

the species to his Chinese colleagues. Yet he is drawn back year after year to the Changtang, the great northern plain on the Tibetan Plateau, to study species such as the chiru, the wild ass called the kiang (*Equus kiang*) and the wild yak (*Bos mutus*), as well as snow leopards. *Tibet Wild* (Island, 2012) chronicles the challenges and joys of conducting research on Earth's highest plateau.

"One reason I like working in China is that the people are very pragmatic," he says. He is only just back from participating in a snow-leopard survey on the plateau, where winter temperatures frequently fall below -30°C . In the new year, he is off to Iran to check on the Asiatic cheetah (*Acinonyx jubatus venaticus*).

Given that Schaller has witnessed the destruction of habitats, the fragmentation of populations and the trade in endangered species, is he disillusioned? Although he acknowledges that apathy, greed and corruption threaten nature, he recognizes major achievements. The population of mountain gorillas has recovered to roughly where it was around 50 years ago; China has created more than 60 national parks across the giant panda's range; the illegal poaching of chiru

G. SCHALLER



Schaller, a herdsman and a snow leopard.

for their fur has been brought under some control in China. The Changtang Nature Reserve, established in 1993 as a direct result of Schaller's work, is larger than Italy.

Schaller's legacy also has a strong human dimension. "The thing I treasure most is leaving behind young biologists who worked with me and who will carry on to train the next generation," he says. "I get uplifted all the time. I see the progress." ■

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Books in brief



Searching for the Oldest Stars: Ancient Relics from the Early Universe

Anna Frebel (translated by Ann M. Hentschel) PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS (2015)

As a "stellar archaeologist", Anna Frebel tracks metal-poor stars — the "ancient messengers" that kick-started the cosmos's chemical evolution. Her discoveries include a Milky Way star 13.2 billion years old and superannated stars in dwarf galaxies that orbit our own. In this account of her work, she neatly balances the technical and the personal — not least in chapters on the mesmerizing slog of nightly observations, many using Chile's 6.5-metre Magellan telescopes.



Patteralia

Jude Stewart BLOOMSBURY (2015)

We are often only half-aware of graphic patterns such as paisley or polka dots, or the patterns that pulsate in nature, from fractals to flocking birds. Jude Stewart here brings "patteralia" to the fore and crisply decodes the mathematical, scientific and cultural connotations behind it. Dip in for some pointed erudition on the tension between comforting algebraic numbers and their 'transcendental', patternless cousins; varieties of military camouflage from chocolate chip to tiger stripe; and the revolution wrought by the programmable, futuristic Jacquard loom, demonstrated in 1801.



Great Soul of Siberia: Passion, Obsession, and One Man's Quest for the World's Most Elusive Tiger

Sooyong Park GREYSTONE (2015)

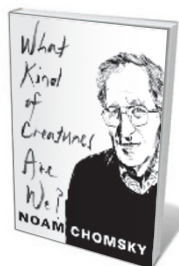
Just 350 Siberian tigers from a once thousands-strong population pad through Russia's northeastern birch forests: massive, elusive, "burning bright". For this astonishing ethological study, South Korean film-maker Sooyong Park spent two decades alternately tracking the beasts and holed up in underground bunkers, seeking glimpses of them in subzero weather. His paean to one of the world's biggest cats has a piercing immediacy distilled from thousands of heart-stopping sightings and encounters. A landmark achievement.



First Bite: How We Learn to Eat

Bee Wilson BASIC (2015)

With televised cake-baking compulsive viewing and Western obesity levels at an all-time high, humanity's relationship with food is a strange melange. For her lucid survey, journalist Bee Wilson uses how we eat as children as a springboard for discussions of the wilder shores of adult consumption. Along the way, she dishes up an impressive range of research in neuroscience and nutrition on topics from the evolution of the Japanese diet to babies' self-directed preferences for, say, turnips, as demonstrated in the fascinating, flawed work of twentieth-century US paediatrician Clara Davis.



What Kind of Creatures Are We?

Noam Chomsky COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS (2015)

At 87, linguist Noam Chomsky is still nimbly tackling big questions about human nature — here, in less than 200 pages. Hanging his analysis off palaeontologist Ian Tattersall's theory that the human sensibility was born 50,000–100,000 years ago, he remakes his case for biology-based linguistics, discusses the "new mysterianism" that is delimiting humanity's capacity for comprehension, and extols libertarian socialism. However, although thoughtful individually, these arguments betray their origins as lectures and fail to gel. **Barbara Kiser**