



A Tropical Birding custom tour

SICHUAN, CHINA:
(Including the Southern Shans Pre-tour Extension)



WHITE-THROATED TIT

One of 5 endemic tits recorded on the tour.

21 May – 12 June, 2010

Tour Leader: Sam Woods

All photos were taken by Sam Woods/Tropical Birding on this tour, except one photo.

The Central Chinese province of Sichuan provided some notable challenges this year: still recovering from the catastrophic “Wenchuan 5.12” earthquake of 2008, the area is undergoing massive reconstruction. All very positive for the future of this scenically extraordinary Chinese region, but often a headache for tour arrangements, due to last minute traffic controls leading us to regularly rethink our itinerary in the Wolong area in particular, that was not far from the epicenter of that massive quake. Even in areas seemingly unaffected by the quake, huge road construction projects created similar challenges to achieving our original planned itinerary. However, in spite of regular shuffling and rethinking, the itinerary went ahead pretty much as planned with ALL sites visited. Other challenges came this year in the form of heavy regular rains that plagued us at Wawu Shan and low cloud that limited visibility during our time around the breathtaking Balang Mountain in the Wolong region. With some careful trickery, sneaking our way through week-long road blocks under cover of darkness, birding through thick and thin (mist, cloud and rains) we fought against all such challenges and came out on top. This led to a highly productive bird tour, with around 300 species scored in our time, including a fantastic tally of 9 male pheasants all seen well by all. Indeed it could be argued that pheasants are **THE** reason to visit Sichuan, and no one on this tour would disagree, both Bob and Ken picking pheasant species for ALL five spots in their top five birds of the tour! Not only did we do well in terms of pheasant species, but the views were spectacular of almost all of them, from the male **Golden Pheasant** that lingered on an open trail at **Wuyipeng**, to the flurry of nine **Lady Amherst’s Pheasants** that were seen during one incredible day, gracing the road up Wawu Shan’s quiet mountain road, to the male **Temminck’s Tragopan** that used an open breeze block by the road up **Wawu** as a calling post in the early morning mist, allowing us to admire his intricate patterning through our well-trained scope! As if that was not enough we should also mention the surprise **Silver Pheasant** that shocked us near the base of **Emei Shan** early on the tour; and we should not forget the pair of **Chinese Monals** feeding quietly in a flower-sprinkled alpine meadow up on **Balang Shan**; or the marvelous pair of **Blue Eared-Pheasants** that showed up in the spruce-cloaked slopes of **Baxi**.

However, to talk only of pheasants is to do a massive injustice to the rest of Sichuan’s bird life. From the impossibly cute **Crested and Svartsov’s Tit-Warblers**, to the striking **Himalayan Rubythroats** singing their hearts out on the dwarf shrubs on top of **Balang Shan**, to the glowing purple forms of male **Grandalas** feeding, ground-tyrant-like, in high flower-clad mountain meadows on **Balang Mountain**, to the haul of **8 parrotbills** and **11 pink-flushed rosefinch species**, not to mention **12 laughingthrushes** and **27 “warblers”**, Sichuan has an amazing array of birding possibilities.

Along with this magical birding, Sichuan provided us with some of the very best food offerings available on any Tropical Birding tour. Even in earthquake-stricken areas, like Wolong, where the remnants of the former hotels still lie ghost-like for all to see, and accommodation options therefore remain limited, our local contacts worked tirelessly to ensure we had a good feed. And what a feed we had, meal after meal, providing varied and mouthwatering culinary delights to feast on throughout. In addition to the fine food, magical birds, we came upon some of Sichuan’s most spectacular scenery, from the

*mighty mountain of **Balang**, to the wide open flower-sprinkled plains of the **Tibetan Plateau** rimmed with snow-capped giants all around. Lastly, and by no means least, Sichuan produced some striking and unforgettable images of China, and an absorbing insight into the culture of this vibrant Asian country and surging economic powerhouse. Colorful Tibetan settlements drew our attentions away from the birds, and vividly-colored prayer flags formed a colorful backdrop to our mountain birding in other areas, while constant, intriguing insights into the intricacies of Han and Tibetan cultures were provided by our ever-attentive local guides, Jane and Philip, which left all of us with unforgettable memories of this gripping Oriental tour, that remains quite unlike any other.*

Tour Itinerary:

May 21	Arrival/night Chengdu
May 22	Panda Breeding Center & Du Fu's Cottage/night Chengdu
May 23	Du Fu's Cottage & Emei Shan/night Emei Shan
May 24	Emei Shan & Wawu Shan/night Wawu Shan
May 25-27	Wawu Shan/nights Wawu Shan
May 28	Wawu Shan to Dujiyian/night Dujiyian
May 29	am Qingchenshan to Sawan (Wolong) pm Balang Shan/night Sawan (Wolong)
May 30	Balang Shan/night Sawan (Wolong)
May 31	Wuyipeng/night Sawan (Wolong)
June 1 - 3	Balang Shan & Wolong area/nights Rilong
June 4	Rilong to Mengbishan, Maerkang/night Maerkang
June 5	Mengbishan, Maerkang/night Maerkang
June 6	Maerkang to Ruo Er Gai, Tibetan Plateau/night Ruo Er Gai
June 7	Baxi Valley & Ruo Er Gai area, Tibetan Plateau/night Ruo Er Gai
June 8	Baxi Valley & Gong Gang Lin Pass/night Jiuzhaigou
June 9 - 10	Jiuzhaigou/nights Jiuzhaigou
June 11	Jiuzhaigou to Chengdu/night Chengdu
June 12	Departure

Good advice on a Chengdu sign...



**May 22 CHENGDU
(PANDA BREEDING CENTER & DU FU'S THATCHED COTTAGE)**

Our Chinese adventure began in the provincial capital of **Chengdu**. Often referred to as “*the biggest city that no one has ever heard of*”, by virtue of its massive 11 million or so population, the city is located within the low-lying Red Basin, at an altitude of just 460m (1510ft) or so. For us this would be the lowest of the areas visited on the tour, that in combination with the lower slopes of Emei Shan would provide some lowland species not possible during the rest of the tour which focused on higher areas in the *Qionglai* mountain range, the grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau, and the scenically spectacular high wooded valley of Jiuzhaigou.

Right off the bat, from the bus, we kick started our laughingthrush list with some boisterous **White-browed Laughingthrushes** bouncing along the roadside curb en-route to Chengdu’s famous **Giant Panda Breeding Center**. I had to quickly alert the group that this was no *typical* laughingthrush, and that the other decidedly more furtive species would not be quite like that! Once in the well-trimmed parkland within the breeding center we began picking up some of the commoner species typical of the Red Basin, like the gregarious **Black-throated Tit**, large parties of which were roaming the ornamental gardens and neatly-kept shrubbery within the grounds. A couple of “subdued”

Oriental Greenfinches stood up for us and posed on open branches in the sweltering humidity, and large dusky shapes proved to be our first “**Mandarin**” **Blackbirds**, a large distinctive “race” of **Eurasian Blackbird** that may well earn full, specific status in the future. Chattering in the trees above led us to a couple of **Asian Paradise Flycatchers** moving nervously through the treetops, and although it



took a little time, finally the tinkling of the strange **Rufous-faced Warbler** was heard coming from a sparse patch of bamboo, where it was soon coaxed out in order to give us close up studies of this odd warbler. Another common species around the center were the “bundles” of noisy **Chinese Bulbuls**. However, pride of place in the morning went to the mixed party of *parrotbills* chattering within, and twitching the low shrubbery, that included both **Ashy-throated** and **Vinous-throated Parrotbills**, with even some recently fledged juveniles among them (**see photo above**).

After taking in lazy-looking **Giant Pandas** in the center munching freshly cut bamboo (**see photo**), we headed for our first of many, many tasty meals. At lunchtime with the sun beating down, and the day decidedly sticky we headed to our first fancy Sichuan



restaurant, where we had our first real taste of the culinary delights from this famous region for food. Refreshed, we went to another area of parkland in Chengdu, bordering the former property of the famous Tang Dynasty poet, Du Fu. Just outside his former “cottage” we added another noteworthy species, **Chinese Grosbeak**, which seemed oblivious to the crowds of lovers, and people exercising, in the park below!

We rounded out the day at a local restaurant for “Sichuan snacks”, having bowls full of steamy dumplings washed down with refreshing, ice cold, Snow Beer.

May 23 DU FU’S THATCHED COTTAGE & EMEI SHAN

After a brief period in the early morning birding around **Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage** again (before the crowds returned in earnest), we picked up a **Silky Starling**, a couple of migrating **Hair-crested Drongos**, another “tinkling” **Rufous-faced Warbler**, and a band of **Gray-cheeked Fulvettas** working their way through a bamboo stand, we left the capital and headed *south* to the Holy Buddhist mountain of **Emei Shan**. A walk around our hotel grounds at the base, just a stone’s throw from Crouching Tiger Temple, we watched both **White-cheeked and Silky Starlings** going in and out of their nest holes, conveniently located within the roof of the hotel theater! Bob and Ken also came across a fine **Forest Wagtail** in full song, characteristically wagging its tail from *side-to-side* very unlike all other wagtail species that favor the more common *up-and-down* technique!

Then we walked a trail along a wooded river that leads to one of the many sacred temples that dot this forest-clad “Buddhist” mountain. As it was late Sunday the crowds of pilgrims were now thinning, and we could focus on the birds instead of dodging in and out of the people drawn to this sacred place. A movement along the river bed drew us to a pair of **Slaty-backed Forktails** standing rather conspicuously mid-stream (**see photo on next page**). High pitched noises emanating from the treetops helped us locate our first **Fire-breasted Flowerpecker** a little further on, and a male **Fork-tailed Sunbird** put on quite a show in the same area, revealing his “Technicolor coat” to good effect. However, it was for one of China’s most remarkable songsters that we were primarily drawn here, and not too long later one piped up and sang its guts out, although trying to

get a clear shot of the **Chinese Hwamei** initially proved difficult, before it finally gave in, and we could watch this loud singer calling conspicuously from its chosen perch. “Hwamei” are so named as they have a thick line of white forming a brow that appears like a make up line over the eye, that we all got to relish while it was in full, spectacular song. Indeed the song has often been this distinctive laughingthrush’s downfall, as Vietnamese and Chinese regularly keep these birds in tiny wooden cages so they can hear them sing every morning from the comfort of their homes. This detail explained a couple of bizarre instances during the afternoon, when I would play the tape and passing people would

exclaim “Hwamei!” as they recognized the loud and boisterous song from their local neighborhood cages! This was just the second in a lofty installment of 12

different laughingthrush species recorded on this fascinating Asian tour. A neighboring tree also held a chunky and distinctive bulbul, the well-named **Collared Finchbill**. We also picked up our first endemic tit, of which



China has a few, in the form of several **Yellow-bellied Tits**, passing through with another pack of **Black-throated Tits**. Our first of 8 *different redstart species* was also seen there, arguably the most widespread and common of them all, the **Plumbeous Redstart**, so called as the male is “lead-colored”. This species graced many of the rivers in Sichuan that we traveled along, and this region is simply overloaded with large and impressive mountain rivers that have powerful white waters rushing through their courses, before they drain into the mighty Yangtze River to the south.

May 24 EMEI SHAN & WAWU SHAN

With the promise of a quieter neighboring mountain calling we spent just a further few hours in **Emei Shan** close to *Fuhu Si*, before we departed for **Wawu Shan** or “*Roof Tile Mountain*”. Our hotel grounds at dawn proved devoid of **Chinese Bamboo Partridges** unfortunately (though some distant ones still managed to taunt us), although the **Forest Wagtail** continued to use the children’s climbing frame as a convenient song post, and a few **White-rumped Munias** flitted up from the well-groomed lawns. A parking lot also held a prominent **Great Barbet** sitting quietly in the treetops as dawn rose around it. Also seen in the area was our first *seicercus* warbler, a confusing group of “leaf-

warblers” that until very recently were one widespread species, known as “*Golden-spectacled Warbler*”, that has since been divided into *SIX distinct species*, all of which show well-defined altitudinal distributions, and largely vocalize very differently. The one here was the **Plain-tailed Warbler**, the lowest occurring of the Sichuan species on the tour. The riverlet at the base of Emei continued to hold a conspicuous flock of **Slaty-backed Forktails**, with several recently fledged dowdy juveniles seen in the company of one of their parents along there. The trees around **Fuhu Si** held the strange **Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher**, a “flycatcher” that has recently been reclassified, *out of the Old World Flycatchers*, as it is thought to be more closely related to the *Fairy-Flycatcher* of southern Africa!

Eventually the day was warming fast, and the birds were slowing down even faster, so we opted to “set sail” for **Wawu Shan**, a much less visited mountain close to Emei, that holds almost all the same birds, although at higher densities that makes them markedly easier to see. China is a fast emerging economic powerhouse, and thus is growing at an incomparable rate, and the consequences of this are that large sums of money are plowed back into developing provinces like Sichuan to both recover from the devastating Wenchuan earthquake of 2008, and as part of a longer term development strategy of economic investment into rural regions like the Sichuan countryside. One unfortunate consequence of this is frequent road construction projects on an inconceivably grand scale, with subsequent traffic controls often preventing passage for long periods of time, varying from minutes to hours, and even days! We got our first example of this as we attempted to leave Emei, but were promptly greeted by the sight of police blocking the road, and we quickly feared the worst. However, by Chinese standards this delay was minimal, just thirty minutes or so, and how *fortuitous* this proved to be. Bob, Jane, Ken and I wandered into the forest to stretch our legs with little expected due to the day being hot and humid by then, and bird sounds having already dropped to a minimum. However, as we watched a local farmers chickens feeding quietly on grain at the forest edge a large white shape homed into view, a head popped up sporting a bright scarlet patch of skin around the eye, deep navy underparts, and trailing a flashy silver tail behind it: **Silver Pheasant!** It had clearly come in to take advantage of the free food laid out for the chickens and had not banked on being eyeballed by three birders marooned by a local traffic control! We could not have dreamt this up. With our delay we tried our best to find a local restaurant along the way and lucked out with one that held some choice birds around the place, including a spiffing pair of **Yellow-throated Buntings** (thanks Bob), and a conspicuous **Lesser Cuckoo** using a tall *larch* as a song post. Along the way to Wawu Shan we also found more **Plain-tailed Warblers**, our first **Klossi’s (White-tailed) Warblers**, and another **Oriental Greenfinch** standing sentry.

Once we reached **Wawu Mountain** we began our drive up the quiet mountain road, passing through open pines near the base flanking another whitewater river, and then more mixed *deciduous* woodland as we climbed higher, sporting a rich and thick understorey. True pheasant country. And so it proved when a female **Lady Amherst’s Pheasant** casually walked out onto the open tarmac, only to realize quickly it was not alone, and then darted back into the undergrowth. Some other key species also fell

early, including another confusing *phylloscopus* warbler, the localized **Emei Leaf-Warbler** responding well to tape in the late afternoon, before a **Chinese Blue Flycatcher** stole the show a little later on, when it posed on an open pine branch while we listened to its sweet song. Our first bush-warbler, **Brownish-flanked Bush-Warbler**, was less well received (relatively speaking), more fascinating for its powerful song than its appearance, although made up for this in its exemplary performance: approaching to within just a few feet of us, as it searched for its unseen intruder.

With a bit of re-shuffling of cabins we finally checked into our mountain villas, once we had located the ones with western toilets that were a little more appropriate for us all, and we looked forward to what the subtropical forests of Wawu Shan would bring us in the coming days...

May 25 WAWU SHAN

Pretty soon we got a taste of some of the best and worst of Wawu. The best came in the form of some of the day's spectacular birding, while the worst came in the form of the atrocious mountain weather that can dog these high Sichuan shans at times. Ironically though it was probably the weather that worked its wonders and produced some of the day's great birds. We awoke to a low mist hanging over Roof Tile Mountain that seemed to cloak it from top to bottom. In spite of this, and arguably because of this, a few kilometers down the road, shortly after we noticed patches of thick bamboo cloaking the roadsides, a party of pheasants stopped us in our tracks. The birds were a little furtive, and a few quickly moved off the road as we waited and raised our binoculars to take in this magical, misty scene. All that remained was a single **Lady Amherst's Pheasant**, a dowdy female, upon our first scan of the open road. Then suddenly a couple of other shapes appeared out of the low cloud, and one of them was a distinctly chunkier beast, a female **Temminck's Tragopan!** We were just trying to comprehend this scene, when a scarlet head appeared, then a scarlet body with a smattering of white spots splashed down the front: a male tragopan had strolled spectacularly into view, and the nature of the show for us all changed instantly. Pretty soon we were all out of the car, training binoculars and scopes on the open tarmac, although we were perhaps a little over confident in our approach, and despite rather foggy scope views achieved, this ornately-patterned "horned" pheasant soon dropped off the road and vanished into the mist, leaving us all happy but longing for more of this smartly-dressed *galliform*. A quick try with the I-pod just as the cloud lifted for just a short while, and then there it was, the male tragopan leapt up onto a concrete block on the roadside, looking around angrily at first and then lifted its handsome head up and calling back to the "Apple invasion", in order to ward off its unseen intruder. Once more the scope was swung into action, although this time a clear, unfogged, and *unforgettable* view waited within. Dawn had barely broken and we had two of Sichuan's most prized avian "possessions" safely "under the belt". How can you possibly follow such a scene? With more pheasants of course. Through the course of the day we amassed an incredible 9 Lady A's, and 3 Temminck's Tragopans, a remarkable tally indeed surely brought about by the unusually low cloud hanging on the mountain and luring the birds out from their usual deep cover.

However, in spite of the weather the day turned out to be full of great birds and we enjoyed some classic Wawu birding. **Emei Liocichlas** could be heard calling all around and it was not long before we clapped eyes on this very local laughingthrush. The same area also brought us another parrotbill, and another from the cute camp in this group, with a couple of gorgeous **Golden Parrotbills** found lurking quietly in a swathe of bamboo (**see photo below**). In marked contrast the hulking form of a **Great Parrotbill** picked up later that morning was pretty far off the normal definition of “cute”, being a true giant among parrotbills, and a very strange beast indeed. You can almost imagine it cracking whole bamboo stalks in two with its massive bill and powerful build! A flush of



color was provided by a gorgeous male **Mrs. Gould's Sunbird** that opted for a high perch to show off his glorious colors. We also got a real flavor of some of the trickier species that roam these subtropical forests in good numbers: the *leaf-warblers*, now finally classified within their own family. At this altitude (around 1800m or so) **Martens's Warblers** were abundant, as were **Claudia's (Blyth's) Leaf-Warblers** watched tilting one wing up and then the other in this strange behavioral trait that makes them atypically recognizable from the other many similar *phylloscopus* warbler species that roam

these subtropical forests. **Large-billed Leaf-Warblers** were also out in force, revealing themselves regularly with their loud and very distinctive songs and calls, although just a few **Chestnut-crowned Warblers** flitted around the woods that morning, one of the few *instantly* recognizable *seicercus* warblers in the warbler-filled woods of Sichuan.

Babblers continued to perform, with a handsome flock of **Rusty (Buffy) Laughingthrushes** to add to the earlier liocichlas, although these laughers are generally much easier as they are prone to hopping up into the open upper branches of trees, making them a little easier than their decidedly sneakier, low lying cousins (e.g. Barred and Red-winged Laughingthrushes to name a few)! We also came upon two separate groups of the striking endemic **Chinese Babax**, and just after a lunch stop, a high-pitched call by the villas drew us to a spritely **Pygmy Wren-Babbler** too. Apart from further **Lady Amherst's Pheasants**, including the most flashy individual of all, an intricately adorned male that held its position on the road for a while, the afternoon was quiet once the thick mist had thickened further still, aside from a small flock of **Black-chinned Yuhinas** lower down the road, (where we had ventured with futility to try and escape the low lying cloud that hung on this mountain for the next few days).

May 26 WAWU SHAN

As thick cloud hung over the table top of **Wawu Mountain** the day before we had opted to keep low and bird the mid to lower sections on our first day, and therefore the flat-topped summit beckoned on our second day. However, on waking low cloud still clung to the top, and we had to make the difficult choice as to whether to make the cable car ride to the 2640m (8660 ft) high summit. In the end we birded the upper section of the road until the cable car started its daily operation and then jumped in and headed up there all the same. There were just too many good birds up top to *not* go. Ken had one of the cars with some clarity through the windows and lucked out with another male **Temminck's Tragopan** munching away on the slope below his lucky cable car on the way up! The beauty of birding Wawu Shan is the access the road and cable car give you to a wide range of elevations, and therefore birds, on the mountain. Near our villas we could use the road and our van to check out forest ranging from 1950m (6400 ft) down to around 1100m (3620 ft), while the cable car gave us further access to the bamboo cloaked fir forests of the summit, markedly higher at some 2640m high (8660 ft).

The nature of the forest on the top of Wawu is strikingly different to the roadside forest below. The mixed deciduous and subtropical forests that line the road, with a closed canopy are gone, and instead are replaced with widely-spaced, dark-barked fir trees that completely dominate the vegetation up there, with the exception of the thick, near unbroken layer of bamboo that carpets the upper slopes. It is these upper slopes that brought Wawu to birder's minds, when a strange "form" of Eurasian Treecreeper was finally rightly realized to be a completely separate species, the **Sichuan Treecreeper** that was first described to science in 2003. That was to be one of our main targets, and we eventually found one in difficult conditions, along with its cousin the **Hodgson's Treecreeper** too (the form of **Eurasian Treecreeper** found on Wawu). The darker underparts, decidedly shorter bill, and very different call, were there for all to see and hear. With our increased elevation, the nature of the warbler mix changed too, and it soon becomes evident that the dominant warbler calls there have changed from those heard down around the villas and below.

The "Golden-spectacled Warbler" *seicercus* on the summit is the distinct **Bianchi's Warbler**, that also had **Sichuan Leaf-Warblers** (an earlier split from Lemon-rumped Warbler), and **Buff-barred Leaf-Warblers** for company up there. All new locally common birds to us, as we had only just begun investigating the birds at this altitude. The upper slopes are also known for bush-warblers, with a dizzy variety of them found on the bamboo-choked summit. We bumped into a number of **Aberrant Bush-Warblers**, whose calls echoed all around the summit, and also picked up **Brown Bush-Warbler**, and a "*Duracell*" **Spotted Bush-Warbler** that called so constantly it needed some one to take out its everlasting batteries!

Just after alighting from the cable car that runs up to the summit, we lucked into a **White-bellied Redstart** (an often furtive and tricky to see species), feeding in some trash within a bamboo patch by the upper cable car station. One of the unlikely highlights of the summit was the smelly trash pile behind the restaurant. An ever-

increasing pile of organic waste was a magnet for birds that dropped in and out to feed on the festering heap of old rice and peppers. This included a fine pair of **Buff-throated Warblers**, a couple of **Rufous-gorgeted Flycatchers** and others. The area also held a couple of strange babblers: **White-collared and Stripe-throated Yuhinas**. Other highlights included a male **Golden Bush-Robin** that was encouraged onto an open perch at eye level with a little use of the I-pod, and a pair of **Black-faced Laughingthrushes** began their calling in the low azaleas that dot the mountain summit, and climbed higher and higher into the upper levels of the tall firs in response to a little playback. The most cute and adorable resident on the summit finally gave itself up later in the afternoon, when our latest flock of **Streak-throated Fulvettas** was finally found to hold a few chattering **Fulvous Parrotbills** too. With heavy rains falling down on us we finally retreated back to the lower slopes and our cozy mountain villas later in the afternoon, praying for a break in the weather on our last full day...

May 27 WAWU SHAN

With this to be our final full day, and with us still sporting a few significant gaps on our bird list, *and in spite of* the seemingly unchanged summit weather (thus blocking our view of the flat top of Wawu), we opted to venture up there again nevertheless. I am glad we did. However, before we got up to the heady heights, we birded lower down while we were waiting for the cable cars to begin running, and found further **Wedge-tailed Pigeons**, **Verditer Flycatchers**, plenty of **Rusty (Buffy) Laughingthrushes**, **Emei Liocichla**, and our first rosefinch of the tour: a “bricked-up” male **Vinaceous Rosefinch**. This was to be the first of an amazing *eleven* species of rosefinch recorded on the trip.

The weather up top was not perfect sure, but markedly better than the previous day, so we added a few more and enjoyed further, less fogged views of some of the birds from the day before. Early on a **Darjeeling Woodpecker** working a fir trunk was the first signs of the winds of change, and boosted a distinctly sparse woodpecker list at this time. Several **Yellowish-bellied Bush-Warblers** were typically bush-warbler like, allowing up close and personal looks of their dowdy plumage, although most people were much more impressed by their strange and powerful songs! As the fog abated for a time a large flock of **Himalayan Swiftlets** dropped in and fed low over the trees. A much bigger more dramatic couple of swifts broke into their ranks where they stood out from the frankly duller swiftlet crowd, and we were able to watch this fine pair of **White-throated Needletails** scything dramatically through the air above us for a time. A flycatcher that flitted on and off the stone steps on the trail proved to be a hyper-active **Slaty-blue Flycatcher**, and numerous **Ferruginous Flycatchers** were found during the day both in the summit zone, and on the lower slopes too. With this marginal break in the weather came a change in the visibility and abundance of birds, with Wawu’s most famous resident turning out to be quite common on this day, with quite a few **Sichuan Treecreepers** seen and heard trilling in the towering fir trees. The rubbish tip was again productive with the now “usual” **Buff-throated Warblers** joined by **White-bellied Redstart**, *aemodius* **Coal Tits** (that sport distinctive “punk” crests and may well be a valid species), and **Dark-sided Flycatchers**, the latter wearing their Olive-chested Flycatcher-like vests.

It was also a good day for parrotbills, with first the bruising **Great Parrotbill** encountered, then several flocks of dinky **Fulvous Parrotbills**, before we finally came upon a band of **Three-toed Parrotbills**, feeding for once out of the bamboo layer. The latter is an endemic parrotbill species that may just be undergoing resurgence in recent years, after a period of scarcity at many sites in recent times, let's hope so! Mid-afternoon we casually wandered back to the upper cable car station to drop back down to the lower slopes with mist slowly but steadily creeping into the summit fir forests, but not before we were literally stopped in our tracks by a **Blood Pheasant** standing, statue-like at the side of the trail, that remained completely unconcerned by us, and even chose to call at us while we stood just meters away. This was turning into quite the pheasant tour.

Once again during late afternoon we were back on the quiet mountain road birding the mixed forest of the lower slopes, where a couple more parrotbills bought our day total to a heady five species: first a **Golden Parrotbill** again emerged out on the bamboo edge briefly before a large chattering flock of boldly marked "parrots" revealed themselves as the smart **Gray-headed Parrotbill** not long after. Some ten or so birds responded in a lively fashion to playback of their calls, giving us all stellar looks at them as they caused the bamboo stalks to twitch all around us. A late afternoon flock along the road held the unobtrusive (and poorly named) **Yellow-browed Tit**, and for Ken at least a smashing **Fire-capped Tit**.

May 28 WAWU SHAN to DUJIYIAN CITY

Just a final few hours were left for us in Wawu's subtropical forests before we had to depart northwards in the direction of Wolong, the realm of Giant Pandas, and yet more pheasants. It turned out to be a fairly quiet morning by Wawu's high standards, although things looked on the up when we all finally nailed down a look at **Red-winged Laughingthrush** that had been slippery up 'til then to say the least. One of the more typical Chinese laughingthrushes, and very different behaviorally than the bold and brazen White-browed seen hopping along a curb on our first day in Chengdu! As Don had opted to avoid the rain and had missed the "star" parrots the afternoon before we were more than happy to bump into the same flock of **Gray-headed Parrotbills** that must have roosted nearby as they were almost exactly where we had left them late the afternoon before. We also stole further looks at **Emei Liocichla**, as we knew these would be our last looks of this highly local species, and a boisterous flock of **Rusty (Buffy) Laughingthrushes** numbering some 25 or more birds also put on quite a show. A hepatic **Himalayan Cuckoo** joined the Lesser Cuckoo already chalked on our cuckoo list, although best off all was a fiery-breasted male **Rufous-bellied Niltava** that sang at length from an open perch, lingering seductively within our 'scope for some time.

In the late afternoon we arrived at a sprawling hotel in **Dujiyian City**, with massive grounds and flanked by good looking deciduous forest. As this was my first time to stay here we were all keen to explore and see what they held, although a late afternoon walk

produced little except for more unresponsive and unhelpful **Chinese Bamboo Partridges** that never showed any hint of emerging out of deep cover unfortunately. It was at night time we would have our best sighting of the day though, as shortly after putting my I-pod into action the unquestionable call of an **Oriental Scops-Owl** could be heard from a small copse of trees within our hotel grounds. The spotlight was soon on and sweeping the trees above for any sign of this oft-difficult little owl. It only took a couple of sweeps though and then there it was glaring with its big angry yellow eyes down at us looking back at it with nothing but complete admiration! A great end to the day.

May 29 QINGCHEN SHAN to WOLONG

An ill-fated attempt to bird at **Qinchen Mountain** on a weekend was quickly abandoned as it seemed we were sharing the mountain with too many noisy trucks, and what felt like the whole of the Chengdu population! We did manage several **Gray-headed Canary-Flycatchers**, and a typically skulking **Dusky Fulvetta** before we decided to abandon the chaos and head for Sichuan's most famous Panda reserve, **Wolong**. This area had only been chosen as a convenient stop off on the journey to there, so we felt our time was better spent in that diverse reserve to the northwest of Chengdu. As we traveled



there our first “official” traffic control had our local agents working rigorously to ensure somehow we could get through, that even involved taking a shadow vehicle and driver, in case our larger van was turned away as advertised. As it turned out though, and indeed so often does in China, sometimes sheer willpower and drive can get you through these challenges (and cute local people talking to the police in an oh so nice fashion!) And so it proved, we kept our

van, our trusty driver, and blasted through the traffic control without a hitch and plowed onto Sawan. As we made our way to Wolong we passed the sobering site of Ying Xiu, the town right at the epicenter of the vicious earthquake, where numerous memorials, and dramatic lopsided buildings were a stark reminder of what a scary place this would have been at 2.46pm on the 12th May 2008, when the famous earthquake struck with such awesome and devastating power.

On arrival for another fine lunch spread we bumped into Keith Barnes with another Tropical Birding group, quickly swapped notes, and then shadowed them in the direction of mighty **Balang Shan** later that afternoon (**Balang Mt. pictured above**). This turned out to be fortuitous as Keith later put us onto a pair of tasty **Tibetan Snowcocks** hiding out on a precarious looking scree slope. The Balang area of Wolong reserve is just fantastic. A paved road snakes its way up the mountain, and provides access to a wide

range of altitudes, from the “Wolong” (more accurately referred to as *Sawan*) village at a height of some 1900m (6235 ft) all the way up to the heady prayer flag-decorated pass at over 4500m (14,764 ft). We chose to cover a variety of spots, and hit several altitudes (and therefore habitats) as Keith’s tip off had advised that this was a rare clear day in recent times and thus we should take full advantage of this privilege.

We quickly racked up some of Balang’s most special birds in what proved to be a fantastic afternoon of high mountain birding. A purple form feeding a high alpine meadow could only be one thing: a stunning male **Grandala**, a perplexing species that has confused taxonomists as to where to classify it: thrush or flycatcher? Bob rightly commented that watching it feed it seemed to have the behavioral traits of another high mountain group of birds, the *ground-tyrants* (*muscisaxicola*) of South America, that also too flick their tail and wings in the same fashion and spend most of their time feeding on the ground in similarly open high mountain terrain. After bumping into Keith at just the right time (and quickly adding **snowcock** onto our bird list) we dropped back down to the treeline just above the **Bei Mu Ping** monument, where we focused our efforts on another *galliform*, an oddity of note, the **Verreaux’s Monal-Partridge**. On playing the call the bird responded within seconds although seemed just a little too far to be able to do anything with, and so we moved a little closer to the sound and peered excitedly

down the steep, scrubby slope where the bird was raucously calling back at us. What followed was another fine “pheasant” show and quite simply my best views ever of this often furtive species. The bird not only came steaming angrily in, but even crossed the paved road and then sat up on an open rock, daring us to play the tape just one more time. Eventually he returned to his favored



side of the road, had a brief period of calling once more, although this time on the stump of a fallen pine, before it dropped down slope and was lost from view leaving us with another treasured memory of the *phasianidae*. We were not done, or more accurately our local guide Jane, was not done with pheasants just yet for the day. As she was taking some snapshots of this visually spectacular mountain range a white shape ghosted into view below her, and soon after we were chasing down a superb sylvan **White Eared-Pheasant** peering out of the low scrub at us. Pheasants were not the only thing on show there though, and we soon added another rosefinch to the list with several blushing male **Chinese White-browed Rosefinches** seen in the area (**see photo above**). More color came in the form of several orange-and-blue male **Blue-**

fronted Redstarts, a misleading name if ever there was one, considering the whole of its back is deep cobalt blue!

With the afternoon sun threatening to drop for the day, we tried (in vain) to head back to **Sawan** but became distracted by one avian thing after another slowing our progress justifiably somewhat. First the raucous calls of another endemic, a gregarious mob of **Giant Laughingthrushes** brought the car to a halt, the largest of all the laughingthrushes, with an intricately patterned body. A little further on and a large powerfully built mountain goat, known as **Ghoral**, stopped as it blocked the road on our way down, and one final stop was made for a **Brown Dipper** feed actively mid-river in the Wolong River.



May 30 BALANG SHAN (WOLONG)

A day was spent combing the higher areas of the pass at Balang Mountain for more high-elevation species. First thing we had a date with more pheasants, although the rarest of these, *Chinese Monal*, that had been giving many groups difficulty this year, was nowhere to be found and we hoped we could be one of the lucky groups and find it in the coming days. However, a **Koklass Pheasant** was “crowing” loudly on our dawn arrival. Unfortunately the distraction of first the seldom-seen **Ferret-badger** and then more **White Eared-Pheasants** slowly patrolling a neighboring hillside at just the “wrong” time, meant that all but the leader missed the punk-haired male Koklass as it scurried across an open grassy slope. Some calls emanating from some near spruce groves alerted us to a pair of chunky **Collared Grosbeaks** in the area, and after some initial blank searches we finally located a pair of these powerfully built “finches” feeding on

fresh buds in a low tree. We then decided to try the higher regions of the pass, and also check the low dwarf shrubs on the far side of the 4500m high pass at Balang. A number of **Plain Mountain-Finches** appeared to be in monotypic flocks, with no sign of the hoped-for Brandt's on this day at least, and we also picked up **Kessler's (White-backed) Thrushes** and several bright male **Common Rosefinches** before we climbed up the high mountain pass, where **prayer flags** waved in the regular gusts, setting prayers on the wind as intended as they did so (**see photo above**). A small stony temple marked the top, as did the numerous people stopping to drop in a donation to the local monks. The nature of the habitat changes markedly as we climbed higher the trees disappearing, thinning first into low, sparsely distributed shrubs, with open grassy areas, before this too almost completely disappeared to be replaced by harsh looking barren treacherous rocky slopes of scree. In this area we found a number of **Alpine Accentors** hopping about the jagged rocks at the top of the pass. As we wound our



way down the far side of the pass, the drop in altitude bought about a marked change in the vegetation, which was once again different from that experienced on the Wolong side of the pass. Low stunted dwarf shrubs began to appear, and so we made a special stop there, as such minimal cover is the lair of a striking songster, the **Himalayan Rubythroat**, one of Balang's classic high mountain species, that conjures images of the great Himalayan mountain range that forms the core of its breeding range. A quick blast of the call was quickly answered from

above, and soon we had the 'scope trained on a feisty male, with throat on fire, and sporting the distinctive "mean" expression that characterizes the pair of rubythroat species. The same stunted vegetation played host to three or four **Rufous-breasted Accentors** too. We were now flying and so headed down a little further to slopes where these dwarf shrubs gave way to taller, more sparsely covered slopes to try for another magical mountain bird, the impossibly cute **Svertsov's (White-browed) Tit-Warbler**. Almost immediately the call was met with a significant response, a feisty male hopped up on a near bush and posed out in the open (**see bottom photo on next page**), showing off its super mix of deep pinks, indigo blues, and rufous tones that make this such an attractive and unusual "warbler". Indeed, the very nature of this bird is a mystery. Originally thought to be a *warbler* (all be it a strange one at that), recently it has been moved into the *long-tailed tit* family. While not sporting the long tail of most of this family, it certainly has many tit-like calls, supporting this latest thinking. A couple of confiding **Tickell's Leaf-Warblers** flitted around the bushes alongside (**see photo above**).



A pair of **Beautiful Rosefinches** in the same area was also swiftly added to our burgeoning rosefinch list. Indeed it turned out to be a fine day for “rosefinching”, as proved when we dropped down to **Bei Mu Ping** and found a very approachable male **Dark-breasted Rosefinch** feeding quietly by an abandoned and far from scenic toilet block! (see [top photo on page before](#)) The same lower area also bought us another pair of bounding babaxes (**Chinese Babax**), and a **White-winged Grosbeak** standing atop a large spruce.

May 31 WUYIPENG (WOLONG)

With conditions at the former research center of legendary Panda scientist, George Schaller having deteriorated since the devastating '08 earthquake, the group decided to make a day trip up to the station and avoid the rigors of staying at the center itself. It proved an inspired decision, as we made good of our day trip up to the bamboo-cloaked slopes of **Wuyipeng**. Indeed this was referred to at the trip end as one of the best days of the tour. We had more than a few big targets this day, and we kicked off with one of these very early on, much to my relief. Just as we entered the forest I was gobsmacked to see a pair of gaudy **Golden Pheasants** hurrying along the trail ahead of me. I quickly backtracked and hurried the others into prime position, when incredibly the male did not follow the female scurrying rapidly upslope but decided to linger seductively on the trail for a few minutes, leaving a few open-mouthed and mightily impressed birders in its impressive wake! What a start to our Wuyipeng experience. Before we emerged onto the 2600m (8530 ft) high wooded plateau on top we targeted some species on our slow, steep hike up. Right near the bottom, and still with the glow of the Golden Pheasants written large across our faces, we tried for our second flashy *Luscinia* robin (after the *Himalayan Rubythroats* of the day before), this one favors the lower reaches of the trail, seemingly replaced by a more furtive cousin higher up. The **Indian Blue Robin**, while not short of spectacular was markedly easier than its highly-desired cousin higher up, a male of which jumped out of the low shrubbery and came into some branches overhead to sing back at us with its distinctive and explosive song. Next up was another elusive “babbler”, this time a **Barred Laughingthrush**, a notoriously shy endemic species that came in close on several occasions, although typically never in one spot for long before sneaking back into the shadows.

Sichuan has an abundance of colorful tits and we added two more species during this day around Wuyipeng, with the handsome **Pere David's Tit** on our climb up, and then **Sooty Tit** was lured in with a mobbing horde of songbirds at the top that responded well to a bit of Collared Owlet (if only the owl could have been so responsive!) Once we emerged onto the forested plateau at the top end of the trail we found ourselves surrounded by a healthy stand of bamboo, a vital lifeline for the few elusive pandas that remain in the area. Sadly a natural and massive die off of the bamboo in the 1980s has made this a very rare creature indeed in recent times. Our local guide Liu, who manages the research station informed us that he had seen just one in the past five years! Another brutish **Great Parrotbill** awaited at the top of the trail, and then the first dramatic appearance of the finest fulvetta in China occurred when a small flock of **Golden-breasted Fulvettas** worked their way through the bamboo. Bob lingered with

them and earmarked this bird and the experience of seeing it within the tranquil woods of Wuyipeng as one of the standout moments of the trip, that had it not been for such a tasty mix of pheasants may well have stole the show. Another woodpecker hit the list a little later when a small party of **White-backed Woodpecker** were picked out of a trailside spruce. However, arguably Wuyipeng's star bird is the striking **Firethroat**, another of the super *Luscinia* robins, and one of the trickier customers in this group. Several males were heard calling from the bamboo and mixed shrubbery and one came in very close on several occasions. While it rarely sat still, the same could not be said for the **Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler** a little further down the trail that hopped out onto a low branch for all to see very well indeed, while it pumped out its surprisingly loud song. Several **Spotted Nutcrackers** were also seen well up there, one surprisingly reacting strongly to an owl call. After a big spicy pot of instant noodles around a small fire at the research station we had some great views of a **Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler** in some near bamboo, before we utilized the owl tape to bring in more **Sooty Tits**, and even the inconspicuous **Green Shrike-Babbler**.

After this absolutely brilliant day, with the fantastic pheasants being the undeniable showstopper, we chose not to return to the station for another pop at some of the missing species but rather to focus on cleaning up the slopes around Balang Shan, especially in light of all the low cloud of poor visibility we had been experiencing thus far. However, our single day in the Wuyipeng area had been a roaring success, the birding had been superb, crowned with gold at the very start, and we also had experienced the tranquil and beautiful forest that cloaks the top of the plateau. Wuyipeng was truly a wonderful setting for our birding, and brought us some truly sensational birds that led this day to be earmarked as one of the most enjoyable days of the tour.

June 1 **SAWAN & BALANG SHAN (WOLONG)**



Shortly after dawn we walked a steep trail heading into the wooded hills above town where we hoped for the endemic **Slaty Bunting**. Unfortunately, on this occasion we could only hear one in this difficult terrain that never responded quite like we hoped and that one would have to wait until another day. Aside from another fine male **Indian Blue Robin**, and a pair of **Daurian Redstarts** hanging about the haunting remains of the formerly extravagant Wolong Hotel, the area was relatively quiet and so we headed upslope once again. Another

shock mammal stopped us along the road once again, as we watched as a smart **Tufted Deer** tried to negotiate its way around a large landslide, with only little success

([see photo above](#)). Although the timing of this trip was a little late for migrants we ran into a few large parties of fidgety *leaf-warblers* in the area that were in concentrations that indicated a recent arrival of them. As if to prove migration was continuing apace even at this seemingly late stage we forced to slam on the brakes for an unbelievable obliging **Amur Falcon** hunting from roadside wires ([see photo below](#)). It was an immature bird that seemed very late to be around here, although on observing it for a while we saw that he was not the best at capturing prey, many flights resulting in nothing in its talons. Despite its healthy appearance we wondered if it had been delayed on migration as it was not in peak condition. We also did not expect to see the **Chinese Pond-Heron** that was found in the same area, and also seemingly at an unlikely location: more than 2500m (8200ft) up, in a steep wooded valley. The wires produced another treat not too far from the falcon when a large black and white shape turned out to be a brilliant **Black-capped Kingfisher**. We then observed our first **White-throated Dipper** of the trip, this one a young one floating mid-river more in the manner of the duck than a dipper.



We were back near the towering white obelisk of **Bei Mu Ping** (meaning “grassland”) for lunch – tasty, spicy instant noodles again – and were surrounded by soaring **Himalayan Griffons** on the wing, and even saw one walking in a rather ungainly fashion on the ground ([see photo on page 22](#)), with just a couple of majestic **Lammergeiers** too for good measure. A **Chestnut-crowned Bush-Warbler** singing its lungs out at the monument was a stake out that Keith had previously “left behind” for us, and an indigo-backed **Himalayan Bluetail** (a recent split from the northern Red-flanked Bluetail) also put in appearance along with two *fulvetta* species: **White-browed** and **Chinese Fulvettas**. Another small but conspicuous group of **Giant Laughingthrushes** were also found moving through the trees around us.

On our way up and over the pass to our next accommodations (forced us on us by recent landslides and subsequent road blockages), the heavily Tibetan-influenced town of Rilong, we ran into two separate groups of chunky **Streaked Rosefinches**, a scarce bird in these parts.

June 2 BALANG SHAN (WOLONG)

The plan for this day was to get up under cover of darkness and get into *monal* country early. However, an overnight snowfall stalled us in getting there so that plan never really got off the ground. However, the snow brought down a covey of **Snow Partridges**

which were shuffling along, kicking up snow, along the road near the high mountain pass on our way. We also got our first looks at a band of **Brandt's Mountain-Finches**

fluttering from meadow to meadow up near the pass, and just below the pass we got a look at a small party of bruising **Red-fronted Rosefinches**, one of the largest and highest-living of the many rosefinches on



Balang Mountain. As we left to get some rest in the afternoon a truck blasted its horn loudly and a flock of **Snow Pigeons** took flight off the side of the road at the sound. With that we alighted from the van and soon found 11 of these handsome pigeons feeding quietly in a flower-sprinkled meadow.

June 3 BALANG SHAN (WOLONG)

We had just one more chance now for the “jewel of Balang Mountain”, Chinese Monal. Rain or shine, snow or sleet, today we were determined to get there in good time. So a very early start had us heading over the pass and dropping down to “Monal Meadow” at the first “sparrow’s fart” as they say. As soon as I jumped out of the vehicle a cursory glance upslope revealed a large shape working upslope in a high meadow. I grabbed the ‘scope but panic set in when I swept the slope again, only to realize to my horror that the **Chinese Monal** must have crept behind a small ridge. The panic was short-lived as Bob picked it up soon after cresting the hill, but panic was justified again as all too soon the silhouetted monal slinked over the top of the ridge again and was gone. Everyone exhibited frustration at the brevity of the view and the distinct lack of

discernible iridescent colors that make this species such a precious mountain pheasant. I nervously scanned the crest of the ridge again and hoped for a miracle, that the bird would for some reason choose to walk back over the ridge and back into the open meadow. This felt foolhardy, although as I glassed the slopes and widened my search I realized with incredulity that there was another much closer meadow working an open meadow much lower down, and in exquisite light, that was revealing its “coat of nine colors” to beautiful effect. Soon after this shimmering male was joined by a female that fed alongside, all the time overshadowed by the wonderfully iridescent male’s colors. She did not have a chance!



It also turned out to be another good day for “rosefinch-fanciers”, with five different species chalked up: **Dark-breasted, Common, Beautiful, Pink-rumped and Chinese White-browed Rosefinches**. The clearer skies brought out some raptors that must have struggled to feed during the misty conditions that had dominated recent days. **Himalayan Buzzards**, a **Northern Goshawk**, a **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**, along with a couple more **Lammergeiers** and **Himalayan Griffons** too were all seen (see photo below). A couple of **Snow Pigeons** also circled overhead during our time in Bei Mu Ping, looking distinctly lost at this lowly elevation for them, which was presumably why they never alighted and were quickly off on their way again. As we descended down to Rilong from Balang, we all agreed it would be rude NOT to check in on the cute tit-warblers that were in the area just a few days before. As we approached the area, a male **Svertsov’s (White-browed) Tit-Warbler** made sure we knew he was still around by flying across in front of the car, just perilous inches away from the windscreen. Once we got out we got views of both the multi-colored male, and less distinctive female too, the latter of which turned out to be the more obliging of the couple.



On our local guide, Philip’s suggestion we shunned the fancy restaurant dining hall in the hotel for dinner and checked out a far less auspicious looking local dining option, which turned out to be an inspired choice, the delicious Sichuan cuisine just never seemed to

tire on us, as Philip ensured that every meal had a new and interesting combination of mouth-watering dishes!

June 4 RILONG & MENG BISHAN, MAERKANG

A short time after dawn we ventured into a deep craggy canyon, close to our **Rilong** hotel. Not far up the gorge we put up a flock of **Hill Pigeons** off the cliffs that was accompanied by a noisy whirl of wingbeats. The area also holds the enigmatic **Wallcreeper** that appeared just briefly a couple of times in our short visit. A male **Hodgson's Redstart** sung from a small outcrop, and swarms of **Fork-tailed Swifts** and **Eurasian Crag Martins** circled overhead. Along the river a number of **Blue Whistling-Thrushes** dashed too and fro.

Our time was short there though as we were being lured northwards to an area of tall spruces near the fascinating Tibetan city of Maerkang. The journey was scenic, with these deep sandstone canyons predominating the first part of the drive (with a few **Blue Rock-Thrushes** spotted peering down at us from the odd boulder), and then we emerged out of these and drove up into higher alpine meadows, then traversed a 3900m (12,795 ft) high pass with just a few bushes scattering the hillsides, before

dropping quickly into towering spruce forest, with a rich understorey of flowering pink rhododendrons, and a mossy under layer beneath this. It was the spruces for the most part that we were interested in as they are home to some cool Sichuan specialties. Arriving bang on lunch time we made a brief pause from birding to admire the scenery and down another pot of steaming spicy noodles, before we began our exploration of **Mengbishan**. Almost the first bird we saw was one of the trickier birds in the area. A call drew us to a particular spruce stand, before I suddenly noticed that a **Sichuan Jay** had hopped out onto the highest sprig of spruce for all to see (see photo alongside). There it lingered, before suddenly deciding enough was enough and it was on its way, with at least another two birds in tow. Not long



later Bob and Ken spotted a movement in a flower rhododendron that proved to be a pair of **Chinese Fulvettas** that worked their way up a spruce trunk before dropping deep into a bank of rhododendrons higher up the bank.

As ever on this years Sichuan tour rain was never far away, and soon our umbrellas were called into action once more. That did not deter a **Long-tailed Thrush** from singing though, and with a bit of luck it was perched out right where we could see it, and even video it, while rain lashed down around it. We were also interested in tracking

down some mixed flocks as they can hold one of China's cutest endemics, the adorable **Crested Tit-Warbler**. Unfortunately, we did not find that jewel of the spruce, although we did find a couple of flocks with **Gray-crested and Rufous-vented Tits** within them, both new for us at the time. There was a surprising amount of vehicles on the road, perhaps due to yet another massive construction project in the area, although this did not stop the abundant **Blood Pheasants** in the area from trying to cross the road, one of a group of 6 birds squeezing between two closely following vehicles that caused us a bit of a scare. Of course too, where there is forest anywhere in Sichuan there are always numerous *phylloscopus* warblers, and Mengbisha is no exception, although here they were dominated by **Hume's Warblers** with their remarkable variety of very different calls. Another choice find came from a tip off from another Tropical Birding group who'd passed through the area just days before (thanks Keith!). I had barely pressed play when a **Maroon-backed Accentor** shot in and perched at eye level, glaring around with its bright yellow eyes for its fictional intruder.

The birds were not the only eye-opener for the day though, as the extravagant lobby of our Maerkang hotel was quite a scene: a large intricate and vividly patterned ceiling had us staring skyward while Tibetan monks checked in quietly below (**see photo below**). The food equaled the dramatic decor too, being simply tremendous (again!).



June 5 MENG BISHAN, MAERKANG

On this day we returned to the same stretch of spruce-lined road we had checked out the evening before. Early on our 8th and final restart of the trip came in and sung from a low *larch* by the roadside: a beautiful male **White-throated Redstart** (**see photo on next page**), many of which were seen by the close of day (including a nesting pair). The **Koklass Pheasant** we were hoping for was much less helpful, calling back at us from high above and out of reach. Further up the road some budding trees drew in



rosefinches from all around, and as we were after a special endemic rosefinch, this seemed just the place we should stop. Among the rosy crowd gathering at the new buds were **Common Rosefinch**, and **Pink-rumped, Beautiful and Chinese White-browed Rosefinches**. A mob of **Giant Laughingthrushes** also appeared rather dramatically in trees alongside. None of these those sadly were the special rosefinch we were especially keen on seeing. We patrolled the road higher up, stopping for a

charming roadside songster sitting up high for us to admire both the song and the bird, a **Chinese Song Thrush**, sitting almost within the same binocular view as a hulking **Himalayan Buzzard**. A little more perseverance and then there they were, first a female and then a rose-dusted male **Three-banded Rosefinch**. Seeing some low sparse bushes beneath the towering spruce trees I thought I would try a tape of **Sichuan (Songar) Tit**, and low and behold a pair of them came in immediately, and allowed for some great close up studies as they fluttered their wings and called back from a very

close perch (**see photo alongside**). The Songar Tit has a checkered history, a widely adopted split from Willow Tit, recent genetic studies have indicated that much of the collection of races that form the “species” are not in fact genetically distinct at all, and should be re-merged into Willow Tit. All except at least the *wielgoldi* race found here on Mengbisha and Sichuan, for now referred to as “Sichuan Tit”. The loud ringing



calls of **Black Woodpeckers** were heard regularly through the day, with the first of them swooping in and landing on an open dead snag for us all to admire through both binoculars and telescope. Later in the day we made it the best rosefinch day of the trip,

adding a sixth species for the day with a male **Spot-winged Rosefinch**. A late flock in the day bought us our first **Bar-tailed (Himalayan) Treecreeper** and annoyingly *for Bob only* a glimpse of a **Crested Tit-Warbler** that had been devilish in our time there, and we hoped we'd right this wrong at a later spot near Jiuzhaigou.

Giant Tibetan prayer wheels were turning ceaselessly at a temple near the mountain base, and while we got out to admire these a movement in the stream drew us to a nesting **White-throated Dipper** using a concrete arch as its nesting spot.

June 6 MAERKANG TO RUO ER GAI, TIBETAN PLATEAU

With strong rumors of roadworks and the inevitable accompaniment of a traffic control being in enforcement in the area for our next journey we left at an ungodly hour to try and outwit this rumored 6-day road block. The idea was to sneak through while the police were sleeping, and so by the time they awoke we would be well on our way to **Ruo Er Gai**, and the promise of the Tibetan Plateau. The planned worked well, we were soon through and cruising north towards the plateau. Stopping for breakfast in a wooded valley we found another pair of **Sichuan Tits**, and our first **Chinese Leaf-Warblers** "rattled" from the treetops. However, sometimes the best laid plans of mice and men go awry, and so it proved. Despite the fact we had dodged the roadblock bullet, we then came upon a truck at a decidedly funny angle. Clearly it had tried to squeeze its way past an overnight landslide with poor results. We were then holed up for the next hour and a half while diggers came in and the electrical company could turn off the electricity from the hazardous looking cable that was hanging over the landslide! Not for the first time though a stoppage bought birding returns, with a **Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler** found in some roadside shrubs. As we neared the plateau our only **Golden Eagle** of the trip was spotted from the car window.

Soon enough though we climbed out from the well-wooded steep valleys, and drove above the trees, where low bushes dominated the vegetation, and winding our way higher still we rose over the lip of the plateau and emerged on to these distinctive grassy plains, ringed by high snow-capped peaks. The nature of the birding and scenery changed immediately once up the plateau: the songs of larks could be heard on the wing above, the dark hides of **Yaks** could be seen dotted across plains, **Black-eared Kites** frequently hung on the wind above, and roadside wires frequently held **Black Redstarts** flitting frequently down to the ground to pick up insects. Passing our first Tibetan settlement on the plateau, nothing more than a tiny gathering of low canvas tents used by the nomadic Yak herders, we disturbed our first **Daurian Jackdaws** that often can be found around such miniature human habitations. While on the lookout for a good lunch spot Bob shouted "Crane", and the lunch spot chose itself! Over lunch we watched our first **Black-necked Crane** feeding next to, and dwarfing, a pair of neighboring **Black Storks**. The afternoon was spent driving to **Ruo Er Gai** and simply stopping wherever the birds showed up. Stopping for our next group of cranes, this time a group of six young ones, we also picked up a **Tibetan Snowfinch** singing from a roadside boulder. This proved a great day for cranes, with an amazing *27 different Black-necked Cranes* tallied by the end of our drive. In addition to the decidedly more common **Eurasian Magpies** that flashed past us on a number of occasions, an

amorous pair of **Azure-winged Magpies** were found “courting” on a roadside cable. Other roadside stops produced a neon-yellow male **Citrine Wagtail**, a flock of **Ferruginous Ducks**, our first brutish **Upland Buzzards** (darker and larger than the Himalayans seen in the mountains), and many, many more **Kessler’s Thrushes**-THE thrush of the plateau.

At the end of the day we drove into the absorbing Tibetan town of **Ruo Er Gai**, where Tibetan Yak herders stared with fascination at our arrival from the top of their Honda motorcycles, and dressed in their characteristic long Tibetan coats. The plateau is famous for changeable weather conditions, and we experienced some of this during our short time that afternoon. Shedding layers on arrival as the sun beat down, and we felt our faces getting burnt up by the suns rays, although by the end of the day a sheet of rain moved in and the temperature had dropped dramatically, with even an odd short shower of hail in between!

June 7 BAXI VALLEY & RUO ER GAI, TIBETAN PLATEAU

Although others had spoken of Wuyipeng as the most memorable day of the tour, this was my personal favorite. The Tibetan Plateau is a remarkable setting, vast grassy plains dominate the scenes up there, sprinkled with yellow poppies, and darkened by the forms of massive Yak herds grazing the plains. Then when your eyes wander to the horizon they catch the sight of giant peaks looming above the plateau, dusted with recent snowfalls. On this day we saw all of this, although began in a spruce-cloaked valley just down from the plateau but still close to our hotel, allowing us easy access to two very different, fabulous birding areas.

So we began in the **Baxi Valley**, with hopes high of tracking down our main quarry, the elegant **Blue Eared-Pheasant** with a number of recent reports in the area filling us with quiet confidence. However, this quickly evaporated when within a few hours of dawn we were near pheasantless. I say near as we still found another pheasant for the trip, although one more familiar to everyone, the wonderful **Ring-necked Pheasant**, here in its natural home, several males of which were seen “crowing” from the slopes. A surprise find though was a female **Brambling** that was quietly feeding very close to us for some time. We were also firmly in **Slaty-backed Flycatcher** territory, with several of these handsome flycatchers seen during the morning, and singing sweetly from the surrounding spruce. We also added another familiar bird from our European birding experiences, **Great Spotted Woodpecker**, and also watched as both **Chestnut Thrushes** and **Kessler’s Thrushes** fed alongside each other for the first time on the tour.

Leaving the lower valley behind we checked some spruce forest bordered by thick scrub, that bought us a brace of endemic laughingthrushes: first a **Sukatschev’s (Snowy-cheeked) Laughingthrush**, followed by a more showy pair of **Pere David’s (Plain) Laughingthrushes** that fed in a near paddock, while a male **Hodgson’s Redstart** sung regularly from the eaves of the roof of the farm building above ([see photo on next page](#)).

We then decided to leave this scenic valley behind (with the view of checking once more for the pheasants the following morning), and head back over the crest of the hill and onto the vast plateau. A short stop before town was planned to check in on a recent nest site of the **Chinese Gray Shrike**. As we approached the area, an adult standing guard literally beside the road alerted us to the welcome news the birds were still present. On closer inspection three recently fledged juveniles were found in the denser part of the tree below, that we watched being visited and fed by the adult over a fascinating twenty minutes or so (**see photo on this page**). We left the adults to their feeding duties (after also taking in a **Saker** scything through the air overhead), and walked into a nearby quarry.

Tibetan "Talent"...



Hodgson's Redstart



Chinese Gray Shrike



White-browed Tit



Tibetan Lark

The rocks in the quarry were alive with birds, mostly **Rock Petronias** that were nesting en-masse on the rock face, along with a number of **Tibetan Snowfinches**, and a few pairs of noisy **Red-billed Chough**. Also within the quarry was a fabulous **Godlewski's Bunting** that serenaded us from the top of a close boulder.

After another (now very familiar) round of tasty instant noodles, we had a very enjoyable few hours birding a large lake on the plateau. En-route to **Daba Lake** (meaning **Flower Lake**, by virtue of the many flowers that are sprinkled on the surrounding meadows), we stopped to check out a colony of **Black-lipped Pika** (a strange mouse-like mammal), where the hoped-for **White-rumped Snowfinches** were in attendance. These birds

have an interesting life history, feeding, roosting and nesting within such pika colonies. As we continued our journey to the lake we also noted extraordinary numbers of **Upland Buzzards** ominously looking down on the pika colonies. Once we



reached the lake we soon realized we'd arrived in "lark central". Not only were the common and widespread **Oriental Skylarks** and **Horned (Shore) Larks** in attendance, but also the "Giant Lark of the Plateau", the monstrous **Tibetan Lark** (see photo on previous page). This massive lark is one of the largest in the world, both in terms of length, and also in terms of overall bulk, weighing in at a hulking 75g! A bizarre sighting involved a female **Black Redstart** intent on nesting on the underside of a parked car (that presumably had not been there long!?), and was seen returning time and again with grassy nesting material! On the lake itself **Red-crested Pochards**, **Ruddy Shelducks**, and **Gadwall** were numerous, with lesser numbers of **Common Pochard**, **Greylag Goose**, and **Eurasian Wigeon**. The muddy edges played host to half a dozen **Mongolian (Lesser Sand-Plover) Plovers**, and many **Citrine Wagtails**, while dozens of the dark *tibetanus* race of **Common Terns** hawked regularly along the lake shore. Several **Black-necked Cranes** fed "regally" on the plains around the lake, and a huge "barn door" flying over the plains proved to be a trip exclusive **White-tailed Eagle**. The marshes also rung with the sound of **Common Redshanks**. They were in the full throws of breeding, their clean white wing flashes regularly seen as they took flight to display noisily over their chosen marshy spot.

On our return journey, and still smarting that we had not yet picked up the endemic **White-browed Tit**, we jettied our way to where there had been a recent sighting. However, as this was some 50km away we had to leg it to get there. Dwelling on this as we drove I spied an interesting shallow valley out the window of the bus that appeared perfect tit country: low sparse bushes in a shallow green valley. I figured that we should try and save ourselves a 100km round trip and try for one here instead. The Tibetan “Gods” were smiling on us today as just a short burst of the song led to an immediate response and with a another quick stanza of the recording the bird came flying in and landed on a near shrub, at which time we simply could not shut it up! Truly show-stopping views were had of this, my absolute favorite of the many tits in Sichuan (**see photo on page 28**). Superb.

We rounded out the day in a local Tibetan restaurant, feasting on various yak dishes and a strange staple of the plateau. Our visit there created quite a stir, with many Tibetans looking to toast us and share their strong local alcohol with us. It was a strange, very different and very enjoyable night, although we all agreed we preferred the more traditional Sichuan food we had experienced thus far!

June 8 BAXI VALLEY & GONG GANG LIN PASS to JIUZHAIGOU

With **Blue Eared-Pheasants** still lingering in the back of our minds we decided to center our morning’s activity around finding this mega-beautiful mountain pheasant. Things were looking shaky when the recent stakeout failed again, no sight nor sound of this fast-becoming mythical *galliform*. So we changed tack and decided rather than stick to one spot and wait, we would comb the valley in the van and stop at every likely spot we could find (and there are a few!). Working our way from the bottom up, we sadly



reached the top and came up empty-handed. Things were looking desperate now, but we did not give up and began to wind our way back down and kept checking any likely looking bare slope. I raised my bins as we drove down and caught a large shape on the bank opposite. I excitedly shouted “ching” for the driver to pull over, and informed everyone I *might* have the pheasant, I just daren’t be too bold at this critical stage of the search. Once the bus had stopped and there was no further vehicle

movement Bob quickly supported my claim “that has to be it”, and there they were two very fancy looking **Blue Eared-Pheasants**, a wonderful pair that on and off fed in the high alpine meadow for 15 minutes or so before they wandered under the spruces and left us with just a beautiful memory of them, and a decidedly poor video taken through the ‘scope too!

This was one of those days where quality won over quantity. Little else revealed itself in the valley, save for possibly the same bold pair of **Pere David's Laughingthrushes** feeding in a mucky paddock once again, and the **Yellow-streaked Warblers** continued not to play ball and remained tucked away in dense scrub. However, yesterday's surprise find, the female **Brambling**, lingered on ([see photo on previous page](#)) and Bob's ever keen sight picked out a **Chinese (Snowy-browed) Nuthatch** working its way along a thick spruce branch. A new one for the trip, and one we now did not feel such an urge to find now in Jiuzhaigou, where we headed for our final Sichuan stop.

With little else evident and time wearing on we headed out to **Jiuzhaigou** by way of another fancy new Chinese highway, complete with massive toll booth, on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. Along the way **Eurasian and Azure-winged Magpies** bade us farewell from the plateau and soon we emerged out of the grassy plains, and up into thick spruce once again, flanked by more snow-capped giants emerging above the dense alpine forest. With our journey faring well what with the new super fast highway in place we decided to go after another species that had rankled us earlier on the tour at Maerkang: Crested Tit-Warbler, that until now only Bob had rather briefly glimpsed. As we alighted from the van and took in the amazingly clear skies, beautiful spruce towering overhead, and massive mountains lurking impressively further back we noted the distinct lack of bird song, and wondered if low activity might make this a tough challenge in the mid-afternoon. However, after getting a couple of **Goldcrests** for starters the second species we latched onto was a female **Crested Tit-Warbler**, very cute indeed and very odd indeed but not the jaw dropper that the male is. We hung in there though, I knew well that this species usually travels in pairs and that the male just had to be there somewhere. We swept the tall spruce several times and a flash of pink later, and there he was dangling acrobatically upside down, a magnificent pink-and-blue male, sporting his flattened white crest. He even flew in and fed at eye level just in case we had not taken in all of his exquisite features! A great round out to the day. A short walk in the woods also added **Maroon-backed Accentor** and **Rufous-vented and Gray-crested Tits** to our day list.



June 9 – 10 JIUZHAIGOU NATIONAL PARK

Jiuzhaigou is one of the most scenic valleys you will ever encounter. The valley is dotted not only with the nine colorful Tibetan villages that lend themselves to its name, meaning “nine villages”, but also with dramatic cascades, multicolored lakes, and is thickly coated with tall spruce forest. None are more dramatic than the park’s centerpiece, the magnificent **Pearl Sholes Falls**.

This is a series of cascades running through scenic mixed woodland, surrounded by towering hillsides (**see photo on the previous page**). On our bus rides into the park **Ring-necked Pheasants** were conspicuous as they fed on the open lawns in the early morning. The park hit birding fame for a rare and little known robin, the Rufous-headed,



that despite long attempts where they had recently been on territory just never called in

our two rainy days within the park. However, there were other birds to see, a mobbing party of passerines turned up **Pere David's Tits** and the unobtrusive **Sooty Tit**, in addition to two species of nuthatch: **Chinese and Eurasian Nuthatches**. Leaf-warblers were again very much in evidence as they are anywhere in the mountains of Sichuan although here dominated by **Chinese Leaf-Warblers** in the areas of the park we visited. Pearl Sholes Waterfall thrilled us not only for the phenomenal falls themselves but also for a family party of **White-throated Dippers** nipping in and out of the white waters ([see photo on previous page](#)). Also around the top of the falls on one morning was the striking **White-crowned Forktail** that had us looking back to Emei Shan, where we had first encountered these strange terrestrial, river-dwelling "flycatchers", (although there it was the Slaty-backed Forktail). Lower down in the valley, near the Tibetan settlement of "Lotus Leaf", we also came across the **Brown Dipper** again too. On the ill-fated robin search we did find some approachable **Slaty-backed Flycatchers**, in addition to an elusive pair of **Slaty Buntings**.



On one afternoon we ventured into an area of dry scrub outside the park, which as well as being much drier and forgiving than the higher elevations within the park, also were more productive bird-wise. Indeed, by this late point on the tour, it was these scrubby, insignificant looking hills that arguably would add the most birds. A short steep hike was needed, but we all managed it at a slow pace, and not long after a chattering party of parrotbills made it all worth while. This one, our *eighth* species, was the endemic **Spectacled Parrotbill** that could

arguably be referred to as "Scrub Parrotbill" in light of the setting ([see photo on this page](#)). The same area also held another spectacled specialty, this time a **Spectacled Fulvetta**. The bushes all around rung with the sound of **Yellow-streaked Warblers**, a former nemesis of ours from the Baxi Valley. This time though *once* he'd come in, we simply could not get shot of it, the same territorial male returning to sing ferociously back at us from a close bush time and again. Then a **Spot-breasted (Black-streaked) Scimitar-Babbler** let us know he was also around, and quick playback of its call, had a pair riled up in no time and flying from bush to bush around us. Lastly, but by no means least the song of a rosefinch led us to a superb pair of **Long-tailed Rosefinches**, my pick for the fanciest rosefinch of the trip, even if it is not an endemic!

Late in the evening Ken and I checked around the hotel for **Gray Nightjar** but came up wanting. With a little discussion we decided we may have left it a little late, as we were distracted by fine food and atmospheric Tibetan music in the hotel restaurant, and so

agreed to re-convene early next morning before our southward journey to give it another shot...

June 11 JIUZHAIGOU to CHENGDU

A late night tally of the bird list made me aware that we were precariously close to 300. However, with merely a traveling day ahead thoughts of cracking the magic 300 looked far, far away...Ken and I met pre-dawn wandered out of hotel and immediately heard Gray Nightjar, but soon realized it might only be visible from the grounds of the hotel opposite. I noticed the gate was open so I thought we should try our luck. We wandered in, and bated ourselves for the guard to call us back. All we were met with was stony silence interrupted every so often by several **Gray Nightjars** letting us know they were still around. I swept the bank with the spotlight sharpish, in case of any guards waking up and soon picked up the eyeshine of the nightjar that then flew across the top of the bank.



After a final hearty breakfast of traditional Tibetan fare mixed with some western “delicacies” (peanut butter and toast), supplied by our ever thoughtful local guide Philip, we were on our way, via a new road to Chengdu. This took us through some spectacular, steep sided valleys. Stopping in one of these where there was an intriguing grove of trees, we quickly found our first **Brown-breasted Bulbul**, as we’d hoped, and also got a pair of **Russet Sparrows**, another male **Long-tailed Rosefinch**, and Bob got a surprise **Chestnut-eared Bunting** to boot. Three new birds even at this late stage. We also made a brief stop at Rhododendron Pass for a final fling at highland birding and picked up a few more redstarts to bring our **day list for redstarts to 6 species (Hodgson’s, Blue-fronted, White-capped, Plumbeous, White-throated and Daurian Redstarts)**, and left with the sounds of **Giant Laughingthrushes** “cackling” in the

bushes. The journey back was pretty birdless, save for a few more bulbuls, and paddies frequented by egrets that eventually led us to our final bird of the trip, an inauspicious Great Egret picked out during a traffic jam!

Over a lavish dinner, at quite literally the finest eatery I have ever been to in Sichuan (which is saying something), we debated the tender Yak meat, ribs, and peppered chicken, in addition to the wealth of beautiful birds on the tour. There was no getting away from the pheasants though and the top five list for the participants was identical-all pheasants, all males, all seen well – in no particular order (as this was just too much to ask): **Chinese Monal**, **Temminck’s Tragopan**, **Golden Pheasant**, **Blue Eared-Pheasant**, and last but not least **Lady Amherst’s Pheasant**. In order to bring some balance to the discussion I pushed for some other “non-pheasant” favorites. These are some of the other many avian delights: **Grandalas** (or as we came to know them “Purple Ground-Tyrants” (for their uncanny behavioral traits that resemble those South American flycatchers) up at the awesome **Balang Shan**; the boisterous parties of **Golden-breasted Fulvettas** that would have ordinarily been the deserved highlight during our magical day up at **Wuyipeng** (were it not for another Golden gamebird); **Long-tailed Thrush** singing in the rain at Mengbishan while we were in the fresh afterglow of our first **Sichuan Jays**; **ALL rosefinches** anywhere, although my pick was the picture perfect male **Long-tailed Rosefinch** at **Jiuzhaigou**, though every male **Chinese White-browed** is pretty special too; both **Crested** and **Severtsov’s (White-browed) Tit-Warblers**: both cute, pink and blue birds with adorable tit-like qualities; many of the **laughingthrushes**; the surprise pair of **Yellow-throated Buntings** en-route to **Wawu Shan**; the **Black-capped Kingfisher** seen within the **Wolong Valley**; and the **Chinese Pond-Heron** that surprised us there too showing up at nearly 3000m altitude!; and finally the small flocks of **Ferruginous Ducks** on the Tibetan Plateau were also listed by someone, from a place that is a true treat to visit for avian, cultural, and scenic attractions.



Bird list

The taxonomy of the list follows: Clements, James F., White, Anthony W., and Fitzpatrick, John W. **The Clements Checklist of Birds of the World**. Cornell, 2007.

This list is up to date with the major changes published by Cornell in December 2008 and further updates in December 2009.

H indicates a species that was HEARD only;

GO indicates a species recorded by the GUIDE ONLY.

DUCKS, GEESE, AND WATERFOWL: ANATIDAE

Greylag Goose

Anser anser

Small groups were seen during our visit to Daba Lake on the Tibetan Plateau.

Ruddy Shelduck

Tadorna ferruginea

Small groups of this pretty duck were seen on all three days up on the Tibetan Plateau.

Gadwall

Anas strepera

This was the most abundant duck species during our trip to Daba Lake (Tibetan Plateau).

Eurasian Wigeon

Anas penelope

8 birds were seen on Flower Lake, up on the Tibetan Plateau.

Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

Numerous on Flower Lake (Tibetan Plateau), and small numbers were also seen around Jiuzhaigou.

Green-winged (Eurasian) Teal

Anas crecca crecca

A pair were found on Lake Daba (Tibetan Plateau).

Red-crested Pochard

Netta rufina

Around 20 birds were seen on the Tibetan Plateau.

Common Pochard

Aythya ferina

A single male was seen on Daba Lake, Tibetan Plateau.

Ferruginous (Pochard) Duck

Aythya nyroca

Two small groups were seen as we traveled towards Ruergai on the Tibetan Plateau, with another 5 birds seen the following day on Daba Lake.

PHEASANTS, GROUSE, AND ALLIES: PHASIANIDAE

Snow Partridge

Lerwa lerwa

A small covey of these distinctive partridges was seen shuffling along a snow-covered road at Balang Shan early one morning following heavy snowfall the night before.

Verreaux's (Chestnut-throated) Partridge

Tetraophasis obscurus ***CHINESE ENDEMIC**

A wonderful performance by this one this year, with a superb bird that came screaming angrily into playback below Balang Shan Pass. The bird was so keen on finding its intruder it even crossed the paved road! Seen very well indeed, a real quality view. Also seen in the same area the following morning too.

Tibetan Snowcock

Tetraogallus tibetanus

Thanks to a tip off from Keith Barnes (who was leading another TB group there at the same time), we managed to find a pair of these large gamebirds at Balang Shan on our first foray up to the pass. The calls of this snowcock were also heard a number of times: a far-carrying and highly atmospheric sound of Sichuan's high mountains.

H **Chinese Bamboo-Partridge**

***Bambusicola thoracicus* *CHINESE ENDEMIC**

One of the frustrations of the tour was only hearing this endemic species at both Emei Shan and near Qingchenshan.

Blood Pheasant

Ithaginis cruentus

We first saw a female at very close range as we were up on the top of Wawu Shan; others were seen on both days at Mengbishan, and also in the Baxi Valley near Ruoergai. At Mengbishan a large group of some seven or more birds were seen crossing the road one by one, dangerously close to passing cars that were driving down at high speed. One of the males was then seen very well lingering underneath a flowering Rhododendron bush.

Temminck's Tragopan

Tragopan temminckii

*This species appears to be increasingly difficult to find. Therefore we were very fortunate indeed to enjoy 3 different birds during one pheasant-filled day on Wawu Shan. A thick mist hung over the mountain all day, that proved excellent for pheasants, that presumably felt safer coming out onto the road in the open in these dull conditions. Our first tragopan came when a bird came out and fed beside a female Lady Amherst's Pheasant! This male bird was joined by a female, and due to the heavy mist the views were initially frustrating as the bird slinked off the side of the road all too soon. However, I tried a quick burst of tape as the mist lifted for a moment, and incredibly the male tragopan immediately jumped up on a roadside concrete block and called back at us. All the while lined up in the scope! Another male was flushed off the road later in the day but never gave the crisp and rare looks that this one did. Unquestionably, due to this rare and unforgettable performance, one of the **BIRDS OF THE TRIP**.*

Koklass Pheasant

Pucrasia macrolopha

A male that crossed an opening in response to my tape below Balang Shan, was sadly seen by Sam only.

Chinese Monal

***Lophophorus lhuysii* *CHINESE ENDEMIC**

*This species was missed by many birding groups this year, and appears to have become inexplicably more difficult than in previous years. (Stories of two Dutch guys wandering the hillsides-to no success-for 2 days were legendary at the time). Of course we tried anyway and amazingly on the 2nd attempt found three different birds feeding in a daisy-sprinkled meadow, below the pass at Balang Shan. The pair lingered for some time, although within an hour of dawn had wandered back into the dense shrubbery once more and were lost from view. The spectacular iridescent nine-colored male unsurprisingly made the final top five list as one of the contenders for **BIRD OF THE TRIP**.*

Silver Pheasant

Lophura nycthemera

This was one of the shock finds on this trip, and was fitting for this trip that had been so amazing for pheasants. In Sichuan right now there are many road development projects, causing frequent and unpredictable delays to our journeys. During the very first of these, near the base of Emei Shan, we wandered into the forest at the roadside to kill time at the road block and saw a male Silver Pheasant coming in to feed on some grain left out for some chickens at a near farm. The bird gave us a crippling look before catching sight of us and slipping back upslope, leaving us all still in shock! A very tough bird in Sichuan, and very unexpected indeed.

White Eared-Pheasant

Crossoptilon crossoptilon

This high-altitude ghostly-white pheasant was seen on four occasions, three times on Balang Shan, (in a rich area for pheasants that in addition to prolonged views of this gleaming pheasant feeding in the open, also brought us an iridescent pair of Chinese Monal, and a confiding and vocal Verreaux's Monal-Partridge). Another group, the largest party seen-8 birds, was seen on the higher slopes of Mengbishan, (that were skillfully picked out by our ever attentive driver).

Blue Eared-Pheasant

Crossoptilon auritum *CHINESE ENDEMIC

*This dapper pheasant tortured us and made us wait right until the last minute. Having scoured a number of good spots within the Baxi Valley, and with the sun well up by mid-morning on our final morning there we were still conspicuously empty-handed. We had already worked our way up the valley, and decided to head down and check all the way down again rapidly one more time before we had to depart for Jiuzhaigou, when suddenly a couple of dark shapes were seen in an open meadow. I hardly dared believe it but made everyone aware of the possibility, before Bob clapped his binoculars on them first and put us out of our misery: a fine pair of Blue Eared-Pheasants. After we got out of the van they quickly retreated into cover, but then emerged again a short time later to some relief, when we were treated to long, slow looks in the 'scope. One of Sichuan's star birds, and most definitely one of the **BIRDS OF THE TRIP**.*

Ring-necked (Common) Pheasant

Phasianus colchicus

A familiar bird to British and American birders alike, although it is always great to see them in China in their true native home. Seen on both of our Blue Eared-Pheasant searches within the Baxi Valley, and again several times inside the park at Jiuzhaigou.

Golden Pheasant

Chrysolophus pictus *CHINESE ENDEMIC

*Our first search near Qingchenshan drew a blank with not a peep heard out of them. Our next shot came in Wolong, where they seem to be getting increasingly difficult in recent years. We headed out for our hike up to Wuyipeng full of trepidation and nervousness, knowing the lower stretches of the trail perhaps held our best chance of this glorious pheasant. We hardly had time to contemplate our best "plan of attack" as right at the start of the trail a pair of Golden Pheasants walked out in front of a stunned Sam, completely in the open on the trail. I ducked back quickly, fearing they would skit straight off the trail before Bob and Ken had latched onto them (and knowing my body was blocking their chance of seeing them). The birds did indeed wander purposefully off the trail to my horror, though miraculously reappeared again in the open for them to stare at with open mouths just minutes later. After this quality showing at the start of the trail we very nearly skipped up the trail afterwards, knowing nothing could top that for the day, and nothing could dampen our mood! Completely predictably it was one of the "magic" five **BEST BIRDS OF THE TRIP**.*

Lady Amherst's Pheasant

Chrysolophus amherstiae

*On this extraordinary trip for pheasants the showing for this species typified some of the extraordinary luck we enjoyed on this tour: during one day on Wawu Shan we racked up nine different "Lady A's" on the road, including both an exquisite male (two other males were seen poorly too), and also a female that was walking around on the road with a pair of Temminck's Tragopans for company! The latter sighting was virtually the first thing we saw that day and soon gave us the feeling this was going to be a day that might just be a little bit special. Aided I am sure by thick misty conditions multiple sightings of this pheasant ensued with the nine on this day and only one other female seen besides. A truly exceptional showing for this majestic bird, and again an unsurprising entry in the top five best **BIRDS OF THE TRIP**.*

H Severtzov's (Chinese) Grouse

Bonasa sewerzowi *CHINESE ENDEMIC

Sadly, a calling bird could not be located along a trail at Jiuzhaigou.

GREBES: PODICIPEDIDAE

Little Grebe

Tachybaptus ruficollis

Two were seen on a pond at Du Fu's Thatched Cottage in Chengdu.

Great Crested Grebe

Podiceps cristatus

4 were seen on Flower Lake up on the Tibetan Plateau.

HERONS, EGRETS AND BITTERNs: ARDEIDAE

Gray Heron

Ardea cinerea

One was seen in Chengdu, and later four birds were seen up on the Tibetan Plateau.

Great Egret

Ardea alba alba

Two birds were seen on our journey back to Chengdu at the end of the tour.

Little Egret

Egretta garzetta

The official bird of the city of Chengdu, where fittingly we first saw them; small numbers were seen at a number of other sites too, including at Flower Lake near Ruoergai.

Cattle Egret

Bubulcus ibis coromandus

Scattered sightings on the tour, including within Chengdu, and also on the Tibetan Plateau.

Chinese Pond-Heron

Ardeola bacchus

A bird seen at over 3000m elevation in the Wolong reserve was a bit of a surprise, with another seen at a similarly high elevation, a few days later in full, spectacular breeding dress. These were the only sightings of the tour.

Black-crowned Night-Heron

Nycticorax nycticorax

Only recorded near Du Fu's Thatched Cottage in Chengdu, at the very start of the tour.

STORKS: CICONIIDAE

Black Stork

Ciconia nigra

Two birds were seen feeding together in a marsh up on the Tibetan Plateau.

HAWKS, EAGLES, AND KITES: ACCIPITRIDAE

H Black Baza

Aviceda leuphotes

One was heard flying over Emei Shan, although our limited view of the sky at the time prevented us from getting a look at it.

Oriental Honey-buzzard

Pernis ptilorhynchus

One passed over the Panda Breeding Center in Chengdu; others singles were seen at both Emei Shan and Wawu Shan.

Black (Black-eared) Kite

Milvus migrans lineatus

Only recorded up on the plateau, where it was regularly encountered during our three days there.

White-tailed Eagle

Haliaeetus albicilla

A surprise find was one of these giant raptors circling around in the distance at Daba Lake (Tibetan Plateau).

Lammergeier

Gypaetus barbatus

Two birds were seen on two of our trips up to Balang Shan, that included both an adult and a young bird.

Himalayan Griffon

Gyps himalayensis

These huge griffons were seen regularly up on Balang Shan, with a flock of 15 birds on one afternoon. Others were also seen up on the Tibetan Plateau, and another en-route to Mengbishan.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk

Accipiter nisus

A couple of singles were seen near Beimuping, below Balang Shan; and another was seen at Mengbishan.

Northern Goshawk

Accipiter gentilis

One was seen soaring above Beimuping.

Gray-faced Buzzard

Butastur indicus

A fine perched bird was found by Bob en-route to Wawu Shan.

Eurasian (Himalayan) Buzzard

Buteo buteo burmanicus

Three birds were seen around Beimuping, and another two were seen perched by the road up Mengbishan. Finally, another single was seen en-route to Jiuzhaigou.

*NB. Although still grouped within Eurasian Buzzard within the Clements list, the IOC list has split this form within the newly recognized species of **Himalayan Buzzard, *B. refectus***.*

Upland Buzzard

Buteo hemilasius

This hulking buzzard is fairly common up on the Tibetan Plateau, with some 20+ seen in one day around Ruoergai.

Golden Eagle

Aquila chrysaetos

One bird was found by Bob, soaring above a ridge en-route to the Tibetan Plateau.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS: FALCONIDAE

Eurasian Kestrel

Falco tinnunculus

One was seen in Wolong reserve, below Balang Shan.

Amur Falcon

Falco amurensis

A superb young male was seen hunting from roadside wires in Wolong. The bird gave incredible views as it tried unsuccessfully to pounce on terrestrial prey from its roadside perch, always coming up empty-handed.

Saker Falcon

Falco cherrug

One bird was seen flying low over the plateau, near the Tibetan settlement of Ruo Er Gai.

Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus

One bird was seen on Balang Shan, and another swept low across the plateau near Daba Lake.

RAILS, GALLINULES, AND COOTS: RALLIDAE

Eurasian Coot

Fulica atra

A number of these birds dotted Flower Lake, on the Tibetan Plateau.

CRANES: GRUIDAE

Black-necked Crane

Grus nigricollis

The flagship bird of the Tibetan Plateau, that seems to vary greatly in numbers from trip to trip. During our first journey up onto the plateau we managed to rack up 26 different birds (with the largest gathering being 15 birds together on one marsh). The following day just 8 were seen, and on our last day in the area just a single and a pair were seen. One of the undoubted star birds of the Tibetan Plateau. Despite an increase in the population in recent years the species remains listed as globally VULNERABLE.

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS: CHARADRIIDAE

Lesser Sand-Plover

Charadrius mongolus

6 birds were seen up at Daba Lake on the Tibetan Plateau. This included some stunning full summer plumage birds among them.

STILTS AND AVOCETS: RECURVIROSTRIDAE

Black-winged Stilt

Himantopus himantopus

Recorded on two days up on the Tibetan Plateau, with a maximum of six on one day seen around Flower Lake.

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES: SCOLOPACIDAE

Common Greenshank

Tringa nebularia

Two were seen feeding on the edge of Flower Lake on the plateau.

Common Redshank

Tringa totanus

A few scattered sightings were made up on the Tibetan Plateau in general, although they were very common around Flower Lake, where numerous birds were seen and watched making noisy display flights over the marshes.

GULLS, TERNS, AND SKIMMERS: LARIDAE

Brown-headed Gull

Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus

Many were seen around Flower Lake, on the Tibetan Plateau.

Common Tern

Sterna hirundo

A few were seen distantly on our first day on the Tibetan Plateau, although many were found the following day around Flower Lake.

PIGEONS AND DOVES: COLUMBIDAE

Rock Pigeon

Columba livia

Just a few scattered sightings around Chengdu.

Hill Pigeon

Columba rupestris

A narrow steep gorge close to our hotel in Rilong was packed with these distinctive pigeons, that were nesting on the sheer rock faces, and regularly fluttered in and out of the cliffs.

Snow Pigeon

Columba leuconota

Seen on two days in the Balang Shan area: a flock of 11 birds initially tried to hide as mist descended around them, although we finally found them feeding unobtrusively on a rocky slope. Then the following day a couple of wandering birds were seen flying around Beimuping, a lower elevation than expected.

Speckled Wood-Pigeon

Columba hodgsonii

Two were seen in flight near the base of Wawu Shan.

Oriental Turtle-Dove

Streptopelia orientalis

We picked up our first as we descended from Balang Shan one afternoon; further sightings were made in the Wolong Valley, Maerkang, and the Baxi Valley, near the edge of the Tibetan Plateau.

Red Collared-Dove

Streptopelia tranquebarica

One was found perched on a cable in the Wolong Valley, and another was seen at the entrance to Flower Lake, on the Tibetan Plateau.

Spotted Dove

Streptopelia chinensis

Recorded a number of times in the Chengdu area only.

Wedge-tailed Pigeon

Treron sphenurus

A hearty group of 11 birds was seen on our first morning on Wawu Mountain, with other small groups (2-3 birds) seen there on two other days.

CUCKOOS: CUCULIDAE

H **Large Hawk-Cuckoo**

Cuculus sparverioides

The tormentor of the tour, heard at many sites but we could just not get it to come in and show itself.

Hodgson's Hawk-Cuckoo

Cuculus nisicolor

Heard on several occasions at Wawu Shan, and seen in flight one time there too.

H **Indian Cuckoo**

Cuculus micropterus

A distant calling bird was heard during our brief stop at Qingchenshan.

Common Cuckoo

Cuculus canorus

This felt like one of the commonest birds on our first day up on the plateau where over 30 birds were seen decorating the various wires and fences up there.

Himalayan Cuckoo

Cuculus saturatus

A couple of hepatic individuals were seen on Wawu Shan.

Lesser Cuckoo

Cuculus poliocephalus

Heard at many mountain sites, and singles seen en-route to Wawu Shan (from Emei), and at Jiuzhaigou too.

GO **Asian Koel**

Eudynamys scolopaceus

One was seen in Chengdu by Sam only, and a constantly calling bird near Crouching Tiger Temple on Emei Shan tormented us by refusing to come in and show itself.

Lesser Coucal

Centropus bengalensis

A bird seen on the edge of the forest on the way up to Wuyipeng was quite unexpected.

OWLS: STRIGIDAE

Oriental Scops-Owl

Otus sunia

One of the finds of the trip was a constantly calling bird in our hotel grounds near Qingchenshan, that remained rooted to the spot and calling away once the spotlight was on it.

H **Collared Owlet**

Glaucidium brodiei

A distant bird was heard on our first afternoon at Wawu Shan, and another calling bird just would not come in at Jiuzhaigou.

Little Owl

Athene noctua

One was seen perched on a roadside wire on the edge of the Tibetan Plateau.

NIGHTJARS AND ALLIES: CAPRIMULGIDAE

Gray Nightjar

Caprimulgus indicus jotaka

One was spotlighted close to our Jiuzhaigou hotel on our final morning.

SWIFTS: APODIDAE

White-throated Needletail

Hirundapus caudacutus

A couple of these powerfully built swifts were found in a large flock of low-flying Himalayan Swiftlets on the summit of Wawu Shan.

Himalayan Swiftlet

Aerodramus brevirostris

At least fifteen birds were found in a single flock circling low around the summit of Wawu Mountain.

Fork-tailed (Pacific) Swift

Apus pacificus

A few were seen en-route to Wolong; others were seen at Maerkang, up on the plateau, and at Jiuzhaigou.

House Swift

Apus nipalensis

Recorded at Emei Shan, Wawu Shan, and also nesting in the gorge at Rilong.

KINGFISHERS: ALCEDINIDAE

Black-capped Kingfisher

Halcyon pileata

A fine bird was found fishing from a roadside cable in the Wolong Valley.

HOOPOES: UPUPIDAE

GO **Eurasian Hoopoe**

Upupa epops

Just the one was seen by Sam from the car, that flew off over a small ridge on the Tibetan Plateau.

ASIAN BARBETS: MEGALAIMIDAE

Great Barbet

Megalaima virens

A superb bird was seen perched up in our vast hotel grounds at Emei Shan, another single was seen at Wawu Shan, and lastly 1 was seen in the grounds of our hotel near Qingchenshan.

WOODPECKERS: PICIDAE

Darjeeling Woodpecker

Dendrocopos darjellensis

A fine bird was seen picking away at some bark up on the summit at Wawu Shan. Another was seen from the bus by Sam only at Beimuping too.

White-backed Woodpecker

Dendrocopos leucotos

3 birds were seen together on the way up to Wuyipeng.

Great Spotted Woodpecker

Dendrocopos major

One was seen in the Baxi Valley near the town of Ruorgai, and another was seen in Jiuzhaigou.

Black Woodpecker

Dryocopus martius

Quite vocal during our full day on Mengbishan, with 2 different individuals seen.

Gray-faced (Gray-headed) Woodpecker

Picus canus

3 sightings: singles at Wawu Shan, near Qingchenshan, and at a nest in Jiuzhaigou, (thanks to another Keith Barnes tip off!)

CUCKOO-SHRIKES: CAMPEPHAGIDAE

Long-tailed Minivet

Pericrocotus ethologus

Small parties were seen regularly in most mountain areas (Wawu Shan, Wolong, and Jiuzhaigou).

SHRIKES: LANIIDAE

Tiger Shrike

Lanius tigrinus

Bob found one of these migratory shrikes sitting on a bamboo fence near Crouching Tiger Temple on Emei Shan.

Long-tailed Shrike

Lanius schach

We first saw a very confident individual in parkland just outside Du Fu's Thatched Cottage in Chengdu; others were seen on the journey to Maerkang, and on our final back from Jiuzhaigou to Chengdu.

Gray-backed Shrike

Lanius tephronotus

The most commonly encountered shrike on the tour. Especially abundant up on the Tibetan Plateau, although also seen regularly in the higher areas of Wolong, and also around Jiuzhaigou.

Chinese Gray Shrike

Lanius sphenocercus

A superb family were nesting at the time of our visit near the town of Ruergai. In fact they were nesting right beside the highway, where we watched the three very recently fledged chicks begging for food and the adults coming in to feed them over an enjoyable half hour or so. All the while Tibetans sped past at high speed with the birds showing no signs of fear!

DRONGOS: DICRURIDAE

Black Drongo

Dicrurus macrocercus

Recorded first a few times in the Wolong Valley; with regular sightings later on the Tibetan Plateau; and a final bird seen on our return journey to Chengdu at the end of the trip.

Hair-crested Drongo

Dicrurus hottentottus brevirostris

Two were seen at Du Fu's Thatched Cottage in Chengdu; singles followed at Emei and Wawu Shan; and a few were also seen near Qingchenshan.

MONARCH FLYCATCHERS: MONARCHIDAE

Asian Paradise-Flycatcher

Terpsiphone paradisi

Two females were some of our very first birds of the tour at the Chengdu Panda Breeding Center.

CROWS, JAYS, AND MAGPIES: CORVIDAE

Sichuan Jay

Perisoreus internigrans *CHINESE ENDEMIC

This was meant to be one of the tougher birds of the tour, with Maerkang providing our best chance. Indeed Mengbishi did produce this scarce jay, that was remarkably easy on this tour, with four sightings in our day and a half up there, of at least three different groups. The largest group contained at least five birds.

Eurasian Jay

Recorded at least four times on the tour: at Wawu Shan, in Wolong, and also in Jiuzhaigou.

Garrulus glandarius

Azure-winged Magpie

Cyanopica cyanus

This striking and pretty magpie was seen four times up on the Tibetan Plateau, including a courting pair that were displaying to each other on a roadside wire.

*NB. Although still considered conspecific on the official Clements list, the IOC checklist splits the form in western Europe as Iberian Magpie **C. cooki**, and retains this Asian form under the name **Azure-winged Magpie, C. cyanus**.*

(Red-billed) Blue Magpie

Urocissa erythrorhyncha

A spectacular magpie, with a long, long blue and white tail, and bright orange bill, that was regularly recorded in several areas especially: Wawu Shan, and in the lower sections of Wolong.

Eurasian Magpie

Pica pica

Recorded on two days up on the Tibetan Plateau: 4 on our first day, and another 2 were seen on our final day there.

Eurasian Nutcracker

Nucifraga caryocatactes macella

Two showy birds were seen during our day up at Wuyipeng (Wolong), and another was seen in the Wolong Valley the following day. These were the only sightings of the tour.

Red-billed Chough

Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax

Good numbers were seen in the gorge near our Rilong hotel where a handful of birds were nesting at the time, and another three birds were seen in a quarry near Ruo Er Gai on the Tibetan Plateau.

Yellow-billed Chough

Pyrrhocorax graculus

When the mists cleared up on Balang Shan (that was not that often on this trip!), several groups were seen, with a maximum of 10 birds near the pass on one of the two days in which we encountered them.

Daurian Jackdaw

Corvus dauuricus

Three groups were picked up as we traveled up onto the Tibetan Plateau for the first time, with a maximum of 7 birds in one of these parties. Also recorded during our full day up on the plateau a number of times.

Carrion Crow

Corvus corone orientalis

Commonly encountered at Maerkang, and also in many areas on the Tibetan Plateau.

Large-billed Crow

Corvus macrorhynchos

First recorded on the journey between the Shans (Emei and Wawu)

Common Raven

Corvus corax

*Four of the large **Tibetanus** race were seen loafing on the ground near Flower Lake (Tibetan Plateau).*

LARKS: ALAUDIDAE

Tibetan Lark

Melanocorypha maxima

This huge heavy lark was seen a few times up on the plateau. The bird is usually not far from boggy areas, and the marshy areas on the edge of Flower Lake proved to be the best area for them, a few giving super views there.

Oriental Skylark

Alauda gulgula

Regularly recorded up on the Tibetan Plateau.

Horned Lark

Eremophila alpestris

A few were seen on two of our days up on the plateau.

SWALLOWS: HIRUNDINIDAE

Bank Swallow

Riparia riparia

At least four birds were seen up at Balang Shan on one of our trips up there.

Eurasian Crag-Martin

Ptyonoprogne rupestris

Good numbers were seen in a steep gorge near Rilong; others were seen around Jiuzhaigou.

Barn Swallow

Hirundo rustica

Scattered sightings throughout the tour, including in Chengdu and up on the Tibetan Plateau.

Red-rumped Swallow

Cecropis daurica

Not as numerous as in some years, with just a few seen at Emei Shan, and just a few others seen in the reserve at Wolong.

Asian House-Martin

Delichon dasypus

Commonly recorded up at Balang Shan; and good numbers also seen at Jiuzhaigou.

FAIRY-FLYCATCHERS: STENOSTIRIDAE

Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher

Culicicapa ceylonensis

We first saw two of these strange flycatchers near the Crouching Tiger Temple at Emei Shan, and another two were seen at Qingchenshan, with a final sighting in the park at Jiuzhaigou.

CHICKADEES AND TITS: PARIDAE

Songar Tit

***Poecile songarus* *CHINESE ENDEMIC**

An extremely confiding pair were found on Mengbishan, that came within inches of us. The following day as we traveled towards the Tibetan Plateau we found another pair at a breakfast stop in forest along the way, before we had reached the plateau itself. Then another single was seen just over the lip of the plateau. Three sightings in all was a good result.

*NB. Some races of Songar Tit, originally split from Willow Tit, are now thought again to be better treated as races of Willow Tit. However, the **weigoldei** race in Sichuan is one of the only forms that recent genetic research has shown to be truly distinct. This has been renamed on the IOC checklist as **Sichuan Tit**, *P. weigoldei* and is endemic to China. Therefore under the IOC list Songar Tit no longer exists, the other races being lumped within **Willow Tit**, *P. montanus*, and a new species is recognized, **Sichuan Tit** that covers the birds that occur in Sichuan formerly under Songar Tit.*

White-browed Tit

***Poecile superciliosus* *CHINESE ENDEMIC**

Arguably the toughest of the endemic tits in Sichuan. It occurs in sparsely vegetated valleys up on the Tibetan Plateau, although often appears to be absent in seemingly suitable looking habitat. After a stop in rain to find it during our first afternoon on the plateau, we hit the jackpot late on our final afternoon there where we stopped at a likely looking spot, played the tape, and immediately got a response. Before we knew it the bird flew in and sung repeatedly from the top of a small shrub, allowing excellent photo opportunities in the process. One of the birds of the trip undoubtedly, were it not for a certain flashy group of pheasants that stole the show!

Pere David's (Rusty-breasted) Tit

***Poecile davidi* *CHINESE ENDEMIC**

This handsome tit first put in an appearance during our day trip to Wuyipeng. They were then seen repeatedly within the park at Jiuzhaigou, on both of our days inside the park.

Coal Tit

Periparus ater

The interesting crested **aemodius** race of Coal Tit (that has been touted as a future split), was seen in some of the higher montane areas: on the summit of Wawu Shan, on the road up Balang Shan, and also near the Wuyipeng Research Station in Wolong.

Rufous-vented Tit

Periparus rubidiventris

Not recorded at all until near the end of the tour, when they were then seen regularly in mixed flocks around Maerkang and Jiuzhaigou.

Yellow-bellied Tit

***Pardaliparus venustulus* *CHINESE ENDEMIC**

One of the more common endemics on the tour, recorded first at Emei Shan, and then at Wawu Shan, and at several sites in Wolong.

Gray-crested Tit

Lophophanes dichrous

Recorded on seven days of the tour, at Maerkang, Jiuzhaigou, and also in the spruce woods of the Baxi Valley.

Great (Japanese) Tit

Parus major

Several races of this tit, listed under **Great Tit** in Clements although considered a separate species, **Japanese Tit** on the IOC list, were seen: the large **tibetanus** race and also the smaller **minor** race. Birds were seen in Chengdu, and Emei Shan in the lowlands, and also in the high spruce forests of the Baxi Valley near the Tibetan town of Ruoergai.

Green-backed Tit

Parus monticolus

Regularly recorded throughout, including on Wawu Shan, and in Wolong reserve.

Yellow-browed Tit

Sylviparus modestus

Just three sightings: In Wawu Shan, and twice within the reserve at Wolong. A very subdued and inconspicuous species compared to the other more boldly-marked species.

Ground Tit (Hume's Groundpecker)

Pseudopodoces humilis

One of the most charismatic birds on the tour. Until recently thought to be closely related to crows it now appears to be genetically close to the tits! A strange, ground dwelling tit, with an oversized bill and an amusing bounding gait, we thoroughly enjoyed watching their comical antics up on the Tibetan Plateau where they were fairly conspicuous with multiple sightings on all three days spent there.

PENDULINE TITS: REMIZIDAE

Fire-capped Tit

Cephalopyrus flammiceps

Ken did well with this one, being the only person on the tour that saw this species at all, along the road up Wawu Shan.

BUSH-WARBLERS AND ALLIES: CETTIIDAE

Brownish-flanked Bush-Warbler

Cettia fortipes

As with many of the bush-warblers arguably has a more interesting song than appearance! A common sound on the tour, and also seen well a couple of times at Wawu Shan, and later once in Wolong too.

Chestnut-crowned Bush-Warbler

Cettia major

Pretty scarce on this years tour, the same bird being heard two times below Balang Shan, where it showed on one occasion.

Aberrant Bush-Warbler

Cettia flavolivacea

Commonly seen and heard on the summit of Wawu Shan.

Yellowish-bellied Bush-Warbler

Cettia acanthizoides

Seen regularly up on the summit of Wawu Shan.

Rufous-faced Warbler

Abroscopus albogularis

This smashing warbler was seen three times in Chengdu, in bamboo patches within the Panda Breeding Centre and inside the grounds of Du Fu's Thatched Cottage.

LONG-TAILED TITS: AEGITHALIDAE

White-browed Tit-Warbler

Leptopoecile sophiae

A pair of these colorful "warblers" were seen twice very well on the slopes of Balang Shan.

The tit-warblers were originally thought of as Old World Warblers (Sylviidae), although have recently been reclassified as Long-tailed Tits (Aegithalidae).

Crested Tit-Warbler

Leptopoecile elegans *CHINESE ENDEMIC

A little panic crept in when we came up blank by the middle of our day at Mengbishan. Bob then found one there late in the afternoon that soon after went inexplicably to ground. Despite re-finding the small flock it appeared to be hanging around with we just could not relocate it. Our final chance then came near Jiuzhaigou, where within ten minutes of leaving the car we located a pair of these cute pink birds. If it were not for the deluge of pheasant species that this tour offers this would surely be regularly voted for as one of the birds of the trip?

Black-throated Tit

Aegithalos concinnus

This delightful tit (also sometimes referred to as Red-headed Tit), was seen regularly in the Chengdu area, and also recorded near the base of Emei Shan.

Sooty Tit

Aegithalos fuliginosus *CHINESE ENDEMIC

A couple of singles turned up in feeding flocks of tits, nuthatches, and shrike-babblers at Wuyipeng, although in the chaotic reaction to an owlet tape it was hard to pick them out as they moved around continually, never holding position. Subsequently not everyone managed to get a look at them at Wuyipeng. The story was very different though at Jiuzhaigou where the same "owlet" tactic brought several in very close on both of our days within this scenic valley.

NUTHATCHES: SITTIDAE

Eurasian Nuthatch

Sitta europaea sinensis

A couple of brief sightings in Wawu Shan were followed by longer, close views inside the park at Jiuzhaigou.

Snowy-browed (Chinese) Nuthatch

Sitta villosa bangsi

Often a tricky species on this tour, it did not prove so this time though, with three separate sightings: one in the spruce forest of the Baxi Valley near the edge of the Tibetan Plateau, followed by two sightings inside the park at Jiuzhaigou.

WALLCREEPER: TICHODROMIDAE

Wallcreeper

Tichodroma muraria

Surprisingly difficult this tour, only Bob getting good views of two different birds: one near Rilong, and another on our journey from there to Maerkang.

CREEPERS: CERTHIIDAE

Eurasian (Hodgson's) Treecreeper

Certhia familiaris hodgsoni

Recorded on five days of the tour: on the summit of Wawu Shan, at Mengbishan, and also around Jiuzhaigou.

*NB. Although considered conspecific with the widespread Eurasian Treecreeper **C. familiaris** under the Clements list, the race **hodgsoni** has been split off as Hodgson's Treecreeper **C. hodgsoni** on the IOC checklist.*

Brian Houghton Hodgson (1800-1894) was a British civil servant who worked for the East India Company in British India and Nepal in the early part of the 19th century. He was also noted as an early explorer, naturalist and ethnologist.

Sichuan Treecreeper

Certhia tianquanensis *CHINESE ENDEMIC

*Our first venture up to the summit of Wawu Shan proved difficult for this one, just a single bird found in rainy and foggy conditions. However, much better weather the following day led to very different results: many birds were heard and seen in the fir forests of the summit, where the original type specimen for this recently described (2003) species was collected. Despite a number of recent records extending the range of this recently described species considerably northwards (e.g. it is now known to occur in Wolong and even Jiuzhaigou in extreme northern Sichuan), the birds remains a localized species currently known only from the mountains of Sichuan province in China. **Tianquanensis** refers to Tianquan county of Sichuan where Wawu Shan is found.*

Bar-tailed Treecreeper

Certhia himalayana

*Just the one was seen in a small flock in Mengbishan, that also held an elusive Crested Tit-Warbler **Leptopoecile elegans** if only for a short time.*

WRENS: TROGLODYTIDAE

Winter Wren

Troglodytes troglodytes szetschuanus

One sitting on top of a prominent rock screaming its lungs out on Balang Shan was our first experience of this tiny songster with the big voice. The constant waves of clouds engulfing it seemingly not putting it off at all! Another was also seen outside the park at Jiuzhaigou.

DIPPERS: CINCLIDAE

White-throated Dipper

Cinclus cinclus

A juvenile bird, swimming in the middle of the river at Wolong was our first sighting. Another was seen near the base of Mengbishan, and several others were found inside Jiuzhaigou. Five sightings in all were made.

Brown Dipper

Cinclus pallasii

Three sightings was a good return: one during an early evening drive back down to Wolong from Balang Shan; another for the guide only just outside our Rilong hotel; and finally, another bird feeding in a spectacular set of rapids within the valley at Jiuzhaigou right at the end of the tour.

BULBULS: PYCNONOTIDAE

Collared Finchbill

Spizixos semitorques

This distinctive and handsome bulbul was seen three times on the tour. First at Emei Shan, then again en-route from there to Wawu Shan, and finally in our hotel garden near Qingchenshan.

Brown-breasted Bulbul

Pycnonotus xanthorrhous

Having missed it a few times earlier on the tour, we finally caught up with this mountain bulbul on our trip back to Chengdu on our final day, when at least five different birds were seen during the journey.

Light-vented (Chinese) Bulbul

Pycnonotus sinensis

This handsome bulbul was seen regularly in the lowlands around Chengdu (Du Fu's, Panda Breeding Centre, and Qingchenshan).

Black Bulbul

Hypsipetes leucocephalus

*The handsome white-headed form of this species (*leucocephalus* actually means white head), was seen at Emei Shan and near Qingchenshan.*

KINGLETS: REGULIDAE

Goldcrest

Regulus regulus

Seen on several occasions during both visits to Mengbishi; others were also seen in the Baxi Valley, and also near Jiuzhaigou.

LEAF-WARBLERS: PHYLLOSCOPIDAE

Tickell's Leaf-Warbler

Phylloscopus affinis

Regularly recorded on the slopes of Balang Shan, where they were encountered on all of our visits there.

Buff-throated Warbler

Phylloscopus subaffinis

A rather unsightly (and odorous) pile of waste food out the back of the restaurant on the summit of Wawu Shan proved a magnet for birds that came in to pick off the insects attracted to the smelly garbage pile. On both of trips up the summit 1-2 Buff-throated Warblers were in attendance.

Yellow-streaked Warbler

Phylloscopus armandii

Having been frustrated by a number of calling birds hiding in dense scrub within the Baxi Valley, we were relieved to finally see one on dry scrub near the town of Jiuzhaigou. In complete contrast to the ones at Baxi, the bird posed right out in the open, often singing from the top of a very near shrub.

Buff-barred Warbler

Phylloscopus pulcher

Regularly heard and seen at some of the highest elevation sites on the tour (e.g. Balang Shan and on the summit of Wawu Shan).

Sichuan Leaf-Warbler

Phylloscopus forresti

Recorded regularly on the tour, including on Wawu Shan, on the lower slopes of Balang Shan, and also within the park at Jiuzhaigou. This is a recent split from the Lemon-rumped Warbler complex.

Chinese Leaf-Warbler

Phylloscopus yunnanensis

Recorded regularly on the latter part of the tour, first seen en-route to the Tibetan Plateau, and later regularly within the park at Jiuzhaigou, where their distinctive song shows them to be pretty common inside the park.

Hume's Warbler

Phylloscopus humei

A commonly encountered species on the slopes of Mengbishan.

Arctic Warbler

Phylloscopus borealis

Only seen in Chengdu, where some calling birds were seen in the grounds of the Panda Breeding Centre, and also in Du Fu's Cottage.

Greenish Warbler

Phylloscopus trochiloides trochiloides

Seen both in Chengdu and on Wawu Shan.

Large-billed Leaf-Warbler

Phylloscopus magnirostris

Along with the next species one of the most common leaf-warblers on the tour, being recorded on many days and their distinctive calls were heard very often. Seen on Wawu Shan, in Wolong, on the slopes up to the Tibetan Plateau, and also inside Jiuzhaigou.

Blyth's (Claudia's) Leaf-Warbler

Phylloscopus reguloides claudiae

Again, one of the most common leaf-warblers on this tour, encountered on all but a few days.

*Although not yet officially recognized as such, the **claudiae** subspecies of Blyth's Leaf-Warbler is a widely touted split (by virtue of its distinctive vocalizations), often being referred to as **Claudia's Leaf-Warbler** in many reports.*

***Claudia Hartert née Reinard** was the wife of German ornithologist Ernst Hartert.*

Emei Leaf-Warbler

Phylloscopus emeiensis

A very responsive calling bird zoomed in at high speed and perched beside us several times on the flanks of Wawu Shan. This bird is locally common within its very narrow elevational range on Wawu Shan.

White-tailed (Klossi's) Leaf-Warbler

Phylloscopus ogilviegranti disturbans

A pair were seen en-route to Wawu Shan, with others being heard on the flanks of the mountain too. Amusingly for such a frustrating species to identify (when not calling) the name disturbans means "to frustrate", although why this was used to name this subspecies I do not know!

Plain-tailed Warbler

Seicercus soror

One of the lower elevation seicercus warblers: our first came within Chengdu, and others were seen on the lower slopes of Emei Shan and Wawu Shan.

Martens's (Omei Spectacled) Warbler

Seicercus omeiensis

The mid-elevation seicercus species, commonly heard and also seen on Wawu Shan, and also around Sawan village in the reserve of Wolong.

Bianchi's Warbler

Seicercus valentini

The high elevation species of seicercus, that was commonly recorded on the summit of Wawu Shan, and also high in the reserve of Wolong, and lastly within higher areas of the park at Jiuzhaigou.

Chestnut-crowned Warbler

Seicercus castaniceps

Two of these striking seicercus, (a welcome relief from the more tricky species within this challenging genus), were seen on the road up Wawu Shan.

GRASSBIRDS AND ALLIES: MEGALURIDAE

(Southern) Spotted Bush-Warbler

Bradypterus thoracicus przewalskii

Some great looks at this relentless singer were had on the summit of Wawu Shan, and also within the Wolong Valley.

H **Russet Bush-Warbler**

Bradypterus seebohmi

Heard calling at distance on our first afternoon on Wawu Shan, although never heard subsequently.

Brown Bush-Warbler

Bradypterus luteoventris

One was seen on the bamboo-cloaked summit of Wawu Shan.

OLD WORLD WARBLERS: SYLVIIDAE

Great Parrotbill

Conostoma oemodium

A better name might be "Giant Parrotbill", so large is it compared with almost all others in this "family". We found them on four different days, including three times on Wawu Shan, and also near the Wuyipeng Research Station in Wolong.

Gray-headed Parrotbill

Paradoxornis gularis

A marvelous flock of at least ten birds was seen in a dense swathe of bamboo along the road at Wawu Shan late one afternoon, and were seen again there the following morning. Arguably the most handsome of all the parrotbills encountered?

Three-toed Parrotbill

Paradoxornis paradoxus *CHINESE ENDEMIC

A scarce and sometimes difficult endemic to find. Not so for us though, as we first found a pair that gave prolonged views on the summit of Wawu Shan, and later saw another three birds well close to the research station at Wuyipeng.

Spectacled Parrotbill

Paradoxornis conspicillatus *CHINESE ENDEMIC

Another endemic parrotbill that can oftentimes be difficult to track down. After scouting out a scrubby hillside near Jiuzhaigou town alone the evening before, we all returned the next afternoon and found at least four birds with ease

Vinous-throated Parrotbill

Paradoxornis webbianus

Some confiding groups of these cute parrotbills were seen in Chengdu, both at the Panda Breeding Centre, and also at Du Fu's Thatched Cottage.

Ashy-throated Parrotbill

Paradoxornis alphonsianus

It seems as if this species is increasingly regular around Chengdu in recent years, with birds being seen at both main sites there.

Fulvous Parrotbill

Paradoxornis fulvifrons

These oh so cute "parrots" were seen on both of our trips up to the fir forest on the summit of Wawu Shan.

Golden Parrotbill

Paradoxornis verreauxi

Strangely difficult to find this year on Wawu Shan, with just two brief sightings. Thankfully the first pair popped up at close range and so we all got to see them.

OLD WORLD FLYCATCHERS: MUSCICAPIDAE

Dark-sided Flycatcher

Muscicapa sibirica

One or two birds were seen on both of ventures up onto the table top summit of Wawu Shan.

Asian Brown Flycatcher

Muscicapa dauurica

Just one was seen near Crouching Tiger Temple at the base of Emei Shan.

Ferruginous Flycatcher

Muscicapa ferruginea

Multiple sightings were made on the slopes of Wawu Shan, with good numbers also seen along in the Wolong area too.

Slaty-backed Flycatcher

Ficedula hodgsonii

Recorded on four days of the day, firstly within the Baxi Valley just below the Tibetan Plateau, and then regularly within the park at Jiuzhaigou.

Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher

Ficedula strophciata

Seen well on both of our visits to the summit of Wawu Shan, with others seen in the Wuyipeng area of Wolong, and lastly two were seen inside the park at Jiuzhaigou.

Slaty-blue Flycatcher

Ficedula tricolor

A female showed well on the summit of Wawu Shan, and a male was seen briefly along the road up to the pass at Balang Shan.

Verditer Flycatcher

Eumyias thalassinus

Three sightings were made on Wawu Shan with a maximum of four birds on one day there.

Rufous-bellied Niltava

Niltava sundara

A super male glowed in our scope along the road up Wawu Shan. Another bird, a more dowdy female bird, was seen near the Wuyipeng Research Station.

Blue-throated (Chinese Blue) Flycatcher

Cyornis rubeculoides glaucicomans

*A male of this beautiful songster was seen on our first afternoon along the road up Wawu Shan. This Chinese breeding endemic (it is a non-breeding visitor to SE Asia) has been split as **Chinese Blue Flycatcher, C. glaucicomans** under the IOC checklist.*

White-tailed (Himalayan) Rubythroat

Luscinia pectoralis

Three sightings were enjoyed in high altitude shrubbery on Balang Shan. This is surely one of the great "Himalayan" birds, the sight of a male puffing its bright red throat out and singing its lungs out with the beautiful mountain backdrop of Balang Shan is hard to beat. Even this year when noisy, large caterpillar vehicles worked away in the foreground on one occasion this could not detract a male from singing away from the top of a low stunted shrub! Just one of many high profile, high altitude species that make visiting Balang Shan so fantastic.

Firethroat

Luscinia pectardens

Several males were heard up near Wuyipeng, with one male seen repeatedly as it circled us in response to tape. A striking bird if ever there was one, although not easy to see on this occasion as it was always on the move, refusing to perch for long in one spot. With quick reflexes and a bit of luck some got good looks!

Indian Blue Robin

Luscinia brunnea

Another striking luscini robin (is there a bad one among them!?), although this one is decidedly more widespread and common than the others on this tour. We got crackerjack looks of a "flame-doused" male on the way up to Wuyipeng.

Himalayan Bluetail

Tarsiger rufilatus

Another very handsome flycatcher, seen on five days of the tour. Both spanking males and considerably duller females were seen at both Beimuping and Mengbishan.

*NB. This is a recent split from Red-flanked Bluetail. The northern birds of Japan to northern Europe are now considered a different species, **Red-flanked Bluetail, T. cyanurus**. The birds in Sichuan, the rest of western China and the Himalayas are now under this newly recognized species.*

Golden Bush-Robin

A couple of smashing male birds were seen up on the bamboo-choked summit of Wawu Shan.

Oriental Magpie-Robin

Only recorded at sites within the city of Chengdu.

Black Redstart

Common and conspicuous up on the Tibetan Plateau, where they regularly decorated the many fences up there.

Hodgson's Redstart

Good numbers were recorded on this tour, with sightings on six days of the tour, including within the Baxi Valley, in a deep gorge on the journey between Balang Shan and Maerkang, and also around Jiuzhaigou. The best of the bunch came in the Baxi Valley where we enjoyed a sharp-dressed male singing from a farm roof top while native Ring-necked Pheasants walked the hillsides behind.

White-throated Redstart

Another sharp redstart, first recorded along the road up Mengbisha, and later also just below the Tibetan Plateau, and near Jiuzhaigou.

Daurian Redstart

Excellent views were enjoyed of a pair flitting around the roofs of the recently condemned buildings in the earthquake hit town of Sawan (Wolong). A few other scattered sightings were made in the Wolong area, and also on the journey to Maerkang, and again on the journey between Jiuzhaigou and Chengdu on our final day.

Blue-fronted Redstart

Another cracking little redstart of the high mountains. Glowing males (and a few decidedly less dazzling females) were seen on the slopes of Balang Shan.

White-capped (Water) Redstart

This widespread riparian species was seen on at least eleven days of the tour.

Plumbeous Redstart

Another river-loving redstart, regularly recorded along mountain rivers throughout the tour.

White-bellied Redstart

Beautiful males were seen twice on Wawu Shan. One of these birds regularly came in to feed around a large festering pile of garbage behind the restaurant on the cool summit.

White-tailed Robin

The melancholy song of this shy robin was heard emanating from dense stands of bamboo on several occasions on Wawu Shan.

Grandala

The bright purple male Grandalas are one of the most thrilling birds up on Balang Shan, leading a whole host of other colorful high altitude species that can be found at this incredible birding site. This is one of the true high altitude specialists and is usually found right near the highest point, the 4500m+ high pass. Five sightings were made on our trips to Balang Shan, with several cool males seen very well feeding in daisy-laden mountain meadows.

NB. The name "grandala" means grand wing, and coelicolor means sky-colored.

Tarsiger chrysaeus

Copsychus saularis

Phoenicurus ochruros

Phoenicurus hodgsoni

Phoenicurus schisticeps

Phoenicurus aureus

Phoenicurus frontalis

Chaimarrornis leucocephalus

Rhyacornis fuliginosa

Hodgsonius phaenicuroides

Cinclidium leucurum

Grandala coelicolor

Slaty-backed Forktail

Enicurus schistaceus

This handsome stream-loving species was seen very well on both of our walks at the base of Emei Shan, with up to three birds seen (including a juvenile or two within the group).

White-crowned Forktail

Enicurus leschenaulti

One was seen around the dramatic Pearl Shoals Falls inside Jiuzhaigou, although sadly did not linger for us all to soak it up as much as we would have wished.

Stonechat

Saxicola torquatus

Small numbers were seen on all three of our days on the Tibetan Plateau.

*NB. The race here was previously split off under the Clements list as **Siberian Stonechat**, *T. maurus*, although has since been lumped again within Stonechat. However, the form here still remains split as Siberian Stonechat on the IOC checklist.*

Gray Bushchat

Saxicola ferreus

Two were seen on the journey between Emei Shana and Wawu Shan, and again in the Wolong Valley.

THRUSHES AND ALLIES: TURDIDAE

Blue Rock-Thrush

Monticola solitarius

At least three birds were seen in deep gorges on the journey between Balang Shan and Mengbیشان. Another three were seen on our final days drive between Jiuzhaigou and Chengdu.

Blue Whistling-Thrush

Myophonus caeruleus

Seen daily up on Wawu Shan, invariably hopping off the road itself and plummeting down into the valley below! Better looks were had near Rilong over the far side of Balang Mountain.

Long-tailed Thrush

Zoothera dixonii

Excellent looks were had of a bird singing in the late afternoon rain along the road up Mengbیشان. Another brief sighting was made up on Balang Shan, although showed only to the guide.

Eurasian Blackbird

Turdus merula sowerbyi

The large sowerbyi race of Eurasian Blackbird has often been touted as a separate species, Chinese or Mandarin Blackbird. A number of these hulking blackbirds were seen on our first two days, around the city of Chengdu.

Chestnut Thrush

Turdus rubrocanus

Recorded on at least fourteen days of the tour, around Wolong, Maerkang, and Jiuzhaigou, where they were numerous and conspicuous. The most regularly recorded thrush on the tour by some way.

White-backed (Kessler's) Thrush

Turdus kessleri

Seen in small numbers on Balang Shan, with regular sightings daily on the Tibetan Plateau too, where our best views were had.

Karl Theodorovich Kessler (1815-1881) was a German/Russian zoologist, explorer and collector.

Chinese (Song) Thrush

***Turdus mupinensis* *CHINESE ENDEMIC**

A singing bird was scoped up on Mengbیشان, and others were heard inside the park at Jiuzhaigou.

H White-browed Shortwing

Brachypteryx montana

Just the one bird was heard calling down slope from the road up Wawu Shan.

BABLERS: TIMALIIDAE

White-throated Laughingthrush

Garrulax albogularis

A group of at least four birds was seen along the road up Wawu Shan.

Pere David's (Plain) Laughingthrush

Garrulax davidi *CHINESE ENDEMIC

This subdued endemic was seen during both of our visits down into the Baxi Valley. What was presumably the same pair was seen on both occasions feeding within a muddy paddock. Another was seen on a scrubby hillside above Jiuzhaigou town late one afternoon too by the guide only.

Abbé Pére Jean Pierre Armand David was a French naturalist and also a missionary to China between 1858 to 1874.

Sukatschev's (Snowy-cheeked) Laughingthrush

Garrulax sukatschewi *CHINESE ENDEMIC

One responded well to tape in the Baxi Valley.

Vladimir P. Sukachev was a Russian merchant, explorer and collector in China between 1884-1887.

H **Spotted Laughingthrush**

Garrulax ocellatus

This boldly patterned laughter was frustratingly unresponsive in our time at Wawu Shan, where several birds were heard.

Barred Laughingthrush

Garrulax lunulatus *CHINESE ENDEMIC

This famously shy laughter was unfortunately no different on this occasion, in spite of responding quickly to tape and coming in very close, the bird was fast moving and difficult to get long looks at.

Giant Laughingthrush

Garrulax maximus *CHINESE ENDEMIC

Unlike some of its congeners this laughingthrush is often quite conspicuous, as proved on this tour, where we enjoyed seven or eight sightings of this hulking "babbler". Small groups were seen on the road up to Balang Shan, on the slopes of Mengbishan, finally within the Baxi Valley. Some of the best looks came during some of our great days up on Balang Shan, where small groups of these noisy, large laughingthrushes were coaxed on to the tops of some low scrub, and were later seen bounding along the floor. A really cracking endemic.

Rusty (Buffy) Laughingthrush

Garrulax poecilorhynchus berthemyi *CHINESE ENDEMIC

Very conspicuous during our time on Wawu Shan, with sightings on four different days, including a massive group of at least twenty five birds on one day.

NB. Although not currently recognized under the Clements list, the IOC have split the Chinese form *berthemyi* from the Taiwanese Rusty Laughingthrush, with the Chinese birds then listed under the new endemic species name of **Buffy Laughingthrush, G. berthemyi**, and the endemic Taiwanese birds retaining the name of **Rusty Laughingthrush, G. poecilorhynchus**.

(Chinese) Hwamei

Garrulax canorus canorus

This is one of the most impressive songsters in Sichuan, that has led the bird to be a prized cage bird among Chinese. So while we were trying to prompt one to sing by playing a recording, we had the strange experience of various Chinese people stopping and exclaiming "Hwamei" as they quickly recognized the beautiful song emanating from my I-pod! In the end we also managed to get a Hwamei or two to respond too, and eventually two different birds were seen well near the base of Emei Shan. NB. The form of Hwamei found in China and Vietnam have been split off from the Taiwanese form on the IOC list. Therefore the birds in Sichuan are named **Chinese Hwamei, G. canorus** on the IOC list, and Taiwanese birds **Taiwan Hwamei, G. taewanus**.

White-browed Laughingthrush

Garrulax sannio

Our first, and most conspicuous laughingthrush on the tour, seen hopping along a pavement in the middle of a busy Chengdu street! I quickly had to explain to the group that this was far from typical for most laughingthrushes, this one being a notable exception. Numerous birds were seen very well during our first few days in the city of Chengdu, that were our only sightings of the tour.

Elliot's Laughingthrush

***Garrulax elliotii* *CHINESE ENDEMIC**

One of the most common and widespread Chinese endemics on the tour, with sightings on at least thirteen days. Our first came up on the summit of Wawu Shan, with others being seen at a number of sites in the Wolong area, on Mengbishan, in the Baxi Valley, and around Jiuzhaigou.

Black-faced Laughingthrush

Garrulax affinis

Excellent views were obtained in the sparse fir trees on the summit of Wawu Shan, where a pair were seen on our first trip up there, and another two pairs were seen on our second visit.

Red-winged Laughingthrush

Garrulax formosus

A very noisy laughingthrush that can be extremely difficult to see. Birds were heard regularly on four different days along the higher stretches of the road that runs up Wawu Shan. Birds were actually seen on three different occasions, although only once did a pair show well.

Gray-faced (Emei) Liocichla

***Liocichla omeiensis* *CHINESE ENDEMIC**

At least four different sightings were made along the road up Wawu Shan, where it is locally common along the higher stretches of the road.

Spot-breasted (Black-streaked) Scimitar-Babbler

Pomatorhinus erythrocnemis gravivox

We began by being frustrated by several calling birds on Wawu Shan, that remained steadfastly hidden in deep cover the entire time. Later on the tour we were sidelined for several hours by a landslide blocking the road between Maerkang and the Tibetan Plateau. Bob put this delay to good use though by finding one of these powerful babblers in some roadside scrub. Another pair were seen in dry scrub above the town of Jiuzhaigou.

*NB. On the IOC list the gravivox form occurring in Burma and China have been split from Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, under the name **Black-streaked Scimitar-Babbler, P gravivox.***

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler

Pomatorhinus ruficollis

Just the one bird was seen close to the Wuyipeng Research Station in Wolong.

Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler

Pnoepyga albiventer

A very responsive bird popped up less than 10 ft away, and gave crisp views, near Wuyipeng in Wolong.

Pygmy Wren-Babbler

Pnoepyga pusilla

One bird showed very well close to our mountain cabins on Wawu Shan, where a number of birds were heard calling during our visit too.

Rufous-capped Babbler

Stachyris ruficeps

Only seen on our first two days, within Chengdu, where birds were seen creeping around dense bamboo stands within the Panda Breeding Centre, and also inside the grounds of Du Fu's Thatched Cottage.

Chinese Babax

Babax lanceolatus

This striking babbler was seen twice in one day on Wawu Shan, and another pair was seen near Beimuping below Balang Shan pass.

Red-billed Leiothrix

Leiothrix lutea

Four of these "Pekin Robins" (as this species was formerly known), were seen in Chengdu on our first day, and later were seen regularly on Wawu Shan, where they were seen on four different days.

GO **Green Shrike-Babbler**

Pteruthius xanthochlorus

*A bird turned up in a frantic mobbing party of passerines near Wuyipeg, although was unfortunately only seen by Sam. The mob of passerines also included **Sooty Tits** and **Pere David's Tits**.*

Blue-winged Minla

Minla cyanouroptera

Just the one bird was seen, on Wawu Mountain.

Golden-breasted Fulvetta

Alcippe chrysotis

If it weren't for the phenomenal pheasants that this tour brought us this would surely be one of the birds of the trip. An absolutely fabulous fulvetta with bright golden-hued underparts, and deep slaty upperparts like no other. They were a big highlight of our day up near Wuyipeng, where several parties were seen very well, and were talked about long after. Although they missed making the top five birds of the trip (its hard to beat the likes of male Golden Pheasant, male Temminck's Tragopan, male Lady Amherst's Pheasant, male Chinese Monal and Blue Eared-Pheasants after all!), they got a worthy mention during our farewell dinner in a luxurious Chengdu restaurant on our final night.

White-browed Fulvetta

Alcippe vinipectus

One of these fulvettas was a surprise find along the road up to Balang Shan one afternoon.

Chinese Fulvetta

***Alcippe striaticollis* *CHINESE ENDEMIC**

Unlike many other fulvettas this endemic one can be devilishly difficult to see, and so it proved with the first bird that called frequently and showed little, near the tree line below Balang Shan, (only really showing well to our local guide). Thankfully it was a different story on Mengbishan where a pair were seen well by all as they crept around the trunk of a large spruce.

Spectacled Fulvetta

Alcippe ruficapilla

One showed eventually on a dry scrubby hillside above Jiuzhaigou town during our final afternoons birding.

Streak-throated Fulvetta

Alcippe cinereiceps

These distinctive fulvettas were seen regularly up on Wawu Shan, where they were seen on three different days. This species was especially common up on the bamboo-cloaked summit where they were seen on numerous occasions. Two others were seen on the hike up to Wuyipeng in Wolong.

Dusky (Brown-capped) Fulvetta

Alcippe brunnea

A super shy fulvetta that was seen only poorly on Qingchenshan despite the fact we had it pinned to a small bush. The bird called and called and showed very little, and could not be tempted out in the open despite much effort!

Gray-cheeked Fulvetta

Alcippe morrisonia

A few were seen during our walk around Du Fu's Thatched Cottage in Chengdu, and we also had further sightings around Qingchenshan.

Stripe-throated Yuhina

Yuhina gularis

Single birds were seen on both of our trips up to the fir forest on the summit of Wawu Shan.

White-collared Yuhina

Yuhina diademata

Seen first up on the flat-topped summit of Wawu Shan, with multiple sightings also around Wolong.

Black-chinned Yuhina

Yuhina nigrimenta

A party of at least five birds was seen on the lower slopes of Wawu Shan.

Chestnut-flanked White-eye

Zosterops erythropleurus

Just three sightings on this tour: two were seen on Wawu Shan, one in Sawan, and finally another single in Jiuzhaigou.

Japanese White-eye

Zosterops japonicus

Recorded a few times near the base of Emei Shan, with another sighting near our hotel in Dujiyan City.

STARLINGS: STURNIDAE

Crested Myna

Acridotheres cristatellus

Although not recorded at any of the birding sites as such, a number of them were seen while traveling on busy highways between sites on three separate journeys. These mynas were seen on the journey from Chengdu to Emei Shan, while traveling to Qingchenshan, and also on our final drive from Jiuzhaigou to Chengdu.

Red-billed (Silky) Starling

Sturnus sericeus

A flyover at Du Fu's Cottage in Chengdu constituted our first sighting. However, later that day we enjoyed much better views of nesting birds within the grounds of our Emei hotel, that were seen again there the following day.

White-cheeked Starling

Sturnus cineraceus

At least five different birds were seen in the grounds of our Emei hotel, where a nest was also seen thanks to a tip off from Keith Barnes, who was leading another TB group around just prior to this tour.

FLOWERPECKERS: DICAIEIDAE

Fire-breasted Flowerpecker

Dicaeum ignipectum

Two birds were seen near Crouching Tiger Temple near the base of Emei Shan. Other singles were seen well in the garden of our hotel near Qingchenshan.

SUNBIRDS: NECTARINIIDAE

Gould's Sunbird

Aethopyga gouldiae

This spiffing sunbird was seen on three of our days on Wawu Shan, that included several gorgeous male Gould's. Another was seen near Wuyipeng (Wolong) too.

Fork-tailed Sunbird

Aethopyga christinae

Another cracking sunbird, this one though generally found at lower elevations than Gould's. A superb male was seen at Emei Shan.

ACCENTORS: PRUNELLIDAE

Alpine Accentor

Prunella collaris

Recorded five times on the tour, all in the vicinity of Balang Shan pass. A maximum of five birds were seen on one of our many foggy days up there.

Rufous-breasted Accentor

Prunella strophiatea

Recorded on just two days: four birds were seen in an area of shrubbery that also held a beautiful singing male Himalayan Rubythroat just below Balang Shan pass; and a group of three other birds was seen on Mengbishan.

Maroon-backed Accentor

Prunella immaculata

A pair were seen really well during our first wonderful afternoon on Mengbishan (that also produced Chinese Fulvetta, Sichuan Jay, Blood Pheasants, Long-tailed Thrush, and more); another bird was also seen in thick spruce forest near Jiuzhaigou.

WAGTAILS AND PIPITS: MOTACILLIDAE

Citrine Wagtail

Motacilla citreola calcarata

This beautiful wagtail was seen on two of our three days up on the Tibetan Plateau, with at least six birds seen around the edge of Daba Lake during one afternoon. These included some shockingly bright spring males with clean luminous yellow heads watched singing in the marsh at the lake edge, and even walking along the boardwalk with us.

Gray Wagtail

Motacilla cinerea

A common species seen on at least nine different days, and at many sites (including Emei Shan, Wawu Shan, and in Wolong).

White Wagtail

Motacilla alba alboides

This distinctive "race" was recorded on at least fourteen days, and at all sites. The form of White Wagtail that occurs, is sometimes referred to as "Himalayan Wagtail".

Rosy Pipit

Anthus roseatus

This colorful highland pipit was fairly common on Balang Shan, where we enjoyed numerous sightings. A few were also on the Tibetan Plateau.

Olive-backed Pipit

Anthus hodgsoni

Recorded on five different days, including below Balang Shan, on Mengbishan, and in the Baxi Valley.

Forest Wagtail

Dendronanthus indicus

A glorious bird was seen singing from a children's climbing frame within our hotel grounds at Emei Shan. The bird was seen on two consecutive days in the same position.

BUNTINGS, SPARROWS, AND ALLIES: EMBERIZIDAE

Slaty Bunting

***Latoucheornis siemsseni* *CHINESE ENDEMIC**

Tricky to find on this tour, a calling bird could not be tempted out of dense cover near Sawan; and another pair was seen only briefly inside Jiuzhaigou.

Godlewski's Bunting

Emberiza godlewskii

Three sightings: our first came within a quarry close to the Tibetan town of Ruergai, another single was found in the Baxi Valley, and finally another party of three was seen on the journey between Jiuzhaigou and Chengdu.

Wiktor Witold Godlewski was a 19th century Polish naturalist and farmer that was exiled to Siberia.

Chestnut-eared Bunting

Emberiza fucata

Bob got lucky with this one, finding a bird south of Jiuzhaigou, on our journey to Chengdu on the final morning.

Yellow-throated Bunting

Emberiza elegans

Bob found a surprise pair of these smart buntings outside a restaurant during a lunch stop en-route from Emei Shan to Wawu Shan.

SISKINS, CROSSBILLS, AND ALLIES: FRINGILLIDAE

Brambling

Fringilla montifringilla

The undoubted shock find of the tour was a bird seen feeding close to us while we were searching for **Blue Eared-Pheasants** on two days in the same area of the Baxi Valley.

Plain Mountain-Finch

Leucosticte nemoricola

Small numbers were recorded regularly up on Balang Mountain.

Black-headed (Brandt's) Mountain-Finch

Leucosticte brandti

Two different groups were seen up on Balang Shan on two separate days. They are normally a little more numerous, although the pea soup like fog on the mountain hindered viewing on many of our days up there.

Dark-breasted Rosefinch

Carpodacus nipalensis

Three separate sightings were had at Beimuping, below Balang Shan, where on one occasion a super male allowed us to walk within two meters of it!

Common Rosefinch

Carpodacus erythrinus

This species was recorded regularly (seven days). Small numbers were seen below Balang Shan, on Mengbishan, and in the Baxi Valley, near the edge of the Tibetan Plateau.

(Chinese) Beautiful Rosefinch

Carpodacus pulcherrimus davidianus

Recorded on four days: below Balang Shan, on Mengbishan, and at a pass en-route to Chengdu from Jiuzhaigou on our final day.

NB. Although this **davidianus** form (found in China, Tibet, and Mongolia) is treated as a subspecies in Clements, it has been split as **Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch C. davidianus** on the IOC list. On this list it is therefore considered separate from **Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinch, C. pulcherrimus** of the Himalayas.

Pink-rumped Rosefinch

Carpodacus eos

A single bird was seen below Balang Shan, and multiple birds were seen within the flowering rhododendrons on the slopes of Mengbishan.

Vinaceous Rosefinch

Carpodacus vinaceus

A brick red male seen on Wawu Shan was our sole sighting.

Three-banded Rosefinch

Carpodacus trifasciatus

Three were seen during our full day in the spruce/rhododendron forest on Mengbishan, that included one deep pink male bird.

Spot-winged Rosefinch

Carpodacus rhodopeplus

One bright male was seen on Mengbishan.

(Chinese) White-browed Rosefinch

Carpodacus thura dubius *CHINESE ENDEMIC

This is one of the most striking of all the rosefinches and also one of the commonest on this tour, recorded on many occasions (at least nine days), although especially below the pass at Balang Shan and in the flowering rhododendrons on Mengbishan.

NB. Although not currently recognized as such in Clements, the IOC list classifies this form (found in Tibet and China) as a separate species, **Chinese White-browed Rosefinch, C. dubius**, separate from **Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch, C. thura** of the Himalayas.

Streaked Rosefinch

Carpodacus rubicilloides

Two different groups of these scarce rosefinches were seen during one foggy afternoon on Balang Shan, with the largest group containing at least six birds.

Red-fronted Rosefinch

Carpodacus puniceus

Just a single sighting of this chunky rosefinch this tour on Balang Shan, of three birds, that included one male in the mix.

Long-tailed Rosefinch

Uragus sibiricus

Ordinarily a scarce species on this tour, we enjoyed three different sightings: a male was seen in a deep gorge en-route to Maerkang; a pair were seen on a scrubby hillside above Jiuzhaigou town; and a final male was seen a short distance from Jiuzhaigou on our journey from there to Chengdu. The males of this species are simply stunning and arguably the most handsome of all the many handsome rosefinch species.

Oriental (Gray-capped) Greenfinch

Chloris sinica

At least three different birds were seen on our first day in Chengdu, and another single was found on our journey between Emei Shan and Wawu Shan.

Red Crossbill

Loxia curvirostra

Ken and Bob picked up two birds that flew over calling on Mengbisha.

Tibetan (Siskin) Serin

Serinus thibetanus

Several brief sightings were made within the Baxi Valley, just below the edge of the Tibetan Plateau.

Gray-headed Bullfinch

Pyrrhula erythaca

This smart bullfinch was recorded on five different days: in the Baxi Valley, near Wuyipeng, on Mengbisha, and below Balang Shan.

Yellow-billed (Chinese) Grosbeak

Eophona migratoria

A key bird in the Red Basin, we saw just one of these hulking grosbeaks in Chengdu on our first day, in parkland just outside Du Fu's Thatched Cottage.

Collared Grosbeak

Mycerobas affinis

A pair of these striking finches were seen in pine forest on the tree line below Balang Shan.

White-winged Grosbeak

Mycerobas carnipes

A single bird was seen at Beimuping, and another was seen in a spruce-cloaked valley just below the edge of the Tibetan Plateau.

OLD WORLD SPARROWS: PASSERIDAE

Russet Sparrow

Passer rutilans

Two birds were seen just south of Jiuzhaigou on the final day of the tour, and was one of the last species added to the list.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow

Passer montanus

Commonly encountered in the lowlands, including within Chengdu itself.

Rock Petronia

Petronia petronia

*Several large colonies of these dowdy sparrows were seen on the Tibetan Plateau. The name **petronia** comes from the local Bolognese name for the **Rock Sparrow**.*

Black-winged (Tibetan) Snowfinch

Montifringilla adamsi

Seen on two of our days up on the Tibetan Plateau, including in a quarry where many were nesting at the time.

White-rumped Snowfinch

Montifringilla taczanowskii

The distributions of these snowfinches are linked to pica colonies, as they use pica burrows for nesting. So once we had located a pica colony it did not take long to find these finches, with at least four snowfinches watched hopping around among the many picas scampering around the grassy plains of the Tibetan Plateau.

WAXBILLS AND ALLIES: ESTRILDIDAE

White-rumped Munia

Lonchura striata

Several different sightings were made at Emei Shan, including within the grounds of our hotel near the base.