

## The wild camel – future prospects

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The shape of the skull, as was noted by Swedish explorer **Svenhal Hadin** in 1905, is a different shape. Interestingly the Mogolians called the wild camel “*huftergai*”, which in the Mongolian language means “flat head”. So it is recognised in the Mongolian language that the wild camel has a different shaped skull to the domestic Bactrian, leading us to believe that this is a new and separate species.

There are many problems facing the wild camel today. It lives in the escarpment of Tibet in what was China's former nuclear test area. Over a period between 1955 and 1979, 43 atmospheric nuclear devices were exploded, of which half were more powerful than Hiroshima. In 1995 I was the first foreigner to be allowed to go to this area, and have been lucky enough to visit eight times since. The Wild Camel Protection Foundation set up a nature reserve there, in Loknor, called “The Ear of China”. I have criss-crossed this area both in a vehicle and on a camel, and I think it is the bleakest area I have ever been in in my life. It is difficult to estimate wild camel numbers since the Chinese government forbids flying over the area to do an aerial survey, but we think there are approximately 600 camels in the area, with a further 450 in a little pocket on the China-Mongolia border.

Before I did another journey on camels in the southern boundary of a nature reserve, we went into the Taklamakan desert, the biggest sand dune desert in the world. Starting from Kerea we went up the rivers going in, most of which have dried up. I couldn't get Chinese permission to get onto a domestic camel and go further but we interviewed a lot of herdsmen and came away with the firm conclusion that in the Taklamakan there are three herds of between 30 and 50 camels. There is a small pocket of the wild camel living in the Taklamakan totally separated from Loknor because there is a major road running between them. They could not cross the road and nor could the Loknor camels.

I want to discuss a series of three expeditions, the last of which ended three weeks ago. The first was in 1999, when we set off from a valley called **Hong Yevu** and to survey the southern part of our Loknor nature reserve. Immediately we encountered sand dunes. From that border, 15-30km further north of the escarpment of Tibet, there are 400 miles of dunes called the **Kumtak**, and at one point these dunes come in and hit the mountains. In 1999 it was extremely hard going. There are no tracks up there and absolutely no route you can follow. The sand was so soft that we had to unload the camels to get up on to the dunes, and my herdsmen had to carry the loads. I think it took six days to cross these dunes. We came down from the dunes and into a little pocket. The **Kumtak** hits the mountains in a shape of a V, so in the middle there is a no-man's land.

Accompanying me on practically all of these expeditions were a Chinese professor and his son (the son on every one) and while we were resting, having come down from the dunes the son suggested we go to explore a gully. We went up the gully and saw that, and he said, “Yes, we're famous! We have found the Yeti! This is the Yeti footprint,” but when we looked carefully we could see the imprints of claws. The imprints are from a Tibetan bear. I've taken a picture to the Natural History Museum in London and they were amazed that the Tibetan bear would be out of the mountains and into the dunes.

When we were going up the gully on foot, suddenly we saw two wild camels coming towards us, incredibly timidly. One of the reasons I always travel with domestic camels is because wild camels pick up the noise of a motor vehicle maybe a mile or two away and they're off, and all you see is footprints in the sand.

As we saw them we crouched down behind a little bush got the closest we'll ever get to a wild camel in the wild. And then suddenly Lei Lei was taking photographs with his camera and the camels heard and were both off like a shot.

We carried on in that V between the dunes and we got to a fresh water spring right in the desert. It was extraordinary. It had never been discovered before. Here, we saw what naturalists call a “naïve population of wildlife”, that is wildlife that has never seen human beings. Among the animals we saw were wild Tibetan asses. As we went through with our camels they trotted behind us. Normally these asses are hunted by the Chinese and they run away on contact, but there they were, just grazing as we went by. We also saw Agali sheep, which we walked amongst as if we were amongst a domestic flock of sheep. Normally the Agali sheep, can only be seen from afar, a dot in the distance, but we were just walking amongst them and they took no notice. And of course the wild camels, which just stood and looked at us, whereas normally they would be terrified. So we got into this tiny area in the desert where there was an extraordinary population of wildlife, including the wild camel. That is what happens when you come into contact with a naïve population of wildlife, and it's the most amazing sensation to be among it.

We made another expedition in 2005, this time approaching from the opposite direction. Having found this naïve population of wildlife, we wanted to return and document it. We planned to spend about four nights there, observing all the animals and taking photographs. On the 1999 trip we travelled from west to east, and so in 2005 so we travelled east to west. It was a tough journey, going in the other direction. Along the way we came across the footprints of the snow leopard which again is a very rare and endangered species. We didn't see the snow leopard but we found where it had killed an Agali sheep fairly recently to our going there.

When we got back to the spring we found huge amounts of plastic and rubbish, as well as 74 empty 44-gallon drums of the deadly poison potassium cyanide and seven more unopened drums. Potassium cyanide is used by gold miners in the extraction of gold from rock. The process requires clear, fresh running water.

When I had returned from the 1999 expedition I had tried to keep the details of the spring quiet. I had reported it to the Royal Geographical Society and they had taken note of it, but otherwise I did not discuss its exact whereabouts. But we had been there with Kazakh herdsmen and they had talked. The **Argin** mountains, where we first saw the wild camel up close, are known to contain gold. Indeed, **Argin** mountains means “The Gold Mountains”. Local miners had brought the blocks of gold on donkeys to this fresh water spring and had poisoned the whole area and contaminated the vegetation. All the wildlife was gone. It was exactly the opposite of the wonderful experience we had had in 1999. The spring had turned from the Garden of Eden into a hellish situation.

When I got back to England I complained to the Chinese ambassador and friends that we had made in **CEPA**, the Ministry of the Environment in China. *National Geographic* published an article, and so did *Geographical Magazine*, the magazine for the Royal Geographical Society. We built up some pressure, and eventually I got a message back, “China acknowledges what you have found, and they will clean it up. When the clean-up comes through we will have people go and clean up the place.”

In 2011 we returned. We couldn't go with camels into the Taklamaran desert so we started going by road. Along the way we talked to lots of herdsmen and came back with the firm conviction that there are wild camels in the Taklamaran but not too many, maybe 50 at most. We drove to **Holiagou** which means “The River of Tamarisk”, where we swapped onto domestic camels which were waiting for us. They had been

bought in October, the previous year and fattened up over the winter, and they were good camels. Our journey took us back to **Kumsa** and on to Lapichan, a distance of 305 kilometres. This may not sound like much distance but it is over extraordinary dunes. I was quite seriously apprehensive before I went, and wondered if I really had the stamina to do what had been quite a difficult expedition again ten years later. I asked the head Kazakh herdsman to find a route if he could, and he pioneered a new route for us along where the sand dunes have impacted with the mountains and there was harder, firmer sand.

Eventually we came to Kumsu spring again. The Chinese had kept their word; they had decontaminated the area and the water was fresh again. The animals hadn't returned but there were tracks showing they had come back, an encouraging sign. There still remained a temporary house where the illegal miners had lived, but they had taken the potassium cyanide drums away, and cleared the other rubbish. They hadn't taken all the temporary housing down, but I was heartened that they had cleaned it up.

On this most recent expedition, on a route which we were pioneering over the dunes, we saw 128 wild camels (out of a total population in China of 600). After the disappointment of the previous expedition we were heartened by this. However, there was one slight drawback – we kept seeing adult camels, and we saw only about eight two to three year-olds, which implied that the youngsters were struggling.

Since the expedition in 1999 the Chinese government had taken firearms away from all the herdsmen who live on the fringe of the desert for security reasons. In Xingyang province last year there was considerable trouble between the Han Chinese and the Uighur population of Xinyang. That was the reason that they had taken all firearms away from herdsmen. As a result the wolf population which lives in the mountains has gone up and the wolves prey on young camels, in particular two and three-year-olds. On our return journey we found a young camel that had been killed by wolves.

On the return journey we found further evidence of illegal mining. A mining machine had broken down and been abandoned in the reserve. The Chinese let us set up one of the biggest nature reserves in the world, 155,000 square kilometers, but China is developing at a huge pace and there is a huge demand for minerals from all over the world. Illegal miners and legal miners are looking for mineral deposits all over the reserve and nobody can stop them. This is a huge problem for the Foundation, which only has 30 people to protect a 155,000 square kilometer reserve, an area the size of Bulgaria. We know the core areas where these wild camels are, and somehow we have to try to broker an arrangement whereby these areas are absolutely sacrosanct and the more peripheral areas are given over to development. I talked to two officials in the Sinyang provincial government on this topic and they said that they thought we could come to an agreement. Fortunately the area is a national reserve, which gives it the same status as a panda reserve. The money to protect it comes out of Beijing, not out of Urumchi (the capital of Xinyang). Had it been a provincial reserve our problems would have been much greater.

Mongolia also has wild camels, and the Foundation has a captive wild camel breeding centre there. It is the only place in the world apart from the zoo in Urumchi where the wild camel is confined. We set up the breeding centre in 2004 and are now seeking to turn over the management to the Mongolian authorities. After all, we are a very small foundation based in England and we cannot run a breeding centre on a daily basis. While we are in the process of handing the management of the centre back to the Mongolians we will continue to raise funds for specific projects at the centre.