

**Winter Mammal Watching**  
**Sichuan – Qinghai**  
**16 Feb – 01 Mar 2025**



*Chinese mountain cat hunting in the grasslands*

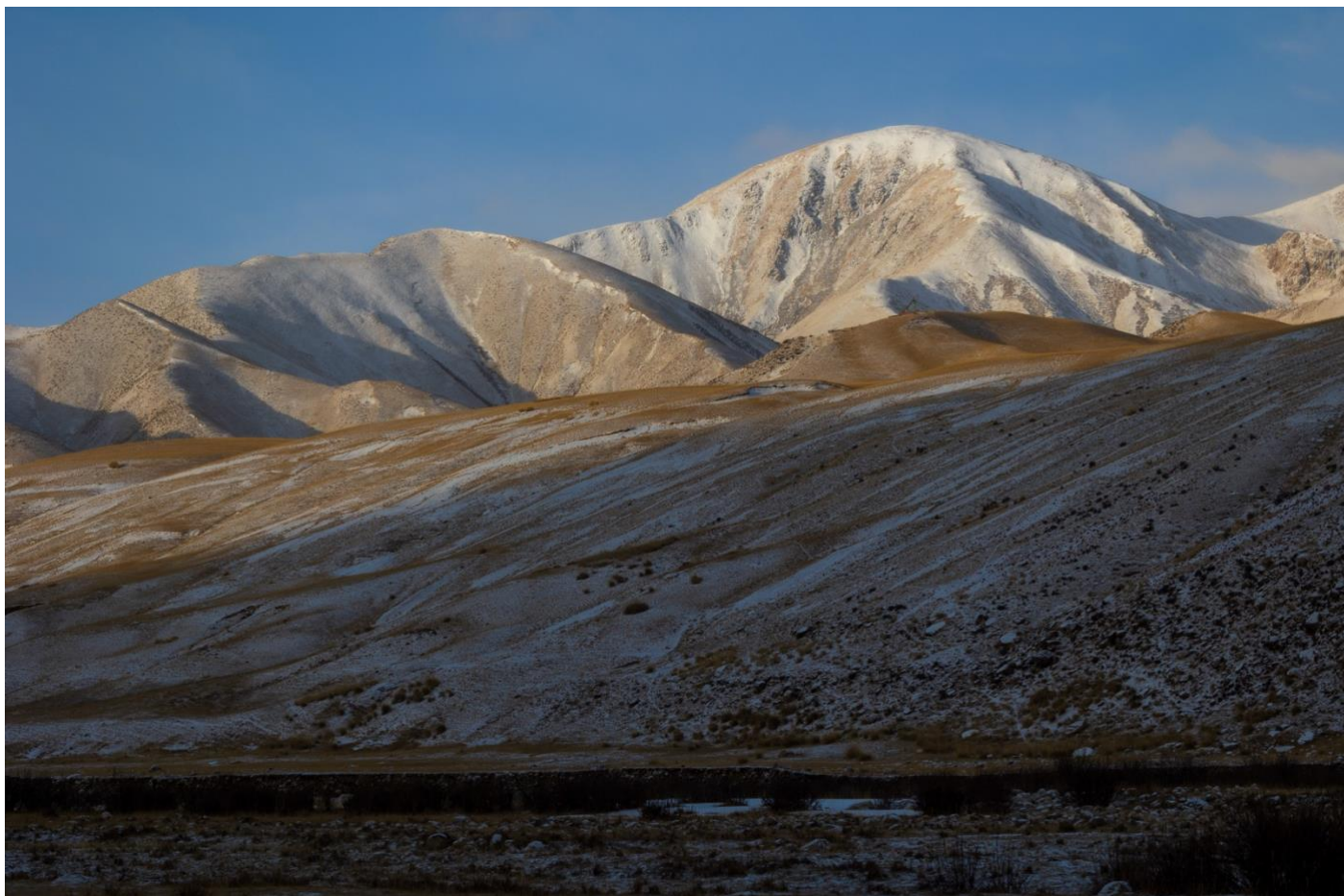
Trip Overview

	Location	Chinese name	Length of time
LBH	Labahe Nature Reserve	喇叭河	2D/2N
TJH	Tangjiahe Nature Reserve	唐家河	2D/2N
PW	Pingwu County	平武省	1D/1N
REG	Ruoergai Tibetan Plateau	若尔盖	2D/1N
T	Transit (Jiucha – Xiangride)	久治-香日德	2D/2N
GL	Gouli Town (Kunlun Mountain Range)	沟里乡	4D/3N

Guides: Philip He, Kevin Gong, Mr Sun

Participants: 5 males and 1 female, aged 32-39

organised by Dr Heng Yirui



*Tibetan mountain range*

China is the largest country that has territorial boundaries entirely within Asia, and it goes without doubt that the vast ecosystems in the country hold many secrets that have been gradually uncovered over the years. What excited me most to plan this trip was the possibility of viewing exquisite species like the red panda, golden snub-nosed monkey, snow leopard and Tibetan fox all in a compressed 2-week itinerary. I contacted AbsolutePanda and worked out an expedition entirely on the Chinese messaging platform WeChat, which is the first time I have planned a trip without a single email correspondence! My emphasis was on the animal sightings, lower visitor numbers and preferably seeing animals in the snow.

There were of course some concerns that I had about this itinerary. The entire journey would involve long journeys by car, with a total of approximately 2800km (thankfully on mostly excellent roads). There would also be an ascent from an elevation of 500m above sea level (Chengdu), to the highest point of 4700m above sea level (Jiucha) in the entire journey, raising concerns of altitude sickness especially on the Tibetan plateau. The temperatures ranged from  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $10^{\circ}\text{C}$ . Most of the accommodation options listed were also not searchable on the internet. At some point I left the finer details of the trip to the expertise of the outfitter. What a spectacularly successful trip this was!



## Labahe Nature Reserve



*Wintry landscape in Labahe Nature Reserve*

The first stop of our journey was to Labahe Nature Reserve, which is a short drive away from Chengdu. It had been snowing heavily for the few days prior to our visit, which made me even more excited about the opportunity to photograph red pandas in the snow.

Although I did not have to opine on how best to optimise the visit for mammal viewing, our eventual strategy was like the other reports: the most prolific portion is between the public access bus stop station to the cable car station at the western sector of the park.

We did not take the cable car to the peak as the visibility was poor due to fog and clouds at the higher elevations, and the only exploration we did to the eastern sector of the park was a single night drive in the surroundings of our hotel, although the sightings and experience were dampened by heavy snowfall on both the nights we were there. This was a disappointment as reports of leopard cats, hog badgers and Asian badgers have been reasonably frequent during these night drives, and I was hoping to see some activity.





*Red panda crossing the road*

On our first walk down the main road from the cable car station, the first sight we were greeted with was a red panda crossing the road! This was followed by three other sightings of different red pandas over two days. It is a wondrous feeling to be able to see a target animal consistently right at the beginning of a trip!



*Red panda in thick snow*



*Tibetan macaque*

On the drive in we were greeted by Tibetan macaques, which was an absolutely menacing encounter. These macaques have associated humans with food, and would not hesitate to make aggressive pursuit, especially if there was a backpack in sight! At some point I resorted to waving my tripod in the air, but I think that was an ineffective deterrent. One large male even grabbed the leg of someone in the group!

In our hikes we also encountered Chinese gorals and a Reeve's muntjacs. There was also a chance encounter with a Lady Amherst's pheasant, which was a lovely surprise!



## Tangjiahe Nature Reserve



*Sichuan takin calf on the river banks of Tangjiahe*

The next stop of the journey took us to Tangjiahe Nature Reserve with the intention of observing the Sichuan takin. As we were guests at the hotel located within the park, we were able to take our vehicle through the 10km stretch from the entrance of the park to the hotel. This single stretch of road is where almost all sightings at the reserve are reported. Not too long after our drive in, we spotted a Sichuan takin calf resting by the riverbank! Strangely there were no other individuals nearby.



*Masked palm civet on a night drive*

The night drives were slightly more successful here as the weather held up for the two nights. There were recent reports of golden cats, leopard cats, Asian badgers and hog badgers seen around the grounds of the hotel, although we were only able to see muntjacs and masked palm civets, which were very active during the night.





*Eurasian river otter playing amongst the rapids*

The most unexpected finding we had was of an Eurasian river otter meandering along the frigid river, playing amongst the rapids. This was a chance finding as we stopped the car to observe a herd of approximately 20 takins high on the mountain ridge when we spotted a slender-shaped animal porpoising in the waters. I would presume that there is no shortage of food for the otter as several freshwater species of fish inhabit these waters. The waterways are truly the otter's playground and we were sprinting up and down the road that followed the river stream just to keep this otter in sight!



Golden snub-nosed monkey

As the winter temperatures were sufficiently low, we were able to use infrared imaging to spot animals in the mornings and late afternoon. Just as we were getting fatigued by seeing troops of Tibetan macaques (who were markedly better behaved here than at LBH), a glimmer of gold and strangely long arms alerted us to a pair of Golden snub-nosed monkeys climbing uphill! Although reported to occur at TJH, sightings are incredibly rare. We also chanced upon a golden pheasant, although he very quickly darted into the shrubs.

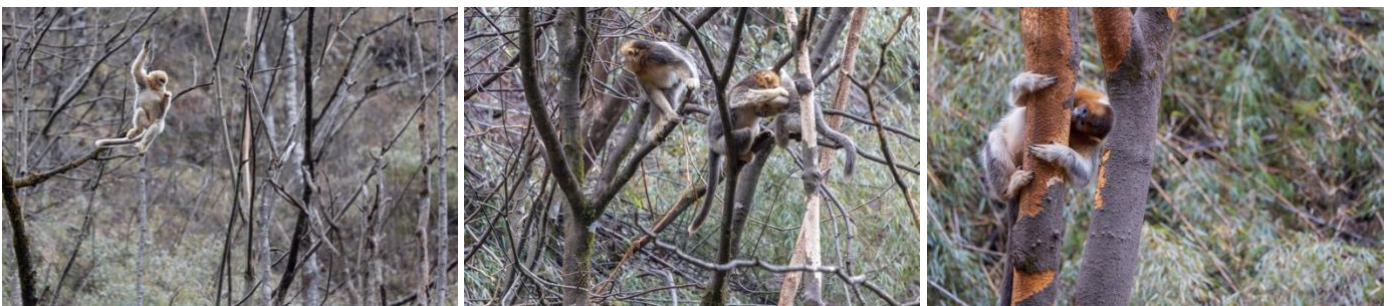


## Pingwu County



*Sichuan golden snub-nosed monkey allogrooming*

The obligatory visit to the Golden monkey research station in Pingwu was purely because this group of approximately 40 individuals have been habituated to remain at the station by the means of food provision. There were of course a few observations about this troop that I was of two minds about: the troop numbers were very much larger than what was commonly reported in the wild, and the supplementary feed was carrots, which certainly was not a natural part of their diet. That said, the animals were still displaying natural foraging behaviours, eating bark and twigs, and this was an opportunity to get up close to these endangered animals to observe their spirited antics.



*Monkeys displaying behaviours including (left to right) jumping, play-fighting and foraging on bark*



## Tibetan Plateau (Ruoergai and Transit)



*Tibetan prayer flags on the plateau*

After spending a week in Sichuan, we were ready to head up north towards Qinghai and the Tibetan plateau. We got ourselves prepared for the colder temperatures and the higher altitudes we would face on our journey.



*Tibetan fox in the snow*

Of all the animals that I wanted to see this trip, the Tibetan fox had the greatest allure to me. The grumpy face of the fox had shot to fame recently, and I really wanted my own sighting and picture! This was an easy target for the guides to hit, and we saw many foxes although this one truly captured the essence of the journey through the plateau in winter.





*Road sign indicating the altitude*

The drive up the plateau was also probably the most physically demanding, especially as the group was largely unaccustomed to high altitudes. Within two days we traversed up from approximately 1000m ASL to the highest record this trip of 4800m ASL, and although everyone eventually was acclimatised to the altitude, it certainly was a little uncomfortable, especially with the wintry conditions.

We set out to try our luck at finding the elusive Chinese mountain cat in the plains around REG and set out at 4am on one morning to peruse the farming fields. There were no cats, although we were pleased with a sighting a red fox eating presumably a plateau pika, likely stashed and buried deep in the ground by a Tibetan fox.



*Red fox having an early meal*

There were many other animals we saw in our transit, like herds of Tibetan gazelles and Asiatic wild asses. The birds that we were able to photograph were also alpine specialists like the blue-eared pheasant, and a sighting of a lammergeier perched on a rock as we traversed a mountain pass.



*Chinese mountain cat in a snow covered grass field*

A wrong turn in our journey brought us to an open field where the silhouette of a carnivore was picked up amongst the grass fields. Little did we expect to find a Chinese mountain cat out hunting in heavy snow in broad daylight!



## Kunlun Mountain Range (Gouli)

The area that I was looking forward to the most in this trip was our visit to the eastern reaches of the Kunlun Mountain range, with high desert alpine mountains that play host to a large variety of rarely seen mammals. We were initially supposed to spend just two full days at an outpost in GL, but the guides added an initial full day to increase the chances of us seeing the three feline stars of the valleys: Pallas's cat, Eurasian lynx and the elusive snow leopard.



*The sun rises in the Kunlan Mountains, viewed from the outpost we were staying at*

Spotting mammals in the valley is no easy feat. There is a road that leads through several gorges where research stations are positioned. However, at this time of the year, frozen rivers had formed over segments of the roads, that created huge hassle for even all-terrain Jeeps, let alone our vehicles. A combination of the extreme cold and the gravel road also made it extremely unfavourable for the tyres. I thought that having tyre punctures in four wheels (two vehicles) was extraordinary, but I soon realised that this was nowhere near to the record number of tyres after speaking to regulars at the outpost.



*Eurasian lynx in snow*

In the combination of heavy snow, strong winds, and pockets of calm over the three days, we certainly were fortunate to be treated to splendid sightings. The first animal that showed up was a Eurasian lynx resting on the cliff face, looking rather disgruntled by the heavy snowfall!



Due to the road conditions, we ended up having to take turns staying at the outpost and going on drives in the valley. Around the outpost, plateau pikas were having a field day digging the snow to get to the grass underneath. This of course attracted hungry predators like the Tibetan fox. A Tibetan fox was going about hunting pikas and stashing them away under the rocks in the ravine.



*(Left) Plateau pika foraging in the snow (Right) Pikas are a significant food source for Tibetan foxes, seen here caching food*



*Pallas's cat with plateau pika kill*

The other animal that relies on an abundant supply of plateau pikas is the Pallas's cat. We had fantastic sightings of this individual hunting one morning.



*Standoff between the predators*

An of course when there is competition for the same food source, both predators did not hold back displaying their displeasure with each other.

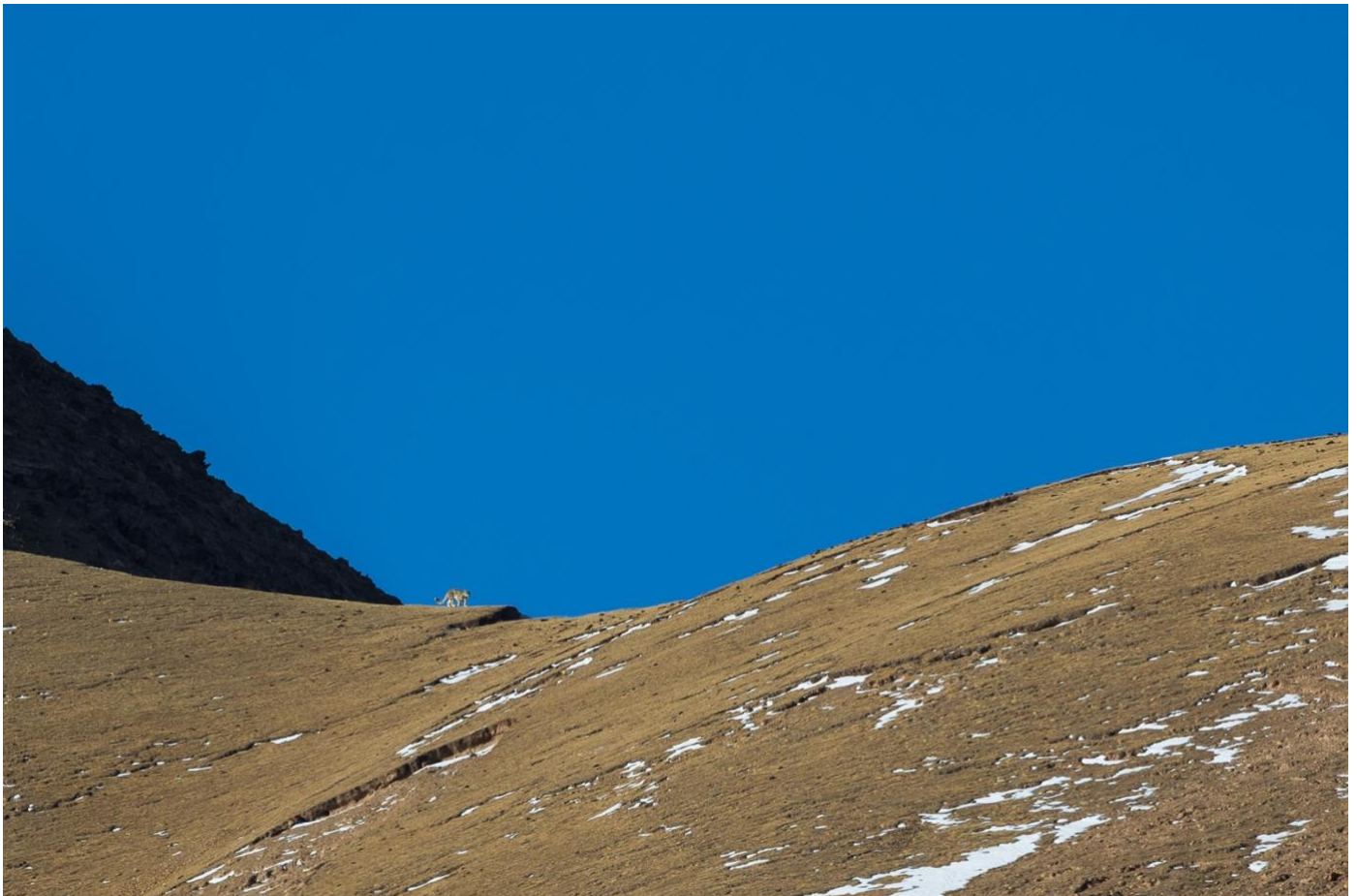




By the end of the third day, we had spent so much time scanning the cliff faces and peaks for snow leopards that we could almost draw out a topographical map of the valley. The prey base of bharal was strong as we saw several large herds negotiating the steep terrain – but still no sign of snow leopards.

*Bharal on cliff face*

The fascinating stories out of this valley certainly kept us entertained. We heard of snow leopards swiping bharals off the cliff face, leopards hunting Pallas's cats, golden eagles snatching fresh kills from Pallas's cats, and the chance appearances of Asiatic wild dogs in these alpine mountains. By the end of the third full day we were already resigned that a repeat visit would be required to get a glimpse of the ghost of the mountain when suddenly, the station ranger lowered his binoculars and exclaimed that he had sighted a snow leopard high up at the peak of one of the mountains.



*Snow leopard walking on a ridgeline*



This sighting at the very last minute of our time in the valley was a humbling lesson that as with all things in the wild, Nature makes the decisions. The alluring crepuscular light of the setting sun against the mountain range made this sighting unforgettable. This was an adult female leopard that had two grown cubs still in tow.



*Snow leopard female with two cubs*

We decided to take the morning of our departure from GL easy and checked out a nearby valley for other animals. In the drive near a river bend a brown mammal with a long tail and body, resembling that of a mustelid, darted across from the river into the thickets. After referencing species lists, I concluded that no other mustelid would be of that size apart from another Eurasian river otter. I would not have thought that they occurred at such high altitudes!



*Tibetan wolf on the valley floor*

In another valley with an expansive valley floor, we had an easy drive through farmlands, that also played host to different wildlife like the Tibetan gazelle. As we turned a corner, two Tibetan wolves appeared just metres beside the vehicle! Expectedly, these shy animals immediately darted towards the mountains and were joined by another individual.

This scene set off an alarm to the nearby Tibetan mastiff shepherd dogs, and the highly protective guardians wasted no time and gave chase. The wolves took the hint and disappeared up into the high mountains!

This was a perfect ending to our two weeks exploring Sichuan-Qinghai. We were very fortunate for above-average sightings. I would love to see how the Tibetan plateau would be like in summer and look forward to returning again soon!



Common name	Scientific name	LBH	TJH	PW	REG	T	GL
<b>Carnivora</b>							
Tibetan wolf 藏狼	<i>Canis lupus</i>						X
Red fox 赤狐	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>				X		
Tibetan fox 藏狐	<i>Vulpes ferrilata</i>				X	X	X
Red panda 小熊猫	<i>Ailurus fulgens</i>	X					
Eurasian river otter 欧亚水獭	<i>Lutra lutra</i>		X				(X)
Chinese mountain cat 荒漠猫	<i>Felis bieti</i>					X	
Snow leopard 雪豹	<i>Panthera uncia</i>						X
Pallas's cat 兔狲	<i>Otocolobus manul</i>						X
European lynx 猞猁							X
Masked palm civet 果子狸	<i>Paguma larvata</i>		X				
<b>Ungulates</b>							
Sichuan takin 四川羚牛	<i>Budorcas taxicolor</i>		X				
Tibetan gazelle 藏原羚	<i>Procapra picticaudata</i>				X	X	
Przewalski's gazelle 普氏原羚	<i>Procapra przewalskii</i>						X
Goitred gazelle 鹅喉羚	<i>Gazella subgutturosa</i>						X
Bharal 岩羊	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>						X
Japanese serow 华西鬣羚	<i>Capricornis milneedwardsii</i>		X				
Chinese goral 中华斑羚	<i>Naemorhedus griseus</i>	X	X				
Reeve's muntjac 小鹿	<i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	X	X				
Sambar 水鹿	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>		X				
Sika deer 梅花鹿	<i>Cervus canadensis</i>				X		
European wild boar 野猪	<i>Sus scrofa</i>		X				
Asiatic wild ass 藏野驴	<i>Equus hemionus</i>					X	
<b>Primates</b>							
Golden snub-nosed monkey 川金丝猴	<i>Rhinopithecus roxellanae</i>		X	X			
Tibetan macaque 藏酋猴	<i>Macaca thibetana</i>	X	X				
<b>Lagomorpha</b>							
Plateau pika 高原鼠兔	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>				X	X	X
Desert hare 藏兔	<i>Lepus tibetanus</i>				X		X