

Environmental Wildlife 12 Tangjiahe, Sichuan, China Trip Fall 2015

A group of ENWI 12 students from Dalian Maple Leaf international School in Dalian, Liaoning, China travelled to Tangjiahe from November 22-27, 2015. We meant to be at Tangjiahe for 4 full days but this turned into 2.5 days after snow over most of northern China grounded us in Beijing (our connecting city) for just under 48 hours ☹. After two cancelled flights and waits in some of the longest lines that airports could have, we eventually landed in Mianyang, Sichuan relieved to finally be over the airplane portion of the trip to Tangjiahe. The only bright spot of our Beijing delay was when Terry Townshend came to our hotel and had an impromptu discussion with the students about everything from the struggles and accomplishments of working with governments on climate change policy to the state of Panda Bears in China. He also brought the ENWI 12 teacher some Indian food which was scarfed down promptly. (thanks again Terry!) The air was fresh and quite mild at around 13 degrees as we descended the steps from the airplane in Mianyang, Sichuan. On the previous trip last June we had flown into Chengdu but the driving time had been just over 8 hours. This time we booked tickets to Mianyang and were very thankful that the bus trip was just over 4 hours. The drive became increasingly scenic the closer we got to Tangjiahe. Pictures below of the drive in including a roadside noodle joint for lunch.



I had remembered a place from the previous June where Takin were very visible just before dark, and we were due to drive past that area on the way in at around 5:00 pm, so we decided to make this our first stop once inside the reserve. Last June, I was told by almost everyone at Tangjiahe that the mammal watching was the best in November, and this proved to be so with 4-5 Reeve's Muntjac between the entrance gate and the Takin Slope (seen on the left from the entrance road just after the camping place on the way to the hotel 32° 34' 06 N 104° 47' 26 E). Once at the Takin place, we immediately saw something moving through some brush about halfway up the slope. This turned out to be a very nice Wild Boar that we enjoyed great scope views of. After a while we noticed 3 Takin watching us from the left, much lower down than the boar. They soon became comfortable with where we were observing from, and continued feeding, making their way around the slope. Three large mammal species on the entrance road, and we had not even checked into the hotel yet! Memories of cancelled flights and long lines were fading😊.



Wild Boar



Takin



Reeve's Muntjac

We watched these three mammals and several bird species until dark and then drove the rest of the way to the hotel (around 10 minutes) and checked in. The accommodations at Tangjiahe are fantastic and well set up for a group with several cabin style buildings that contain 10-15 rooms in each. The food is excellent and the views from the entire area is breathtaking. We woke up the next morning at daybreak and enjoyed a Takin just behind our cabin on our way to the breakfast area. The pictures below show the hotel grounds, scenery, and the gorgeous weather we enjoyed. Memories of the snow delay fading indeed!



Before eating, we ventured across the river from the hotel on a pedestrian bridge to set a wildlife camera trap we had brought along with us from Dalian. This short walk turned into a long walk as we saw 3 more Reeve's Muntjac trailside as well as many bird species. We scrambled back for breakfast, realizing we almost missed the time they were serving. Some pictures from our walk to install the camera trap.



Top Middle: Great Spotted Woodpecker

Bottom Row: Reeve's Muntjac, Streaked-breasted Scimitar Babbler, Slaty Bunting (female)

During breakfast there was a Mountain hawk Eagle sitting nearby being pestered by two Large-billed Crows who were clearly not happy about it being there.



After breakfast, we drove further up the road above the hotel to a research station where I had been with the other class last June. On the way we ran into two juv. Male Golden Pheasant on the side of the road which pranced around oblivious to our vehicle and more Muntjac.



Also on the way there, one of the students asked if they could drink the water in the river. I agreed, as long as they did it without their hands – see below. Apart from one cell phone falling out of a pocket and into the river in the process, all went well ☺.



We stopped at this place because some Golden Snub-nosed Monkeys had been seen there a few weeks previous but we didn't find any despite having a thorough look. More on that hard to find specie a little later in this report ☺. We did have some noisy Elliot's Laughingthrush feeding on some berries across the river while we drank.



At the research station, we met with a person who is currently studying Panda vocalizations, and he was nice enough to show a presentation of the camera trap photos that they have captures at Tangjiahe from the last several years. It was a wonderful sample of the wildlife there: Asian Black Bears, Pandas, Badgers, a medium sized cat that might not have a name yet, Golden Snub-nosed Monkeys, a large variety of deer, etc.. etc... Below are some pictures of the research station and the presentation in progress. After the presentation we enjoyed a picnic lunch on the deck area in the photo below.



Some park staff then took us to check one of their camera traps which had photos of Takin and Wild Boar on it. We were also shown a Wild Boar den (is that the name?). It was made from piled brush with an entrance in one side. Some students also tasted wild bamboo at this place. River water and bamboo on the same day? We were definitely out of the city! We also saw some wild rhododendrons on the walk back (and in other parts of the reserve) which is a plant transplanted to Europe and North America for landscaping in yards/gardens. We had one at the house where I grew up in western Canada. On the drive back to our hotel we stopped at another possible monkey site and saw a couple woodpecker species as well as Eurasian Jays, Spotted Nutcracker, Rufous-capped Babbler, more Slaty Bunting, etc... We also saw a few more Reeve's Muntjac on the road back.



Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker



Rufous-capped Babbler

Back at the hotel, we changed into warmer clothes and headed back down the entrance road to the place where the Takin are easily seen, and to see what else there was to see. It is on this road, approximately 15 minutes from the hotel, that one student yelled out about seeing a monkey in a tree! Tibetan Macaque (a kind of monkey) were very common here last June and we had not seen them yet on this trip. They were pestering tourists for food last June around the hotel, so I was a bit surprised by their absence. I thought this is what the student was seeing so was very happy indeed to look out and see some Golden Snub-nosed Monkeys! This is a species that is hard to see and we were very fortunate to have 3 of them roadside! The location of the sighting was $32^{\circ} 34' 26$ N $104^{\circ} 36' 35$ E. They came down to the ground and walked up the forested hill a ways before sitting in plain view on a ledge. I managed to snap a few photos.



Supper back at the hotel was quickly devoured and soon we were back on the road after dark with two flashlights for what we hoped would be a bit of night time mammal watching. I had brought a flashlight that was semi-bright and a couple students also had some small ones. We weren't sure what could be seen with sub-par lighting but decided to give it a go. We weren't 5 minutes from the hotel heading down the entrance road when a student, the same one who found the monkeys I might add, called out that he had eyes looking back at him from out of the darkness! This turned out to be a Leopard Cat. Not 5 minutes further and we had a Chinese Serow followed 5 minutes later by a Chinese Goral! What a place Tangjiahe is in November! The next 15 minutes produced several Reeve's Muntjac, a Takin crossing the road and then a Hog Badger waddling down the road in our headlights. To put it mildly, a fantastic hour of night time mammal watching! All of these animals were found from the hotel to the camping area using a light out each side of the bus with many eyes looking for eye shine. Lots of lighting changes on the computer resulted in the pictures below. Leopard on the left, Chinese Goral on the right.



Thursday we awoke and had a quick breakfast. We were on the road by 7:30 to search out a Tawny Fish Owl site that I had dipped on last June. Apparently the owls had a nest in a cliff area near the bridge by the second gate area once inside Tangjiahe. We were hearing differing reports about the recent whereabouts of the owl(s) but we decided to give it some time anyway. We were heading across that bridge to a higher area of Tangjiahe for most of the day and were passing right through the owl area enroute. Despite searching for around 30 minutes, we could not locate a roosting owl. Apparently one of the local guides was saying that they usually can hear the owl in the vicinity at night but didn't know where it was currently spending the day. On the way up the road over the bridge we stopped several times. The first was when a White-crowned Forktail flew across the road and the second was to watch a Takin cross the river right in front of us. There were also numerous birds seen along this road. Clockwise from the top left: White-crowned Forktail, Takin, Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, Red-winged Laughingthrush.



The road eventually ends near a parking area where tourists are shuttled to. There is also a small gift shop and small instructional museum-type place there for educating people about Panda Bears that we checked out. After picking up a local guide (Mr. Ma) we were able to drive further up the trail on gravel quite a ways. Eventually the road dead ends near a place where there is a small foot bridge over a river. Mr. Ma informed us that we were at or near 2000 m above sea level at that point. Because it was later in the day, there were not many animals to be seen (other than 1 Wild Boar) so we just enjoyed the

scenery as we walked part of the ways down back towards the gift shop/museum complex. Mr. Ma was a very good birder so we did a bit of birding here and there between conversations about Pandas, Tangjiahe, and his 20+ years there. I got the feeling that he knew a lot and was very experienced in working with wildlife and conservation. I also got the feeling that we were able to drive up past the gift shop/museum because he was in our vehicle. He also showed us places that Panda's had been seen in recent years which was very special for students and teacher alike. We were walking in exactly the same place as wild Pandas had walked. Once back at the gift shop/museum we enjoyed an outside lunch with an exceptional view. Everyone was very hungry after walking around in the colder higher elevations of Tangjiahe.



On the way back down to the bridge area we got out of our vehicle 1 km before the parking lot just above the bridge area. Mr. Ma was optimistic about the owl roosting somewhere just up the river from the bridge so we thoroughly checked out the area. We spent at least an hour scouring the trees in this location all the way down to the bridge. We did see several new species of birds for the trip (including the Red-billed Leothrix and Mountain Bulbul pictured below) but no owl. It would have been neat to show the students a 50 cm owl that eats fish but this will have to happen on the next trip scheduled for late April or early May. The way our trip had been, I don't think anyone was complaining too much when we eventually left Tangjiahe around 2:30 pm for our drive back to Mianyang.



We took a different route to Mianyang which turned out to be 30 minutes faster and more scenic than the way in (if that's possible). That night we enjoyed Sichuan hot pot at a lovely place in Mianyang and checked into our hotel before our flight the next morning. The next day, all flights left on time and all connections were made ☺. It was a bit of whirlwind trip trying to make up for our two days in Beijing

but all in all, it went very well. The main goal of the trip was mammals but we could not help but notice the many birds as well. I almost forgot to mention that our camera trap did catch several Reeve's Muntjac, but nothing off the charts. More birds seen between Tangjiahe and Mianyang:



White-collared Yuhina



Collared Finchbill



Rufous-faced Warbler

And some more bird photos from Tangjiahe. From left to right: Black-throated Tit, Sooty Tit, and a Eurasian Wren on the road.



Special Thanks:

Judy, one of the students who came on the trip, for all the work she put into organizing and corresponding with Sissi in Chengdu leading up to our departure.

Robbi (Zhu Lei), a highly recommended bird and mammal guide who is based in Chengdu, for helping to set up our itinerary and suggesting destinations, etc... Robbi is the face of a young Chinese conservation movement who works hard to promote Sichuan, Tibet, and all other birds and wildlife in China and their environment. Robbi was on an assignment in Zimbabwe, Africa during our trip and we wish him well in that venture. He's back in China in January, 2016.

Sissi, a person who works with Robbi based in Chengdu, who accompanied us on the entire trip and was instrumental in making sure all of our transportation, lodging, and food was taken care of. She was good company and enthusiastic about Sichuan's wild places and did a very good job facilitating our trip.

Sid Francis, a highly recommended bird and mammal guide based in Sichuan, for his local wisdom in terms of where and how to find mammals within Tangjiahe. He also helped to identify some of the birds and mammals seen. His excellent blog can be seen at

<http://www.birdforum.net/showthread.php?t=149725>

Terry Townshend, an all around bird and nature enthusiast and a very good friend of mine, based in Beijing. Terry works in assisting countries in their climate change policies as well as many bird projects in terms of research and popularizing Beijing's birding destinations. Thanks to Terry for coming to our hotel on such short notice when we were trapped in Beijing and speaking with us about China's environmental successes and future challenges. You can see his fantastic blog at <http://birdingbeijing.com/>

Mammal list from within the Tangjiahe Nature Reserve:

1. Chinese Goral 1
2. Chinese Serow 1
3. Leopard Cat 1
4. Pere David's Rock Squirrel 8
5. Wild Boar 8
6. Reeve's Muntjac over 20
7. Takin over 20
8. Snub-nosed Monkey 3
9. Hog Badger 1

Complete bird list from the Mianyang Airport to Tangjiahe and back:

1. Golden Pheasant 2
2. Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker 2
3. Great Spotted Woodpecker 2
4. Eurasian Treecreeper 2
5. Common Kingfisher 1
6. Crested Kingfisher 5
7. Oriental Turtle Dove 3
8. Mountain Hawk Eagle 2
9. Eurasian Sparrowhawk 1
10. Eastern Buzzard 3
11. Common Coot 1
12. Grey Heron 1
13. Little Egret 10
14. Black-headed Gull 10
15. Long-tailed Shrike 2
16. Eurasian Jay 2
17. Red-billed Blue Magpie 6
18. Common Magpie 5
19. Spotted Nutcracker 3
20. Large-billed Crow 6

21. Oriental Magpie Robin 1
22. Red-flanked Bluetail 2
23. Daurian Redstart 1
24. Plumbeous Water Redstart 10
25. White-capped Water Redstart 8
26. Little Forktail 2
27. White-crowned Forktail 2
28. Common Myna 10
29. Coal Tit 1
30. Yellow-bellied Tit 2
31. Black-throated Tit 10
32. Sooty Tit 30
33. Brown Dipper 10
34. Brown-breasted Bulbul 1
35. Mountain Bulbul 1
36. Chinese Bulbul 3
37. Collared Finchbill 1
38. Rufous-faced Warbler 1
39. Elliot's Laughingthrush 4
40. Red-winged Laughingthrush 8
41. Blackbird 2
42. Streaked-breasted Scimitar Babbler 2
43. Eurasian Wren 2
44. Red-billed Leothrix 8
45. Rufous-capped Babbler 1
46. Grey-cheeked Fulvetta 12
47. White-collared Yuhina 2
48. Vinous-throated Parrotbill 20
49. White Wagtail 6
50. Grey Wagtail 1
51. Slaty Bunting 5