

An Adventure in Search of the Chinese Xenosaur

Looking back, the story of my trip should start with a description of the immense amount of time I spent performing detailed searches for information on the Chinese Xenosaur. Time that yielded very little helpful information for what I was slowly beginning to realize would be a difficult goal of finding a Xenosaur in the wild reaches of south-eastern China. It seemed that every road I went down yielded the same basic information that consisted either of a description of the lizard or how to care for them in captivity (which I have since learned is fairly prevalent in Europe).

I had formed a picture in my mind of what China was like, especially the places that I would be spending the majority of my time at. The pictures that I had formed all drew from photos on the internet and descriptions from various books and magazines that I had read. As my anxiety reached one of its highest points, the day for me to leave finally came and I lifted off in the plane for what would be a grueling long flight to China. After getting my luggage, I stepped out of the airport and into the chaotic Beijing taxi realm which quickly brought my senses back from the low point they had reached during the 14 hour flight. Beijing is a spectacular Mecca of activity and hustle that I really was in awe of. After a short ride to a predetermined youth hostel, I was officially on my own in China. Being on my own sparked strong feelings of excitement and anticipation for what was to come. I spent the next couple of days getting things that I needed while I was in a place where I knew I could get them. I figured it was a good idea to get these assorted things as I had no idea if they would be available once I reached the more remote parts I was soon to be in.

I had successfully secured a ticket for the short two hour flight from Beijing into Guilin. Guilin and the surrounding towns would serve as a central point for my excursions into the smaller more remote towns where I wanted to look for Xenosaurs. Seeing one of these little lizards was the soul drive behind my actions for the next couple of weeks. I also needed to get to the University that employed the Chinese scientist that carried out his research on these extremely endangered creatures.

As the plane approached Guilin, I was finally introduced to the immense natural beauty that I had hoped China would offer. Jagged peaks of limestone (karst) created formations that comprised entire mountain ranges. These steep geologic formations were covered in dense bright green vegetation and undoubtedly housed some of the most spectacular wildlife that made this region if China so special to me. At one point on the bus ride out of the center of town, I saw two monkeys sitting on some rocks near the top of one of these peaks. As the road winded, this same landscape continued on for miles and it didn't take long for me to feel completely lost. It was just as well that I had a good road map to keep me informed of where I was. I don't know if it is the same with others, but even with my map I always had a hint of doubt in the back of my mind that I wasn't on the right path. This didn't end up being the case as I got to my destination successfully, but none-the-less this feeling was a constant companion of mine through my trip.

I found a place to stay for a couple of nights as I tried to familiarize myself with the local layout. I was also on the hunt for anyone with local information on Xenosaurs. This was a tough goal as everyone I talked to wanted to take me to see monkeys or river

rafting. It didn't take long to get down the areas layout which paved the way for my trip down to the University to meet with the Xenosaur researchers.

I made my way onto the campus and began to show people the name of the scientist who had studied these creatures at the University. As I expected I was unsuccessful at first. In a fortuitous stroke of luck I stumbled upon the English department of the University, where I was able to make friends with a couple of girls that were studying by watching the daily news in English. They spoke just enough English and thought that they could help. We made our way over to the biology department where I was to be given the first significant setback of my adventure. The professor that had spent a large part of his professional career studying the Xenosaur, had retired some 4 months prior to my arrival. Needless to say this hampered my spirits as meeting with him was a big part of my plan. I had hoped that he could guide me to places where these illusive little lizards still thrived. However, my low spirits were quickly given a boost as the professor that had taken over his position was in that day and would soon be returning from lunch. I decided to wait until he returned in hopes that he could shed more light on the situation.

Some two hours later he had made his way back from a long lunch and was only two stories up from where I was. My two translators and I made our way up to his office. He was a very nice man and relayed to us that the retired professor used to have a small group of live Xenosaurs that he used for his studies. They kept the animals on campus even after he has retired. Approximately 2 weeks after he retired a group of guys broke into the exhibit and stole the live animals. I asked if they had any on campus still, he told me to wait and he went back into his office. A couple of minutes later he returned

holding a small jar. Inside the jar was a preserved Xenosaur that had died during the studies that had gone on over the years. After collecting some photos with my two translators and the scientists at the University, I thanked them and departed with plans of beginning my searches for the Xenosaur.



My first Xenosaur at the University

I had read of a small river valley that Xenosaurs had been found at in the past. This valley lied outside of the town of Guilin and was to be where I would start my searches for a Xenosaur. I had done plenty of reading on where they had been found in the past, but had no idea if they still persisted in these same general areas. The difficulty of my position was that even if they were still there I didn't know how long I needed to search in order to see one. I was hoping that they would be readily visible resting on branches above water, a situation they had been most commonly observed in during past surveys by those who studies them. I had read plenty about the weather during the

summer months, however a lifetime in California had not prepared me what I was to be in while in southern China. The temperatures were nothing to write home about but the humidity tested my resolve on a daily basis. As soon as the sun came up the humidity began to rise and make conditions tough. I would literally be soaked in my own sweat as I sat in the shade eating breakfast. As I went about daily business during the mid day conditions, I needed to take in copious amounts of water to avoid quick dehydration from all the perspiring I was doing.

The vegetation along the shores of many of the local waterways was very dense and difficult to traverse during my searches. I decided one day to take a small raft ride down a short section of the river in hopes of being able to locate spots that were open and void of this dense vegetation. Walking through head high vegetation in a remote part of a country that hosts numerous species of extremely venomous snakes did not sit well with me. The raft trip did exactly what I had hoped it would do and I now was able to pinpoint exactly where I was to spend time searching. The somewhat open banks were exactly what I was looking for and sparked images of Xenosaurs on every branch. I had been looking for about two hours in this area when I heard something make a splash in the water some 5 feet away. I turned to see the water ripple and whatever had made the splash was gone. Along the banks were many water birds but the noise still intrigued me. I marked the place with a couple of rocks as I planned on returning the next day to check this area again, especially this particular spot where I heard the noise. I didn't see anything the rest of this day and I called it quits as night approached. I enjoyed the early evenings, because as the sun set the silhouette of the surrounding mountains was second to none in sheer beauty. I will forever remember these nights walking along the river.

I returned the next day to the same area of the day before and went right back to the spot of the splash I heard. I had my camera out just in case there was a Xenosaur on any of the braches. I moved slowly and examined every branch I could see. I took a step closer and noticed a movement off to my left. I turned quickly to see the first glimpse of the little lizard that had brought me thousands of miles to a location on the other side of the earth. An adult Xenosaur slipped into the water some 5 feet from where I was standing. I had looked over the area where it was but was unable to detect it. Later on in my adventure, I would learn that this would be the rule as opposed to the exception. Xenosaurs are perfectly camouflaged with the shadows and branches that they live within. I would return to this exact spot daily for the next week or so. On a few days this individual was not at the same location, and on several others the same routine of me sneaking in for a photo only to have it in a different spot where it dove into the water as I got closer. Needless to say this week was one of mixed emotions. I had successfully done what I came here for and that was to see one of these endangered creatures in the wild parts of southeast China. On the other hand I wanted to photograph these creatures and if possible get my hands on one.

I spent time in and around other areas that I thought would harbor these secretive and well hidden creatures. I was able to come across 3 more individuals all under the same conditions as the first. They were all along the edges of some type of water course and all dove straight in when they felt I got close enough. Through my experiences with other lizard species in North America, some are really calm and you can approach them easily and other are extremely nervous. Xenosaurs seem to fall into the later category. The habitat that they live in also makes them difficult to observe and get close to them.

More times than not they saw me coming before I saw them. It was at this point they flung themselves into the safety of the water. Accompanying me on many of my excursions was a Chinese man who said his name was Marcos (I thought this was odd given that Marcos was not a name I expected to come across in China). He was a wonderful companion and a great translator for my time spent wondering the more remote parts of China. On numerous occasions he set up wonderful lunches for us in the small villages we were near. Heaping amounts of wonderful authentic food were offered to us by various hosts in various villages. None of them wanted to accept my money but I insisted that they take it for I wanted to show them my appreciation. I made sure to be really generous as I felt the hospitality and joy I received from these lunches and dinners was among the most rewarding time I spent in China.



River habitat where I found my first Xenosaur

Other Miscellaneous Highlights I Want to Share

As I began to get established in the areas that I was spending most of my time looking for Xenosaurs, the local villagers began to associate me with the reptiles I was looking for. This association was one that would later lead me to what ended up being the most dangerous situation on the entire trip. During one of the many hot and humid days, a farmer approached me and motioned for me to follow him. This happened to be one of the days that I chose not to have a translator accompany me. The presence of a translator can often not have a value attached to it, but I quickly found that I also immensely enjoyed being by myself. On this day I was unable to communicate with the farmer that I was now following. I didn't get a bad feeling about where he was taking me. He opened the door that lead into a small single room building that had old concrete floors. As I entered into the room I could not believe I was looking at. He was an animal collector and had many types of local creatures including several mongoose, birds, lizards, snakes, and turtles. I was well aware that most if not all of the animals I was looking at were destined for dinner plates in the surrounding area. This bothered me to some degree but I knew that it was part of a long standing culture and belief system surrounding the powers that certain animals hold when eaten.

In one of the corners was a small cage that contained a rather large snake. I knelt down to look at it and the man quickly came over to the corner where I was a motioned for me to take a step back. The snake had been making and odd noise that initially drew

my attention to it. As I quickly learned, this was not a snake to be taken lightly or approached in the manner that I did. For what I was looking at was a Chinese spitting cobra that could easily spray venom the short distance that I was from it. This ranked up there with one of the most dangerous situations that I came across during my time in China.

Summary

My adventures in China were everything that I wanted them to be and more. Interacting with the quality of people that I met was awesome. The people were extremely kind and respectful, both virtues that escape many people here in the states. As far as the natural beauty goes, there were parts that blew my mind and inspired me to return one day in the future. I was disappointed to not get photos of the few wild Xenosaurs that I came across, but when I take a step back and realize that these are one of the worlds most endangered lizards I realize how privileged I was to see them while they still persist in the wild. I brought home more stories than I could possibly relate in this report. I thank those who selected me and funded my trip. This is something that I would have never been able to due without opportunities that you guys have given students like myself

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