

Mammals of NE Tibet, 28 July – 16 Aug 2014:

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

By Jesper Hornskov ****this draft 23 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 Clark, A Daws, M Hoit, J Jackson, S Lowe, H & P Schiermacker-Hansen, W Sterling, T Sykes, A Whitehouse & myself during a 2014 Oriental Bird Club Fundraiser visit to China's Qinghai province.

It was the 9th Oriental Bird Club Fundraiser trip in this area (another three have targeted desperately neglected Yunnan province, China's biologically richest). This year we followed a slightly adjusted itinerary: as in the past we had allowed a good margin for altitude acclimatization & plenty of time to ensure that all specialities could be properly searched for.

The mammals, the birds, the unbeatable scenery (at this time of the year in many places absolutely 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 - being so under-visited.

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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 "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.

Glover's Pika *Ochotona gloveri*

21+ animal-days. Noted on four dates.

Tsing-Ling Pika *Ochotona huangensis*

Noted in two different spots (both different from where one was seen briefly on the June/July OBC Fundraiser) on 29th & 31st.

***Proved every bit as photogenic as its neighbour!

Woolly Hare *Lepus oiostolus*

37+ animal-days. Noted on eight dates.

Tolai Hare *Lepus tolai*

Four near Xining on 28th.

***?**Gansu Mole** *Scapanulus oweni*

Mole hills noted on several dates were thought to be the work of this species.

Pallas' Cat *Felis manul*

Three animal-days. An adult w/ one kitten in view intermittently over a period of four hours on 1st, and one photographed close to the road on 9th.

Wolf *Canis lupus*

Prolonged views of a pregnant female on 10th.

Tibetan Fox *Vulpes ferrilata*

31 animal-days. Noted on six dates.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

Six animal-days. Noted on four dates – one on 28th caught a Tolai Hare that we were watching!

Mountain Weasel *Mustela altaica*

Four animal-days – three on 2nd, and one 'seen well; on size probably a juvenile' on 5th.

Kiang *Equus kiang*

272 animal-days. Noted on four dates. 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 very long lenses!

Alpine Musk Deer *Moshus chrysogaster*

Great views of one on 7th!

Siberian Roe *Capreolus pygargus*

4+ animal-days. Singles heard N of Xining on both 29+30th, and 2-3 males seen very well on 9th: 'a strikingly different animal from its W Palearctic counterpart – almost orangey in hue, and much less dainty'...

***A deer sp also on 9th could have been one of the two Roe Deer, but was more likely a third one, or possibly an Alpine Musk Deer...

MacNeill's (Red) Deer *Cervus macneilli*

Seven animal days. A female w/ one small, still-marbled juv on 4th & five [MH] in roughly the same place on 8th.

***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 (elaphus) kansuensis*

29 (incl 25 seen only by MH!) on 13th.

***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.

Goitred Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa*

20+ animal-days. Noted on two dates.

Tibetan Gazelle *Procapra picticaudata*

341 animal-days. Noted on eight dates.

Przewalski's Gazelle *Procapra przewalskii*

64+ animal-days. Noted on two dates – my 'we might see some birds on the way' swayed those reluctant to undertake a minor trek across a broad valley to try and get close enough to these rare creatures to see the fish hook twist to the tip of the male's horns...

***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 <http://www.iucnredlist.org/apps/redlist/details/18230/0>

Tibetan Antelope *Panthalops hodgsonii*

135 animals, incl at least 60 males!

***Noted only along the remotest Roof of the World stretch of road.

Blue Sheep *Pseudois nayaur*

502+ 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 5th.

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Bird highlights:

Verreaux's Monal Partridge *Tetraophasis obscurus*

3+ showed well if only rather briefly N of Xining on 30th - too often a heard-only species, but this time diligence was rewarded...

Szechenyi's Monal Partridge *Tetraophasis szechenyi*

13 near Nangqian on 7th – four allowed prolonged 'scoped viewing.

Tibetan Snowcock *Tetraogallus tibetanus*

Four confiding birds relatively low on 5th – we were able to follow the contour to get closer, getting more or less frame-filling 'scope views from across a gully.

White Eared Pheasant *Crossoptilon crossoptilon*

48+ bird-days. Noted on two dates – at one point we had 42 adults (and one ½-sized chick!) in view simultaneously!

Blue Eared Pheasant *Crossoptilon auritum*

A group of 11 found within half an hour of starting to look N of Xining on 29th – great views, so: 'EASY'!? Well, actually, that we then neither saw nor heard more during the rest of our stay at this site suggests it was just as well we'd allowed quite a bit of time – having had such good views everyone understood just how bad it would have been to have missed this species!

Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus*

c365 bird-days. Noted on three dates.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*

Two adults at Koko Nor on 15th.

Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*

One flew in and landed directly in front of us – as if to ensure we didn't miss it: there are perhaps no more than half a dozen previous records from Tibet - at Koko Nor on 15th.

Saker *Falco cherrug*

27 bird-days. Noted on six dates.

***A juvenile on 11th was seen rather spectacularly buzzing a Woolly Hare – 'must have been just fooling around' was one reaction, but 'numbers of lagomorphs and Ochotona taken': BWP vol II p347.

Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*

34 bird-days. Noted on no fewer than seven dates - a top Dreambird, this emblematic species was not at all devalued by one superb encounter after another... 12 in the course of an afternoon's hike, incl an adult doing repeated bone-drops within a few hundred meters of where we had taken up position!

Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis*

c205 bird-days. Noted on 17 dates.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

18 bird-days. Noted on no fewer than 11 dates this classy Holarctic species granted us some memorable encounters: WOW!

Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis*

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

Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*

Nine bird-days. Noted on two 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 (as our 1st five were) – 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!

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrid*

Two adults showed well at Koko Nor on 15th.

Tibetan Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes thibetana*

It turned out that unlike on the earlier trip this year, taking up position next to the cars, drinking coffee, didn't quite do the trick, but pretty much as soon as we started into the habitat we came upon a pair... the birds seemed reluctant to increase the distance between us and them, and sure enough: once we retreated they approached to collect their single, hard-to-spot chick.

***A very satisfying encounter with an endemic which is 'on the Hardest Bird in the World shortlist along with Emperor Penguin' – nonetheless we all agreed that so spectacularly grand was the landscape that it would have been no loss at all to have 'had' to return the following morning in the event none had been found 1st time around!

Pallas' Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*

47+ on 14th: long 'scope views after a flock flew in and landed not too far away... MAGIC!

Snow Pigeon *Columba leuconota*

13 bird-days. Noted S of Yushu on three dates.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*

12 (!) bird-days. Noted on no fewer than five dates.

Tibetan Grey Shrike *Lanius (s.) giganteus*

Six bird-days. Noted on five dates – we'd hoped to confirm breeding at a site where two birds had been around since May (JH pers. obs.) but nothing doing: no fledgings were in evidence, and even the adults left us wishing for better views. Which we all got later!

Tibetan Magpie *Pica (pica) bottanensis*

72+ bird-days. Noted on six dates.

***The two *Pica* taxa occupy mutually exclusive ranges and display a number of vocal, morphological & habitat differences.

Long-billed Calandra Lark *Melanocorypha maxima*

31 bird-days. Noted on six dates – main event 11 on 14th, including both adults & juveniles posing: click, click, click!

Tarim Hill Warbler *Rhopophilus albosuperciliaris*

Four on 12th.

***The much-loved Chinese Hill Warbler *Rhopophilus pekinensis* turns out to be two monotypic species (Leader *et al.* 2013: Forktail 29, pp31-36): *Rhopophilus pekinensis* & *R. albosuperciliaris*, with the proposed English names Beijing Babbler & Tarim Babbler, respectively... Seeing that Beijing is only a tiny dot on the map of the former's vast range (from N Korea to NE Tibet), and that the latter is *not* endemic to Xinjiang's Tarim Basin (its range extends into Qinghai's Qaidam Basin) perhaps the best selling point for these names are that they consign the 'Chinese Bush-dweller' of Handbook of the Birds of the World (Vol XII, p281: Collar & Robson 2007) to history?

The two taxa are easily distinguished – *pekinensis* has a striking whitish iris, broad-ish streaking on the mantle & extensive orangey streaking on the flanks, while *albosuperciliaris* has a dark iris, narrower & less extensive streaking above, and much less orange markings on the flanks. Both species 'have a wide repertoire of vocalizations', but at least one song type is distinctively different.

Gansu Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus kansuensis*

32 bird-days. Noted on four dates.

***This attractive warbler was only recently reaccepted as a valid species, and its winter quarters remain undiscovered...

Kozlov's Babax *Babax koslowi*

Eight bird-days. Noted on three dates.

***One of our main 'pretexts' for visiting an unbeatably pretty area on the remote Xizang border, this restricted-range species proved obliging.

Giant Laughingthrush *Garrulax maximus*

38+ bird-days. Noted on four dates – main event 26 on 6th, incl several which allowed close-up viewing.

***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*

3+ at Koko Nor on 15th.

***None recorded at this site since 2008: JH.

Przevalski's Nuthatch *Sitta przewalskii*

Four on 30th - a species which invariably makes the Bird of the Trip shortlist!

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*

Three bird-days. Noted on two dates.

***'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', 'red-winged cliff-hanging bird'.

Kessler's Thrush *Turdus kessleri*

41+ bird-days. Noted on seven dates.

***Evidently a somewhat erratic species – the 2011 OBC Fundraiser trip logged 128+ bird-days, encountering post-breeding gatherings of up to 70 birds.

Himalayan Rubythroat *Luscinia pectoralis*

21+ bird-days. Noted on three dates – on the rather long shortlist of FANTASTIC birds seen on this trip: just to make sure everyone got great views (some group members had already headed back to HQ when the rest of us obtained 'scope views of a fine male late one afternoon) we made a special stop on 9th & saw no fewer than seven adult males.

Przevalski's Redstart *Phoenicurus alaschanicus*

Ten bird-days. Noted on two dates – all the sweeter for appearing a day early! 'Arguably the prettiest in the genus'? Oh yes!!

Pied Wheatear *Oenanthe pleschanka*

5+ on 28th ... nice views of a pair w/ at least one fledgling.

Tibetan Snowfinch *Montifringilla adamsi*

14+ bird-days. Noted on five dates.

***Rather unspectacular on the ground but truly striking in flight, this species is blessed with no less than four English names...

White-rumped Snowfinch *Onychostruthus taczanowskii*

63+ bird-days. Seen on six dates this was the most charismatic of the six spp of snowfinch encountered – it 'dive-bombs' rivals, engages in strutting stand-offs, and lumbers along, all hunched up and true intentions hidden behind its highwayman's mask...

Citrine Wagtail *Motacilla citreola*

34 bird-days. Noted on eight dates – seeing (AND photographing!) a couple of splendidly black-backed *calcarata* males on 8th was a highlight.

Brandt's Mountain Finch *Leucosticte brandti*

13+ bird-days. Noted on three dates – it is perhaps its hardiness rather than its plumage that makes this an attractive species...

Przevalski's Rosefinch *Urocynchramus pylzowi*

Eight birds were seen so well that we did not feel a need to try to see more – in the course of the OBC Fundraisers we have found this species at half a dozen or so sites.

***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 which we saw repeatedly), odd song, as well as taxonomic interest (it has for some years now been known to represent a monotypic family).

Roborovski's Rosefinch *Kozlowia roborowskii*

13 bird-days. Noted on two dates.

***We saw no fewer than ten species of rosefinch in addition to the not-really-a-rosefinch Przevalski's... and eight of these were seen extremely well, incl the scarce Roborovski's: our team photographers were simply blown away when a male dropped in for a sip of melt water at <10m from where we were purposefully lingering.

Red Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra*

14+ bird-days. Noted on four dates – a couple of obliging males allowed 'scope viewing.

***A strikingly different bird than the one more or less familiar to us from W Europe - Clements (1993) include our area in the range of ssp *himalayensis*.

Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*

Three was all we could manage – but one of them was VERY obliging, sitting up on a fence post.

Kozlov's Bunting *Emberiza koslowi*

Nine on 5th.

***Only when this highly localized and hard-to-get-to Restricted Range endemic species is 'in the bag' does anyone allow themselves a sigh of relief and a pleasant 1st taste of 'we've done it!'. And did we do it!? Superb views, views that could not possibly have ben improved upon, and ditto photo opportunities of adult males, adult females & fledged juveniles - well worth the efforts, and arguably the Most Special Bird of the Trip.