

An early claim of Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens* from Vietnam

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Abstract

There remains no proof that Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens* inhabited Lao PDR or Vietnam in historical times, but in 1904, a generally reputable account of the mammals of Indochina (accompanying results of the Pavie expedition) stated, without caveat, that it occurred in Tonkin, the northernmost part of Vietnam. No basis is given for this statement so its accuracy is unclear; but it expands suggestions of Red Panda occurrence from solely within hunters' memoirs into the scientific literature.

Keywords: geographic range, historical opinion, Pavie expedition, Tonkin

In a recent review of reports of Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens* from south and southeast of its known geographic range, Duckworth (2011) discussed extensively the history of such reports from Vietnam and nearby countries. The earliest source traced for Red Panda in Indochina was Roussel (1913), but the compilation overlooked de Pousargues (1904). Moreover, other early sources from this region (excepting simple tabulated lists of species believed to inhabit Indochina) are all hunters' memoirs; de Pousargues's (1904) text discusses the results of the Pavie scientific exploration during 1879–1895 and provides a comprehensive overview of the mammals of Indochina.

De Pousargues (1904: 521) wrote that “cette petite espèce méridionale est représentée vers le Nord, dans le Tonkin [the northernmost part of modern-day Vietnam], par une autre plus robuste, l'Ours du Tibet, *Ursus tibetanus* [sic] (G. Cuv.), qu'accompagnent quelques individus du genre unispécifique, *Ailurus fulgens* (F. Cuv.), ou Panda éclatant” (this small southern [in Indochina] species [Sun Bear *Ursus malayanus*] is replaced to the north, in Tonkin, by Asian Black Bear *U. tibetanus* and by several individuals of a monospecific genus, the Red Panda). Nothing in de Pousargues (1904) illuminates the meaning behind ‘several individuals’. That it is not simply a text compilation error is indicated by the Table of mammals of Indochina on p. 545, which indicates again (by use of a ‘ditto’ mark) that Red Panda inhabits Tonkin.

De Pousargues (1904) did not detail his basis for believing that Red Panda occurred in Tonkin (the northernmost part of Vietnam). It seems unlikely that the expedition had acquired any specimens of it, because the collection was exhibited in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris (MNHN) shortly after its return to France in 1895, yet Delacour (1940), who used the MNHN collections extensively in his account of the mammals of Indochina, did not countenance the occurrence of Red Panda there. However, the ship carrying the Pavie collection was wrecked off the Somali coast and although much of the collection survived, some cases of material were lost (de Pousargues 1904), so it is possible that Red Panda specimen(s) had been collected. All the other carnivores stated by de Pousargues (1904, table and text) to occur in Indochina without caveat are now known to do so, independently from de Pousargues, in the regions mentioned for them: this statement of Red Panda occurrence gains credibility because it is not accompanied by multiple obviously implausible claims. (The listing for Thailand of the mongoose *Herpestes griseus* is here unidentifiable as this name was applied historically to all of *H. ichneumon*, *H. auropunctatus* and *H. edwardsii* [Van Rompaey & Colyn 1996], and the possibility of occurrence of *H. auropunctatus* in Thailand [also listed by Pavie directly] remains unclear

[Veron *et al.* 2006]; and the listing of the Sundaic *Felis diardi* is a simple nomenclatural error for the northern Southeast Asian *Felis* [now = *Neofelis*] *nebulosa*.)

De Pousargues's (1904) laconic treatment of Red Panda, with no comment that occurrence in Tonkin was surprising in the context of contemporary perceptions of Red Panda distribution, suggests the possibility that yet earlier statements of the species in Vietnam may exist. Alternatively, it may simply reflect de Pousargues's (1896: 180) earlier expressed opinion that “d'un autre côté, toute la partie Sud du Yun-nan ne diffère pas géographiquement de la Birmanie, du Haut Tonkin et du Sud-Est de la Chine, et nous retrouvons dans les types mammalogiques rapportés de cette région par le prince Henri d'Orléans la plupart des espèces signalées déjà par Anderson sur les frontières du Yun-nan et de la Birmanie, et par Swinhoe dans les provinces sud-orientales de l'empire chinois” (in contrast [to the similarities between north-west Yunnan and Szechwan], all southern Yunnan resembles, geographically, Burma, upper Tonkin and southeast China, and most of the mammal forms reported from southern Yunnan by Prince Henry d'Orléans [the collection under discussion] have already been found by Anderson along the Yunnan–Burma frontier or by Swinhoe in southeast China): de Pousargues's (1896) noted (*vide* Anderson) that Red Panda was particularly common on the Yunnan–Myanmar frontier, and so would not have been particularly surprised to find it in Tonkin.

It remains difficult to see how such a distinctive animal could have inhabited the area into the late 19th century and presumably into the first half of the 20th century, the main era of specimen-collecting expeditions, and not have been found. Two Red Panda specimens purchased in Hanoi in 1931 were taken at the time to be from international trade (Duckworth 2011), raising the possibility that de Pousargues's (1904) view was also based, unbeknownst to him, on trade animals from Hanoi or elsewhere in Tonkin. A fair amount of Vietnam's northern highlands lie at altitudes suitable for Red Panda, but habitat would be atypical (it is not annually snowbound, for example), so it is conceivable that Red Panda did inhabit Vietnam but was eradicated before being collected or otherwise securely documented there.

In conclusion, the mention of Red Panda in de Pousargues (1904) makes it less surprising that hunters were discussing the species in the memoirs of Indochina, secure in the knowledge from its listing in this generally authoritative source that it did indeed live there.

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