

Mammal watching in Pakistan

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In October-November 2004 I spent three weeks in Pakistan and saw 74 species of mammals. I had nine small Sherman traps and one large one. Things have change a lot since that blissful time; some places have become too dangerous to visit, while others might be a bit more accessible. As my information about access, general conditions, etc. is so dated, I'll only talk about mammals here.

My travelogue written for non-biologists is available at <http://dinets.info/eibex.htm>. A brief overview of Pakistan's national parks is at <http://www.kjti.co.uk/nationalparks.htm>.

1. **Khirtar National Park** is a very hot place 80 km from **Karachi** (look for **fulvous leaf-nosed bats** flying around Karachi Airport lights and occasionally landing under the roof edges), close enough to be easily reached by motorbike (rentals are available at the airport; ask directions to Khar Centre). The park office (completely deserted on Fridays) is on a hill, and its lights attract lots of bats at night, including **greater horseshoe-nosed bats**, as well as **desert house bat**, **common**, **Savi's** and **least pipistrelles** (a few of the latter roost in the switchbox on the wall, while all three pips species and the house bats can be seen emerging from the roof at dusk). **Greater short-nosed fruit bats** roost in date palms nearby. The vicinity of the office is good for spotlighting: I got **golden jackals**, **Balochistan gerbils**, **Indian jirds**, **Indian hares** and one **Indian porcupine**. At dawn, **small Indian mongoose** came to collect leftover moths around the lights. **Striped palm squirrels** are common in palm groves.

The desert had **chinkara gazelles** and **blackbucks**; I've recently heard that the blackbucks are gone and chinkaras survive mostly in a huge fenced enclosure. There is a rocky ridge that you can climb to see the Sind subspecies of **wild goat** and some **urial sheep**.

A full list of recorded mammals (including such goodies as **caracal** and **Indian pangolin**) is available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/257940542_current_habitat_distribution_and_status_of_the_mammals_of_khirthar_protected_area_complex_sindh

2. **Sukkur** is a city where you can arrange a boat upstream from Sukkur Barrage to look for the Indus subspecies of **South Asian river dolphin**. The dolphins are difficult to find and very shy; you can try swimming up to them, but still can't get closer than 30-40 m.

3. **Ziarat**, a town on the road to Quetta, sits at the edge of an open juniper forest. This forest is the only known place where **Balochistan dormouse** occurs. It is considered rare, but I found it in about six hours of spotlighting by looking for fruiting trees. I also found one **roof rat** in a willow grove near the river (Pakistan is supposed to be part of its native range). A nice bonus was **Zarudny's shrew**, found under one of many juniper logs I flipped.

4. **Hazarganji-Chintal National Park** is very close to Quetta and easily accessible. In rocky canyons you have a good chance of seeing the so-called **Chintal goat**, a form clearly intermediate between wild and markhor goats (but it seems more similar to the latter to me). A

night of spotlighting in the rocks and the surrounding desert produced a **Rueppel's fox**, lots of **small five-toed jerboas**, a **Hotson's five-toed jerboa**, a **Blanford's jerboa**, a **Balochistan pygmy jerboa**, a **swarthy gerbil**, tons of **Libyan** and **Persian jirds**, one **sand-colored rat** and, most excitingly, a **Balochistan mouse-like hamster**. I set traps outside the park and got two **grey spiny mice**.

The full list of known mammals in the park is very long and lists some cool stuff such as **marbled polecat**, but no Rueppel's fox, no gerbils, and no jerboas other than the small five-toed, probably because the surrounding desert isn't included; it's available at:

http://www.cjpas.net/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/5/1/feb-11_06.pdf. It also lists **forest dormouse**, but I strongly suspect it's actually **Balochistan dormouse**.

5. Mohenjodaro, an excavated ancient city, is not worth going to just for mammals, but if you visit it anyway, look for **short-tailed bandicoot rats**, common in the ruins at dusk.

6. Lahore, a colorful city near the Indian border, has lots of abandoned Hindu temples. I briefly searched a couple of them for bats and found a small colony of **lesser mouse-tailed bats**. I am sure there are many other species there. **Striped palm squirrels** are common in city parks, while **Norway rats** inhabit garbage-clogged waterways. I trapped an **earth-colored mouse** in a brush-covered gulch on the western outskirts of the city.

7. Salt Range is a chain of arid hills crossed by the Lahore-Rawalpindi Highway. Just 30 km W of the highway is **Chumbi-Surla Wildlife Sanctuary**, where you can see the rare Salt Range subspecies of **chinkara gazelle**. I also saw a **Cape hare** there. **Punjab urial** is supposed to occur in this area.

8. The Karakoram Highway, by far the world's most beautiful road, leads to many interesting side valleys and ultimately into Chinese Pamir. The first side trip worth making is the notoriously conservative **Palas Valley**, where I got a **forest dormouse** (they are probably common in forests higher up, too, but were hibernating there during my visit). **Himalayan rat** is common here (look in places where rocky slopes rise above irrigated fields or other juicy vegetation).

Higher up you enter a world of vertical surfaces. From Raikot Bridge, a rather scary side road climbs 3,000 m to a Sunni village of Jhel (many parts of the road look like excellent **Himalayan rat** habitat). From Jhel, a long trail climbs along the side of Raikot Valley to a somewhat touristy (but completely deserted by October), densely forested terrace known as **Fairy Meadow** or **Paradise Meadow**, and then to **Nanga Parbat Base Camp**. This route has excellent mammals, and scenery to match (the view of moonlit Nanga Parbat on a winter night is certainly one of the best this planet has to offer). At Paradise Meadow there are a few tourist cabins; in winter months they are locked up and used by **Himalayan long-eared** and **Scully's tube-nosed bats**. Inaccessible caves in the cliff that separates the terrace from Raikot Glacier a few hundred meters below is where **woolly flying squirrels** den; they climb to the terrace every night to feed in coniferous trees, and then glide back to their caves in a breathtaking arch (when I saw them I became the first naturalist to observe this enigmatic species in the wild). Small **Kashmir flying squirrels** are more common in the forest, and can also be seen if there's full moon. There were

lots of **yellow-throated marten** tracks in the forest, but the only carnivore I saw was a **red fox**. Above the terrace is a steep slope where I briefly saw a fleeing **Kashmir musk deer**. This is also a good area to look for small rodents: I trapped a **burrowing vole** and **Himalayan field mouse** around the cabins, and a **silver mountain vole** near the tree line. I also spotted a **Royle's pika** in a boulder pile about 500 m past the tree line; I guess they are more common in summer.

The gorgeous, friendly Hunza Valley (you move from Sunni to mostly Ismaili lands by the time you reach it) is worth a stop; I saw a **Kashmir white-toothed shrew** there along the path to **Baltit Fort**.

Even higher up the Karkoram Highway there are spectacular, glacier-filled valleys accessible by short hikes; they are excellent for birding, but mammals seem to be sparse. I trapped a few **house mice** of South Asian *castaneus* subspecies near the village of **Passu**. The mountains of Afghanistan and Pakistan are where all four subspecies of house mouse occur, but they don't overlap and inhabit different natural habitats; I suspect that they spread into human-modified habitats from here and eventually colonized the rest of the world.

The part of the Highway before the Chinese border crosses the huge **Khunjerab National Park**. You might see a few **Siberian ibex** and **blue sheep** from the road, but it's better to do some hiking. **Khunjerab Pass** on the Chinese border is a good starting point; here you can see *tibetanus*-type **Cape hares**, **silver mountain voles**, and **large-eared pikas**. **Long-tailed marmots** are said to be very common in summer. I found some **snow leopard** tracks, and they led me to a huge herd of **Siberian ibex**, with a few **Marco Polo sheep**. The pass used to be the best place in the world to see these sheep, but they have all by disappeared by now (reportedly they are slightly easier to see on the Chinese side). Rocky side valleys in lower parts of the park are also worth exploring; I saw a vole there that I think was the rare and little-known **white-tailed mountain vole**.

A preliminary list of Khunjerab mammals is available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230629507_FIRST_REPORT_ON_THE_BIODIVERSITY_OF_KHUNJERAB_NATIONAL_PARK_PAKISTAN

9. Kalam is a town west of Karakoram Highway, one of the few places in the country where deodar forests are easily accessible. I trapped a few **Oriental house rats** there; apparently the forests are their natural habitat.

10. Chitral Gol National Park is said to be one of the best mammalwatching sites in the country. Unfortunately, when I got there the weather was dreadful. I managed to see the park's main attraction, the **markhor ibex**, and caught a **silver mountain vole** between boulders. On the way back to Chitral Town I saw a **grey dwarf hamster** in a roadside ditch. But I'm sure it's possible to see a lot more there.

11. Machiara National Park in Pakistani Kashmir is mostly known for one of the last remaining populations of Western tragopan, but it is said to have some nice mammals including the Ladakh subspecies of **urial sheep** and **Bengal cat**. It is difficult to access; the only mammals I saw there were **Himalayan serow** and **small Indian mongoose**.

Some information about the park's mammals is available at:

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/224858427_distribution_food_and_habitat_preferences_of_small_mammals_in_machiara_national_park_district_muzaffarabad_azad_kashmir_pakistan

12. Ayubia National Park around a former hill station called Murree is probably the most relaxing place in the country, with beautiful deciduous forests and a system of pleasant trails (excellent for birding). The park has **leopard**, **Asian black bear**, **rhesus macaque**, two species of **civets**, and many other mammals, but the only large mammals I saw were a pair of **yellow-throated martens** of the large, bright-colored Kashmir subspecies playing and sunbathing on a large boulder and a **common giant flying squirrel**. It proved to be the country's best place for small rodent trapping: ten traps set on the outskirts of Murree got three gorgeous **Murree voles**, five **Kashmir field mice**, one *castaneus*-type **house mouse**, and a juvenile **lesser bandicoot rat** that was kind enough to occupy my only large Sherman trap. I also found a small, very shy big-eared bat in a large hollow tree at night. These bats are now claimed to be a highly localized endemic species with no common name; I think **hill big-eared bat** would be appropriate since most known locations are hill stations.

13. Margalla Hills National Park on the outskirts of Islamabad is nice and warm in winter; its dry tropical forests are said to have **leopards** and **Indian pangolins**. It is probably the best place to see **grey goral** (there are said to be up to seventy); look at the base of large rocks. **Wild boar** and **rhesus macaque** are common and tame, and there are lots of **Indian porcupine** quills on the trails (these species are never hunted in Pakistan). There are also **striped palm squirrels**. Spotlighting should be really good, but I only got there an hour before sunrise, and saw just one **Indian gerbil**.