

Tour Report

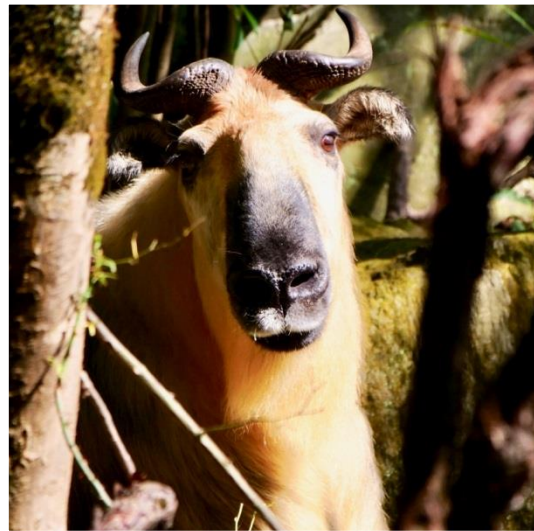
China – Sichuan's Sensational Mammals & Birds

2-17 November 2019

Pallas's cat



Takin



Blood pheasant



Red panda



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Images by: Lance Tuckett

Tour Leader: Nick Acheson

What an incomparable tour this was. What a superb introduction to the beautiful wild landscapes of Sichuan and their fantastic wildlife. We owe tremendous thanks to Mr Zhu, for driving us diligently and safely throughout and, despite the language barrier, doing so much else to make us welcome and happy at all times. Still greater thanks go to our brilliant leader Tang Jun, always attentive, always efficient, astonishingly sharp in the field, and great company. It was thanks to them both that we saw so much, ate so much perfectly delicious food, that we laughed and smiled so much, and that the tour was such an enormous success. Many thanks to you too, of course, for your part in making it so special, for your unflagging enthusiasm, good humour, passion for the wildlife, and wonderful sense of fun.

Day 1: Saturday 2 November 2019

This morning most of us (those who weren't already in Sichuan) boarded our flight from Heathrow to Hong Kong.

Day 2: Sunday 3 November 2019

Following a second flight, from Hong Kong onwards, we reached Chengdu where we met both the vanguard of the party (who had been giant-panda-spotting in the captive rearing centres of Chengdu and Wolong) and our outstanding leader Tang Jun.

We were then driven for five hours to Labahe by our equally wonderful driver (who would be with us throughout) Mr Zhu. Our first Sichuanese meal was a delicious dinner taken at the Lu Ming Hotel (at 1,800m of altitude) in Labahe, while sambar grazed just outside. Following dinner, as utterly exhausted as we were, we went for our first night walk, on which, through drizzle, we saw a handful of fairly distant red-and-white giant flying squirrels.

Day 3: Monday 4 November 2019

This morning we were up with the lark (we would later see an oriental skylark in a car park, so this is technically not misinformation), with an important mission: to find red pandas and the other charismatic wildlife of Labahe. The weather was not fantastic, being misty all day and at times drizzly, but this did nothing to dampen our zeal. Red pandas we had come to see and red pandas we would jolly well see.

We did see red pandas, three of them, but not until we had taken the shuttle bus to the top of the road (and the cable car station) at 2,500m of altitude and begun our walk back down again. Almost as soon as we started to walk down, shortly after our first large-billed crow, who was kronking in the car park, we bumped into a charming family of brown parrotbills. Our next flock was of hyperactive grey-hooded fulvettas. Then we stumbled into a red panda sitting on a bare trunk a short distance from the roadside. It stayed a moment, beaming at us through the mist, before shuffling down into the low bamboo at the base of the tree. Shortly thereafter it was spotted again, feeding on fruits in a rowan-like tree slightly further away. Here our first red panda was admired and photographed at length. Hurrah!

Our next red panda was perhaps a little more obliging, if somewhat less photogenic. Through some mishap it had lost the splendid brush from its tail, leaving it with a somewhat ratty appearance. But every red panda is a good red panda and we were delighted to see it. Before the day's third red panda we had a flurry of fine birds. First two dusky thrushes flew over and landed in a tree nearby; then we happened upon a marvellous flock including black-browed bush tits, grey crested tits, coal tits, rufous-vented tits, green-backed tits, Sichuan leaf warblers and chestnut-vented nuthatches. Next, just before RP number three, we added a new mammal, in the form of a highly active Swinhoe's striped squirrel. Our third red panda was far more distant but, feeding in the top of a tree, against the background of a forested hill, as mist drifted

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occasionally across our view, we felt it was probably the most charismatic and the most representative of Labahe.

Next, a large party of Tibetan macaques swaggered up the road, passing right through the middle of us but showing neither aggression nor interest. In the afternoon the mist grew thicker and sometimes broke into drizzle, so we hopped in and out of the bus for as long as was feasible, seeing little forktail, brown dipper, white-collared yuhinas and both white-capped and plumbeous water redstarts. The avian highlight of the later morning was a chaffinch: a new bird to Tang Jun and clearly a very rare bird in Sichuan! Having dodged the thick mist by driving downhill to taller forest we saw a lovely mixed flock including chestnut-vented nuthatches and Sichuan treecreepers and had quick looks at some super-energetic Père David's rock squirrels.

Back at the shuttle bus terminal we saw our first white wagtail (subspecies *leucopsis*) before returning to our grandiose hotel for another excellent dinner. Thereafter, once heavy rain (which threatened to put the whole thing off) had passed, we went on a night walk, seeing more red-and-white giant flying squirrels, and two masked palm civets, one of them extremely well. The pedometer on my phone told me that today we walked 23,700 steps and I can quite believe it. It was nonetheless a superb first full day to our tour.

Day 4: Tuesday 5 November 2019

As we drove up the mountain in the shuttle bus again this morning, Tang Jun, from his seat at the front, spotted not one but two cock Lady Amherst's pheasants in the morning mist. We were delighted. There followed flocks of charming grey-hooded fulvettas, handsome blue-fronted redstarts and a brief, all-too-distant red panda. Then rain began to fall heavily, so, red pandas emphatically having been seen and enjoyed by everyone, we caught a shuttle bus back to the bottom of the hill and emerged into bright sunshine.

Before nipping into one of the park restaurants (in fact the staff restaurant) we looked up along the ridges where the rising temperature was launching raptors. We quickly saw a Himalayan buzzard, a mountain hawk-eagle and an *Accipiter* too distant to identify. The chief excitement here, however, was the Tibetan macaque which mugged a member of the party for her bananas and steamed buns and fiercely defended them from another monkey.

In the afternoon we took a lovely long walk along the river valley in which the hotels and restaurants lie. There were plenty of Tibetan macaques here too, though we survived without surrendering our victuals. Also here we saw a couple of female Hodgson's redstarts (plus both water redstarts), a thoroughly obliging little forktail and a family of ridiculously tame sambar, the female of which was being stroked on the nose and included in innumerable selfies by Chinese families. The young stag had obviously demonstrated his opinion of selfies in the past as his antlers had been sawn off.

This evening we had our best night outing in Labahe (taking the bus up a little further along the road). In addition to red-and-white giant flying squirrels, we saw a single complex-toothed flying squirrel clinging to a limestone cliff face, two Chinese goral (rather more improbably balanced on a tiny ledge on the same cliff face) and several sambar. Even though we were rained off, my pedometer helpfully told me that today we walked 18,700 steps.

Day 5: Wednesday 6 November 2019

This morning it was too misty and drizzly to risk going back up the mountain in Labahe, so we left our hotel at 8:15am, bound for Wolong. There were several Himalayan buzzards along the valley as we went, plus a sprinkling of white wagtails (this time subspecies *personata* also known as masked wagtail). At a stop on the Xingou River the sky above was crowded with Eurasian crag martins, while both water redstarts and the customary brown dippers played on the rocks in the river. The star bird here was a scaly-breasted wren-

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babbler (also known as scaly-breasted cupwing) which obligingly popped out of vegetation for all to see. Said vegetation was fascinating in its own right and here we saw many plants we grow in British gardens (or close relatives thereof) including *Cosmos*, *Chrysanthemum*, *Anemone* and *Buddleja davidii* (the celebrated butterfly bush).

We then went through an incredible series of long tunnels (the first series of very long tunnels, it would transpire, of numerous series of very long tunnels). We made our next stop by the Quingeyi River in the town of Ya'an (close to where Père David was the first westerner to learn of the giant panda). Here, on the rocky and sandy banks and islets of the river, we saw long-billed plover, common sandpiper, both water redstarts (which pretty much came as standard along moving water on this tour), grey and masked (white) wagtails and a little egret. Overhead were many pale martins, with the odd barn swallow among them. In riverside scrub we found a pair of handsome long-tailed shrikes.

Following an amazingly delicious lunch in a family-owned restaurant known to Tang Jun (delicious food in Tang Jun's favourite haunts was a bit of a theme on this tour), we searched a little further along the river, seeing a gorgeous male Hodgson's redstart, a charming flock of black-throated bushtits and a big flock of bramblings on a building lot. In the afternoon we drove through a valley-bottom riverine landscape with extensive tea gardens, rice paddies planted with winter vegetables, huge empty roads, and vast building projects everywhere. Having bypassed the city of Chongzhou we entered another set of long tunnels, including one terrifying one in which the ventilation had clearly failed, which for many hundreds of metres was clogged with exhaust fumes. Everywhere we looked this afternoon there was giant panda iconography in this heartland of the species' distribution. Tang Jun informed us that there are thought to be 1,860 giant pandas in the wild, 60% of them in Sichuan, and the largest population in Wolong.

We reached the misleadingly named (but very comfortable) Panda Conservation Hotel outside Wolong shortly after five in the evening and had an excellent dinner at another restaurant where Tang Jun was greeted as a member of the family.

Day 6: Thursday 7 November 2019

Today's task was to scale the mighty Balan Shan mountain (or rather for Mr Zhu and his bus to do so). We left our hotel at six and at precisely seven in the morning we rose above the thick cloud lying in the valley and entered sunshine. It was fiercely cold up here, however, and the landscape was thickly frosted. We made our first stop at 3,600 metres of altitude, by a patch of forest well known as habitat for a number of special pheasants. Koklass pheasants were calling around us for much of the time we spent here (as we drank piping coffee and tea served by Tang Jun and Mr Zhu) but we never saw one. However all thoughts of koklass were forgotten when Tang Jun found just about the Holy Grail of his country's stunning pheasants: a male Chinese monal. We watched this magnificent bird at length as it walked across the frosty ground and we gasped as it walked into sunlight, setting its remarkable colours aflame. We also glimpsed our first tufted deer here, saw a distant flock of snow pigeons, watched golden eagle and Himalayan griffon over the far ridge, and enjoyed seeing giant laughingthrushes and white-winged grosbeaks on the scrubby slope above us. At a second stop, at 4,200m, Tang Jun found two blue sheep grazing in a distant valley.

At 4,500m we stopped again, at the pass to Mount Siguniang. Neither Tibetan snowcock nor snow partridge responded to Tang Jun's tape here, but we were amazed to see two migrant grey-headed bullfinches (a bird of forests much lower on the mountain) stop briefly on an antenna to break their journey. Also here some saw two extremely distant alpine accentors, the only representatives of the species on the tour.

The way down was punctuated by a male common kestrel hovering dramatically against the mountains, two yellow-billed chough and a failed attempt to see Moupin pika (at a site where we did find a bumblebee and some much derided, or disbelieved, grey-headed woodpecker feathers). We stopped for lunch at a set of roadside cafes where recently slaughtered yaks (or their constituent parts) were for sale. Some of you even sampled some fresh yak kebabs hastily purchased by Tang Jun. While most of us concentrated on

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photographing Himalayan griffons flying past, the prayer flags flapping against a gorgeous blue sky and the extremely friendly goats in the car park, Tang Jun picked up our first takin on a very distant slope, in a characteristic but nonetheless magnificent feat of spotting. A little further we stopped to scan (in vain) for golden snub-nosed monkey, seeing instead a group of rufous-vented tits mobbing an unseen predator, two giant laughingthrushes, and a female northern goshawk on a mission. Much lower we took a beautiful walk along the road through a forest ravine, marvelling at the orange colours in the needles of larches, the leaves of willows and the berries of buckthorn, and the reds in the berries of honeysuckle and *Viburnum* and the leaves of *Cotoneaster*.

In the night we went out in Mr Zhu's bus, seeing Chinese goral, masked palm civet and a fine tufted deer eating cabbages in someone's vegetable garden.

Day 7: Thursday 8 November 2019

After breakfast at 7:30, this morning we left Wolong at 8:30, bound for the city of Hongyuan. Predictably our journey involved lots of tunnels, many of them kilometres in length. We made a loo stop in Wenchuan and had lunch at yet another of Tang Jun's favourite roadside restaurants. After lunch we went through many more long tunnels but stopped at 3:30 to scan hillsides by the road. Here we saw our first white-throated redstart and white-throated dipper and a couple of golden eagles. We then drove up onto the plateau, where we would spend the following three days, very quickly meeting our first ruddy shelducks, white-cheeked starlings, common magpies and azure-winged magpies. We were delighted to see a short-eared owl perched right by the roadside in lovely evening light and amazed (as we would be for the next few days) by the huge herds of domestic yaks all over the plain.

Stopping at Tang Jun's favourite spot for Siberian roe, we saw the deer at extreme distance, but also nearby added hen harrier, grey-headed greenfinch, plain laughingthrush, common merganser and our first (of many) black-necked cranes. We reached our hotel in Hongyuan to find that the entire city was suffering a powercut, so we went across the street to a jolly noodle restaurant which had a generator and were proofed against the high altitude cold by incandescently spicy noodles. Our polite cheer when the town's power came back on seemed to bemuse the many local people also in the restaurant.

Day 8: Friday 9 November 2019

We left our hotel this morning at seven and arrived at the Siberian roe site at first light. It was knuckle-crushingly cold but thoroughly worth it as we saw deer far better than on the previous evening, plus birds including Japanese and white-browed tits, robin accentor, red-billed starling, plain laughingthrush, red-throated thrush and a magnificent adult white-tailed eagle flying over. On the way back to the hotel for breakfast we saw ruddy shelducks and common mergansers. After an excellent breakfast we left Hongyuan at 9:45, just as our first northern raven flew past the bus.

Our journey towards Ruergai was eventful, with plenty of birds and a few mammals to see. There were more black-necked cranes in roadside wetlands, plus common mergansers, common teal, tree sparrows, a great egret and plenty of beautiful azure-winged magpies. There were also thousands and thousands more domestic yaks, each worth £1,500, Tang Jun told us (note to self: invest in yaks). We soon added more new birds, in the form of our first handsome Chinese grey shrikes and Daurian jackdaws and at a wetland we watched Chinese (eastern) spotbills, ruddy shelduck, teal, ferruginous ducks and a mallard. As we drove on we added Pallas's gull, upland buzzard and more ravens to our list of highland birds. We stopped to check a quarry (one thing we would learn around Ruergai is that you must always check a quarry), seeing an immaculate male hen harrier fly over a family of three black-necked cranes on the plain below us. Then over our lunch stop (at a simple noodle restaurant) we saw red-billed choughs, Himalayan griffons and a distant hen harrier, while white-cheeked starlings perched on nearby wires and a yak (£1,500-worth of yak!) wandered on the forecourt.

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Following lunch we stopped at a known site for pinktail, but in the middle of winter it was not to be. We did see oriental short-toed larks here, however, and a surprise wallcreeper flew over our heads and down the little valley. In the winter-blasted scrub of *Potentilla fruticosa* we saw more white-browed tits and our first white-browed tit-warblers. Driving on we met two red foxes (the first of many we would see in the coming days), plus our first ground tits and horned larks.

Since we reached Ruergai with remaining daylight, we drove immediately to the route we would later take by night, where Tang Jun has seen an enviable cast of mammals. We encountered handsome white-winged redstarts, ravens, another white-tailed eagle and, to our delight, a distant Asian badger busy snuffling around on a grassy slope. At a second stop we saw rock sparrows, a perched saker, twite and plenty of ground tits. Stopping for fuel on the edge of Ruergai we were amazed to see a Chinese pond heron at an altitude of 3,600m. We then checked in to the brand new Tang Gute Hotel, a magnificent affair built in the style of a huge Buddhist gumpa.

On a very cold night drive we saw a couple of woolly hares and had a few false alarms caused by distant pieces of reflective rubbish. Sadly for us, the moon was almost full, not a good sign for the coming nights of lamping.

Day 9: Saturday 10 November 2019

This was our first day dedicated to exploring the magnificent peat grasslands and wetlands of the Ruergai plateau, and explore it we jolly well would. We left at 7:30 with the bus thermometer reading -8 degrees Celsius. It was decidedly parky at our first quarry stop, but this did nothing to prevent us seeing plenty of plateau pikas, a grumpy-looking little owl (do little owls come in any other persuasion?), several upland buzzards, our first endearing white-rumped snowfinches (quite absurdly endearing, in fact) and two distant Tibetan foxes.

At our second quarry stop we took quite a long walk, past the quarry and into a wide peaty valley. There seemed to be wildlife everywhere here. Plateau pikas and white-rumped snowfinches were all around us at all times, with the latter so busy fighting and displaying to one another that they showed almost no concern at our approach. There were also plenty of rufous-necked snow-finches and horned larks, the former distinctive even at distance by their tight flocks. With so much prey around, it was only natural that there would be predators. Upland buzzards were numerous (as they would be wherever we were on the plateau) and a pair of sakers was busy trying to catch pikas. Two Tibetan foxes were about the same business. When we later went into the quarry which we had passed, we saw no fewer than three red foxes, plus a perched steppe eagle. Also here a little owl was much admired and photographed.

With black-necked cranes calling from the wetlands below us, lammergeiers circling above, the sun shining and wildlife literally everywhere we looked, it was what one of you called 'a good-to-be-alive day'.

Driving on, we made several roadside stops, most notably for immensely photogenic lammergeiers flying low over the road and a hugely accommodating saker which was feeding at the top of a roadside post.

Stopping for lunch at a third set of quarries (quarries, quarries, quarries) we met our first beautiful Tibetan gazelles grazing on a hillside. Thereafter we split into two groups: those who wished to potter around the nearer quarry before reuniting with Mr Zhu and the bus, and those who wished to stomp across the plateau to check a distant quarry. Those of us in the group taking the longer walk saw steppe eagles and lammergeiers over the hills, lots of Tibetan foxes and a woolly hare. Then, long after we had passed the quarry in question, something made Tang Jun turn back and, in a stroke of superhuman spotting, he found the fluffed up ball of a Pallas's cat asleep on an impossibly distant ledge. The group walked back towards the quarry and the cat, while I went to the bus, to intercept the other half of our group and bring them to the cat. Happily everyone saw this amazing animal on its ledge, many saw the thrilling moment when a second cat burst out of nowhere to chase it off, and everyone had further good views when we re-found

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one of the cats on a different rock face elsewhere in the enormous quarry. Tibetan foxes and gazelles strolled along the ridge behind us at the same time, making for a Tibetan plateau triumvirate of remarkable animals. At one point, two sakers perched on a mast right behind the original cat, but to be honest we were exclusively focused on one of the most prized animals of the tour.

Having seen Pallas's cat very well, thanks to Tang Jun's simply brilliant field skills, we spent the last half hour until dusk shivering at the first quarry where we had stopped (also shivering) in the morning. A first winter hen harrier few past in apricot evening light and many ruddy shelducks went overhead to their roost. On the wetland below us were the black-necked cranes and Tibetan foxes we had come to expect, and a fat moon rose behind us as the sun set in front.

After a wonderful dinner in a small restaurant with patriotic slogans and murals of Chairman Mao (during which most of us anaesthetised our lips by eating spiced peanuts), we took a second moonlit night drive, seeing three woolly hares and a red fox.

Day 10: Sunday 11 November 2019

Having seen so much on the plateau yesterday, today we headed downhill into the Baxi forest. First, however, we stopped for exquisite steamed, stuffed dumplings at a baozi restaurant (where again Tang Jun seemed to be known and liked). We particularly appreciated sitting down with local people and starting our day in exactly the way they do, in what was clearly Ruoergai's hottest baozi venue. From here we drove down to Baxi, making our first stop for no fewer than 19 magnificent blue eared pheasants feeding on the icy ground in a ravine beside the road. Also here there were Elliot's and giant laughingthrushes and a couple of Kessler's thrushes made brief appearances.

We next screeched to a halt when, through his open window, Tang Jun heard Gansu blood pheasants. To our complete delight around 30 of these dazzling birds seemed unconcerned by our presence, allowing many excellent photos to be taken. A little further on, we stopped to scan for the rest of the morning, at a smallholding overlooking an expansive hillside with fields, grassland and forest. In bushes and trees around us here there were Chinese fulvettas, grey crested, rufous-vented and Sichuan tits, Przevalski's nuthatches and startlingly beautiful crested tit-warblers. Across the valley there were more blue-eared pheasants, plus a few common pheasants, and we had a tantalising glimpse, at great distance, of what everyone who saw it agreed simply had to be an alpine musk deer, so different was it in colour and shape from all the other deer we saw on the tour.

Some of us later took a fairly steep, and initially deeply frozen, walk into the forest behind us, composed of *Picea koraiensis* spruces with an understorey of *Berberis* and rose, hoping to see a selection of special animals. Chinese grouse and snowy-cheeked laughingthrush declined to put in an appearance, though we did hear the latter calling, but some of us managed lightning-speed views of a Gansu pika. By the time we came back the ice had melted, so we slipped down the slope in the mud.

We had a lovely lunch in yet another of Tang Jun's regular spots, in Baxi village, where the garden was full of the chatter of tree sparrows. Hereafter our plans went somewhat awry, as we learned that the road back to Ruoergai would be closed for roadworks until 7pm. We were stuck! So Tang Jun took us exploring a valley he hadn't visited in years (since he was kicked out of it by police!). This was an excellent decision as we spent the afternoon standing in the sunshine, in a beautiful clearing, and we saw many wonderful things. They included cinereous vultures overhead, common pheasants feeding on buckthorn berries in surrounding scrub, plenty of Chinese white-browed rosefinches, a couple of pink-rumped rosefinches, white-browed tit-warblers and a posse of local people who were astounded to look through our optics and see how they worked. Mammal highlights here were two groups of Sichuan sika deer, including a male and female just above us on the slope, the best tufted deer of the tour, and our first Chinese serow. All in all a marvellous afternoon, made better by effortlessly getting through the roadworks just after six. Our luck ran out after dinner, however, as the full moon meant we saw only a distant red fox on our night drive.

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Day 11: Monday 12 November 2019

After an excellent day in the forest, we returned today to the Ruoergai plateau. We left at 7am and at our customary first quarry it was brutally cold. Here, however, we saw the family of four cranes which seemed always to be present and a few of us saw tiny black voles which matched nothing at all in the field guide. We drove on, into the dramatic rising sun, past lots of cold-looking upland buzzards. Our next stop was at the complex of quarries where we had seen Pallas's cats two days previously. As before there were Tibetan gazelles here (17 this time) and on very distant wetlands to the other side of the road, among thousands of unidentifiable ducks, there were whooper swans. Driving on, we turned east (to the right) into a wild valley where Tang Jun has many times seen wolves, and this was the species on which we focused most of our attention this morning. The wolves, however, had not read the memo, and the more we scanned the less we saw of them. There was plenty to keep us occupied all the same, including Tibetan gazelles, twite, horned larks, rufous-necked snowfinches and a Tibetan fox.

Having scanned high and low for wolf, we drove further, towards the village of Zhasage. Further scanning produced no wolf, though we did find a massively distant shape in a cave (around two kilometres away) that we convinced ourselves must be a Chinese mountain cat. Nothing for it, we would have to go and see: so we crossed a kilometre of wet peaty grassland and went up onto a rocky outcrop to sit directly across the valley from the putative cat. For a long while we saw nothing, until the cat again appeared at the mouth of the cave, revealing its identity. A Chinese mountain cat indeed! On our walk across the grassland we had passed armies of horned larks and as we sat in the snow waiting for the cat to appear a dozen Himalayan griffons whooshed low over our heads. Also here were two lammergeiers, a male hen harrier and a white-tailed eagle.

Before our picnic lunch it began to snow and we decided against a walk into the blizzard. However the snow passed and, tummies full, we walked further. Lammergeiers played in front of cliff faces in this dramatic snow-crowned landscape and Tang Jun found us distant Siberian roe deer and many blue sheep. Eventually we were driven back by a perishing wind which threatened to topple our tripods, but on the drive back we had a marvellous encounter with a cinereous vulture, a first winter steppe eagle and two first winter eastern imperial eagles which were all hungering for the same carcass of what had apparently been a woolly hare. Many photos were taken as the eagles flapped around one another, hoping to catch a scrap of meat from the talons of the powerful vulture. We scanned all our habitual quarries on the drive back, hoping to see a wolf, but managed only to see three or four Tibetan foxes (about which we had by now become almost blasé!).

Day 12: Tuesday 13 November 2019

Today was long. Today involved tunnels. Today we travelled to our final destination: Tangjiahe.

We began the day, however, in dramatic style. We returned to our dumpling joint, where a pan of radioactive chillies being flash-fried sent us all into fits of coughing and gasping, much to the amusement of the dumpling-stuffers. Some of us even fled to the icy morning air of the street to regain control of lungs and composure. From here we returned to the very first site we had visited around Ruoergai (the route of our night drives) in a last attempt to see a wolf. We did not, though we did see a huge flight of red-billed chough and a gathering of vultures on a distant hillside. Thereafter, our ever sharp and diligent friend Tang Jun scanned miles of mountains along our way in the hope we might still find a wolf.

At our stop for fuel there were tree sparrows and Daurian jackdaws; and at 10am we drove off the plateau, at which point all hopes of seeing a wolf left the building. Immediately, however, we entered our first tunnel. How we had missed them! Passing through lightly wooded valleys we saw a few carrion crows on rocks in the river and stopped to admire and photograph a Chinese serow very close to the road. It had lost its hind left foot, apparently to a snare, but seemed to be coping well without.

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After many more tunnels, including one stretching 8km (our personal best) we stopped for lunch in a small spa town, at a lovely restaurant where the chef was away so Tang Jun stood in (was there no end to his skills?). While we waited for the delicious food to be ready, some of us strolled down the street and admired a very handsome group of snow pigeons on a small cliff. Having passed a protected area checkpoint, we then drove down a dramatic road through forested valleys. This was a laborious process for Mr Zhu as much of the road had been washed away in floods in August. On a quick break to stretch legs and visit the loo, we experienced a taste of what was to come in Tangjiahe and saw green-backed tit and our first brown-breasted bulbuls and collared finchbills.

We had yet another perfectly delicious dinner at a truly local restaurant, thronged with families from the last town before Tangjiahe. So wide had our exploration of Sichuanese cuisine been by this point that, with his cheeky smile, Tang Jun suggested we do a food checklist to accompany the wildlife checklist. We drove in to Tangjiahe after dark, seeing multiple takin and Reeves's muntjac (both would be common throughout our stay), a Chinese goral and our first wild boar. We checked in to our hotel in the park (at a positively balmy and oxygen-laden 1,500m of altitude) exhausted by a long day and hugely grateful to Tang Jun and, especially, Mr Zhu for their extremely hard work throughout it.

Day 13: Wednesday 14 November 2019

Today we made our first assault on the glorious forested landscape of Tangjiahe. We drove down to the park entrance (on the only road which is open to visitors' vehicles) to see what mammals might be along the road, then back up a short distance, before walking back down. At this time of year these stunning forests are fairly quiet, in terms of birds, and Tangjiahe's star attractions are unquestionably its night mammals. Nonetheless we saw Tibetan macaque, takin, mountain hawk-eagle, golden eagle, some obliging streak-breasted scimitar-babblers, lots of Elliot's laughingthrushes (which come as standard in Sichuanese montane deciduous forests) and the usual cluster of river species: little forktail, brown dipper and both water redstarts.

The group then split, with half staying on the gentle walk along the road with Tang Jun and half taking a pretty steep path up the mountainside with me. The mountaineers saw some lovely birds including red-billed leiothrix, grey-cheeked (David's) fulvetta and chestnut-vented nuthatch. As the group met again we watched a couple of Reeves's muntjacs and a posse of collared finchbills. Next came a Himalayan buzzard overhead and a lovely flock of black-throated bushtits (what exquisite birds they are). A little further down the road a flock of red-billed leiothrix also held a couple of Sichuan tits and a very elusive rufous-faced warbler.

Over lunch several of you began your relationship with smoked tofu (some might go so far as to describe it as a giddy flirtation). Thereafter some of us took a walk across the river from the hotel, almost immediately encountering a marvellous and confiding flock containing red-billed leiothrix, green-backed tit, red-billed blue magpie, sooty bushtit, chestnut-vented nuthatch and grey-cheeked fulvetta. Higher up the slope we watched some Père David's rock squirrels and our first subtly charming yellow-browed tits. Reaching the hotel again we watched a black-faced bunting flitting between trees and bushes.

In the afternoon we drove down to the start of the road which can only be visited on the park shuttlebus, and here we saw some very obliging crimson-breasted woodpeckers, golden eagle and mountain hawk eagle. Along the road we saw an elderly takin and a Chinese goral.

This evening's night drive was excellent, though some of the animals were seen quite quickly. There were plenty of Reeves's muntjac and takin. We also saw five Chinese goral, a Chinese serow, two wild boar, a brief hog badger, a masked palm civet and, for a couple of lucky folk, a tawny fish owl.

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Day 14: Thursday 15 November 2019

How had we reached our last full day of wildlife so soon? You may be sure we didn't squander it, as we spent it further exploring the dramatically beautiful forested valleys of Tangjiahe. Driving down the river valley we saw our first crested kingfisher. We then took the shuttlebus up towards Motianling Mountain, seeing two ridiculously endearing baby takin as we went.

Reaching the start of Yinping Ancient Road, the group again split, with four members deciding to take a measured stroll back down the road. The other four, with Tang Jun and me, took the strenuous trail. No sooner had we started than we saw a golden snub-nosed monkey running away across a clearing, its long tail bouncing as it went. The next highlight was a black-faced laughingthrush with a group of Elliot's, while a Père David's rock squirrel peering adorably from his hole under a rock stole the show. Rounding a corner we met a lovely white-crowned forktail foraging quietly along a stream; then we were dazzled by a firework display of many golden-breasted fulvettas and fulvous parrotbills dripping from a stand of bamboo.

Our next new parrotbill came in the form of a pair of great parrotbills which responded with alacrity to a whistled rendition of their call, giving us excellent views. Higher up, as the scenery became ever more breathtaking, we repeatedly heard two male golden pheasants calling from dense bamboo, but no amount of coaxing, sitting and waiting, or peering allowed us to see them. As a freezing mist rolled in we did, however, see barred laughingthrush, and flocks of white-collared yuhinas and dusky thrushes. Through breaks in the mist we scanned and scanned and scanned in the hope of seeing an Asiatic black bear or a giant panda, but the gorgeous montane forest of birch and lime was compensation enough for not finding either.

Heading back down we met a lively flock of sooty bushtits, holding our only goldcrest, and a little further we met a family of streak-breasted scimitar-babblers. It wasn't for a very long time that we met the four other members of the group as they had walked right back down the road to the bus stop at the bottom, with even the venerable (indomitable!) 81-year-old member of the party walking 7km. Driving back, reunited with Mr Zhu, we stopped to photograph a Chinese goral scampering over rocks across the river. We also saw Tibetan macaques and two crested kingfishers.

Our afternoon drive began with the same highly obliging Chinese goral. We also saw both water redstarts and some of us had the good fortune to see a Eurasian otter in the pool below the bus stop.

Our last night drive was a triumph. It began with a niviventer (which, four species being possible in Tangjiahe, remains unidentified to species). As expected there were plenty of Reeves's muntjac and takin. In addition, we saw a Chinese goral, two wild boar, two hog badgers, and a masked palm civet. Most excitingly, most people also saw a leopard cat as it shot away from the road and everyone saw a Malayan porcupine right next to the bus on a slope.

Day 15: Thursday 16 November 2019

The most hardcore birders went into the forest at first light this morning, in the hope of seeing a golden pheasant. We didn't, but we did enjoy great encounters with Reeves's muntjac, red-billed blue magpie and (similarly) red-billed leiothrix. After breakfast we left Tangjiahe, bound for Chengdu. We passed lovely forests of sweet chestnut and alder, terraced farming villages and ever bigger rocky rivers as we went. Driving by a reservoir we screeched to a halt at the sight of three mandarins, two drakes and a duck, which were much admired once we got our telescopes on them. Also here were brown-breasted bulbuls, Chinese pond heron, little egret and our first charming vinous-throated parrotbills. After lunch in Jiangyou, and plenty of flyby crested mynas, we stopped in the city of Deyang, largely thanks to Tang Jun's kindly indulgence of my duck fixation. For the previous three winters a large flock of wintering mallard, wigeon, tufted duck and ferruginous duck (all of which we saw) had held a single drake Baer's pochard. Also for the last three winters he had arrived in the second week of November. So Tang Jun kindly took us on a detour

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and – miracle of miracles – there, among the other ducks, was the world’s most handsome drake Baer’s pochard. The geekier birders among us were pleased to see a single first winter brown-headed gull among the many black-headed gulls here. Also present were little egret and little grebe.

Chengdu this evening was, to say the least, a contrast to the rest of our tours. Nonetheless we had a lovely final meal with Tang Jun while Mr Zhu went home to spend a little time with his family.

Day 16: Friday 17 November 2019

All too early this morning we left for the airport and said our heartfelt good byes to Tang Jun and Mr Zhu, and our huge thanks for a superb tour of Sichuan in their company. We reached Heathrow late in the evening, UK time.

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Checklist



	Common Name	Scientific Name	Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4	Day 5	Day 6	Day 7	Day 8	Day 9	Day 10	Day 11	Day 12	Day 13
	BIRDS														
1	Whooper swan	<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>									✓				
2	Ruddy shelduck	<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>					✓	✓	✓			✓			
3	Spot-billed duck	<i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i>						✓							
4	Mallard	<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>						✓							✓
5	Mandarin duck	<i>Aix galericulata</i>													✓
6	Eurasian wigeon	<i>Anas penelope</i>													✓
7	Common teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>						✓							
8	Baer's pochard	<i>Aythya baeri</i>													✓
9	Ferruginous duck	<i>Aythya nyroca</i>						✓							✓
10	Tufted duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>													✓
11	Common merganser	<i>Mergus merganser</i>					✓	✓			✓				
12	Chestnut-throated partridge	<i>Tetraophasis obscurus</i>				H									
13	Blood pheasant	<i>Ithaginis cruentus</i>								✓					
14	Koklass pheasant	<i>Pucrasia macrolopha</i>				H									

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15	Chinese monal	<i>Lophophorus lhuysii</i>				✓									
16	White eared pheasant	<i>Crossoptilon crossoptilon</i>				✓									
17	Blue eared pheasant	<i>Crossoptilon auritum</i>								✓					
18	Common pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>								✓					
19	Golden pheasant	<i>Chrysolophus pictus</i>												H	
20	Lady amherst's pheasant	<i>Chrysolophus amherstiae</i>		✓											
21	Little grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>												✓	
22	Chinese pond heron	<i>Ardeola bacchus</i>			✓		✓	✓							✓
23	Little egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>			✓										✓
24	Great egret	<i>Casmerodius albus</i>						✓							
25	Great cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>			✓		✓	✓			✓				✓
26	Lammergeier	<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>							✓		✓				
27	Himalayan vulture	<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
28	Cinereous vulture	<i>Aegyptus monachus</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
29	Mountain hawk eagle	<i>Spizaetus nipalensis</i>		✓										✓	
30	Steppe eagle	<i>Aquila nipalensis</i>							✓		✓				
31	Eastern imperial eagle	<i>Aquila heliaca</i>									✓				
32	Golden eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>				✓	✓							✓	
33	Northern goshawk	<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>		✓		✓									

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34	Eurasian sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>		✓						✓					
35	Hen harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>						✓	✓	✓	✓				
36	White-tailed eagle	<i>Haliaeetus albicilla</i>						✓			✓				
37	Upland buzzard	<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>						✓	✓		✓	✓			
38	Himalayan buzzard	<i>Buteo burmanicus</i>		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓			✓		
39	Eurasian coot	<i>Fulica atra</i>													✓
40	Black-necked crane	<i>Grus nigricollis</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
41	Northern lapwing	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>							✓						
42	Long-billed plover	<i>Charadrius placidus</i>			✓										
43	Common sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleuca</i>			✓										
44	Green sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>						✓							
45	Black-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus ridibundus</i>													✓
46	Brown-headed gull	<i>Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus</i>						✓							✓
47	Pallas's gull	<i>Larus ichthyaetus</i>						✓							
48	Hill pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>							✓	✓					
49	Snow pigeon	<i>Columba leuconota</i>				✓						✓			
50	Spotted dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>			✓										✓
51	Tawny fish owl	<i>Ketupa flavipes</i>											✓		
52	Short-eared owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>					✓								
53	Little owl	<i>Athene noctua</i>							✓		✓				

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54	Crested kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle lugubris</i>												✓	
55	Grey-headed woodpecker	<i>Picus canus</i>											✓		
56	Crimson-breasted woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopus cathpharius</i>											✓	✓	
57	Common kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			
58	Merlin	<i>Falco columbarius</i>									✓				
59	Saker falcon	<i>Falco cherrug</i>					✓	✓		✓					
60	Long-tailed shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>			✓										
61	Chinese grey shrike	<i>Lanius sphenocercus</i>					✓	✓							
62	Azure-winged magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>					✓	✓	✓						
63	Red-billed blue magpie	<i>Urocissa erythrorhyncha</i>	✓	✓	✓							✓	✓	✓	✓
64	Eurasian magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>					✓	✓			✓	✓			✓
65	Spotted nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>	✓	✓										✓	
66	Red-billed chough	<i>Pyrrhonorax pyrrhonorax</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
67	Yellow-billed chough	<i>Pyrrhonorax graculus</i>			✓										
68	Daurian jackdaw	<i>Corvus dauuricus</i>						✓				✓			
69	Carrion crow	<i>Corvus corone</i>						✓				✓			
70	Large-billed crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓			✓	✓	✓
71	Northern raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>						✓			✓				
72	Yellow-browed tit	<i>Sylviparus modestus</i>											✓		

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73	Rufous-vented tit	<i>Periparus rubidiventris</i>	✓			✓				✓					
74	Coal tit	<i>Periparus ater</i>	✓												
75	Grey crested tit	<i>Lophophanes dichrous</i>	✓							✓					
76	Japanese tit	<i>Parus minor</i>						✓		✓			✓		
77	Sichuan tit e	<i>Poecile weigoldicus</i>						✓		✓			✓		
78	Ground tit (hume's groundcreeper)	<i>Pseudopodoces humilis</i>						✓	✓		✓				
79	Green-backed tit	<i>Parus monticolus</i>	✓										✓	✓	
80	Oriental skylark	<i>Alauda gulgula</i>	✓					✓	✓		✓				
81	Horned lark	<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>						✓	✓		✓				
82	Collared finchbill	<i>Spizixos semitorques</i>										✓	✓		
83	Brown-breasted bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus xanthorrhous</i>										✓		✓	✓
84	Light-vented bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus sinensis</i>			✓										
85	Pale martin	<i>Riparia diluta</i>			✓										
86	Barn swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>			✓										
87	Eurasian crag martin	<i>Hirundo rupestris</i>			✓		✓								
88	Scaly-breasted wren -babbler	<i>Pnoepyga albiventer</i>			✓										
89	Pygmy wren-babbler	<i>Pnoepyga pusilla</i>											H		
90	Rufous-faced warbler	<i>Alboscopus albogularis</i>										H	✓		
91	Brown-flanked bush warbler	<i>Cettia fortipes</i>		✓											

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92	Black-throated bushtit	<i>Aegithalos concinnus</i>			✓								✓		
93	Black-browed bushtit	<i>Aegithalos bonvaloti</i>	✓												
94	Sooty bushtit	<i>Aegithalos fuliginosus</i>											✓	✓	
95	White-browed tit-warbler	<i>Leptopocile sophiae</i>					✓		✓						
96	Crested tit-warbler	<i>Leptopocile elegans</i>							✓						
97	Sichuan leaf warbler	<i>Phylloscopus forresti</i>	✓												
98	Streak-breasted scimitar babbler	<i>Pomatorhinus ruficollis</i>		✓									✓	✓	
99	Grey-cheeked (David's) fulvetta	<i>Alcippe morrisonia</i>											✓		✓
100	Barred laughingthrush	<i>Garrulax lunulatus</i>												✓	
101	Snowy-cheeked laughingthrush E	<i>Garrulax sukatschewi</i>							H						
102	Giant laughingthrush e	<i>Garrulax maximus</i>				✓			✓						
103	Plain laughingthrush e	<i>Garrulax davidii</i>					✓	✓	✓						
104	Elliott's laughingthrush e	<i>Garrulax elliotii</i>	✓	✓		✓			✓				✓	✓	
105	Black-faced laughingthrush	<i>Garrulax affinis</i>	✓											✓	
106	Red-billed leiothrix	<i>Leiothrix lutea</i>	✓									✓	✓	✓	
107	Golden-breasted fulvetta	<i>Lioparus chrysotis</i>										✓		✓	
108	Chinese fulvetta e	<i>Fulvetta striaticollis</i>							✓						
109	Grey-hooded fulvetta E	<i>Fulvetta cinereiceps</i>	✓	✓											
110	Vinous-throated parrotbill	<i>Paradoxornis webbianus</i>													✓

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111	Ashy-throated parrotbill E	<i>Paradoxornis alphonsianus</i>											✓		
112	Fulvous parrotbill	<i>Suthora fulvifrons</i>												✓	
113	Great parrotbill	<i>Conostoma oemodium</i>												✓	
114	Brown parrotbill	<i>Paradoxornis unicolor</i>	✓												
115	White-collared yuhina	<i>Yuhina diademata</i>	✓										✓	✓	
116	Goldcrest	<i>Regulus regulus</i>												✓	
117	Eurasian wren	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>		✓									✓		✓
118	Chestnut-vented nuthatch	<i>Sitta nagaenensis</i>	✓	✓									✓	✓	
119	Przevalski's nuthatch e	<i>Sitta przewalskii</i>								✓					
120	Wallcreeper	<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>						✓							
121	Sichuan treecreeper e	<i>Certhia tianquanensis</i>	✓												
122	Crested myna	<i>Acridotheres cristatellus</i>			✓										✓
123	Red-billed starling	<i>Sturnus sericeus</i>						✓							
124	White-cheeked starling	<i>Sturnus cineraceus</i>					✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				
125	Kessler's thrush	<i>Turdus kessleri</i>								✓					
126	Dusky thrush	<i>Turdus eunomus</i>	✓												✓
127	Red-throated thrush	<i>Turdus ruficollis</i>						✓							
128	Himalayan bluetail	<i>Tarsiger rufilatus</i>											✓		
129	Little forktail	<i>Enicurus scouleri</i>	✓	✓									✓		

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130	White-crowned forktail	<i>Enicurus leschenaulti</i>												✓	
131	Hodgson's redstart	<i>Phoenicurus hodgsoni</i>		✓	✓										
132	White-winged redstart	<i>Phoenicurus erythrogaster</i>						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			
133	Blue-fronted redstart	<i>Phoenicurus frontalis</i>	✓	✓									✓		
134	Plumbeous water redstart	<i>Rhyacornis fuliginosus</i>	✓	✓	✓							✓	✓	✓	
135	White-capped redstart	<i>Chaimarrornis leucocephalus</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓					✓	✓	✓	✓
136	White-throated redstart	<i>Phoenicurus schisticeps</i>					✓	✓		✓					
137	White-throated dipper	<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>					✓			✓					
138	Brown dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>	✓	✓	✓							✓	✓	✓	✓
139	Eurasian tree sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>					✓	✓		✓	✓				
140	Rock sparrow	<i>Petronia petronia</i>						✓	✓						
141	White-rumped snowfinch	<i>Pyrgilauda taczanowskii</i>							✓		✓				
142	Rufous-necked snowfinch	<i>Pyrgilauda ruficollis</i>							✓		✓				
143	Robin accentor	<i>Prunella rubeculoides</i>						✓	✓		✓				
144	Rufous-breasted accentor	<i>Prunella strophiata</i>	✓												
145	Alpine accentor	<i>Prunella collaris</i>				✓									
146	Grey wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>			✓							✓			
147	White wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	✓	✓	✓		✓					✓	✓	✓	✓
148	Brambling	<i>Fringilla</i>			✓										

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		<i>montifringilla</i>													
149	Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	✓												
150	Grey-headed bullfinch	<i>Pyrrhula erythaca</i>		✓		✓									
151	White-winged grosbeak	<i>Mycerobas carnipes</i>				✓									
152	Pink-rumped rosefinch	<i>Carpodacus eos</i>								✓					
153	Chinese white-browed rosefinch E	<i>Carpodacus thura</i>								✓					
154	Grey-capped greenfinch	<i>Carduelis sinica</i>				✓	✓					✓			
155	Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>					✓			✓					
156	Slaty bunting e	<i>Latoucheornis siemsseni</i>										✓			
157	Black-faced bunting	<i>Emberiza spodocephala</i>										✓			
	MAMMALS														
1	Tibetan macaque E	<i>Macaca thibetana</i>	✓	✓	✓							✓	✓	✓	
2	Golden snub-nosed monkey	<i>Rhinopithecus roxellana</i>											✓		
3	Woolly hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>					✓	✓							
4	Gansu pika e	<i>Ochotona cansus</i>							✓						
5	Plateau pika	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>					✓	✓		✓					
6	Niviventer species	<i>Niviventer sp.</i>											✓		
7	Red and white giant flying squirrel	<i>Petaurista alborufus</i>	✓	✓											
8	Complex-toothed flying Squirrel	<i>Trogopterus xanthipes</i>		✓											

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9	Père david's rock squirrel	<i>Sciurotamias davidianus</i>	✓										✓		
10	Swinhoe's striped squirrel	<i>Tamiops swinhoei</i>	✓	✓											
11	Malayan porcupine	<i>Hystrix brachyura</i>												✓	
12	Chinese mountain cat e	<i>Felis bieti</i>								✓					
13	Pallas's cat	<i>Otocolobus manul</i>						✓							
14	Leopard cat	<i>Prionailurus bengalensis</i>												✓	
15	Masked palm civet	<i>Paguma larvata</i>	✓			✓							✓	✓	
16	Tibetan fox	<i>Vulpes ferrilata</i>						✓		✓					
17	Red fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>						✓	✓	✓					
18	Red panda	<i>Ailurus fulgens</i>	✓	✓											
19	Hog badger	<i>Arctonyx collaris</i>											✓	✓	
20	Asian badger	<i>Meles leucurus</i>						✓							
21	Common otter	<i>Lutra lutra</i>												✓	
22	Wild boar	<i>Sus scrofa</i>										✓	✓	✓	
23	Alpine musk deer	<i>Moschus chrysogaster</i>								✓					
24	Siberian roe deer	<i>Capreolus pygargus</i>					✓	✓			✓				
25	Red deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>					✓								
26	Sika deer	<i>Cervus nippon</i>								✓					
27	Tufted deer e	<i>Elaphodus cephaloph</i>				✓					✓				
28	Reeves's muntjac	<i>Muntiacus reevesii</i>										✓	✓	✓	✓

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29	Sambar	<i>Rusa unicolor</i>	✓	✓		✓	✓								
30	Takin	<i>Budorcas taxicolor</i>				✓						✓	✓	✓	
31	Chinese serow	<i>Capricornis milneedwardsii</i>									✓		✓	✓	
32	Chinese goral	<i>Naemorhedus griseus</i>		✓								✓	✓	✓	
33	Tibetan gazelle	<i>Procapra picticaudata</i>							✓		✓				
34	Blue sheep	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>				✓					✓				

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