

SICHUAN 18-25 APRIL 2011

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INTRODUCTION

After Nigel Goodgame's highly successful trip to look for Red Panda's at Wawu Shan in November 2010, he saw three in a day, I hoped that a short trip with Chris Grimmett & Sheelagh Halsey, over Easter would be equally successful but as with Jon Hall's recent April trip, we dipped, albeit for very different reasons, i.e. the park was actually closed for most of our stay for annual cable car maintenance. Trips to other sites in Sichuan, i.e. Western Wawu, Emei Shan & Wanglang NP did little to improve our spirits.

All in all I would recommend a late autumn visit if looking for Red Pandas as the lack of leaves on the trees and the fact that young animals will be supplementing the population should make sightings more likely. We did meet some panda researchers at Wawu and they recommended July although it should be noted that they are only there from late March to August.

In total we saw very few mammals the highlights being Asiatic Black Bear & Chinese Serow.

WEATHER

The first couple of days were quite damp and misty but after that we had a lot of warm sunshine so could not blame the weather for our lack of success. The nights were very cold & there had been recent snowfalls at higher altitudes in Wanglang NP.

GENERAL INFORMATION

As always the relevant pages on Jon Hall's www.mammalwatching.com are the key source of reference & the Bradt Guide to Chinese Wildlife provided ideas for different locations to visit.

As mentioned above I suspect that late autumn would be better for mammal watching & Jon Hall & Nigel Goodgame's experiences seem to support this.

I organised the trip through Sid Francis chengduuk@hotmail.com, a Brit who has been based in China for seven years and he worked tirelessly for us as he had for Nigel Goodgame. On Nigel's trip he was accompanied by his wife Meg & I think we certainly suffered from her not joining our trip as she is currently pregnant. Meg is apparently an excellent panda spotter & I believe that having a Chinese guide along would have simplified access at some sites. Sid frequently had communication difficulties and had to resort to calling Meg to talk to the other person on the phone.

On all trips to Sichuan be prepared for itinerary changes, after finding Wawu closed I would have liked to visit Rouergai instead to look for Tibetan Fox etc but the Chinese authorities had recently closed the area to all visitors, a still too common practice in China.

THE SITES

Wawu Shan

See Jon Hall's site for further details. To maximise your chances of Red Pandas you need to stay at the Xianger Hotel in the upper part of the park to be on the trails at dawn and dusk. Due to the park closure we only had one day in the park and were only able to be in the prime area from

0900-1530 which was far from ideal. The best area for pandas is supposed to be the trails down to the Mandarin Ponds but surprisingly there was no sign of scat in this area, possibly as a result of the number of tourists walking the trails. We did find a lot of scat including fresh scat on the closed trail referred to in Jon Hall's report.

As Jon found the mammal watching here is hard work but Sid, Chris & Sheelagh did find a **Complex-toothed Flying Squirrel** while spotlighting on foot c.5 kms from the park visitor centre as had Nigel Goodgame & Nigel also saw Tibetan Macaque at Wawu. Sid also saw an unidentified rodent in the grasslands near the duck ponds & the panda researchers told us that Tibetan Pika also occur in this area.

Western Wawu

This is a new area, a forest park, recently discovered by Sid & you would need to contact him for directions. I have no idea how to get there. We stayed in a guesthouse 30 minutes from the entrance, the rooms were very comfortable & good value at £15 per room per night, and apart from a visit from the local police, checking us out 'for our own safety', it was a good base. We managed to get the people at the park to let us in prior to dawn and well after dark and on the third day they actually left the barriers open for us. I assume they didn't want to get up at six to let us in.

Sid had found bear & panda scat about 30 minutes drive in to the park on a previous trip. We concentrated on the top part of the road parking where the road deteriorated badly 45 minutes from the gate and then walking for a further 40 minutes into what, judging from the amount of scat found, was the best area for mammals. In two and a half days in the park we only saw 3 mammals but judging from the amount of scat found the area appeared to be rich in mustelids & we found lots of Red Panda scat & what I assume was Hog Badger scat.

The habitat from the gate upwards all appears excellent for mammals and I'm sure the area warrants more effort. The only downside was spotlighting, we tried one night but the rough state of the track made it difficult and the area we were able to spotlight from the car was largely closed forest also making spotlighting difficult.

The 3 mammals seen were:

- A superb **Asiatic Black Bear** sunning itself at the entrance to its den in a hole in a tree for 30 minutes. The bear was about an hour's walk from where we parked the car on the opposite side of a deep valley to the trail.
- A wacky **Gansu Mole** which Sid caught by hand c.10 minutes further along the trail. Bizarrely when released it then swam across the flooded trail before disappearing.
- A **Siberian Weasel** seen all too briefly 30 minutes from the car at dusk.

Wanglang NP

We visited Wanglang NP, about 8 hours from Chengdu, rather than the excellent Tangjihai that Jon had visited as it was unclear whether Tangjihai had re-opened after recent closures. In addition it appears that you can no longer self-drive in Tangjihai and have to travel around on electric buggies which rather limits your freedom to mammal watch.

On face value Wanglang should be as good as Tangjihai & has excellent habitat & an impressive mammal list although the understory is heavily grazed by domestic stock in the park which may have explained the paucity of mammals seen.

We stayed in the more expensive rooms at the park headquarters, c.£30 for a double-room per night having negotiated a reduced price, or more accurately Meg had on the phone.

The main surfaced access road runs about 8-10 kms from the entrance gate to the headquarters, it then continues for a further 2-3 kms before splitting, the right hand fork continuing 7 kms to some open grasslands where we saw **Chinese Serow** at dawn (on the slopes to the right of the road). Sid has also seen up to 150 Blue Sheep here, & eventually to a parking lot. From a parking lot there is a boardwalk trail where pikas can sometimes be seen.

The left hand fork continues for c.10 km past the Golden Meadow on the left where pikas occur, to a parking lot at the end of the road. From here you can walk trails with excellent views over the slopes where Sid has previously seen Blue Sheep & Chinese Goral. Snow Leopard is known to occur in the upper reaches of the park.

We spotlighted the roads for upwards of 2 hours. On the first night we saw **Complex-toothed Flying Squirrel** about 5 kms along the left hand fork & **unidentified flying squirrels** along both forks, a **Moupin Pika** about halfway along the right hand fork, and a superb **Leopard Cat** by the dump on the left hand side of the track as you reach the headquarters from the entrance, an area that has apparently previously been very good for palm civets.

On the second night in two and a half hours we saw absolutely zilch & after 90 minutes I was so bored I even relinquished the spotlight, almost an unknown event.

Emei Shan

About 3 hours from Chengdu, see Jon Hall's site for details, and an awful tourist site. It was busy enough at 9 am on a Sunday in April. It must be truly heinous in the high season. We visited simply to add **Tibetan Macaque** to the list, and saw four at monkey viewing area which pretty much sums it up. Don't be tempted to take out any food or drink in the area where the macaque's are. Chris did & was quickly jumped by a macaque.

We also saw a **Pallas's Squirrel** about 20 minutes walk in from the park entrance. Enough said.

Conclusion

All-in-all a highly frustrating trip with only 9 mammals being seen although we did also see a few decent birds most notably at **Wawu** Golden Bush Robin, at **Western Wawu** a brief Temminck's Tragopan, & at **Wanglang** two excellent Chinese Grouse along the left hand fork, several Wallcepers low down on the cliffs on the last 10 miles of road prior to the entrance gate, several cracking Red-flanked Bluetails & a nice male Red-throated Thrush.