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A NOTE ON RHESUS MACAQUE MONKEYS IN TIBET, CHINA

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A Rhesus Macaque, *Macaca mulatta*, at c. 3350m/11,000' in Linzhi Prefecture, Southeast Tibet

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On an August 2000 visit to Linzhi Prefecture in SE Tibet, we were surprised to see brownish monkeys at about 3350m/11000' scrambling over rocky outcrops on the eastern side of the Nyang Chu Valley (also known as the Gyamda Valley) at a point some 40 km west northwest of Bayi. However, the troop, was too far away to allow a satisfactory identification of the species involved. Tibet is not often associated with monkeys. However, five species (possibly six) occur within the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR). These are the Black-and-White Snub-nosed Monkey, the Gray Langur, and three (possibly four) macaques.



Rhesus Macaques, *Macaca mulatta*, gather in a feeding area.

It turns out that macaques are fairly common on some slopes of the Nyang Valley

and in 2003 the TAR government established a monkey preserve in a north-south trending valley that drains into the Nyang from the south. This valley includes the settlement of Lingzé and features agriculture on the lower valley floor. Birches and pines dominant east facing slopes while oaks move into the middle valley floor and are the primary cover on west-facing slopes. Prior to our visit we heard that the animals protected near Lingzé were “golden monkeys” but obviously these could not be the famed Golden Monkey, *Pygathrix (Rhinopithecus) roxellana*, of Sichuan forests, so we were eager to see the primates.



When around food, Rhesus Macaques display considerable aggression towards other members of their troop as well as towards outsiders.

Upon arriving at the preserve on the morning of 09 May 2006 we found that in size, coloring, and behavior the monkeys were typical Rhesus Macaques, *M. mulatta* [see photographs]. Most Rhesus show a pronounced russet wash over the flanks but in this part of Tibet this reddish-orange color continued, in some individuals, up the

back and onto the crown, thus showing considerably more rufous than is usually seen on animals living in South Asia.

In the eastern Himalayan lowlands and adjacent plains south of Tibet, the Rhesus is the lowest elevation macaque and troops roam in both forest and along forest edges. In places they live in close association with humans. As one ascends the slopes of the eastern Himalayas, the lowland Rhesus is replaced, at moderate elevations [up to about 2286m/7500ft] by Assamese Macaques, *M. assamica*. The latter, slightly larger and darker than the Rhesus, features a russet wash over the shoulders. This is the macaque seen along roadsides as one approaches Darjeeling and Kalimpong.

In addition to the two species mentioned above, the eastern Himalayas harbors a macaque in the comparatively dry terrain of Tawang in northwestern Arunachal Pradesh where the monkey ascends to at least 3,500m/11,480ft. The range of this macaque, recently proposed as a new species, *M. munzala* [see Borges, p. 1], is currently unknown but it may occur in the Tsari area of Tibet.

A fourth macaque, the large and dark Tibetan Macaque, *M. thibetana*, lives in forests at moderate elevations in the extreme eastern Himalayas and east into Sichuan. Initially we thought that, despite the lack of heavy forest, the Nyang Valley macaques might be this species so were surprised to find Rhesus roaming here to a height of at least 3600m/12,000ft. Actually we should not have been taken aback as the Rhesus is a remarkably resilient and adaptable species and survives well in the winter snows of Gulmarg and Lidderwat in Kashmir.

However, this Nyang Rhesus population would seem to be isolated and not connected with others. This lack of linkage, though, may be due to our inadequate knowledge. While it is highly unlikely the Nyang monkeys have contact with Rhesus



This valley, to the south of the monkey feeding grounds, leads up to snow covered slopes. The dark, rounded trees in the foreground are oaks while the light green trees in the middle distance are birches.

population in the Himalayan foothills, there is every possibility that there is some gene flow between the Nyang population and others to the east. Indeed the macaques of the Wolong Panda Reserve not far from Chengdu, and some 900 km to the east, look much like those in the Nyang Valley. The Wolong animals also exhibit a pronounced reddish wash well up the back and onto the crown [see illustration]. And there is surely suitable macaque habitat in parts of the dry valleys of eastern Tibet. Indeed, Derek Martin, *pers. com.*, reports sightings of macaques in the Mekong Valley near Chamdo.

In a significant conservation effort, the entire Lingze valley, well beyond what the monkeys actually utilize, has been declared a preserve. This offers additional protection to Asian Black Bear, Blue Sheep and Harmon's Eared Pheasants, among others, and makes the valley an important cog in the overall Four Great Rivers Environmental Protection Plan that is now developing.

The monkey reserve is financed by the government, which has assigned wardens to look after the primates. The latter are fed from a wooden platform once a day in the summer and twice in the winter. This feeding attracts the primates to a field near Lingze town. We were told that the budget for monkey food and care is about



The feeding platform allows the caretaker to widely broadcast the food and this lessens squabbling.

100,000 Yuan [= US \$12,500] a year. One of the managers suggested that in three years the numbers of monkeys in the reserve had increased from about 300 to an estimated 1,000 individuals. Not all animals come to the feeding station at one time and during our May visit we noted some 200.

In the early 1980s village life of the Lingze Valley revolved around agriculture and logging. We were told, for example, that in 1980 about 20,000 m³ of lumber, mostly pine, was extracted from this valley. However, starting in 1990, a program to relocate the approximately 200 residents of the valley began, the villagers settling into a “model” town at the base of the valley where fifty percent of the cost of an individual house, often two-storied, was covered by the government and fifty percent by the villager involved. In most cases the villagers did not move far from traditional farmlands and some still till the soil near the red-roofed settlement. Certain activities, though, have been curtailed in the valley, including some of the agriculture and most of the logging. In 2006 the logging volume is expected to be about 2,000 m³ or one tenth of what it was sixteen years earlier. In addition, the cut timber is designated for local use and is not for export outside the community.

With the fine new Lhasa to Sichuan highway running the length of the Nyang Valley,

the addition of a new jet-capable airfield near the Yarlung Tsangpo, and with numerous recently constructed buildings, the whole region is preparing for mountain and ecotourism. The monkey preserve is part of this effort.



Looking north from the monkey feeding ground towards Lingzé town where a number of the houses are still under construction.

Currently, access to Lingze village and the preserve is somewhat limited by a rather rickety bridge over the Nyang Chu. Locals suggested that should a sturdier structure be laid, visitors, often from Sichuan and other provinces, could gain easier access to the region. In addition to a visit with the monkeys, the valley could provide multi-day camping and hiking opportunities that, with proper supervision, would not unduly stress the environment or animal populations. Entrance fees could become an important income source for the village and if a significant portion of these revenues were designated for the benefit the local population, with the villagers themselves directing spending, the proceeds could vastly add to the long-term viability of the park. Suitably managed activities in traditional use and adjoining zones will play an increasingly important role in the overall success of the Four Great Rivers Environmental Protection Plan.

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For further reference see:

Tawang Macaques:

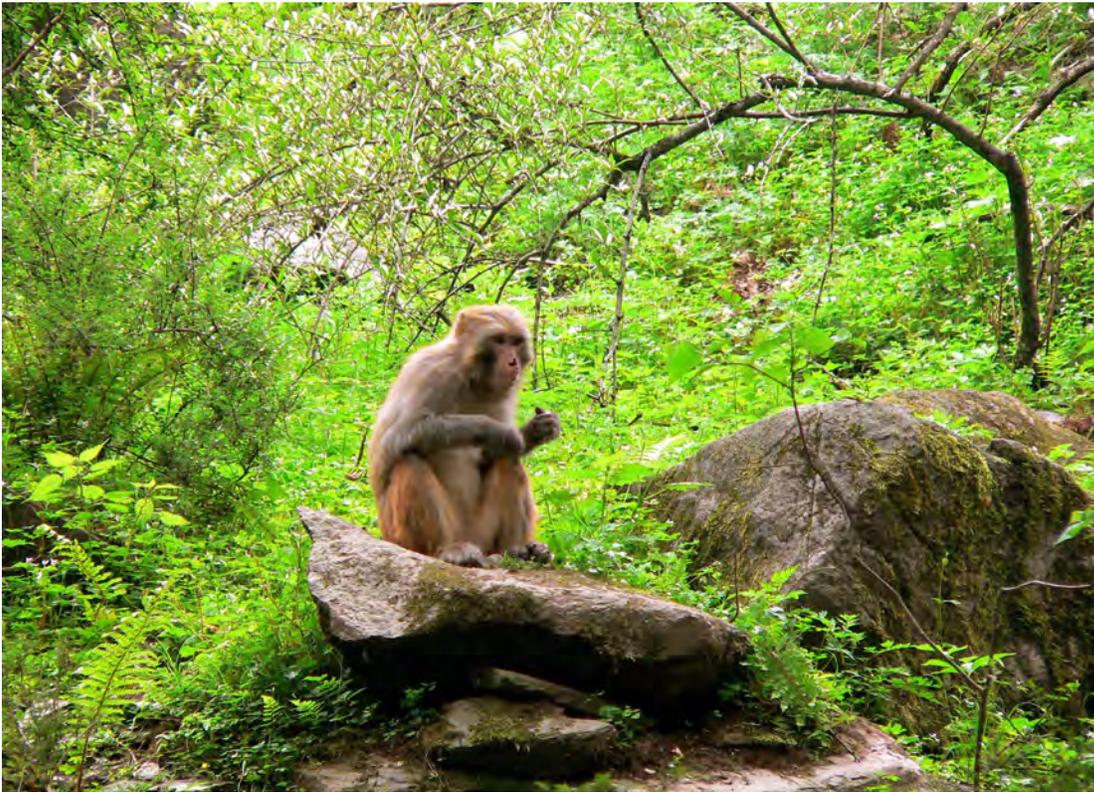
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The Rhesus of Wolong National Nature Preserve, Sichuan