

THE MAMMALS OF TIBET

- A Fourteen Day Quest for Pallas' Cat and Other Specialities of The Tibetan Plateau.



The Wenquan Mountains: home of Pallas' Cat.

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1 Background and Objectives

I had long wanted to see Pallas' Cat as well as other equally rare and elusive mammals of central Asia such as Tibetan Antelope and Tibetan Fox. However, the difficulty of finding suitable sites and then getting access to them had presented an insuperable barrier until I discovered that a UK company, Greentours, operated a two week tour of Tibet focusing on these very targets. I usually travel independently these days but, given the logistical, linguistic and administrative problems of setting up my own trip in a country like Tibet, I bit the bullet and signed up for the package.

As usual, I had a long shopping list of other targets. There would be three species of Gazelle to find: Tibetan Gazelle (which I assumed would be a "given"), Goitered Gazelle (probably not too hard) and the extremely rare and endangered Przewalski's Gazelle (requiring either a miracle or specialised inside information). I wanted Tibetan Wild Ass (or Kiang), which I expected to be pretty easy, and White-lipped Deer (which, naively, I also thought would be straightforward). Tibetan Wolf, obviously was a key target and I was interested in seeing for myself the *mcneilli* and *kansuensis* forms of Red Deer about which so much taxonomic hot air was being expended in the scientific community. Finally, I harboured faint hopes of bumping into either Snow Leopard and/or Chinese Desert Cat, either of which would probably require more "karma" than I could reasonably offer.

2 Logistics

The trip ran from the 1st October to the 18th October 2014. We had 14 full days in the field and covered, according to our guide Jesper, some 3900 kilometres. A lot of driving! But to get all the target species we had to cover a variety of habitats and that in turn meant covering a lot of ground. Our route took us in a big loop starting and finishing in Xining. We progressed via Koko Nor, Gonghe, Wenquan, Maduo, Yushu, Nangqian, Yushu again, Qumulai, Budongquan, Golmud, Dulan and Chaka. We used two vehicles - both Toyota Landcruisers - which were roomy and comfortable and which offered excellent platforms for observation while in motion.

Accommodation was mostly in modern hotels which tended to look good superficially but suffer from serious flaws on closer inspection. Often we found very smart, well appointed rooms which were freezing cold. Hot running water was sometimes available, sometimes not. Even electricity was not absolutely reliable with one hotel suffering a late evening power cut. Connections to the Internet, theoretically possible in most places, in reality were patchy. Things like broken door handles, wobbly toilet seats, missing floor tiles and non-working lights were common, suggesting failures of maintenance and a general lack of attention to detail.

On two occasions it was necessary to stay at extremely basic places. The first, at Wenquan, was a rather grim and shabby little hostel offering air-conditioning (broken windows), under-floor refrigeration (the coldest floor tiles I have ever experienced) and alfresco ablution facilities (an outside communal toilet in a delapidated "cow shed" type of structure where there were three filthy holes in the ground). The establishment soon earned itself the soubriquet "The Wenquan Hilton". The second, the "Junction Motel" at Budongquan, was even more primitive. No water of any description was on offer (hot or cold, running or otherwise). Its only saving virtue was the presence of a stove in the middle of each room which raised the temperature inside to a balmy three or four degrees Celsius. It was so bad that I actually quite liked it! However, if you want to see the wildlife you have to go where the action is and I do realise that all these places were the only realistic choices available. Sometimes you have to suffer to get your wildlife!

I expected the food to be absolutely dire. (I don't much like rice, noodles, bean curds, spicy food and so on). But in fact I was very pleasantly surprised and only at Wenquan did I struggle a bit. Often it was very good indeed. The breakfasts were usually taken in the field and offered bread, cheese, jam, sausage, eggs and fruit. Lunch was either a repeat of breakfast in the field or a simple dish of noodles or soup in a roadside cafe. The evening meals offered lamb, pork or beef together with green vegetables, rice and sometimes dumplings or potato. On several occasions the quality was sublime - the roast belly of pork, the boiled yak, the sweet and sour pork.....all of which were so good that they shouldn't have been legal.

The international long hauls were on KLM from London via Amsterdam to Chengdu and domestic flights between Chengdu and Xining on Air China These all went smoothly enough.

Lastly, visas were obtained through China Visa Direct who charged only a modest fee for negotiating a potentially debilitating administrative minefield.

3 The Team

The team was led by Ian Green of Greentours and Jesper Hornskov, a local guide based in Xining. Jesper set up all the local ground arrangements and designed the itinerary. Both were excellent. Ian not only found the Pallas' Cat (thus meriting at least membership of the Legion d'honneur) but also produced the miracle cure of Papua New Guinea Paracetamol when I fell ill halfway through with a bad headcold and an infected sinus. He also guided Martin through the Chinese Health Service when he developed an infected gum, a condition so painful that it threatened to abort his participation in the tour. Jesper, a brilliant storyteller, entertainer, host, supplier of beer and multi-linguist, also proved to be a genius at finding wildlife. His knowledge of Tibetan birds and mammals is probably unique.

Our drivers were Mr Pang and Mr Ao. Both worked very long hours without complaint and remained cheerful despite occasional traffic jams, punctures, inclement weather and

painfully early starts. Our long absences when we went walkabout must have been excruciatingly boring for them.

The crew consisted of Martin Singfield, Jane Appleton, Roger Smith and me.

4 Results

In the end we ran out of targets such was the completeness of our success. We recorded 25 mammal species (of which 19 were new for me). Critically we got the star animal, Pallas' Cat.

Other major "hits" included Tibetan Antelope, Wild Yak, Kiang, White-lipped Deer, Asian Badger, Tibetan Fox and Tibetan Wolf. The last of these we found on three occasions, the last of which memorably presented us with the sight of a pack of six Wolves indulging in a "group howl" before setting off to hunt Tibetan Gazelle.

The rarest mammal we saw was undoubtedly Przewalski's Gazelle. It took a lot of finding but after an increasingly desperate search we eventually found a bachelor group of 17 males - something like 4-5% of the world population! I was ecstatic.

The birders got a good deal too. For me the avian highlights were Black-necked Crane, Ibisbill, Eurasian Bittern and Saker Falcon. There were innumerable Tits, Larks and Snowfinches, most of which I have to say passed me by. The Redstarts were very decorative and I was particularly struck by the White-browed Tit-warbler, a bird that seemed to glow with a translucent purple sheen. Very pretty!

5 Day By Day Log

Friday 3rd October

After an eternity of travel we finally found ourselves heading into the field. Our plan was to spend the day in a Reserve north of Xining called Yu Zhu, an area of forested hills at a moderate altitude of around 2800 metres. Our principal mammalian target was the Siberian Roe Deer and we set off well before dawn so that we would be in situ at the time of day when activity was most likely.

We arrived just as a cool, grey dawn was breaking. There was a slight frost but, in the absence of any wind, it didn't feel especially cold. We took our first field breakfast, the first of many, then set off up an adjacent hillside with Jesper leading the way. We soon came to the brow of a ridge where we had a grandstand view of an open grassy area where, Jesper assured us, the Roe Deer had previously been seen grazing. Well, they weren't there when we arrived and, an hour later, they still weren't there. Eventually, as the sun rose ever higher in the sky and the frost melted, it became apparent that they weren't coming at all. A few birds, including White-chinned and Blue-fronted Redstart, pleased the birders. But, from a mammal perspective, we were off to a rather anti-climactic start.

We decamped to a second site where Jesper revealed he had found both Tsing-ling and Chinese Red Pika on a previous recce trip. Our route took us on a zig-zag path up a gently sloping hillside. In the bright sunshine there was quite a lot of bird activity - Chestnut Thrush, Chinese Nuthatch and Songar Tit all came our way - but I wanted to press on to where the Pikas had been sighted. I hadn't long to wait. The site in question was a well vegetated rocky slope with bare scree covering its lower portion. We sat ourselves down and waited. Nothing. The sun blazed down; we shed layers of clothing; still we waited. But no Pikas were in town it seemed.

We pushed on up the hill finding another impressive scree slope which too was devoid of Pikas. A Himalayan Buzzard soared overhead but mostly it was quiet. With lunch beckoning, we picked our way back down the hill, stopping at the Pika site once more to gaze at the scree in the hope that something marvellous might happen. Then, quite suddenly, it did! A small bundle of silky brown fur materialised from nowhere and hurtled over and through the scree before abruptly disappearing into a crevice between two large rocks. A Tsing-ling Pika! We stared at the hole willing it to re-appear though of course it didn't. Nevertheless, I was delighted. We had opened our account at last.

Lunch turned out to be noodles - loathsome worms of chewy stodge - and I contented myself with a cup of proper Yorkshire tea. It is a mystery to me how people even manage to eat them, tangled together as they are in a continuous, glutinous bird's nest.

We had one last foray in the afternoon, ascending a long though gradually sloping hill. There was quite a lot of disturbance from holiday-makers but I still hoped we might stumble across an obliging Roe Deer if we got far enough away from the crowds. And, high up on the hill, we did indeed hear the barking of a not-too-distant Deer. But thick forest stood between us and the animal and we couldn't even get a glimpse. Our main objective for the day thus went unaccomplished. But I wasn't too worried; we had much bigger fish to fry in the days ahead.

We returned to our very comfortable hotel in Xining, the traffic being predictably appalling on a Friday evening in the rush hour.

Saturday 4th October

We departed Xining long before the last vampires were returning to their tombs, bound for the wetlands at Koko Nor, several hours' drive to the West. Jesper had recently seen Asian Badger there, a startling find that I was very keen to repeat. And in the South Koko Nor Mountains, which we would have to cross to reach our evening destination of Gong He, there had been, in the not so distant past, a sighting of Chinese Desert Cat. So, plenty to chew on!

Dawn broke as we headed into open countryside West of Xining. It was a miserable looking morning with black clouds overhead and sleet and snow whistling past horizontally. But as

we neared the wetland blue skies to the South lifted our hopes that the weather might break. However, reaching a junction in the road, we headed North! Arriving at our breakfast site there was already three inches of snow on the ground and the air was cold and damp. When it finally stopped snowing we set up breakfast and ate our boiled eggs and cheese sandwiches with pinched fingers and chattering teeth.

However, our arrival did at least bring us a second mammal - the Black-lipped or Plateau Pika - a creature which we would subsequently see in the thousands. The Black-lipped Pika is the common Pika of the Tibetan Plateau and lives in populous colonies anywhere there is suitable soil and grass. It is a corner-stone of the eco-system of course and is preyed on by both birds of prey and mammalian carnivores, not the least of which being the Pallas' Cat.

We scouted the wetlands at various points as we hiked along the shore. Among the hordes of common waterfowl and geese there were six or seven Black-necked Cranes and several raptors, including Saker Falcon and Northern Harrier. And a Eurasian Bittern put in a pleasing appearance later in the day, creeping surreptitiously through the reeds as it stalked its prey. But my main pre-occupation was the Badger and I took every opportunity to scan the grassy fields surrounding the wetland in the hope of catching it out in the open. An hour after we had set off the sun was driving nails in our backs and the snow was rapidly shrinking. Suddenly we were all ripping off redundant clothing. Then, soon after, a chilly breeze sprung up and we were putting most of it back on. Such is Autumn in Tibet.

We found numerous badger holes but, not entirely surprisingly, no sign of their owner. The Asian Badger is, theoretically at least, nocturnal or crepuscular though I did wonder whether some diurnal activity would be usual in the colder months. Roger glimpsed a small mammal scurrying through the grass and into its (much smaller) hole, probably a Hamster. Jesper had heard faint squeaking earlier in the day and, judging by the number of small holes present in the grass, at least one species of Hamster was probably common. I spent some time creeping around in the hope of spotting one but without success.

After a picnic lunch we slowly made our way back to the vehicles, finding a juvenile Peregrine sitting on a fence post and a few more Northern Harriers quartering the marsh.

We still had quite a bit of ground to cover and the afternoon saw us skirting the Southern shores of Koko Nor Lake, a vast inland sea, before turning South-west into the South Koko Nor Mountains. The country here looked a lot wilder, the road running through a gently undulating and grassy valley floor between rugged hills on either side. Jesper brought us to a halt at the spot where the now famous Chinese Desert Cat had previously been seen and we all got out to scan. I wasn't expecting an encore of the Cat but I was hoping for a Fox and, sure enough, after a few minutes Jane spotted something moving at around 1000 metres. Moments later it was in Ian's and Jesper's scopes. Our first Tibetan Fox! We drove a little way down the road to get a closer view and found at least two more, one sneaking up on a colony of Black-lipped Pikas and insinuating itself into a depression in the ground ready

to pounce. For five minutes we watched it sit motionlessly waiting for a Pika to come close enough for a strike but eventually it lost patience and loped off over the brow of a hill. The midday warmth of the sun was fast becoming a distant memory and a very chilly wind was by now starting to make itself felt. But I didn't care. I had got one of my key target species. Jesper assured us that we'd see plenty more but I only half believed him. How wrong I would later be proved!

Sunday 5th October

We got up in the middle of the night. Well, all right five o'clock. But today was to be our first real chance of Pallas' Cat and, the animal being mainly crepuscular, it was vital to be at the site as early as possible. The site Jesper had in mind was a boulder-strewn hillside in a quiet valley South-west of Gong He. In August he had seen a mother and kitten there and the prospects looked good for both still being in the area. We scanned the hillside immediately on arrival while our breakfast was being set up but nothing presented itself straight away. We would have to go walkabout and explore the surrounding hills.

The morning was bright and clear with a sharp frost. But we were now at an altitude around 4000 metres and the exertion of climbing the hill opposite the Cat's slope soon had us forgetting the cold. Our ascent gave us a much better vantage point and, on a sweep with his scope, Ian found our first Himalayan Marmot, a fat sausage of creamy-brown fur sitting inconspicuously on a grassy slope opposite. No doubt it would soon be hibernating for the winter.

We traversed the hill we had climbed until finally we reached the point where it and the hill opposite joined forces at the head of the valley. We then switched to the other side and toiled up to the brow of the hill that we had until then been scanning from afar, the plan being to scan the valley yonder. This brought us some fabulous views but no Cat. It was time for Plan B.

Plan B turned out to be Er La, a high mountain pass at an altitude of well over 4000 metres. One of Jesper's previous visits here had produced a rather peculiar outcome. He had set off, with his clients, to explore the pass only to find, on later returning to the vehicles, that the drivers had enjoyed close and prolonged views of a Pallas' Cat and her kitten. They had, apparently, tried frantically to call Jesper on his mobile but hadn't been able to get through. Needless to say, by the time the group had got back to the scene of the action, the Cat had long gone. Hardly in the script! Nevertheless, it was confirmation that we were in a good area and that was all the encouragement I needed.

The pass had to be reached by ascending a steep bare slope, a gruelling climb which we made in zig-zag fashion to ease the gradient. It was cold, even in the early afternoon, and a raw breeze chilled us to the marrow. Eventually we crested a saddle between two high ranges of hills and settled down to scan the long valley beyond. We had hoped that, with

the wind at our backs, we would be protected by sitting in the lee of the saddle but, to our dismay, the wind slammed into us with unabated force. Having had an initial scan and finding nothing we tried a new spot to our right, a rough rock-strewn slope semi-carpeted in frozen snow. This turned out to be even worse and, as the wind freshened yet further, it soon became intolerable. Martin and Jane had had enough and retreated to the vehicles. The rest of us looked around desperately seeking a spot where we wouldn't be blown off the mountain. All we had left to try was the left hand hillside but this did the trick. We traversed the slope for about half a kilometre and found a quieter spot at last. It might not have been the perfect vantage point - we were after all sitting bang in the middle of the area where a Cat was most likely to appear - but at least we weren't in immediate danger of hypothermia.

In our new eyrie, with a pale sun offering us at least a little warmth, we felt re-invigorated. Quite soon, three Tibetan Gazelles appeared below us in the valley. They materialised from nowhere, as animals so often seemed to do on this trip, skipping along briskly and pausing every so often to stare at some unseen danger behind them. They had just crossed the frozen stream at the base of the valley when I noticed two new figures enter the scene. For a moment I thought they were Tibetan Foxes but the stocky frames, big heads and black-tipped tails told a much different story. Wolves! No wonder the Gazelles had been nervous. However, the Wolves seemed uninterested and trotted off down the valley as if on some more important mission. They paused at the end of the valley to look around and then disappeared below the skyline. I felt a twinge of disappointment for Martin and Jane who had particularly wanted to see Wolf and who had left at precisely the wrong moment.

We stuck it out for another couple of hours in the hope that a Cat would start moving in the late afternoon but our effort went unrewarded. As we tracked back around the hill towards the saddle the force of the wind hit us again. By now it was approaching Force 7 and twice it nearly took me off my feet. The air temperature was already some degrees below zero but the aggravating effect of the wind chill was brutal. As I crossed the saddle and began the long downhill trudge back to the vehicles I felt as if I was in a refrigerated wind tunnel. I wrapped my scarf around my mouth and ears and, hunched over, marched resolutely onwards. In the end, no-one got frostbite, no-one died and we saw Wolves. A good day!

Monday 6th October

We had over-nighted at the inglorious "Wenquan Hilton", a grubby and charmless hovel with no running water and no heating. There were stoves in some of the rooms but with no coal to burn these were no more than decoration. My room was like an ice box! A nearby well provided hot water from a natural spring - one saving grace - and an electric blanket did provide (eventually) some warmth to what would otherwise have been a hypothermic bed. The toilets were simply holes in the ground in a "cow shed" type of structure situated (wisely) some distance from the rooms themselves.

I actually managed to oversleep, quite a feat in such an uncomfortable place! Horrified to discover it was already 06.15, (we were leaving at 06.30), I managed to wash, dress and get ready in record time, fully aware that our best chance of Pallas' Cat would be today at a site where Jesper had had most of his previous sightings. What was I doing oversleeping on such an important day?



The redoubt: Pallas' Cat habitat.

We set off in darkness along what seemed to be a very long road into the mountains and after an hour or so pulled off into a lay-by. In the half-light of early morning another steep, bare hillside greeted us. Jesper explained that we would traverse it diagonally and then climb towards some distant ridges to get a vantage point from which to scan other more distant valleys. It was cool but not freezing; some cloud cover had spared us another sub-zero start to the day. And, critically, the previous day's gale had subsided.

I felt quite apprehensive. This was to be the best chance of a Cat. If we failed today - and we certainly keep trying until darkness fell - then, at best, we had just one more chance the following day. And, as I was fully aware, our best chance lay in the first hour or two after dawn. So this was it; do or die!

We had reached the brow of the first hill and stopped to scan a distant ridge where two huge rocky outcrops broke the skyline and boulders of all sizes littered the slope below. I

scanned quickly with binoculars and found nothing. But Ian was more diligent and picked his way much more carefully along the ridge line with his telescope. "I think I've got a Cat" he declared calmly. It was like being electrocuted. "Where?" came several voices at once. Garbled instructions were issued, scopes were re-positioned and frantic efforts were made to locate the distant feline. I was sure it would slip away before anyone could get on it. But, despite the panic, we did eventually all get on it and, though a small object in the scopes, we had unforgettable views. First it sat on its haunches like an Egyptian Sphinx; then it got up and stretched before padding slowly along, its white throat patch and dark dorsal stripes evident. It looked stocky and squat, a tough little bundle of grey fur at ease with the hostile environment in which it lived. It continued its march leftwards until, finally, it disappeared behind an intervening ridge. There was much back-slapping and hand-shaking and self-congratulation. We had done it! The narcotic effect of finding a new Cat lingered all morning and, as we resumed our progress along the hill, I was grinning from ear to ear. And perhaps we might find the same Cat later once we had crossed the ridge separating us.

We eventually crested the ridge ahead and a new valley stretched out before us. This produced a very distant Tibetan Fox but was otherwise quiet. Continuing our climb we reached a rocky redoubt where Jesper, on an earlier trip, had seen Snow Leopard. I could see why: it offered a high vantage point from which a Leopard could monitor two valleys at the same time. Leopards just love these sorts of lookouts and, were one present in the area, this would be just the place to see it.

With no Leopard at home we settled in to scan a very interesting new valley. On distant slopes to our right were six or seven Blue Sheep and in the middle-ground stood a rocky crag around which were the sort of boulder-strewn slopes that screamed Pallas' Cat. (Indeed Jesper had seen them there before). But a long and intensive scan produced only two more Tibetan Foxes and a Red Fox which showed itself briefly in open ground to our front.

We hung around for well over an hour in the hope that something might turn up. And in the end it did, though it wasn't the Cat we were hoping for. Jane, who had climbed round the outcrop to answer the call of Nature, got a glimpse of a small rodent. Obviously I was intrigued and went to investigate. It turned out to be a Tibetan Dwarf Hamster, a creature which Jesper had seen hereabouts before.

We eventually got as high as 4800 metres where the ground was gripped by snow and ice, the where the wind blasted at us menacingly. In all directions were distant snow-capped peaks, above us a grey sky full of snow and below us bare, empty valleys with frozen streams, thin grass and stony ground. We had our picnic lunch in such a place, perched on a ledge in the lee of the wind. But the only sign of life was a herd of distant domestic Yaks which, incredibly, had climbed as high as the snow line in their search for grazing.

On the way back we found a colony of Dwarf Hamsters on a gentle grassy slope, their heads popping up periodically from their holes. Jesper took photographs and after a long and careful analysis we determined that they must be Kam Dwarf Hamsters, apparently the most common species of its type in such habitat.

It was a slow walk back to the vehicles and the light was starting to dwindle but I was walking on air and even the Wenquan Hilton didn't seem so bad that evening. I drew a bucket of piping hot water from the well and had a decent wash to celebrate our big success.

Tuesday 7th October

We left Wenquan in freezing temperatures well before dawn. There was fog at first though the sun, when it rose, soon burnt it off. We arrived at our breakfast site to find the world blanketed in snow and sparkling with frost.

Around us were vast open steppes and here and there, in strips, were patches of dwarf willows, the habitat that we had come to investigate. We certainly expected to find Gansu Pika lurking under the willow scrub but it was quite likely also that Wolf might be using the cover to rest up during the day. We opened our account with a Tibetan Fox trotting along on open ground beyond the first patch of willow scrub.

It didn't take long to find the first Gansu Pika. Jesper spotted it first, dashing back under a willow as we approached. So we surrounded the scrub, Jesper on one side and the five of us on the other. And out it came, blinking into the sunlight. For a few seconds we had glorious views but then it dashed off to another willow and we lost it. Others followed. It was simply a question of searching each willow bush carefully. Several times we caught them basking in the sunshine at the perimeter of their willow bush havens.

We spent all morning working our way through the willows. With sand underfoot it was quite hard going but interesting nonetheless; you never knew what might be waiting around the next corner. There turned out to be no Wolves though we did spot a couple of Woolly Hares and another Tibetan Fox. And on a distant hillside were a group of Blue Sheep.

By lunchtime we had toiled through four or five kilometres of willow scrub and reached an open area where a shallow, gravelly stream ran along the edge of another broad steppe. The snow had more or less all melted by then though clouds had built up and instead of warm sunshine we now had a chilly breeze. We took lunch in a nearby village where, to my delight, the proprietor served up a big plate of boiled Yak. I have never tasted charcuterie like it. All it needed was some French mustard but salt did the job nearly as well. What a feast!

Our target in the afternoon was Wild Tibetan Ass (or Kiang). These proved to be very easy and we soon found a herd of thirty or more animals scattered across the steppe. They were

also quite obliging and we were able to walk within about a hundred and fifty metres of them before they began walking off. We continued our own walk, getting views of more and more "donkeys" as well as several Tibetan Gazelle and a couple of Tibetan Foxes. But Jesper had a trick up his sleeve. To me it seemed like we were wandering fairly aimlessly across the steppe but then Jesper stopped and motioned me forward. He pointed to a patch of slightly damper, softer ground in front of us. And, on cue, a little head popped up from within a small hole in the ground. It was a colony of Steppe Voles, which Jesper had discovered on an earlier visit. To be precise they were Przewalski's Steppe Voles, a common diurnal species which we were to see several times more subsequently in similar habitat.



Kiang near Maduo.

Later, en-route to our evening destination of Maduo, we found yet more Kiang near to the roadside and stopped to photograph them. Spread out across the steppe were Tibetan Gazelle and the inevitable Tibetan Fox or three. Then, as we got ever closer to Maduo, wild animals gave way to vast herds of domestic Yak, busily grazing the fragile steppes into oblivion.

Wednesday 8th October

We had some serious driving to do today with the bustling town of Yushu being our target that evening. But we did manage a few stops along the way.

We stopped at dawn to look at a series of wetlands. The ground was thinly covered in snow which had fallen overnight and everything was hard with frost. In the freezing mist and half-light we made out Black-necked Cranes and Bar-headed Geese and, sitting on its haunches not far away, a Tibetan Fox. On distant hillsides were Kiang and a few Tibetan Gazelles. I was quite glad to get back in the car - it was bitterly cold and the road surface was solid with black ice.

We had intended to explore the Bayanlake Pass, a barren, high altitude mountain pass where the birders expected to find a rare species of Rosefinch. (Don't ask me which one!). But we arrived to find the whole area enveloped in thick fog. Visibility was down to fifty metres or so and there didn't seem to be any immediate prospect of improvement. So we pressed on. Further along to road to Yushu, at a significantly lower altitude, Jesper had a site which potentially could produce Alpine Musk Deer and/or Siberian Roe. This sounded a much better deal to me!

We had a picnic lunch at this new site, where a long, barrow-shaped mountain stretched out before us. Its flanks were covered in dense willow scrub, very similar to the type we had seen previously on the way to Maduo. After already having driven quite a distance I was itching to get out and explore.

We made our way up a path, (the course of the original Maduo-Yushu road as it turned out), which ascended the mountain diagonally. I was pushing on ten or twenty metres ahead of the group scanning all the time for signs of movement in the willow scrub when I suddenly became aware of something happening behind me. Jane had seen Wolf. There had been two of them, momentarily silhouetted against the skyline at the top of the mountain, but now out of sight. It had been brief but at least Martin and Jane had got their Wolves, making up at least in part for their near miss at Er La.

We pushed on for about a kilometre and a half before Jesper suggested that we climb the mountain and double back along the crest to our vehicles. This would give us a perfect opportunity to scan the surrounding hills and, possibly, a chance to meet the two Wolves again. It looked steep and it was. The climb might only have been two or three hundred metres but every step took a big effort. By the time I had finally reached the top I was gasping for breath and my legs felt like they had been encased in concrete. Did I say "*significantly lower altitude*"?

We had also, till now, been protected from the wind by the mountain. But, at the top, we were exposed to its full force and suddenly it was no longer a warm and pleasant afternoon and I hastily put my gloves back on. There were broad hillsides to scan, all covered in willow scrub and all looking ideal for either of our two Deer targets. But it was a difficult and uncomfortable job; the wind made it hard to hold the binoculars steady enough to find anything and, before long, we were on the move again.

Tracking back along the ridge at the top of the mountain our vehicles eventually came in sight far below us. We paused to scan again and soon found a Red Fox on the edge of the willow scrub and two groups of Tibetan Gazelle. But the two target Deer, both to be honest quite long shots in the middle of the afternoon, eluded us.

As we approached Yushu an hour or two later, we entered the valley of the Yangtse River. Of course the river here is in its upper reaches but it is still a formidable watercourse. It was fifty or sixty metres wide with an obviously strong flow. In spring, when it full of meltwater, it must be a monster! We made one last stop to photograph the great river and found, to everyone's delight, an Ibisbill on the shingle over on the far bank.

Yushu came as rude shock after driving through vast, wild open spaces. Suddenly we were engulfed in a big city with high rise buildings and a traffic jam.

Thursday 9th October

Gathering in the lobby at 06.00 we were shocked to discover that Martin's long-standing tooth infection had deteriorated overnight to the point where immediate treatment was necessary. He was even considering abandoning the tour altogether and heading home, such was the degree of pain and discomfort he was now suffering. Plans were hastily made to get Martin to a local clinic where penicillin could be administered, accompanied by Ian and assisted over the phone by Jesper who would translate communications between patient and doctor. Meanwhile, Roger, Jesper and I would proceed with our plans, which were to head south to Nangqian for two days before returning to Yushu. All being well, we would re-join Martin, Jane and Ian in two days time and continue the tour.

We stopped at a very scenic valley just after dawn and got out to scan for Deer. Our target was the enigmatic McNeil's Deer, a species which seems to defy taxonomic classification. Is it a sub-species of European Red Deer (*Cervus elephas*), a sub-species of Wapiti (*Cervus canadensis*), a sub-species of Central Asian Red Deer (*Cervus wallichi*) or a distinct species of its own? The scientific community cannot seem to come to a definitive conclusion and so, pro tem, I shall treat it as *Cervus mcneili*.

In any event, it was damned cold, probably in the region of minus fifteen or so. Fortunately there was not a breath of wind. The hardest of frosts had everything in its vice-like grip - and that included the Domestic Yaks, which were coated white! We scanned the surrounding hills, thinly covered with spruce and juniper, but found nothing. The Deer, whatever its true taxonomy, wasn't at home. We tried another spot which also suffered from a lack of Deer though it did produce a covey of Tibetan Partridge. It was still bone-achingly cold but the sun was just breaking over the mountain tops and warmth was clearly imminent.

Our third stop, yet another Deer-less valley, was our breakfast spot. By now the sun had risen to a sufficient height to clear the mountains and the marvellous warmth of its rays was having a miraculous effect. As we ate breakfast a great gathering of scavengers looked down

upon us from the adjacent hill. There was a Domestic Yak carcass up there, (we later discovered), and Himalayan Griffons, Lammergeiers, Tibetan Magpies and Daurian Jackdaws had convened en-masse to take advantage of it. It was fascinating to see these birds, normally silhouettes in the sky, at close quarters standing on the ground.

We hadn't given up on McNeil's Deer by any means and after breakfast went to explore another valley where Jesper had seen them before. Moreover, in this latest valley, Jesper had once seen a Eurasian Lynx sunning itself atop a rocky outcrop. So I scanned with some hope that the miracle might repeat itself. But no amount of searching could turn up either Lynx or Deer and eventually we gave up and retreated back up the valley to some cliffs where Jesper knew that a population of Glover's Pika was present.

These proved to be easy meat. The sun was really up by now and it had turned quite warm, ideal conditions to see Pika after a very cold night. Before long we had several out in the open, sunning themselves on rocks. And what elegant little creatures they were, each with chestnut-brown ears and a brown stripe down its forehead. We found perhaps nine or ten easily enough. I wondered what else might be around and scouted round the base of the cliffs in the hope of stumbling into a Weasel or a Polecat. It looked the perfect place to me and, given that the Pikas were diurnal, the perfect time of day. But there was nothing doing.

We had one last valley to try for Deer. There was no road as such, merely a very rough and muddy track, access to which was over a river bridge too narrow for vehicles. So we resigned ourselves to a lengthy foot slog. But, to our astonishment, just as we were setting off a vehicle did appear. Surely it couldn't squeeze through the impossibly narrow space on the bridge? But it did, its sides clear of the bridge by millimetres. A magnificent feat of judgement! Jesper paused to speak to the driver, who we later realised lived in a homestead a couple of kilometres further up this valley. And, lo and behold, we got a lift.

Quite what the driver thought of us, laden with binoculars and scopes, was anyone's guess. Jesper doubted whether any European had ever ventured up this valley before and when we did reach the homestead the children gawped at us as though we had just arrived from Mars. It was a lovely unspoilt valley beyond the homestead, its hillsides thick with juniper and spruce. I would have liked to have explored it more, particularly at dawn when mammalian life might have been more active. But, quiet though it was, it looked simply splendid - a picture of what many similar high altitude valleys might look like in their natural state - that is to say ungrazed by ruinous armies of Domestic Yaks.

We worked our way back on foot, scanning frequently as we went. Jesper heard the distant call of White-eared Pheasant which I managed to locate on a far hillside in my scope. About a dozen of them were bustling their way down the slope. Both Roger and Jesper seemed very pleased; presumably it is quite a rare bird.

More importantly, (to me at least!), we soon afterwards discovered a group of five McNeil's Deer. At last! I had scanned that particular hillside quite a number of times already without success. Yet here they were. Quite how they had materialised was a mystery. But then animals in Tibet do seem to have that strange ability to appear from nowhere as if suddenly teleported from afar. It seemed to happen time and again making it critically important to keep scanning even when a piece of ground apparently contained nothing. The Deer were grey with pale rump patches lined in black and looked quite distinct from European Red Deer (*Cervus elephas*) and indeed from Wapiti (*Cervus canadensis*). For what that's worth! We had good telescope views for five minutes or more before a young couple arrived on the scene on a motor cycle. They were obviously amazed to see Europeans in their valley and clearly curious about our optical equipment. I invited them to look through my scope and they gasped audibly when the distant Deer came into view in the eyepiece. Doubtless we were the talk of the valley that evening!

Mission finally accomplished, we retraced our steps and continued on our way to that evening's destination, Nangqian. This took us along the course of the Mekong for about ten or fifteen kilometres, during which time we stopped twice to admire the view and scan for animals. Then, on reaching Nangqian and stopping at a gas station to fill up, Jesper found Blue Sheep in his scope. Incredibly we had more than a hundred in view, on a very distant hillside far above the town. I never imagined I would ever watch wild Blue Sheep from a petrol station in the middle of a busy town!

Nangqian looked dusty and scruffy with feral dogs roaming the streets. In fact, we watched in horror as two of these mongrels chased a couple of schoolchildren down the street, snapping ferociously at their legs as they fled. By the looks on the children's faces, this attack looked quite serious. We swerved directly at the dogs and, threatened with being run down, they gave up the chase. The two boys kept on running and got away unscathed.

The good news was that Martin's treatment had so far gone well and that he would be returning to the clinic the next morning for a further blast of penicillin.

Friday 10th October

Another cold, frosty morning with air temperatures at dawn well below freezing. We had driven South to forested mountains in the hope of Alpine Musk Deer and/or Siberian Roe but, despite trying several likely spots where Jesper had scored on earlier trips, our luck was out. We did, however, see a Woolly Hare in Nangqian as we left, a very strange sight in the middle of a large town!

As the sun came up the local bird population began to wake up and Great Laughing Thrush, Kessler's Thrush and Tibetan Babax put in an appearance. The last of these, quite a good bird I was told, was perched on a low branch in a juniper tree and lost in shade, though that didn't phase either of my two birding companions. I kept scanning all the dim and shaded

areas beneath the trees in the fast diminishing hope of Musk Deer, but as the sun's glare lit up the frosty scene it soon became obvious that our elusive target would have to wait for another day.

We breakfasted in glorious sunshine, watched intently by two rangy dogs, a Tibetan Magpie and several Daurian Jackdaws, all of whom seemed to begrudge us every mouthful. A slope opposite our perch produced a covey of White-eared Pheasants and on very distant hills were several groups of Blue Sheep.

Later, we came across more Blue Sheep, high on a hill above the road. Well spotted Mr Pang! There were two groups, one very high up on a sunlit pasture grazing peacefully, the other slightly lower down and evidently much less sanguine. Most of them were staring fixedly to the right, at a huge rocky crag, the sort beloved of predators like Snow Leopard. My instincts told me that this might be worth watching. Then, suddenly, they were all in flight. Something was afoot. Sheep, when confronted by Snow Leopard, usually run for fifteen or twenty metres and then stop to face the enemy once more. The Leopard is an ambush predator and cannot chase them over any distance. The Sheep know this and, having put some distance between themselves and their pursuer, stop to keep tabs on the Leopard's whereabouts. But on this occasion the Sheep kept on running until they had caught up the other group. Wolves? I scanned carefully, half expecting a pack to materialise somewhere to the right of the slope. But nothing. A false alarm? Well, maybe, but in general Blue Sheep don't do false alarms and don't run unless there is a clear and present danger. It was just that I couldn't find it. Eventually, I gave up in frustration, sure that an opportunity had slipped by.

We had another card to play. On an earlier trip one of Jesper's clients had spotted an Irene's Mountain Vole on a high pasture at a place called Kanda Shan. There was also a slim possibility of one of the rarer Pikas and the even slimmer possibility of finding a very distant Snow Leopard on the high tops. So we gave it a go. This entailed a long, slow hike up a steep, grassy hillside. The altitude at road level when we started was around 4500 metres and so by the time we got to where the Vole had been sighted it was considerably more. Needless to say, the Vole wasn't in town. Or at least, if it was, it wasn't visible. (No great surprise - they're crepuscular at best). Nor were there Moupin Pika in the scrub or Snow Leopards on the snowy crags far above us. Eventually we gave up and descended to the waiting Mr Pang who was probably wondering why we had been wandering about on a bare, deserted mountain side.

That evening we were back in Yushu where we discovered that Martin's treatment had been a complete success and that he and Jane were to re-join the tour. Good news to round off a pretty uneventful day.

Saturday 11th October

A mild, overcast morning with temperatures hovering around zero. We breakfasted at a big wetland called Longbaotan where a few Black-necked Cranes and Ferruginous Ducks were hanging around. The fields were crawling with Black-lipped Pika, the only sign of mammalian life as far as I could see.

We noticed that cars coming in our direction had snow on their roofs and Mr Pang confirmed that the forecast for the day ahead was grim. Snow, snow and more snow! And, within an hour, the first flurries greeted us. The flurries then thickened until, eventually, we were engulfed in a near-blizzard. We lunched at a busy Tibetan village, dawdling in the hope that the weather might improve. Our plans were to stop at a good site for White-lipped Deer, but with visibility down to about one hundred metres we needed a rapid and dramatic improvement in conditions.

We potted along through freshly snow-bound valleys, our view of the surrounding hills truncated by low cloud and falling snow. And when we got to the Deer site, we couldn't even see the hill where Jesper was hoping to see the animals. The snow, driven by a stiff breeze, was coming at us horizontally. I settled back for a snooze; there was nothing to do but wait it out.

After about an hour it stopped snowing. The top half of our target hill was still lost in cloud but at least we could now see the lower slopes. Ian was already scoping as much of the hill as was visible when I got out to investigate. To my surprise he suddenly announced that he had three Deer. Really? I took a quick scan through binoculars and, as the cloud shifted slightly, got a tantalising glimpse. They were about half way up the hill, barely visible through the lower layers of cloud. But the weather was improving minute by minute. And, within a few moments, I had my scope on them. There were four or five in all, one of them a magnificent stag with broad, sweeping antlers. Then Jesper announced that he had quite a few more over to the right.

Just as we were trying to re-focus our scopes, Martin called our attention to three new animals behind us on a nearer hillside. Tibetan Argali! They weren't very far away but being perfectly camouflaged against the rock and scree they were surprisingly hard to spot. But there they were: three juvenile males, their horns not yet spiralled back on themselves like the "Ammonite shells" of their elders.

We went to get a closer look at the horde of Deer that were now visible to our right. The clouds had lifted so much that the whole of the hill was now clearly revealed. There were fifty or sixty of them, some of them stags with enormous antlers. As we got closer we could make out their distinctive white lips and white-fringed ears. One or two stags were bellowing. A marvellous sight!

Suddenly Ian, (who had been scoping the area behind us), cried "Marten!" and, shocked at this unexpected discovery, I immediately came running. "Where?" I demanded to know. "Over there, flying low to the left" came the bizarre reply. Flying? Since when did Beech Martens fly? Then the penny dropped. It was a Sand Martin, or some such thing. What an anti-climax!

We later found more Deer, in willow scrub on islands on the Yangtse River, which we had to cross on our way to Qumulai. It was a curious sight to see massive sets of antlers moving about above the scrub, their owners completely hidden from view. From time to time we glimpsed the whole animal but mostly we just saw disembodied antlers, hurrying this way and that as if held aloft by unseen children scampering about in the scrub. It struck me as completely surreal.



The Yangtse near Qumulai.

The skies once again darkened and it was obvious that, after our afternoon reprieve, more snow was on its way. In the early evening gloom we drove into our destination for the night, Qumulai, a scruffy, downbeat town consisting of hideous rectangular concrete boxes - tributes to the familiar "*Socialist-Realist*" School of Architecture whose baleful influence has disfigured much of Communist Asia.

At least we would have a nice comfortable, modern hotel for the night. Well, actually, no. Our intended hotel was under renovation. So much for the booking! And the second hotel, a nice clean looking establishment, was also closed for refurbishment. This was starting to look desperate. Our third choice, a rather less grand hotel, could accommodate us (thankfully) though it only had three good rooms. Ian and Jesper would have to make do with second class rooms and an unspeakable outside toilet. The "first class" cabins, as it turned out, were also unheated and had no hot running water. But at least, stacked high on the bedside table, was a pile of soft drinks, potato chips and mineral water. Imagine my surprise when, half an hour after having retired for the night, the door suddenly opened, the lights came on and two figures strode into the room carrying a big cardboard box. "What the Hell's going on?" I stuttered. "Sorry Mister" came the reply and without further ado they loaded all the bedside goodies into the box and left. Absolutely bizarre!

Sunday 12th October

I had had a slight headcold for a couple of days and this was complicated overnight by an infection of one of my sinuses. I gulped down Ibuprofen but the pain just kept getting worse. I managed no sleep at all and by our scheduled leaving time I was exhausted and my jaw was throbbing. I also had a thumping headache and felt weak. Somehow I dragged myself out of bed and, flicking the light switch, discovered that there was no electricity.

Ashen-faced and shivering violently, I crawled into the vehicle and we were off. Today's main target was Tibetan Antelope. We were heading for the famous Changtang, a wild area of steppe, and nothing was going to deny me my Antelope. But I was in a real mess and it was clear that only a massive pharmaceutical boost was going to get me into the field. So, ignoring the instructions on dosage, I took a cocktail of Ian's Paracetamol and Jesper's Ibuprofen every few hours, the quantities being at least double the recommended limits. And it worked.

We drove past a large group of White-lipped Deer before dawn, sitting quietly next to the road, their breath visible in the freezing air. Then there were Tibetan and Red Foxes, Gazelles and Saker Falcons. But all of this went past in a blur. I was in too much pain to appreciate any of it. The world outside was deep in snow, a spectacular winter wonderland, which would have been captivating had I not been so pre-occupied. But, gradually, the avalanche of medication I had taken began to work. The hard, steely pain became a slow throb; the throb eased to a dull ache and, at last, the ache mellowed into little more than stiffness. By about nine o'clock I was back in the real world. The headache had disappeared too and I had stopped shivering.

My recovery had come just in time. As we were driving along Jane spotted something on the hillside on our left. Six animals were padding along together through the snow. They could hardly be Foxes - not a platoon of six anyway - and Jane came to the obvious conclusion.

"Wolves!" We stopped abruptly and everyone got out. One quick scan was enough to confirm the initial diagnosis and moments later I had my scope trained on them.

Against the white backdrop of the snowy hillside they were a glorious sight. They paused and for a few moments there was much licking, muzzling and submissive displaying. Then one of them howled. Then another. Then all together, the group standing tightly as a unit with their heads thrown back. The eerie sound resonated around the valley. And, from afar, another Wolf, (or Wolves?), howled back. A rival pack? Or another member of this pack? I suspected the former, though I was shortly to be proved wrong.

It was then that we noticed two Tibetan Gazelles much higher up on the hillside. They were both on red alert, unsurprisingly, and stood stock still staring down at the Wolves. Then, the action started. One Wolf trotted forwards directly towards the Gazelles. Two more swung left as flankers and the rest held back or drifted right. The lead Wolf broke into a gallop and, at this terrifying turn of events, the Gazelles bolted to the right and escaped up the hill. It seemed that the Wolves' plan of attack had been far too naive. But then the true subtlety of it revealed itself as a seventh member of the pack came loping into view from somewhere off to the right. The plan had evidently been to drive the Gazelles into the clutches of the unseen Wolf stage right. It hadn't worked but at least the logic of it was now obvious to us. Re-united, the pack indulged in exuberant greetings with their estranged member before trotting off to seek new opportunities.

We lunched in a small town called Qumahe where the local Tibetans stared at us with mute incredulity. Our cafe was warm, dimly lit and homely and a group of denizens sat around a stove in the middle of the room warming their hands. We were obviously the main topic of conversation. Who were we? What were we doing?

The main event for the day was the Changtang, a vast area of steppe where we hoped to see Tibetan Antelope. We would only have the opportunity to see the extreme Eastern end of it but it was enough to give us a flavour of the place. At our first stop we were presented with a gently undulating grassy plain, patchily covered in snow which, by now, was starting to melt. On the horizon, perhaps twenty kilometres away, were towering mountains, separating steppe from sky. We scanned and Jesper soon found some Antelope, tiny rust-coloured dots lost in a shimmering heat haze and much too far away to be bothered with. However, he then announced that he had something at much closer range - and just as interesting - an Asian Badger! It was a small telescope object at about 800 metres but, nevertheless, we could just make out its distinctive pale face. It was scurrying about with its nose close to the ground foraging for food. And, eventually, it found something and began digging furiously with its front paws. I would have stayed to watch it longer but Jesper reminded us that time was passing and we still had Antelope to see.

Our second stop brought us the required Antelope. There were three or four groups, not close, perhaps two kilometres or more distant, but within striking range. Maybe if we had

driven on we might have found Antelope closer to the road but a bird in the hand, as they say, is worth two in the bush. We resolved to yomp across the intervening two kilometres to get a closer view. After half a kilometre we were getting reasonable binocular views and after a kilometre we were getting very good views in our scopes. We gradually drew closer and closer until, at about 400 metres, it was clear that we were approaching their flight distance. We didn't need to get closer than that anyway. we were now getting frame-filling views in the scopes, every detail of the animals visible. The best males had long, sabre-like horns and black faces, high shoulders and soft, chestnut-brown flanks. I still felt weak from the effects of the headcold but that hardly seemed to matter. The sun was shining and we had forty or more Antelope grazing peacefully in front of us. And behind us, as Jesper pointed out, was another colony of Przewalski's Steppe Vole, their little heads popping up and down every so often to keep tabs on us.

The yomp back was much longer of course than the outward one, distance being, as everyone knows, directly proportional to motivation. Two kilometres? Probably more like three and by the time my weary feet had taken me back to the vehicles I was dead beat. I surmised that a combination of headcold and altitude and a reaction to all the painkillers I had taken was beginning to tell.

Thankfully there was no more walking to be done, though we still had a fair drive ahead of us. Our destination was the Junction Motel at Budongquan and we arrived in darkness. The ground was hard with ice and frozen snow and the mercury was falling out the bottom of the thermometer. Above us the stars glittered fiercely. It was going to be an exceptionally cold night.

The "motel" consisted of about a dozen small rooms in a line, each one stone-floored and grubby. The doors wouldn't shut properly and there were no keys. There was no water of any description and the "toilets" consisted of three holes in the ground in an open-air enclosure at the end of the line. This enclosure was, of course, snow-bound. But there was one feature that immediately brought cheer to my heart when I entered my room - a stove! Some kind soul had already lit it and a pile of coal was ready to be fed to the flames. I eagerly stoked it up and before long the temperature inside was at least three or four degrees. What luxury!

Monday 13th October

We left at 06.00. It was minus plenty outside, as I had feared, and the snow in the yard was like concrete. I felt cold and lethargic and took a few more painkillers.

Our target was "Wild Yak Valley", one of the few remaining places where genuine Wild Yak could still be seen. Since Yaks were large black objects and the valley in question was open and tree-less, I assumed that our quest was more or less a foregone conclusion. If they were there and if the place wasn't stiff with Domestic Yaks, then surely we would see them.

We arrived just after dawn but before the sun had risen above the surrounding mountains. It felt cold as I stepped out of the vehicle and before long I began to appreciate that it was actually very cold indeed. I suppose it might have been about minus fifteen. But the sky was clear and the sun would soon clear the mountain tops and warm us up. Or so we hoped! Jesper had seen some Yaks on a far hillside which, initially, we thought were wild. But then Ian spotted a white one among them and the herd instantly lost its credibility.

Nevertheless, much closer, on the far side of an intervening stream were three or four very convincing animals with huge frames, long shaggy fur, wide horns and belly fur almost reaching the ground. These had to be genuine and we took a short hike to get closer views. We found a lot more Yaks, some of which were definitely Domestic, some of which were definitely Wild and many of which I couldn't decide. It is of course tragic that Domestic Yaks are now invading this valley, a protected area indeed, and eventually the incursion will spell doom for true resident Wild Yaks through hybridisation and the absorption of wild animals into domestic herds. It is just instance of a much wider problem for wildlife. Unless checked, the ever-increasing numbers of Domestic Yak will inevitably graze the rest of Tibet's wild ungulates into extinction. Already the herds are grazing at "pastures" above 5000 metres; the Gazelles, Antelopes and Deer, will ultimately simply have nowhere left.

Further along the valley were Tibetan Gazelles, Kiang and Blue Sheep, all in good numbers. And back at our starting point were a few young male Tibetan Argali, which Ian, Jesper and Roger hiked across the valley floor to see at closer quarters. I started out too but turned back after a while, still weakened by the effects of the headcold I had nearly shaken off.

The afternoon was taken up with the long drive north-east to Golmud, a journey which brought us down from an altitude of 4300 metres to about 2800. Halfway down we stopped for a picnic lunch and my headache and shivering briefly returned. Yet more painkillers were deployed; by now I was starting to feel like a living monument to the pharmaceutical industry. As we ate our sandwiches a car pulled up and a petty official leaned out of the window to take issue with Jesper over something. It seemed that we were parked on a private access road and the official was intent on giving Jesper grief about not leaving litter. However, Jesper had the perfect reply: "we're Westerners, not Chinese!" The official harrumphed, wound up the window and drove off in a bad mood.

Golmud was another Chinese "instant city" with scarcely a single building more than ten years old. But the hotel was comfortable with luke-warm running water. After Budongquan it felt like paradise.

Tuesday 14th October

We only had a few days left in the field but there was still important business to be transacted. Our main targets today were Goitered Gazelle and, if we were lucky, Midday Gerbil, (the latter very inappropriately named as it is crepuscular). We were heading for the

Southern edge of the Qaidam Basin, a desert lying directly to the North of the Golmud-Dulan road along which we were to travel. Naturally, our departure preceded dawn but, at this much more modest altitude, it wasn't particularly cold and we breakfasted in the field in temperatures of two or three degrees.

The fringes of the Basin were sandy and a belt of dunes perhaps two kilometres wide separates the main road from a very broad, empty expanse of flat wasteland. It was here, among these dunes, that our targets were likely to be present. The Gazelles were likely to be shy and so we crept along quietly, stopping periodically to check sight lines between the dunes and to scan from high vantage points. This paid off almost immediately, Ian finding a Gazelle standing a couple of hundred metres away. Unfortunately it bolted before anyone else could get on it but Roger and I did get a fleeting glimpse of its mate as it galloped after it.

No amount of scanning, even from atop two very high dunes, could turn up another chance. There were fresh Gazelle tracks everywhere, suggesting that the two we had flushed might not be alone, but the dunes remained eerily quiet. Indeed it took us two hours even to find our first bird - a Henderson's Ground Jay which scuttled in and out of scrub, to the frustration of the birders. I was also checking each suitable piece of scrub I came across for signs of movement, in the hope of finding a Midday Gerbil. Encouragingly, there were Gerbil holes all over the place. But all my searching was in vain and by mid-morning it was obvious that we needed to resort to Plan B.

Plan B was another site twenty minutes further along the main Golmud-Dulan road. This looked completely different. There were no dunes, just rolling grassland. And there seemed to be quite a bit of human disturbance. I wasn't convinced at all but Jesper insisted he'd seen Gazelles there before. So we got out, mounted a slight rise and began scanning. Bingo! About a kilometre and a half away, buried in a terrible heat haze, was another Goitered Gazelle. A dismal view but at least everyone saw it. Nevertheless, we had to find a way of getting closer.

So we drove along a farm road which at least took us 500 metres nearer. The trouble was that we no longer had any rise to stand on and from our new "worm's eye view" we could see nothing in the direction where the Gazelle had been. We had no way of improving matters and so we at least took the opportunity to scan our new surroundings. A flock of Chinese Hill Warblers came past and then, astonishingly, a Gazelle materialised barely two hundred and fifty metres away on open ground. I had already scanned it three or four times without finding anything but now, bold as brass, a Goitered Gazelle had arrived on the scene, calmly grazing and ignoring us. The heat haze spoiled, even that close range, the views in the scopes but it was a very presentable object in binoculars. Job done!

We stopped at a simple roadside cafe for lunch and as usual became the focus of attention for the bemused locals. A group of Tibetan Muslims were sitting at the other end of our

table and, finally, their curiosity got the better of them. They engaged Jesper in conversation at which he soon broke into a smile. Apparently they were asking if we were Uighers!

There then followed a rather long and boring drive to Dulan. To our left the Qaidam Basin stretched almost to the horizon, flat, gravelly and apparently lifeless. To our right stood a great barrier of snow-capped mountains. We broke the tedium with a rest stop at a small hamlet called Xiangride where we found a roosting Eagle Owl in some trees. Yes, trees! Apart from junipers and spruces south of Yushu we had hardly seen a tree for a fortnight. Certainly not deciduous ones. I scouted round for signs of mammal life - after all the Owl had to feed on something - but without success.

The hotel in Dulan had hot running water and the electricity worked. It seemed that we were getting closer and closer to civilisation.

Wednesday 15th October

This was to be our last full day in the field, (the following day being mainly a driving day), and we had two important targets to find. The morning would be spent looking for Gansu Red Deer in the Dulan Hills, the afternoon looking for Przewalski's Gazelle in the Chaka Basin. I was especially keen to find the second of these, a species standing on the edge of extinction with barely four hundred mature individuals remaining.

We arrived in the Dulan Hills under grey skies but with temperatures hovering just above freezing. There was snow on the ground, particularly on the higher slopes. I spotted a Red Deer almost immediately, a young stag in a clearing about 1000 metres away. A little later it transpired that there were in fact two animals.

We were intent on climbing to a high vantage point where we would be able to scan all the surrounding hills and, without further ado, we set off up a narrow gully. The gully had steep rock faces on either side and looked promising for either Chinese Red Pika or Glover's Pika but, with the sun yet to make an appearance, I was doubtful whether any would be visible. They weren't, and we ascended the hill at the far end of the gully without seeing anything interesting. The going was fairly steep and we stopped frequently to catch our breath, finding a good sized group of Blue Sheep on a distant ridge line as well as three nice Deer stags. Eventually, we arrived at the foot of a final very steep hillside. Now the going got really hard and we were obliged to scramble upwards on all fours, pausing every three or four steps for oxygen. The last thirty metres were in soft snow and by the time I made the summit I was gasping like a dying fish. But it was worth it; the view was stunning and we were able to pick out several groups of Red Deer, one of which contained a truly monstrous stag with colossal antlers. We were on level terms, more or less, with all the surrounding peaks. To the North lay a long range of snowy mountains piled up in triangles forming a weird geometric pattern. To the South were more great snow-bound ranges stretching to the horizon. And, to emphasise the drama, a Steppe Eagle drifted past on rigid wings at eye

level. We stayed for an hour or more gazing at the scenery, watching the Deer and, finally, planning our descent.

Jesper had originally planned a circular route taking us back to the vehicles by a different path. But the snow was melting and the ground was becoming increasingly greasy, making the intended route potentially dangerous. So we had to re-trace our steps. We zig-zagged our way back down through the higher snow slopes, after which the going became easy. We had a brief glimpse of a Himalayan Marmot, (which must have been very near to beginning hibernation), but I still hoped for a Pika in "Pika Gulley". However, the sun still hadn't appeared and in the cool, grey conditions it didn't seem very promising. (Pikas love to sun themselves to warm up after a cold night and the first hour of strong sunlight is a particularly good time to see them). A earlier, none showed. But at least we'd had superb views of the Gansu Red Deer, the enigmatic *kansuensis* race of Wapiti.



The Dulan Hills.

So much for the hors d'oeuvre; now for the main course. Jesper's expectation was that we had about a 50% chance of seeing the Przewalski's Gazelle. Either they would be there in their usual spot, (in which case we were certain to see them), or they'd be somewhere else, (in which case we were out of luck). We would know either way very soon.

The spot, a nondescript valley in the Chaka Basin, had little to distinguish it from any of the surrounding areas. There was a slightly lush, greener patch - the spot where Jesper apparently had seen the Gazelles before - but otherwise it looked featureless and bleak. I immediately set about scanning the valley, as did Jesper and Ian, but with every passing minute it became depressingly clearer that the Gazelles weren't there. Twice I panned the scope slowly in a wide arc over the whole area and twice I found nothing. Jesper looked subdued. "We're out of luck then?" I remarked and Jesper nodded.

We tried another spot a couple of kilometres further along the valley, but they weren't there either. In desperation we even tried doubling back and scanning a less promising area five kilometres in the opposite direction. I had by then more or less resigned myself to a blank but we did have one last card to play. There was a rough track passing to the North of the original spot from which we might at least be able to scan from a different point. If this didn't produce the goods then it looked like we might have to come back the following morning, a radical change to our plans which would severely disrupt the schedule but one which was starting to loom large. We pulled up on slightly higher ground which gave us a good field of view across the area we had scanned earlier from the opposite direction. Then, no sooner had we set up the scopes in our new position, than Martin calmly announced that he had something very Gazelle-like in his binoculars. There were several of them in fact, very distant, but I felt sure they were Przewalski's rather than Goitered Gazelle. They just looked too stocky and too heavy to be anything else. But to be sure we had to get closer.

Off we went at a very brisk march across the valley. Gradually we drew closer, stopping periodically to look through the scopes. Yes, they were Przewalski's! Eventually we got to about 400 metres range and we could sense that the Gazelles were becoming tense. We were obviously very close to their flight distance. We settled down for a good, long look. The animals, a bachelor group of 17 males, were grey with a much smaller pale rump patch than either Tibetan or Goitered Gazelle. Their faces were pale with short muzzles. And their horns curled over at the ends in the characteristic "fish hook" shape that is the hallmark of the species. Their unease subsided and we spent an hour watching them. How we had missed them from our earlier spot was unclear; perhaps they had been sitting down? Once again, Tibetan wildlife had surprised us by materialising from thin air.

We had now practically run out of targets. We had one day left, which would mainly be spent driving, though the birders were keen to try a spot for Pallas' Sandgrouse. I didn't care anymore; as far as I was concerned we had seen virtually everything we had set out to see and now it was time for a beer!

Thursday 16th October

We had over-nighted at Chaka in a really nice, clean hotel with both room heating and running hot water. Easy living! Now, the job was to drive the 350 kilometres from Chaka back to Xining. There had been a little snow overnight which by dawn had turned to drizzle.

This prompted Jesper, quite uncharacteristically, to give us a lay-in and we left Chaka at the preposterously late time of 09.30.

The Sandgrouse site was a featureless, flat piece of grassland on the edge of Chaka Salt Lake. We walked to a small stream where the Sandgrouse sometimes came to drink and got fly-by sightings on three or more occasions. The birders seemed very pleased! There was also a Little Owl which, it seemed, we had flushed in the act of devouring a small rodent. We found the lower half of the unfortunate victim lying on the ground, the Owl having evidently shorn it in two. It might have been a Dwarf Gray Hamster, though obviously precise identification is difficult when one only has half an animal to work with!

There were a few birds later, en-route, including some Lesser Kestrels and a Chinese Grey Shrike. But, otherwise, all there was to do was to sit back, relax and enjoy the ride back into Xining. For me, the war was over, though for my compatriots a three day extension to Sichuan still lay ahead. I wondered whether they would see their main target, Red Panda.

Friday 17th October

With the job done I was eager to get back home. But the flights from Xining to Chengdu and from Chengdu to Amsterdam didn't connect and so I had to spend a night in transit at Chengdu. Jesper came with us to the airport to see us safely through any irksome last minute beurocracy and, at Chengdu, I said farewell to the rest of the party who set off on a six hour drive Southwards.

I had hoped to spend the afternoon in Chengdu visiting the Panda Sanctuary. They weren't wild animals but I thought it might at least be more entertaining than watching Chinese television. However, this turned out to be problematic. It was late in the day and the staff at the hotel, (the famous "Holly's Hostel"), wanted double the normal price for just a single visitor. So I gave up on the idea and went for a walk instead. After two weeks of Chinese food, it was glorious to feast on pizza and fries that evening.

Saturday 18th October

Chengdu was soon Chengdone and the flight to Amsterdam went to schedule. By midnight I was back home in the UK.

6 Notes For Future Visitors

The following might be useful for those wishing to follow in our footsteps:

- Tibet, even in early Autumn, can get very cold. And even on a warm day, it doesn't take long for an evil wind to spring up and for temperatures to plummet. You need to be prepared for early morning temperatures well below minus ten degrees and for bone-aching wind chill. But when the sun gets up, equally, you need to be able to remove layers quickly - or boil alive!

- For those who lead active outdoor lives the going is fairly moderate. But there are steep slopes sometimes and the ground is often muddy or frozen. And the altitude is a big factor with a lot of the action taking place at 4000 metres plus. Tibet is not for those who are grossly unfit.
- Bring a small flask for hot water. Most of the hotels have kettles in the rooms and freshly boiled water will be hotter at breakfast than water in the communal flasks which will have been boiled the night before.
- Don't bother with a water bottle. Mineral water is always available in pre-sealed bottles.
- Bring plenty of toilet paper. The Chinese don't seem to believe in it.
- If, like me, you can't use chopsticks then bring a fork and spoon. None of the cafes or restaurants we used seemed to mind.
- Bring a good first aid kit with plenty of Ibuprofen (or similar). Bring Diamox (or similar) if you have a history of altitude sickness.
- Bring an alarm clock. Most of the hotels don't do alarm calls.

7 Mammals Recorded

The following is a systematic list of the mammals we recorded:

Species	Latin Name	Notes
Pallas' Cat	<i>Felis manul</i>	Seen once at Wenquan.
Tibetan Wolf (1)	<i>Canis (lupus) chanco</i>	Three sightings.
Tibetan Fox	<i>Vulpes ferrilata</i>	Thirty plus sightings.
Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	Four or five sightings.
Asian Badger	<i>Meles leucurus</i>	Once in the Changtang.
Tibetan Gazelle	<i>Procapra picticaudata</i>	Very common. Seen daily.
Goitered Gazelle	<i>Gazella subgutterosa</i>	Three sightings near Dulan.
Przewalski's Gazelle	<i>Procapra przewalskii</i>	One sighting of 17 males.
Gansu Red Deer (2)	<i>Cervus canadensis Kansuensis</i>	Common in Dulan Hills.
McNeil's Deer (3)	<i>Cervus mcneili</i>	One sighting of 5 animals.
White-lipped Deer	<i>Przewalskium albirostris</i>	Three sightings near Qumulai.
Tibetan Antelope	<i>Pantholops hodgsonii</i>	Seen once on Changtang.
Wild Yak (4)	<i>Bos grunniens</i>	Several groups in Wild Yak Valley.
Tibetan Wild Ass	<i>Equus kiang</i>	Large numbers over several days.
Tibetan Argali	<i>Ovis ammon</i>	Two sightings.
Blue Sheep	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>	Large numbers. Common.
Woolly Hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>	Common throughout.
Black-lipped Pika	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>	Abundant.
Tsing-ling Pika	<i>Ochotona huangensis</i>	Once at Hu Zhu.
Glover's Pika	<i>Ochotona gloveri</i>	Once near Nangqian.

Gansu Pika	Ochotona cansus	Once near Maduo.
Przewalski's Steppe Vole	Eolagurus przewalskii	Several colonies found.
Tibetan Dwarf Hamster	Cricetulus tibetanus	Once at Wenquan.
Kam Dwarf Hamster	Cricetulus kamensis	Once at Wenquan.
Himalayan Marmot	Marmota himalayana	Common throughout.
Total Species Recorded	25	

Taxonomic Notes

(1) The Tibetan Wolf (*Canis lupus chanco*) is treated here as a race of Grey Wolf (*Canis lupus*). A split, affording Tibetan Wolf full specific status, seems quite likely. An "armchair tick" might be in the offing!

(2) It is assumed that the *kansuensis* Red Deer is a race of Wapiti (*Cervus canadensis*). Given the ongoing debate this is obviously only provisional.

(3) The status of McNeil's Deer is unclear (to me at least!). I have described it as *Cervus mcnelli* for the time being. It may turn out only to be a sub-species - but a sub-species of what exactly? Time will tell. Perhaps!

(4) There were both Domestic and Wild Yaks in Wild Yak Valley and the difference was not always clear cut. Only those with massive frames, long grey horns, completely black hair and belly hair down to the ground were treated as genuine *Bos grunniens*.