

# Mammals in NE Tibet, 14 June – 4 July 2015

*An at-a-glance list of 23 species of mammals & bird highlights.*

By Jesper Hornskov \*\*\**this draft 10 Aug 2015*\*\*\* 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 & birds noted by R Ake, P Colston, N Dymond, R Fray, P Harvey, D Johnson, S Piotrowski, J Spahr, P Thompson, N Williams & myself in NE Tibet, China's Qinghai province, during 21 days in the field.

Our trip aimed to see as many of the unique birds of the Tibetan highlands as we could, but searching for birds typically allows one to pay close attention to mammals as well, and it is hopefully of interest what we saw at a time of the year when few dedicated mammal-watchers visit this mysterious land. We saw many of the specialities extremely well.

We recorded 225 spp of birds in addition to 23 spp of mammals – some are listed after the mammals.

A few additional species of birds were noted at Beijing before and after the main trip - nothing unusual but enjoyable nonetheless (during migration we've seen as many as 40+ spp in the grounds of our hotel in an hour and a half pre-breakfast...).

Our photographers worked diligently, making the most of the often exquisite light – I hope their images will be made available as soon as possible...

The mammals, the birds, the unbeatable scenery (in many places enhanced by a variety of 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 birds or mammals - being so under-visited.

A huge 'THANK YOU!' to Nick for getting things off the ground...

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Enquiries concerning future **Oriental Bird Club Fundraisers** - to NE Tibet, by and large following the itinerary used on the trip dealt with here, or Yunnan (our trips to China's in every way most diverse province have been very popular) - can be made to Michael Edgecombe of the OBC at [mail\(at\)orientalbirdclub.org](mailto:mail(at)orientalbirdclub.org) or directly to this author.

In the species list the concept "bird-days" is used - it is the avian equivalent of man-hours, the day totals added up – it indicates relative abundance but does not consider the “problem” of lingering birds or, far from unimportant in a non-scientific context such as a birding holiday abroad, how satisfying the encounters were. 25 bird-days for e.g. Spoon-billed Sandpiper could be one distant flock of migrating birds, gone in a flash, or one bird lingering for 25 days, offering the observers point-blank views anytime in that period...

The sequence of the bird list follows *The Howard and Moore Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World – 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (Dickinson 2003), in my opinion by still the most useful one-volume checklist.

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

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## **Species list:**

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

### **Rhesus Macaque** *Macaca mulatta*

One near Nangqian on 25<sup>th</sup>.

\*\*\**vide* G Broddez probably these 'Rhesus' Macaques are better regarded as a different species...

### **Himalayan Marmot** *Marmota himalayana*

128+ animal-days. Noted on 14 dates.

### **Przewalski's Steppe Vole** *Eolagurus przewalskii*

15+ showing well at their colony on 20<sup>th</sup>.

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

Three at c4,850m on 20<sup>th</sup>.

### **Gansu Pika** *Ochotona cansus*

Seven animal-days. Noted on two dates.

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

Widespread – not systematically recorded.

### \*\*\*?**Daurian Pika** *Ochotona dauurica*

A pika seen on 17<sup>th</sup> [ND, JH] may have been this species...

### **Glover's Pika** *Ochotona gloveri*

Ten animal-days. Noted on three dates.

### **Woolly Hare** *Lepus oiostolus*

46+ animal-days. Noted on 13 dates.

### **Tolai Hare** *Lepus tolai*

One [ND] near Xining on 16<sup>th</sup>.

### **Wolf** *Canis lupus*

Four seen – noted on two dates. Main event one taking its time to pass as close as 150m, offering good photo ops & prolonged 'scope views... while we were still having breakfast!

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

31 animal-days. Noted on five dates – one highlight was seeing an adult w/ two playful cubs on 28<sup>th</sup>.

### **Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes*

12 animal-days. Noted on four dates.

\*\*\*In addition, an unidentified fox was seen on 28<sup>th</sup> ...

### \*\*\***Asian Badger** *Meles leucurus*

One dead on the road along Koko Nor on 17<sup>th</sup>.

\*\*\*The Asian species is clearly NOT distinguished from its Eurasian counterpart by its better traffic awareness...

### **Kiang** *Equus kiang*

445 animal-days. Noted on four dates – main event 253 along the way across the Roof of the World: it was a real pleasure to watch these dignified ‘donkeys’ - in the absence of hunters they (and other large mammals on the Plateau) are fairly confiding, and in a couple of cases we were able to get good-to-decent photos even without the help of long lenses!

### **Alpine Musk Deer** *Moshus chrysogaster*

One photographed [RF] at c4,300m on 24th.

### **Siberian Roe** *Capreolus pygargus*

Four N of Xining on 15<sup>th</sup> – two full-antlered males ‘scoped at fairly close range & two heard-onlies.

### **MacNeill’s (Red) Deer** *Cervus macneilli*

131 animal-days. Noted on two dates S of Yushu – main event scattered groups totaling 130 (128 adults & two youngsters; all but four counted from the same spot!).

\*\*\*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/ruosa group’.

\*\*\**macneilli* is ‘the pale red-grey deer of the eastern margins of the Tibetan plateau’: Groves (2005).

### **Gansu Red Deer** *Cervus kansuensis*

Ten hinds W of Koko Nor on 1<sup>st</sup> – great ‘scope views of several as they made their way across a hillside and up to the ridge...

\*\*\*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.

### **White-lipped Deer** *Przewalskium albirostris*

27+ animal-days. Noted on three dates – great ‘scope views!

\*\*\*‘The species previously ranged across much of the eastern Tibetan Plateau, [but now] occurs in fragmented populations in northwestern and southwestern Gansu, eastern and central, and southern Qinghai, eastern [Xizang], western Sichuan, and northwest Yunnan’.

‘There is no [official] global population estimate’, [though] ‘Wang (1998) estimated a total population of some 7,000’: see <http://www.iucnredlist.org/details/4256/0>

### **Goitred Gazelle** *Gazella subgutturosa*

Seven on 30<sup>th</sup> – enjoyable ‘scope views of three males w/ one female...

### **Tibetan Gazelle** *Procapra picticaudata*

375 animal-days. Noted on seven dates - main event 178 in a day along the remotest Roof of the World stretch of road!

\*\*\*In the absence of human hunters these nimble creatures are fairly confiding (if still jumpily high-strung, no doubt on account of the healthy population of wolves roaming the highlands... in August 2005 we were even privileged to watch four particularly mean-looking wolves undertake a successful chase, killing and ripping apart their victim).



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

**Barbary Falcon** *Falco pelegrinoides*

An adult male in the Qaidam basin on 30<sup>th</sup>.

\*\*\*Zheng *et al.* (2011) listed the species only for 'N Ningxia & Qinghai'.

**Lammergeier** *Gypaetus barbatus*

25 bird-days. Noted on ten dates - one adult 'scoped on its nest, and another seen repeatedly bone-dropping, then corkscrewing down to the target area... WOW! encounters even for our well travelled group.

**Upland Buzzard** *Buteo hemilasius*

128 bird-days. Noted on 13 dates - main event 41 along the remotest Roof of the World stretch of road.

**Golden Eagle** *Aquila chrysaetos*

19-21 bird-days. This classic Holarctic species was on eight dates.

**Black-necked Crane** *Grus nigricollis*

c63 bird-days. Noted on five dates - we were repeatedly treated to great views: TINGALING!

\*\*\*Widespread overgrazing - of hills and wetlands alike - is bound to spell trouble for this emblematic species... Nonetheless it was heartening to see a pair accompanying their two tiny chicks on our last day on the Plateau.

**Ibisbill** *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*

12 bird-days. Noted on five dates.

\*\*\*As anyone contemplating a quick twitch for this charismatic species had better bear in mind, Ibisbills seen in Tibet feeding on a flowered-over meadow next to a rushing, icy stream – with Red-billed Choughs cawing, Blue Hill Pigeons cooing, Elliot's Laughingthrushes cheerfully whistling & domestic yaks snorting thoughtfully in the background - are more REAL than the sad one or two which still desperately attempt to cling on in competition with sickly-looking domestic ducks along the last stretches of barely acceptable water close to Beijing!

**Tibetan Sandgrouse** *Syrrhaptes thibetana*

22 (a reconfiguring flock of 21 plus a singleton) at a new site near Golmud on 28<sup>th</sup> - TINGALING!

\*\*\*An outstanding encounter with an endemic which is 'on the Hardest Bird in the World shortlist along with Emperor Penguin' - prolonged views at <100m in great light, and we even witnessed a copulation!

Nonetheless we all agreed that so spectacularly grand was the landscape that it would have been no loss at all to return the following morning, as we would definitely have done in the event no sandgrouse had obliged 1<sup>st</sup> time around!

**Pallas' Sandgrouse** *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*

Ten W of Koko Nor on 2<sup>nd</sup>. Repeated fly-bys as a prelude to 'scope views of a pair with two chicks: our team photographers made a point of keeping a respectful distance but obtained good shots nonetheless.

\*\*\*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; find one, and your street cred would be established forever.

\*\*\*Despite the species' nomadic inclinations it is usually reliable at our favoured site...

**Snow Pigeon** *Columba leuconota*

21 bird-days. Noted S of Yushu on four dates.

\*\*\*One of those 'has-to-be-seen-to-be-believed' species...seeing these strikingly patterned birds effortlessly sail along the towering rock faces is a visual treat, the simple beauty of 'em enhancing the grandeur of the setting.

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

Singles on two dates – one at c4,300m on 20<sup>th</sup> proved difficult to refind although we had a fair idea of where it had settled after being accidentally flushed...

**Little Owl** *Athene noctua*

Singles on three dates – one on 20<sup>th</sup> bobbed & called at the Eagle Owl but we got an incorrect fix on where its attention was focus'd...

**Black Woodpecker** *Dryocopus martius*

11 bird-days. Noted on no fewer than five dates – great 'scope views for everyone!

**Tibetan Grey Shrike** *Lanius giganteus*

Three bird-days - nice views on two dates.

\*\*\*A low-density species, wide-ranging and often inconspicuous even when present (and thus easily missed), we were fortunate to see it so well!

**Henderson's Ground Jay** *Podoces hendersoni*

17 bird-days. Noted on two dates, this was - understandably! - one of the most hoped-for species...

**Hume's Groundpecker** *Pseudopodoces humilis*

139 bird-days. This hugely entertaining endemic was noted on no fewer than 13 dates.

**Red-rumped Swallow** *Cecropis daurica*

c42 bird-days. Noted S of Yushu on five dates - ssp *gephrya* is an even better-looking bird than the *japonica* standard-issue Red-rumpeds we saw @ the grounds of our Beijing hotel...

**Stoliczka's Tit-Warbler** *Leptopoecile sophiae*

18 bird-days. Noted on seven dates – we got repeated views & point-blank range photo ops...

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

Eight bird-days. This charismatic endemic was noted on four dates.

**Giant Laughingthrush** *Garrulax maximus*

38+ bird-days. Noted S of Yushu on four dates - GREAT views!

\*\*\*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 at this time of the year pairs travelling through the forest will mark their progress with occasional sessions of loud calling.

**Przevalski's Nuthatch** *Sitta przewalskii*

Five bird-days. Noted N of Xining on two dates – heard-onlies except for one seen flycatching on 15<sup>th</sup>.

\*\*\*This is may be the only nuthatch to regularly undertake flycatching sallies...

**Wallcreeper** *Tichodroma muraria*

Five bird-days. Noted on two dates.

\*\*\*'One of the most spectacular birds in the world, this [monotypic family] species is aptly named 'rock flower' in Chinese': Harrap & Quinn (1996) – I'm not sure which Chinese dialect Harrap and/or Quinn is

