

Sneaky male kiangs and their shifty courting strategy

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Tibetan wild ass of the Trans-Himalayas. Credit: Brill

Wild equids such as Spanish Mustangs and wild Burroughs captivate and delight people around the world. To many, these animals represent freedom and adventure. However, these iconic animals are often

persecuted because they compete with livestock for limited forage and water. Researcher Prameek M. Kannan, a Master's graduate from Pace University's Environmental Science Program (ENS), travelled to some of the harshest terrain on Earth in order to study the behavior of the most elusive and unknown of all wild equids—the Tibetan wild ass of the Trans-Himalayas. While attempting to establish the first ethograms for this species—a descriptive analysis of their behaviors—Mr. Kannan discovered something unusual.

While most sexually active male equids stick to the same territory, he observed a few that were entering other male's territories and courting the females within. Supervised by Dr. Michael H. Parsons of nearby Hofstra University in collaboration with the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF-India), he quantified these behaviors and arrived at some stark conclusions. Whereas male equids have long-been thought to consist mostly of two groups: social bachelors, and solitary, territorial males, they discovered a third male type which they have since named "transients."

As published in *Behaviour*, they determined that because 'transients' routinely move into—and retreat from—other male territories, and based on reduced time spent around other males, increased time spent courting females within other male's territories, with minimal time spent in each courtship event, they appear to employ "sneaky" tactics to secure mating opportunities before hastily retreating.



Tibetan wild ass of the Trans-Himalayas. Credit: Brill

Mr. Kannan expressed this outcome as "a joy to learn something about the unique courtship behavior of a maligned species that has not been thoroughly studied." While Mr. Kannan has now moved onto working in a tiger-infested area mitigating human-wildlife conflict, he is excited about the prospects of geneticists coming to study the transient males to find whether these animals have adapted a true alternative mating system, or whether this social class is a transitional period where bachelors—not yet ready to challenge a rival—must pass through.

Parsons added "while I'm excited about this discovery for science, I am equally pleased for the success of a recent graduate that gave up the creature comforts of modern living in NYC, to endure rough field conditions that persistently challenged his health and ability to cope in some of the harshest environments on Earth."

"To me, overcoming the challenges of science in such hostile environments should be celebrated, especially when it results in naming a new social class."

More information: Faith E. Parsons et al. The discovery of the 'transient' male Tibetan wild ass: alternative 'sneaky' mating tactics in a wild equid?, *Behaviour* (2016). [DOI: 10.1163/1568539X-00003407](https://doi.org/10.1163/1568539X-00003407)

Provided by Brill

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