

Looking for Pallas' Cat in N Tibet: 27 Oct – 4 Nov 2006.

An at-a-glance list of 12 spp of mammals (& birdwatching highlights).

By Jesper Hornskov *** ALL RIGHTS RESERVED ® ***[this draft 26 Feb 2012]

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 mammals noted on a trip undertaken by A Bassett, D Heintz & myself. The trip was planned as a targeted attempt to see Pallas' Cat *Felis manul*, an enigmatic & stunningly beautiful animal which had proved most obliging a year earlier when I visited with A Guillemont, J F Terrasse & M Terrasse. The cat - though possibly not uncommon in Tibet - is almost as rare in terms of sightings by Westerners as the notoriously elusive Snow Leopard. With a tight schedule dictated by a too-short - aren't they always!? - holiday there was only a minimum of time available for acclimatization, and an adverse reaction probably to a combination of lingering jetlag, altitude, low-ish temperatures & windchill got to one team member, making a continued search unfeasible. In retrospect we felt that with Diamox, a prescription drug which participants on other trips have found very helpful at altitude (or *Rhodiola rosea* extract - available inexpensively in capsule form in China) it probably wouldn't have come to this... However, a Plan B was quickly agreed on - lower elevation, more birds, other mammals. Descending led to the expected almost instant improvement, and we had an enjoyable last few days seeing lots - though not the hoped-for feline...

Thank you for for enjoying the journey so much!

The mammals, the birds (136 species in total), 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 mammal-watchers.

Anyone considering China as a destination for mammal watching is welcome to contact the author at:

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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 the 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

Mammals:

Black-lipped Pika *Ochotona curzoniae*

Fairly widespread on the Plateau.

Gansu Pika *Ochotona cansus*

A few individuals identified as this species were seen N of Xining.

Woolly Hare *Lepus oiostolus*

A few were seen.

Wolf *Canis lupus*

Four on 31st could very well have been the same mean-looking individuals which we in 2005 were fortunate enough to watch hunt down and kill a Tibetan Gazelle. Just as we arrived they were doing a tentative but in the end unsuccessful run, and then split up to amble around eyed warily by the gazelles.

Tibetan Fox *Vulpes ferrilata*

Nine individuals, incl one which was 'scoped as it was yelping over and over, throwing its head back as it emitted the far-carrying sound - other individuals were seen even closer as they went about their business quite unwarily, on the look-out for pikas & repeatedly stopping to scent-mark.

Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes*

Singles were noted on two dates, incl one hunting at c4,700m, apparently trying to flush out pikas from under snow on a fairly steep slope.

Kiang *Equus kiang*

282 animals on 31st.

'Red Deer *Cervus elaphus*'

A female was seen very well.

***It seems certain that with taxonomic updates the animal we saw should be assigned to *Cervus kansuensis*.

Goitred Gazelle *Gazella subgutturosa*

Eight unwary individuals...

Tibetan Gazelle *Procapra picticaudata*

Ten (incl three plus one in snowfields) when we were searching for Pallas' Cat & no fewer than 1,244 the next day.

Przevalski's Gazelle *Procapra przewalskii*

Nine (two males & seven females) were seen close to where nine individuals (a buck with four females each with a youngster) were seen in Oct 2005 (JH *et al.* pers obs).

***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 represent an additional 'undiscovered' population.

Blue Sheep *Pseudois nayaur*

A group of 11 was seen – not exactly close but the crisply crystalline air typical of this time of the year (combined with state-of-the-art optical equipment!) allowed us to thoroughly enjoy these animals as they moved around, coming over a shoulder onto a sunny hillside, running briefly in alarm, and finally retreating into the shadows amongst crags.

Bird highlights:

Przevalski's Partridge *Alectoris magna*

Four seen well – ‘scope views of calling birds as we were having breakfast by the car – on 2nd.

Daurian Partridge *Perdix dauurica*

c20 at drinking spot near Chaka was a bonus, the birds being so obliging as well as unexpected (none seen there over 30+ visits) .

Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus*

c220 bird-days.

Whooper Swan *Cygnus cygnus*

Five adults at Koko Nor.

Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*

c275 bird-days. Noted on five dates. Of especial interest were c230 migr S of the South Koko Nor range – the timing and flock sizes suggest that we may have caught only the tail end of the movement...

Merlin *Falco columbarius*

Three bird-days. Noted only at Koko Nor with singles, possibly involving just two individuals, on three dates.

Saker *Falco cherrug*

36 bird-days. Noted on five dates.

Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*

22 bird-days, concerning no less than 21 individuals noted on two dates, with a number of individuals offering feather-by-feather views in superb light. Most memorable perhaps the adult which approached from behind – what gave it away was the hiss of wind through the primaries!

Black Vulture *Aegypius monachus*

Five bird-days. Noted on three dates. On 31st one dropped in next to the road ahead of where we were watching a Tibetan Fox – when we approached we were able to watch it alongside four Steppe Eagles (which looked rather small next to the bulky vulture!) before it flew off, and then in flight with 1-2 Steppe Eagles and eventually another Black Vulture.

Upland Buzzard *Buteo hemilasius*

146 bird-days. Noted on six dates. Main event 105 on 31st. One WOW! view after another...

Steppe Eagle *Aquila nipalensis*

57 bird-days. Noted on four dates, with 'field guide views' on several occasions.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

Four bird-days. Noted on two dates.

Common Crane *Grus grus*

Seven flying E at Koko Nor.

Black-necked Crane *Grus nigricollis*

Six (four adults and two 1st c-y birds) at Koko Nor.

Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrhaptes paradoxus*

c66 bird-days. Noted on two dates, with flying-away flocks of ten and 11 one day much improved upon the following day when a group of 21 was located on the ground, permitting us to approach to c50 meters. We watched these birds in bright morning light as they fed, milled about, stretched their wings, and preened, taking in such subtle details as the peachy underwing coverts and the white tips to all but the elongated central pair of tail feathers. The birds only flew off when a shepherd whom we had been aware of for some time as he pulled his heavy motorbike along a desert track - his woman limping along behind as best she could - parked up and walked over to try and bum a liter of gas off us for his ride into town...

Eurasian Eagle-Owl *Bubo bubo*

One impressive individual was seen...

Henderson's Ground Jay *Podoces hendersoni*

Ten bird-days. Having failed to locate any on one windy afternoon we'd been at The Spot barely a minute the following day before one appeared, on cue, in unbeatable light, and within 50m of our vehicle. It being a major Dreambird we all but ignored the also-present Chinese Grey Shrikes and watched the bird intently as it treated us to a fine run: at one stage, with the breeze behind it, it seemed to get up too much momentum and had to apply the brakes urgently; it then went to work, pecking vigorously at the base of a clump of vegetation, stretching tall at short intervals to make sure all remained well. Before we knew it there were five birds together, probably a family... what a way to end a fine day: Tingaling!

Hume's Groundpecker *Pseudopodoces humilis*

70 bird-days.

Common Raven *Corvus corax*

31 bird-days. Noted on four dates.

White-browed Tit-Warbler *Leptopoecile sophiae*

29 bird-days. Noted on five dates. Several memorable encounters with sparkling males...

Mongolian Lark *Melanocorypha mongolica*

26 bird-days. Noted on four dates.

Wallcreeper *Tichodroma muraria*

One N of Xining [DH].

Kessler's Thrush *Turdus kessleri*

Two males & a female.

Przevalski's Redstart *Phoenicurus alaschanicus*

14 N of Xining. This localized endemic – 'arguably the prettiest in the genus and undoubtedly the one fewest birdwatchers have seen' – treated us to unforgettable views....

Himalayan (= Tibetan) Snowfinch *Montifringilla adamsi*

14 bird-days. Noted on three dates.

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

Blanford's Snowfinch *Pyrgilauda blanfordi*

20+ bird-days. Noted on two dates. Birds at the small pool, drinking, yielded superb views.

Robin Accentor *Prunella rubeculoides*

29 bird-days. Noted on seven dates. Many satisfying looks at this emblematic species but none perhaps sweeter than the first, one which – perched on a haystack – kind of jump-started our Plateau birdwatching.

Brandt's Mountain Finch *Leucosticte brandti*

c96 bird-days. Noted on two dates – superb views of birds coming in to roost!

Mongolian Trumpeter Finch *Bucanetes mongolicus*

Seven coming in to drink - great views of a species we had not been expecting to see...

Przevalski's Rosefinch *Urocynchramus pylzowi*

Six was just one highlight of an unforgettable day.

Grey-headed Bullfinch *Pyrrhula erythaca*

Nine bird-days. Noted only N of Xining – persistence paid when we managed unsurpassable views of a feeding male.