

Mammals of NE Tibet, 16 June – 5 July 2014:

An at-a-glance list of 23 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 X Andriesse, D de Boer, P Jones, I Roberts, A Samarpan, J Van Dieen & myself during a 2014 Oriental Bird Club Fundraiser visit to China's Qinghai province.

As all group members turned out to be very keen on photography we recalibrated the day-to-day activities to maximise opportunities - already excellent - to photograph the special birds and mammals encountered, accepting completely that this would very likely cost us a few birds overall. Sure enough, the tally of 204 bird spp was around 20 fewer than average for the OBC Fundraisers, but bearing in mind that the trip started after the late May / early June 'stray migrants' peak & ended before most Siberian waders had started reappearing this was not bad, and given the quality of the images obtained (do keep an eye on www.orientalbirdimages.org !) everyone on the trip felt satisfied.

In addition to the birds we saw - and photographed - mammals such as Tibetan Fox *Vulpes ferrilata*, the emblematic Kiang (= Tibetan Wild Ass) *Equus kiang*, the critically endangered Przevalski's Gazelle *Procapra przewalskii*, Wild Yak *Bos grunniens*, and the superb Tibetan Antelope *Panthalops hodgsonii*, a host of pretty flowers, and scenery of the sort for which one ought to reserve the nowadays much overused word 'stunning'.

It was the 8th Oriental Bird Club Fundraiser trip in this area (another three have targeted Yunnan province, desperately neglected despite being 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 birds, the mammals, the really quite unbeatable scenery (at this time of the year in many places absolutely blanketed in wildflowers), a very 21st century mix 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.

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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...

c392 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 17th.

MacNeill's (Red) Deer *Cervus macneilli*

One male w/ antlers still growing on 23rd.

***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).

Gansu Red Deer *Cervus (elaphus) kansuensis*

Four females – a singleton quite close & three together on a distant ridge - on 2nd.

***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*

125 animal-days – 19 (females w/ 8+ not-very-small youngsters which came out of the forest onto the slope opposite our vantage point at c17h50) on 24th, and a herd of no fewer than 106 ('two small-antlered males; rest young animals + females w/ small young') on 28th: BINGO!

Goitred Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa*

4+ on Canada Day – a full-horned male posed for photographs!

Tibetan Gazelle *Procapra picticaudata*

357 animal-days. Noted on six dates.

Przevalski's Gazelle *Procapra przewalskii*

Nine on 2nd – at least six were males: from not too far away the fish hook twist to the point of the horns was obvious in the nice afternoon sunlight.

***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>

***Our animals appear to represent an additional 'undiscovered' population.

Wild Yak *Bos grunniensis*

8+ on 29th – one in particular made a lasting impression as it watched us across a gravelly river bed, with an expression that suggested it was severely affected by the altitude (or perhaps just one thought away from articulating The Meaning of (Bovine) Life in a single well-formed sentence!)

Tibetan Antelope (= Chiru) *Panthalops hodgsonii*

119 animal-days along the remotest Roof of the World stretch of road.

Blue Sheep *Pseudois nayaur*

127+ animal-days. Noted on seven dates... of several nice encounters perhaps eight females each with a newborn nimbly and unhurriedly ascending a steep cliff next to the road was the most memorable.

***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.

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Bird highlights:

Szechenyi's Monal Partridge *Tetraophasis szechenyi*

10+ on 27th – heard only for most of us, but DdB saw & photographed three adults w/ at least two half-sized chicks...

Tibetan Snowcock *Tetraogallus tibetanus*

Seven bird-days. Noted on four dates, with a particularly satisfying encounter with two pairs at Er La pass.

Tibetan Partridge *Perdix hodgsoniae*

Five bird-days. Noted on three dates.

Blood Pheasant *Ithaginis cruentus*

Eight bird-days. Noted on four dates – two males & a female photographed at close range in front of our rock overhang on 26th: TINGALING!

White Eared Pheasant *Crossoptilon crossoptilon*

34+ bird-days S of Yushu. Noted on four dates - close encounters as well as prolonged 'scope views of more distant birds!

Blue Eared Pheasant *Crossoptilon auritum*

11 bird-days N of Xining - fairly common but patience can be required to obtain photos!

Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus*

1,010+ bird-days. This attractive species was noted on four dates – main event 890 scattered across a roadside wetland on 28th.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*

Two adults at Koko Nor on 5th.

Saker *Falco cherrug*

25 bird-days. Noted on no fewer than eight dates - 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 less than three weeks!

Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*

18 bird-days. We recorded this 'flying dragon' on nine dates – eh, hang on, 'recorded'? We were BLOWN AWAY by the views we got: TINGALING!!

Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis*

83+ bird-days. Noted on 13 dates.

Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus*

Singles on two dates.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

18 bird-days. Noted on nine dates.

Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis*

46 adults in total. Noted on six dates. This hardy yet undoubtedly 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 - it was entirely appropriate that our wonderful trip ended on an upbeat note with two pairs of Black-necked Cranes at Koko Nor, each accompanied by two thriving chicks: TINGALING!

Ibisbill *Ibidorhyncha struthersii*

Ten bird-days. Noted on six dates, with a close to Best Ever encounter with a pair w/ two downy chicks en route to Yushu: 'we found ourselves next to an Upland Buzzard nest when we stopped to clean the windows of our Landcruisers, then heard Ibisbill as we were lingering to take photos. Superb show. The adults were calling constantly; one was seen bathing. When we approached the adults flew upstream right by us, landed, still calling, and the chicks ran up offering directly-across-from-us photo ops w/ soft, perfect afternoon lighting. As we were preparing to leave we watched the adults divert a dog away from the chicks, flying slowly in front of it, driving it quite mad by allowing it to keep up but not to catch up. The dog ended up swimming across the river, though possibly less as a result of the Ibisbills baiting it as because it was going there anyway – it went off... And the parent Ibisbills flew back upstream to rejoin the chicks!'

***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 tibetana*

Two pairs!

***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 return the following morning, as we would definitely have done in the event no sandgrouse had obliged 1st time around!

Pallas' Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*

8-9 bird-days. Noted on two dates...

***Essentially a bird of the steppes of Central Asia east to Mongolia - its occasional irruptions, during which it may reach and breed in e.g. the British Isles, adds considerably to its charisma, making it a real Dreambird! Despite its nomadic inclinations it is usually reliable at our favoured site: this time we saw drink-fighting ones and twos, but none 'feeding warily amongst the scattered, wind-burnt clumps of grass'.

Snow Pigeon *Columba leuconota*

Eight bird-days. Noted 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.

Tibetan Grey Shrike *Lanius (sphenocercus) giganteus*

Three bird-days. Noted on two dates - a probable breeding pair N of Yushu seen also in late May & in early June [JH pers obs] delighted & frustrated in almost equal measure as they kept their distance from us before finally posing...

Henderson's Ground Jay *Podoces hendersoni*

15 bird-days. Great encounters on two dates.

Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica*

14 bird-days. Noted on three dates.

***ssp *gephrya* is an even better-looking bird than the *japonica* standard-issue Red-rumped we saw @ the grounds of our Beijing hotel...

Crested Tit-Warbler *Leptopoecile elegans*

One pair 'scoped & photographed on 27th - more would very likely have been found if we hadn't concentrated quite so hard on photography...

Gansu Leaf Warbler *Phylloscopus kansuensis*

37 bird-days. Noted N of Xining on three dates.

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

Kozlov's Babax *Babax koslowi*

8+ bird-days. Noted on two dates.

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

Giant Laughingthrush *Garrulax maximus*

28+ bird-days. Noted on three dates – main event 16 on 25th, incl three 'scoped across the river...
***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.

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*

Seven bird-days. Noted on five dates - finding an active (and, importantly, not overly distant!) nest was a bonus: we watched both male & female do fluttery, gliding show-off approach flights!
***'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'.

Chinese Song Thrush *Turdus mupinensis*

Three bird-days. Noted on two dates - diligent scanning was rewarded on 19th when a singing bird was 'scoped.

Himalayan Red-flanked Bluetail *Tarsiger rufilatus*

Singles on two dates – XA managed nice photos of a flitty male.

Przevalski's Redstart *Phoenicurus alaschanicus*

11+ en route to Koko Nor on 2nd - TINGALING! views were enjoyed.

***The subdued song of this species – ‘arguably the prettiest in the genus’ – seem to consist largely of mimicry.

Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*

24 bird-days. Noted on four dates – main event? hearing an impressive range of mimicry from two birds on 20th: between them they ‘did’ Redshank, Hume’s Short-toed Lark, Black Redstart, Marmot... and, not for the 1st time, whistling shepherd!

White-throated Dipper *Cinclus cinclus*

Six bird-days. Noted on three dates – a brown morph bird on 18th delighted our team of photographers...

White-rumped Snowfinch *Onychostruthus taczanowskii*

97+ bird-days. Seen on eight 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...

Blanford’s Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda blanfordi*

Eight bird-days. Noted on two dates – on 3rd an adult w/ two begging juveniles seen at close range as we were having breakfast by the cars: WOW!

Brandt’s Mountain Finch *Leucosticte brandti*

14 bird-days. Noted on six dates – it is perhaps its hardiness even more than its plumage that makes this a very attractive species...

Przevalski’s Rosefinch *Urocynchramus pylzowi*

We devoted a full morning to this species & were rewarded with outstanding views of seven males & two females.

***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).

Kozlov’s Bunting *Emberiza koslowi*

Seven bird-days. Noted on two dates – one male in particular proved incredibly obliging on 24th: WHAT A BIRD!

***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 been improved upon, and ditto photo opportunities of males & females - well worth the efforts, and arguably the Most Special Bird of the Trip.