

QINGHAI SNOW LEOPARD EXPEDITION SEPTEMBER 2019

I was privileged to have joined Jamin York, founder of Himalaya Journeys Tibetan run and owned <https://himalayajourney.com/> on a two week expedition into the heart of the Sinjiangyuan Reserve. Jamin is not only an amazing and knowledgeable guide, he had with him the best wildlife guide in Qinghai. We began our journey in Xining, flew to Yushu, then drove several days to an undisclosed camp deep in the reserve. We were surrounded by large herds of Bahral sheep, white lipped deer, and the grassland was full of pika and marmots.

Jamin is from my home in Washington State, but has lived in Yushu and explored the Tibetan plateau for over 12 years. He speaks two dialects of Tibetan, and mandarin, and is one of the most dynamic and friendly, serving guides I have ever met. We did encounter a snow leopard only 30 meters away, and the only photograph recorded was by one of the clients Linus. The weather cooperated, and we were all struck by the tremendous fecundity of this area of the Tibetan Plateau.



Zaduo to Base Camp on the Upper Mekong River Sanjiangyuan Nature Reserve



Medong (Lancang Jiang) River along the route to our base camp

After the first days drive from Yushu, we left Dzado (Zaduo) in the early morning and travelled SW under a partly cloudy sky, encountering rugged mountains with verdant alpine slopes as we followed the Mekong upriver. Many low peaks jagged with metamorphosed rock, and scenic sections where we glassed many



Top: Mekong River, Bottom: Bahral sheep mixed young males and female .Below: wetlands w/black-necked cranes



sheep herds. Above the river we watched one group above us playing on the edge of a cliff bouncing and jumping rocks with amazing leaps and dexterity. Followed the herd for some time as they were a bit shy of us. We watched the herd of about 40 females and immature males move to the green slope, then over the ridge. Several young lambs continued to play on the grass above us, bounding around with amazing energy. Then across the river watched four musk deer, three females and one male.



We turned off a primitive gravel road and ascended through several passes as it began to snow before we finally came to the Mekong River after three hours of rough road. We passed through a narrow canyon and reached to our campsite for 6 days. The landscape and scenery



Below: upper Mekong River several hours by 4x4 to our base camp



here was stunning with sweeping grasslands flowing from islands of metamorphic peaks, some with snow that were absolutely dramatic. The Mekong flowed through this broad and remote valley, full and rust brown.

Our first day in a remote wilderness, with only a few yak nomad encampments across the river. We began walking east and I got comfortable with my pack filled with camera gear, but a bit



Sunrise from base camp on the upper Mekong River



Top: Base camp on the upper Mekong River; Bottom, Bahral sheep, primary prey of snow leopard



Chukar partridge, saker falcom, snow finch; Below Plateau pika, Tibetan marmot female and young



Above: Bharal (blue sheep), the major prey of snow leopard; Below: White-lipped deer



winded going uphill at this altitude (4300m or 14,100ft). In warm morning sunlight our small group crossed a stream, then ascended the grass slope 300 meters below almost a hundred blue sheep grazing above. Large lammergeier (bearded vulture) and griffon vultures circling

near us with some birds on the ground, a sign of a kill. We spotted the fresh remains of a blue sheep skeleton made by a snow leopard only a day old, and a half km from us; so close to camp. Three foxes came onto the kill and chased off the birds to scavenge any meat and bones left.

We spent all morning on a grass ridge above at the base of limestone iron infiltrated metamorphic rock outcroppings with scattered caves. Time was spent glassing for the snow leopard that had made the previous days kill. They are well camouflaged and very difficult to see, at times resting in caves. The view above the ridge revealed a grandeur of rugged mountains all around us, some covered with small glaciers. There were herds of blue sheep all around us, some numbering up to 75 on the other side of the ridge. With excellent pasturage and adjacent rock faces to escape predators, its no wonder this area is so fecund in wildlife that includes large mammal ungulates that include Bahral sheep and deer.



Top: Ursus arctos, Tibetan brown bear, blue bear color phase that is suspected to be the Yeti

Descended the ridge by noon, ate lunch and ascended the ridge immediately above us. We had the scopes out by 2 pm where Tuga spotted a brown bear on the ridge we had just hiked from earlier in the morning. This bear was big, probably 200 kg (450 pounds) with a striking dark blue-black coat, a white-collar strip across its shoulder and back, and a face that was a light tan. There is greater diversity in brown bear in Tibet than North America, varying from the grizzly-like pelage to a blue-black coloration. I wasn't certain if it was the rarer blue bear pelage of the Tibetan grizzly. After crossing the steep meadow, the bear settled down and fell asleep on the grass at the base of a rock. Above the bear on the ridge was a herd of almost twenty white lipped-deer with one large stag overseeing the herd. They were aware of the bear, but not threatened.

We left the knoll and descended along the green alpine pastures, and walked to the west in the opposite direction for several km before we sat and glassed the mountains above us. There was barbed wire fencing for yaks put up by the nomads, meant to keep them close to their scattered permanent dwellings along the river. Within two hours a herd of 40 white-lipped deer

appear grazing towards us on the ridge, joining a herd of almost one hundred Bahral below them. Amazing to see such concentrations of large mammals. We were standing in the midst of a pika colony with one sentinel chirping at us as we scoped the ridges when Tuga spotted a lone wolf walking down by the river. At the same time, the bear we had seen at lunch woke up and began to move, then ambled off after 4 hours of a nap before heading towards the big herd of sheep.

The following morning, I witnessed a red /turquoise sunrise to the east as I emerged from my tent, thankful that good weather was with us and the sun will soon warm up the cold mountain air. Reached -4 C (28 F) last night. This morning we left



early under a beautiful cloudless sky and ascended a steep slope above our camp. Once at a saddle above I laid my heavy camera next to me and kneeled by Linus and Jamin to scope the

rocks above us. Within seconds below Linus spotted a snow leopard below us only 30 m (100 ft) away and yelled it out, causing the cat to get up and leave. I was stunned, and amazed with a five second view only 30 meters away, so close. I immediately caught it walking away from us below, then the beautiful cat stopped for a moment looking back and continued up a grass slope between two rock ledges, stopped one more time to look at us, then disappeared.

Right: Snow leopard leaving below us less than 30 meters from us. Linus Helm

Incredibly found it hard to believe I had seen one, as it was a fleeting moment observing the most elusive animal in the Tibetan plateau and Himalayas.

Spent the rest of the day glassing, and across the valley and observed three lammergeier on a rock across the narrow valley. There was a large group of males, large-horned sheep that were actually separated from the nearby mixed herd of sheep. Below we saw a large animal moving across the meadow where a brown bear appeared, and worked its way down to the stream to drink, its black/bluish fur rippling as it descended. It was so amazing to watch it drink, climb back up to the road, then back, then finally ascended the meadowed slope.

Scoping towards the river, our guide discovered a Tibetan wolf traversing a terrace, a female with her yearling pup trailing behind. They were looking for carrion or to catch an unwary pika or marmot for a meal. Amazing morning, and we were all grateful, knowing how fortunate we were to have seen the snow leopard.



As the sun set behind the mountains to the west, one final check with the scope revealed another Tibetan wolf by the river. Left by 630 pm and back to camp by 7 pm. An absolutely incredible day.

We spent an incredible 8 days in the camp, and explored the source of the Mekong river. I have not listed the mammals seen, but hopefully the description hit the main species. We additionally viewed a Pallas Cat.

Thanks to Himalayan Journeys and founder Jamin York for an amazing trip.

