NE Tibet Mammals: 25 May – 14 June 2008.

An at-a-glance list of 22+ species of mammals (& birdwatching highlights)

By Jesper Hornskov ***this draft 27 Feb*** ALL RIGHTS RESERVED®

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

Based mostly on my own field notes, this brief write-up covers mammals noted by J Adamson, N Birch, R Birch, P French, A Kelly, J Newman, D O'Mahony, J Penhallurick, A Short, B short & myself during the 2008 Oriental Bird Club Fundraiser visit to China's Qinghai province.

The mammals, the birds (229 species in total), the butterflies, the plants, the unbeatable scenery, a stimulating mix of local cultures, wonderful food, comfortable accommodations & (not least) the companionship all came together to produce a trip the more memorable for the region being so under-visited by bird- & mammal-watchers.

Thank you all for making this trip so enjoyable, and thank you for, by joining, contributing to OBC's Conservation Fund. Special thanks are due to Michael Edgecombe for volunteering to coordinate.

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Inquiries concerning future trips to NE Tibet or Yunnan - our trips to China's biologically most diverse province have been very popular - can be made directly to this author.

We are currently planning a NE Tibet Mammal Special for autumn 2012. That itinerary is inspired by / based on a 2005 trip, but it has been comprehensively fine-tuned drawing on experience gathered over the intervening years, incl on the trip covered by the present write-up.

In the species list the concept "animal-days" is used - it is the 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 natural history holiday abroad, how satisfying the encounters were. 25 animal-days for e.g. Goitered Gazelle could be one distant herd vanishing in a cloud of dust before you'd had a good look at them, or one individual lingering for 25 days, offering the observers point-blank views anytime in that period...

The sequence of the mammal list follows "A Guide to the Mammals of China", Smith & Xie (ed.) 2008, while in the list of bird highlights I have followed The Howard and Moore Complete Checklist of the Birds of the World – 3^{rd} Edition (Dickinson 2003), in my opinion by far the most useful one-volume checklist to date.

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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MAMMALS:

Himalayan Marmot Marmota himalayana

Widespread – not systematically recorded.

Tibetan Dwarf Hamster Cricetulus tibetanus

Several were seen at >4,500masl.

Gansu Pika Ochotona cansus

Animals identified as this species 'with a high degree of confidence' were seen on a few occasions.

Plateau (= Black-lipped) Pika Ochotona curzoniae

This cornerstone species is widespread & in places abundant – not systematically recorded.

Glover's Pika Ochotona gloveri

Several were seen well.

Moupin Pika Ochotona thibetana

Animals identified as this species 'with a fair degree of confidence' were seen on two or three occasions.

Woolly Hare Lepus oiostolus

Widespread – not systematically recorded.

Tolai Hare Lepus tolai

Subsequent visits have cofirmed that hares near Xining are indeed this species rather than *Lepus oiostolus*...

Pallas' Cat Felis manul

2-3 at >4,500masl. A rarely encountered species... we were very fortunate indeed to get prolonged views of one sitting still in good light, then stalking down towards us.

Wolf Canis lupus

Singles were noted on three dates.

Tibetan Fox Vulpes ferrilata

14 animal-days. Noted on four dates.

Red Fox Vulpes vulpes

Nine animal-days. Noted on four dates.

Brown Bear Ursus arctos pruinosus

An adult with three cubs offered superb views on 2nd. Having just gained The Ridge we were settling down to scan & catch our breath when mum bear was spotted, approaching us. There was no need to scatter, however – or get in formation, boiled eggs and other weapons of self defence at the ready – she was only collecting her cubs, and it was a privilege to then watch the little family make off fairly unhurriedly across the boulder-strewn terrain, the female setting the proverbial 'realistic pace' but stopping now and then to let her youngsters catch up.

Eurasian Otter Lutra lutra

Two 'playing' & allowing extended viewing...

Asian Badger Meles leucurus

Three singletons, all seen very well.

***One seen digging for pikas on 12th, dust flying everywhere – it was obviously a longer-legged and much longer-tailed animal than its European counterpart.

Mountain Weasel Mustela altaica

At least three singletons were seen.

Kiang Equus kiang

244 animal-days. The superb "Tibetan Wild Ass" was noted on two dates – main event 160 on 3rd when time allowed us more frequent stops. Several group members remarked on how confiding these graceful 'donkeys' were, making things easy for our team photographers.

Siberian Roe Capreolus pygargus

Three at c4,450masl on 11th.

'Red Deer Cervus elaphus'

38 animal-days. Noted on five dates.

***It seems certain that with taxonomic updates the animals we saw should be assigned to two species, *Cervus kansuensis* & *Cervus macneilli*.

***Smith & Xie (2008) considered Red Deer "very rare and restricted in China"

White-lipped Deer Przewalskium albirostris

27 animal-days. Noted on two dates – one group of 11 unwary individuals gawped right back at us when we stopped...

Goitred Gazelle Gazella subgutturosa

11 W of Koko Nor... two of them were males who briefly engaged in a half-hearted sparring contest.

Tibetan Gazelle Procapra picticaudata

528 animal days. Noted on eight dates.

Blue Sheep Pseudois nayaur

223 animal-days. Noted on six dates – main event 127 on 10th included three which ascended an 'impossible' rock face...

BIRD highlights:

Severtzov's Hazel Grouse Tetrastes sewerzowi

Five bird-days near Nangqian - two pairs intermittently showing well on 6th & one briefly [PF] on 8th.

Szechenyi's Monal Partridge Tetraophasis szechenyi

24+ bird-days. Noted on three dates. Extended views of two at close range (<15m) on 8th far exceeded our wildest hopes - a well-earned reward for putting in the mileage in pursuit of this attractive species.

Tibetan Snowcock Tetraogallus tibetanus

13-15 bird-days. Noted on three dates... nothing like arriving at a high pass on a fine morning to find the pure air resounding with the clucking and curlew-ey calls of this snowline specialist.

Tibetan Partridge Perdix hodgsoniae

24 bird-days. Noted on six dates.

***'Not being molested by Buddhist faith, the bird is fairly common in most parts of its distributional range' ... Cheng (1987) was writing about the status of another gamebird but his comment applies equally to this one.

Blood Pheasant Ithaginis cruentus

c14 bird-days. Noted on four dates – heard-only until 10th when half a dozen allowed prolonged 'scope viewing.

White Eared Pheasant Crossoptilon crossoptilon

30 bird-days. Noted on four dates - we'd been out of the vehicles at the designated spot for barely 15 seconds before the first calls were heard, and then it was mostly a matter of scanning diligently.

Bar-headed Goose Anser indicus

530+ bird-days. Noted on eight dates.

Whooper Swan Cygnus cygnus

Three bird-days. An incubating bird was seen on two dates; on the 1st occasion its presumed partner was present nearby.

Eurasian Bittern Botaurus stellaris

Two bird-days. Singles at Koko Nor on both visits – seen...

Saker Falco cherrug

17 bird-days. Noted on seven dates. For most of us a most welcome opportunity to familiarize ourselves with a species which is declining globally.

Lammergeier Gypaetus barbatus

36 bird-days. Noted on 13 dates. A top Dreambird for several group members, this emblematic species was not in the least devalued by several superb encounters...

Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis*

115-120+ bird-days. Noted on 15 dates.

***On 13th 13 birds 'around a yak carcass close to a felt tent whose owner, a nomad woman, untied large dog which started chasing the vultures. Fortunately the vultures never seemed in serious danger. Later the dog started feeding off the carcass...'

Upland Buzzard Buteo hemilasius

195 bird-days. Noted on 12 dates.

Steppe Eagle Aquila nipalensis

A superb 2nd c-y bird overhead on 1st.

Golden Eagle Aquila chrysaetos

14 bird-days. Noted on eight dates. A pair of adults on 10th crossed the valley mobbed by an Alpine Chough, then landed acrobatically on ledge; the Alpine Chough kept up the harassment. Later seen collecting material for nest-building: enegetically pulled at bushes to break off stems.

Demoiselle Crane Anthropoides virgo

A flock of ten at a well-timed stop at Koko Nor on 28th - the birds did a bit of standing around and a bit of dancing before flying past us at <50m: very much a bonus bird as this time of the year!

Black-necked Crane Grus nigricollis

41 bird-days. Noted on four dates.

Ibisbill Ibidorhyncha struthersii

Ten bird-days. Noted on six dates.

***Somehow, Ibisbills seen in Tibet feeding on a flowered-over meadow or 'frozen' against a rushing, icy stream - yaks snorting in the background - are more *real* than the sad one or two which cling on along the last stretch of acceptable water close to Beijing in competition with sickly-looking domestic ducks!

Tibetan Sandgrouse Syrrhaptes thibetana

Four birds near Er La pass. The first two flew past us even before we'd reached the main target area, calling repeatedly and showing the diagnostic nearly all-black underwing 'under the sun' before dropping to become nearly impossibly to get on against a snow-flecked hillside... thus a couple of hours of agony for our top lister, but soon enough we were all watching another bird. WOW!

Pallas's Sandgrouse Syrrhaptes paradoxus

c20 W of Koko Nor. A pair on the ground allowed prolonged 'scope views as others flew back and forth overhead, all in superb light... WOW!

Snow Pigeon Columba leuconota

40 bird-days. Noted on four dates. 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

Three bird-days. Singles noted on three dates –one seen well by all on 1st ('in flight; then perched on a ridge in full view, with two Red-billed Chough in attendance')...

Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

26 bird-days. Noted on eight dates.

Northern Wryneck Jynx torquilla

Two (one seen singing later joined another we hadn't noticed) near Gonghe on 31st.

Black Woodpecker Dryocopus martius

11 bird-days. Noted on four dates at Nangqian forest reserve: 'scope views on a couple of occasions and frequently heard calling.

Tibetan Grey Shrike Lanius (s.) giganteus

One put on a good show W of Koko Nor on 29th. A low-density species, wide-ranging and often inconspicuous even when present (and thus easily missed), we were fortunate to see this individual so well.

Crested Tit-Warbler Leptopoecile elegans

Eight bird-days. Noted on four dates. To say that this species does not draw attention to itself is hardly an exaggeration... our patience was, however, amply rewarded: I've leafed through the dictionary and two Birdquest brochures in search of a superlative which fully does this jewel justice, in vain...

Long-billed Calandra (= Tibetan) Lark Melanocorypha maxima

35 bird-days. Noted on seven dates.

Kozlov's Babax Babax koslowi

Seven bird-days. Noted on four dates. Occupying a restricted range this was one of our main targets. Often a rather tricky one to dig out but this time the species could hardly have surrendered itself more easily: everyone got memorable views as two birds fed in the open, one squabbling briefly with a Giant Laughingthrush.

Giant Laughingthrush Garrulax maximus

c62 bird-days. Noted on five dates. This superb-looking 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 traveling through the pristine forest will mark their progress with sessions of loud calling.

***We were surprised to see one do a long flycatching sally, not returning to its starting point.

Kessler's Thrush Turdus kessleri

145 bird-days. Noted on 12 dates – this supremely attractive species proved common near Yushu.

Himalayan Rubythroat Luscinia pectoralis

29-30 bird-days. Noted on three dates. Although very much an expected species we initially struggled to get satisfactory views of a satisfactory individual (our first bird was a singing male in a rarely seen ruby-throat-patch-less plumage!) but with the trip barely begun it was too soon to panic, and sure enough we managed no less than 26-27 singing males in a morning later on, several of which sat out to the delight of camera-wielding team members.

Przevalski's Redstart Phoenicurus alaschanicus

Five males & three females W of Koko Nor. We'd barely caught our breath before the 1st superb male appeared, and throughout a fine morning we were treated to close-up encounters with this sought-after, very pretty species.

Grandala Grandala coelicolor

Three bird-days. Noted on two dates. A nest-building pair at 3,950m close to the N edge of the species' known range very early in the trip. The species never came close to losing its place on the hypothetical Bird of the Trip shortlist: 'Grandala Blue' may not be in your dictionary but it should be - no named shade captures the glowing colour of the male of this sought-after species.

Tibetan (=Himalayan) Snowfinch Montifringilla adamsi

36 bird-days. Noted on eight dates.

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

White-rumped Snowfinch Onychostruthus taczanowskii

37 bird-days. Noted on four dates – a side attraction at colonies of Black-lipped Pika.

Przevalski's Rosefinch Urocynchramus pylzowi

Three bird-days. Noted on two dates.

***The alternative English names suggested for this species are hereby vetoed...

Roborovski's Rosefinch Kozlowia roborowskii

20 bird-days. Noted on four dates... the first – as is often the case – were the most satisfying: three males & five females 'scoped as they were feeding together at close range.

Crimson-browed Finch Pinicola subhimachala

Six bird-days. This retiring species was seen extremely well & heard singing on two dates at Nangqian forest reserve.

Kozlov's Bunting Emberiza koslowi

Four birds – two pairs S of Yushu... Unsurpassable views were had – and we'd earned 'em! TINGALING!