

Mammal watching in Afghanistan: a few notes

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I've been in Afghanistan three times. In October 1988, when the country was still under Soviet occupation, I talked a Soviet border post commander I knew into letting me cross the border from Kushka (Turkmenistan), and calling a friend of his in Termez (Uzbekistan) to make sure I'll be able to get back. I hitchhiked with army convoys to Herat, then to Salang Pass north of Kabul, and back to Mazar-i-Sharif in the NE.

The second time was in September 1989. By that time the Soviet Union has withdrawn its troops, and the Communist forces were being slowly pushed out of peripheral areas by the rebels; the border towns were full of horror stories about former officials, infidels and government soldiers being skinned and/or buried alive. The borders of the Soviet Union were still closed, and I knew the time was coming for me to see the rest of the world, so I decided that as soon as I'll be done exploring the Soviet Union, I'll get to Pakistan and ask for asylum in an American embassy (someone has successfully done it in Turkey after crossing the Black Sea from Georgia on an inflatable mattress). First I decided to do a practice run, crossed from Tajikistan's Pamir into Vakhan Corridor (a narrow strip of Afghan territory in the far E of the country), hiked across the Corridor to the Pakistani border on one of the high passes of the Hindukush, and returned the same way (at that time Pamir was the last section of the Soviet border without a complex prison-style system of barbed wire fencing). The plan was to return in a few years and do the same hike one way, but soon the Soviet Union fell apart and getting out was no longer a big problem.

The third time was in October 2004; by that time Afghanistan was governed by the former rebels while Pakistan-sponsored Taliban was fighting a guerilla war against them. I learned that in winter there was a Pakistani bus from Chitral to Peshawar that went through the Afghan territory, and used it to cross the border without a visa. Once in Afghanistan, I ran into a team of Japanese filmmakers and traveled with them to Band-i-Amir National Park in the central part of the country, then met with the same bus in Jalalabad during its next trip, and returned to Pakistan. This was my riskiest visit to Afghanistan since I could get busted at any checkpoint, but everything went smoothly.

Afghanistan has some great natural habitats, particularly in the E part, and some wildlife survives despite decades of war, but travel to remote areas is dangerous and will probably remain so for a long time. I saw very few mammals (13 species), but found some places worth exploring.

1. Kabul had some beautiful parks and hunting reserves before the 1970s, but they are all gone and the valley is thoroughly trashed. You still see some **European freetails** flying over the suburbs; I don't know where they roost. If you have to spend time in the city, try the outlying suburb of **Paghman**: it has a few parks with natural vegetation, and you should be able to find some **Himalayan rats**, **Afghan voles** and **grey dwarf hamsters**; I saw what looked like **Afghan mole-vole** burrows along the road to Paghman, but didn't have time to wait for them to emerge.

2. Tora-Bora Mountains S of Jalalabad have large caves (famously used by Osama bin Laden during the American invasion). The caves have become a bit of a tourist attraction. In one cave I

found a colony of bats that I misidentified at the time, but later figured to be **Kashmir cave bats**, a very local and little-known species. **Silver mountain vole** is common there, and in the foothills there were some **Afghan vole** burrows. There is an old record of **Blanford's fox** from this area.

3. Band-i-Amir National Park, famous for travertine-dammed lakes amongst arid hills, is the only nature reserve in the country with some degree of de-facto protection. During my visit with the Japanese film crew we were approached by a local boy who offered us a live **Gmelin's white-toothed shrew** in a plastic jar. I traded it for a cigarette lighter and released. There were a few **Persian jirds** around the lakes, and one **Afghan pika** on a nearby slope. **Urial sheep**, **Siberian ibex** and **wolves** used to winter in the area, but I don't know if there are any left.

4. Nuristan is a huge area of tangled mountain ranges in E Afghanistan. It has some coniferous forests left, and is said to have a lot of surviving wildlife (including a sizeable population of **Kashmir musk deer**), but I was there very briefly, couldn't leave the highway, and saw only one mammal, a **house mouse** in a patch of tall perennial herbs along a stream. It was greyish-brown and probably belonged to the northern *musculus* subspecies which occurs in the mountains from Tajikistan to Altai and also pretty much everywhere in and around Russia.

5. Salang Pass is in the mountains NW of Kabul. It saw some of the heaviest fighting during the Soviet war, and the long tunnel was a very scary place as both ends were frequently attacked by the rebels. It is too high to be cleared of landmines by wandering goats, which is unfortunate because it provides excellent access to high-elevation habitat. The only wild mammals I saw there were **Afghan pikas**, but drivers reported seeing **wolves** there on a few occasions.

6. Vakhn Corridor is the safest (although a Russian hitchhiker disappeared there without a trace in 2001) and best preserved part of the country. It is inhabited by a small number of Kyrgyz nomads. As the borders around them gradually became closed, they lost their summer pastures and had to overwinter in the bitterly cold and windy Corridor; the increase in child mortality was so catastrophic that the population plummeted. Some moved to Pakistan and many to Germany; the valley is still inhabited and used for grazing, but the surrounding slopes seldom see people. There are huge numbers of **long-tailed marmots**, lots of **large-eared pikas** on talus slopes, and I saw a **Pallas' cat** in the vicinity of **Sast**. The part of the valley near the Chinese border is said to be completely deserted and have herds of **Marco Polo sheep**, **blue sheep** and **Siberian ibex**, plus a few **snow leopards**, **wolves** and **brown bears**.

7. Afghan Pamir, the mountains across the Panj River from Tajik Pamir, is a scenic country of deep gorges and high peaks. I've only seen it from across the river, but my father traveled there in the 1990s thanks to his personal friendship with the late Ahmad Shah Massoud (a long story I'm not at liberty to tell in detail). He was mostly interested in butterflies, but reported seeing one **markhor ibex** on a steep slope and a few **Siberian ibex** at high elevations – a good indication that other wildlife also persists. The Tajikistan side has lots of nice mammals including **Eurasian lynx**, **Siberian ibex**, **Ladakh urial** (near Ishkashim) and **Altai weasel**.

8. Mazar-i-Sharif, an Uzbek city on the N border, was once surrounded by extensive marshes and floodplain forests where **Turan tiger** and **Bukhara red deer** have possibly survived into the 1960s. Now there are mostly wastelands and irrigated fields; the only mammals I saw in the area

were a **Blanford's jerboa** and a **Zarudny's jird** (in 1988 this was the only part of the country where Soviet military convoys would risk moving at night, giving me an opportunity to do a night drive).

9. Herat is an ancient city in the NW part of the country. Its vicinity, like all lowlands, have apparently been cleared of all edible wildlife, but there should still be some interesting jerboas and other rodents. I saw a **small five-toed jerboa** on the grounds of a military compound just outside the city, and a few **house mice** in remnant *tugai* (riparian forests) between Herat and the Turkmenistan border. The mice belonged to the small, pale, white-bellied *bactrianus* subspecies, and I think this was their original habitat. Burrows of **Afghan mole-vole** are a common sight around Herat. Drivers reported seeing **golden jackals** and what sounded like a **striped hyena**. The far NW corner of Herat Province is especially interesting; just across the border is the famous Badkhyz Nature Reserve in Turkmenistan with lots of interesting mammals. **Goitered gazelle, urial sheep, Indian porcupine** and **Afghan mouselike hamster** (despite its name it's never been documented in Afghanistan) might be present there.