

Mammals of the Roof of the World

A Greentours Itinerary

Days 1 & 2 To Xining

An overnight flight from Europe takes us to China and from Chengdu we fly on to Xining high on the northern edge of the Tibetan Plateau and check-in to our comfortable hotel.

Day 3 Xining Hills – Hu Zhu

We'll explore the eroded hills on the outskirts of town. Apart from walking off the long hours spent on planes we'll be keen to start the process of acclimatization, and the Xining hills at c2400m above sea level offer an excellent opportunity to do so. We have a fair chance of encountering Tolai Hare. The local race of Sinai Rosefinch inhabits the wadis. We'll explore a mixed area of mainly spruce forest with fields and mixed buckthorn and barberry scrub where we'll see various colourful redstarts, tits and rosefinches. Rufous-browed Accentor and both Pere David's and Elliot's Laughingthrushes should be seen and other likely birds include Przevalski's Nuthatch, named after one of the main players in the 'Great Game', and Grey-headed Bullfinch. Golden Eagle and Northern Goshawk may be overhead

Later in the day we'll make our first visit to higher altitudes, hoping to find Chinese Red Pika and perhaps even Blue Sheep. En route we will pass through rural villages where the year's farming activities are drawing to a close ahead of the severe winter, and we may spot an India-bound bird of prey or two looking for a suitable roost site as the day draws to a close.

Day 4 Lake Koko Nor

This morning we will depart early for the fabled lake Koko Nor, a vast expanse of brackish water reflecting the limitless sky. Most mammals will be of the domestic variety – yaks and sheep herded by often traditionally clad locals – but we should see some pikas (=mouse hares) today, maybe a prowling Red Fox, or even a Wolf, a Steppe Polecat, or an Asian Badger.

As we take in the autumnal spectacle of thousands of ducks, smaller numbers of striking Bar-headed Geese, and flocks of larks comprising several species, our bodies will be continuing the essential process of acclimatization, and we will be making a point of setting a modest pace. Prolonged scans could yield birds of prey attracted by the wildfowl – the declining Pallas's Fish Eagle is a possibility, as are faster fliers such

as Merlin, Saker, and Peregrines. Late in the afternoon we'll press on south, overnighing in a surprisingly comfortable hotel in the last town to offer a night's rest at relatively low altitude.

Day 5

Across the Plateau

Driving on to a Wild West-type, truck-stop village where we will be based for at least two nights, we will stop for anything of interest along the way, mostly staying close to the road and taking it slow. Excitement is sure to rise as we enter our trip's target area, home to mammals such as Wolf, Red & Tibetan Foxes, Alpine Weasel, Pallas's Cat, Snow Leopard, Kiang (=Tibetan Wild Ass), Tibetan Gazelle, Blue Sheep & Black-lipped Pika.

Bird-wise today could also prove memorable – Chinese Grey shrike is sometimes seen, While Spotted and Eastern Great Rosefinches are frequently present in a barren-looking gully. We should be able to find Mongolian Lark en route, and though we will not attempt to cover the highest altitudes fully today a minor effort could well yield the enigmatic Roborovski's Rosefinch, as well as Guldenstadt's Redstart, as many as six species of Snowfinch (Blanford's Rufous-necked, Pere David's, White-rumped, Tibetan & Henri's), and Plain & Brandt's Mountain Finches.

Our temporary home will not be grand but it is comfortable enough, with a supply of hot water for 'stand-up rub-downs', and possibly the starriest sky we are ever likely to encounter: once the settlement's generators are off (we are here in an area where at the time of writing a really reliable electricity supply is not yet a reality) there is neither light pollution nor the shimmer associated with lower altitudes.

Days 6-8

The Eastern Kunlun Shan

We'll spend as much time as necessary around a pass which in recent years has yielded a number of sightings of Pallas's Cat including all our recent tours to this area. Larger mammals such as Blue Sheep provide prey for that arch-predator of the snowy heights, the mythical Snow Leopard. A sighting of one of these rare animals is unlikely, nonetheless we will hardly be able to forget that we are at the site of your leader's 1995 sighting, and we will progress slowly not only due to altitude, making sure to scan carefully for 'furry rocks'!

Overhead we will be expecting a scattering of birds heading south, mostly birds of prey such as Steppe Eagle, and we need not be exceptionally fortunate to see one of the majestic, resident Lammergeiers do a bone-drop, behaviour aimed at cracking open larger bones to get at the nutritious marrow.

We will have a unique degree of flexibility to fine-tune plans as we go along. Assuming that our target (Pallas's Cat!) does not prove overly hard to get we will take

our time heading south in expectation of seeing the stately Kiang, Tibetan Gazelle, a graceful browser which unlike the severely endangered Tibetan Antelope remains quite common, the grey-flanked, Pika-hunting Tibetan Fox, and maybe Wolf. We see them on most trips, frequently at relatively close range, sometimes undertaking a hunt, sometimes at a kill.

Several pairs of the hardy Black-necked Cranes breed at wetlands in the area; others utilize it as a stop-over during migration. Several of these wetlands are Ramsar quality, though, undesignated. Numbers of birds of prey can be impressive particularly Upland Buzzards & Sakers. Calm, sunny mornings are, even in autumn, a-tinkle with the songs of Long-billed Calandra Larks, Oriental Skylarks and Horned Larks.

Travelling over the barren Bayankala pass (at nearly 5,000 m we're here on one of the highest roads in the world) we will eventually descend to the Yangtze and, a short way up a tributary, the town of Yushu. A combination of relatively oxygen-rich air and a general sense of satisfaction deriving from encounters amid grand scenery en route with new mammals ensure that most teams arrive at colourful Yushu in high spirits...

Days 9 - 11 In search of...

A foray in the general direction of the main Himalayan ridge will allow us to sample a region of spectacularly wild scenery, peaks covered in permanent snow, each valley a massive rent in the landscape, each sandstone ridge defiantly rising towards temperamental skies. The presence of a healthy population of Blue Sheep (we have seen as many as 150 in a day) suggests that eventually diligent scanning will result in the sighting of their main predator, the Snow Leopard. On one trip we were encouraged as well as amused when we asked a local Tibetan herb gatherer "had he ever seen a Snow Leopard here?" His reply – "No. But I saw one over there once!" indicating a spot 300 metres from where we were standing! During the 2019 tour we spotted a female Eurasian Lynx with a large cub in this area! We'll search for the local form of Red Deer, now often split as MacNeill's Red Deer, as well as the localized White-lipped Deer. We've seen both Asian Badger and Alpine Weasel in this area and occasionally have come across Moupin Pika, Eurasian Otter as well as Chinese Serow and Alpine Musk Deer. Jesper has even seen Lynx here!

Days 12-14 Across the Chang Tang to Golmud

The drive to Golmud is a long one – from almost anywhere anyone of us is likely to have heard of, much less been to – but these days the roads across this section of the Roof of the World are good, affording us plenty of time to take in the transitions in the landscape and stop to look for mammals.

The impressive, highly endangered Chiru (=Tibetan Antelope) will be just one quarry on our venture onto the vast wind-blown plains of the Chang Tang. Hardly any naturalists “do” this route but your leader has consistently been able to find Chirus not too far from the road.

During the 2019 tour we watched a Snow Leopard for almost an hour and when we spotted it we were less than a hundred metres from the road!

We'll be fairly flexible in our pursuit of Chiru, allowing ourselves time to search also for Wild Yak & Argali, but shall be expecting to overnight in a patched-up inn for one night (preferable to the energy-sapping hardships of camping at high altitude with temperatures dropping well below zero!) before pressing on to the unlikely comforts of Golmud.

The approach to Golmud is through barren country, sheer geology with virtually nothing of interest to the biologist: bleakly thrusting mountains which, slashed by icy streams, held at bay all but a tiny, determined elite amongst the early explorers, and for centuries protected Tibet from military invasion from a northerly direction.

Other mammals present include Wolf, Tibetan Fox, Pallas's Cat, Kiang, Tibetan Gazelle, and Blue Sheep. Possible avian novelties are few but the enigmatic Tibetan Sandgrouse is among them. Endemic to Tibet this sandgrouse enjoys the distinguished company of the Emperor Penguin on the official (!!) 'Hardest Bird in the World' list!

Golmud is – or aspires to be – a boom town of development connected to trade, transport & the oil industry. It has the surreal, disjointed feeling of an out-on-thin-ice venture running out of momentum, but at least for the moment it offers travellers comfortable lodgings and surprisingly good meals.

Days 15 - 17

The search for Przevalski's Gazelle - one of the rarest mammals in the world

The details of the return journey from Golmud to Xining will be decided flexibly based on how we have done with our target mammals. We traverse country which is home to Goitred Gazelle, an animal we'll try our best to see, and we are likely to encounter at least a few Henderson's Ground-jays.

Top priority will be a pretty valley offering comparatively easy access to hillsides & relict vegetation which is home to *kansuensis* Red Deer & Blue Sheep as well as to an array of special birds, star among them the localised Przevalski's Redstart, arguably the prettiest of the genus (and undoubtedly the one fewest birders have seen) - we should also see Robin Accentor, Kessler's Thrush, Stoliczka's Tit-warbler, the endemic White-browed Tit, Tibetan Snowfinch, Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch and Pine Bunting. The taxonomically challenged Przevalski's Rosefinch, nowadays considered to represent a monotypic family (is it a Rosefinch? is a Bunting? – good question, seeing that in the field it does not appear obviously close to either, with its graduated,

blindingly pink tail, absurdly thin lower mandible, and a summer habit of doing 'parachute' type songflights!) is a possibility in the same habitat.

We even have a very good chance of locating Przevalski's Gazelle, one of the rarest mammals in the world – in 2005 we discovered a relict population & have now pinpointed an area favoured by as many as 40 individuals. In the evening of Day 17 we'll have arrived back in Xining.

Day 18
Depart Xining and arrive UK/Europe

or...

Red Panda Extension

Day 18
Flight to Chengdu. Transfer to Laba He

We take a morning flight from Xining to Chengdu and thence a five hour drive to Laba He, deep in the valleys that lead up to the eastern rim of the Tibetan Plateau, and home to many wonderful birds and animals.

Days 19-22
Laba He

Laba He is a magical place, the landscape quintessentially Chinese. The lower valleys are clothed in orange, yellow and red autumn tints, interspersed with meadows where we can watch Sambar at our leisure. Higher is a stunning landscape of old-growth conifers draped in mosses and lichens, their sculpted branches twisting this way and that. Red Pandas seem extraordinarily easy to see here. On a two day reconnaissance to Laba He in 2011 we spent no less than four hours watching four different Red Pandas. What is intriguing is how approachable these stunning animals are. One we approached to within just a few metres and still it stayed feeding in a leisurely fashion right in front of us. In short, Laba He offers an unparalleled opportunity to see and photograph what is one of the World's most beautiful creatures, and one which has a reputation for being very elusive. Not here though! Why should they be so easy to see at Laba He? It is certainly not habituation for Laba He has been closed to the public until recently and there are still relatively few visitors. We suspect that it may be linked to the rosehips and other red berries that all four Red Pandas we saw were steadily chomping on – clearly a favourite foodstuff at this season, and it seems that they prefer to continue to feed all day with the onset of winter not far away. Whatever the reason we can be sure of enjoying spending time with such a delightful creature. They vary quite a bit in the intensity of the 'red' from almost orange-red through to a rich deep russet-red, the bright white face markings making them easy to pick out. Their fur is long and luxuriant, especially on their long thick tails.

Whilst much time will be taken up enjoying the Red Pandas there's plenty of other mammals to be seen at Laba He. On the way in we'll no doubt have become acquainted with troupes of Tibetan Macaques, a rather fine macaque with a thick warm coat. Long-tailed Goral is the local goat-antelope and almost anywhere we might bump into Sambar. The park authorities have designed an 'African-style' salt lick which attracts many of these large deer in at night and we can sit in comfortable armchairs and watch them from just a few metres away. Up in the Red Panda zone is a considerable population of Takin. These are the dark-backed *tibetana* form, quite different-looking from the golden *bedfordi* form found in Foping. Some of the higher valleys look like herds of cattle have been roaming through the bamboo so many Takin are there up there. Jeeps will take us up into this zone, just a twenty minute drive from our rather nice chalet-rooms down at headquarters. The set-up is very comfortable at this reserve. Most days we'll take the jeeps up and walk down, but on one of the days we'll walk higher as not far above us is the limit of the forest and above is a zone of yellow grassland before the snow and rock of peaks that reach around 4000m. Groups of elegant blue-grey Bharal, or Blue Sheep, are common up here.

Groups of Black-faced and Moustached Laughingthrushes move noisily through the low bamboo whilst pheasants include Silver Pheasant and the lovely Lady Amherst's Pheasant, the stunning males appearing from time to time on the track. Also here is the gorgeous Temminck's Tragopan. The rare and little-known (it doesn't look like its illustration the Birds of China!) Rufous-tailed Babbler (*Chrysomma*) moves through the bamboo coming within inches of our feet as it passes by. Almost equally unobtrusive are the parrotbills, several species of which move through the bamboo in groups, notably the impressive Great Parrotbill. Above the forest we'll see rosefinches, and hopefully Snow Partridges and accentors. Moving back into the upper reaches of the forest we'll encounter groups of Collared Grosbeaks, flocks of Speckled Wood Pigeons and Naumann's Thrushes. Grey-hooded Fulvettas form noisy parties with Stripe-throated and White-collared Yuhinas and we'll see Sichuan Leaf Warblers and parties of tits, nuthatches and woodpeckers. On the afternoon of Day 22 we'll travel back to Chengdu after lunch for a night at the excellent Hollies Hostel, a pleasant little hotel in the Tibetan quarter.

Day 23

Depart from Chengdu and arrive UK/Europe

or ...

Tanjahe Extension

Day 22

Arrive Tanjahe

Instead of stopping in Chengdu we'll bypass the city and head north into the mountains again to the wonderful forested valley in which sits Tangjiahe.

Days 23-26 Tanjiahe

Tanjiahe is as quintessentially Chinese as landscapes get. The hills/mountains (they reach not far over 2500m which barely registers as mountains round here...) are cloaked in a stunningly varied forest with maples, oaks, walnuts and a variety of conifers making it very colourful at this season as the autumnal reds and golds were starting to show. The hills and ridges were very shapely and the rivers stunning. The main river – the River of the Tangs as the place is named – is wide and full of smoothly worn boulders, but in other places it narrowed between white cliffs and tumbled over load waterfalls. Just one look at this river and you could imagine a bear or a panda crossing.... The side rivers are smaller bubbling brooks where the boulders are moss covered and the layered maples and liquidambar looked achingly beautiful. Now if this all sounds like it would be difficult to see mammals in I should mentioned that every so often there are open 'meadows' maintained by Golden Takin, where both day and night one could expect to see grazing animals or....

The rooms of the rather luxurious hotel are in little blocks either side of a landscaped stream and surrounded by superb natural forest. A large fast-flowing river runs down past the hotel. Tibetan Macaques stop by to see if they can cadge some food, but it is the Golden Takin that make this hotel special. Taking time off to keep those meadows open they graze the lawns here at night and indeed even in daylight – we need to be careful watching them for they are bad-tempered beasts! We'll have no shortage of seeing these amazing creatures day and night in Tanjiahe and will have marvelous photographic opportunities with them. This is a great place for goat-antelopes. We'll see Chinese Goral and Long-tailed Goral, one or two a day usually, and we'll also come across the lovely Chinese Serow, an altogether stockier beast with a blue-grey coat. There are Tufted Deer too and Reeve's Muntjac are very common. Pere David's Rock Squirrels are frequently seen and we'll also have a good chance of finding both Rhesus Macaques and the Chinese Ferret-Badger.

We'll have nightly walks or drives up and down the entrance road. These seem particularly productive at Tanjiahe. We'll see Golden Takin on them as well the Serow and both Goral and a range of fine smaller species including the gorgeous little Leopard Cat. Others include Masked Palm Civet, Porcupine and Hog Badger.

Many patches of Orange-peel fungus shine in the sun under beeches, walnuts, alders and maples, many of the latter already turning yellow and red. The birding is excellent in these forests with large parties of Sooty Tits and Elliot's Laughing Thrushes are everywhere. Stunning groups of Golden Pheasants cross the paths and Nutcrackers are frequent. Mountain Hawk-Eagles and the *japonicus* race Common Buzzard are chief aerial predators. Parties of Red-billed Leiothrix are a beautiful and common sight, and there's also Grey-headed Woodpeckers, Green-backed Tits, Daurian Redstarts, Chestnut-bellied Tesias, Slaty Buntings, Vinaceous Rosefinches, White-naped Yuhinas, Grey-cheeked (David's) Fulvettas, Collared Finchbills and

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babblers. Parties of Vinous-throated Parrotbills lurk in the bamboo with Rufous-capped Babblers and the gorgeous Golden-breasted Fulvetta. We'll return to Chengdu during the afternoon of Day 26.

Day 27

Depart Chengdu and arrive UK/Europe

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