

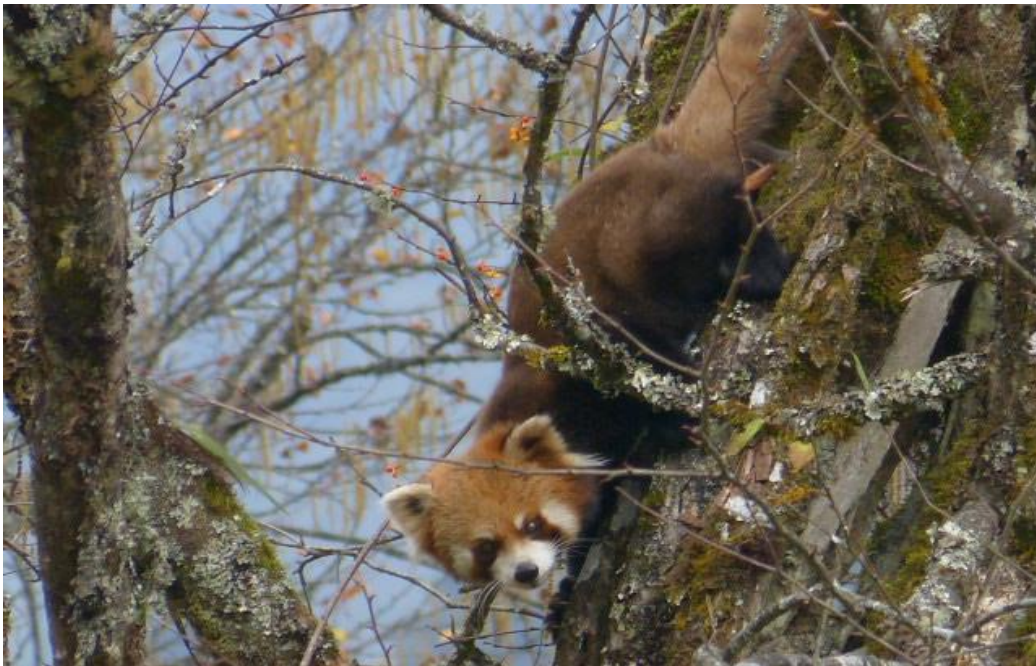
# **RED PANDAS AND TIBETAN PLATEAU PREDATORS**

**Labahé, Rouergai & Baixi 26 October – 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2012**

**Richard Webb, Debbie Pain & Duncan McNiven**

**Balan Shan Pass 23-26 October 2012**

**Debbie Pain & Duncan McNiven**



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## **Introduction**

After an unsuccessful trip to look for Red Pandas at Wawu Shan in April 2011 reports of a new Red Panda hotspot at Labahe in Sichuan encouraged me to return in 2012 with superb results, a panda being seen within a couple of hours on the first afternoon, and at least three individuals being seen incredibly well within two and a half hours the following morning.

Keen to see Tibetan Fox as well, without incurring the costs of a full-blown Tibet trip, I decided to add a few days at Rouergai on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau to the itinerary and this proved a good decision with lots of foxes, six sightings of Wolf and a fabulous Pallas's Cat, plus some terrific birding with lots of raptors attracted to the vast numbers of Plateau Pika in the area. Nearby alpine forest produced Chinese Serow and Tufted Deer.

Debbie & Duncan visited Balan Shan Pass for a few days prior to the main trip to look for high altitude pheasants, but also saw some good mammals including Raccoon Dog, Mountain Weasel, Masked Palm Civet, Blue Sheep and Chinese Goral.

In my experience autumn just before the onset of winter tends to be the best time to see mammals and this seems to be borne out by this trip. Red Panda were more visible because of the lack of leaves and they were also actively feeding on small berries. Sid our driver/guide has visited Rouergai on numerous occasions but infrequently at this time of year. Prior to this trip he had only ever seen three Wolves whereas we had six sightings of at least 14, and possibly 17 individuals, in three and a half days in the field.

All in all it was great trip and can be thoroughly recommended as a cheaper alternative to a full plateau trip particular if your main target species are carnivores rather than ungulates.

**Richard Webb**

## **Logistics**

### **Guides**

As with the 2011 trip we used a Chengdu-based British birder Sid Francis to organise the trip and he (with a fair bit of help from his wife Meg on the phone) did a good job, working long hours most days and completing some long drives, most notably the 10+ hour drive back to Chengdu from Rouergai. Sid charged 2000 yuan per day for guiding, driving and use of his 4x4 vehicle. This equates to £214 per day which isn't cheap but still compares favourably with a number of other well-known operators.

We paid for everything else, i.e. accommodation (including Sid's), food, petrol, tolls, park entrance fees etc. separately and I spent roughly £40 per day for everything.

The total cost including flights came to £1500 for 8 full days, 9 nights.

Sid can be contacted at [chengduuk@hotmail.com](mailto:chengduuk@hotmail.com).

### **Flights**

As with my previous trip to Sichuan I used China Eastern as the flights only cost £550 and the connection times in Shanghai were good. However as with my previous trip they are not the best airline in the world and once again on the return trip could only check me through to Shanghai so I had to check-in again at the transfer desk for the international flight.

## Visas

The visa requirements for China are constantly changing and you currently need to supply flight details and accommodation details with your visa request. The first visa agency I used Visa for China failed to mention this and my initial visa request was consequently rejected. ChinaVisa24 <http://www.chinavisa24.co.uk> were far more efficient and I would recommend them. The service cost £84.

## Accommodation

**Chengdu** – although there is lots of accommodation in Chengdu as on my previous trip I used Holly's Hostel for the three nights in Chengdu. A double en suite room costs £20 per night and can be booked in advance online. Holly's also has an excellent restaurant offering Chinese & Western meals.

**Labahe** – we stayed in chalets near the reception for £30 per night. Most people now stay in the new hotel about a kilometre from the reception. The hotel has the advantage that Sambar and presumably other mammals visit the salt lick by the restaurant but the chalets are in a nicer location. Sid, Debbie & Duncan did however eat in the restaurant at the hotel.

**Rouergai** – there are several alternatives in Rouergai. We checked out Sid's normal hotel first, £16 per night for a double room but switched to the far nicer and more comfortable Rouergai Hotel at double the price. However note that even here we had a power cut so keep a torch by the bed. There are other hotels in Rouergai but Sid's preferred business hotel was closed at the time of our visit.

## Mammal-watching sites

### Labahe

- Labahe is a forested reserve in NE Sichuan about 4-5 hours from Chengdu although given the vagaries of the Chinese road system, and particularly the one-way systems adopted at road works it can take 7-8 hours or longer on a bad day.
- From the entrance gate the road continues along the river for several kilometres to the reception area to the left of the road. We saw Tibetan Macaque & Pallas's Squirrel along this stretch of road during the day and Sambar at night.
- Beyond the turn-off to the reception the road continues to the new Labahe Hotel where Sambar can be seen on the salt lick at night. The road continues to a second older hotel and spotlighting along this stretch produced Masked Palm Civet by the ranger station, Reeve's Muntjac and others have seen Long-tailed Goral & Takin.
- From the reception a jeep trail runs 10-12 kms up to a trailhead and boardwalk. Technically you can only walk this trail although park jeeps will drive you to any point on the trail and either drop you off letting you walk back down or pick you up later in the day. On the first day we took a jeep up to the 7 km mark and walked back down but after that were allowed to drive the trail ourselves.
- The first couple of kms produced Tibetan Macaque & Pere David's Rock-Squirrel but the main area is 6-7 kms up the track where after an open area and toilets on the left of the track there is a fenced off area on the right of the track. Although we saw one Red Panda (two days running) just to the left of the track after the toilets, the other three sightings were in the area on the right and we walked about 2 kms off the main trail in this area. We also saw two Swinhoe's Striped Squirrel here.
- Pandas have also been seen beyond this area and from the boardwalk at the end of the road.

## **Rouergai**

- Rouergai is a town on the edge of the Tibetan plateau in NW Sichuan. On a good day it's an 8-9 hour drive from Chengdu, on the way back it was closer to 11 hours!
- Rouergai is a superb area and is undoubtedly worth a lot more exploration particularly in late autumn and early winter when it has been rarely visited to date. It is a veritable predators' restaurant with Plateau or Black-lipped Pika being the main item on the menu for a range of mammalian and avian predators. Earlier in the year these are supplemented by Himalayan Marmot, & Wolves undoubtedly also feed on domestic stock, i.e. sheep and yaks.
- We concentrated on the area north of Rouergai but there are other areas to the west and south-west probably also worth investigating. The distances given below are approximate and are measured with the main junction just north of Rouergai.
- Kms 0-24 – relatively unrewarding with only Red Fox and a dead Steppe Polecat although we tended to drive through this area fairly quickly and did not spend much time scanning in this area.
- Km 24-30 – a particularly rewarding area.
  1. At 24 kms there is a pull-off to the east of the road just after a 'hut' on a hillside on the right. We saw a single Wolf and several Tibetan Foxes in this area. Plateau Pikas are abundant from here on.
  2. Just after this there are three or four turn-offs on the right. The best one of these followed a rocky stream and produced several Tibetan Foxes. Sid has seen Pallas's Cat briefly here on one occasion. We only found this spot on our last day and were not able to try spotlighting here. This might have been rewarding.
  3. The next track to the north produced four Wolves near a kill and a couple of kilometres further on a short track up into the hills produced a single Wolf.
  4. The area to the west of the road twice produced Wolves, three on the first morning & five around midday on the final day. Sid has also seen Hog Bader in this area.
- Area near the entrance to the Flower Lake Recreational Area – another good area for Tibetan Foxes and we also saw three Wolves just south of here.
- Toll gate (50-60 kms from Rouergai) – Just after the toll gate take a left hand turn and park after 150-200m. From this point on we had no sightings of Tibetan Fox or Wolf and Tibetan Fox was replaced by Red Fox albeit in much lower numbers. However this was the area where we found the Pallas's Cat which was first seen 250 metres or so from the road in a heavily disturbed area. It subsequently appeared to prefer a small valley c.500m from the road.
- Toll gate onwards – we continued along the side road and explored this road for c.10 kms and another road leading off of this road to the right for another 10-15 kms. Mammal-wise this area was relatively quiet but it was excellent for birds.

## **Baixi**

- Baixi is an area of alpine forest c.25 kms from Rouergai.
- Leave Rouergai south on the road to Chengdu. After 17 kms and just before the toll gate turn left towards Baixi which is 15 km down this road but the forest starts after a couple of kilometres..
- Follow this road for c.10 kms and after passing a couple of homesteads there is a pull-off on the right hand side of the road just before some corrals set slightly back from the road. Park here and walk the trail until you find a vantage point just above the corrals. Scan the hillside on the opposite side of the road from here. We saw Chinese Serow, Tufted Deer and Wild Boar in the last 90 minutes of the day. Others have also seen Sika and Siberian Roe from here.
- There are other vantage points along the valley and I suspect it would be worth scanning from any of these.

## Itinerary (main trip)

- 26<sup>th</sup> • Late evening arrival in Chengdu. Transferred to Holly's Hostel. Met with DN & DP.
- 27<sup>th</sup> • Early 6 am departure from Chengdu, arriving Labahe late morning with Tibetan Macaque and our only Pallas's Squirrel of the trip near the entrance gate.
  - Afternoon jeep ride up to 'panda' area c.7 kms from reception seeing more macaques on route. Remainder of afternoon in this area seeing a snake and Red Panda after two and a half hours before walking back down to chalets.
  - Short spotlighting session between reception & old hotel seeing Masked Palm Civet, Sambar and Reeve's Muntjac.
- 28<sup>th</sup> • Morning drive up to 'panda' area where remained until early afternoon seeing three Red Pandas and two Swinhoe's Striped Squirrels.
  - Remainder of day driving jeep trail looking for pheasants.
  - A sort spotlighting session only produced several Sambar.
- 29<sup>th</sup> • Morning looking for tragopans with limited success, a female plus at least two Pere David's Rock-Squirrel.
  - Long drive back to Chengdu arriving at Holly's Hostel early evening.
- 30<sup>th</sup> • Early start for long drive to Rouergai arriving early afternoon seeing six Siberian Roe and our first Black-necked Cranes on route.
  - Checked into hotel and headed out along road north of Rouergai quickly finding Red Fox, lots of Plateau Pikas and our first exquisite Tibetan Foxes.
  - Turned back to Rouergai and switched to the more comfortable Rouergai Hotel on our return.
- 31<sup>st</sup> • Early start from Rouergai and we found our first albeit distant Wolf and more Tibetan Foxes c.24 km north of Rouergai. Lots more foxes followed and we found three closer Wolves a few kms further north between the road and Flower Lake.
  - Continued beyond the toll gate and decided to turn left on a quieter road. An inspired decision when Sid almost immediately found a cat, which proved to be a terrific Pallas's Cat, as soon as we stopped to start scanning only a couple of hundred metres from the toll. We managed to eventually approach the cat to within 50 metres albeit in strong heat haze during the middle of the day. We left it after an hour or so but returned later in the day for further prolonged views in better light.
  - Continuing north from the cat the habitat changed and became slightly hillier. Mammals other than pikas became few and far between with only a couple of Red Foxes but the birding was first class with good numbers of raptors and passerines and a nice flock of Hill Pigeon as well.
  - Returned to Rouergai after dark.
- 1<sup>st</sup> • We awoke to find it had snowed overnight and it proved harder work with few foxes and no sign of the Pallas's Cat in early morning searches. A freshly dead Steppe Polecat was additionally frustrating.
  - We continued north from the toll gate and took a different road skirting another lake. The numbers of raptors was outstanding although few mammals were seen and we eventually returned to the cat area where after an hour or so wait the Pallas's Cat appeared albeit distantly at first. We managed to approach to within 50 metres but unfortunately it bolted down a marmot burrow not to be seen again.
  - Returning to Rouergai we found another three Wolves about 50 kms from Rouergai.
- 2<sup>nd</sup> • A terrific morning north of Rouergai with lots of Tibetan Foxes, and three sightings of Wolves, a group of four, a singleton, and a group of five near Flower Lake in the middle of the day.
  - For a change of scenery, and hopefully an additional or two to the mammal list, we headed to the alpine forests near Baixi for the afternoon where after a couple of



- hours wait we saw Wild Boar, Tufted Deer and a terrific Chinese Serow with Gansu Pika calling widely but remaining elusive.
- A short spotlighting session along the road proved disappointing probably due to the number of vehicles on the road so we headed back to Rouergai.
- 3<sup>rd</sup>
- Early morning at Baixi. No mammals in very cold conditions but a few good birds.
  - Started long drive back to Chengdu. Delayed by traffic and eventually arrived back at Holly's Hostel after a 10-hour drive.
- 4<sup>th</sup>
- Early morning departure from Chengdu via Shanghai.

## Mammals

Nomenclature follows **A Guide to the Mammals of China** (Smith & Xie).

### **Tibetan Macaque** *Macaca thibetana*

Labahe, c.20 along the river between the reserve entrance and the reception, and another group of 10+ a few hundred metres up the jeep trail on the first day.

### **Pallas's Squirrel** *Callosciurus erythraeus*

Labahe, one along the river in the same area as the macaques.

### **Pere David's Rock Squirrel** *Sciurotamias davidianus*

Labahe, at least two along the jeep trail.

Balan Shan Pass – seen by DP & DN.

### **Swinhoe's Striped Squirrel** *Tamiops swinhoei*

Labahe – two in the first c. 7 kms from the reception area.

### **Plateau (Black-lipped) Pika** *Ochotona curzoniae*

Rouergai – absolutely abundant, 100s and sometimes 1000s seen each day, and the reason for the exceptional numbers of mammalian and avian predators in the area.



### **Gansu Pika** *Ochotona cansus*

Several heard at Baixi but unfortunately not seen.

### **Pallas's Cat** *Felis manul*

Rouergai – **The highlight of the trip.** fabulous views of one on three occasions just north of the toll gate c.60 kms north of Rouergai. First seen at around 1100 on the first morning. Initially seen from the road at ranges of c.250m we were able to approach it to within 50

metres before it disappeared into a marmot burrow with a pika. It then re-emerged and was watched at ranges of 50m to 100m in total for roughly an hour although unfortunately with significant heat haze. We returned that evening and watched it again for over an hour at ranges down to 75m. It mainly sat watching us but shortly before dark starting hunting. The following day it could not be found an hour after first light after overnight snow but it reappeared about 2 hours prior to dark that afternoon and we had good views again but it disappeared into a burrow when I tried to approach it.

Remarkably the area the cat was in was heavily disturbed by pastoralists herding domestic yak and sheep with dogs and motor bikes but the cat remained largely unconcerned. However interestingly the cat was seen in an area free of Tibetan Foxes and with very few Red Foxes. Note: Pallas's Cat has been recorded in the area before Sid having seen one briefly c.26 km from Rouergai and Victor Emmanuel Nature Tours having seen one near Flower Lake.

**Masked Palm Civet** *Paguma larvata*

Labahe – one near the bins by the ranger station and others heard in the roof of the chalet on the first night.

Balang Shan – three seen by DN & DP.

**Wolf** *Canus lupus*

Rouergai – six sightings of at least 14 and possibly 17 individuals.

- 31st – a single hunting early morning east of the road, c.24 km north of Rouergai, and three to the west of the road between the road and Flower Lake, 304 kms further north.
- 1st – three just south of the Flower Lake entrance gate shortly at dusk.
- 2nd – four along a side road to the east of the main road 26 kms north of Rouergai an hour after first light. Appeared to have recently killed judging by the numbers of vultures on a nearby carcass. A single adult in the hills to the east of the road c.28 kms north of Rouergai. Another five at midday near the edge of Flower Lake possibly included the three from the 31<sup>st</sup>.

**Raccoon Dog** *Nyctereutis procyonoides*

Balan Shan Pass – one seen by DP & DN

**Tibetan Fox** *Vulpes ferrilata*

Common 24 – 55 km north of Rouergai. Personal daily counts of 3, 10, 4 and 11+.

Interestingly seemingly replaced by Red Fox north of the toll gate. Fabulous animals.





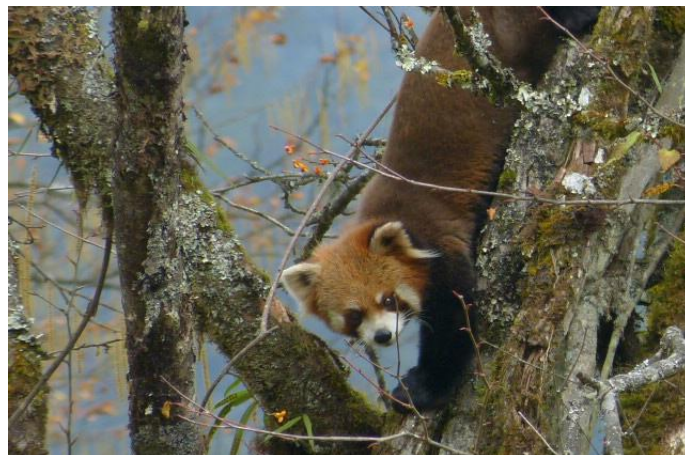
**Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes*

Rouergai, less common than the previous species and not seen alongside each other. One seen c.18 kms north of Rouergai and all other sightings were north of the toll gate 60 km north of Rouergai. 4+ on the 31<sup>st</sup> & 2 on the 1<sup>st</sup>.

**Red Panda** *Ailurus fulgens*

Labahe – the original reason for organising the trip and we were not to be disappointed. One seen after two and a half hours on the first afternoon and watched for over 45 minutes despite the arrival of a party of noisy tourists. One was seen by RW in the same tree the following afternoon.

The following morning we saw three individuals possibly including the animal from day one in the space of two and a half hours. Great views of all three individuals. Labahe is undoubtedly **THE** place to see this species. A Greentours group a few days later may have seen as many as seven different animals?



**Mountain Weasel** *Mustela altaica*

Seen at Balan Shan Pass by DN & DP.

**Steppe Polecat** *Mustela eversmanii*

One freshly dead on the road c.22 km north of Rouergai. Pelage much darker than portrayed in most guides and comparable with that of Eurasian Polecat.

**Wild Boar** *Sus scopa*

One Baixi.



**Siberian Roe** *Capreolus pygargus*

Six c.20 km south of Rouergai on the drive up from Chengdu. Also known to occur at Baixi.

**Sambar** *Rusa unicolor*

Labahe, common judging by the tracks and droppings seen but only seen at night. Singles along the road between the reception and old hotel on both nights, and seven on the lick by the hotel on the second night.

**Tufted Deer** *Elaphodus cephalophus*

One Baixi

**Reeve's Muntjac** *Muntiacus reevesi*

One Labahe. One near the hotel while spotlighting in the first night.

**Blue Sheep** *Pseudois nayaur*

Seen at Balan Shan Pass by DN & DP. Also occurs at Labahe but not seen on our visit unfortunately.

**Chinese Serow** *Capricornis milneedwardsii*

A nice mature male at Baixi

**Chinese Goral** *Naemorhedus griseus*

Seen at Balan Shan Pass by DP & DN.

## **Other possibilities**

**Perny's Long-nosed Squirrel.** *Dremomys pernyi*

Seen at Labahe by a Greentours group a few days after our visit.

**Himalayan Marmot** *Marmota himalayana*

Lots of evidence, burrows, at Rouergai & Baixi but unfortunately they were already hibernating & none were seen.

**Woolly Hare** *Lepus comus*

Not seen but known to occur at Baixi.

**Chinese Desert Cat** *Felis bieti*

Victor Emmanuel Nature Tours have encountered this species on two occasions near Rouergai and we may have had more joy had we spent time spotlighting in the area.

**Leopard Cat** *Felis bengalensis*

Occurs at Baixi and has been found dead at Rouergai.

**Giant Panda** *Ailuropoda melanoleuca*

Has been recorded at Labahe & Baixi but extremely unlikely particularly at the latter site.

**Hog Badger** *Arctonyx collaris*

Has been recorded at Rouergai.

**Yellow-throated Marten** *Martes flavigula*

Occurs at Labahe & Baixi

**Sika** *Cervus nippon*

Occurs at Baixi

**Takin** *Bodorcas taxicolor*

Sid has seen this at night at Labahe.

**Long-tailed Goral** *Naemorhedus caudatus*

Sid has seen this near the old hotel at Labahe.

## Birds

Although not a birding trip the birding was superb particularly on the plateau. Highlights included.

- Black-necked Grebe & Ruddy Shelduck at Rouergai.
- Exceptional numbers of raptors many attracted to the pika colonies in the Rouergai area including Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffin & Black Vultures, Hen Harrier, Golden & Steppe Eagle, Upland Buzzard, Saker and Merlin.
- Northern Goshawk at Labahe and Crested Goshawk & 'Himalayan' Buzzard at Baixi.
- Up to 12 superb Lady Amherst's Pheasants each day at Labahe.
- Great views of Temminck's Tragopan, albeit it a female, at Labahe.
- Good views of Chinese Grouse (DN & DP) at Baixi.
- Good numbers (probably 50+) of Black-necked Crane around Rouergai.
- Pallas's & Brown-headed Gull at Rouergai
- Flocks of Hill Pigeon north of Rouergai.
- Little Owl at Rouergai.
- Crimson-breasted Woodpecker at Labahe.
- Black-capped Kingfisher, Brown Dipper & Little Forktail at Labahe.
- Numerous Hume's Groundpecker at Rouergai.
- Tibetan Lark, flocks of Horned Lark with smaller numbers of Oriental Skylark at Rouergai.
- Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler at Labahe.
- Guldenstadt's, White-capped River, Blue-fronted, White-throated, Hodgson's, Plumbeous & Daurian Redstarts.
- Himalayan Bluetail at Labahe.
- Rufous-breasted (at Labahe) & Robin (at Rouergai & Baixi) Accentors.
- Green-backed, Yellow-browed & Grey-crested Tits at Labahe.
- Elliott's, Black-faced, Giant & Snowy-cheeked Laughingthrushes.
- White-browed & Sichuan Tit & White-browed Tit-Warbler at Baixi.
- Chinese Leaf & Buff-rumped Warbler.
- Chinese Grey Shrike south of Rouergai.
- Numerous Nutcrackers at Labahe.
- Large flocks of Tibetan & White-rumped Snowfinches at Rouergai with smaller numbers of Rufous-necked Snowfinches, Rock Petronia & Twite.
- Great Parrotbill at Labahe.
- White-browed & Beautiful Rosefinch at Baixi & Dark-breasted Rosefinch at Labahe.
- Little Bunting at Rouergai & Godlewski's Bunting at Baixi.
- Daurian Jackdaw & Azure-winged Magpie at Baixi and Chough at Rouergai.

**REPTILES – just this one**

