

## **SICHUAN SPRING 2016**

**Tangjiahe, Rouergai and Baixi**

**28 March – 5 April 2016**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

After two previous successful trips to Sichuan the recent increase in the number of sightings of Chinese Mountain (Desert) Cat in the Rouergai area, particularly in the autumn of 2015, (see Paul Carter and Phil Telfer's reports on [www.mammalwatching.com](http://www.mammalwatching.com)) was simply too much to resist another visit.

In the ideal world I would have visited in autumn as I believe that mammal watching is more productive in autumn. However with autumn 2016 already largely committed to tour leading I decided to fit in a spring trip and was really rewarded with no less than six sightings of at

least four different Chinese Mountain Cats, four sightings of at least two Pallas's Cats and an excellent supporting cast including a single Golden Snub-nosed Monkey and multiple Hog Badgers.

The trip was limited to two main areas Tangjiahe, which I had not visited before, and the Rouergai area which I first visited in 2012. Although the trip was highly successful I remain convinced that autumn would probably be even more productive. The main areas at Rouergai were far more disturbed by herders and livestock than they had been on my previous visit and we consequently only saw one Wolf compared to sightings of at least 14 previously. Tibetan Gazelle also proved elusive although on the other hand we saw large numbers of Himalayan Marmot and Woolly Hare that I had not seen previously.

The weather was generally good and much warmer than on the late autumn trip but we did have one day of rain at Tangjiahe and our final day of travelling was largely in wet conditions.

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## LOGISTICS

### Guides

As with the 2011 and 2012 trips I used a Chengdu-based British birder Sid Francis to organise the trip and he yet again did a great job, working long hours and completing some long drives, most notably the 10+ hour drive from Tangjiahe to Rouergai. Sid charged 1500 yuan per day for guiding, driving and use of his 4x4 vehicle. This equated to £170 per day which isn't cheap but still compares favourably with a number of other well-known operators.

I paid for everything else, i.e. accommodation (including Sid's), food, petrol, tolls, park entrance fees etc. separately and I spent roughly £55 per day for everything.

As mentioned in Phil Telfer's 2015 report Sid now carries a hotplate and grill with him so we were able to save time cooking up meals in hotel rooms. This is also particularly useful if like me you're not a fan of spicy or oriental food.

**Having now done three trips to Sichuan with Sid I would unreservedly recommend him to anyone visiting Sichuan. He also guides elsewhere in China and I fully intend using him for future trips to Qinghai and Poyang as well. Sid can be contacted by email at [chengduuk@hotmail.com](mailto:chengduuk@hotmail.com).**

### Flights

British Airways now fly direct from London Heathrow to Chengdu two or three times a week often for under £500. This saves the hassle of going via Beijing or Shanghai. My flight out was on Easter Sunday so the price was slightly higher at just under £600 but the flight was not totally full so I had a spare seat next to me. On the way back the flight was less than 50% full making for a very comfortable journey.

### Visas

The visa requirements for China are constantly changing and you currently need to supply flight details and accommodation details with your visa request. I used China Visa Direct who were extremely quick and efficient. <http://www.chinesevisadirect.co.uk/>

## Accommodation

**Chengdu** – I stayed at the Chengdu Airport Hotel which is a short shuttle bus ride or a five-minute walk from the terminal on my last night. Although convenient for the airport I did feel that it was over-priced. A large single room with breakfast cost 610 yuan (£68).

**Tangjiahe** – we stayed at the hotel in the park at a cost of 380 yuan (£42) per room per night. We cooked our own food so did not use the restaurant

**Rouergai** – there are numerous alternatives in Rouergai. We stayed in Sid's normal business hotel in the town centre at 150 yuan (£17) per night for a single room but given the erratic supply of hot water would probably have been better off using one of the many more expensive hotels in town.

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## ITINERARY

- 28<sup>th</sup>
- Late morning arrival in Chengdu and met with Sid before long drive to Tangjiahe.
  - Post dinner spotlighting session along access road.
- 29<sup>th</sup>
- Pre-dawn spotlighting session along approach road followed by walk along trail beyond the hotel.
  - Post-breakfast drive down to start of road to Motianlin and then back to hotel.
  - Early afternoon scanning from balcony before resting for remainder of afternoon.
  - Night drive.
- 30<sup>th</sup>
- Pre-dawn spotlighting session before returning to hotel for breakfast.
  - Post breakfast walk (16 km round trip) on track behind hotel to 4 kms beyond protection station returning to hotel mid-afternoon with Golden Snub-nosed Monkey under the belt.
  - Evening spotlighting session before being stopped by fire protection officers. Went out again an hour later including spotlighting the track beyond the hotel.
- 31<sup>st</sup>
- Early morning along the river near the hotel followed by long drive to Rouergai with two or three short stops on route in Huanglong National Park.
  - Arrived Rouergai around 1930 after a delay caused by a broken down lorry in a tunnel causing long queues. After a quick dinner headed out to the first quarry north of Rouergai quickly finding a Pallas's Cat.
- 1<sup>st</sup>
- Mistimed our arrival at the quarry until after first light then visited several sites up to 40 kms north of Rouergai until late morning before returning to hotel having amassed a total of 13 Tibetan Foxes.
  - Late afternoon at second quarry c.40 kms north of Rouergai producing Chinese Mountain Cat followed by spotlighting session around first quarry producing both species of cat!
- 2<sup>nd</sup>
- Early morning back at quarry one with Chinese Mountain Cat prior to dawn. Spent the rest of the day at various sites up to 90 kms north of Rouergai, briefly exploring the mountains west of Langmusizhen and going as far north as the lake at Gahaixiang. Also birded wetlands north of Flower Lake.
  - Returned to quarry one at dusk and further views of both cats flushing the Chinese Mountain Cats as I stalked the Pallas's Cat!
- 3<sup>rd</sup>
- Early morning at Baixi and also explored side road c.5 kms SE of Rouergai. Returned to hotel early afternoon.
  - Late afternoon back at quarry two produced a new Pallas's Cat and spotlighting on the road to the SE of Rouergai produced five Woolly Hares and another Chinese Mountain Cat.
- 4<sup>th</sup>
- Early morning Baixi and then explored quarries and side roads to the south of Rouergai before exploring the main road south towards Hongyuan returning to the

- hotel just after midday.
- Late afternoon exploring road south towards Hongyuan and then found a side road through a superb relatively undisturbed valley until dark. Started spotlighting back through the valley finding another Chinese Mountain Cat at point bank range, several Woolly Hares and the first of five Red Foxes.
- 5<sup>th</sup>
- Unproductive pre-dawn spotlighting to the south of Rouergai before starting long drive back to Chengdu in heavy rain.
  - Short stop on route c.80 kms south of Songpan, eventually arriving back in Chengdu late afternoon.
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## **MAMMAL-WATCHING SITES**

### **TANGJIAHE**

Tangjiahe lies about 7 hours north-east of Chengdu. It is an excellent park although as with most Chinese parks rules change regularly and different authorities within the park have different interpretations of the rules so it can be frustrating. Tangjiahe Hotel 11 kms into the park is the place to stay.

#### **The Park Roads**

- Much of the mammal watching at Tangjiahe can be done from the 11 km road that leads to the hotel. Spotlighting from the junction with the Mountainlin road is very productive although it is advisable not to spotlight around the protection station halfway down this road. Fire protection officers stopped us spotlighting on the third night even though the forest protection officers had been fine with it. Hog Badgers are easy most nights and others have seen Chinese Ferret Badger as well. We also saw Masked Palm Civet. Both Tibetan and Rhesus Macaques were seen along the road and ungulates were common with good numbers of Chinese Takin and Reeve's Muntjac, and smaller numbers of Tufted Deer, Chinese Goral and Wild Boar.
- Another section of road, close to the park entrance, forks over the river in the direction of Motianlin. Unfortunately only park busses are permitted to drive this route, and they only stop at the end-station, but you are permitted to walk the road. We didn't visit this road.
- The access road continues past the hotel but is unpaved. If the barrier is up you can drive around 4 km down the road until you come to a small carpark at a protection station. From here you have to walk. We saw Chinese Takin, Reeve's Muntjac and Chinese Serow (the latter at night) along the stretch between the hotel and the protection station, and the first two species plus a fabulous Golden Snub-nosed Monkey while walking the track a couple of kilometres beyond the protection station.

#### **Around the Hotel**

- There is excellent birding around the hotel and we also saw Tibetan Macaques and Chinese Takin from our rooms. One of the latter walked across the front of reception one evening. Others have seen Pere David's Rock Squirrel in the rocks alongside the stream adjacent to the hotel

### **HUANGLONG NATIONAL PARK**

- We drove through this park on route from Tangjiahe to Rouergai seeing Pere David's Rock Squirrel at a short stop along the lower stretch of the road. We also tried conifer forest higher up for Swinhoe's Squirrel but unsuccessfully. We stopped and scanned the higher peaks for Blue Sheep which Sid has seen here before but a lack of time prevented us from putting in adequate effort here.

## **ROUERGAI**

- Rouergai is a town on the edge of the Tibetan plateau in NW Sichuan. The roads have been improved since my visit in 2012 with a motorway for the first 80 kms or so and it is now, accidents, traffic and landslides permitting, an eight-hour journey from Chengdu.
- Rouergai is a superb area and is undoubtedly worth a lot more exploration. 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. In spring, summer and early autumn these are supplemented by Himalayan Marmot.
- We concentrated on the area north of Rouergai in 2012 but explored more widely in 2016 including areas to the south and south-west. The distances given below are approximate and are measured with the main junction just north of Rouergai.

### **North of Rouergai**

- Kms 0-24 – relatively unrewarding with only an unidentified fox at night. We had Red Fox and a dead Steppe Polecat in 2012. We tended to drive through this area fairly quickly and did not spend much time scanning in this area.
- Km 24-35 – a particularly rewarding area. Himalayan Marmots are commonly found throughout this area.
  1. At km 20 there is a track on the right hand side leading to a quarry with a massive pika colony below it. This is where we saw Chinese Desert and Pallas's Cat and other trips have recorded these species in the same area. Tibetan Foxes were also denning on the slope on the right hand side.
  2. 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 several Tibetan Foxes in this area. Plateau Pikas are abundant from here on. In 2012 we saw Wolf here and others have seen Tibetan Gazelle here in late autumn and winter,
  3. Just after this there are three or four turn-offs on the right. These can be worth exploring. I have seen Wolf here previously and others have seen Tibetan Gazelle.
  4. After c.35 kms there is a track on the right that leads to another quarry where both cats have also been seen. We saw a distant Chinese Mountain Cat while scanning the wide valley to the south, saw Pallas's Cat in the quarry itself and I have also seen Wolf here previously. It is also another winter site for Tibetan Gazelle.
- Area near the entrance to the Flower Lake Recreational Area – previously another good area for Tibetan Foxes and we also saw three Wolves just south of here in 2012 but heavily disturbed by herders in spring 2016..
- Toll gate (50-60 kms from Rouergai) – Just after the toll gate take a left hand turn and park after 150-200m. We saw Pallas's Cat here in 2012 but it was even more heavily disturbed in 2016
- 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 seeing our only Wolf of the trip here. We then turned right towards Langmusizhen. This was during the middle of the day and was relatively quiet but went through some great mountain passes that could well hold Blue Sheep and other ungulates. Snow Leopard has been reported here.
- When we returned to the main road at Langmusizhen we turned left and continued north for 30 kms to the wetland reserve at Gahaixiang which produced a few nice birds but little from a mammal perspective other than pikas.

## South of Rouergai

We explored three areas south of Rouergai on the road towards Chaunzhusizen.

- A road to the right c. 5 kms south of Rouergai runs for c.8 kms to a small town where you can continue straight on or take a turn through the village to the right. We spotlighted the first few kms of this road as far as the second quarry on the left and saw Chinese Desert Cat and five Woolly Hares along this road.
- A turn on the right 10-15 kms south of the Baixi turn-off (see below) looked promising but produced nothing of note.
- A quarry to the left of the main road about 10-15 kms south of the Baixi turn-off produced two nice Tibetan Partridges but no mammals.

## South-west of Rouergai

- We spent some time exploring the first 30 kms or so of the road that runs south-west from Rouergai towards Hongyuan seeing Woolly Hares during the day and at night, Himalayan Marmots during the day and four Red Foxes at night.
- 25-30 kms down this road we explored a side road on the right which we followed for 12 kms through a nice wetland and relatively undisturbed valleys where we had our final Chinese Desert Cat, our first Red Fox and several Woolly Hares. This site is referred to as Hidden Valley in the checklist.

## 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 Baix which is 15 km down this road but the forest starts after a couple of kilometres..
- Follow this road for c.10 kms stopping the scanning the hillsides on both sides of the road at regular intervals. We made several stops seeing Siberian Roe Deer and Chinese Serow on route.
- Sid's main site. 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. Following this trail mid-morning produced good views of Gansu Pika.
- In 2012 we scanned 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 but during our 2016 visit there was too much disturbance from yak herders.

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## MAMMALS

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

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

Tangjiahe. Groups of 5, 3 and 9 on the 29<sup>th</sup> and 8 on the 31<sup>st</sup>.

### **Rhesus Macaque** *Macaca mulatta*

One seen along the approach road to Tangjiahe Hotel on the 29<sup>th</sup>.

**Golden Snub-nosed Monkey** *Rhinopithecus roxellana*

One seen along the trail continuing on behind the hotel, about six kilometres from the hotel and two kilometres beyond the protection station on the 30th. A hoped-for but unexpected bonus.

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

One at a roadside stop in Huanglong National Park and another at a stop on route from Songpan to Chengdu.



**Himalayan Marmot** *Marmota himalayana*

Rouergai – widespread in all directions from Rouergai with large numbers seen including 1<sup>st</sup> am (45) and 2<sup>nd</sup> (100+).

**Woolly Hare** *Lepus comus*

Rouergai – 3<sup>rd</sup>, five along a side road while spotlighting SE of Rouergai. 4<sup>th</sup> – two late morning along the road towards Hongyuan and another while spotlighting in the same area later in the day. Seven in 'Hidden Valley' the same evening.



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

Rouergai – abundant, 100s seen each day, and the reason for the exceptional numbers of mammalian and avian predators in the area. Also seen at Gahaixiang.

**Gansu Pika** *Ochotona cansus*

One seen well at Baixi on 3<sup>rd</sup>.

**Confucian Niviventer (Chinese White-bellied Rat) *Niviventer confucianus***

Tangjiahe – two on the 28<sup>th</sup> and one on the 30<sup>th</sup>.

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

Rouergai – One of the highlights of the trip.

- At quarry one, one seen down to 20 metres within five minutes of arriving on the 31<sup>st</sup>. The same individual more distantly in the same quarry on the 1<sup>st</sup> and sitting on the rim of the quarry at dusk on the 2<sup>nd</sup>.
- At quarry two one seen by RW slipping away just prior to dusk and then re-found while spotlighting in the quarry 30 minutes later.

**Chinese Desert Cat *Felis bieti***

Rouergai – the highlight of the trip.

- Quarry Two – 1<sup>st</sup>. One watched distantly for over 15 minutes about 45 minutes prior to dusk in the open valley to the south of the quarry at one point unsuccessfully trying to catch a pika.
- Quarry One - After distant views of a probable in the spotlight on the 31<sup>st</sup> great views of one which allowed us to follow it down to 50 metres for upwards of 30 minutes to the right of the quarry on the 1<sup>st</sup>. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> presumably the same individual was in the same area pre-dawn and eventually headed into the quarry. Later in the day presumably the same individual was flushed at close range prior to dusk while I was stalking a Pallas's Cat!
- Side road SE of Rouergai. 3<sup>rd</sup>. Fabulous views of an adult hunting in grassland close to the road before sitting down to watch us.
- 'Hidden Valley'. 4<sup>th</sup>. One, sitting less than three metres from the car totally focussed on a rodent burrow and totally oblivious to the spotlight for several minutes.



**Masked Palm Civet *Paguma larvata***

Tangjiahe, an adult and juv on the night drive on the 29<sup>th</sup>,

**Wolf *Canus lupus***

One distantly on a ridge near Mucuogan c.65 kilometres north of Rouergai was the only one seen. Much more difficult than in late autumn possibly due to the large numbers of livestock and herders in the Flower Lake area.

**Tibetan Fox *Vulpes ferrilata***

Common 24 – 55 km north of Rouergai. Personal daily counts of 1, 18, 10 and 3.



**Red Fox** *Vulpes vulpes*

Rouergai, only seen on the 4<sup>th</sup> when seen while spotlighting SW of Rouergai, one in 'Hidden Valley' and four along the Hongyuan road. Surprisingly not seen north of the toll gate where they had been common in autumn 2012.

**Hog Badger** *Arctonyx collaris*

Seen nightly at Tangjiahe but not seen on pre-dawn drives. 28<sup>th</sup> (3), 29<sup>th</sup> (4), 30<sup>th</sup> (2).

**Wild Boar** *Sus scrofa*

Tangjiahe. 28<sup>th</sup> pm (2), 29<sup>th</sup> pm (2), 30<sup>th</sup> am (1), pm (3).

**Siberian Roe** *Capreolus pygargus*

Baixi, one single and a group of four on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, and a single animal again on the 4<sup>th</sup>.

**Tufted Deer** *Elaphodus cephalophus*

Tangjiahe. 28<sup>th</sup> (3+), 29<sup>th</sup> am (3), pm (3), 30<sup>th</sup> am (2) and pm (4). Much commoner than other reports suggest. Many were moulting from winter to summer coats.

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

Very common Tangjiahe although numbers varied widely from drive to drive. Highest count 35+ on the morning of the 29<sup>th</sup>, 30 of these being seen in a one-hour spotlighting session prior to first light! Some previous reports have reported low numbers in Tangjiahe but they really are very common. Many were moulting from winter to summer coats.



**Chinese Takin** *Budorcas taxicolor*

Common Tangjiahe with up to 15 being seen on each drive and several seen while walking the track beyond the hotel. One seen on the hotel forecourt at night.

**Chinese Serow** *Capricornis milneedwardsii*

One spotlighted on the track beyond the hotel on the 30<sup>th</sup>, a stunning white-maned male close to the road at Baixi just after first light on 3<sup>rd</sup> and another more distantly on the 4<sup>th</sup>.

**Chinese Goral** *Naemorhedus griseus*

Small numbers at Tangjiahe. 29<sup>th</sup> am (1) pm (3), 30<sup>th</sup> am (2), pm (2), 31<sup>st</sup> (1).

## BIRDS

Although not a birding trip the birding was very good. Highlights included.

- Ruddy Shelduck at Rouergai.
- Bar-headed Geese at Gahaixiang and near Flower Lake.
- Ferruginous Duck at Gahaixiang.
- Goosander south of Rouergai.
- Black Stork at Gaxaxiang, Rouergai and in Hidden Valley.
- White-tailed Eagle at Gahaixiang.
- Good numbers of raptors many attracted to the pika colonies in the Rouergai area including Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffin and Black Vultures, Hen Harrier, Steppe Eagle, Upland Buzzard, Black-eared Kite and Saker.
- Golden Pheasants at Tangjiahe and at a roadside stop in Huanglong National Park.
- Wild Common Pheasants at Baixi.
- Blue Eared Pheasant at Baixi and west of Chaunzhusizen.
- Chinese Grouse at Baixi.
- Tibetan Partridge south of Rouergai.
- Large numbers of Black-necked Crane across the plateau.
- Great Black-headed Gull at Gahaixiang.
- Hill Pigeon north of Rouergai.
- Oriental Turtle Dove near Tangjiahe.
- Three Tawny Fish Owls and Collared Scops Owl at Tangjiahe.
- Crested Kingfisher, saturatus Hoopoe, Black (heard) and Grey-headed Woodpecker at Tangjiahe.
- Oriental Skylark and Horned Lark around Rouergai.
- Hume's Groundpecker around Rouergai.
- Amur and 'Himalayan' Wagtails at Tangjiahe.
- Asian House Martin at Tangjiahe and Crag Martin south of Songpan.
- Brown Dipper at Tangjiahe.
- Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler at Tangjiahe and Black-streaked Scimitar-Babbler south of Songpan.
- Chestnut (Tangjiahe) and Kessler's (Baixi) Thrushes.
- White-capped River, Blue-fronted, eastern Black, Hodgson's, Plumbeous and Daurian Redstarts.
- Himalayan Bluetail at Tangjiahe.
- Robin Accentors at Baixi.
- Green-backed, Sooty and Grey-crested Tits at Tangjiahe.
- Bar-tailed Treecreeper at Tangjiahe.
- Elliott's, Black-faced, Giant, White-browed and Plain Laughingthrushes.
- Rufous-necked, Tibetan and White-rumped Snowfinches around Rouergai.
- Rock Petronia and Twite north of Rouergai.
- White-browed and Pink-rumped Rosefinch at Baixi with the latter also seen south of Songpan..
- Godlewski's Bunting at Baixi, south of Rouergai and south of Songpan.
- Slaty Bunting at Tangjiahe.
- White-cheeked Starling north and south of Rouergai.
- Daurian Jackdaw west of Chaunzhusizen.
- Red-billed Chough around Rouergai.
- Collared Crow near Tangjiahe.