# Mammals of N Tibet, 3-16 Oct 2014:

An at-a-glance list of 26 species of mammals (+ bird highlights)

By Jesper Hornskov \*\*\*this draft 30 Oct 2014\*\*\* ALL RIGHTS RESERVED®

Please note that the following list is best considered a work in progress. It should not be quoted without consulting the author.

Based mostly on my own field notes, this brief write-up covers the mammals noted by J Appleton, I Green (Greentours), S Morgan, M Singfield, R Smith & myself during the 2014 Greentours ( www.greentours.co.uk ) visit to China's Qinghai province.

It was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Greentours mammalwatching trip in this area; the first was in October 2012. Our trip aimed to see as many of the unique mammals of the Tibetan highlands as we could.

The mammals, the birds (161 spp in total), the unbeatable scenery (at this time of the year in places still blanketed in wildflowers), an intriguing amalgam of local cultures, wonderful food, comfortable - from 'definitely OK' to 'surprisingly good' - accommodations & (not least) the companionship all came together to produce a trip the more memorable for the region - though in many ways an indisputable 'MUST' destination for anyone hooked on Palearctic and/or Asian mammals or birds - being so undervisited.

Our photographers worked diligently, making the most of the often exquisite light – their images will be uploaded as soon as possible; meanwhile please view images in this gallery, obtained in 2012:

http://www.greentours.co.uk/Gallery/Asia/Mammals-of-the-Roof-of-the-World/3/

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In the species list the concept "animal-days" is used - it is the zoological equivalent of man-hours, the day totals added up — it indicates relative abundance but does not consider the "problem" of lingering individuals or, important in a non-scientific context such as a mammal-watching holiday abroad, how satisfying the encounters were. 25 animal-days for e.g. Tibetan Gazelle could be one distant group, a mere blur in the midday heat haze, or one confiding animal lingering for 25 days, offering the observers point-blank views anytime in that period...

Initials in brackets after a few single-observer sightings does not imply that I have doubts as to the correctness of the ID.

# **Species list:**

Sequence and taxonomy follows "A Guide to the Mammals of China", Smith & Xie (ed.) 2008.

#### Himalayan Marmot Marmota himalayana

11 animal-days. Noted on five dates.

#### Przewalski's Steppe Vole Eolagurus przewalskii

35+ animal-days. Noted three dates – 10+ on 8<sup>th</sup> were busy doing home improvement (AND taking breaks to enjoy the warming sunlight!)...

#### Kam Dwarf Hamster Cricetulus kamensis

3-4 at c4,450m N of Maduo on 6<sup>th</sup>.

#### **Tibetan Dwarf Hamster** Cricetulus tibetanus

One on 6<sup>th</sup>.

\*\*\*^'someone really needs to do a review of the hamsters of the plateau – they are a mess and we could only guess in 'The Mammals of China' as to the best possible arrangement': A Smith in email to 2009 OBC Fundraiser participant P Los when tentatively confirming the ID of the small animal we're seeing regularly...

#### Gansu Pika Ochotona cansus

Six animal-days. Noted on on two dates - WOW! looks at one out in the sun next to two Przvalski's Rosefinches...

#### Black-lipped (= Plateau) Pika Ochotona curzoniae

Common in places, this cornerstone species was not systematically recorded.

## Glover's Pika Ochotona gloveri

Seven seen well & photographed on 9<sup>th</sup>.

#### Tsingling Pika Ochotona huangensis

Staking out the spot where the Oriental Bird Club Fundraiser trip had found the species in August 2014 finally paid off...

# Woolly Hare Lepus oiostolus

Ten animal-days. Noted on five dates.

# Pallas' Cat Felis manul

One on 6<sup>th</sup> allowed extended 'scope views on x60 magnification: TINGALING!

#### Wolf Canis lupus

11 animal-days. Noted on three dates – main event a memorable pack of seven on 12<sup>th</sup>: six joined by a seventh after moving uphill scraping & scent-marking – greeting ceremony seen: animals falling over eachother w/ tails wagging... finally moved off across snow covered hillside... wonderfully lit, evocative photos obtained by MS!

\*\*\*The above followed an equally interesting and satisfying encounter on the 2012 trip (during which we also saw a total of 11 wolves!): a long session with two individuals down on the flats, 'scoped quite close - 'one of them was seen trying to punch through a patch of frozen snow, then carried on tentatively while the other animal was lying down. All of a sudden that one was making off in a different direction carrying a Tibetan Fox (!), seemingly trying to take advantage of the lay of the land to get away and not share the meal with its companion... nice plan, but as they disappeared from view the more active individual was firmly on the trail of the meal-carrying one.'

#### **Tibetan Fox** Vulpes ferrilata

63 animal-days. Noted on seven dates.

\*\*\*The first we encountered – a day or two ahead of schedule, catching one or two of us underdressed and / or 'scope-less! - constituted a 'range extension' only as far as our own previous sightings go: mapped range incl W end of Tulai Nanshan, S of Yumen (Gansu), and extends as far W as the Tajikistan border mts, S of Kashgar (Xinjiang): Smith & Xie (2008).

#### Red Fox Vulpes vulpes

Six animal-days. Noted on five dates – several nice encounters, but the one in soft afternoon light hunting the edge of scrub on 8<sup>th</sup> made the strongest impression: 'in absolutely immaculate nick, w/ narrow rufous stripe along top half of tail'...

# **Asian Badger** *Meles leucurus*

One on 12<sup>th</sup> – a bit distant, but definitely worth watching!

# Kiang Equus kiang

581 animal-days. Noted on four dates... It was a real pleasure to watch these dignified 'donkeys' - in the absence of hunters they (and most other large mammals on the Plateau, even the mythical Chiru) are fairly confiding, and in a couple of cases it would have been possible to get good-to-decent photos even without the help of long lenses!

#### Siberian Roe Capreolus pygargus

One heard on 3<sup>rd</sup>.

#### Gansu Red Deer Cervus (elaphus) kansuensis

50 in mts W of Koko Nor – ONE very impressive alpha stag, and quite a few well antlered younger stags: once we got to our vantage point and were feasting our eyes on a rare concentration of these little-known animals (we could see the clouds of steam emitted with clearly audible bellows!) the climb to get there was forgotten...

- \*\*\*In N Tibet the respective ranges of *Cervus kansuensis* and *Cervus canadensis alashanicus* are unclear, as is their taxonomic status. The type locality for *kansuensis* is Lintan (= Xincheng: 34\* 42'N, 103\* 21'E), not far NE of where Schafer collected undoubted *macneilli*.
- \*\*\*vide Groves (2005), kansuensis is 'quite distinct, the winter pelage being especially different: macneilli stags are very light, creamy grey, while kansuensis stags are deep steely grey. The black on the croup [...] is much more conspicuous in kansuensis.'
- \*\*\*Subsequently (Groves & Grubb: *Ungulate Taxonomy* (2011)) it was felt, however, that *kansuensis* is probably NOT a valid taxon. There are specimens from S Koko Nor Range 37\*N 100\*E & from Tatung Shan 37\*15'N 100\*E, and there are sight records from Qilian Shan.

#### Macneil's Deer Cervus macneilli

Five – incl two well antlered, pretty much alpha stags – 'scoped S of Yushu on 9<sup>th</sup>.

- \*\*\*Groves (2005) concluded that two Shou taxa merit full species treatment *Cervus wallichii* & *Cervus macneilli*. They 'retain many features' 'that characterized the primitive basal stock of the entire red deer/wapiti/sika/rusa group'.
- \*\*\*macneilli is 'the pale red-grey deer of the eastern margins of the Tibetan plateau': Groves (2005).

#### White-lipped Deer Przewalskium albirostris

201 animal-days. Noted on two dates.

#### Goitred Gazelle Gazella subgutturosa

Six on 14<sup>th</sup> – nice view of one wandering back & forth unceasingly wagging its erect tail.

# Tibetan Gazelle Procapra picticaudata

1,187 animal-days. Noted on six dates – main event no fewer than 779 in a day along the remotest Roof of the World stretch of road!

# Przevalski's Gazelle Procapra przewalskii

A bachelor group of 17 males at fairly close range (great photos by MS!)...

\*\*\*The species has recently be 'downgraded' to 'merely' Endangered (following the discovery of additional herds in 2003) although the world population may be no more than 350-400 mature individuals. See <a href="http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/18230/0">http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/18230/0</a>

#### Wild Yak Bos grunniensis

189 animals on The Roof of the World - incl some impressive bulls 'just across the river'!

#### Argali Ovis ammon

62 animal-days. Noted on two dates – main event a herd of 36, incl 2-3 near-alpha rams!

\*\*\*Our first three permitted digiscoping as they grazed not far above the road without showing any sign of being alarmed; however, if they'd timed their move across the hillside into a steep gully even slightly differently we'd guite likely not have seen them at all!

#### Tibetan Antelope Panthalops hodgsonii

131 along the remotest Roof of the World stretch of road – we pottered closer without at all spooking the animals, getting back to the cars only at 6PM, by which time the weather had quite suddenly turned menacing (and soon we indeed found ourselves driving through a snow squall) after the loveliest light on both the antelopes and on the far-away snow peaks, revealed briefly in all their glory: enough to send shivers down the spine of even the most talented water-colourist...

# Blue Sheep Pseudois nayaur

463+ animal-days. Noted on six dates... Given how important a prey this species is to Snow Leopard (Schaller, 1998: pp204-5) we felt almost aggrieved that we failed to spot one – the closest we got to seeing one was, as far as we know, getting an undeniable whiff of cat pee along a cliff on 5<sup>th</sup>.

**VVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVVV** 

# **Bird highlights:**

<u>Note</u> that our success with mammals determined how much effort we put into searching for birds. Often there is no conflict between the two pursuits...

#### Severtzov's Hazel Grouse Tetrastes sewerzowi

Three N of Xining on 3<sup>rd</sup>.

# **Daurian Partridge** Perdix dauurica

Five flushed from a snowy slope at c3,850m on 15<sup>th</sup>.

#### **Tibetan Partridge** Perdix hodgsoniae

42+ bird-days. Noted on three dates.

#### White Eared Pheasant Crossoptilon crossoptilon

48+ bird-days. Noted S of Yushu on two dates – seeing a covey of 35, incl four two-thirds sized juveniles, was a real treat.

#### Bar-headed Goose Anser indicus

c500 bird-days. Noted on six dates.

#### Falcated Duck Anas falcata

One in flight at Koko Nor on 4<sup>th</sup>.

\*\*\*Zheng *et al.* (2005) listed the species for 'all [of China] except Gansu, Qinghai, Xinjiang & Xizang', and it appears to be genuinely scarce in Qinghai (JH pers obs)...

#### Goosander Mergus merganser

c75 bird-days. Noted on three dates – main event a flock of c70 staging at c4,800m on 8<sup>th</sup>.

#### Eurasian Bittern Botaurus stellaris P

Two at Koko Nor on 4<sup>th</sup> – seen well, and even heard booming a couple of times.

#### Lesser Kestrel Falco naumanni

Four on 16<sup>th</sup> – 'scope views of a male on a wire!

#### Saker Falco cherrug

97 bird-days! Noted on eight dates – main event 44 in a day on the high plateau!

\*\*\*For most of us a welcome opportunity to familiarize ourselves with a species which is declining globally: not many trips allow you to graduate to full Saker Expert status in two weeks!

#### **Lammergeier** Gypaetus barbatus

26-27 bird-days. Noted on nine dates - a top Dreambird, this emblematic species was not at all devalued by one superb encounter after another...

# Himalayan Griffon Gyps himalayensis

166+ bird-days. Noted on 12 dates.

#### Black Vulture Aegypius monachus

Ten bird-days. Noted on two dates – main event two doing synchronized flying directly overhead on 13<sup>th</sup>: we felt they must have touched, one above the other, though because of the angle we couldn't be sure...

#### **Upland Buzzard** Buteo hemilasius

360 bird-days. Noted on 11 dates – main event 183 along the way across the highest part of the plateau...

#### **Steppe Eagle** Aquila nipalensis

Ten bird-days. Noted on four dates – a 1<sup>st</sup> c-y bird 'against far snow-ridges' was a sight to remember.

#### Eastern Imperial Eagle Aquila heliacal

One [IG] on 10<sup>th</sup>.

# **Golden Eagle** Aquila chrysaetos

Singles on four dates... nice, but fewer than expected: in 2012 we logged eight bird-days, seeing this Holarctic species on six dates.

#### Black-necked Crane Grus nigricollis

63 bird-days. Noted on four dates, this hardy yet vulnerable (and 'Vulnerable': <a href="http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/143783/0">http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/143783/0</a> ) Tibetan Plateau endemic breeder was one of the most hoped-for species, and we were repeatedly treated to great views: TINGALING!

#### **Ibisbill** *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*

Six bird-days. Noted on three dates – things got off to a good start on 8<sup>th</sup> with one heard, then seen flying along, and finally 'scoped across the mighty Yangtze after it landed directly opposite where we'd stopped for scenery photos...

#### Great Black-headed Gull Larus ichthyaetus

Ten bird-days. Noted on three dates – one adult on 12<sup>th</sup> was mobbed by a juvenile Saker...

# Brown-headed Gull Larus brunnicephalus

88+ bird-days. Noted on seven dates.

# **Tibetan Sandgrouse** Syrrhaptes thibetana

Noted on two dates. One flying over, high, as we were concluding a field breakfast on 13<sup>th</sup> might have got away if it hadn't been for our sharp-eyed driver...

# Pallas' Sandgrouse Syrrhaptes paradoxus

c70 in desert W of Koko Nor on 16<sup>th</sup>.

\*\*\*For some of us, growing up carrying one of the field guides covering the Western Palearctic, Pallas' Sandgrouse was one of a handful of Ultimate Dreambirds, along with White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus*, White's Thrush *Zoothera aurea*, Mugimaki Flycatcher *Ficedula mugimaki* & Yellow-browed Bunting *Emberiza chrysophrys*: see one, and you'd be in Seventh Heaven; <u>find</u> one, and your street cred would be established forever.

#### **Eurasian Eagle-Owl** Bubo bubo

One in a wood on the edge of the Qaidam basin on 14<sup>th</sup>...

#### Little Owl Athene noctua

One flushed off half a vole – which RS obligingly put on his coat sleeve for photos (no unequivocal ID resulted from this; on the plus side, nor did blood stains…) – on 16<sup>th</sup>.

# Great Spotted Woodpecker Dendrocopos major

3-4 bird-days. Noted on two dates.

\*\*\*It is worth noting that ssp *beicki* [of Ningxia, Gansu & E Qinghai: Zheng *et al.* (2005)] is not recognized as a taxon in HBW Illustrated Checklist Vol 1, being lumped into ssp *stresemanni* [of E Xizang, W & S Yunnan, N Guizhou & Sichuan: Zheng *et al.* (2005)], but 'this latter may be split with *cabanisi* [of SW Liaoning, Hebei, Shandong, Henan, Shanxi, N Anhui & N Jiangsu: Zheng *et al.* (2005)] as Chinese Great Spotted Woodpecker': S Lowe pers com.

#### **Tibetan Grey Shrike** Lanius giganteus

Three bird-days. Noted on two dates.

# Eurasian Jay Garrulus glandarius

Three seen extremely well on 3<sup>rd</sup>.

\*\*\*vide Zheng et al. (2005) the very pretty ssp kansuensis is restricted to NW & SW Gansu and 'Qinghai', though the only Qinghai locality for which it was listed by Cheng (1987) was Zekog. Dickinson (2003) listed it also for NW Sichuan.

#### Henderson's Ground Jay Podoces hendersoni

Four on 14<sup>th</sup>.

\*\*\*This sought-after species frequently gives birdwatchers the dodge-and-run treatment, but then typically succumbs to curiosity to sit up allowing good views...

#### Hume's Groundpecker Pseudopodoces humilis

96 bird-days. Noted on 11 dates.

***Althou	gh most clo	sely re	lated to Paridae	(Dickinson	2003; B K	ing pers co	m.) please l	et us do	our bit
to avoid a	a newly cond	cocted	English name -	which the	risk of keyb	ooard distre	ss prevents	me typi	ng
here		-	- from slipping in	nto commor	n usage!			-	

#### White-browed Tit Parus superciliosus

Eight bird-days. Noted on four dates.

#### Stoliczka's (= White-browed) Tit-Warbler Leptopoecile sophiae

30 bird-days. Noted on seven dates.

#### **Long-billed Calandra Lark** *Melanocorypha maxima*

52 bird-days. Noted on five dates – main event a flock of 34 at Koko Nor on 4<sup>th</sup>, showing wonderfully well...

#### Elwes' Horned Lark Eremophila elwesi

Widespread – not systematically recorded.

# Tarim Hill Warbler Rhopophilus albosuperciliaris

Three very active and excitable birds allowed interrupted 'scope viewing in the Qaidam basin on 14<sup>th</sup>.

#### Gansu Leaf Warbler Phylloscopus kansuensis

No fewer than 24 birds N of Xining on 3<sup>rd</sup>.

\*\*\*This attractive warbler – a real gem-with-wings - is the key *Phylloscopus* to look for in this part of the world: it was only recently reaccepted as a valid species, and its winter quarters remain undiscovered...

#### Kozlov's Babax Babax koslowi

6+ bird-days. Noted on two dates, this restricted-range species proved obliging on 10<sup>th</sup>, becoming vocal & starting to move around pretty much as soon as the morning sun reached the frosted-over hillside we were keeping an eye on.

\*\*\*For birdwatchers one of the main 'pretexts' for visiting an sigh-inducingly pretty area on the remote Xizang border.

#### Giant Laughingthrush Garrulax maximus

6+ on 10<sup>th</sup>, alongside Kozlov's Babax...

\*\*\*This superb-looking but all-too-frequently hard to see species has an impressive range of calls, some subdued, some anything but, yet others direct or derived mimicry – duetting birds are often a striking component in the dawn chorus, and throughout the day groups travelling through the forest will mark their progress with occasional sessions of loud calling.

#### Bearded Tit Panurus biarmicus

Heard in two locations at Koko Nor on 4<sup>th</sup>.

# **Chinese Nuthatch** Sitta villosa

15 N of Xining on 3<sup>rd</sup> – outstanding views!

# Wallcreeper Tichodroma muraria

One headed S across a grassy valley on 9<sup>th</sup> after allowing brief-ish 'scope views.

\*\*\*'One of the most spectacular birds in the world, this species is aptly named 'rock flower' in Chinese': Harrap & Quinn (1996) – I'm not sure which Chinese dialect Harrap and/or Quinn is familiar with but both Cheng (1987) and Zheng *et al.* (2005) refer to *Tichodroma muraria* as '*Hongchi xuanbi que*', 'redwinged cliff-hanging bird'.

#### Kessler's Thrush Turdus kessleri

36+ bird-days. This emblematic species was noted on five dates.

## Guldenstadt's Redstart Phoenicurus erythrogastrus

160+ bird-days. Noted on eight dates.

#### White-rumped Snowfinch Onychostruthus taczanowskii

c145 bird-days. Seen on nine dates this was easily the most charismatic of the snowfinches encountered – the species 'dive-bombs' rivals, engages in strutting stand-offs, and lumbers along, all hunched up and true intentions hidden behind its highwayman's mask...

#### **Mongolian Trumpeter Finch** Bucanetes mongolicus

Two dropped in onto a sandy patch at Koko Nor: seen well, but only for ten seconds... then, gone for good – another magic migration moment had passed!

#### Przevalski's Rosefinch Urocynchramus pylzowi

9+ bird-days. Noted on two dates. TINGALING!

\*\*\*A not-to-be-taken-for-granted bird which has something to offer no matter what subspecies of birder you are: beauty, interesting behavior (notably its parachute type song-flight), odd song (as we confirmed: not always delivered from atop a bush!), as well as taxonomic interest (it has for some years now been known to represent a monotypic family).

#### Eastern Great Rosefinch Carpodacus rubicilloides

35+ bird-days. Noted on five dates.

# White-winged Grosbeak Mycerobas carniceps

22 bird-days. This somewhat erratic species was noted on three dates.

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