

Sichuan & Qinghai China – March 2025

Chris Daniels

I went to Sichuan and Qinghai provinces in China for 10 days in early March 2025 with the goal of finding Chinese Mountain Cat, Eurasian Lynx and Mainland Leopard Cat. I'm happy to say we were 3/3 for lifer cats with great views of each. While Asiatic Golden Cat was a slim possibility in Tangjiahe, we realistically knew the chances were near impossible. A bonus cat that we also saw was a snow leopard family in Gouli, although missed Pallas's Cat there and in Ruoergai.

The trip was organized by Tang Jun of www.chinamammaltour.com. The guide was Jason Tan who was great - nice to spend time with, highly energetic and knowledgeable. His wife, Hedy, also joined us to help with driving and was friendly and warm to travel with as well.

The trip entailed a lot of driving - 4,300km! Much of this was getting to and from Gouli. Poor weather with icy roads made the hours of driving much longer than we would have liked. The food and hotels were good, the people were friendly, and the parks and wildlife were fantastic.

Day by Day

Mar 3

Arrive Chengdu and drive to Tangjiahe. We spotlit that night in light rain, but no cats.

Mar 4

Walked in the park much of the day and had excellent views of **Golden Snub-Nosed Monkeys, Tibetan Macaques**, and distant views of **Rhesus Macaque**. We were more optimistic about the cats given the dry weather and sure enough started spotlighting around 7:30 and had our first **Mainland Leopard Cat** by 8. Our second was around 10:40 and we wrapped up by 11pm. Jason had an infiray L-19 infrared scope which was pretty ideal for scanning a wide area from the car. Far better than my Pulsar Axios monacle which is just too zoomed (ie it provides a narrow field of view) to scan efficiently.

Sichuan Takin, Reeve's Muntjak, Chinese Goral and **Masked Palm Civet** were fairly common with multiple sightings of each on each night. **Pere David's Rock Squirrel** were easily findable in the day and we had 3-5 of them. We had a couple of mice in vines hanging from the trees that we spotted via the thermal. We didn't attempt to identify them as I wanted to respect their privacy before they met their inevitable end in the claws of a cat, and we hadn't seen the leopard cat yet so I couldn't be bothered.

Tangjiahe Mammal List

1. Golden Snub-nosed Monkey
2. Sichuan Takin
3. Rhesus Macaque
4. Tibetan Macaque
5. Pere David's Rock Squirrel
6. Chinese Goral
7. Reeves's Muntjac
8. Mainland Leopard Cat
9. Masked Palm Civet
10. Two mice in vines hanging from a tree while spotlighting

Mar 5

Long drive to Ruoergai/Zoige. Snow on the road in many areas and a full blizzard at night for our last couple hours. Many crashed cars and stalled lorries. What should have been a 7.5hr drive took about 11hrs due to the weather and road conditions. No spotlighting due to the long drive, full blizzard and terrible road conditions when we arrived.

Mar 6

We went exploring on the road north of Zoige during the day, to the old quarry and on other side roads, and the Zasage area which was particularly beautiful. In Zasage, we had **Tibetan Gazelle**, and a pack of four **Tibetan Wolves**. Throughout the day, we had a lot of **Tibetan Foxes** (at least 10), 5 or so **Red Foxes**, and gobs upon gobs of **Plateau Pika**. Unfortunately, there was snow in the afternoon which had turned the roads icy. We had to pass 100+ lorries behind a few that were stuck on the slightest of inclines before town, so again we could not go spotlighting tonight due to the road conditions.

Mar 7

Went out exploring during the day again, and then spotlit from 8-2am. It was unusually cold and while we had 10-12 **Tibetan Foxes**, no cats.

Mar 8

Tried to go explore the Baxi Forest but icy roads had flipped one car and crashed another on the downslope to the forest so we had to turn around. We explored other areas and then decided to drive up to Langmusi for dinner and spotlight our way back. We had **Asian Badger** near Langmusi (thanks to Jon and Sid for a solid place to look!) and then spotlighting a field of long grass on a side road between Langmusi and Zasage, we had **Chinese Mountain Cat**! Excellent views as it simply decided to hide in a bush which was totally open from one side. All of the field marks - ringed tail, blue eyes, and red tufts on the ears, were easily visible. Again, the L-19 thermal was key in finding this cat - it's wild field of view is fantastic from a vehicle, and it's got a laser pointer to find what you're seeing in the real world quickly.

Ruoergai Mammal List

1. Chinese Mountain Cat (1)
2. Tibetan Gazelle (regular in the Zasage valley)
3. Asian Badger (up by Langmusi)
4. Tibetan Fox (the most common mammal aside from Pika - literally dozens)
5. Red Fox (a handful. Common the first day but then nearly all Tibetan Foxes thereafter)
6. Tibetan wolf (pack of 3 in Zasage valley)
7. Himalayan Marmot (1)
8. Plateau Pika (everywhere in enormous colonies)

Mar 9

Long drive all the way from Zoige to Xiangride. Xiangride is a town about 1h 15min north of the Gouli valleys where we'd spend the next two days looking for Eurasian Lynx (with bonus opportunities for Snow Leopard and Pallas's Cat).

Mar 10

Arrived at the ranger station in Gouli around 8am. The program here is that the ranger gets into a visiting car and all of the visitors' cars go up the valleys together, stopping to scan for animals. There were 5 cars in our caravan today and we went way up a valley to over 4,300m. The roads were gravel with a lot of ice and snow, and even a sketchy frozen stream to drive across. Some cars gave up at the gravel or ice. The scenery is

stunningly gorgeous. We only had one **Tibetan Wolf** in the morning. Lunch is served at the ranger station and was warm and good soup both days. We changed a flat tire at lunch.

In the afternoon, we went down to the main valley that the paved road to Xiangride runs through and waited for a Eurasian Lynx that had been observed to re-emerge. It didn't, but we got a call around 5pm that a snow leopard had been spotted up the morning's valley so we raced up there. Sure enough, there were three **Snow Leopards** perched high up the mountainside. We crossed the river to approach them more closely with the ranger by going up a drainage that hid our movement, but another group went out in the open much closer (still 500m probably from the cats) and spooked the family so they left. Still had excellent views.

We had a second flat tire on the way back from the snow leopard so I went back to the hotel with an extremely generous Chinese photographer named Chen while Jason stayed with the car to try to get it repaired. I had a wonderful dinner in town with Chen and his friends. They were a great group of generous wildlife photographers and the dinner was fun and talkative. I'm forever indebted to them for their kindness and generosity in taking me to the hotel and to dinner when we were in a pinch. This dinner was the homo sapiens highlight of the trip.

Mar 11

One of the photographers from dinner, Hua Dai, took me back to the park as the car never got repaired and Jason stayed at the ranger station overnight. Again, I'm indebted to the generosity of the Chinese tourists here. Hua Dai was extremely kind and enthusiastic about Lynx in particular. He's also a great photographer.

We focused the entire day on the main valley with the paved road for two reasons: 1) my target was Eurasian Lynx and this was their best habitat. It also happened to be breeding season so some were out and seen recently during the day. 2) we didn't want another flat tire. As a side note - if you go here, it's worth ensuring that your guide has a vehicle with off-road tires, not city tires.

The day was exceptionally quiet. The ranger found no cats today. Everyone was focused on the Lynx and we literally drove a 5mi stretch of road back and forth, with long periods of waiting at "hotspots" in between. It could not have been more boring. This is why my kids hate mammal watching. I was able to go through all of my photos and delete the duds, write in my journal, do some bird watching, plan my next cat trip, and more, all why developing a kink in my neck from endless scanning of the same damn rocks that looked like cats.

We decided to leave at 6:45 or so, but Jason had forgotten his hat and another person had it, so we turned around 5 minutes into our drive and then got a call from the ranger that the Lynx was out! We got back quickly and were able to see an **Eurasian Lynx** cub sitting in the open which was then joined by its mother in an adorable cheek rubbing greeting. The two disappeared back into a bush where we could see in the thermal that they had sat back down. While scanning with the thermal, I found another Lynx across the river! We suspect it was the second cub of this mother as the three had been seen in prior days together in this area.

Gouli Mammal List

1. Tibetan Wild Ass (1-2h S. of Gouli on the highway, seen both when we came and went)
2. Tibetan Gazelle
3. Woolly Hare (dozens ievable vin the mornings and evenings in the main low valley...where the lynx hang out)
4. Tibetan wolf
5. Blue sheep
6. Snow Leopard
7. Eurasian Lynx

8. Plateau Pika

9. Mouse crossing the road pre dawn. We were racing to get to the ranger station on time, so no ID. I hope it was eaten by a cat.

Mar 12 & 13 & 14

With our targets seen, we started the absurdly long drive back to Chengdu. I wish this drive upon nobody. Gouli is insanely beautiful and full of cats with a ranger that can pick them out of the landscape incredibly well, but is a solid 17-20+ hours of driving from Chengdu. If I were to go again, I'd try to fly (apparently there is an airport within a day's drive of Gouli, but I don't know the details), and I'd stay there for 4-6 days. This would leave time to explore more valleys and likely get better views of the cats.

It's worth noting that we missed Pallas's Cat which is supposed to be the easiest cat to see in Gouli. I suspect it's because we focused our efforts in the main valley by the paved road on finding the Lynx rather than driving up the many side valleys. Another argument for more days here.

We had a nice goodbye dinner together in Chengdu and I got to see a bit of the tourist area. Left on Mar 14.



The Plateau Pika. While cute, this is not an inherently awesome mammal. Rather, it derives its secondary awesomeness from the fact that it is food for wild cats.



*Tibetan Fox. I walked around a hillside and he was scanning the planes and unaware of me until I snapped a photo. This is his "Oh sh*t." face.*



Tibetan Wolf in the Gouli valley.



Chinese Mountain Cat



Snow Leopard family - the first view.



Snow Leopard



Asian Badger



Tibetan Gazelle



Eurasian Lynx



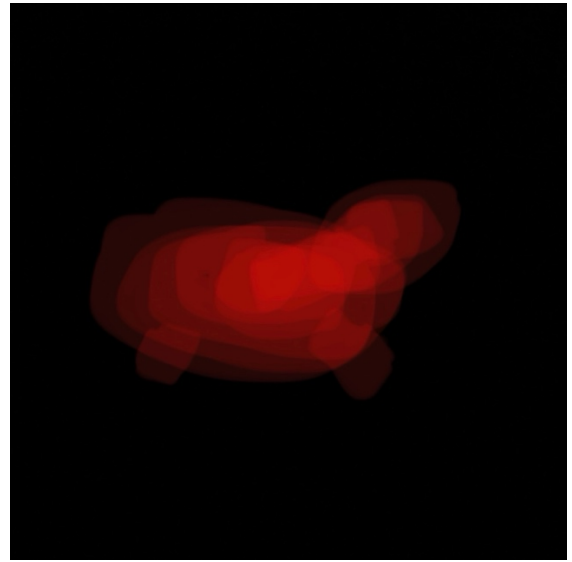
Mainland Leopard Cat



Tibetan Macaque



Golden Snub-nosed Monkey



I didn't take a pic of one of the dozens of Muntjack, so here's an artist's impression of what one looks like in a thermal. I hope that this is helpful.



Chris, Hedy and Jason