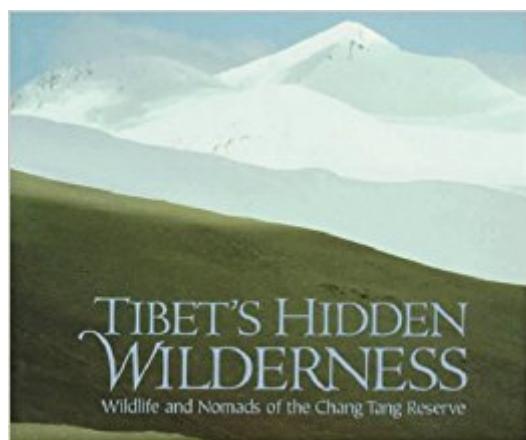


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Tibet's Hidden Wilderness: Wildlife And Nomads Of The Chang Tang Reserve



Synopsis

Tibet's Chang Tang ("Northern Plain") is a vast, remote area where ice-capped peaks soar over windswept steppe and arid plains. Its southern reaches are home to nomadic herders, but most of the region is the exclusive domain of a unique community of spectacular and rare mammals - such as wild yak and Tibetan antelope - most of which have seldom been seen, much less studied. For years, world-renowned wildlife biologist George Schaller longed to explore the Chang Tang, but Tibet's doors were closed. Finally, in 1988, Schaller became the first Westerner permitted to enter this uninhabited region. He sought to answer many basic questions about these unstudied animals. Largely as a result of the work of Schaller and his local colleagues, the Chinese government has set aside more than 125,000 square miles of this high-altitude terrain as a reserve - the second largest in the world. Profusely illustrated with Schaller's haunting photographs, Tibet's Hidden Wilderness is a unique record of one of the earth's most remote and least-known regions. It introduces us to the Chang Tang's majestic landscape, extraordinary wildlife, and traditional nomadic society and concludes with a hopeful plan that would allow the people and animals there to continue to live in harmony.

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Customer Reviews

Tibet's Hidden Wilderness is a beautiful coffee-table type book (albeit with a fair amount more text than your typical book of this genre) that contains wonderful photographs by the eminent wildlife researcher George B. Schaller. The subject of the book is the people, wildlife, and landscape of the

vast Chang Tang in northern Tibet. This land (Tibetan for Northern Plain), is one of "vast empty spaces and howling skies," a treeless steppe located above 15,000 feet, "windswept ranges" home to nomadic pastoralists with their herds of yak, sheep, and goats and a surprising amount of wildlife (several, such as the wild yak, chiru, kiang, Tibetan gazelle, Tibetan brown bear, and Tibetan argali sheep unique to the Tibetan Plateau). A forbidding area, hard to reach physically and also due to politics, Schaller was one of the first Westerners to travel through the region in decades when he started visiting the Chang Tang in the late 1980s (a fact he doesn't trumpet that much but authors in other books were quite impressed with). Granted hard-won permission to visit the region, he hoped to take the most of such a rare opportunity to study and help formulate a way to protect and manage such a large and virtually undamaged ecosystem. The entire region was uninhabited, even by nomads, as late as the 1870s when Russian Colonel Nikolai Przewalski traveled through the area and pastoralists didn't really start arriving until the 1950s when a road opened the region up for settlement. Though humans had started to make an impact on the Chang Tang Schaller, obviously in love with the region, dearly hoped to preserve the area from any further damage; he wrote that no one alive today has ever seen the American West as it was once was, was it massive bison herds and "its prairies unfenced, unplowed, and undamaged by sheep and cattle." He hoped to spare the Chang Tang such a fate. Instrumental in encouraging the Chinese government to establish one of the world's largest reserves in the Chang Tang, Schaller didn't stop there as he continued to research the land's wildlife, worked to educate nomads about the value of wildlife, help document poaching, and in general help the locals and Chinese officials make the reserve a real one, not just one on paper. He envisioned a multi-use sanctuary, one in which wildlife, livestock, and people could all coexist, but for that to happen there had to knowledge of the interactions between livestock and wildlife, in particular as it related to overgrazing. Schaller made a dozen journeys into the Chang Tang and on writing the book he debated on upon how to best present what he learned and saw. In the end, he decided to not write a guidebook with chapters on say nomads or wild yaks, a "tidy and logical presentation," as this would not convey the often unpredictable way in which his research was actually done as well as leaving out what he felt and saw at a personal level. In the end he decided upon a "book of incidents, facts, and feelings," each chapter dealing with a particular trip to the Chang Tang and relating the author's feelings, memories, and anecdotes tied to that specific journey. His first journey detailed in the book took place in June 1987. In it he vividly described entering the Chang Tang with a caravan of Bactrian camels, the area they traveled through so austere that they had to carry extra maize for the animals to eat, at times "an utterly tired and tan wasteland, so desolate that even birds avoided it." Nonetheless he did see wildlife, include

wild yak (only fourteen, a continual source of frustration on most trips as many times he encountered them in very small numbers) and the chiru, sometimes called the Tibetan antelope, a handsome animal that was in many ways the star of the book. The second expedition he discussed, July and August 1990, had a great deal of information on wildlife. He had beautiful descriptions and pictures of the kiang, describing the interaction of stallions and mares and how that a lone kiang or even a herd would race alongside their car for miles, gorgeous animals with "chestnut coats and gleaming white undersides." He saw more yaks this time, including a rare golden color phase of this animal, compared the Aru Basin in the Chang Tang in particular to the Serengeti; yaks were the equivalent to buffalo for instance, with the kiang taking the place of zebras, the migratory chiru similar to the migratory wildebeest, and the Tibetan gazelle very similar to Thomson's gazelles, and as with the Serengeti there were always animals in view. His June and July 1991 trip gave the reader a taste of one of the big problems with journeying in the Chang Tang (vehicles getting bogged down in the mud due to summer rains and melting snow), had good descriptions of life in a nomad's camp, and a long section of text and pictures of pilgrims and temples in Lhasa. He also showed examples of ancient stone tools he found and gave vivid descriptions and pictures of the homemade leg traps that poachers made to snare wildlife. I don't have the space in this review to adequately detail each journey. Though he has written a more academic book on the Tibetan plateau's wildlife I have nonetheless learned a good deal from reading this one. Two subjects he turned to again and were overgrazing issues (analyzing the overlap between the six main wildlife species and domestic animals) and the chiru, discussing their behavior, their biology (not actually antelope but a caprid, a member of a family that includes sheep and goats, only looking like antelope due to the "their lithe beauty and the male's long, slender horns"), and sadly the continuing poaching of them, as their wool was quite valuable, worth over \$600 a pound. Called shahtoosh, the fashion world's demand for them has been a death sentence for the chiru.

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