

A GENERAL VIEW OF ARGALI SHEEP (Ovis ammon)  
IN CHINA

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The Chinese government considers the Argali sheep (Ovis ammon) an important component of the local large mammal fauna, and provides it with special protection from hunting and live capture.

The argali is a large species of wild sheep. It has a heavy body and relatively short legs. The pelage consists of short, coarse and thick hair, with longer hair around the neck region. The tail is short and hardly noticeable. The lachrymal glands are very obvious. Both sexes have horns. Those of the rams are heavy, long and wind in a spiral shape. Certain subspecies of Ovis ammon have larger horns than any other wild sheep. On the other hand, the horns of ewes are relatively short, thin and only slightly curved.

Though the argali is a typical alpine animal, its habitat is somewhat different from that of the Blue sheep (Pseudois nayaur). It prefers relatively open areas with bare rocks and the basis of higher mountains. The altitudinal distribution ranges from 3000 m to 5500 m. Argali are social animals. The most commonly observed band size is around a dozen. Rams and nursery bands are segregated except during the rutting season. Lambs and young animals are with the female bands. Argali use their habitat in a traditional manner. During winter heavy snow forces them to migrate to lower elevation near the valleys. In summer they move up again and spend that season near the permanent snowline. These seasonal migrations are observed every year. Argali are grazers, and the major component of their diet consists of plants of the grass family.

According to investigations by the author, argali reach sexual maturity after two years of age. The rutting season is in fall, and after a gestation period of about 180 days, lambs are born the following spring. Ewes only give birth to single lambs.

Argali range over much of central Asia. They have been divided into numerous subspecies, the following being recorded for China.

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| 1) <u>Ovis ammon hodgsoni</u>    | Blyth, 1941      |
| 2) <u>Ovis ammon darwini</u>     | Przewalski, 1883 |
| 3) <u>Ovis ammon polii</u>       | Blyth, 1841      |
| 4) <u>Ovis ammon dalaillamae</u> | Przewalski, 1888 |
| 5) <u>Ovis ammon sairensis</u>   | Lydecker, 1898   |
| 6) <u>Ovis ammon littledalei</u> | Lydecker, 1902   |

Among the subspecies noted, the author is only familiar with the following three: O.a. hodgsoni, O.a. darwini, and O.a. polii. Further investigations and taxonomic research is required to clarify the status of the other subspecies in the future. Argali have a wide distribution in China, but for many years proper conservation efforts for this species were not in existence. Therefore, argali are almost extinct in certain areas now. For example, in the

Helan Mountains in Ningxia, argali were widespread in the past, but there is no recent record about this species in that region now. Also, in the mountain region of the Huanqyuan County west of Xining City, argali used to be recorded regularly, while there are no recent observations.

Among the three subspecies listed above, which the author is familiar with, *O.a. hodgsoni* has the largest distribution. Its habitat ranges over Tibet, Qinghai and Kansu. In remote and inaccessible areas the population size of this sheep is considerable. On the other hand, *O.a. polii* is in China only found in the district of Xinjiang. It is much less numerous than the Tibet sheep (*O.a. hodgsoni*). The third subspecies, *O.a. darwini*, is distributed over the districts of Hebei, Shansi, Inner Mongolia, Shensi as well as certain localities in Ningxia. However, the population size is small.

It has to be admitted, that conservation work is inadequate in China. In certain respects, it has only begun recently. It must be strengthened in the days to come. The government departments concerned ought to take effective steps to devote much attention to conservation efforts as well as to education work among the public. Violations of conservation laws, formulated by the government must be acted on with prosecution. At the same time the government must assist local people and agencies with their protection and conservation efforts, by carrying out supplementary feeding during winters, conduct relevant research projects, support the development of enhancement measures, and cooperate and exchange experience with conservation organizations abroad. The author believes that great progress would be achieved in this respect before long.