



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

14 Greenfield Road, Eastbourne,
East Sussex BN21 1JJ, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1323 731865
Mob: +44 (0)7821 640118

Email: jason.woolgar@btinternet.com
Website: www.wildglobetours.com



CHINA

Date - October 2015

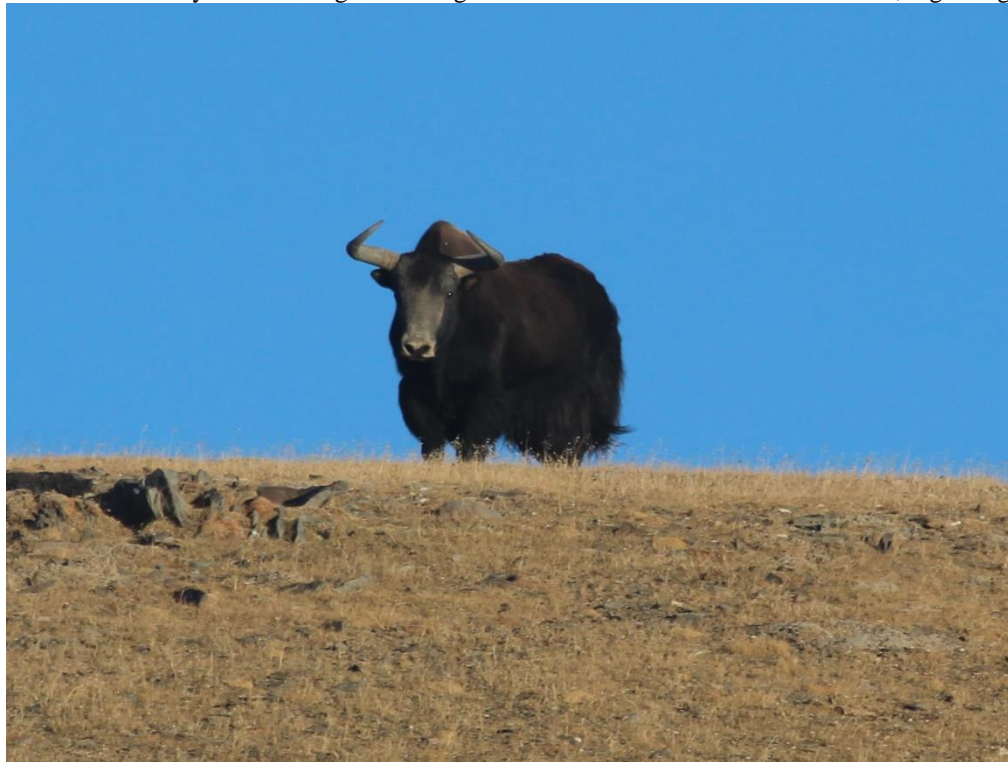
Duration - 16 Days

Destinations

Chengdu - Xining - Tibetan Plateau

Trip Overview

Although my previous tour in Paraguay had been somewhat disappointing in terms of the quality of the sightings, it was an absolute triumph in comparison to my return to China after an extended absence, as this trip was the worst I have experienced in living memory and, to add insult to injury, I had only myself to blame for the entire sorry episode. Unfortunately, the local operator who I had used previously in China and trusted my guests with, died some time ago and I had consequently not been involved with trips to the region for a number of years. As I often state, I pride myself on the fact that all of the operators I use are local people living in whichever country I am visiting or running a tour to and when I last broke this rule, regarding a section of a trip to Yellowstone seven



years ago, I was provided with a guide who liked shooting all of the animals that I was hoping to photograph and ultimately send my guests to view. Not surprisingly, that part of the tour was an unmitigated disaster, but thankfully, it was not the whole visit and it did at least remind me to avoid the international corporations that run package tours all over the world, as long as there are sufficient customers to fill them that is, without really knowing or understanding the often fragile environments and vulnerable wildlife they are profiting from. While these largely soulless companies can be fine for basic city tours or resort type holidays, to me wildlife and wilderness travel has always been a deeply personal experience involving expertly crafted individual adventures, which I would always hope to equal or perhaps even surpass, but certainly never duplicate. This philosophy was developed at a young age, in part as a

result of a few truly catastrophic trips that I experienced, but also because I witnessed a number of unethical operators and individuals, at least half would be a highly conservative estimate, causing significant harm in the areas that I realised they should be working to protect. A handful of disreputable, or even basically honest but incompetent travel agents, can severely damage a region and it quickly became apparent that there had to be a more appropriate and less harmful way to visit these remote destinations and encounter the beguiling wildlife they support. I was therefore ultimately disappointed in myself for again breaking my own cardinal rule in using a UK operator and definitely will not do so again. However, 2015 was a savagely busy year for me and I needed to visit China without having to spend the huge number of hours that I currently devote to each research trip, particularly given the often challenging complexities of travel within that territory. Ideally I would leave the awkward logistics to someone else on this occasion and instead concentrate on refamiliarising myself with the Tibetan Plateau, as well as assessing the best wildlife areas and hopefully developing a few valuable contacts for future expeditions. That was the tenuous plan, but I remained unsure until it became evident that if I did not use someone else this time, I would almost certainly not be able to visit China for probably another year, as I was already committed



to long tours in India and Alaska within a relatively short period. Even then I wavered, but I had wanted to return to Tibet for longer than I can recall and eventually made a spur of the moment decision to fit one more trip into an already packed schedule, even if I was not able to organise it myself. As they say, 'act in haste, repent at leisure' and that decision has ultimately cost me far more than the time that I had hoped to save, not least because the guides that we were provided with were so disinterested that it was impossible to complete my research to anything approaching an acceptable standard, which of course means that I will have to return before I can even consider offering tours to the area. The entire experience was inordinately frustrating, especially as I had selected an operator with a decent reputation, that appeared to specialise in wildlife travel. They claimed to be experts at least, but in reality they only specialised in removing the wild element of wildlife and what should have been a thrilling adventure across a succession of spectacular landscapes, was somehow transformed into a sanitised, lifeless trapeze behind two of the least inspiring individuals that I have ever had the misfortune to spend time with. More seriously, in a way at least, the company director turned out to be misleading and basically dishonest, as he deliberately withheld logistical information before we travelled, information that he was undoubtedly aware would seriously impact the enjoyment and possibly even the success of the tour. James was again travelling with me, but I would have certainly cancelled our booking, had I known the details that I discovered when we landed in China and I think that was probably the case for some of the other guests as well. Within a few minutes of



our arrival we were informed that two standard size four-wheel drive vehicles had been made available for ten people, six guests, two tour leaders, never has that word been less appropriate, and two drivers, as well as all of our luggage and camera equipment, of which there was a great deal. We knew instantly that this was a major problem, but when questioned, the main leader helpfully ascertained that it was 'tough' and that we would have to make the best of it, which is not really what you want to hear thirty minutes into an expensive holiday, let alone an expensive wildlife holiday, the success of which can often hinge on tiny details. Organised well, these trips generally involve meticulous planning and a great deal of dedication, but from the very beginning, we were essentially being told...*we know this is not really acceptable, but we wanted to make as much profit from you as possible and therefore decided not to hire a third vehicle or driver.* Whilst sadly common in this industry, that type of attitude is tremendously disappointing when you have put your faith in what you hope will be a reputable operator and the situation was further compounded by the fact that we were only spending one night at most destinations, which meant that we had to continually load the vehicle with all of the luggage and had



very little room in the back for our day bags or camera equipment, which we usually had to keep on our laps. As such, we were all extremely confined and the person squeezed into the middle on the back seat could barely see anything throughout the day and had absolutely no chance of getting out of the vehicle quickly if anything was spotted along the road. One woman suffered such bad cramp that she was often in a great deal of pain and, on more than one occasion, was forced to sit sideways with her legs and hiking boots stretched across the other passengers, who now had even less room. The situation was simply not good enough, but until we had seen the exact configuration of the vehicle, we had not realised that there were far more serious implications of having just two

cars, as only three actual guests could fit in each vehicle, which was going to mean that each pair could only travel together on two of every three days. This really was wildlife travel from the dark ages and I could barely comprehend that they not only intended to split the pairs who had booked together, but that they had deliberately concealed this policy before we departed, almost certainly in case anyone cancelled as a result. When you travel in a large group you know and accept that it is unlikely that you will all be able to stay



together, but when you make a reservation as a couple, and are not informed otherwise, you automatically assume that you will spend the tour with the person that you booked with. In this case they split a husband and wife, best friends and a father and son, regardless of the fact that in doing so, they were also separating an adult from the minor that he was legally responsible for. When I attempted to point this out to our charming tour leader and his hapless assistant, I was informed by both that we had to join the rota system and get on with it. ‘That’s the way the cookie crumbles’, was the most pleasant of the replies that I received, which just about sums up the care and commitment demonstrated by each throughout the tour. Whilst there are many unsatisfactory aspects of being separated in this way, including serious safety concerns with children, one of the most scandalous is that two people, who may have spent an entire lifetime together, will often return home with different experiences and perspectives of a tour, as the vehicles do not drive together in

convoy and can sometimes be hours apart. Can you imagine if a couple have spent literally years saving for their dream trip and one of them spots a snow leopard while the other is in a different vehicle? Can you really comprehend how that conversation is going to unfold and what the judge is going to think when the ‘other party’ in the divorce settlement is recorded as a particularly captivating felid? Although a snow leopard was a definite possibility on this trip, none of the disparities were thankfully quite that extreme and we all more or less observed the same animals. However, there were still countless examples of the two cars experiencing entirely different events and on one drive the passengers in the lead car enjoyed twelve Tibetan fox sightings, in comparison to the three that the succeeding car witnessed. The first



vehicle was of course disturbing the foxes and making it more unlikely that the second would be as successful and this happened on several occasions, including with a wolf and a red fox, which were viewed splendidly by the vehicle in front, but barely at all by the car bringing up the rear. These anomalies are unavoidable on group trips, but I maintain that you should be able to treasure the same golden memories as your partner, friend or family member and that the real crime is the duplicity that so many operators engage in when attempting to sell their products. They send you a packing list, but neglect to mention that you may not be allowed to travel with your spouse or even your children. This was a real issue for me, for although James is a huge asset on these trips and displays a massive amount of enthusiasm, he is technically still a minor and I obviously wanted him with me, particularly given the often



treacherous weather conditions that we were driving in and the fact that we saw at least two accidents that no one was walking away from. One of the journeys when we were apart was completed in a heavy blizzard, in unbelievably poor visibility, and it was only when we pulled up at the hotel that I knew for certain that James had also arrived safely. Despite these genuine and well aired concerns, the tour leaders repeatedly refused to allow James to travel with me permanently and this negligence regarding the welfare of a child, extended to the fact that they also allowed the Chinese drivers to smoke in the vehicles, in some cases when we were driving and in others when we were engaged in an activity and had to return to smoke-filled cars. I am actually very relaxed and tolerant around smokers, as I myself only gave up smoking in Sri Lanka in early 2015 and understand as well as anyone what it is like to desperately need a cigarette. That said, I would have never considered smoking in an enclosed vehicle and to do so with a minor is now illegal in the United Kingdom, which should have meant that it was also illegal on a holiday that had been arranged under British law. I somehow sensed that this would not carry a great deal of weight, which was confirmed when one of the guests mentioned that



they would prefer it if the drivers did not smoke in the vehicle and our altruistic leader magnanimously asserted ‘so they smoke in the vehicles, give them a break’. By this stage I was not at all surprised by such an unreasonable attitude, as the tour leaders were both thoroughly unpleasant and the main one openly kicked a dog in front of us all and laughed as it cowered and ran. This was as revealing as it was upsetting, as the trip had been advertised as a mammal tour, but it quickly became apparent that both guides were hardcore birders and had no real interest in mammals or helping us search for them. The assistant is a member of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and participates in the slaughter of red foxes on RSPB reserves, where foxes are not killed for taking lambs or imported game birds, but for the entirely natural act of hunting waterfowl, animals they have preyed upon for centuries. I soon realised that the trip had been arranged around a few reliable areas where several mammal species could be viewed at extreme distance with the

assistance of a spotting scope, which is fine as far as it goes, as you cannot blame the guides for the fact that the target species are a long way away and not always accessible. However, even in these areas more time was spent birding than actual mammal viewing, as there was no will to look for anything that could not be encountered easily and no real attempt to get any closer to the animals that had already been observed. On several occasions both guides disappeared with the two members of the group who could also be described

as avid birders, leaving the remaining four of us without a guide at all, and at almost every destination the same routine would unfold on a daily basis, as the pair of them would set up their spotting scopes and the tour leader, who was probably only slightly more egotistical than he was despotic, would begin a running commentary of the bird activity as it played out in front of us. This might sound amusing if you have not had the pleasure of watching birding groups in action before, as one or more of the group will literally begin commentating for the benefit of everyone standing there apparently with their eyes closed. *Robin accentor showing nicely on the left, two, sorry three, Tibetan snowfinches flying overhead.* The entire approach is excruciating and incredibly counterproductive, as standing up and talking constantly may be fine for watching birds, but it is completely hopeless in terms of finding mammals. During one particularly irritating stop, the tour leader mentioned a single redstart, a type of flycatcher, 27 times before I began looking



for a suitable peak that I could throw myself off and the whole antiquated process was repeated every 50 or 100 metres throughout each interminable session. Eventually James and I began searching on our own and while the tour leader sermonised to his flock, in both possible senses, we discovered, among others, a pair of juvenile pallas's cats, the only two alpine musk deer of the trip and a lone wolf. The hours spent in the field were again birding hours, as opposed to the best times to encounter mammals, as we did not arrive anywhere particularly early, certainly not early enough to hope to find any nocturnal animals, and would always leave well before dusk, which is another perfect time to look for a wide range of mammals. We were basically only in the field during the main daylight hours and although I did ask if we could tarry a little longer on the afternoon that we found our first Tibetan foxes, as we departed in that last 'golden hour' of glorious sunlight, the tour leader was his usual autocratic self and we again left just as we should have been turning our attention to the crepuscular mammals that are largely active during twilight hours. There was a great deal of discussion regarding the possibility of us encountering a Eurasian lynx, which remains the animal I most want to see anywhere in the world, and much of the habitat that we were exploring was indeed ideal for that elusive animal. Unfortunately, the times that we were exploring it were not and on one occasion, at a site that had been noted as a possible lynx destination, we arrived at 8.30am and by 9.40am had covered less than 500 metres following another three prolonged birding commentaries. For whatever reason, perhaps to deflect attention from the fact that he was also totally disinterested in most of the mammals that we were searching for, the assistant continuously repeated that he would love to see an Asian badger, as one of these more or less strictly nocturnal creatures had been watched in a spotting scope during the day on a previous tour. It became like a mantra for him, but of course he did not want to see one badly enough to ever leave his comfortable hotel at night and actually search with a spotlight, when his chances of finding one would have improved exponentially. Instead he was content to just witter on about it constantly and not one single spotlighting session was arranged throughout the entire trip. I had never previously experienced this on a mammal tour, as you always make at least some effort, even in unfavourable conditions, and the situation was further compounded by the fact that I was not permitted to use a driver or vehicle when I asked whether James and I could go out at night, if no one else wanted to. I initially mistook this lack of enthusiasm for ineptitude, but as the trip progressed, I gradually realised that it was much worse than that, as both men were clearly highly proficient birding guides and simply had no interest in the job that they were being paid to fulfil. This was apathy masquerading as incompetence and it was noticeable that, as they completed the bare minimum on our behalf, they were able to devote far more time to their own passion for birding. Both guides could identify every possible bird, generally just from their calls, but neither had any idea regarding the smaller mammals that we encountered or even those that occurred in the areas of their supposed expertise. Of the vole species that we observed, and I believe that there were at least two and probably three, we were only able to identify blyth's vole and this was with the assistance of a third party and not as a result of their knowledge. Mid-day gerbil, northern three-toed jerboa and a few other small mammals should have been relatively easy to find, but looking for them was treated more as a brief afterthought during intense birding sessions and on several occasions the guides simply walked off as we were actively searching

for something. There was no pretence in terms of even offering to help and after we had been looking for Chinese zokar and moupin pika on our own, I found both of them privately birding. In the vehicle, the main leader did not spot a single mammal, while I picked out wolves, red foxes and Tibetan foxes sitting behind him, and he only ever asked the driver to stop for birds, on one occasion screaming 'snipe, snipe, a solitary snipe', when he caught a glimpse of what I presume must be a personal favourite. This was a running theme sadly, as both men were only truly animated when birding and, as such, were not really fit for purpose as committed and reliable mammal guides. If this is now reading as an anti-birder tirade, that is not my intention, although it must be said that tales of ruthless 'twitchers' are legion for a reason and that many hardcore birders, metaphorically kicking small children and grannies out of their path in order to see a new species, probably come second only to suicide bombers in terms of people that you would least like



to board a plane with. Equally, I have met and travelled with many erudite and charming people with an interest in ornithology and a huge number of birders are also dedicated environmentalists with a real enthusiasm for conserving the habitats that they spend so much time in. The problems occur, for both mammal and bird enthusiasts, when you start to encounter extremes, as human beings are driven and competitive creatures and some individuals appear to become more or less defined by the life lists that they maintain. Travelling with a list or a decent reference book largely makes sense, as it is always nice to know what you might encounter on a trip, but travelling purely for a list is an anathema to me and when the tail starts wagging the dog in this way, then you begin to witness the type of fanatical behaviour that has been largely associated with birders to date. This is not strictly fair, for although many birders are undoubtedly obsessive, they do not generally go to the extremes that some mammal watchers will go to in order to populate their lists, including trapping animals, which is inexcusably invasive and extremely stressful to the creatures concerned. Animals are injured and can die in these traps, it is not uncommon for one animal to take the opportunity to eat another when they are caught together, and some of the more compulsive devotees are not using one or two, but literally dozens at a time. Only humans could justify such unnecessary suffering for what basically amounts to a hobby and I would actually make it illegal to trap an animal for either recreational or commercial purposes, as many unethical wildlife tour operators are now offering dedicated tours to trap and identify small mammals, purely to make money. The resulting life lists have no true relevance, as they record only the number of species seen, but do not reveal the traumatic conditions in which each has been observed. In some ways it would be more acceptable if

these people just visited zoos, as the sightings would be about as authentic as treating trapped animals as wild, which they somehow convince themselves can ever be the case, and they could then record each species without harming any of them. Some of course have ventured beyond such reason and will even accompany hunters into the field and watch animals being killed, just to maybe add a new tick to their precious, but ultimately meaningless, list. Although my trips are all about freedom and I very much support the concept that individuals should essentially have the right to experience nature in the way that they personally enjoy, including with a checklist if that works for them, that fundamental principle should never be allowed to extend to killing, injuring or distressing wild animals, as we have a responsibility to ensure that future generations can savour the incredibly complex and diverse beings that have enthralled so many of us, whether they be mammals, birds or any other equally enchanting creatures. I had my own targets on this particular tour, but I was more concerned about the health of Tibet in general, as wildlife does not fare well under Chinese rule and I have recently received harrowing reports of extreme cruelty and unrestrained poaching in Sichuan Province, another area that I am familiar with and one of the richest wildlife destinations in all of China. Depending on our success and whether I was able to secure the services of a reliable local operator, Sichuan was likely to be my next foray within the region, but for now I was simply hoping that the spectacle and mystery of the Tibetan Plateau had somehow endured, as there are few more compelling destinations on earth. Extending 2,500 kilometres from east to west and over 1,000 kilometres north to south, the Tibetan Plateau is the largest plateau in the world and includes areas of northern India, Bhutan and Nepal, as well as several Chinese provinces and the Tibet Autonomous Region, which China took by force in 1951. Although not widely known for his sense of humour, Mao Tse-tung, or Chairman Mao as he would

become known, is responsible for either one of the subtlest jokes of the 20th century or for one of the most conspicuous oxymorons of any age, as Tibet had been an independent nation until Mao's troops intervened and it is difficult to consider a less appropriate classification for modern day Tibet than autonomous. If autonomous subjugation does not quite work for you, perhaps instead consider the more inspirational 'The Liberation of Chamdo', which certainly sounds impressive until you realise that liberation is actually a euphemism for conquest and that Chamdo, the base for the Tibetan army, was invaded to force the Tibetan government in Lhasa to recognise Chinese sovereignty. The authorities in Tibet had no choice but to comply and a brief and bloody uprising aside in 1959, when the influential Buddhist monk and current Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso took the opportunity to escape to India with thousands of his compatriots, Tibet has been under Chinese occupation ever since. Foreign tourists were not permitted to enter this part of China until the 1980's and even today a special permit is required for anyone wishing to visit the autonomous region, including the magnificent Potala Palace in Lhasa. Once the seat of the Tibetan government and the chief residence of the Dalai Lama, construction on the Potala Palace began in 1645 on the site of an earlier Buddhist monastery dating back to the 7th century. Thousands of craftsmen and labourers took over 50 years to complete the mesmerising labyrinth of ornate state rooms, imposing chapels, iridescent stupas and the equally conspicuous but highly contrasting White and Red palaces, for which the remarkable complex is known. Now a UNESCO World Heritage Site, at first glance the Potala Palace more resembles a vast fortress than either a spiritual sanctuary of contemplation or an imperious stately residence, but the treasures within reveal a far more intimate world of astounding Tibetan art and superlative architecture. The artistry on display and sheer volume of artefacts, there are literally thousands of elaborate murals, vibrant painted scrolls and intricate statues, can be almost overwhelming and it is easy to understand why most tourists who make the not inconsiderable effort to visit Potala, also



go on to spend time at two other significant Buddhist sites in Lhasa, the Jokhang Temple, the oldest part of which also dates from the 7th century, and Norbulingka, the Dalai Lama's summer palace until the present incumbent was driven into exile in 1959. We would not have the opportunity to savour these particular delights on this tour, as the Tibetan Plateau stretches across an immense expanse and our time would instead be spent in some of the best wildlife areas of Qinghai Province, safely beyond the additional bureaucracy of the Tibet Autonomous Region. Although the Potala Palace is undoubtedly spectacular, 50 years of human endeavour cannot hope to compete with the timeless splendour of the plateau itself and every astounding panorama somehow appears to surpass the last. Forged over eons in fire and ice and surrounded by some of the most colossal mountain ranges on earth, including the Himalayas and Mount Everest to the south and the Kunlun Mountains to the north, the Tibetan Plateau has become known as the 'The Roof of the World' and it is difficult to imagine a more apt sobriquet for such a breathtaking natural phenomenon. Shadowing all that it surveys at an average height of almost 5,000 metres, this is the tallest plateau in the world and also one of the most important, as its innumerable glaciers and immeasurable subterranean reservoirs form the third largest repository of freshwater after the two poles and these waters feed many of Asia's mightiest rivers. The Brahmaputra, Indus, Yangtze, Yellow, Mekong and Ganges all rise in the plateau region and around two billion people depend on the life giving waters produced by literally tens of thousands of glaciers. Disturbingly, if a pending ecological catastrophe can be depicted so mildly, climate change is having a disastrous effect on these glaciers, as the region is believed to be warming at twice the rate of the global average and this is producing unparalleled and unsustainable damage to the



ice fields that basically sustain life for approximately a third of the planet's rampant population. Historically more snow and ice would be produced annually than the amount lost in glacial melts, but in the last half century that process has been reversed and of the hundreds of glaciers meticulously monitored in Tibet, over 95% are losing more ice than they are adding each year. In some of the worst areas the ice cover has disappeared by up to 35% within that devastating 50-year period and it must now be time for us to collectively acknowledge the 'inconvenient truth' of global warming. Most people are conscious of the fact that China is currently the biggest producer of carbon dioxide emissions on the planet, however, far fewer are aware that the United States remain a close second or that from 1850 to the present day, the USA was responsible for the production of a higher percentage of greenhouse gases than any other nation, including the entire continent of Europe, which was measured collectively. You would have thought that maybe being the largest polluter in world history just might provide some sort of determination or impetus to redress the balance, but there is little



political will in either America or China to instigate meaningful change and the United Nation's barely credible assertion that a 3.6 degree increase in global average temperatures would prove 'tolerable', was met with slightly less enthusiasm from the various territories that would be submerged well before that increase was ever reached. As it is, the current estimates indicate that unless radical action is taken sooner rather than later, global temperatures will rise by approximately 4.7 degrees by the end of the century, which is generally accepted would produce a humanitarian disaster on an unprecedented and irreversible scale. As we observed on a daily basis, Tibet faces many other serious environmental issues, not least the destruction of the grasslands upon which over a million nomads depend, principally in order to feed their livestock. Climate change is considered to be a significant factor in this 'desertification', which is basically a modern shiny new term for an age old problem, our inherent inability to conserve or even adequately manage the land that supports us and hopefully our descendants. As was the case with the Dust Bowl, which ravaged the North American prairies during the Great Depression of the 1930s and is probably the most famous example of severe land degradation, there are a number of factors involved in the continued destruction of Tibet's great plains, although, as is generally the case, the majority of them relate to a combination of human ignorance, greed and sheer folly. That massive areas are being extensively overgrazed is beyond question, as we witnessed enormous herds of domestic yaks at more or less every destination we visited or drove through. Major industry is also increasing at a rapid rate, with huge government and overseas investments being made in copper and gold mines, cement factories and new roads. If improvements to the transport infrastructure sound reasonable enough, the reality of the situation is less so, as in several places we encountered two substantial concrete roads, and on one memorable occasion three, running parallel with each other. These are not separate lanes of the same road, but entirely different roads and you can only begin to imagine how much money was made by the local party officials who assessed and ultimately authorised those contracts. We should no doubt be grateful that only three construction companies submitted tenders or Tibetan motorists would probably now be able to choose a different road for each day of the week and those same dignitaries may well have been forced to add their names to the rather substantial list of 300,000 Chinese officials who were disciplined for various forms of corruption during 2015. Much of the damage to the grasslands has been attributed to excessive pika and rodent populations, but given that so many of the raptors and large carnivores that would have preyed on these species have been hunted to the edge of extinction across much of their range, even this rationale returns us to the basic fact that we cannot protect the very ecosystems that sustain us. In 2003 the Chinese government introduced the 'ecological migration' scheme to alleviate the problem by paying hundreds of thousands of nomads to give up their traditional lifestyle and move to resettlement centres, which Native Americans would probably recognise as reservations. The aim apparently, was to prevent overgrazing and restore the grasslands, but there is no real evidence that this has been achieved and many independent observers believe that the government are simply taking the opportunity to remove the indigenous people from their land, which can then be utilised for further industrialisation. Given their recent ecological record, which is worse than woeful, it is hard to accept that



the politicians and businessmen in Beijing do not have an ulterior motive for relocating so many people and it is certainly true that we barely encountered a single pristine landscape, from the road at least, during the entire trip. The situation did improve on some of the more remote hikes and although the Tibet that I once gazed upon clearly no longer entirely exists, the region is still humbling and at least some of the landscapes remain as majestic as I recall. Having been unwell the previous year on a snow leopard expedition at Hemis National Park in Ladakh, it was nice to be trekking at altitude again without any ill effects, as I have never really suffered with



altitude sickness and the hiking on this trip was again reasonably comfortable. Unfortunately, this was also partly due to our tour leader's rather lacklustre approach to mammal watching, as we generally parked at the side of the road for spotting scope views of a variety of animals at great distance, without making any effort to get closer. When we did occasionally walk, we rarely covered much ground due to the previously described birding technique of repeatedly stopping and many of the quintessentially Tibetan species were consequently observed as miniscule dots on a collection of far-flung horizons. As per the mammal list below, around half of the animals encountered were only seen at long range, including chiru, przewalski's gazelle, argali, white-lipped deer and the iconic wild yak, which are considerably larger and far

more impressive than their domestic cousins. If our guides had displayed even a semblance of will or ambition on our behalf, it is very likely that we would have been rewarded with far better views of these magnificent beasts, but they were dismissive in their disinterest and only James and I made the effort to cross a rather refreshing shallow stream and approach a small herd on foot. Whilst we were partially successful and I was at least able to take a few shots, this was a scrambled attempt towards the end of the day and we were never afforded sufficient time to try properly. This was a recurring theme throughout the tour, with a great deal of time devoted to birding and very little to the animals around which the itinerary had apparently been designed. Despite this, and the fact that our guides were not responsible for a single trip highlight between them, we were still able to savour a number of thrilling and memorable experiences. As usual we had a lot of fun photographing some of the smaller animals that people often overlook or disregard, including pikas and woolly hares, one of which posed beautifully for us against a crisp layer of early morning snow. Marmots were less common, but they are highly social animals and we were fortunate to come across a small colony interacting

around their burrows. When they are not eating, which can appear to be a fulltime occupation, these large squirrels spend much of their time interacting and greet each other by rubbing noses, more often than not in an upright 'boxing' stance. Their fascinating behaviour is interspersed with mad comical dashes between burrows, as they attempt to propel their rather full pre hibernation frames as fast as their little legs will carry them. They are actually fairly quick and there are few more endearing or amusing sights than an extremely well fed marmot flying across the tundra to avoid a predator. One of those predators is the Altai or mountain weasel, a splendidly elegant mustelid that I have enjoyed a lot of success with previously and had expected to see on a few occasions. As it was, these diminutive but ferocious



carnivores proved to be in short supply and we were ultimately grateful for one outstanding encounter with an obligingly inquisitive weasel that approached to within a couple of metres as I made the traditional squeaking sound to mimic injured prey. Tibetan gazelle were of course far more conspicuous, although no less appreciated for that, and we also encountered healthy populations of kiang, a truly magnificent equid and the largest of the wild ass species. Perversely, given that they were barely looking, we had our guides to thank for most of our remaining mammal highlights, as they were so inept and unprofessional that James and I eventually gave up on



them and spent long periods searching far more intelligently on our own. Whilst the guides stood birding with everyone else, James spotted a pair of alpine musk deer, which we attempted to beckon the rest of the group over to see, and almost exactly the same thing occurred with pallas's cat, the main target species for the trip. Again we left the entire group huddled around their scopes and this time I spotted a pair of sub adult cats that we were able to watch for well over an hour until they were disturbed by a herd of domestic yaks. Unlike the musk deer, which were walking across a snow covered clearing and unfortunately disappeared before everyone could see them, thankfully the two young cats were very relaxed and we were all able to savour an exceptional sighting at a reasonable distance. They were not close enough to photograph well, but they could be seen with the naked eye, which is how I noticed them on the side of a hill, and binoculars were more than adequate to follow the action as they chased each other from rock to rock. Given their size, both were almost fully grown, they were probably born in April and would have been around five or six months old when we saw them in early October. They were certainly still displaying a great deal of youthful energy and spent much of their time engaged in the pouncing and play hunting that would serve them so well when independence beckoned and they had to leave the security of both their den and their mother. I have no idea if the makers based their creation on a pallas's cat, but it has to be said that this particular



felid looks a lot like a less pink version of Bagpuss, an old dishevelled toy cat that came to life in a charming and exceedingly gentle British children's stop motion animation series from the mid 1970s. Bagpuss was made at around the same time as another animated classic Roobarb, the story of a dopey green dog called Roobarb and his rivalry with another glaringly pink and considerably more astute cat called Custard. That the animation was almost prehistorically rudimentary was of no import, as the best children's programme ever, certainly as far as I was concerned at age seven, had an incredibly catchy theme tune and was voiced by Richard Briers, a classically trained and hugely talented actor who played Polonius in Kenneth Branagh's 1996 screen version of Hamlet, some 40 years after he had himself portrayed the

troubled Prince of Denmark. Most people now remember the series mistakenly as Roobarb and Custard and if I appear to have deviated somewhat, the point is that this one quirky cartoon still divides a nation, or at least those of us old enough to remember the street parties of Queen Elizabeth's Silver Jubilee and the Sex Pistols rather irreverent take on the same celebration, into two categories, dog or cat lovers. Whilst I absolutely do love cats and have spent thousands of hours either watching or searching for a huge variety across the globe, the unavoidable reality is that I am unequivocally a dog man. As such, I was elated that so many trip highlights involved canids, including a large number of Tibetan foxes, a dozen majestic wolves and two red foxes, which I am always delighted to see given the unrelenting persecution these beautiful creatures still face across much of their range. Remarkably, we had the privilege of observing wolves at six different locations and I can honestly say that I never tire of seeing these evocative and ancient predators. To me wolves evoke the true spirit of the wild and a primeval freedom that you can really only understand when you see them run as a pack across an untouched landscape. Although they were not close, we were exceptionally lucky to be able to watch a pack of five for an extended period and on another occasion I spotted one directly ahead of our vehicle, despite the fact that I was sitting in the back behind the tour leader. The wolf ran as soon as we stopped, but it was not unduly concerned by us and looked



back a few times before disappearing slowly over the brow of a hill. Many of our Tibetan fox sightings followed a similar pattern, as these distinctive animals were not overly disturbed by our presence, but equally, they did not linger when we approached and after several days we had all seen them reasonably well, without having experienced that one great encounter that you are always hoping for. A few unproductive hours into our final day in an area where the foxes were known to occur and I was beginning to wonder whether that one special moment was possibly going to elude us. To make matters worse, James and I were in the second vehicle, but at least we were together and when I spotted yet another fox, we decided that this might be our last opportunity and that we would try to get as close as possible on foot. The results, I am thrilled to say, were spectacular, as the fox turned out to be an extremely calm female and her initial caution quickly dissipated. Within maybe fifteen minutes she barely acknowledged us and less than five minutes later we were lying a few metres away as she concealed herself in a typical foxhole in an attempt to ambush an unsuspecting pika. We probably did not help in that endeavour, as the pikas were more alarmed by our activity than she was and eventually she gave up and wandered off. To call the encounter exhilarating would not even begin to do it justice and when I look back on this trip in years to come, I will not be thinking about a disingenuous company owner or hopeless guides and will instead remember the unadulterated privilege of sharing a magical occasion with my wonderful son and a truly captivating Tibetan fox.



No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Pallas's Cat	<i>Felis manul</i>	Two sightings of three animals on the same day, one at distance with a spotting scope.
2	Grey Wolf	<i>Canis lupus</i>	Six sightings of twelve animals across various locations.
3	Tibetan Fox	<i>Vulpes ferrilata</i>	Numerous sightings at several locations.
4	Red Fox	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>	One at the side of the road and one at a distance while photographing kiang.
5	Altai Weasel	<i>Mustela altaica</i>	One brief but close encounter.
6	White-lipped Deer	<i>Cervus albirostris</i>	Spotting scope views of a herd of about 40.
7	Red Deer	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>	Distant scope sightings of two subspecies, macneill's deer and kansu red deer, at two different locations.
8	Siberian Roe Deer	<i>Capreolus pygargus</i>	Three at distance on the first full day in the field.
9	Alpine Musk Deer	<i>Moschus chrysogaster</i>	Two briefly walking across an open snow covered area and into the tree line.
10	Chiru	<i>Pantholops hodgsonii</i>	Large numbers in one area, but all at long range.
11	Tibetan Gazelle	<i>Gazella picticaudata</i>	Commonly observed and usually in high numbers.
12	Przewalski's Gazelle	<i>Gazella przewalskii</i>	Distant scope sightings of individuals at one location.
13	Goitered Gazelle	<i>Gazella subgotturosa</i>	Herd of between 60 and 80 at distance on our final full day in the field.
14	Wild Yak	<i>Bos mutus</i>	Low numbers at two destinations on consecutive days.
15	Kiang	<i>Equus kiang</i>	Routinely encountered at higher elevations.
16	Argali	<i>Ovis ammon</i>	Distant spotting scope views of three males and a small herd at a second location, again at distance.
17	Blue Sheep	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>	Small herds regularly encountered.
18	Rhesus Macaque	<i>Macaca mulatta</i>	Spotting scope views of a small troop.
19	Woolly Hare	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>	Observed at several destinations in low numbers.
20	Gansu Pika	<i>Ochotona cansus</i>	Low numbers at two locations.
21	Black-lipped Pika	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>	Abundant and routinely encountered.
22	Glover's Pika	<i>Ochotona gloveri</i>	Small colonies in two areas.
23	Moupin Pika	<i>Ochotona thibetana</i>	One individual running across a trail and then hiding at the base of a bush.
24	Himalayan Marmot	<i>Marmota himalayana</i>	Between 20 and 30 at various locations.
25	Blyth's Vole	<i>Phaiomys leucurus</i>	The only vole species identified and commonly observed.







14 Greenfield Road, Eastbourne,
East Sussex BN21 1JJ, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1323 731865
Mob: +44 (0)7821 640118

Email: jason.woolgar@btinternet.com
Website: www.wildglobetours.com

© Copyright 2014. All Rights Reserved (Wild Globe Travel Consultancy)