

Survey of Mountain Wildlife in Xinjiang

REPORT # 7

Brief wildlife surveys were conducted in two areas of southern Xinjiang in 1988. 1) From July 19-30, Li Hong, Sawir Yakup, and I, together with forest department staff from Ruoqiang, checked on wildlife conditions in the Arjin Shan Tagh), surveying a mountain area to the east of that covered in (Altun 1987 (Fig. 1). 2) The route from Kashi in Xinjiang to Lhasa in Tibet crosses the Kunlun Mountains east of the Taxkorgan Reserve (which we surveyed in 1985 and 1986), ascends onto the Tibetan Plateau, and there crosses an area sometimes referred to as Aksai Chin before entering the Tibet Autonomous Region (Fig. 2). From August 10-14, en route to Lhasa, Wang Zhongyi, Kay Schaller, and I, took note of wildlife near the road.

1) The Arjin Shan Reserve is the best reserve for large mammals in China. However, in spite of its 40,000 km², it is not a complete ecosystem. As our surveys in 1987 showed, migratory species such as Tibetan wild ass and Tibetan antelope move westward out of the reserve. We were told that much wildlife also occurs north of the reserve, in the Arjin Shan, an area with a varied topography ranging from desolate, eroded hills and broad arid valleys to glaciated peaks with alpine meadows along the flanks. Most of the area lies above 3000 m.

Our surveys were concentrated along the northern slopes of the Akoto Shan, a subrange of the Arjin Shan bordering the

northern edge of the intermontane Tula valley. Areas were reached driving cross-country by car and rugged terrain was surveyed on foot; total distance covered was about 1000 km.

The following large wild animals were noted:

Tibetan argali sheep (Ovis ammon hodgsoni): A total of 64 argali were observed, including one herd of 31 individuals. Among these were 8 adult males, the rest females and subadults. The animals were characteristically at the head of valleys near the limit of vegetation at 4000 m and above. During winter, argali are said to move to lower elevations and there frequent rather barren hills. Scattered horns in such areas confirm such seasonal movement. Of 27 horns aged, 70% died when 5-8 years old; the oldest animal was 8.5 years.

Wild yak (Bos grunniens): Wild yak were observed only along the northern slopes of the Akoto Shan, high up in the valleys in the same habitat as argali. Our sightings comprise a group of 3 males, a group of 4 males, a solitary individual, and a herd of 14 that included several young.

Blue sheep (pseudois nayaur): No blue sheep were observed, even though much excellent habitat is available. Occasional horns attest to the survival of this species in the area, but in number possibly below that of argali.

Tibetan antelope (Pantholops hodgsoni): A small population of antelope extends from the Tula valley northward over the low rolling hills at the western end of the Akoto Shan. A total of 60 antelope were seen, usually singly and in small groups numbering up to 8 individuals, except for one group of 13 (7 females, 6 young). Males and females both frequented the area (see Table 1).

Tibetan wild ass (Equus hemionus kiang): Wild asses were sparsely but widely distributed. a total of 47 asses were observed. 19 of them lone individuals and the rest in groups of 2-9. Two (4%) of the asses were young of the year.

Goitered gazelle (Gazella subgutturosa): This gazelle species, characterized by a moderately long tail and horn tips that curve inward, was noted only in the eastern Tula valley (1 male, 1 female) and in a large shallow basin just north of the Mangai mine (5 male, 7 female, 1 young).

Tibetan gazelle (Procapra picticaudata)? Two males were observed north of the Akoto Shan. These animals had the short tail and horn shape typical of Tibetan gazelle, but they were of larger size and their white rump patch was smaller than typical members of the species.

Snow leopard (Panthera uncia): Snow leopard are said to occur in the Akoto Shan. If so, they are extremely rare. Given the scarcity of wildlife, even of marmots which represent important potential prey, the area cannot support a viable cat population. No definite evidence of the animal was noted except one possible dropping on a pass.

Wolf (Canis lupis): Wolf tracks were found in most valleys, though nowhere in abundance. Thirteen droppings were examined for prey content: 3 contained domestic sheep, 4 argali, 5 marmot, 1 yak, and 1 hare.

Although our survey was brief, it showed that large mammals are, contrary to reports by others, scarce in the region. It was suggested to us that many animals visit in autumn and winter. However, it is likely that wildlife is at those seasons merely more visible, having moved from the upper to the lower valleys. Possibly a few wild ass and yak migrate north out of the Arjin Shan Reserve across the Tula Valley into the area we surveyed, but no evidence for large-scale movement exists.

Tula Valley is for the most part rather arid, with good pasture confined to the vicinity of water and human disturbance is considerable along a road leading to a mine, both factors which help explain the few animals encountered there. However, the northern slopes of the Akoto Shan have ample pasturage, and there are few herdsmen with livestock. The low density of wildlife can only be ascribed to excessive hunting. The

herdsmen, We were told, do not hunt much--althOUGH I found, ,', snares set at several marmot holes. The area "is lhowever "' accessible by car, both on rough tracks leading to'mines' and by "'' cross-country travel. It appears likely that wildlife has in recent years been decimated by motorized intruders from nearby mines and other population centers.

Ruoqiang County, to which our survey area belongs, has at present neither staff nor vehicle to monitor and protect its wildlife resources. It is likely that wildlife outside of the Arj in Shan Reserve will ultimately disappear unless means **are** found to enforce the existing regulations concerning the killing of wildlife. Officials in Ruoqiang suggested that wildlife, being an economic resource, should be harvested by foreign hunters upon payMent of a huge fee. Aside from the fact that yak, Tibetan antelope, Tibetan argali, and snow leopard are fully protected by law in China, no species in the survey area is abundant enough to justify hunting. Tourism with the purpose of wildlife viewing in the Arjin Shan Reserve has much greater longterm economic potential for the count y.

2) From Yecheng, at the edge of the Taklimakan Desert, a road ascends for 216 km to the crest of the Kunlun Mountains. Two ungulate species occur on the northern slopes of the Kunlun. Based on information from local people and on horns we examined, ibex (Capra ibex) live in the lower more arid parts, as on the peaks around Kuda post, and blue sheep confine themselves to the higher parts, above 4000 m. Whether the ranges of the two

species here overlap, as in parts of the Taxkorgan Reserve, 'is not known. The ibex in this area are probably near the eastern',

limit of their range in China Snow leopard, though rare, are said to occur in the areas occupied by blue sheep.'

From the crest, the road descends the southern slopes of the Kunlun to Mazar post and from there turns eastward to Xiadulla, an abandoned fort, and up the Karakax valley to its head, a 4700 m pass, a distance of about 300 km. The mountains along this route are extremely barren, usually without vegetation, and even the valleys are desert except for occasional patches of meadow and scattered Tamarix shrub along river banks. The mountains along this route are devoid of wildlife, according to local informants. (A hundred years ago, wild yak were found a day's ride by horse south of Xiadulla, as noted in an 1871 account).

At the head of the Karakax valley the rugged terrain of the Kunlun and Karakoram gives way to the rounded hills and plains of the Tibetan Plateau. At this point the road enters the Aksai Chin area which it crosses in a southern direction for about 125 km and then enters Tibet. A few wild yak are said to survive around the head of the Karakax, and we observed two Tibetan antelope there. The northern half of the Aksai Chin uplands are almost devoid of vegetation, but the southern half has patches of the procumbent shrub Ceratoides compacta, Carex moorcrofti, and other species. In the latter area we observed 13 Tibetan antelope (Table 1) and 6 Tibetan wild ass. Suitable habitat for ungulates at this elevation of 4700-5000 m is patchy and

popula tion density of wildlife is by necessity low' this ',
together with the fact that animals near the road are likely to
be shot at from passing vehicles, accounts for the few animals WE
observed in this largely uninhabited area, ''