

Trip report: Sichuan, 2018

by *Rauno Väisänen*

After a wonderful snow leopard trip to Mongolia (Greentours; led by Ian Green, Uugan Chuluunbaatar & Attila Steiner) we had a short break at home at Pärnu, Estonia, and in Finland visiting relatives, and then my wife Anneli and me headed to China. I had made several business trips to China since 1996 and visited quite a few protected areas, but frustratingly at mid-day with big delegations so that I had seen hardly more than rhesus monkeys and superb sceneries. I had also visited Jiuzhaigou, Huanglong and Wolong with Anneli in 1996, so that it finally was time to revisit Sichuan and try to see more of its fascinating fauna.

Our 2018 trip was a combined mammal, bird, butterfly and moth watching tour, though the season was definitely not the best for the winged groups. We spent two weeks from 30th October to 13th November in Sichuan concentrating on mammals, and then we made a successful two-day detour to Shaanxi only for the crested ibis on 14-15th November. We spent also quite a lot of time on the Emei Shan mainly due to butterflies, moths and birds.

Our guide and driver was German Roland Zeidler from Western Sichuan Tours (wstourix@gmail.com). He has lived in China for about 20 years and been a mammal- and bird-watching guide for 13 years. He was good company and really an excellent guide showing a very high degree of professionalism and can be sincerely recommended. He was very good at spotting animals from a distance and very careful scanning with his telescope, which proved to be essential. He knew all the sites very well as well as the voices of birds, which were not that noisy in late autumn. Warm thanks to him!

We visited the following sites: Labahe (abbreviated as **LA** in the list below) in Erlang Shan, 30th Oct. - 1st Nov.; Emei Shan (**ES**) 1st-4th Nov, and the Leshan Giant Buddha, 4th Nov.; a few sites in the Baoxing region (**BA**), 4th-5th Nov.; a long drive to Hongyuan (**HY**), 6th Nov.; Ruoergai (**RG**) or Zoige with visits to Baxi Forest (**BX**), 7th-9th Nov.; and Tangjiahe (**TJ**), 10th-14th Nov. In addition, we made a birding detour to Shaanxi Province and back to Chengdu airport on 14th-15th Nov. Incidentally, Professor Wang Yamin from Shandong University also joined us in Tangjiahe on 11th-12th Nov.

Most of the sites we visited have been described well in previous mammal and bird-watching trip reports. Sadly, the pressure of tourism seemed to have negative effects on the fauna at least in some sites. This was particularly true in Labahe with quite heavy traffic, very noisy tourist groups, introduced Altai wapitis, and terrible noise from road works. In addition, an adventure park had been built at the core area of the red panda and the lady Amherst pheasant. More alarmingly, the incredible scale and speed of building new highways, dams and large groups of large buildings seem to turn much of the non-protected areas into hostile landscapes for many species. On the other hand, the Chinese road engineers' affection for long tunnels is apparently good news for landscape connectivity and consequently for the fauna. Some protected areas seemed to be well-managed, notably Tangjiahe. The hotel at Tangjiahe even had a nice collection of faunistic literature available in the rooms.

The accommodation and food were good everywhere. However, some hotels rejected to accept foreign customers. Though the ordinary people were very friendly, there seemed to be some suspicions as regards to foreigners, and the access to all interesting mammal-watching sites is by no means self-evident. Thus, it is of utmost importance that all visitors behave well and show respect to local rangers and authorities.

The weather was mostly nice and sunny in Sichuan, though there was cold weather and a lot of snow in the mountain passes and on the Tibetan Plateau. Thus, travelling was slow in the passes due to trucks stuck in the snow, while butterflies were still flying in the sunny valleys in between. The extreme snow conditions on the roads prevented us from visiting the sika deer reserve close to Zoige. The weather on the Tibetan Plateau was generally unusually cold. Spotlighting at -16°C was a bit challenging and probably limited our efforts to spotlight wolves and badgers. Surprisingly, some moths were still on flight at temperatures as low as -2°C , which I have never witnessed in Finland. In Shaanxi the weather was cloudy and drizzly, something like we had expected for the whole trip.

Our trip proved to be successful with about 40 mammals, 230 birds and about 50 butterflies and moths. The mammals are listed below. The bird list is available from the author (raunok.vaisanen@gmail.com) and included many nice species, e.g. white eared, blue eared, blood and golden pheasants and Temminck's tragopan; black-necked crane; collared crow; snowy-cheeked, barred, giant, spotted, black-veined, red-winged laughingtrushes and Chinese hwamei; Emeishan liocichla; great, brown, fulvous and golden parrotbills; and Chinese beautiful, Stresemann's pink-rumped, three-banded, Sharp's and Chinese white-browed rosefinches. Among the moths, three large species of emperor moths and the butterfly-like callidulid moth *Pterodecta felderi* were especially delightful. It was also nice to see wild *Davidia* dove-trees in Labahe.

List of mammal species

Tibetan macaque (*Macaca thibetana*). A few groups of 20-30 individuals were seen in **LA** and **TJ**.

Golden snub-nosed monkey (*Rhinopithecus roxellana*). A group of about 25 individuals interrupted our bus trip and was seen very nicely in **TJ** on 12th Nov.

Red and white giant flying squirrel (*Petaurista alborufus*). Six-seven individuals of this large and beautiful species were seen nightly at **LA** when spotlighting.

Red giant flying squirrel (*Petaurista petaurista*). One individual seen at **LA** on 31th Oct.

Complex-toothed flyig squirrel (*Trogopterus xanthipes*). Several individuals were seen in tall trees and also gliding above the river in **ES** just when dusk fell on both 2nd and 3rd Nov. The identification of these flying squirrels caused us some problems, but it seems likely that having contrasting dark brown upper parts and warm yellowish underparts they belonged to this medium-sized species.

Pere David's rock squirrel (*Sciurotamias davidianus*). Several individuals were seen in **TA**, and in the valleys between **BA** and **HO** and between **RG** and **TJ**.

Pallas squirrel (*Callosciurus erythraeus*). Quite common in **ES**.

Swinhoe's striped squirrel (*Tamiops swinhoei*). A few individuals were seen in **LA**, **BA** and **TJ**.

Himalayan marmot (*Marmota himalaya*). Only one marmot was briefly seen in **RG** grasslands on 8th Nov.

Malayan porcupine (*Hystrix brachyura*). A group of three was closely encountered (you know the smell!) on the road verge in **TG** when spotlighting on 11th Nov. Remnants of a poached one were found in **ES**.

Chinese birch mouse (*Sicista concolor*). I saw very nicely one individual of this long-tailed beauty climbing on a narrow branch of a bush when we were spotlighting by foot in **TJ** on 13th Nov.

Plateau pika (*Ochotona curzoniae*). Hundreds of pikas were seen in **RG**

Woolly hare (*Lepus oiostolus*). One was finally found after a long search in **RG** on a road side just next to the car on 8th Nov. Another hare was found next day in **BX**.

Chinese zokor (*Eospalax fontanierii*). There were thousands of mounds in **RG** grasslands. However, we decided to let them alone and not to dig their burrows in order to get a glimpse of one. We heart that hunting of this species is increasing.

Confucian niviventer (*Niviventer confucianus*). Probably due to the cold weather we saw only one niviventer at **TG** on 12th Nov.

Brown rat (*Rattus norvegicus*). One individual was seen at a road service centre close to Sichuan-Shaanxi border.

Great leaf-nosed bat (*Hipposideros armiger*). Several individuals were seen flying every night in **ES**. Most interestingly, we saw them repeatedly touching a huge wasp nest obviously in order to get wasps out for food. We were not fully convinced of the identification of the bat species, though the big size and the shape of the head seemed to fit best to this species.

We saw also several individuals of small unidentified pipistrelle-like bats in **ES**, **LA** and **TG**.

Chinese mountain cat (*Felis bieti*). This was definitely one of the highlights of our trip. When we approached one of the quarries in the afternoon sunshine in **RG** on 7th Nov., we saw a mountain cat running to its hole. After a longish wait, the cat came out at sunset, slept on the ground, cleaned itself, stretched and went gracefully for a pika hunt. It was much more beautiful animal than I had imagined, and it was great to see it so well in full light for a long while at close distance.

Pallas's cat (*Felis manul*). Another cat highlight followed at another quarry in **RG** next morning. We saw the manul at once and it spent then long times on stones, sleeping, cleaning itself and just basking in the sunshine.

Leopard cat (*Prionailurus benglensis*). One individual was seen sitting behind a small bush on a cliff when spotlighting along the road in **TG** on 11th Nov. When walking and spotlighting on 13th Nov. we saw another leopard cat, an extreme beautiful young animal limping along road towards us, closer and closer like a domestic cat.

Masked palm civet (*Paguma larvata*). Three individuals were seen in **LA** on 30th Oct., and 2-3 individuals nightly when spotlighting in **TG**.

Tibetan fox (*Vulpes ferrilata*). Ten individuals were seen in **RG**, both in the daytime and at night.

Red fox (*Vulpes vulpes*). One individual was seen in **RG** on 8th Nov. when also two unidentified foxes possibly belonging to this species were seen at night.

Giant panda (*Ailuropoda melanoleuca*). This species was not on our list of desired species, since we believed it is simply impossible to find. Even Roland had never seen one in the wild. Of course it is on everybody's secret list, and it had an additional symbolic value for me with a long history in

the voluntary WWF work. So, we were somewhere in Ya'an region (I am afraid that exact locality would lead to considerable disturbance to the site and possible also into restrictions in the access by sensitive officials). We had already been very lucky in the morning of 5th Nov. seeing a red panda at very close quarters in a frozen and snowy bamboo forest – just beautiful! After a field lunch we headed to another site. After a long climb, we started scanning. After a while it seemed hopeless. The foggy snowy forest was quite dense and totally black and white, with more than enough hiding places in trees and on the ground. Suddenly Roland said "Panda!" behind his telescope. First we thought that it was just one of the bad jokes, or bouts of wishful thinking since there were hundreds of panda candidates which soon proved to be stones, tree branches or just black holes in snow-covered vegetation. Second, we thought it was possibly a red panda in a tree. At this point, Roland was already calling Chengdu with his voice trembling so that we became exceedingly excited, and finally got it. It was indeed a giant panda sitting on the ground behind bushes, but well visible when we finally realised where it was, not that far, and it was big! We spent some time watching it eat bamboo branches and take short walks to get more food, just like in nature films. Then we decided to try to get closer, descended to the valley, and climbed a bit towards the panda, though in the monotonous forest it was quite difficult to say exactly where it was and the vegetation covered it very well. Thus, we didn't find it any more. However, we were totally wordless, possibly feeling something like winning a million dollars in a lottery.

Asian black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*). A few days before we arrived to **TG**, five black bears had been seen around there. So we spent a lot of time scanning the slopes without results, no bears, no golden monkeys. On 10th Nov. we were visiting another part of the park for pheasants and luckily saw the golden monkeys, but no bears. In the evening we heard that the others, including big groups of students, had seen a bear just along the main road in the daytime. Next day was our last chance in **TG** so we tried hard in the evening and in the morning, but only at the last moment I noticed some life at the top of a distant tree. Yes, two black bears were sleeping and eating berries at the top of tree, which covered them very well from sight from most directions. In addition, quite surprisingly, we found fresh and clear bear footprints in the mud in **ES**.

Hog badger (*Arctonyx collaris*). Two individuals were seen along the main road verges in **TG**. In addition, three split and smoked individuals with many other exotic mammals and caged birds like the endangered moustached laughingthrush were for sale at the service centre near the Sichuan-Shaanxi border. Illegal and simply disgusting! The next SARS epidemic appears to be just a question of time.

Yellow-throated marten (*Martes flavigula*). Roland saw two martens at the river side at **TG** on 13th Nov. We missed them, but were a bit relieved by the fact that we had seen a glimpse of this species previously in Bhutan.

Chinese ferret badger (*Melogale moschata*). We saw well one individual on the road in **TG** on 10th Nov., but it was not seen anew in spite of our attempts.

Red panda (*Ailurus fulgens*). One almost tame individual was seen twice in **LA** close to the road towards the cable car eating berries in trees in spite of all the noise, traffic, and some harrassing tourists. That remained the only individual in **LA** though we tried to find more along different trails. Another individual was seen in **BA** on 5th Nov. In addition, we found footprints of red panda in **ES** and its feces in **TG**.

Wild boar (*Sus scrofa*). Two individuals were seen in **LA** on 31st Nov. and six more in **TG**.

Forest musk deer (*Moschus berezovskii*). One individual was seen by spotlighting in **LA** on 30th Oct.

Siberian roe deer (*Capreolus pygargus*). Three roe deer were seen between **HY** and **RG** on 7th Nov, and one in **BX** 9th Nov.

Sika deer (*Cervus nippon*). We only heard one deer obviously belonging to this species calling repeatedly behind a small hill in **BX** on 9th Nov., but it had disappeared when we reached there.

Altai wapiti (*Cervus canadensis sibericus*). A few more or less tame individuals of this introduced species were seen daily in **LA**, fortunately mostly just along the road or close to buildings.

Tufted deer (*Elaphodus cephalophus*). One individual was seen in the morning in **BX** on 9th Nov. and two more in **TG** on 11th and 13th Nov.

Reeve's muntjac (*Muntiacus reevesi*). Abundant in **TG**, up to 35 individuals seen per night, mostly along the road sides.

Sambar deer (*Rusa unicolor*). A group of 20-30 was seen every evening at feeding site of the hotel in **LA**, one male almost crashed into our car next to the park gate on arrival.

Tibetan gazelle (*Procapra picticaudata*). Altogether four individuals were seen on the mountains in **RG** on 7th and 8th Nov.

Takin (*Budorcas taxicolor*). Quite abundant in **TG**, 5-15 seen easily every day along the road sides.

Chinese serow (*Capricornis milneedwardsii*). One serow was seen in **LA** on 30th Oct., two in **BX** on 9th Nov., and altogether four in **TG** on 9th and 12th Nov.

Chinese goral (*Naemorhedus griseus*). Four gorals were seen in **LA** on 30th Oct. and 3-6 different individuals per night in **TG**.

Blue sheep (*Pseudois nayaur*). A group of 4-5 blue sheep was seen twice in **LA**, and a large group of about 50 individuals in the mountains in **BX**.