Wild Globe Travel Consultancy
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CHINA

Date - October 2017

Duration - 22 Days

Destinations
Chengdu - Longcanggou Forest Park - Labahe Nature Reserve - Wolong National Nature Reserve - Balang Shan - Shuama Lukou - Ruoergai - Baixi - Huanglong Scenic and Historic Interest Area - Tangjiahe National Nature Reserve - Foping National Nature Reserve - Xi'an

Trip Overview

Having previously visited Mongolia, my next tour would largely take place in Sichuan Province, part of a region of China ruled by the Song dynasty until the Mongol leader Kublai Khan conquered the area in 1279 and totally obliterated an empire that had reigned for over 300 years. Kublai Khan completed the conquest that his grandfather Genghis Khan had started 70 years earlier and ruled over a unified China as emperor from his capital Xanadu, which was immortalised by the English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in his poem of 1816 *'Kubla Khan'*.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan
A stately pleasure-dome decree:
Where Alph, the sacred river, ran
Through caverns measureless to man
Down to a sunless sea.

Now officially back in Chinese hands, Sichuan has long since been considered one of the premium mammal destinations in East Asia and this essentially remains the case despite the severe conservation issues faced throughout China and the unfortunate fact that government officials have closed all giant panda reserves to visitors, which has made it almost impossible to observe these iconic creatures in the wild. I am currently investigating ways of circumventing these extreme and entirely unnecessary measures, by either accompanying scientific expeditions into one or more of the restricted regions or by searching for small fragmented populations in areas that have not been closed. I aim to make further progress on this over the next year or so and, meanwhile, this tour was designed to see how likely groups were to encounter certain species at some of the more renowned wildlife sites across the province. In addition to the mammals that appear on the trip list at the bottom of this report, Asiatic black bear, forest musk deer, Asiatic golden cat and snow leopard are all feasible in or around the reserves that I visited, although no network currently exists in terms of monitoring snow leopards and it will therefore take time to establish reliable locations and regular sightings. On range at least Eurasian lynx should also be present, they certainly are in healthy numbers to the west in Tibet and Qinghai, as well as dhole, which historically covered much of the country. However, if these tenacious wild dogs do still occur in the province, it must be in extremely low numbers, as they have not been observed in Sichuan since 2003 and only once since that time in neighbouring Shaanxi. The Asiatic black bear aside, which I knew we had a reasonable chance of seeing, none of these rare animals were serious prospects for this trip and I more wanted to confirm which mammals guests could realistically hope to encounter, given sufficient time and effort. This involved spending longer than is strictly necessary at a couple of destinations and briefly checking a few new sites for future reference. Although it sadly means sacrificing the hibernating Siberian chipmunks and Himalayan marmots, two great species in their own right, mid to late October is a tremendous time to visit Sichuan, as much of the province is ablaze with the most radiant autumnal colours and restricted areas of some reserves are opened for just a few days at this time of year, specifically to allow visitors to enjoy and photograph the glorious autumn landscapes. As will remain the case until he departs for university in late 2018, my son James would again provide the invaluable support that I had grown accustomed to and, having tried a UK based operator to disastrous effect on my previous visit, I had employed the services of a local guide for the duration of the tour. In truth he is more of a birding guide, with an outstanding reputation in that field, but he did work exceptionally hard on our behalf and knew most of the best mammal sites, both of which are fundamental requirements for any dedicated guide. Despite his obvious inexperience with certain animals, between

us we were able to find most of the species that I had hoped or expected, albeit with some unexpected assistance throughout the tour from another guide who we kept bumping into. Some poor weather aside, which I have more or less grown to expect in recent times, our only real problem involved trying to photograph wildlife at night, as our guide was also our driver and I was therefore responsible for 50% of the spotlighting from inside the vehicle, which makes it almost impossible to use a camera, effectively at least. James tried with his camcorder as well and did actually succeed on one memorable occasion with a wolf, but generally he was in exactly the same position in terms of being hindered by a spotlight and most of our nocturnal shots were taken on foot, which regrettably ensured that we were not able to photograph a few of the more nervous creatures. The tour itself started inauspiciously, or at least it appeared to, when our guide informed us, just before we flew, that it would not be possible to visit Labahe Nature Reserve immediately, as our hotel has been commandeered for a government function and would not be available. Instead we would spend a single night near

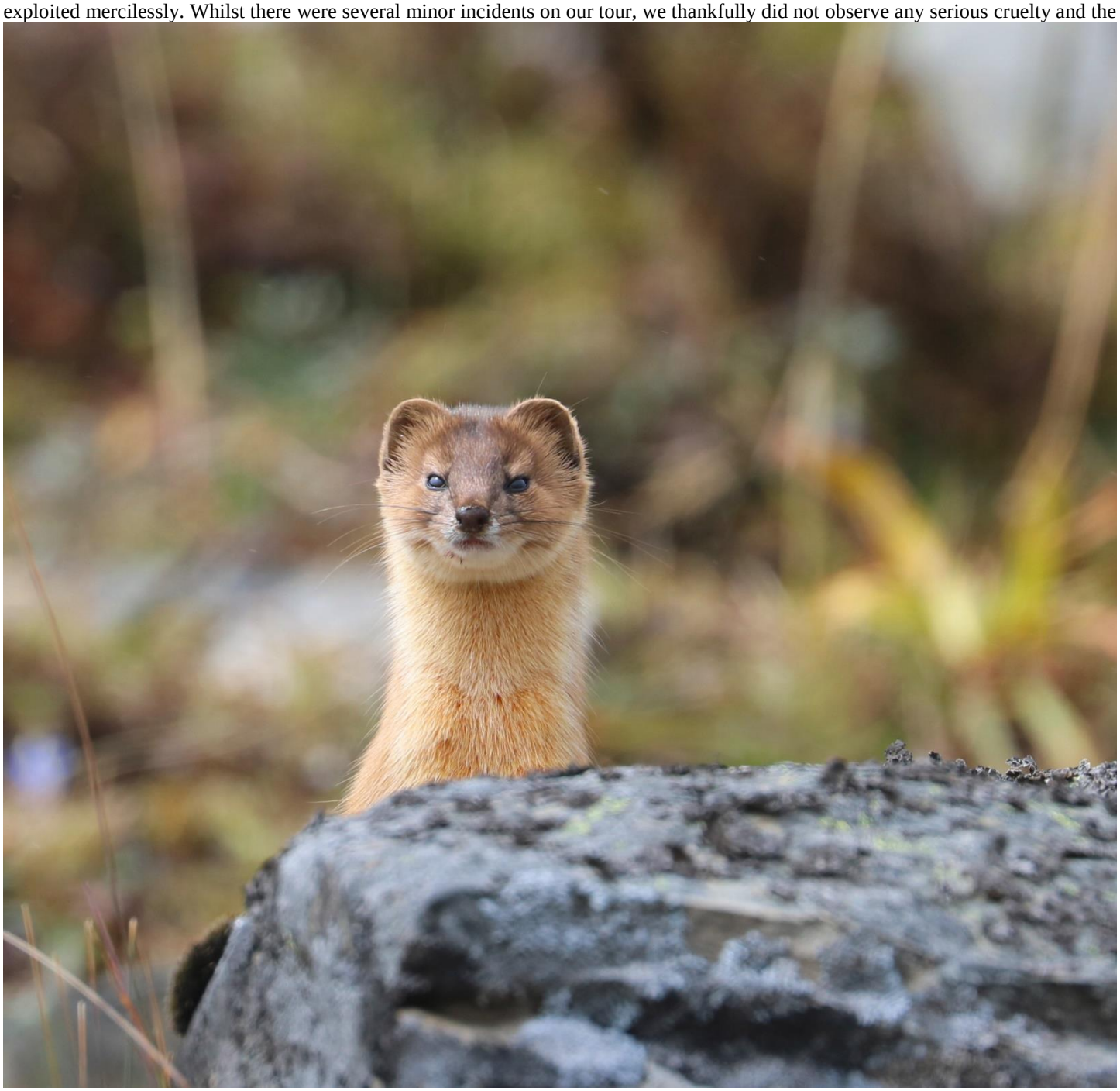
Longcanggou Forest Park before moving on to Labahe at some stage the next day. It was not a disaster by any means and having encountered both wild boar and a masked palm civet on our one night drive at Longcanggou, as well as a resplendent tawny fish owl, we were more than satisfied with the change of plan, necessary or otherwise. This satisfaction increased immeasurably the following morning when, despite some heavy rain, a red panda crossed the road in front of our vehicle and proceeded to feast on berries in a tree beside the road. Although it moved on fairly quickly and we lost sight of it for several minutes, James spotted it again feeding in another distant tree and we were able to spend the next half an hour or so watching the bedraggled creature climbing around and eating, all the time remembering to give thanks to the Communist Party of China for hijacking our accommodation at the very last moment. After the initial disruption, it had been the perfect start to the tour and we all moved on to our first major destination in the very best of spirits. Until it was closed in 2014 due to a major expansion and building programme, Labahe had established a well founded reputation as the premier red panda destination throughout its entire range from China in the east to Nepal in the west. Visitors would regularly encounter several pandas in a single day and when the reserve reopened in 2016, with new roads and improved facilities, the highly encouraging news was that pandas were still being seen. Less encouragingly, there was still quite a lot of construction work going on when we arrived, which certainly disturbed the general ambiance and no doubt the animals as well. In many cases the reserves in China are more public parks than actual wildlife reserves, with formal boardwalks, ornamental lakes and

often a great deal of concrete, usually at the side of the road to prevent the inevitable landslides. This is now the case at Labahe and they are even building a cable car system to carry tourists to the very top of one of the mountains that provide the park with such a spectacular backdrop. Undoubtedly the view will be amazing, but what effect the changes and increased visitor numbers will have on the wildlife and in particular the red pandas, remains to be seen. There will still be wild areas that tourists cannot reach and my guess is that, unless they become completely habituated to people, the pandas will retreat to some degree and become more difficult to observe at close quarters. Access hours are another real concern in terms of mammal tours, as you are not allowed to enter the majority of reserves in China at night and Labahe, for example, does not officially open until eight o'clock in the morning, which is obviously not ideal from a mammal viewing perspective. The strict access regulations are further compounded by the rules regarding private vehicles, which basically prohibit the use of private cars, either in entire reserves or certain sections of them. Instead visitors have to line up each morning and board shuttle buses that carry you to various points within each park, which again makes it almost impossible to observe all but the tamest of animals. We managed to avoid this ignominy at Labahe, where common sense thankfully prevailed, but later on in the trip there would be no escape and we would have to join the throngs of noisy tourists in crowded buses. We were still not able to access the reserve at night, but the security barriers were raised each morning at Labahe and we were able to enter several hours before the park was due to open and in our own vehicle, which gave us a great deal more flexibility to move around and search throughout the day. As it was, we saw very little in those dark early hours within the actual reserve and most of our nocturnal success came beyond the park each evening, where the surrounding cliffs and forest produced two species of flying squirrel, red and white giant and complex-toothed, as well as further masked palm civets and a number of sambar deer. We also encountered several rodents, which most wildlife enthusiasts automatically assume must be the species *confucian niviventer*, or the Chinese white-bellied rat in regular parlance, simply because they are so common across the region. However, this animal is virtually interchangeable with others from the niviventer genus, of which there are eight in China, and I would say is more or less impossible to identify in the field unless you were trapping and had one in hand. Even then it would be extremely difficult to classify to exact species level and although it is likely that the majority of our unidentified rodents were indeed white-bellied rats, I only eventually included them when observed at Foping, where I do not believe there is any overlap. Despite a rather worrying absence of red pandas during our first two days at Labahe, we did enjoy several nice views of Tibetan macaque, sambar deer and swinhoe's striped squirrel, as well as a distant herd of takin on the side of the mountain over which a cable car and dozens of tourists will soon dangle. Takin are fabulously distinctive creatures and whilst I was delighted to see them at such an early stage, I was very much looking forward to visiting Tangjiahe later on the tour, where I knew they were likely to be observed within a matter of metres. Meanwhile, a great deal of hard work and our very best efforts notwithstanding, the search for a red panda went on and by the third day I was becoming distinctly concerned. I could certainly devote more time at Labahe if necessary and had intentionally designed a flexible itinerary that

would provide us with an element of freedom to dictate our own pace and could cope with a reasonable amount of disruption. That said, we were now searching almost entirely for one species, which is never ideal for this type of general research trip, particularly when an animal has the reputation of being reasonably easy to observe. Of course, nothing is ever guaranteed when it comes to genuinely wild creatures and we were about to receive yet another object lesson on the unfathomable vagaries of wildlife viewing. Fortuitously, it was very much going to work in our favour on this rare occasion, not only at Labahe, but throughout the tour. The breakthrough came when we bumped into a British guide who lives in China and has organised both bird and wildlife tours there for many years, always with great success and entirely favourable reviews. I actually tried to hire him at one stage, but he was unavailable for my dates and it was an incredible stroke of good fortune to finally meet him at Labahe, especially as he had just left a red panda feeding in a tree and very kindly described exactly where we could find it. Thanks to his generosity, as well as no little skill in finding the animal in the first place, we spent an enchanting half an hour or so watching an extraordinarily beautiful panda surrounded by bright red berries in the most idyllic afternoon sunlight. It really was an absorbing experience and well before the end of our tour, I would be enormously grateful to the same guide on more than one occasion. As for the vagaries that I touched upon, well, it almost goes without saying that, having just left the dazzling little panda that had been gifted to us, we immediately found one ourselves. Our

rather belated and extremely welcome dual triumph signalled the end of our stay at Labahe and we departed that same afternoon for the contrasting habitats of the Wolong National Nature Reserve, which sits at an altitude of approximately 1,500 metres, and Balang Shan, a mountain in the Qionglai range with a pass that we would reach at around 4,500 metres. We were actually very near the epicentre of the devastating 2008 earthquake that measured 7.9 on the Richter scale and claimed the lives of up to 90,000 people, thousands of whom were never found. Many of the dead where children, as tragically the earthquake struck in the afternoon and huge numbers of crowded and poorly constructed schools and colleges were demolished with an appalling loss of life. Millions of homes were destroyed and billions of dollars of damage caused in a horrific natural phenomenon that could be felt as far away as Shanghai to the east and Russia and Pakistan to the north and west respectively. At one point we passed the colossal Zipingpu Dam and reservoir, which was completed and filled two years before the earthquake struck and which some credible and respected scientists believe could even have been responsible for it. I obviously have no idea whether this was the case or not, but it is certainly true that an almost incalculable number of massive construction projects, from a vast network of roads, bridges and tunnels to gigantic dams, mines, power plants and skyscrapers, have been undertaken all over China with little or no concern for the environmental impact. Entire landscapes have been obliterated or submerged in places and billions of dollars have been spent on remedial work, as if the catastrophic damage can be repaired with a concrete and steel Elastoplast. To be fair, this form of ecological vandalism is not limited to China by any means, but the scale of the problem here is simply staggering and there appears to be no empathy with or even understanding of nature, just an innate determination, however ingenious, to defeat or at least tame it. In the same way that their traditional medicine industry claims the lives of more wild creatures on earth than any other single cause, China currently produces more carbon dioxide emissions than any other nation and this total disregard for the environmental issues that affect us all, is causing severe and irrevocable harm in every corner of the globe. Whilst they have poured millions into saving their national animal the giant panda from extinction, their insatiable demand for the world's dwindling resources, including millions of wild animals that are killed each year for absolutely no reason other than ignorance and superstition, will certainly see species disappear elsewhere on the planet and the wildlife conservation laws that the Chinese government announced in January 2016 did not inspire any hope of change. The new draft laws added the term *'regulating the utilization of wildlife'* to existing conservation laws, which basically permits the continued use of wildlife in Chinese medicine and for commercial benefit and approves the existence of tiger farms, where tigers are killed for their skin and bones, bear farms, where thousands of bears are kept in appalling conditions and 'milked' for their bile, and fur farms, where a variety of animals have no rights at all and have been known to be skinned alive. Although a decline in the demand for shark fin soup and the recent ban on the sale of ivory are small steps in the right direction, they do not go anywhere near far enough to protect the millions of pangolins, jaguars, snakes, seahorses, rhinoceros, sharks, turtles and innumerable other species that are poached from fragile ecosystems all over the world, more or less at the behest of a single nation. Millions more are killed within China each year for food, including huge flocks of endemic and migratory birds, and pollution has reached such extreme levels, that the water is not safe to drink in many areas and marine life is being contaminated and killed by the toxic algal blooms, commonly known as 'red tides', that are now a regular feature along China's coastlines. From an entirely dispassionate perspective, I should add that some of these issues are now being addressed. A ban on domestic logging has witnessed a significant increase in forest cover across large areas, although in reality this has probably pushed the problem elsewhere, as China's timber imports have increased massively during the period that they have been preserving and regenerating their own forests and they are still

overwhelmingly the largest consumer of wood on earth. Air quality has also improved since the nadir of 2013, when pollution was measured at more than 30 times the safe or permitted level by the World Health Organisation and residents of Beijing were basically told to stay indoors to avoid respiratory harm. However, for all of these and other undoubted improvements, it is difficult to remain objective when you have personally witnessed the environmental destruction that China is responsible for all over the world. The majority of the population display an inherent and indisputable lack of compassion for wildlife in general, which is still very much viewed as an inexhaustible resource that exists purely for their benefit. No consideration is given in terms of sustainability or animal welfare, which barely even exists as a concept, and almost no distinction is made between wild and domestic animals, all of which are exploited mercilessly. Whilst there were several minor incidents on our tour, we thankfully did not observe any serious cruelty and the



only real problem at Wolong, the inclement weather aside, was the busy road that we had to utilise in order to search the lower forested sections of the reserve and the montane areas leading up to the Balang Shan pass, which was fairly deserted and was as far as we chose to explore. Before we reached the actual pass, the higher elevations provided us with two really superb altai weasel sightings, both animals approached to within a few metres in response to my squeaking, as well as several Glover's pikas, all of which were observed between 4,100 metres and 4,200 metres. There would be no blue sheep, however, as the fog was too dense to scan the mountainsides on which they occur and a blizzard did little to improve the situation. The same fog also deprived us of anything more than a shrouded view of Mount Siguniang, or the Four Maidens or Sisters as it is locally known. As the name suggests, Siguniang comprises four main peaks and the highest, at 6,249 metres, is the second tallest in Sichuan after Mount Gongga, which stands at 7,555 metres and has the distinction of being the most easterly 7,000 metre summit in the world. The forest on the lower mountain slopes were likely to be far more productive in terms of mammals, but the issue at Wolong is that you are only exploring the reserve along the busy road that cuts directly through it and as such the number and type of animals you are likely to encounter is fairly limited. Ungulates are usually the most commonly observed creatures on steep hillsides and the irregularly forested slopes at Wolong proved to be no exception. In addition to a few distant sambar deer, we encountered our first Chinese serows and Chinese gorals of the trip and our only major surprise here was another red panda, which on this occasion was spotted at night. Given its size and the fact that it was fairly high in a tree, I thought at first that it was probably another palm civet and we were all as amazed as we were delighted when my light picked up that first splash of red and we realised it was actually a fourth panda. We had now seen these

endearing and often elusive animals at three consecutive locations and we spent about ten minutes watching this one across the river before moving on to avoid disturbing it too much with our light. We had actually been looking for leopard cats, which are encountered reasonably regularly at Wolong, but having discovered two dead ones on what is clearly a treacherous road, and taking the poor weather into account, I made the decision that we would leave and begin searching for other species in a more natural setting. The reserve itself of course deserves far more commitment and a much longer stay and I am currently investigating the possibility of returning to access a few of the tantalising side valleys where both giant pandas and snow leopards dwell. Meanwhile, we staggered the transfer north to our next main destination to enable us to make a few stops en route, including an overnight stay at the tiny town of Shuama Lukou, which I am not sure even exists on any maps. Our guide wanted to try a largely disused road that snaked up through a promising patch of forest to a high mountain pass, where we would have to turn and retrace our path down. It turned out to be a very good call on his part, as we quickly encountered the first of several woolly hares and, towards the end of the climb, an Asian badger, which looked absolutely magnificent against a powdery carpet of freshly fallen snow. We had good reason to be grateful to him on a couple of occasions the next day as well, when he suggested specific sites for red deer, now known as wapiti in Asia and North America, and Siberian roe deer, both of which turned out to be spot on. In all we observed two stags and five does across three red deer sightings at the beginning of the day and several hours later, one male and three female roe deer a few kilometres before we reached Ruoergai, our base for at least the next five days. Sitting on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau at between 3,300 and 3,600 metres, the Ruoergai grasslands and marshes are home to an almost entirely different set of mammals and we would not see either of these deer again. Other ungulates would replace them, but we were here mainly to search for small carnivores and in particular two species of cat, pallas's cat and Chinese mountain cat, both of which the region is renowned for. We had a number of well known and generally reliable sites to try, including one that would take us to the border of neighbouring Qinghai Province, as well as a forested area at nearby Baixi. Sadly, tragically perhaps in the long-term, much of Ruoergai has been severely compromised by a massive increase in yak and sheep herders and their innumerable livestock are clearly disturbing the resident wildlife and damaging the natural habitat. The huge proliferation of domestic animals is further compounded by the new high speed railway being built directly through this important stretch of prairie and we arrived to discover that our main Chinese mountain cat site, an old abandoned quarry, had been totally ruined by a preliminary group of workers completing a survey for the railway. I was to later discover that they had actually set up camp just three weeks before our arrival, but three weeks or three days, I took one look at their vehicles, generators and tents, which had been erected just a few metres from where we knew at least one animal lived, and knew instantly that we could forget seeing Chinese mountain cats here. A more distant section towards the back of the large quarry did still appear to be reasonably promising, but our guide showed his inexperience here to some degree and made the fundamental error of continually returning to a site where he had previously encountered an animal. This really is a classic mistake that so many guides who are not used to working with mammals make and we wasted a great deal of time endlessly searching an area that was clearly never going to be productive. Although I mentioned this on several occasions and should have stopped it sooner, it is essential that you work as a team on tour and there is no point having a guide with expert local knowledge, if you are going to ignore their advice. I always try to listen to my guides and his previous suggestions had of course been sound. However, his determination to persist with this one site, turned out to be an obvious blind spot and it would have been better if I had

recognised it slightly earlier or had at least acted upon my initial instinct, which I generally tend to trust and rely on after so many years in the field. Our cause was further hampered by a great deal of rain and snow and at times it was so cold that it became difficult to hang out of the moving vehicle with spotlights. In some cases the rain was so heavy that we either had to suspend spotlighting sessions or were only able to use a light from the one side of the vehicle protected from the driving elements. Similarly, we had to pull over during an especially severe blizzard at night, as we could not see to drive and just had to wait it out. Fortunately it was a fairly

brief flurry and we did our very best to keep going through all but the very worst of the weather. Whilst most of our drives sadly involved the same rather depressing spectacle of literally thousands of domestic animals, Ruoergai remains a beautiful region and it is still possible to reach and explore undisturbed areas, particularly on foot. Largely due to the need to cover as much ground as possible and the very open landscape, across which it is comparatively easy to spot animals at distance, we did not do as much walking as usual and most of our hikes were purely reconnaissance missions for our efforts at night, when we did spend far more time searching on foot. That kept us warm at least and also produced several spectacular sightings, including incredibly close encounters with two pallas's cats. The first we had to climb a steep hillside to observe clearly, having picked up its eyeshine from below and the second was at the very back of the disused quarry that I have already mentioned. The site was as promising as we had imagined it might be and I was able to approach an extraordinarily calm animal to within a few metres to take the photograph that appears at the very top of this report. That second encounter would remain one of the highlights of the trip and Ruoergai would eventually provide a number of almost equally memorable moments, despite the various disturbances and poor climatic conditions. Two more Asian badgers were observed in different areas and we had two prolonged views on different nights of probably the same fantastic steppe polecat, which kept running towards our spotlight in that typical slinky mustelid fashion before abruptly changing its mind and continuing on its way. Tibetan and red foxes were as common as I had hoped, although on this occasion I was not able to devote sufficient time to getting even moderately close for photographs, and our wolf sightings involved one splendid creature at night that James was able to film as I held the light and another lone animal in the early morning, which was running through the snow and disappeared over a high ridge. As chasing wolves has always been a favourite pastime of mine, one that my son has obviously inherited, we set out to follow and after a fairly gruelling ascent, finally reached the peak that the wolf vanished beyond with only a minimum of effort. I would love to

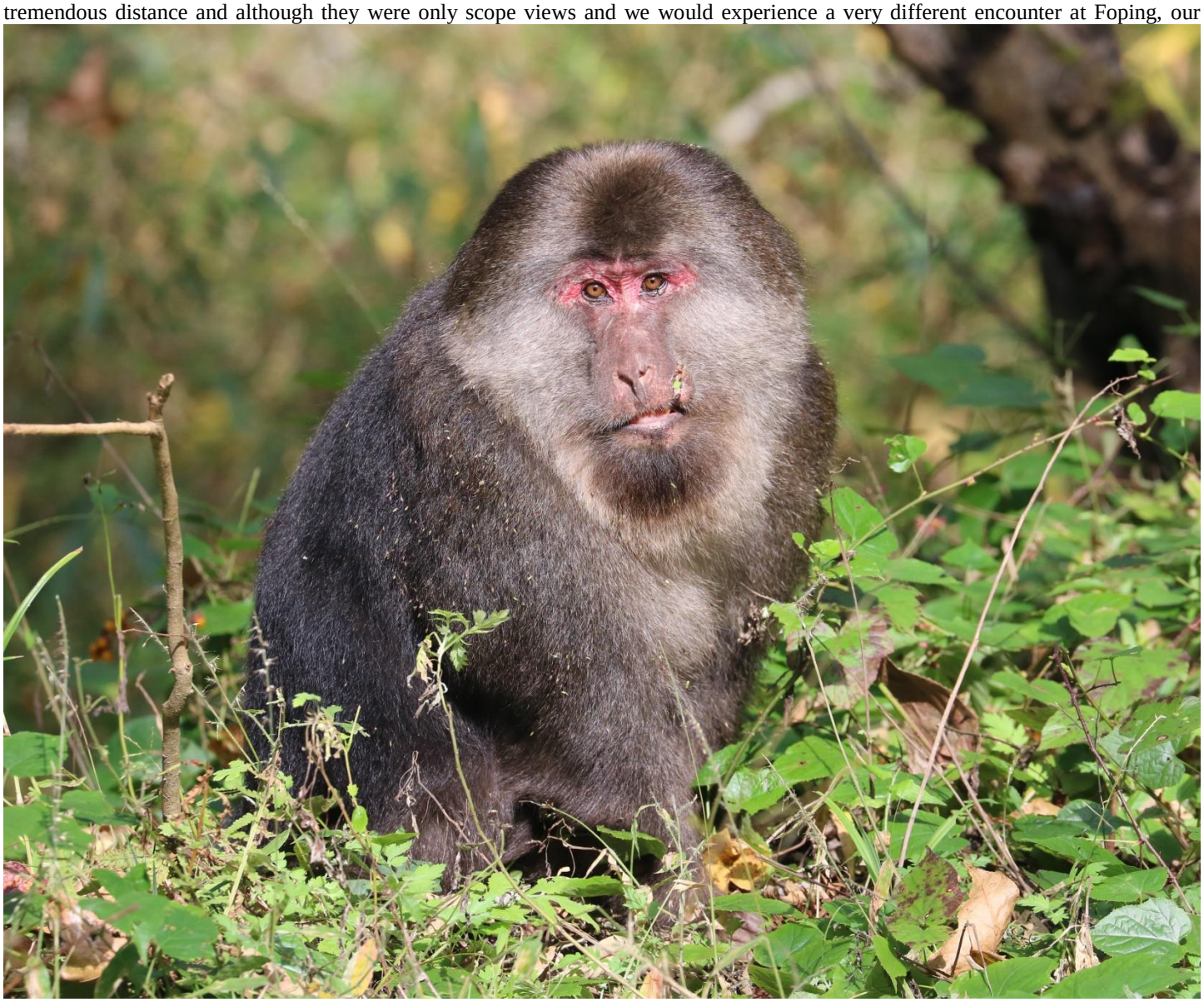
say that our spontaneous morning exercise was greeted with the most amazing and intimate encounter, but the wolf was long gone and we were left with a series of unblemished tracks in the snow and a few bemused vultures. Woolly hares were very common and the plateau pikas could certainly be described as abundant, which was good news for the host of hungry raptors on display. In addition to the various falcons, kestrels and kites, steppe eagles, Himalayan Griffons, upland and Himalayan buzzards, lammergeyers and little owls were all present, and, now that the Himalayan marmots were safely tucked up in their deep burrows for winter, they all had their eyes on the understandably nervous pikas. Large mammals were far less common and over a full five days in the grasslands, our

ungulate sightings consisted of three female Tibetan gazelles during a night drive and three daylight views of a combined total of eight sika deer. Not a great deal to show for so much effort and our time in the forest at Baixi was similarly slow, although it did look wonderful in the snow and was an exciting habitat to explore. Within the forest itself wild boar and red foxes were observed against an idyllic backdrop of snow covered pines and on the edge of the trees common and blue-eared pheasants and flocks of Chinese grouse added a splash of colour to an atmospheric winterscape that always promised slightly more than it would ever deliver. With perhaps a tinge of desperation, I even went to the trouble of excavating a few Chinese zokor in the neighbouring fields, which is not quite as bad as it sounds and involves scraping away a layer of topsoil from around their burrows and waiting patiently for the zokor, a small mole-like rodent, to pop up and make the necessary hasty repairs. We saw three of these absurdly sweet creatures in this manner, but were not as fortunate with whatever species of pika can be found at Baixi, as there is currently some debate as to whether Gansu or moupin pikas occur there. I had seen both previously, but would be denied the opportunity to add my opinion to the issue, initially due to a herd of domestic yak, which proceeded to trample the area we were searching, and ultimately because of another heavy blizzard, which would stop us looking for anything, let alone a handful of tiny lagomorphs that had far more sense than us in such extreme weather. Despite a conspicuous lack of success at Baixi, where we also missed a Siberian weasel by a matter of minutes, the surrounding grasslands at Ruoergai had been productive, particularly in terms of small predators. However, as had been the case with the red panda at Labahe, we were still missing the main animal that we had travelled all the way to Ruoergai to see and this time there was no helpful British guide to turn up and save the day. Until that is, a helpful British guide turned up and did actually save the day…again. We could barely believe it when we bumped into exactly the same guide from Labahe

and he told us where his group had been watching a Chinese mountain cat the previous evening, as well as the fact that the quarry we had continually returned to was now bereft of life. I think that even our local guide was beginning to understand this, but it was good to get confirmation for future reference and, far more significantly, specific details of an actual site where a mountain cat had been seen, as we had searched extensively without success and had not met anyone who had seen this animal for several days. Not surprisingly, we headed more or less straight there and I insisted that our vigil begin in daylight, just to ensure that we did not miss anything. Although there were a few rocky hills and small disused quarries further along a narrow dirt track, that was only wide enough for one vehicle in places, the cat had been observed near the beginning of the trail in the typical grassland that covered most of the area. Having waited almost four hours, when our moment came it was all rather confused, as James and I spotted different animals almost simultaneously and mine appeared to be a cat and his a fox. Given their distinctive appearance, I could tell immediately that it was not a pallas's cat and I was fairly convinced that I was watching a mountain cat until the fox that James was following began walking directly towards my cat. Initially I could not understand why the two animals appeared to be so comfortable with each other, until I confirmed in my binoculars that my creature was definitely a mountain cat and it suddenly dawned on me that James was almost certainly watching one as well. His mysterious beast had been further away in tall grass and when the two animals finally converged, it was clear that they were both mountain cats and that we owed our benevolent friend a huge debt. Having greeted each other, the second of the cats disappeared into the night and we spent almost an hour following the one that I had spotted as it strolled parallel to the road about 30 metres deep. I was careful to avoid holding the light on it the entire time and would instead illuminate an area just behind or beyond, purely to give us sufficient light to look for an opportunity for at least a reasonable photograph. It sadly never happened and the best I could manage with so much grass cover, was a couple of grainy reference shots, as my flash is not hugely effectual at that distance and in those conditions. They do not do any justice to such a beautiful cat and ultimately we just enjoyed the encounter for what it was, a special moment with a rare and remarkable animal that we had made a great deal of effort to see. Neither of us were overly concerned about the lack of pictures and although we were undoubtedly ecstatic to finally encounter such a key species, I believe that the overriding emotion was intense relief. If I am honest, I also expected additional chances over our final two nights, as animals are invariably easier to find once the pressure of that first sighting has been removed and now we had the added advantage of knowing where to look. It never occurred to me that this single encounter, however exceptional, would be our last and whilst I was surprised and disappointed when this did actually prove to be the case, with hindsight it makes me smile, as I should know better than most that you never take wildlife for granted and that when you do, you can end up looking and feeling decidedly foolish. We were laughing about a rat in our hotel room as we prepared to leave, but as we were driving away a convoy of railway construction trucks were rolling in and the smiles quickly faded. I can only hope that Ruoergai survives the upheaval and that the animals endure, as they always seem to have to. Our next destination would be Tangjiahe Nature Reserve and the drive between Ruoergai and Tangjiahe is one of the great scenic journeys, especially at this magnificent time of year when the towering mountains and lush valleys are overwhelmed in a sea of burning autumnal colour. Burnished reds and golds embellish the white foaming rivers and when the sun shines, as it did on us both figuratively and literally, a picturesque landscape is transformed into something truly magical. The journey takes you through the exquisite Huanglong Scenic and Historic Interest Area, which is an appallingly inappropriate name for such an astoundingly beautiful reserve and one day I will return to explore Huanglong, as well as the staggering pools, lakes and waterfalls of nearby Jiuzhaigou. Both are UNESCO World Heritage Sites and either would be ideal for a peaceful short break between mammal or birding destinations on a busy wildlife tour. Tangjiahe is similarly gorgeous at this time of year and additional sections of the reserve had been opened to

allow visitors to explore an array of stunning landscapes that are generally inaccessible. The park was consequently busy and although this did not inconvenience us too much during the day, when it was easy to escape the crowds on long remote hikes, it did become an issue at night and on one occasion, while we were spotlighting, guests were still arriving at the hotel within the park at 1am. You are only allowed to use your own vehicle on this main road from the entrance up to the hotel and the two other routes have to be accessed on the tourist buses that carry the masses up to the higher sections of the reserve. There is no alternative to these boisterous bus journeys, but you are then free to walk away from the main tourist sites and search some breathtaking scenery more or less undisturbed, which is exactly what we did for the majority of our visit. During our six full days at Tangjiahe, we covered well over 100 kilometres on foot, including multiple circuits of the surprisingly productive forest trail overlooking the river and our hotel. The drive in aside, which passed without incident, we actually started our stay there and within one slow preliminary sweep, had encountered reeves' muntjac, the first of at least seven northern hog badgers, several takin, two Chinese serow and an unidentified flying squirrel, which could have been a grey-headed flying squirrel. It was quite a haul for a single walk and very much set the tone for an enthralling destination that delivered a succession of immensely rewarding sightings against a series of sublime backdrops. We would positively identify seventeen mammal species at Tangjiahe, ten of which were new for the trip, and although that is not a massive number, not in comparison to an African game reserve for example, there were some marvellous animals on display and I was particularly pleased with our takin encounters. Most were observed at the edge of the forest, but these uniquely distinctive goat-antelopes could pop up anywhere and I even found one feeding serenely in an ornamental flowerbed at our hotel. Perhaps not surprisingly considering their unusual appearance, takin are the only species within their genus and their closest relatives are the similarly remarkable muskox. There are around 35 goat-antelopes in the subfamily caprinae and we would encounter two more on this trip in the form of Chinese serow and Chinese goral, both of which were seen well and reasonably frequently at Tangjiahe. The same could be said of the Tibetan macaque and although we did not encounter a single rhesus macaque, which are often spotted at this reserve and are probably the single most common primate across their range, their Tibetan cousins were observed in large groups for

extended periods. They were sadly fed just before the entrance to Labahe, with one Chinese lady getting out of her car and throwing unopened bags of popcorn and potato chips to the monkeys for her children to watch and laugh at. This no doubt occurs at Tangjiahe as well, but thankfully we did not come across it and instead enjoyed several prolonged and perfectly natural encounters with a number of calm family groups. We were guaranteed a second primate when we moved on to Foping, where the golden snub-nosed monkey is more or less impossible to miss, and there was a slight chance that we could see the same species here as well. I did not really expect to until we yet again bumped into the by now legendary British guide who had already helped us with two of the main mammals of the tour and was now watching a group of snub-nosed monkeys with his group. He had spotted them scanning at tremendous distance and although they were only scope views and we would experience a very different encounter at Foping, our



subsequent conversation proved to be far more significant than the actual sighting. I mentioned that having already found two of the three badgers that occur in Sichuan, the Asian and northern hog varieties, we were now spending our nights searching for a small-toothed ferret badger, which of course this guide automatically knew where to find. We were given a specific stretch of road to try that evening and, quite unbelievably, as we arrived and were parking, an adorable little ferret badger came snuffling out of the undergrowth and onto the road. The timing was simply extraordinary, as was the fact that lightning had now struck not twice, but on three occasions and that this entirely independent guide had provided us with three of the most important events of the entire tour, our best red panda and our only Chinese mountain cat and ferret badger. It goes without saying that I will endeavour to procure his inestimable services on my next visit and in all we saw this supremely sweet ferret badger three times, without me ever managing to get a really nice shot. As I have already mentioned, photography was virtually impossible from the vehicle and we therefore attempted to spend at least part of each night on foot. This included an idea that I had to explore an area away from the often busy main road, which was severely compromised at times and where we had been disturbed more than once. Although private vehicles were not allowed within the remaining two sections of the reserve, and the last shuttle buses returned well before dusk, one of the roads looked so promising that we decided to take a bus up to the top and spotlight the ten kilometres back on foot. We had already completed the same walk during daylight without meeting another living soul and at night the road would have even more potential, when it was barely used. Nocturnal mammals would have no fear of the constant daily relay of tourist coaches and we were consequently hoping to find the last two species we had been actively searching for at night, a leopard cat and a Malayan porcupine. There was also the outside possibility of some exceedingly rare creatures, including Asiatic black bear, forest musk deer and maybe even an Asiatic golden cat, which have been recorded on camera traps here, but are almost never seen. We would not include our Chinese guide or ask him to assist in any way, as we assumed what we were doing may well be prohibited and did not want to cause him any problems. Instead, the plan was for the two of us to wait out of sight at the top until dark and then spotlight down over the course of several hours, each taking one side of the road. Having spent several evenings traversing the same somewhat repetitive stretch of road, we were both extremely eager to try somewhere new and within literally three minutes I had picked up the eyeshine of what turned out to be a leopard cat. Twenty minutes later James spotted another before it was my turn to detect a pair of Malayan porcupines at the edge

of the river, which we sat down and watched ambling about happily for about half an hour. These were just the initial highlights and much of our time was spent identifying the reflections of countless masked palm civets, serows, gorals and a hog badger. Having encountered a second pair of porcupines before we had even reached the halfway stage, we knew that we were on course for one of our greatest ever night walks and were beginning to believe that anything was possible on a road that may not have been explored at night for years. At which point disaster struck and some officials returning from dinner in the local town passed us and insisted that we had to go back, but not on foot as we tried to persuade them would be fine from our perspective, but on a bus that they called out to collect us. I cannot remember the last time I felt as disappointed on tour, as the evening had been the most exciting of the trip and although I asked if we could return on a subsequent evening for even a short walk, our guide, who the park officials had requested to see, was told in very clear terms to keep us away. I was glad at least that we had not involved him in the overall strategy and we had still been incredibly successful, but at the same time, James and I were certain that the evening was not done and that we had been on

the verge of something very special. We will never know of course and in many ways that is the real essence and joy of wildlife viewing, as you are always on the verge of something special and the very next day James pointed out the first of the three yellow-throated martens we would see at Tangjiahe. Having hoped to see a marten throughout our stay, this was no mere consolation and we were able to follow the dynamic little predator down the river, as it bounced and leapt along the opposite bank. This was the last new carnivore that we were destined to see and took the trip total to a highly impressive fourteen, although that figure has to be treated with an element of caution when you consider that the red panda is classified as a carnivore, a creature so sensitive, it cannot sleep unless it has a nice comfy bed of moss. I am not really sure that the ferret badger could be considered a raging meat eater either,

unless earthworms count, and the least said about the palm civets the better, an animal that has spent millions of years perfecting a defensive strategy that involves freezing on the spot and looking immeasurably sweet. In fact, when you examine the entire list, with perhaps one exception, as wolves really do appear to have got the hang of this hunting lark, the so called predators of Sichuan are probably the most hopeless and least threatening carnivores you are ever likely to encounter. An Asiatic black bear would have at least added a semblance of menace, and even they largely subsist on fruit, nuts and insects, but it was not to be this time and Tangjiahe instead provided us with first views of tufted deer, as well as a couple of flying squirrels, which were later identified for me as the grey-headed variety. Unfortunately, from an aesthetic perspective at least, the two tufted deer we came across were both female and although they do possess the forehead tufts for which they are named, we were not able to observe the characteristic short antler or familiar fangs of the males. Similarly, and whilst it feels awful to write this about any creature, most of the golden pheasants encountered were dowdy females and our one stunning male flapped back into the dense forest as instantaneously and inelegantly as only a pheasant can. Several handsome tawny fish owls were far more cooperative and on the transfer to Foping we made a detour to look for the Asian crested ibis, which was believed to be extinct in the wild until seven birds were discovered in Shaanxi Province in 1981 and the Chinese used them to launch a highly successful captive breeding programme. There are now several small populations in Shaanxi and reintroductions have commenced in both Japan and South Korea. We were delighted to discover three birds in all at

two different sites, before we had to move on for a brief stay of just one night at our final wildlife destination, Foping Nature Reserve in the Qinling Mountains. Although Foping was created in 1978 as a giant panda reserve, the wild pandas are again inaccessible and we were here to visit a group of golden snub-nosed monkeys, which I had not realised were fed in the forest each morning. Technically they are still wild and the quantity of food is not sufficient to sustain even a small number, but they were still completely habituated to our presence and several males were moving confidently between photographers and looking for bags with the possibility of an additional and perhaps more appetising free meal. Whilst I was ultimately pleased to have viewed the authentically wild troop at Tangjiahe, albeit at great distance, it was still an interesting experience and I chose to sit slightly further back in order to observe the group dynamic and social behaviour, which was natural for the most part, as many of the monkeys do not approach the main feeding area, at least not while visitors are there. On the way out we stopped to spend a short period with a captive giant panda, that's enclosure is part of a large educational exhibition highlighting the complex ecology of this iconic animal and the conservation efforts that have been implemented to save it from certain extinction. Although they are few and far between, certainly on a worldwide basis, the giant panda is a Chinese wildlife success story and in 2016 its global status was downgraded from endangered to vulnerable according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature or the IUCN for short. Wild panda numbers have doubled to more than 2,000 in recent years and instead of believing that their task had been accomplished, Chinese officials acknowledged the IUCN decision by announcing that they had no plans to downscale their conservation efforts and that larger reserves are planned to ensure the continued existence of their national animal. Funds have already been put in place for a new five million acre mega reserve in southwest Sichuan, which is significantly larger than the Serengeti in Tanzania and more than twice the size of Yellowstone in the United States. The park will open in 2023 and will provide pandas with a vast area of intact habitat that they can roam and mate within, without roads or villages or human disturbance of any kind. Another carnivore that can barely be described as such, giant pandas are of course a species of bear, but their diet consists almost entirely of bamboo, which makes them particularly susceptible to habitat destruction in the form of deforestation and illegal logging. Whilst bamboo is actually a grass, it grows in the shade of large trees and when old growth forests are cleared for livestock or agricultural

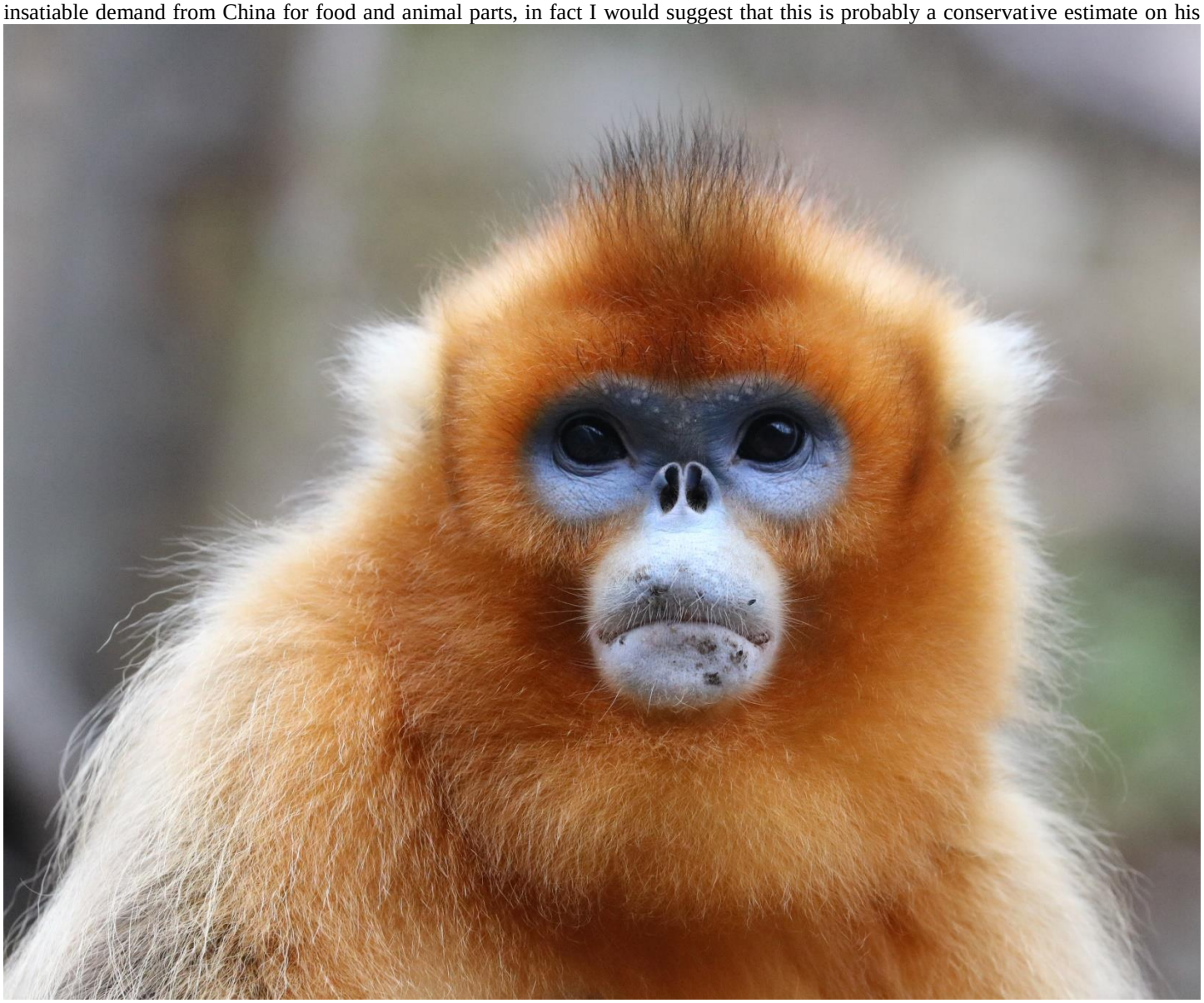
purposes, so the bamboo is lost as well. However, popular to contrary belief, pandas have high birth rates in the wild and the myth that they find it difficult to breed, and were therefore somehow to blame for their own impending extinction, was based purely on captive animals and our lack of knowledge regarding how to care for them. Whilst I generally agree with many of the forthright views held by the British naturalist Chris Packham, particularly those regarding the spiralling global population and the urgent need to address that critical issue, his assertion that pandas are not worth attempting to save because they are *'a species that of its own accord has gone down an evolutionary cul-de-sac'*, is about as inane an argument as I have heard from someone with a genuine knowledge

and supposed understanding of wildlife. Like almost every living organism, pandas have adapted to their habitat and the environment in which they have been squeezed and his ill-advised comment is a bit like suggesting that a salmon has gone down an evolutionary cul-de-sac because it chooses to breed in freshwater. Packham insists, as do others, that it does not make economic sense to spend millions of dollars attempting to save just one species, when that same money could be used to protect hundreds. Whilst that may appear to make sense, it is actually the type of nonsensical rhetoric that I would expect to hear from a Republican senator defending the slaughter of bears and wolves in Alaska, not from someone like Chris Packham, who should know far better. Ignoring the fact that it is simply wrong in the purest sense of the word, letting any species just slip away delivers entirely the wrong message to the governments, organisations and individuals who have no interest in conservation or in protecting the environment for future generations. We are suddenly saying that anyone has the right to pick and choose what lives and dies and, if in the famous words of Baba Dioum, *'we will conserve only what we love'*, what chance do other less attractive or endearing animals have if we let such an iconic and internationally recognised species succumb? For those that are not aware, Baba Dioum was a forestry engineer in the West African country of Senegal and in 1968 he gave a speech to the IUCN in Delhi that so memorably proclaimed:

'In the end we will conserve only what we love;
we will love only what we understand;
and we will understand only what we are taught.'

More significantly in many ways than even the moral argument, in practical terms the panda has been reprieved, not by the vast sums that scientists have admittedly spent on the controversial captive breeding programme, which has had absolutely no effect on wild populations, but by preserving habitat and regenerating massive areas of forest. In this respect giant pandas should be viewed as an archetypical umbrella species, ultimately responsible for the long-term protection of entire ecosystems and the thousands of sympatric

species they support. Whilst Packham is extremely critical of what he refers to as *'single species conservation'*, I would argue that in the stark reality of wildlife conservation, there is actually no such thing and that it is almost impossible to successfully protect one animal without assisting others and the environments in which they coexist. Panda reserves, where around 70% of the remaining wild pandas occur, have doubled in size during the last 30 years or so and, as I have already touched upon, forest cover continues to increase substantially across many regions. In early 2018 it was announced that a further six and a half million hectares would be planted that year, an area approximately the size of Ireland or more than twice the size of Belgium, and that by 2020 23% of the entire country would once again be swathed in forest. I still agree with Chris Packham's view that 80% of all wildlife crime is fuelled by the insatiable demand from China for food and animal parts, in fact I would suggest that this is probably a conservative estimate on his



part, but the two issues are not mutually inclusive and any conservation triumphs should be celebrated as such. They should not be permitted to mask or exonerate the inexcusable global catastrophe caused by the Chinese, or by any other people for that matter, but nor should they be dismissed and the day that we give up on an entire species, as Chris Packham would counsel, is probably the day we should give up on ourselves. The threat of long prison sentences or even the death penalty, have more or less eradicated panda poaching today, but many people might not be aware that brothers Kermit and Theodore Roosevelt, the sons of the former U.S. President Theodore 'Teddy' Roosevelt, had the 'honour' of being the first foreigners to shoot a panda, an old male apparently. They both claimed the kill after firing simultaneously and were so thrilled with their exploits that they wrote a blow by blow account in the book *'Trailing the Giant Panda'*. It certainly must have taken a great deal of courage and skill for two Americans with two guns and two bullets to produce one dead panda. Having already crossed into Shaanxi Province to reach Foping, I was never going to miss the opportunity of driving just a few kilometres further in order to visit the momentous ancient site of the Terracotta Army near Xi'an and this would be a fitting final destination for anyone with an interest in history or Chinese culture. Discovered in 1974 by farmers digging a well, the army largely consists of some 8,000 clay-fired warriors and hundreds of horses and chariots created to stand guard as immortal sentinels over their dead emperor, Qin Shi Huang, founder of the Qin dynasty. Construction was believed to have begun just after Ying Zheng, as he was then known, was crowned king of the state of Qin at age thirteen following his father's death in 247BC. As leader of one of several warring states, Zheng mounted a series of military campaigns against his rivals and by 221BC had subjugated every kingdom to become the first emperor of a unified China and take the name Qin Shi Huang, which literally translates as 'First Emperor of Qin'. Opened to the public in 1979 and declared a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site in 1987, the three main pits of eternal warriors discovered so far form just a small part of what is a huge burial complex and the UNESCO site is officially known as the Mausoleum of the First Qin Emperor. The vast majority of the extensive site has not yet been excavated, including the sealed emperors tomb, and writing around one hundred years later, the Han dynasty historian Sima Qian described a lavish subterranean city with palaces, court buildings, heavenly constellations, mechanical rivers and numerous deadly booby traps designed to ensure that any grave robbers would share the afterlife with the emperor. Peripheral excavation has subsequently revealed substantial outer and inner walls protecting the main mausoleum, as well as dozens of additional pits housing the most amazing and

precious artefacts. Some of the treasures include two exceptional bronze carriages with teams of exquisite horses, intricately carved stone armour, elaborate bronze waterbirds, terracotta acrobats and officials in civilian dress, as well as musical instruments and thousands of real weapons, which were fashioned specifically for use in the next world and had never been raised in anger. Other finds have been less salubrious, although just as fascinating, as large numbers of skeletons have also been exposed, some of which have clearly been mutilated. According to Sima Qian, at his death in 210BC the concubines of the emperor without sons were killed and buried with him at the command of his son and successor Qin Er Shi and the workers and craftsmen who had devoted their lives to this royal sepulchre, ultimately did exactly that, when they were sealed inside to die. Their killers were in turn despatched at a different site to protect the secret location of the tomb and another pit, or perhaps a shallow grave would be more appropriate, has recently revealed an intriguing theory regarding Qin Er Shi, who we know already was one of Qin Shi Huang's youngest sons and was at least jointly responsible for the death of his eldest brother Fusu, who would have inherited his father's position as emperor. This mysterious grave, which lies in an isolated position to the south of the main burial complex, was found to contain largely male skeletons, one of which still has a crossbow bolt lodged in his skull. Were these the bodies of royal princes murdered by their sibling Qin Er Shi to clear his path to the throne and, if the answer is yes, did he also then slaughter his father's concubines just in case any were pregnant and could produce an heir to challenge his ascension as the 'Son of Heaven', the sacred title conferred on all Chinese emperors? Whatever the truth, Qin Er Shi had none of the strength of his father and his reign lasted just three years until he was forced to commit suicide by the treacherous advisor and eunuch Zhao Gao, who had helped him dispose of his brother Fusu. Whilst elaborate tombs and burial grounds are common to almost every major civilisation across the ages, the scale and ambition of the mausoleum

and its defensive Terracotta Army is simply staggering, as is the standard of detail when you conjure an entire army in full battle array and brandishing state of the art weapons. All of the figures would have been brightly painted and were organised in authentic military units with officers of various rank, both lightly and heavily armoured foot soldiers, archers, kneeling and standing, cavalry, with their horses, and charioteers, including drivers and warriors. This was clearly no ordinary memorial and undoubtedly reflects the fact that Qin Shi Huang was obsessed with immortality and spent most of his life looking for ways to cheat death. Thousands of his subjects were sent out to search for an elixir of life and sorcerers and scholars who could not provide the necessary answers were apparently put to death. The emperor visited various remote locations said to grant eternal life and, most ironically of all, he was almost certainly killed by an elixir of immortality drafted by a court physician. These elixirs commonly included mercury and other deadly components and would go on to account for a large number of emperors and court officials over more than two thousand years. So much for the wonders of traditional Chinese medicine, which is about as effectual now as it was then and for which millions of animals have been pointlessly killed, as well as a few dozen emperors. You have to surmise that when Qin Shi Huang realised that he was not destined to defy death in this world, he clearly intended to rule in the next and whilst he never achieved the immortality he so dearly sought and ultimately died for, he lives on in his eternal army, literally a garrison to the gods, forever protecting an emperor for whom *'Death is only the beginning.'*

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
1	Chinese Mountain Cat	Felis bieti	A pair at Ruoergai at night, one for an extended period.
2	Pallas's Cat	Otocolobus manul	Two at night at Ruoergai, both within five metres.
3	Leopard Cat	Prionailurus bengalensis	Two individuals on a night walk at Tangjiahe.
4	Grey Wolf	Canis lupus	Two lone wolves at Ruoergai, one at night and one in the early morning.
5	Tibetan Fox	Vulpes ferrilata	Routinely observed at Ruoergai.
6	Red Fox	Vulpes vulpes	Seen on a daily basis at Ruoergai.
7	Red Panda	Ailurus fulgens	One at Longcanggou, two at Labahe and one at night at Wolong.
8	Yellow-throated Marten	Martes flavigula	A lone animal and a pair at Tangjiahe, the individual for an extended period along the river.
9	Altai Weasel	Mustela altaica	Two encounters above 4,000 metres at Wolong.
10	Steppe Polecat	Mustela eversmanii	Two sightings in the same area at Ruoergai.
11	Masked Palm Civet	Paguma larvata	Observed at Longcanggou, Labahe and in high numbers at Tangjiahe.
12	Northern Hog Badger	Arctonyx albogularis	Eleven sightings of at least seven different animals at Tangjiahe.
13	Small-toothed Ferret Badger	Melogale moschata	Three encounters with probably the same individual at Tangjiahe.
14	Asian Badger	Meles leucurus	One near Shuama Lukou and two at Ruoergai.
15	Wapiti	Cervus canadensis	Five females and two males across three sightings on the drive to Ruoergai.
16	Sika Deer	Cervus nippon	Three sightings at Ruoergai of eight animals in total.
17	Siberian Roe Deer	Capreolus pygargus	One male and three females at Ruoergai.
18	Sambar	Rusa unicolor	Relatively common at Labahe and also observed at distance at Wolong.
19	Tufted Deer	Elaphodus cephalophus	Low numbers at Tangjiahe.
20	Reeves' Muntjac	Muntiacus reevesi	Commonly observed at Tangjiahe.
21	Tibetan Gazelle	Procapra picticaudata	Three females on a night drive at Ruoergai.
22	Takin	Budorcas taxicolor	Long range view of a small herd at Labahe and numerous at Tangjiahe.

23	Chinese Serow	Capricornis milneedwardsii	First observed at Wolong and common at Tangjiahe.
24	Chinese Goral	Naemorhedus griseus	Low numbers at Wolong and relatively common at Tangjiahe.
25	Wild Boar	Sus scrofa	One at Longcanggou, three at Baixi and low numbers at Tangjiahe.
26	Golden Snub-nosed Monkey	Rhinopithecus roxellana	Distant scope views at Tangjiahe and a large troop of habituated animals at Foping.
27	Tibetan Macaque	Macaca thibetana	Routinely observed at Labahe and Tangjiahe.
28	Woolly Hare	Lepus oiostolus	First viewed near Shuama Lukou and abundant at Ruoergai.
29	Plateau Pika	Ochotona curzoniae	Abundant at Ruoergai.
30	Glover's Pika	Ochotona gloveri	Observed at Wolong between 4,100 metres and 4,200 metres.
31	Malayan Porcupine	Hystrix brachyura	Two pairs on a night walk at Tangjiahe.
32	Chinese Zokor	Eospalax fontanierii	Three individuals at Baixi.
33	Pallas's Squirrel	Callosciurus erythraeus	Individual viewed on the transfer between Longcanggou and Labahe.
34	Perny's Long-nosed Squirrel	Dremomys pernyi	Five or six individuals at Foping.
35	Swinhoe's Striped Squirrel	Tamiops swinhoei	Several sightings at Labahe and Foping.
36	Pére David's Rock Squirrel	Sciurotamias davidianus	Encountered daily at Tangjiahe and once at Foping.
37	Red and White Giant Flying Squirrel	Petaurista alborufus	Several sightings at Labahe.
38	Grey-headed Flying Squirrel	Petaurista elegans	Observed on different nights at exactly the same location at Tangjiahe.
39	Complex-toothed Flying Squirrel	Trogopterus xanthipes	Observed at Labahe and Foping.
40	Confucian Niviventer	Niviventer confucianus	Identified on range at Foping, but most of the unidentified rodents were probably this species.

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