

WildWings

China: “Snow Leopards in Comfort”

7 - 21 April 2026

TRIP REPORT AND SYSTEMATIC LIST



Snow Leopard © Keith and Helen Jones, tour participants

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Trip Report

Leaders: Nigel Goodgame and Sid Francis

Introduction

The second WildWings “*Snow Leopards in Comfort*” tour to China proved to be a great success, with an impressive 28 mammal species recorded. This included hours spent watching Snow Leopard, Eurasian Lynx and Pallas’s Cat, with the added bonus of four Tibetan Blue (Brown) Bears and all with the quality of accommodation that was up to the standard of any western hotel.

The trip also visited the new “go to” Qinghai Snow Leopard site at Gouli Valley on a road trip, which took us from Chengdu to our departure airport in the Qinghai capital of Xining exploring wonderful nature rich sites but also stunning scenic areas of the Tibetan Plateau.

The mammal highlights were two Snow Leopards, including one individual that remained in full view for over five and a half hours, two Pallas’s Cats, four Eurasian Lynx, four Tibetan Blue Bears (two females both with cubs) , six Himalayan Wolves, three Chinese Red Pandas, as well as Wild Yak, Tibetan Antelope (Chiru), Tibetan Fox, Argali, Blue Sheep (in abundance), White-lipped Deer, Kiang, Przewalski’s Gazelle and an Altai Mountain Weasel.

During the first few days at lower altitudes, we were fortunate to find three Chinese Red Pandas, although they were more challenging to locate this year due to the higher temperatures.

The gradual journey from the Sichuan Basin to the Tibetan Plateau not only provided a diverse range of wildlife but also allowed for altitude acclimatisation. This approach worked very well and apart from a long morning hike at the initial site, Labahe, which was at a much lower altitude than the Tibetan Plateau sites, our wildlife watching didn’t require any strenuous walking.

Comfort was a key part of the tour, and all our hotels, even those in remote Tibetan towns, were warm, clean, spacious, and well-equipped with ensuite bathrooms, western style sit-down toilets and hot showers.

Lunches and evening meals were usually taken in restaurants with light lunches mainly being fried rice type dishes, while evening meals often consisted of a series of Sichuan cuisine style dishes. Breakfasts were often self-made with toast, porridge, fried eggs, butter, jam, peanut butter, cheese, bananas and oranges, with coffee and tea always on offer. When out in the field, we often had picnic-style lunches with sandwiches filled with freshly made tuna salad or cheese amongst the favoured choices.

A big thank to the group for their excellent company and photographic contributions to this report. Special thanks also to Sid Francis, whose guiding, driving, and cooking were outstanding, and to our driver Zeng Zhang, whose spotting skills were invaluable throughout.

Nigel Goodgame

Trip Diary

Day 1 – 7 April

We departed London Heathrow on a direct Air China flight to Chengdu. The journey was smooth, and we arrived safely the following day.

Day 2 – 8 April

Arriving in Chengdu in the afternoon, Immigration was quick and efficient with no visa requirements for UK citizens. We were met by Sid and Zeng Zhang and began the three-hour drive to Labahe.

After a short stop for snacks at a motorway service station, we arrived in the evening where we met two group members who had arrived earlier. A short walk produced Red-and-White Giant Squirrel, Sambar Deer, and Chinese Goral - a highly promising start.

Day 3 – 9 April

An early start was taken by those keen to explore before breakfast, with a few birds and mammals seen in the cool morning air. After breakfast, we drove to the top of the reserve and began a full day of scanning and walking in search of wildlife.

Conditions were mixed. The morning started cool, but as the sun rose the temperature increased quickly, making mammal activity more limited. Our main target here was Chinese Red Panda, but we were aware that the rising heat would make this a challenging task.

Bird activity was good, with plenty of song throughout the forest, but mammals proved difficult. We walked throughout the morning with our only mammal sightings consisting of several chipmunk-like Swinhoe's Striped Squirrels. This was rather disappointing since our long walk went through prime Red Panda habitat.

After a picnic lunch, we continued along the boardwalk through the forest, hoping for a change in fortune but again, no Red Pandas.....

By mid-afternoon, the walking and heat had taken their toll on some of the group, however, some participants decided to return to the upper section of the reserve to continue searching. This decision proved crucial, as we were rewarded with excellent views of two Red Pandas, a well-earned success after a long day in the field.



Chinese Red Panda © Nigel Goodgame

The day concluded with a productive night drive, adding further sightings of Chinese Goral and Red-and-White Giant Squirrel.

Day 4 – 10 April

With some of the group still missing Red Panda, we adjusted our plans to give an extra morning to continue the search at Labahe. Arriving earlier than the previous day, we worked our way systematically down through suitable habitat, spacing the group out with one leader at the front and another at the rear.

Eventually, Red Pandas were located, although the viewing conditions were not ideal with telescopes required. Some of the group had to make their way back up a section of trail to see them, but most managed to connect, bringing relief after the previous day's effort.

Late in the morning, we began our two-day journey towards the Tibetan Plateau. The drive was spectacular, crossing dramatic mountain passes at up to 4,200 metres. Wildlife sightings along the way included Himalayan Griffon, Lammergeier, an Ibisbill, Red-billed Chough, and Rhesus Macaque.

Despite the delayed start, we arrived in Luhuo in good time for a relaxed evening meal and a well-earned rest.

Day 5 – 11 April

We departed early, continuing our gradual ascent, under clear skies and excellent visibility, onto the 4,000m areas of the plateau. Here, the landscape opened into a vast rolling grassland terrain framed by snow-capped peaks and we made multiple stops to scan for wildlife.

The area was very rewarding and we recorded multiple Tibetan Foxes, 6 Eastern Roe Deer, 15 Tibetan Gazelles, along with huge numbers of pikas and marmots.

The birdlife was equally impressive with highlights including Ibisbill, Bar-headed Goose, Tibetan Partridge, various finches and redstarts and an impressive total of 37 Lammergeiers.

In the early evening, we reached Jiangma/Serxu in cold, snowy conditions and our first real taste of high-altitude weather.

Day 6 – 12 April

A pre-breakfast excursion at 6am in freezing conditions (-10°C) proved outstanding. Fresh snowfall overnight made tracking particularly effective, and we spent time reading the landscape through footprints.

Early sightings included a number of Tibetan Gazelles, Tibetan Foxes and a Red Fox, followed by a Himalayan Wolf moving swiftly across the plateau.

As the light improved, scanning revealed six Argali, now a very local and rather uncommon Tibetan species, high on the slopes, while the roadside was alive with thousands of Shorelarks, along with Robin Accentor, Brandt's Mountain Finches, Upland Buzzard, White-winged Redstart and Saker Falcon.

The highlight came with the discovery of two female Tibetan Blue (Brown) Bears, each with a cub on either side of a snow-covered mountain peak. They were slowly moving through the snow and the sight of them looking back at us was an unforgettable wildlife encounter.

After watching the bears for an hour, we returned for breakfast before continuing our road trip to Qumarlai crossing a 4,800-metre pass enjoying more awesome scenery. Further stops added White-lipped Deer, Blue Sheep, Black-necked Crane (Qinghai Longboa National Nature Reserve) and, at our local stakeout, Glover's Pika, which we saw just before the last light of evening faded.

Day 7 – 13 April

Today, we ventured out onto the vast and remote Kekexili Plateau, one of the wildest and highest ecosystems on Earth. The journey itself was not without its challenges as one of

the vehicles had been filled with poor-quality diesel the night before, which slowed our progress, particularly as we crossed several high passes above 4,500 metres.



Wolf © Rune Bjoernstad, tour participant

However, any delays were soon forgotten as the wildlife spectacle unfolded with highlights including Wild Yak, 51 male Chiru (Tibetan Antelope), Himalayan Wolves, Kiang, Woolly Hare, Tibetan foxes and vast numbers of Tibetan Gazelle and Plateau Pikas.

What made the experience truly special was the sense of isolation. With no one else around, we paused, poured tea, and simply watched wolves and foxes hunting, birds circling above, herds moving across the plains. It was a quiet, almost magical moment, where everything seemed to slow down and the scale and beauty of the plateau fully sank in.



Tibetan Gazelle © Fiona McHugh, tour participant

Eventually, we had to pull ourselves away and begin the return journey, still absorbing what we had witnessed. Despite the earlier vehicle issues, which were promptly fixed by mechanics at Qumerlai, this had been one of the most exhilarating and wildlife-rich days of the entire trip.

Day 8 – 14 April

After the intensity of the previous day, we set out on a slightly more relaxed schedule, departing at 08:00 for the drive towards Madoi. The journey itself was anything but ordinary, taking us across a series of high mountain passes ranging between 4,200 and 4,800 metres, with vast, open landscapes unfolding in every direction.

We made frequent stops to scan, and the wildlife did not disappoint. Tibetan Foxes were particularly numerous, with well over 30 individuals seen throughout the day. Herds of Kiang and Wild Yak were encountered at intervals, along with Himalayan Marmots emerging across the plateau.



Altai Mountain Weasel © Keith and Helen Jones, tour participants

An Altai Mountain Weasel gave us prolonged, close views and provided some highly entertaining behaviour, when we were able to lure it out of a burrow with squeaking sounds. At one stage, the little predator dashed over to the van and looked as if it was going to jump in through the front door – these weasels really are fun to watch.

Although this was primarily a travel day, the combination of dramatic scenery, excellent visibility, and constant wildlife encounters ensured it remained a highly enjoyable and productive one.

Day 9 – 15 April

We began the day with a relaxed breakfast. There had been an overnight snowfall, however, by the time we departed at 8am, the weather had cleared to bright sunshine, and we set off for the 3½-hour drive to Xiangride, which was the hotel town for our Guoli Valley visit.

The journey which is normally straightforward, quickly became more eventful as at the top of a mountain pass, we came across many lorries which had become stranded on ice, bringing the traffic to a complete halt. On reaching the scene, we found local police working to resolve the situation and in a memorable and very hands-on moment, we joined in, helping to clear the snow and spread grit to make the road passable again.

Meanwhile, Sid ensured our vehicle was prepared by fitting snow chains, and once conditions had improved, the group worked together to push the vehicle over the final icy section. After what felt like quite an effort, we made it safely over the pass and continued on our way.

The remainder of the journey was more relaxed, with sightings of Kiang and Tibetan Gazelle, along with several notable birds including our first Tibetan Larks and Przewalski's Partridge of the trip.

We arrived in Xiangride around lunchtime and checked into a comfortable hotel. After a short rest, we headed out for an afternoon excursion along nearby river valleys and hillsides. This proved productive, adding several new bird species including the endemic and very local Ala Shan Redstart (7 individuals), Blue-fronted Redstart, Citrine Wagtail, Long-legged Buzzard, and Siberian Buff-bellied Pipit.

An unexpectedly adventurous day, combining challenging conditions, teamwork, and rewarding wildlife sightings.

Day 10 – 16 April

An early start at 05:15 saw us heading into Gouli Valley, greeted by a fresh covering of snow. We met our local guide at the park entrance and were encouraged by news that Eurasian Lynx had been seen regularly in recent days.

These reports proved accurate as within minutes of entering the valley, we encountered two Lynx walking slowly through the snow, completely unconcerned by our presence. We watched them for over 30 minutes as they moved gracefully across the landscape - an exceptional start to the day.



Eurasian Lynx © Keith and Helen Jones, tour participants

Continuing deeper into the valley, the fresh snow revealed a multitude of tracks, mostly from pikas, with Tibetan Foxes actively hunting across the slopes. The clear weather and excellent visibility allowed for careful scanning of the surrounding mountains, where



Blue Sheep were present in large numbers, although no Snow Leopards were found.

Tibetan Fox © Anne Balfour, tour participant

Later, we received news of another sighting further up the valley and on arrival, we were rewarded with two more Lynx, this time resting in the sunshine. We spent a

couple of hours watching these magnificent cats - an unforgettable experience and one of the highlights of the trip.

Despite continued scanning on the return journey, no Snow Leopard was located, but the quality and duration of the Lynx sightings made this a remarkable day.

Day 11 – 17 April

Another early start saw us return to the valley with high expectations. Conditions were again favourable, and it wasn't long before we were rewarded with one of the most sought-after species of the trip - Pallas's Cat.



Pallas's Cat © Keith and Helen Jones, tour participants

The cat was actively hunting, and we were able to observe it for over an hour as it stalked pikas across the slope. Eventually, it succeeded, capturing its prey - a fascinating behavioural moment and a major highlight for the group.

We continued scanning higher up the valley, but Snow Leopard once again remained elusive. Returning to the park headquarters for lunch, we then spent the afternoon focusing on a fixed vantage point, carefully scanning the surrounding ridgelines.

Patience nearly paid off as a Snow Leopard was briefly sighted by one participant as it crossed a ridge, disappearing from view almost as quickly as it had appeared. Despite continued effort, it was not relocated.

Himalayan Marmot © Fiona McHugh, tour participant



As the light began to fade, we added a second Pallas's Cat to the day's sightings - an excellent way to end another highly productive day.

Day 12 – 18 April

Another early start and there was a sense that something special might happen today as spirits were high as we returned to the valley under clear skies and excellent visibility.

We began scanning the now-familiar slopes, while some briefly diverted to observe a Wolf further up the valley, enjoying excellent views before rejoining the main group.

Back at our main vantage point, we settled in for a sustained scanning session. After some time, a lone male Blue Sheep came into view, behaving unusually as it was alert, agitated, and repeatedly looking back over a ridge. It was a clear sign that a predator was nearby.

Moments later, the reason became clear, as a Snow Leopard appeared, walking slowly over the ridge and into full view. A brief moment of urgency ensued everyone was on the animal, but it soon became apparent that this was not going to be a fleeting encounter.

The cat continued along the slope for several hundred metres before settling down in the open. For the next six hours, we watched in awe as it rested, scanned its surroundings, and simply existed within its mountain domain.



Snow Leopard © Keith and Helen Jones, tour participants

The atmosphere among the group was electric with equal parts excitement, disbelief, and quiet appreciation. At one point, a Wolf briefly passed by adding to the drama, before attention returned to the Snow Leopard.

In true expedition style, we marked the moment with tea, crackers, cheese, and even onion, served from Sid's now-famous mobile setup - an unexpectedly perfect pairing with one of the greatest wildlife encounters imaginable.

Over the course of just three days, we had recorded two Snow Leopards, four Lynx, two Pallas's Cats, and two Wolves - an extraordinary sequence of sightings that few trips ever achieve.

A truly unforgettable day, and without doubt the defining moment of the tour.

Day 13 – 19 April

An early start to Gouli Valley quickly paid off as within minutes of entering the area, we encountered two Lynx walking slowly through fresh snow – yet another exceptional sighting.

Continuing up the valley, we found extensive tracks in the snow, mostly from pikas, with Tibetan Foxes actively hunting.

Later, we were directed to another area where two more Lynx were resting in the sunshine, allowing prolonged and relaxed views.

Despite extensive scanning, no Snow Leopard was found, but the quality of Lynx sightings alone made this a remarkable day.

Day 14 – 20 April

On our final day in the field, we stopped off to look for the ultra-rare Przewalski's Gazelle on our way to Xining.



Przewalski's Gazelle © Nigel Goodgame

We found a small herd of females and a couple of males which were very photogenic. Having enjoyed these, we then headed for lunch before continuing the journey to our comfortable airport hotel.

Here, we said goodbye to Sid and Zeng Zhang and had an opportunity to repack our bags. It had been a very successful trip, with the key targets achieved, plenty of good weather, no major issues, and excellent company throughout.

Day 15 – 21 April

It was a stress-free morning as it was only 0a minute via the hotel shuttle bus to the airport where we were able to check our luggage through to Heathrow.

An easy flight back home then followed and with no Chinese visa requirements for UK passports, it had been great time to visit in terms of culture and the wildlife experience.



Woolly Hare © Fiona McHugh, tour participant