

Pakistan November 2011

I had always dreamt to see Markhors. I knew that the easiest places to see them were in Pakistan: Chitral Gol national park and Tushi game reserve. There was even a trip report in Travelling birder of somebody who went to Chitral by public transport. But the security is very poor now. There is also a national park in eastern Turkmenistan, but to get the visa is a nightmare and you must book everything with a local tour operator and I don't know if you have a chance to see any Markhor. They are also in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tadjikistan and Indian Cachemire, all places difficult or impossible to reach for security reasons. So when I saw Jon Hall's trip report I was decided to try.

In August 2012 as I had finished to prepare all my next winter trips I contacted Hindu Kush Trails, the company used by Jon Hall. I got fast information from the manager, Maqsood ul Mulk. He told me that it was possible to see Markhor at any time of the year, but November being the best time to see Markhors males fighting. First I didn't want to go in November 2011 because I had only 10 days free between a trip to Africa and another to Chile. But as the political situation is regularly going worst in Pakistan I booked the trip and paid everything. It was not cheap, but I had no choice: it is now unconceivable and would be crazy to travel by public transport in Pakistan.

Two days before leaving home, Maqsood sent me an email in which he told me that now it was forbidden for foreigners to travel by car from Islamabad to Chitral, but surprisingly the way back was still possible. I was quite afraid to go to Pakistan for nothing.

I left France on the 1st of November, arriving the day after in Islamabad. The weather was nice, even too warm. At the airport a guy from Hindu Kush was waiting for me. He offered me to fly immediately to Chitral. I accepted and checked in, but one hour later the flight was cancelled because of bad weather. So I picked up my luggage and was driven by the same guy of Hindu Kush to a hotel. I spent the day resting. In the evening Maqsood phoned me to tell me that because he had a friend in the army he had got a special permit to drive me to Chitral in case the flight was again cancelled tomorrow, what happened. So it was the same scenario, the guy was waiting outside the airport where we took a taxi, got another guide, younger and headed on the way to Dir. There was a lot of army along this road, including tanks. Far from Dir, we were stopped at a checkpoint and were not allowed to continue despite the permit Maqsood got. We waited 2h and a half, the young guide phoning numerous times. Then we went to the next town before the check-point, got a fax, went back to the check-point where this time we were allowed to continue.

In Dir, we entered the courtyard of a hotel. They closed the door and we changed of vehicle, using now a large Jeep. I got another guide (Chirah) and a new driver. But before leaving, the young guide told me that place was very dangerous, with plenty of terrorists in the mountains around. He told me not to stay too long. It was not encouraging. Nevertheless the drive was without problem. The tunnel was opened, which saved at least 2 hours. Maybe half an hour at an army check point I had to register and sign a book where I saw I was the second westerner to come this year. We arrived by night in the house of Maqsood where I was received by him. The place was maybe 30mn of Chitral. I slept there. The day after I was driven to Chitral by Chirah. I met there my new guide Babu and then was dropped in my hotel. There are quite a few hotels in Chitral. They were used by foreigners before the war in Afghanistan. They are all empty.

Babu explained me he was used to guide foreigners in the mountains. But he told me that he got his last group from Germany 9 years ago and that all of them were murdered. He told me not to worry, that too stay 2 or 3 days was not dangerous, but not to stay more. Nevertheless while speaking with him I got several bad news: one greek kidnapped and released after paying a ransom, one Spanish murdered, one Belgian who came the year before and escorted by 9 policemen. I had checked several times the Chitral news on the web and knew talibans come regularly in Chitral, kidnapping even local people like in last May.

But more interestingly, in the afternoon I was driven in the mountain to Chitral Gol by Babu, Chirah and 2 policemen. There is a warden. We immediately looked in the gully. The warden soon found with a scope a group of Markhors males. They were at least 8. I had not come for nothing! By the end of the afternoon we went back to Chitral.

The day after, in the morning, Babu offered me to visit the town and the fort. I was again escorted by him, Chirah and the 2 policemen. And in the afternoon we went altogether to Tushi game reserve. Tushi is easy to get to, reachable by a road at same level that Chitral. When we arrived there were several local people with guns to protect the Markhors, because it is here that rich hunters come to kill Markhors. It is also here that the BBC did a film on the Snow leopard. The Snow Leopard is or was used to come everyday in January and February, following the Markhors which come every afternoon to drink. I saw at least 40 Markhors, females, young and males immatures.

The day after I flew to Islamabad where I spent the day. After the night I flew back home via Koweit where when landing I saw a Ruppel's fox.

I must agree that everybody I met was very sympathetic. But I have been told several times, even by my guides: we don't like Americans. It was a dangerous experience and I felt there in a completely different world.

Dominique BRUGIERE