I first visited Tibet in 1995, as a Ph.D. student enrolled at Beijing Normal University. To reach the study site in southeastern Tibet, I traveled for 3 days in a jeep from Lhasa to a small town, and for another 3 days riding a horse through virgin forests. I stayed there for 6 months to study the ecology and social behavior of Tibetan eared pheasants. In 1997, after I joined Wuhan University as a faculty member, I continued my work from a Buddhist nunnery in the mountains around the middle of the Yarlung Tsangpo River in southern Tibet. The nunnery served as my field station for studying alpine birds until 2004. Since then, I have focused my research on grassland birds in northern Tibet.

Doing fieldwork on the cold, windy, and oxygen-poor Tibetan Plateau is a challenge for anybody. I have struggled through deep valleys, climbed steep cliffs, cooked my meals using firewood for fuel, and lain in an unheated hut without electricity, missing my family. Nevertheless, the thrill of discovering the unknown world has eased the physical and emotional hardships. It’s fun to probe the enigmas of the highland birds’ natural history, which ornithologists have never before unraveled.

Besides academic payoffs, fieldwork offers emotional and spiritual rewards. The molecules and cells that other biologists study in their labs are full of wonder, but they can’t be directly seen or heard. In contrast, mountains and glaciers, rivers and lakes, and plants and animals excite the senses, inspiring anyone with poetry in their souls. I’m a conservationist and amateur writer of fairy tales. Getting into the fantastic wild of Tibet through fieldwork feeds my imagination and inspires me to view the world in ways that go beyond science.

Gaining an in-depth understanding of local culture is another unique charm of fieldwork. I have watched Buddhist nuns chanting to morning bells and evening drums. I have experienced the generosity of Tibetan villagers who, despite the hardships they have suffered, always gave me as much help as they could when I needed shelter, food, horses, and dogs.

Fieldwork teaches me that struggle can lead to joy. After an exhausting search through thorny undergrowth, I have the pleasure of discovering a bird’s nest. After hours of climbing, sleeping in a rough bed under the stars is a delight. And all that physical hardship makes my body stronger. While sitting at high elevations, a person burns far more calories than she or he would at rest in the lowlands, according to physiologists. Add to that the trekking and climbing, and I return from fieldwork with a bonus in fitness.

I cherish my memories of field time: singing loudly on horseback, petting the villager’s dog that had safeguarded me against bears, getting lost in forests filled with misty rain. All those memories are a kind of wealth—a reward that goes beyond the scientific papers I have published about my findings.

My attitude toward fieldwork is influencing my students. Following in my footsteps, they go to the Tibetan Plateau every year, dedicating their youth, talent, and love to alpine ornithology. I like to think they feel as fortunate and happy as I do.

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The rewards of roughing it
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