

Mammals of the roof of the world

Qinghai province of China – August 2019



Travelling to and arrival on the roof of the world



After two days of the inevitable international hassle of waiting in terminals, security checks, customs, international and domestic flights plus an overnight stay in Chengdu, we finally set foot on the Tibetan Plateau. Given the fact that Chengdu is 400 metres above sea level the arrival in Yushu, at 3600 metres above sea level, was quite a shock it felt a bit like being drunk without drinking alcohol!



However, as none of us really felt ill or had a headache, we decided to visit the local monastery, strolled a bit around town near the local statue square and, in the evening, did some birdwatching in the vicinity of the river and adjacent agriculture fields. Seeing both Himalayan and Bearded Vultures, Pallas's gull and Fork-tailed Swifts were the most obliging species being present above our heads. Abundant terrestrial birds species were Rufous-necked Snowfinch, Humes Groundpecker, Blue-fronted Redstart and Little Owl. Mammalwise it was the numerous Plateau Pikas getting our attention.



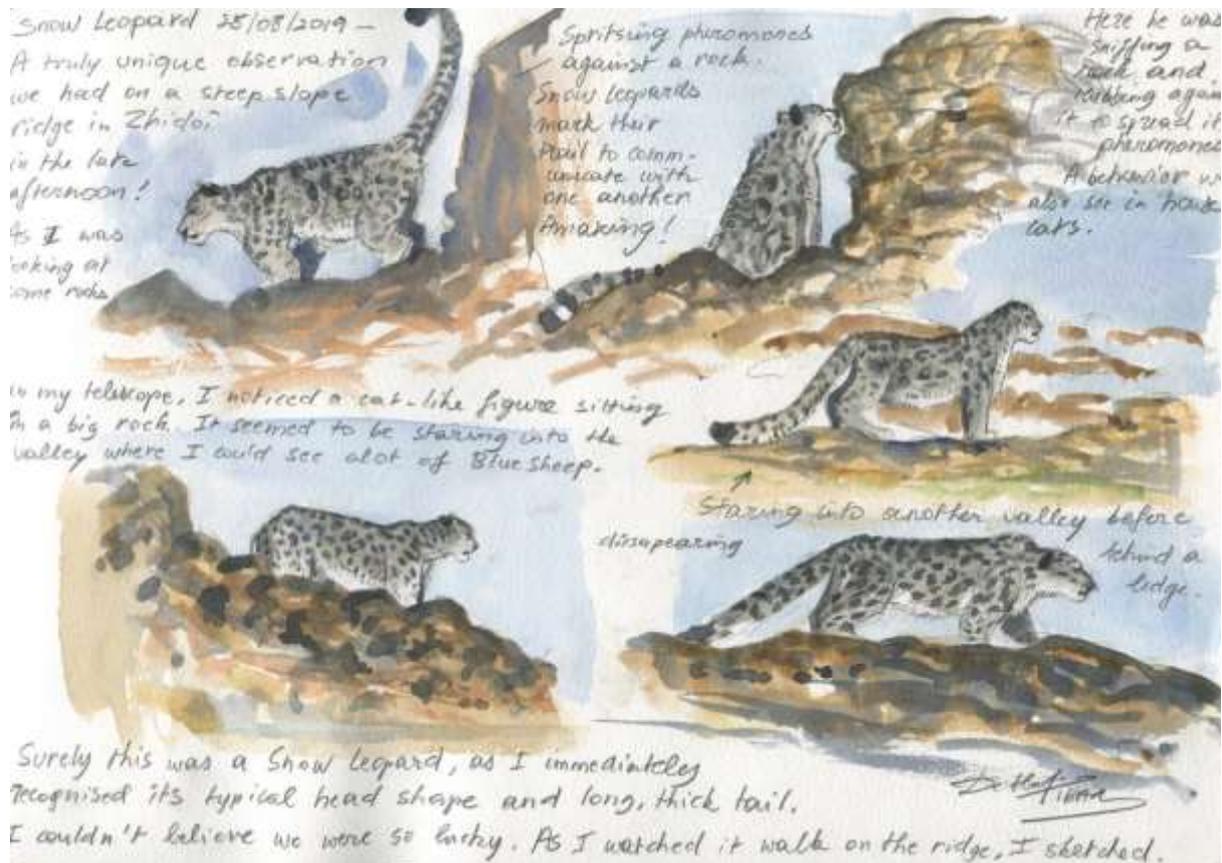
Towards Zhidoi

Although still in a landscape affected by human development while transferring to Zhidoi we soon noticed the typical character of the plateau: vast and endless treeless hills stretching all the way to the horizon. Being out for the first time in a new country is always a pleasant experience as, equal with the new landscape, wildlife offers a lot of new stuff to look out for. While at a road site breakfast stop we spotted our first Himalayan Marmots, Tibetan Gazelles, Red and Tibetan Foxes. Species we would come accross daily over the coming days.



Once in Zhidoi, we dropped our gear in the hotel, and went straight to the Snow Leopard mountains only 45 minutes driving away. Although Tibetan farmers and their domesticated Yak herds still dominated the road side valleys, the landscape blends in by its character of raw nature. Especially the vast cordillera of bare mountain summits with steep cliffs appear very wild. Because of the distances the use of our scopes was vital. Two places, offering good views over the surrouding hills, were used by us to get familiar with the area. Although undoubtedly an area offering a high potential for finding both target species it was still a bit of a challenge. Pallas's Cat and Snow Leopard were seen here close to the road in winter time but not in summer. Anyway, both scanning sites became, more or less, our main vantage points while exploring the area over the following days.

The first Snow Leopard



As with the discovery of a resting daytime Eurasian Lynx in Poland (2018), it was also Detlef doing the first remarkable and fantastic discovery of this trip on our first full day in the area. Rather distantly and nearly invisible, he pointed out a sleeping Snow Leopard laying on a ridge with only a front paw and part of the head visible. Although already late afternoon, it took a while to see more of the animal that kept on sleeping only lifting its head now and then looking across the valley lower down where a herd of Bharal were grazing. For Jan, who had seen Snow Leopard before in Ladakh, this individual appeared much more grey in colour. Given the position where it was laying it was all about keeping fingers crossed that the animal would stay on our side of the summit once it became active. As the afternoon slipped by into evening the Snow Leopard started to become active. It lifted its head more and more, repositioned a bit, yawned several times before stretching itself into a sitting position just like all members of the cat family do! Unfortunately - that's at least what we thought at the time - the animal decided to start its evening stroll on the wrong side of the summit as it walked off out of view for us. But it was not! To our great relief, it reappeared a bit later back on our side and now in full view! What a massive looking animal! Including the long thick tail, about 2.5 metres in size for sure!

The typical black rosettes and spots clearly visible too on its smoky-grey coat. The high domed forehead another and obvious feature of this big cat species! Continuing its stroll to the top, we felt privileged in observing territorial marking behavior as it urinated twice followed by scraping the gravel afterwards with its powerful limbs. In addition to these scrapes, the animal also showed facial marking behavior as the cat rubbed its cheeks, as high as possible, on an overhanging rock to deposit chemical pheromones produced in glands in the cheeks. After this facial marking behaviour, it backed up against the overhanging rock to spray a jet of urine with its tail in a vertical position! After re-marking the ridgeline the animal layed down. It must have felt relaxed after marking its territory as "safe" again! Just like we did! The animal eventually disappeared out of view once it started to descend from the summit! Highly satisfied we left the area!

1 - 2 - 3 - 4!

For Jan, fixer of this trip, it was all about having another wildlife experience equal with the feeling of his personal Snow Leopard discovery in Hemis NP, India - back in the autumn of 2012. An atmospheric report of that once in a lifetime observation is available on the EB5 website (report chapter).

Nowadays, Snow Leopards are seen anually in the Indian Himalayas. Incredible reports full of crazy sightings and pictures are not a surprise any longer. Which is actually just great to see and read in these days of diminishing wildlife and extinction threats! But reports aren't any longer only from India. For several years Snow Leopards have been spotted too in Mongolia and China. Moreover, especially those from the Chinese Tibetan Plateau, these reports are topped with numerous sightings of different and other iconic mammal species like the bizzare and beautiful looking Pallas's Cat, the massive Wild Yak and the enigmatic looking Tibetan Antelope. So actually the intention to get out to the Tibetan plateau was already made just after Jan's first Hemis experience. Though, mainly because of being occupied by EB5 guiding, it took way too long in effectively doing it. But nothing wrong in dreaming is there? Being a bit felid addicted, the Pallas's Cat was Jan's goal and target number one for several years and, to be honest, this dream was fullfilled far beyond all expectations! Although the first of our four Pallas's Cat observations we had during the trip was missed by Jan. But not the other three!

1: The morning after our first Snow Leopard sighting, we posted ourselves near a stake out were Plateau Pikas occured in very high densities. In a sudden moment we had 4 different Tibetan Foxes hunting on the spot. To get a wider and better view of the spot, Jan posted himself a bit further away from where the others stood. This undoubtly was a bad idea! As soon Ronan was making obvious gestures, Jan knew what was going on. 'They must have seen a Pallas's Cat!' And they had! But the animal was seen only briefly moving up the slope in its typical stealth mode. It was actually disturbed by a local

Tibetan Yak herder driving by on his motorcycle between where we stood and the cat. Despite the brief observation and quick disappearance, the cat was definitely somewhere near by. Nevertheless, several attempts looking from different positions failed in refinding it.

Despite many more days to come, wildlife people perfectly know the psychological thoughts beginning in Jan's mind: "am I gonna dip this one"?



Anyway despite Jan's mind spinnings as the day moved on our focus on this stake out faded a bit. We all started to look around in a 360° angle from the vicinity of our 4WD vehicle. Doing that, Jan scanned rocky outcrops looking similar to the site where the invisible Pallas's Cat was hiding. The result was surreal! He, totally unexpected and out of the blue, located another most wanted member of the felidae family in his binoculars. Swapping straight to Detlef's scope, he pointed out the animal and spoke the words: "I've got a Lynx!" Still feeling pleased, fortunate and excited about our recent Snow Leopard observation, we again all went mad! Another moment of intense yeahs, high fives, raised fists, jumping around and hugging each other - even Jan who has 10+ sightings of these holy grails on his personal cat list! Different from the Pallas's Cat earlier this cat couldn't escape! Way too big and no cover around! When spotted, the lynx was sitting on its haunches facing the sun. Although distant, besides the obvious jizz, the following distinctive features were visible in our scopes: powerful, relatively long, legs, large well furred paws, large pointed ears with tufts at the tips and

a long, white facial “ruff”. Due to the bright sunlight it was facing into its coat appeared red coloured on its hind parts. The black body spots were less numerous than the animals observed by Jan in Poland. White coloured underparts, as with their European relatives, including the neck and chin. Very obvious, the coat looked thicker furred. Given Jan’s field experience, to him the animal gave the impression of a very large, winter coated individual. As soon as we all had the animal in our scopes, the cat started to move showing more features: short body, large feet and the typical short "bobbed" tail with an all-black tip. While moving, its rear limbs were obviously longer than the front ones, giving the body a tilted forward look. Although being present in bare but rocky country, the animal managed to disappear in the endless slanted landscape. Fortunately, we quickly relocated it a bit higher up the slope where, after a second stroll up slope, it lay down to start lavating its fur. Amazing to see such a rare animal laying down licking its paws, back, chest and genitals. Afterwards the animal curled up and appeared to go to sleep. So time to focus again on the Pallas’s Cat site. But as that one decided to stay hidden, from late afternoon onwards it was, of course, the lynx again that earned all our observations. It stood up, looking around now and then but never during the whole afternoon leave its resting spot. As with the Snow Leopard earlier, serial yawnings announced the lynx becoming active again. The animal started its afternoon stroll rather quickly and went up the slope, ignoring a fenced area by just crawling underneath, to eventually disappear behind a curve on the summit. So, overall a superb observation of a third member of the felid family within 24 hours and, especially for Ronan, an unexpected bonus after three fruitless attempts for Eurasian lynx in Poland!

PC sighting 2: Half way on the journey to Budongquan, we stopped to watch a local horse race that was going on. Rules were easy but crazy for the horses: 10 rounds around a square race track. Difficulty for the riders was keeping the horse in its fastest trotting mode all the time. If the horse went into a gallop it was disqualified straight away. For the riders, without having the comfort of a saddle, it was all about keeping their balance on the horse. In the end the horse in the best physical condition and best rider won. A bit cruel while the race was on were horses breathing their lungs out. Fortunately, as some of the horses just didn’t make it to the end, their empathic riders just aborted the race! Despite being adapted to absorb every bit of available oxygen, there is just not enough air to breath at an altitude of 4000 metres above sea level to run such races! At least that was our opinion even if the locals really enjoyed it!





After enjoying this remarkable festivity we moved on. At a small restaurant in a rural town en route a resident elderly couple prepared one of many tasty hot lunches we had during our trip: fresh, full of vegetables and very cheap. Exciting news during the meal was our driver's information about a site nearby where he had seen a Pallas's Cat earlier. Once at the site, it was the road side slope that looked promising as the area was literally drenched with Plateau Pikas. They were just everywhere! Although something in Jan's mind was whispering something else it clearly was all about who would be the one finding our target first. This area with such an abundance of prey had to host a cat! And indeed, it happened very quickly as our driver suddenly pointed out a Pallas's Cat he spotted through his binoculars! What we then witnessed was a 'Planet Earth' experience. Not a DVD episode but a real hunting scene seen through our own binoculars and scopes for 45 minutes! Being surrounded by an agile version of 'an-all-you-can-eat-buffet' the Pallas's Cat's senses were all triggered. The cat not knowing where to look or what individual pika to focus on as its bizarre striped head looked in all directions with whiskers motoring and a twitching upperlip, its tail tip moving up and down, left and right. While moving in stealth mode it would take two steps forward and one step back and vice versa. After a few unsuccessful raids the cat finally succeeded in grabbing and pulling a pika out of its burrow where the unfortunate rodent had tried to hide. Proud of its catch of the day, the Pallas's Cat moved off with the pika in its mouth a bit away from the killing scene. This time not in stealth mode but in a more upright stance with its tail held out straight. After eating its lunch half hidden underneath an overhanging bank the cat sat relaxed with, now and then, its mouth slightly open. Nice too was its anticipation on alarm calls produced by the numerous nearby Himalayan Marmots. It looked up and around to detect potential enemies. After resting a bit the cat went again into hunting mode but this time just briefly and not really with any intent. Then it started to patrol all the way up the slope trying to find a resting refuge. Entering a burrow situated underneath an overhanging turf bank we thought the scene was over but, as a Red fox appeared from the same burrow the scene went on. The cat, first chasing the fox away, continued its stroll further along the slope where it quickly disappeared in what, from our view point, must have been a vertical burrow. What a show, an outstanding parade of Jan's number one target!

While witnessing this superb sighting, we had plenty of time to study its colours and physical characters. Feature wise, the combination of its dense fur, short legs, very low and wide apart positioned ears, flat looking face and unusually short toes resulted in a stocky, stout and plush general appearance. Colourwise, its cheeks appeared white with narrow black stripes running from the corners of the eyes. Its dense summer fur appeared strikingly patterned with a combination of ochre patches and dark vertical bars on the body and forelegs.

PC sighting 3 & 4:

During one afternoon, we managed our 3rd and 4th PC sighting while exploring the far side of the Zhidoi mountain range. This area became one of our favourite hang outs as it looked so pristine and beautiful. More over, being off tarmac and gravel roads, there was no annoying passing traffic with locals getting crazy with shooting selfies surrounded by tall European strangers! Yes, sometimes we felt like celebrities plagued by obtrusive Tibetan residents!



So, feeling liberated, it was Ronan this time who from the back seat spotted a female Pallas's Cat low down on a slope in front of us. It had obviously just finished a successful hunt as it had a pika in its mouth. As we stopped, it walked up the hill towards the ridge where at a cave entrance there was two kittens sitting. After a short scope session we took our camera gear and walked up hill and positioned ourselves behind some large boulders in front of the cave. After a couple of minutes one curious kitten came out of the cave to watch us for a moment. Unfortunately it didn't stay out long. It was the middle of the day and we were out in the open on a very hot and sunny day, both the kittens and us couldn't cope with the situation. So we decided to retreat from the scene. Returning in the afternoon would be a better idea.

Being in an area all day with a high potential for mammals we continued to scan at random on the same road further into the endless landscape. Remarkably, quite soon,

Jan spotted another Pallas's Cat, a male, on a slope in the same valley. Just crazy to find such a rarely spotted animal in such a short interval after the denning scene we just had! Although behaving less stressed in its behaviour, this cat showed like the one we had earlier en route to Budongquan. Judging by its speed this animal was obviously prowling. Great to observe its natural behaviour for about half an hour. Although distant this individual's striking characteristics were a combination of ochre patches and dark vertical bars on the body and forelegs plus its white cheeks with narrow black stripes running from the corners of the eyes. Along with its stocky, stout and plush general appearance of course no other cat looks as bizarre as this one! Although we were actually scanning the area hoping to locate a Himalayan Brown Bear, two more goodies, Asian Badger and a Tibetan Wolf, were spotted by Jan while continuing on the same road. As being way too hot, the bears didn't show up. The badger sighting was the only we had during our trip. The wolf, our 3rd encounter so far during the trip, was busy hunting pikas.

Once back near the Pallas's Cat denning area in the afternoon, we first scoped the scene from a distance. The mother, spying us straight away, promptly moved on top of a vertical boulder nearby but soon vanished. Both kittens kept sitting just in front of the cave mouth. We approached the cave from a much wider angle trying to disturb the kittens as less as possible. Which we managed rather well! As soon as we were seated behind the same boulders as before both curious kittens came out to watch us this time. One of them couldn't find a good position and was struggling a bit trying to be as close to its sibling as possible while keeping an eye on the strange looking, camera clicking creatures in front of him! Truly a magical experience of this very rare cat species. Pallas's Cat mission accomplished 100%!

A constant variety of beautiful, mostly horned ungulates

In contrast with the cats, all the potential ungulate species we encountered during the trip didn't take any real effort to find. Only exception on that maybe were both herds of Argali and a sole observation of an Alpine Muskdeer. The first herd of Argali were 6 impressive males we suddenly encountered while occupied with photographing a playful, young Mountain Weasel near an abandoned shed at the entrance of Wild Yak valley. The second herd consisted of 8 females just before we managed to get our second Snow Leopard sighting. Very typical of these large horned sheep is their behaviour of keeping their distance. As soon as they notice humans approaching they run off. A mission impossible to get close to them! The only Alpine Muskdeer was seen by chance during a morning session when exploring the other side of Zhidoi. However, all other ungulate species were seen frequently and in good numbers near the road or while scanning from vantage points: Tibetan Gazelles, Blue Sheep, Tibetan Wild Ass, Tibetan Antelopes, White-lipped Deer and even Wild Yak.

Tibetan Gazelles were always nice to watch: smart looking and agile moving with their slender and graceful bodies. Equal with the Argali, some Blue Sheep males in particular had very impressive horns too! The shape of White-lipped Deer antlers were very different compared to our Red Deer in Europe: flattened with the first and second tines noticeably far apart.









Our first encounter with Wild Yak was a small bachelor group that was a little way away from a larger herd nearby. Without doubt this was one of the many highlights during the trip. To establish dominance and hierarchy, one of the bulls showed non-violent threat display towards the others by bellowing and scraping the ground with its horns. These really are large and heavily built animals with a bulky frame, sturdy legs and rounded cloven hooves. More over, their horns were out of range regarding size! Sweeping out from the sides of the head, they curved forward ranging around 75 cm in length. Being lucky in encountering several large herds of Wild Yak, we could also clearly notice these animals are indeed sexually dimorphic with males obviously being much larger than females. Both sexes had long shaggy hair with a dense woolly undercoat over the chest, flanks and thighs, especially in males, this undercoat formed a long "skirt" that almost reached the ground.

Ending with Snow Leopards near a kill

Before returning to Yushu, we spent one last full day in our beloved Zhidoi area. Being totally satisfied and happy with all observations so far we spent our last evening near the stake out where Detlef located the Snow Leopard. Probably the most remarkable discovery of our trip. However, looking from a different angle, it was Jan's turn now to announce another remarkable sighting. Looking through his binoscope (adapter attached to tri-pod head and binoculars attached on it) he located a Snow Leopard looking shape sitting on its haunches in that typical cat like sphinx way of sitting. Although Detlef said to Jan he wouldn't find a Snow Leopard that low in the valley, Jan pointed out the promising shape in Detlef's scope and spoke the words "if it moves it's a Snow Leopard". Indeed, as the shape started to move, Detlef screamed: "You're right! It is! It is moving! It really is a Snow Leopard". Needless to say in that instant an atmosphere of pure adrenaline and intense hilarity took over the scene. Again!

Although the cat descended and came in our direction, we were still rather far away from the place of action. So we left to drive a bit closer. As the cat had sat still while we relocated it we thought that it was focusing on some nearby prey. ZZ and Detlef decided to get a little closer, Jan and Ronan just stayed. Suddenly they noticed that it was actually near a kill! But why was the animal so alert and approached the kill very carefully? That soon became clear as another Snow Leopard was nearby! A bit higher up from where the first one was eating from the kill (presumably a dead Blue Sheep), the second Snow Leopard approached the scene in a round about way trying to stay off radar as much as possible to the one at the carcass. Although showing this rather skitish behaviour, the intruder promptly went to the kill. Once facing each other, it was this second cat that dominated and caused the first cat to leave the scene. Smashing to see the newcomer making gestures with his right front paw to the other to leave. But a real cat fight or clash, apart from aggressive facial expressions showed by both, didn't happen. Soon both animals changed positions the one eating retreated and submitted the kill to the other. So they were probably a paired couple, a female with a near adult cub or two near adult siblings now fending for themselves. The one with its belly full then did what we already witnessed: spraying, scraping, paw licking and laying down nearby to where the other one was still eating. New behaviour was the polishing session of its back fur by rolling over on a partly vegetated area on the rocky slope. Once finished with the odour statements, it decided to return to the kill. It seems, as the one eating now didn't move at all, the one we saw first must have been less dominant than the one that took over the carcass. Difficult to know if the first one we spotted was the killer or the one that came in second. As the light faded the one lingering around suddenly left the scene. It covered quite some distance at a rather quick pace. Just marvelous to see it disappearing through an opening in a boulder formation and then descending on the opposite slope over the horizon. Meanwhile the one near the carcass just stayed on the scene while we packed away our optical gear! Next morning, there were no Snow Leopards present. Instead 2 Bearded Vultures, 5 Himalayan Griffon Vultures and 2 Ravens were eating the carcass remnants.

Tibetan Wolves

Like all wolves worldwide the Tibetan wolf packs roam and defend large territories. To come across them, it was all about scanning or driving around those vast territories. This is exactly how we managed our 4 observations. Twice we just stumbled upon them. The first encounter was a pack of 5 all of a sudden crossing in front of our 4WD while we were off road. The second encounter was one of an old, resting individual laying down right beside the gravel road we drove on. This loner, once at a safe distance of approx 50 metres, actually just strolled on at a slow pace trotting further on across the plateau. Must be said that both these observations were made in areas with hardly any Yak herders or cattle present.



With sufficient numbers of large ungulates being present on the plateau, most of the wolf packs in the area primarily feed on these prey animals larger than themselves (being Tibetan Gazelles, Blue Sheep, Tibetan Wild Ass, Tibetan Antelopes, White-lipped Deer and domestic Yak) as this obviously provides food for many individuals. Back in 2012 Jan witnessed this with his finding of a Tibetan wolf pack present near a Wild Ass carcass at lake Tsokar, on the Tibetan Plateau of India. But the situation with both the solo wolves we found while scanning on this trip was different as they were busy hunting pikas. Estimated to eat approximately 10 pounds of food per day on average, it's known that wolves actually don't need more than approximately 2.5 pounds of food per day to survive. With such an amount of pikas around on the plateau at this time, it was clear that some of the Tibetan Wolves can live perfectly well by concentrating on pika as their main prey. A fact we witnessed twice! Different with the hunting Tibetan Foxes we saw, the wolves hunting technique more resembled the Red Fox. Where as Tibetan Foxes concentrated more on a freezing mode followed by a sudden, speedy sprint at the end, both wolves actually approached burrows very silently and step by step. All the time with a body in a straight position, twisting both their head and ears constantly to measure distance to the prey. In the end, they just made a short jump to catch their prey in its burrow. With the first close encounter with the wolf pack of 5 individuals noting the typical physical characters of this subspecies was straight forward. Besides being very large wolves, their long sharp faces, elevated brows, broad heads and large pointed ears where striking features. But also colourwise they looked different from wolves we are familiar with in Western Europe. Above dull earthy-brown and below (including the entire face and limbs) rather yellowish-white. Their tails, brownish above and yellowish below, lacked a dark tip.

A healthy ecosystem

Being in the field we have never witnessed an area so full of rodents. Plateau Pikas were literally everywhere with at some specific places, their abundance was looking like a plague. On every square metre several individuals were foraging, emitting alarm calls or just running from one burrow to another. As females can produce 2 to 5 litters of 2 to 7 offspring with a three-week interval in between each litter, not surprisingly, this group of lagomorphs are known to have the fastest growth rates of their order.



Their abundance resulted in good numbers of some specific birds of prey - Upland Buzzards and especially Saker Falcon sightings were remarkably common.



Glover's Pika, endemic to China, was seen too but less abundant and always spotted near rocky clefts.



As mentioned before, equal with rodents, several bovid species occurred in good numbers. This resulted in good numbers of different and larger species of birds of prey. Nowhere else before have we encountered such high number of Bearded and Himalayan Vultures. It must be said too that uncountable numbers of domestic yak herds resulted in a lot of none natural carcasses too. Which is of course a feast for vultures. Besides both former mentioned vulture species, Golden Eagles and Black Vulture were observed too.



Although biodiversity amongst bird species in general is not that high on the plateau some terrestrial bird families were very abundant in gorges and near rivers: snowfinches, accentors, redstarts, rosetfinches and ground jays.



Most striking birds, found in shingle-bed river valleys, undoubtedly were Ibisbills



Marvelous dots in an endless landscape

The vast plateau landscape is heaven for those eager to scan. Being equipped with good optical gear does really increase the chances of being successful in finding your wildlife targets. A combination of Jan's Swarovski binoculars, attached with an adaptor to his tripod, combined with Detlef's Swarovski scope really benefitted the quality of our observations. Using this specific optical gear resulted in high level scanning sessions. All of which helped in finding and identifying distant target mammals. It must be said too that we are all skilled and experienced watchers. Despite one Pallas's Cat, all the target species we located, were personal discoveries without the help of our local guide. So, if you go there take someone who loves to scan and is equipped with good optics!



Logistics, high altitude and what to bring

Although not a real problem for us, be prepared for different standards of accommodation compared to those in Europe or safari lodges worldwide. Beds are hard everywhere, hot water isn't always available and rooms not always clean. At some places things are really basic with toilets/bathrooms pretty gross. But again we were out there to see wildlife in the first place. Enjoying comfort is something to like when at home. Also the catering standards are different to those in Europe. Food can be really spicy although they say it's not! Be prepared to eat a lot of rice, soup, noodles and nuts. Forget about continental breakfast. We always had cereals or oatmeal in the morning, took a prepared meal from a supermarket with us as lunch and, in the evening, went to local restaurants. As all ingredients are cooked in woks and boiled in frying pans on high temperatures, the chances to get an upset stomach are slim. None of us were sick because of the food.

None of us suffered from altitude sickness though arrival and first night were unpleasant. Felt dizzy and couldn't sleep. Later on we got used to the high altitude but as soon as we walked a bit faster - especially uphill - we just couldn't inhale enough oxygen to feel comfortable. Fortunately most sightings were done near the car which made things a lot less demanding!

Don't forget to take a small chair with you which is ideal to break the long periods of standing when scanning. Take sunglasses, sunscreen and a cap! The sun really burns here!

Take a guardian angel with you: traffic can be very dangerous!

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Aquarel (field) art work © Detlef Tibax