Aug are good for birds in this region.

About Snow leopard:

Zaduo County in Yushu, is suppose to have the highest density of snow leopard all over the world, according to the local ranger, there're 300 snow leopard in this county. Very good habitat, and plenty of blue sheep for food. **According to the local NGO's statistics, the chance to see the snow leopard here is: 80% in 4 days visit.**

According to the local said, March to early May is the best time for snow leopard watching, because they make mating sound during then, which help us to locate them much easier. Nov to Feb, in the cold winter, snow leopard follow the blue sheep to a lower elevation, which will save you a lot of hiking above 4000m.



Day 1,

Arrived in Xining Airport, bought some supply.

Day 2,

Long drive for 800km(12hrs) to Yushu, All high way, stunning scenery. After Huashixia town, we started see wildlife, 2 wolves, several Tibetan gazelle, hundreds of Kiang, whole day of snowfinches and raptors. As we didn't plan for those species, we just pass by.

A much faster way to Yushu is by flight from Xining, but you need to consider the elevation of Yushu(3800m)





Day 3,

Early morning head to the valley in Zaduo County. This valley is in the core area of Sanjiangyuan Reserve, visitor need apply for permission from local authority. It's about 3 hrs driving up, we saw the Tibetan fox and many upland buzzard along the way.

Just a few hundred meters before we arrived to the host Tibetan family, we found the Alpine musk deer and red fox in the bush on the other side of the river.





In the afternoon, we hanged around to learn about this area and let our body to get use to the elevation. Judge by the shape of the mountains, you'll never doubt there're snow leopards.





Day 4,

First morning in this valley, we decided to check around the monastery, where supposed to have many blue sheep, and of course it's a hot killing spot according to the local. It's not difficult to locate the big group of blue sheep when we just arrived there, about 50 of them. Then we walked up hill carefully, hope to find snow leopard somewhere, but in vain. The climbing up is really very difficult...





When we driving down, we met across a small group (30) of blue sheep, got some very good photos.



Before we driving back to home, we saw a fresh kill of a domestic yak near the road, our Tibetan friend think it is either snow leopard or wolf, they saw snow leopard

crossed the road at the same place 3 days ago at this very narrowest part of the valley.

And we also heard that right behind our living place, at the other side of the hill, the Tibetan grandpa saw many vultures flying around, but no landing, which he guess should be a killing by snow leopard, because only with the snow leopard nearby, the vultures dare not to get close. If it is wolf or fox, vultures just fly to them directly.

We decided to try it next day.

Day 5

We started climbing before dawn, it is very vertical climbing at about 4500m elevation, the slope is about 60° near the top , plus the iced grass make it very very dangerous. We nearly didn't make it...

Finally we got to the mountain ridge, and when we looked down, there's a **snow leopard** just sitting near a prey about 200m below us!





We quickly took some photos. Once the snow leopard heard the click of camera, took a look at us, then slowly run away with no turning back.

After just one minute, we saw the snow leopard about 2km away on the ridge of other mountain. Soon, **2 wolves** from nowhere are eating the dead animal together with the Himalayan griffons!



We cannot believe that we met across the snow leopard at such a close distance and together with 2 wolves. We walked down hill with satisfaction. When we just reached to the bottom, we saw a Himalayan marmot hole was dig by a bear not long ago.

After a break in the middle of the day, we went for the **white-lipped deer**. It's not difficult to find them in the much more open slopes. There're around 50 of them, 2 big male with 8 juvenile and many females. Males were fighting and chasing females.



Day 6,

Another beautiful morning in the valley, we started early hope to get some luck. Right at the same killing site as 2 days ago, there was another big domestic yak fresh killed at the fence near the road.





Day 7 and 8,

We had a lot of climbing and research in different mountains and smaller valley in these 2 days, tried to photograph the snow leopard again, but with no luck. Other things we saw are: over **500+ blue sheep, 50+ white-lipped deer, 50+Himalayan griffon, 20+ Lammergeier, 2 wolves, 1 red fox, 1 Tibetan fox, 2 Pallas's pica,**















Day 9,

After waved goodbye to the Tibetan host family and the 2 **Alpine musk deer** near their house, we drove back to Yushu for a big meal and hot shower.

Day 10,

From Yushu to Qumalai, we actually move from Langcangjiang River Region to Yangtze River Region of the Sanjiangyuan National Park(Three River Source NP).

4hrs driving plus some stop for the water birds at Longbao Wetland, including 2 **black-necked cranes**. And we also stopped at a **Pallas's cat** paradise after the mountain pass, found 2 of them feeding on the pica buffet.



When the road started getting winding and upward, we found a group of **Agarli** at the "usual place", 25 of them, 3 big male, 5 young male. Only problem for this spot is: parking can be dangerous, due to the winding road and crazy trucks.



Day 11,

From Qumalai to Budongquan, We move out from Sanjiangyuan Reserve to Kekexili Reserve. It was heavy snow last night, out of the town, it's not difficult to see the Tibetan fox and the Tibetan Gazelle in the pure white.

Before we got to Budongquan, we saw 100+ **Kiangs**, 2 **Yaks**, 24 **Tibetan Antelope**(Chiru), and 200+ **Tibetan gazelle**.







Day 12 and 13

We had some good photo opportunities of the iconic species in these 2 days.

I've been here every year since 2007, and I found the protection work are doing very well by Chinese authorities, year by year, I can see the number of animal are increasing even just by the national road. Fence was removed, animals are not so tense, less domestic animals (at least the law said no domestic animal allowed).

Accommodations here improved a lot, but the elevation is still a challenge (4500m)

By the way, the local told us, the Tibetan brown bear show up frequently around here in the recent years, mainly because of the food waste in the back yard of the restaurant.



















Day 14,

Drive to Golmud(Ge'ermu) for overnight and supply.

Day 15,

Drive from Golmud to Dulan. 2 easy targets on the way: The **Mongolian ground-jay** and **Goitered gazelle**. The ground-jay is easy when there's a pull over, they're usually feeding around. The gazelle becomes tricky because government plant some trees and tall bushes along the road which blocked our view. And the city industry expand to the half-desert area, loads of solar power panels were built.

Luckily we saw 2 Goitered gazelle at a fairly close distance right before we drove out of the habitat. They shouldn't be so difficult to see.

We also saw a domestic dog feeding on the Goitered gazelle body, the dogs are another threaten to the fragile wildlife system on the plateau as well.

Overnight in Xiangride town.



Day 18,

Today we explored the valleys between Dulan and Maduo. These valleys used to be international hunting field, but closed due to public opinion. Hunting is another topic worth a debate.

However, it is quite a good wildlife habitat, when we just drove into the valley, we saw 20+ **Greater neck-laced chukar**, countless **wooly hare**, and 5 **wolves**!

We went up mountains, we saw 20+ **red deer**, 200+ **blue sheep**, 10+ **Tibetan snowcock**, According to the local, here supposed to have Altai snowcock and snow leopard, which I have no doubt because we found a lot remains of blue sheep and deer.







Day 17,

Full day searched around. We found 7 wolves, 2 Tibetan fox, 1 Red fox, 2 Pallas's cat, a lot blue sheep, 1 Mountain Weasel, 2 lammergeier, 2 golden eagle, white-rumped, rufous-necked, and Tibetan snowfinch.

The local said, in this season when the yak herders move to their winter grassland, the brown bears usually break into their house here, eat whatever they can find. Here you good chance to see snow leopard and bear in the summer.

Meanwhile there is a good number of Lynx as well, we missed it, but we saw a new killed juvenile red fox after a snowing night, typical lynx bite on the head. The wooly hares, picas and chukars feel like to stay with human houses, so that the local can always see the fox and lynx feeding near their home.





Day 18,
Long drive to Qinghai Lake.

Day 19,

Full day photographing the endangered Przewalski's gazelle. The number of Przewalski's gazelle is less than the panda, but haven't been put into focus yet. Due to loss of habitat, their future is very dark.





Day 20,
Finish in Xining.