



# Qinghai's Snow Leopards & Other Mammals of the Tibetan Plateau July - August 2024 Trip Report

Every summer after the annual cordyceps harvest on the Tibetan Plateau, Royle Safaris takes a small group out there to explore some of the best and least visited large mammal watching locations in all of Asia. Starting in the high altitude city of Yushu we then move around various locations looking for iconic mammal species of Central Asia, including snow leopards, Tibetan wolves, Tibetan antelopes, wild yaks and various other species. It is not just the larger species that we search for, there is a variety of smaller mammals such as various pika species which are also targeted and seen with a good success rate.

The trips here are led by expert local guides (Sid and ZZ) who have spent the last several years exploring these high altitude grasslands mountainous regions and each trip uses the latest information and locations to maximise the best chances of seeing as much as possible. Our group was 8 people strong (Julija Zandersone, Bonnie Shirley, Lesley Cupitt, Mark Langston, Miles Foster, Ingrid Statman, Phil Davison and Roman Schwartz) and was successful in seeing a total of 22 species of mammals.

In general trips onto the Tibetan Plateau are never an easy affair, itineraries are always vulnerable to factors far out of our hands. This year was no different; our proposed Snow Leopard site, Valley of The Cats, had been closed to the public (both local and foreign) due to ongoing site safety work – we are unsure when (if) it will open up again. Luckily, with Qinghai containing a wealth of wildlife habitat, the local team could easily compensate that loss with more than adequate substitute sites, which were used on this trip and subsequent ones with great success in seeing targeted species.

These other areas (and places we regularly have visited) not only gave a haul of 22 Tibetan Plateau mammal species that included **Snow Leopard**, **Tibetan Blue Bear**, more than 10 **Pallas's Cat**, the mega-fauna, **Wild Yak**, **Kiang** and **Tibetan Antelope (Chiru)** of the Kekexili, **Tibetan Wolf** and **Tibetan Fox**, three rare and range restricted deer, **White-lipped**, **Sichuan (MacNeill's)** and **Alpine Musk** and, last but not least, great views of two very slippery characters, **Mountain Weasel** and **Steppe Polecat** – but also gave daily access to hotel facilities with on-suite hot-showers and sit-down toilets. A far cry from the days of pioneering trips to see Snow Leopards up here watching – or even what you might have expected a few years ago.

We were a party of 8 with 2 driver guides – driven in one 6 seat mini-bus and Landcruiser size 4WD vehicle (Nissan Terra) (however for future trips we will be using 2 or 3 4x4 vehicles – depending on the size of the group. Which is better for logistics and also everyone will get a window seat). Most of the driving took part on well driven dirt-tracks – sometimes a little bumpy but always within expected safety and comfort zones. Most sites were not more than 2 hours drive from the hotel and although group members were welcome to walk around when we were looking for wildlife, most stayed around vehicles where we scanned with scopes and binoculars. Average altitudes were in excess of 4000m ASL, which made hiking a little more challenging, but with a generally pleasant daytime climate (many sunny days of +20C) it was often a harsh alpine sun that became biggest irritant. Most days started at 06:00 and if no night drives were planned finished by 20:00. Since the main predator prey are diurnal Pika, and local, tent dwelling, Yak herders might take exception to groups of flashlight bearing foreigners, we kept the night drives down to a modest couple of riverside forays. A couple of nighttime visits were also made to our Tibetan Blue Bear site. Food was a combination of evening restaurant and daytime field meals – nearby shops meant items such as milk, western style soft drinks and snacks like potato crisps, biscuits/cakes and fresh fruit were also present.

It's important to note that although the locals are extremely friendly, much of Qinghai is still very sensitive to independent travel by foreign nationals, with police registration and travelling in certain directions being complicated affairs and entry into Snow Leopard areas requiring rigorous negotiation to open a checkpoint gate. However, thanks to our local guide ZZ, who should surely be nominated as chief UN negotiator, who at one stage miraculously persuaded (bribed) a team of unflinching gate-guards with small bottles of very plain drinking water to let our vehicles pass, all went pretty smoothly.

All in all, a very successful trip resulting in a great list of 22 mammal species, a large number of bird species including all of the main Tibetan targets and perhaps the real highlight of the trip was that the group were allowed access to observe a Tibetan sky burial which is a unique relict of a culture which is being stripped away from China these days and something that only a few very privileged outsiders have ever been able to see.

So below is a brief summation of our mammal sightings.

We have 3 places remaining on next (July/August 2025) Qinghai mammalwatching tour, for anyone interested please let us know as there limited availability on this wonderful group tour to one of the best mammalwatching locations in the world. You can contact us at [info@royle-safaris.co.uk](mailto:info@royle-safaris.co.uk) and we will happily provide information and answer any questions.

### **Snow Leopard**

The Snow Leopards were obviously the highlight of the trip. A lot of scanning went into the single sightings of two animals and, just like the 2023 trip, it took until the very last day and hour to find them. A possible sighting was made some days before by ZZ, but, after a very brief view, that animal was never picked up again. The Snow Leopard pair came down a green ridge line and on an easily viewable rocky ledge exhibited interactive behaviour – moving together, growling and pronounced posturing. We speculated whether they were larger siblings that hadn't split, but observations of a local female Leopard with cubs had shown that, even outside normal mating season, male Leopards will approach and interact with females – the behaviour of the cats, viewed for around 20 minutes, makes me think that this was the case – a meeting of two unrelated animals of opposite sexes.

### **Pallas' Cat**

Were sighted on 7 of the 14 trip days – involving 4 specific sites, two of which involved multiple animals. Two kittens and at least 1 adult at one, and 3 distinct adults and very young kittens being moved by a mother cat at another. At least 7 distinct animals were seen with most sightings during daytime (both morning and afternoon) watching, while cats were also observed on both of our night drives. Daytime observations included the meeting of two adult cats, where one cat charged another resulting in chase where we quickly lost site of the animals. We also witnessed a cat carrying what we first assumed was a pika. Later examination of photos revealed very young Pallas's kittens – literature states that mother cats will often swap dens. Hunting was also observed. The cat, with excitedly vibrating tail held high, making typical belly crawl advanced towards likely pika prey, which were so plentiful that even if the majority dodged the cat's advances eventually one emerged from a burrow at just the wrong time. In one grassland pasture, where pikas were particularly abundant, 3 distinct cats were seen, indicating territory overlap and an abundance of prey that might allow for far smaller territory size than normally associated with this species.

### **Tibetan Blue Bear**

Considered a very rare subspecies of Brown Bear, may not be as uncommon as once reported. Our trip found over 10 of these animals during a couple of nightly visits to a refuse site. The bears were able to climb over fences designed to keep out feral dogs and had become well-known to the locals. The animals seen included 2 mothers and their cubs. However, once we stepped out of our vehicles, to get better views, the bears beat a hasty and very nervous retreat – indicating a human/bear conflict and possible local persecution, which must include the practice of setting the dogs on any that are seen. The police had already warned us to avoid bears, which of course have a dangerous reputation, and any videos the locals have shown me include chasing dogs and barking dogs. I'm sure this persecution results in a mainly nocturnal lifestyle.

### **Tibetan Wolf**

Surprisingly few seen on this trip – but great views were had in the Kanda Shan area when a single animal crossed the road, which resulted in us finding two more followers that gave longer and closer sightings.

### **Tibetan Fox**

Near daily sighting – the abundance of prey for this pika hunting specialist means this species is common site scurrying over the grassland.

### **Red Fox**

Seemingly a more adaptive species – being able to survive of both the pika rich grasslands and areas where prey species might be more varied and include carrion. Almost as many sightings as the Tibetan Foxes.

### **Tibetan Antelope (Chiru)**

Seen during the single trip day to the Kekexili, with scores of male animals being easily viewed from roadside observations. Males and females with young remain separated outside the breeding season and we only saw males. They are docile and easily approached, with some close to the road giving good

photo opportunities. The Kekexili reserve buffer zone – an area open to mammal watchers – is around 4 hours from the hotel – an early start allows for this site to be viewed with a day trip.

### **Tibetan Gazelle**

Commonly seen throughout the whole trip, on all trip days – small herds present in all areas.

### **Wild Yak**

Another of the iconic Kekexili megafauna, although abundant as a domestic animal. The wild herds of this animal are now classified as vulnerable. We often see single Wild Yak bulls in the buffer zone – we presume they are taking advantage of female domestic Yaks that might be ready for mating. At first just spotting very distant likely animals we eventually found a huge wild male that was close enough to the road for closer examination.

### **Kiang (Wild Ass)**

Many small herds seen during our day on the Kekexili – most in the buffer zone, but also a couple of single animals on grassland areas leading to the site. Many foals, some immatures literally horsing around and often so close to the road to give easy photo opportunities.

### **Alpine Musk Deer**

An endangered species, hunted for its musk glands, we were able to find 3 singletons on 3 different days at 3 separate sites. Often well hidden in scrub or rocky surroundings all our animals were found with the use of our thermal scope.

### **Sichuan Deer (MacNiell's Wapati)**

Currently considered a subspecies of Elk, this may be the rarest animal found on the trip. A single female was found in the Kanda Shan area close to Yushu – only seen on a single trip day.

### **White-lipped (Thorold's) Deer**

Another species hunted to rarity, mainly for supposedly medicinal body-parts. It was seen on 2 trip days – firstly a small group of Stags, very large deer, resplendent under their massive set of antlers and on a second day with a herd of 50plus females and fawns.

### **Argali (Marco Polo Sheep)**

An uncommon sheep species easily identified by large size, muscular appearance and big curvaceous horns – seen on one trip day as a large flock of male, female and young – great views of animals silhouetted against a setting sun on a rocky ridgeline.

### **Blue Sheep (Bharal)**

Commonly seen in flocks feeding on high mountain side pasture. This species is a prime prey animal for Snow Leopards – where we find Blue Sheep we can find the cat. Observation of herd behaviour can also indicate the presence of Leopard or other large carnivores.

### **Steppe Polecat**

Close and lengthy daylight views of this attractive and normally hard to find animal was another trip highlight. Seen on two days, the first being a brief pre-dawn encounter with lights but a second trip day brought far improved and prolonged sightings of one marauding a well-packed pika colony. The animal slipping in and out of view as it raided the various pika burrows.

### **Mountain (Altai) Weasel**

We ran into this mini killing machine on the way home from the Kahekili – hiding under a discarded cardboard box thrown in a roadside gutter. This species finds it difficult to resist a bit of hand squeaking and a weasel soon charged out. On its way down the gutter, it killed 2 pikas with bites to the neck that were so quick they were hardly visible. Three other weasels were found in the same locality.

### **Woolly Hare**

Seen on our two night drives – enjoys the dense buckthorn habitat found in river valleys.

**Blyth's Mountain Vole**

Also, a burrow dweller and living very close to Pika Colonies this vole is easily identified from its pika neighbours by smaller size, grey pelage and possession of a tail. Diurnal in nature was seen in many locations.

**Himalayan Marmot**

Seen in good numbers – at distance can often be confused for other similar sized animals – especially cats

**Chinese Red Pika**

Formerly called Glover's, this larger rock climbing pika was found at 4 sites – again the thermal proved a useful tool to find it in small crevice locations

**Plateau (Black-lipped) Pika**

Last but not least – the bedrock of food chains that include so many carnivores. An abundant species, living in vast colonies, that seem vital for healthy grassland biodiversity. Seen in great numbers on every trip day.



Snow Leopard



Snow Leopard



Snow Leopard



Snow Leopard



Pallas's Cat



Pallas's Cat



Pallas's Cat



Tibetan Fox



Tibetan Fox



Tibetan (Himalayan) Wolf



Red Fox



Brown Blue (Tibetan Blue Bear)



Mountain Weasel



Mountain Weasel



Himalayan Marmot



Blyth's Mountain Vole





Woolly Hare



Plateau Pika



Chinese Red Pika



MacNiell's Deer



Alpine Musk Deer



White-lipped Deer



Blue Sheep



Tibetan Argali



Tibetan Gazelle



Tibetan Antelope



Kiang



Wild Yak



Himalayan Griffon



Ibisbill



Pink-rumped Rosefinch



Eurasian Magpie



Little Owl



Eurasian Hoopoe



Lanner Falcon



Lammergeier