

Qinghai self-driving mammal watching tour

July 6th – 12th, 2020, Qinghai, China.

This was an adventure tour, self-drove by 8 guys without a guide. I together with 3 schoolmates were on our graduation trip. The other 4 teammates are nature lovers who concentrated more on birds or plant before. None of us had been on this route before. Everything was new for us and we got 15 mammal species in 7 days.

Day 1. Xining 西宁 - Ha'ergai 哈尔盖 - Chaka 茶卡

We rent two cars from CAR Inc (神州租车 <https://www.zuche.com/>) in Xining. It was very convenient, at least for Chinese citizens. We only drove on paved roads, so ordinary cars were enough. Departure from Xining at 9:30.

Our first target was the Przewalski's gazelle. The site was 3 km east of Ha'ergai town. Form G315, there is the 526 Country Rd leading to Ha'ergai train station. Many Przewalski's gazelles was grazing on each side of the road.

Driving along the shore of Qinghai Lake, many plateau pikas can be saw on the pasture. There are Chinese mountain cats and Pallas's cats reported, but we don't know if they were easy to found so we did not take a night to try.

We arrive at Chaka town in late afternoon. The sunset was late, nearly 21:00. We went out for night drive on the road south of Chaka town and north of Chaka Salt Lake between 22:30-0:30. It was not very successful. We got dozens of woolly hares and one Mongolian five-toed jerboa. As there is no larger animal, I guess night walk may produce more jerboas than night drive.



Przewalski's gazelle



Mongolian five-toed jerboa

Day 2. Chaka - Golmud 格尔木

We got up late today for enough sleep. A long drive for 480 km. Arrive at Golmud city and go to bed early preparing for the important next day.

Day 3. Golmud - Suonan Dajie Protection Station 索南达杰保护站 - Yeniugou 野牛沟

Departure from Golmud city at 5:30 and drove south along G109. The road has only two lanes but is busy with big trucks. At 8:30 we passed the Kunlun Pass, and entered Hoh Xil (可可西里, also spelled as Kekexili) National Nature Reserve, now part of Sanjiangyuan National Park.

A herd of kiangs was seen on the hill not far south of Kunlun Pass. Then, dozens of Tibetan gazelles (both males and females) and Tibetan antelopes (only males in this season) appeared on each side of the road from time to time. Sometimes parking may be dangerous as the road is narrow and big trucks rush. We passed Budongquan, and turned back at Suonan Dajie Protection Station. At 11:00, before we got to Budongquan again, we saw a solitary wild yak lying 300 m by the road.

One guy tried walking closer to the wild yak. When there was about 150 m, the yak stood up, walked a few steps away, and turned back watching the guy. Although the yak did not show aggressive behavior so far, we knew we should not get any closer.



Tibetan antelopes



Wild yak

In the afternoon, we drove back north, and went to Yeniugou (means wild yak valley). It is approximately 110 km south of Golmud city, and there is a paved road 110 km deep into the valley. You can find the entrance by searching Kunlun Culture Tourism Area (昆仑文化旅游景区) on Google Map, and there was a huge blue glass building and a grand Taoist temple easy to be seen. The valley was free for entrance, at least till now, and only a few tourists here. Some herdsmen with flocks of sheep, cattle and horses, but no mobile phone signal inside the valley.

We entered the valley at 17:00. Some bharal were on the hill not far from the entrance. Many plateau pikas, Himalayan marmots, woolly hares and Tibetan gazelles. Tibetan foxes and kiangs were also common. Wild yaks were very far on the mountains and must search hard.

At 20:00, 70 km in the valley, we suddenly saw a lynx stuck out its head from a trench very near the road. Watching each other for one or two minutes, the lynx hide itself into the trench. We got out the car, searched along the trench and found it had not gone far.

Happy with the lynx, we drove further. About 10 minutes later, one guy noticed a sheep skull, and

decided to check it. Most of us did not care as it obviously belonged to a domestic sheep. When that guy was out the car, others looked around. Suddenly 2 or 3 of us shouted out together: "Bears!" The guy out the car ran back in panic. Don't worry, actually the bears were 400 m away. A mother Tibetan blue bear with a subadult, walking and digging pikas on the meadow. They did not notice, or just did not care about us at all. We excitedly watched them for a while.

What a great day! Lynx and bear in 10 minutes! Soon, there was the sunset. I promise it is one of the most beautiful sights I've ever seen. In Chinese culture, Kunlun Mountains is a fairyland, now I understand why. All of us were fascinated by the beautiful scenery, and relaxed your vigilance. Then, one of our cars rear-ended the other. Fortunately, no one get injured and the cars were not seriously damaged. While the accident happened and we check the cars, a Tibetan gazelle looked at us in surprise all the way.



Eurasian lynx



Tibetan blue bear



Sunset in Yeniugou

We had to end the tour today, drove out of the valley and reported to the traffic police and CAR Inc.

When we drove out, it was all dark. Tibetan foxes and some rodents crossed the road, but we all worried about the accident and did not stop to see. We also have spotlights, but we did not use it either. We should have.

Day 4. A day off in Golmud.

Arrived at our hotel in Golmud at 1:00 midnight. So, if the accident did not happen, how late will the tour end? We would have this day off to take a rest any way.

The traffic police and CAR Inc all said we can continue our tour. The cars were full insured, and CAR Inc will be in charge of the repairment and insurance matters after we return the cars.

Day 5. Golmud - Yeniugou - Golmud.

Today we went to Yeniugou again, and the bharal were still there. We drove to the end of the 110 km road, Lake Heihai. Light rain. We encountered many plateau pikas, Himalayan marmots, woolly hares, Tibetan foxes, Tibetan gazelles and kiangs again. At about 100 km, we saw more than 200 wild yaks grazing on the mountain.



Bharal



Kiang



Tibetan fox



Tibetan gazelle



Wild yaks on the mountain of Yeniugou

Day 6 Golmud - Balong 巴隆 - Xiangride 香日德

We drove back east from Golmud along G109. This area is semi-desert, habitat for goitered gazelles. When came from the east we used G6. G109 and G6 run side by side, while G6 is an Expy and we cannot stop on the road to search animals. 30 km west of Balong country, we find a small herd of goitered gazelles south of the two road. There are wildlife passages under G6, but the animals have to cross G109 at the risk of road kill. We did sadly see some remains.

We took a rest in the evening at Xiangride town. From 22:00 to 1:00 we went back to a road east of Balong country, which was in good condition but nearly no vehicles for night drive. This road through semi-desert produced only marmots and hares at the daytime. At night, we found bharal, goitered gazelles and some good view of northern three-toed jerboas.



Goitered gazelle



Northern three-toed jerboa

Day 7 Xiangride - Xining

Drove back to Xining. End of the tour.

Mammal list

	Chinese name	English name	Scientific name
1	喜马拉雅旱獭	Himalayan marmot	<i>Marmota himalayana</i>
2	蒙古五趾跳鼠	Mongolian five-toed jerboa	<i>Allactaga sibirica</i>
3	三趾跳鼠	northern three-toed jerboa	<i>Dipus sagitta</i>
4	高原鼠兔	plateau pika	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>
5	高原兔	woolly hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>
6	猞猁	Eurasian lynx	<i>Lynx lynx</i>
7	藏狐	Tibetan fox	<i>Vulpes ferrilata</i>
8	西藏棕熊	Tibetan blue bear	<i>Ursus arctos pruinosus</i>
9	藏野驴	kiang	<i>Equus kiang</i>
10	鹅喉羚	goitered gazelle	<i>Gazella subgutturosa</i>
11	藏原羚	Tibetan gazelle	<i>Procapra picticaudata</i>
12	普氏原羚	Przewalski's gazelle	<i>Procapra przewalskii</i>
13	野牦牛	wild yak	<i>Bos mutus</i>
14	藏羚	Tibetan antelope	<i>Pantholops hodgsonii</i>
15	岩羊	bharal	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>

We thought this tour has already be successful for the 8 of us novices. The small accident warned us to be careful at any time. Great thanks to Mammal Watching Forum, as many helpful information learned here.

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