

I spent two weeks in Bhutan at the end of January 2010. Although the main purpose for the visit was mammal watching I have also visited some cultural and historical sites as heritage of the country is worth to explore as much as its natural wonders.

Bhutan is a fascinating country and still largely intact by mass tourism. That mainly because of high fees imposed by government on visitors. But the wind of change is coming. There are many voices from local businessman circles to liberalize attitude towards mass tourism and allow some backpacking as well. As Bhutan became more democratic in recent times there is quite probable that pressure of tour operators and hotel owners will finally reverse present time cautious policy. For better or worse.

Bhutan is often presented as something like environmentalist paradise filled with Buddhist and of Gross Happiness spirits. That image is basically true as low population has relatively low impact on forest cover and many large mammals still roam the country. Up o now Bhutanese government (in person of the former king) was enough wise to promote sustainable development, create large network of protected areas and ban commercial logging as well as hunting.

Unfortunately economy of the country was liberalized in recent times the smell of money is quite present around (especially in Thimpu) with new shopping malls being build, soap operas watched, tower blocks raised and more luxury cars driven. That of course creates more temptations to make quick money from natural resources and pressures on the environment. By the consequence deforestation become quite visible in some regions. Several hundred hectares of the forest are being destroyed for large hydroelectric projects (main source of country's income), agricultural development (population is growing) and construction of new roads.

Road building is to be blame for worst damages in Bhutanese environment. It is performed (usually by Indian contractors) in very primitive and particularly devastating manner. Forest are simply dynamited and bulldozed. Rocs and debris is pulled down the slopes destroying hundreds of hectares of vegetation as well as polluting rivers and streams. Indians present in the country are also accused for initiating poaching in some regions. Practice previously unknown by locals (who are Buddhist). Plastics bags and garbage is also quite visible around

and streams more and more polluted, as chemicals more available and waste water treatment inexistent.

Mammal watching is still something relatively unknown in Bhutan and not very popular both among tour operators and parks staff. Its different with bird watching, which is practiced both by expats and tourist. By the consequence hotel staff and guides are happy to advise about best places to observe birds but know virtually nothing about mammals. Observing them in Bhutan is quite challenging but not impossible.

With the help of tour operator I have chosen several locations for my trip covering few vegetation zones (high mountains, evergreen forest, tropical zone). Unfortunately most known Bhutanese national park was out of reach for me (Royal Manas). One need to be very well connected to Bhutanese government to get a permit to visit the area. Fortunately there is still no differences between what is inside and outside the park in Buthan, and same animals can be observed all around the country.

I started my trip in Thimpu by visiting well known and fenced group of Thakins in the outskirts of the town. That emblematic animal for Bhutan is quite difficult to spot in the wild. The only places for doing so are Tsharijathang and Tarina valleys in Lunana in Summer and Tashithang, Damjee and Gasa in winter.

Thimpu is also best place to purchase fantastic guide “Mammals of Buthan” written by Tashi Wangchuk and edited by department of Forestry, Ministry of Agriculture of the Royal Government of Buthan with the foreword of minister in person. If out of stock Vivek Menon’s Field Guide to Indian Mammals can be used as a reference.

Accompanied by guide, driver and cook (compulsory) I have started my trip on the main road to Trongsa via Wangdue Phodrang and Pele la pass. Although very cold Pele la is worth being explored by mammal watchers. Slopes, which are not (yet) logged, of neighboring mountains are covered with fantastic old grown pine forest. Many domestic yaks, some quite aggressive are wondering around as well as village dogs (unnagresive). Apart of them I had a chance to spot pair of stone martens (*Martes foina*) in early morning, in the small village close to the pass.

I have my chance of exploring more deeply Buthanese forest hundred and fifty kilometers past Trongsa village in the Black Mountain National Park (officially Jigme Singye Wangchuk National Park). My tour operator has organized a trek along so called “nabji trail” there. The trek was relatively easy, especially as our luggage was transported by wild looking (100% przewalski like) horses. The trail usually takes 4 days to complete but I was not in hurry and made it in 7 days, stopping in several locations to explore the forest and observe mammals.

Unfortunately new and very devastating road building project is undertaken in the park as well as electricity grid connecting villages. That in turn attracts more squatters which an obvious consequence of driving animals further away from the fringes of the park.

Local Monpa people, living along the trail proved to be very useful local guides. Officially they do not hunt, but their knowledge of the forest and animal habits proves something different. Thanks to their expertise I was able to see and photograph several barking deers (*Muntiacus muntjak*), sambars (*Cervus uicolor*), wild boars (*Sus scrofa*), golden langurs (*Trachypithecus pilatus*), himalayan yellow-throated marten (*Martes flavigula*) and malayan giant squirrel (*Ratufa bicolor*). We have also spotted traces of leopard (*Panthera pardus*) and seen several himalayan black bear (*Ursus thibetanus*) nests in the forest.

Tigers (*Panthera tigris*) are present in the Black Mountains National Park but rarely observed. Camera trapping undertaken by park authorities proved that the density of the species is relatively low if compared with some Indian reserves. From the other hand Bhutan provides undisturbed, relatively safe and continuous habitat for tigers and might play the role of potential reservoir of genes for animals migrating to India parks in Assam.

My main method for observing mammals was going with a local guide up and down the slopes and looking around. That was not easy as mountains in Bhutan are usually very steep and forest very dense. Worth exploring are animal tracks and stream beds often frequented by wild boars and deer. Matchete like knife is essential as foliage is very dense.

Another method for observing mammals which proved to be successful in Black Mountains was night watches on the rice fields combined with light spotting (nights were very dark). Barking deers, wild boars and sambars are often wandering on the rice paddies. Hen houses

attracts smaller predators like martens and civets but I did not see them. Palla's and orange bellied squirrels (*Callosciurus erythraeus*, *Dremomys lokriah*) were easy to spot in villages along the trail.

After visiting Black Mountains national Park we have continued our exploration around the village of Gonphu (past Zhemhang inside Royal Manas National Park). Scenery along the road was spectacular with luxuriant vegetation and fantastic wild rivers. I was lucky to see assamese macaques (*Macacca assamensis*) along the river bordering the park as well as group of gorals on the rocky slopes inside it (*Nemorhaedus goral*).

On the road back we have turned right from the Zhemhang road towards the village of Beli. The place was not known to my guide well but we succeeded by finding local men. He had shown me a forest pond which proved to be a good place to see many kaji pahsants and fighting barking deers.

On the road back I had a chance to see a band of assamese macaques in Trongsa dzong and grey langurs taking a sun bath in Paro valley.

Here is my list of mammals observed in Bhutan

English name	Latin name	Place of observation
Stone marten	<i>Martes foina</i>	Pele la pass
Golden langur	<i>Trachypithecus geei</i>	Black mountains national park along the road from Trongsa to Zhemhang (several groups), Jangbi and Kuda villages, New road past Zhemhang Royal Manas National Park, near Chenoli Gauchi bridge
Barking deer	<i>Muntiacus mutjak</i>	Black mountains national park near Jangbi, Kuda, Nabji villages.

		Beli village near Zhemghag
Sambar	<i>Cervus unicolor</i>	Black Mountains National Park near Jangbi and Kuda villages
Goral	<i>Naemorhedus goral</i>	Royal Manas National Park,
Yellow throated marten	<i>Martes flavigula</i>	Black Mountains National Park near Kuda
Pallas squirrel	<i>Callosciurus erythraeus</i>	Black Mountains National Park near Kuda village
Orange bellied squirrel	<i>Dremomys lokriah</i>	Black Mountains National Park, Nabdji village, Zemshang
Malayan giant squirrel	<i>Ratufa bicolor</i>	Black Mountains National Park between Kuda nad Nabdji
Wild Boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>	Black Mountains National Park near Kuda village
Assamese Macaque	<i>Macaca assamensis</i>	Royal Manas National Park, Thintibi village, Black Mountains National Park, near Zemshang, Trongsa Tsong, Paro valley

Total 11 species