Sichuan & the Tibetan Plateau (Qinghai)*

Pheasants and Prayer Flags in China’s “Heavenly Kingdom”

26 May – 16 June 2012

A confiding male Temminck’s Tragopan at Labahe, a new site on this tour; one of 12 species from the pheasant family seen on the trip (Sam Woods)

Tour Leader: Sam Woods

*Please note that this itinerary was changed from that originally advertised

Thanks to participants Mark Gawn & Thomas Olsen for contributing their photos to this report.
Introduction:
Each and every the Sichuan tour produces a few challenges—from the massive earthquake that rocked the region in 2008 (and the subsequent prolonged, and ongoing, period of recovery), to the incredibly rapid pace of development in the country, we always expect some “curveballs” to come our way. Having said that, aided by the sharp negotiating skills of our experienced local guide, Frank, now a veteran of this tour—having been successfully working with Tropical Birding now for the past seven years—we have always managed to overcome these, and so worry little for these minor inconveniences. However, this year saw some bigger challenges than expected when it was announced in spring that one of the sites on the tour, Wawu Shan, was to be closed for development, for a period of years, prior to the spring birding season! This was our most serious challenge to running the tour this year, and so Sam cut short his planned vacation in Taiwan before the tour, and set out for Sichuan to use this newly available time to scout some areas immediately before the group arrived. This worked out well, with two new sites visited successfully, which slotted in well as for Wawu Shan, and were more than adequate substitutes for that site. In addition to these obstacles to the tour, there were also regular uprisings of protest in some Tibetan areas of Sichuan prior to the tour, and so, fearing sudden closures of such areas on the tour (as has happened in years past), we chose to relocate the Tibetan section of the tour to the neighboring province of Qinghai instead. This proved to be a roaring success with the group, which voted this leg as their favorite section of the tour, and most definitely gained us some species, not least a certain family enigma, the Przevalski’s Rosefinch (Pink-tailed Bunting), a haul of six snowfinch species, and the much sought-after Mongolian Ground-Jay, to name but a few.

Indeed, the tour as a whole proved very successful indeed, in spite of the hurdles that were thrown in our way shortly before departure, and miraculously we not only amassed a personal best species total for this tour yet-312 species, but also enjoyed a healthy list of mammals—over ten species, including the enigmatic Red Panda, the humungous Takin, and a shocking, and most unexpected Asiatic Black Bear (photo left, Sam Woods) that brought our bus to a sudden halt in the hills near Maerkang.

However, sometimes looking at merely numbers hides the real story, although in this case it merely emphasizes the story. As well as a healthy species list for both mammals and birds, it was the sheer quality of the sightings that will be remembered above all, from the exquisite male Lady Amherst’s Pheasants that lingered for some time at the “new” site of Labahe, and the pair of Temminck’s Tragopans that also memorably graced the roadsides in the same reserve and lingered for longer still than the “Lady A’s”, allowing us to walk away after we had soaked them up, time and again. There is no doubt that this newly emerging site is set to become a firm favorite among pheasant-lovers travelling to Sichuan. Many people make the long trek to the Far East lured there with the promise of such extravagant Asian jewels which do not come any better decorated than China’s pheasants. This trip was no different, and those looking for a pheasant fix were not to be disappointed. Aside from the aforementioned galliformes, two pairs of Blue Eared-Pheasants showed for a long, long time at a mountain pass in northern Sichuan, allowing scope-filling views for as long as we wanted them, while Balang Shan’s famously temperament Chinese Monals were remarkably easy to come by this year, seen on all four visits to this
scenically spectacular mountain. On top of that were long, slow looks at a male Golden Pheasant that dared to walk into the open one quiet evening, allowing us to study him for some time as it foraged on a steep alpine slope. Of course it is all too easy to focus on the pheasants (of which 12 species were seen from this “celebrity” family), when talking of the tour, but there was much more besides: 8 parrotbills, 5 Accentors, 10-12 Rosefinches (depending on taxonomy-12 if you include Pink-tailed Bunting and Crimson-browed Finch), 6 Snowfinches, 14 species from the crow family—including Sichuan Jay and Mongolian Ground-Jay, 7 lark species, 16 tit species, 17 leaf-warblers, 14 laughingthrushes, and 8 redstarts! Other highlights included the soft pastel coloration of both White-browed and Crested Tit-Warblers, several striking and confiding Firethroats (none of which made it onto anyone’s top five!), and the always dashing Himalayan (White-tailed) Rubythroat made all the more memorable when it is seen singing within the stunning setting of Balang Shan.

There is clearly more than “just” pheasants on offer in this Far Eastern country that seems to continually dominate the thoughts of economists, and occupy increasingly more space on international newsreels. As if to prove this, people complained that picking a top five birds of the trip was simply NOT possible, with such a wide range of choices being available. The difficulty of this was proved thus, when a varied list was produced by the group, with almost no consensus at all, so that it was only possible to scale it down to around 15 species, from an original target of five! These are outlined later...

A modified itinerary saw us begin with our usual relaxed forays into parkland in the sweaty city of Chengdu, located in the lowlands of Sichuan’s Red Basin, from where we traveled south to Longcanggou, a neighboring mountain to Wawu Shan that, as mentioned, is off-limits for the foreseeable future. We then headed west and visited the emerging site of Labahe, a long-time haunt of Chinese birders and nature photographers, for the unrivaled pheasant viewing provided in the mixed forests within this stunning valley. After a short break back in Chengdu we were on the road north, visiting our first Tibetan area, in the form of the visually stunning valley of Jiuzhaigou, a UNESCO World Heritage Site site for good reason, which preceded our visit to another mountain close to Maerkang. After visiting the spruce-cloaked flanks of Mengbishan, close to this bustling Tibetan city, we headed to our final forest site of the trip-Wolong, where we visited an array of sites and habitats from alpine pastures to scree slopes on the flanks of the mighty Balang mountain, and birded our way through mixed woodland as we day-tripped up to Wuyipeng, a former hang-out of China’s most famous resident of all, the exceedingly shy, and exceedingly rarely seen, Giant Panda, one of the great symbols of world conservation. Finally, we boarded a plane and left Sichuan behind, making a short, but bird-filled, visit to the high plateau west of Xining, in Qinghai province for a stunning finale, to what had been a dream tour for “foodies”, bowled over by the diverse and tasty Sichuan food; a great tour for lovers of spectacular mountain scenery, as numerous steep-sided, rocky gorges, forest-lined picturesque river valleys, high mountain passes adorned with strikingly colorful Tibetan prayer flags, and valleys dotted with multi-colored lakes ensured that lovers of wild landscapes also got their fix too; while hardened birders and keen mammal watchers could also offer little complaint either, from a tour which offered much, and delivered much more than expected...
Itinerary:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>May 26</td>
<td>Arrival in Chengdu (Sichuan)/ Afternoon visit to Giant Panda Breeding Center \ night Chengdu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 27</td>
<td>Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage, Chengdu Afternoon birding lower flanks of Langcanggou \ night Longcanggou</td>
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<td>May 28-29</td>
<td>Longcanggou \ nights Longcanggou</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 30</td>
<td>Longcanggou to Labahe \ night Labahe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 31</td>
<td>Labahe \ night Labahe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 1</td>
<td>Labahe to Chengdu \ night Chengdu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 2</td>
<td>Chengdu to Gong Gang Li Pass \ night Jiuzhaigou</td>
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<td>June 3-4</td>
<td>Jiuzhaigou \ nights Jiuzhaigou</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 5</td>
<td>Jiuzhaigou to Maerkang \ night Maerkang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 6</td>
<td>Mengbishan \ night Maerkang</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 7</td>
<td>Maerkang to Wolong \ night Rilong</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 8-9</td>
<td>Balang Shan &amp; Beimuping (Wolong) \ nights Shawan (Wolong)</td>
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<td>June 10</td>
<td>Wuyipeng day trip (Wolong) \ night Shawan (Wolong)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 11</td>
<td>Beimuping area (Wolong) \ night Shawan (Wolong)</td>
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<td>June 12</td>
<td>Wolong to Qingchengshan to Chengdu \ night Chengdu</td>
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<td>June 13</td>
<td>Flight: Chengdu-Xining (Qinghai) to Qinghai Lake &amp; Rubber Mountains \ night Niao Dao</td>
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<td>June 14</td>
<td>Chaka Flats &amp; Rubber Mountains \ night Niao Dao</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 15</td>
<td>Rubber Mountains to Xining, fly to Chengdu \ night Chengdu (Sichuan)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 16</td>
<td>Departure from Chengdu</td>
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</tbody>
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Daily Summary:

May 26 Giant Panda Breeding Center, Chengdu (Sichuan)

Although this was scheduled to be the arrival day, with no birding initially planned, almost everyone (barring a delayed John) made it on time and were in Chengdu early, and all opted for some early birding and panda-watching around the city’s popular breeding center. As it turned out there was not too much panda watching (as far as Giant Pandas were concerned anyway), as these pied mountain beasts opted to stay in the luxury of their air-conditioned rooms at this steamy time of day, rather than roam their pens for the crowds in the fierce afternoon heat! Eugenia though fulfilled one of her goals by paying a little extra for some “personal” panda time, and a short photo shoot for her relatives back home with them. In between all this we gently strolled around the bamboo-choked, well-manicured, grounds of the center checking off our first Chinese birds, some of which we were not to see again, as most of our time would be away from these steamy lowlands, as Sichuan’s greatest diversity can be found within its misty and
cool mountains. The *first* bird of the tour was a *laughingthrush*, and Sichuan’s easiest species in this often difficult group, the positively tame **White-browed Laughingthrush**, *(photo page before, Sam Woods)*, that comes with a warning that it is *atypical* for Chinese laughers which are ordinarily shy creatures. Indeed, Sichuan’s relaxed capital city provides some very easy birding to kick-start this tour, and we soon also enjoyed our first two parrotbills as a mixed group of **Vinous-throated and Ashy-throated Parrotbills** passed by, chattering from a near grove of bamboo, and belying their close relationship, which may yet see them lumped into one species. Up in the taller trees overhead we found our only **Blue-winged Minlas** of the trip, while several groups of tits passed through, with a large, hyperactive flock of **Black-throated Tits**, and a lesser group of **Great Tits** too. Handsome **Chinese (Light-vented) Bulbuls** were also typically common and conspicuous in the parkland *(photo below, Thomas Olsen)*. As we weaved our way between large noisy tour groups, with our attendant guides and their attendant identification flags, we found a low feeding **Oriental (Gray-capped) Greenfinch**, and a number of “Peking Robins” *(a.k.a. Red-billed Leiothrix)*. However, the most bizarre shout of the afternoon came from Mark who asked “what gulls do you have here?” as a vagrant **Black-tailed Gull** passed low overhead! Most unexpected in this, normally gull-less, city. While their pied cousins were less co-operative, the timing of our visit coincided well with the feeding times for the *Red Pandas*, which quickly came bounding out of their own air-conditioned quarters to thrill the crowds at their scheduled feeding time. These handsome creatures entertained us and made us all long for some real, *wild* encounters with them somewhere on our journey through Sichuan’s mountains. A distinctive call from the bamboo distracted us from the panda frenzy for a little while and pretty soon the culprit, **Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler**, was tempted out into the open. With our targets achieved we slowly made our way back to the entrance, stumbling onto a pair of brazen bamboo-partridges *(Chinese Bamboo-Partridge)* that wandered onto the path in front of us, leaving us stunned but elated at a great finale to our first Chinese birding. These handsome gamebirds just made it across the paved path before one of the larger tour groups in the center came thundering past!

**May 27**

**Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage (Chengdu) to Longcanggou**

Overnight, and 24 hours later than scheduled, John arrived and over breakfast acquainted himself with the group, some of which already knew him from a recent Tropical Birding trip to Peru! Our early morning was once again to be based in the lowland parklands of Chengdu, though this time at another site-*Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage*, the former home of a Tang Dynasty poet, and good birding spot and migrant trap in the heart of this absorbing Chinese city. This was to offer John some catch-up species from the day previous, such as **Black-throated Tit**, and a small but significant batch of new birds for *all* of us. Just after alighting we found one of these-a large black shape revealing itself to be the odd Chinese race of **Eurasian Blackbird**, that is larger than its other cousins and sounds quite different, leading many to declare it a potential separate species, oft-referred to as **“Mandarin” Blackbird**. The next bird was a surprise,
and proof of Du Fu’s attractiveness to migrant birds, as a second year Amur Falcon was found staring down at us from a lofty perch. Though sadly, this was to be the only migrant evident that day. Not long after another major target for the site flew into the high trees overhead, Chinese (Yellow-billed) Grosbeak, although we would have to wait another hour before we all got the killer looks of this that we desired. The distinctive tinkling sound of Rufous-faced Warbler soon drifted to our ears and not long after we were admiring this handsome warbler as it sung low in the park side vegetation. Other additions around the cottage included a male Common Cuckoo proclaiming its name loudly, and a small flock of babblersthat held both Rufous-capped Babblers and Gray-cheeked Fulvetta. As crowds increased, some practicing Tai Chi in the open parkland, whilst others exercised their voices loudly, we decided to head south into the shans, and the exciting new site of Longcanggou, that I had only recently acquainted myself with in light of Wawu’s recent closure.

While the enticingly named “Tiger Forest Resort” left a little to be desired at Longcanggou, the friendly staff more than made up for the unusually below par lodgings with their fantastic culinary offerings, all of which were of course (as we were to learn) under the watchful eye of Frank, our local guide and “foodies”, who ensured we never had a bad meal if he could help it. Once again, this was to be a Sichuan tour filled with delicious dishes, of seemingly infinite variety, and of spicy and non-spicy products to satisfy all but the pickiest of eaters!

In the afternoon, post lunch, we headed up into the “Forest Park”, having chalked up Russet Sparrow, Black-naped Oriole, Blue Magpie, Asian Koel, and a flock of thirty or so White-throated Needletails scything through the air overhead within a mixed flock of Asian House-Martins and Pacific Swifts, all over lunch from the resort. Once up on the conifer-cloaked lower slopes of Longcanggou we were hoping for a flurry to jumpstart our bird list there, but instead experienced relatively few birds in a quiet first afternoon. However, we did pick up our first leaf-warbler, and a specialty one at that, Emei Leaf-Warbler, and glimpsed another major target, Emei (Gray-faced) Liocichla, of which we hoped for better views of in the future. We also chalked up another Chinese endemic, in the form of a Yellow-bellied Tit. While not endemic, or a specialty, the white-headed form of Black Bulbul was welcomed for being a fine bird in its own right anyway. Overnight a developing and familiar pattern of heavy rains began to fall, leaving the courtyard of the attractive traditional wooden building we were staying in dampened from the downpour.

May 28  Longcanggou (upper slopes)

This day was spent at the upper reaches of Longcanggou, where our focus was the myriad of parrots found within its bamboo-choked slopes. The most-prized asset up there is the Gray-hooded Parrotbill, which was to prove difficult for all groups this year. Here at Longcanggou they are at much lower density as the upper peak is much lower (just over 4500m). Sadly we did not find this rare parrotbill, but parrotbills were still very much on everyone’s lips. One of our first stops revealed a chattering party of adorable Golden Parrotbills moving through the bamboo to within just a meter or so of us all, and was the bird of the day for many. A hike was undertaken to try for parrotbills and
treecreepers, although the Sichuan Tree creeper I had found just days before did not show in heavy mist and rain unfortunately, and was to prove frustratingly elusive throughout the trip. However, the bamboo-cloaked hillocks on the summit did yield a Three-toed Parrotbill as hoped, a Black-faced Laughingthrush, along with the distinctly more common endemic Elliot’s Laughingthrush. A gorgeous male Gould’s Sunbird was quickly elevated to bir of the trip by John, and we got to work on our warbler list, a confusing array of species occurring in Sichuan to challenge all but the most dedicated warbler junkies with their confusingly similar garbs. We found Claudia’s Leaf-Warbler (recently split from Blyth’s), giving itself away with its distinctive behavioral trait of raising first one wing and then the other; Bianchi’s Warbler, the highest reaching of the puzzling, recently-split, seicercus “Golden-spectacled” complex; and a conspicuously marked Sichuan Leaf-Warbler from another confusing complex of “Lemon-rumped Warblers”. Somber-colored bush-warblers are also well represented in Sichuan, best appreciated for their extraordinary songs, which made the Yellowish-bellied Bush-Warbler substantially more popular with the group during its late afternoon performance than the dowdy illustration in the field guides would suggest. Other highlights included Hodgson’s Tree creeper (a local form, and future split from Eurasian Tree creeper), our first vivid Long-tailed Minivets, White-collared Yuhinas, (photo page before, Sam Woods) Dark-sided Flycatchers, (photo next page, Sam Woods), and a Lesser Cuckoo.

However, the headlines from the summit were hogged by a mammal and not a bird, and were a precursor of what a great mammal trip this was to turn out to be. Mark must have taken the award for the most calmly announced panda sighting in history when he quietly stated, with no hint whatsoever of the excitement that the animal was to cause for the rest of us in his voice, that he “had a Red Panda!” (photo above, Thomas Olsen) The subdued nature of his announcement caused a rather delayed and disbelieving response, and then suddenly we were locked onto the rich red coat of this extremely handsome Chinese creature as it slept within the crook of a tree on the other side of the valley. At times it even reared its head, revealing attractive white markings on its handsome face before it nuzzled back into its fur and was soon engulfed by the descent of low cloud around it. A magical sighting indeed, and, the “thing” of the day for most. A last final parrotbill sighting came along the road as we descended towards our lodging. We begun the day with one of the smallest, Golden Parrotbill, and ended with the giant in the group, a pair of very popular Great Parrotbills, which “growled” regularly in response to playback.
May 29  Longcanggou (lower slopes)

The morning opened with us pausing by a rushing mountain river, whose rapids-washed boulders held three **Brown Dippers** for us. Shortly after we were listening to the soft melodic song of the **Chinese Blue Flycatcher** (a potential split from **Blue-throated Flycatcher**), although despite calling close, and moving often, this furtive flycatcher could not be located at this time. In the same area a distinctive call came from the pines overhead and revealed the presence of a male **Red-headed Trogon** in the area, a surprise find. However, after a sudden flight view the bird remained firmly hidden within thick cover thereafter. A **Kloss’s Leaf-Warbler** (split from **White-tailed**) did though bring us an addition to our lists a little later. Another **Emei Leaf-Warbler** was also watching singing in the same area before we ventured higher. Some tall spruce trees offered a lofty perch for a set of **Red Crossbills**, a good bird to bank in case of splits within this complex, complex of birds in the future. Several **Oriental Honey-Buzzards** were seen displaying overhead, hinting at breeding within the area, and several new woodpeckers were seen with the diminutive **Gray-capped Woodpecker**, and larger **Crimson-breasted Woodpecker**. Several tit flocks were suitably stirred up with the use of a **Collared Owlet** “tape” (although not an owlet sadly), and yielded a number of feisty **Yellow-browed Tits** among them, who invariably came in and showed marked disdain for this predatory bird! The odd **Yellow-bellied Tit** was also in the mix, although the star bird within the mobbing party was surely the pair of **Fire-capped Tits** that lingered in view for some time. Apart from several parties of very confiding **Golden Parrotbills**, the odd **Verditer Flycatcher** and a couple of **Ferruginous Flycatchers** things were fairly quiet, presumably this bright clear weather was not to the liking of the mountain birds used to a distinctly cooler climate. However, it did afford wonderful views of the surrounding landscape, including the table-topped Wawu Mountain. Our luck changed sharply later in the day though when we tried for **Chinese Blue Flycatcher** once more, and chose to follow Brian’s suggestion and creep into the bamboo where we were rewarded with excellent looks at this handsome Asian bird.

May 30  Longcanggou (lower slopes) to Labahe

After long periods of inactivity in bright and spring like conditions once again, we finally ran into an understory flock in the bamboo under layer that held a stunning **Golden-breasted Fulvetta**, which proved a great crowd pleaser. However, our main target for the morning, the local endemic **Emei (Gray-faced) Liocichla** taunted us for most of the morning until just before we were going to leave one popped up right at the side of the road and
remained for some time, giving us all long, long, long looks at this key species and brought relief to all. Keen eyes picked out a **Chinese Goshawk (Sparrowhawk)** passing low overhead, as well as our first **Himalayan Swiftlets**, just before we descended for a spicy lunch before our departure northwest for **Labahe**, another new and exciting site to emerge after the Wawu Shan closure...

As we left Longcanggou behind us we picked up a lone pair of **Tiger Shrikes** standing guard in a local field, which proved to be the only ones of the trip. Arriving at Labahe in the late afternoon we checked a site low down for the endemic, and junco-like, **Slaty Bunting**, and scored almost immediately with a charcoal gray male quickly emerging from the brush. Trees alongside also held our only **Wedge-tailed Pigeon** of the trip, and the scrub held a confiding **Russet Bush-Warbler**, while the forest edge produced a conspicuous **Hair-crested Drongo**. At night we went to bed with dreams filled with pheasants as the following day was to be our first try for two of the biggest targets of the trip: **tragopans** and **Lady A’s**...

**May 31  Labahe**

As glimmers of dawn light broke through the clouds above, and after a make-shift breakfast in the heated, resort lobby, we boarded the park jeeps at Labahe, the only vehicles permitted to travel the road we needed to focus on for pheasants. Nervous excitement was all around: excitement as everybody knew the drive held our best chances for the two pheasants, and nervousness as we were all wary of being in the “wrong” position in the jeep to get views. A lottery over dinner the night before had led to allocation of seats and so there were no complaints, just obvious fear laid bare on everyone’s faces...

![Chinese Goshawk](image)

I had visited the site just the week before for the first time and was mighty impressed by the pheasant viewing and had learnt the lay of the road and the best areas for our targets, due to a fortuitous encounter with a jeep driver...
with an unexpected passion for “white chickens” (i.e. Lady A) and “red chickens” (i.e. tragopans). Sadly this favored driver of mine was on leave, and so some added fear was in the air due to our new driver, who more typically seemed to have little interest in the birds at all. My eyes were locked on the mist-shrouded road for any large shapes lurking at the verges, and I became especially focused around a bend where I had enjoyed a magical sighting of tragopans just days earlier. Amazingly, there at the side of the road was a bright scarlet, polka-dotted male Temminck’s Tragopan, photo page before Sam Woods, (with a much less conspicuous, cryptically-patterned, female close by)! Fearing the worst we all stayed put, and watched them through the dirty windscreen, as they foraged in the dull mist a short time after dawn. We were elated to get them, although the looks were not satisfying and so we dared to get out of the vehicle, with the result being that the tragopans did not budge an inch! The ‘scope was duly set up and locked onto the male for some time. As we watched the birds move around another, nervier, male appeared on the road too. But above all the main result was that the day brightened affording thrilling and prolonged looks at this Chinese dream bird. Eventually we also dared to venture further forward with the birds looking relaxed and unconcerned by our prolonged presence. Using the jeep as cover we crept closer and enjoyed even more impressive views of this spectacular, horned pheasant. Finally, after half an hour or more, the male slowly walked up the bank and vanished into the forest. Wow, wow, wow. The group was distinctly calmer following this wonder view, although we still had the small matter of tracking down a Lady Amherst’s-a distinctly faster, shyer, and famously more skittish bird altogether. What unfolded was the first “big day” of the tour, with some unforgettable sightings...

Not long after we bundled ourselves back in the jeep, deep in the afterglow of the “tragopan show”, we brought the car suddenly to a halt for the first of three resplendent male Lady Amherst’s Pheasants (photo left, Sam Woods). Although they by no means lingered to the extent the tragopans did, being as furtive as they are, we all managed looks at what can easily be argued for as one of the World’s must-see birds. Finally, after our nine kilometer “chicken run” up the mountain road, we reached the top and stretched our limbs after the confined space of the jeep, and went for a walk along a very well-placed boardwalk. This deserted trail passes through mixed woodland at some 2600m/8530ft, which has a significant under layer of bamboo, the haunt of more bird quarry for us... We had just stepped on the boardwalk when the high-pitched tones of a tesia reached our ears, and a little intermittent use of the I-Pod brought the Chestnut-headed Tesia in extremely close, even using the boardwalk itself as a hiding spot on occasion, although everyone managed looks at this stub-tailed beauty. However, when one thinks of bamboo our attentions are inevitably drawn to parrotbills, which simply love the stuff. Not long after the tesia had retreated back into cover, the ends of the bamboo stems were seen twitching from the movement of some impossibly cute Fulvous Parrotbills hiding within them, which had some very confiding Golden-breasted Fulvetta for company too. Then a Red-winged Laughingthrush landed in full sight, if only briefly, but at least Tom and a few others were well placed to see this extremely shy laugh before it dropped out of sight once more. Carrying on further along the boardwalk we began to leave the tall, closed canopy,
mixed forest behind, and entered into a Tolkien-esque world where bamboo dominated save for some scrubby “outcrops” and some tall, scattered spruces. As we descended we heard another of our quarries, a much larger parrotbill this time, the Brown Parrotbill. After initially avoiding our advances they popped up of their own accord and were observed carrying food, so were presumably in the full swing of nesting at that time. We had little time to dwell on the parrotbill though, as soon after the rich repeated phrases of a male Firethroat in full song broke the silence, and geared us into action. Before trying the tape, I advised the group we should check the low scrub for it per chance it might just be sitting out in the open. This idea was a little half-hearted, as I did not expect this very much at all, but what do I know, I did not expect to get a Red Panda a few days before either! Almost immediately after my words of hope, an incredulous Brian announced he had it! I could not believe it, but following his sightline led me, and all others to a striking red throat simply glowing out of the gloom of the dark shrubby understory. What a morning we were having. I was not looking forward to my duel with this species, as it often leaves you feeling beaten and frustrated, so I was exceedingly happy to get this one so easily. So easily in fact it gave us time to erect the ‘scope and have prolonged looks at it. This bird is one of those that even if you’ve seen it before, it still takes your breath away when you see it again, as if it is that glorious first time all over again. Paintings and illustrations simply cannot do it justice. And yet, this striking species did not make into anyone’s top birds of the trip list! Other less flashy birds seen during the day included an active flock of Speckled Woodpigeons feeding on the banks of the river, several Rufous-gorgeted Flycatchers showing off their famous gorgets, and for Mike at least a Spotted Laughingthrush that belatedly came into my tape, but only after most of us had walked away (don’t you just hate it when that happens!) Drinks flowed that night, although it was hard to know what to toast to...tragopans, Lady A’s, parrotbills, or Firethroats?!...we raised a glass of Snow beer and said “kampai” (i.e. cheers) to them all!

June 1 Labahe to Chengdu

With a final morning in the Labahe area, we again squeezed ourselves into the jeep, and again came across pheasants along the road—both a brief tragopan this time, but our best sightings yet of an extravagant male Lady Amherst’s Pheasant. The male on this occasion took his time to flee the scene, allowing all of us to scour his entire, exquisite plumage, and absorb every intricate detail. It was not alone though, as two different males graced the road that morning. After such a quality viewing it was little surprise that Lady A was a popular choice among the top five birds of the trip up until the very end.

We again returned to the wonderful boardwalk at the top that weaves its way through rich mixed woodland. With cloud descending regularly it was not surprising that the birding was distinctly slower than the day previous, save for a Himalayan Cuckoo that sang out in the open, and made hearing them regularly following this much less painful than it had been until we got this clear, and long, look! We also had our first crisp views of a party of tits that contained among them a few Gray-crested Tits. We again came upon a mixed bamboo flock that comprised both Fulvous Parrotbills and Golden-breasted Fulvettas. We did though add Eurasian (Himalayan) Nutcracker to the list, which were noisy and conspicuous in several areas that morning, and also found our first male Vinaceous Rosefinch of the trip, (following a lone female seen at Longcanggou earlier). Once again returning to the same area as the day before we also found the male Firethroat in full song once more, and perched once more in the same poorly concealed spot! We also added Gray-headed Bullfinch to the bird list, with a lone but very approachable female in the area, feeding unconcernedly at close range while we looked on. Perhaps best of all though was finally catching up with a White-browed Shortwing, whose calls had plagued us regularly until then, each bird having eluded us until that point. However, in spite of all of this a mammal again stole the headlines, with
a party of enormous **Takin** (a hulking, Musk Ox like goat-antelope), *photo below, Thomas Olsen*, found feeding on an alpine slope by Mark, who was quickly emerging as the mammal finder of the trip (*Red Panda, Takin...what next!*?). Returning to bird the road down before the jeep came back to collect us we ran into a small flock of tits that contained a party of the rare **Black-browed Tit**, with a single **Fire-capped Tit** among them too. Incredibly just as we were getting back to the jeep, the driver put some of us onto another **Red Panda**, which was more skittish than our first animal, quickly disappearing into the bamboo...thank goodness we had all seen the former animal at Longcanggou so well!

![Takin](image.jpg)

In the afternoon we returned to **Chengdu**, in preparation for our journey north into our first Tibetan area. We did make a stop en-route to a **Chinese Hwamei** site, but were thwarted by this beautiful songster that never revealed itself sadly, and was to be missed on the trip.

**June 2 Chengdu to Gong Gang Li & Jiuzhaigou**

After a night in Chengdu we headed north into our first Tibetan area of the tour. Although we left in the wee hours of the morning for the eight-hour journey, we were soon within a fleet of buses piling north to the famous, and popular, reserve of Jiuzhaigou. Although relatively little known outside China and Japan, this scenically spectacular wooded valley has been on the tourist map for years in the region, a credit to the uniqueness of the valley in terms of landscape beauty which has led to its designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. However, we are jumping the gun here, as this day was not about the valley, but the journey to the town of the same name, which took us through the edge of the Tibetan Plateau, before we climbed up to a spruce-laden pass near the park, both of which led us to many new birds, and made for a very exciting end to our long journey.

A few brief stops came on the first leg of the journey, which, generally speaking, was pretty uneventful, although “uneventful” did lead us to our first **Chinese Pond-Herons**, **Blue Rock-Thrushes**, and **Daurian Redstarts** of the trip. We lunched in **Songpan**, a tourist town deep in the heart of Tibetan country, with Yak on the menu, and steeped in history from the Mao era, whose Red Army even made a stop off there during their famed Long March
north in 1935. After a fantastic lunch, again proclaimed as the “best of the trip”, (this was to become something of a joke by the trip end, as nearly every lunch was proclaimed thus by someone!), we stopped when Eugenia spotted a roadside pheasant, which turned out to be our first Ring-necked Pheasants, here, strangely, in their less familiar native home. A short stop for a single pheasant quickly turned into a much longer stop for more pheasants, some dozen or so were found scattered across the agricultural fields in the area, and more other birds, and so a few minute stop quickly turned into an hour or more as Pere David’s (Plain) Laughingthrush was found, along with Chinese Beautiful and Common Rosefinches, Kessler’s (White-backed) Thrush, our first Hill Pigeons, Chestnut Thrushes, and Tickell’s Leaf-Warblers, and a very friendly party of Songar (Sichuan) Tits which came in to get their photos taken (photo below, Sam Woods). A cloud of Yellow-billed Chough and a scattering of Red-billed Choughs too were also witnessed in the same area. Never had a few minute stop felt so good!

From there we climbed ever higher, passing through open areas with some Tibetan villages adorned with bright prayer flags which constantly fluttered in the cool winds. Eventually we moved beyond this and returned to high altitude scrub and spruce forest where we made a special stop, for a major target bird, but also where we were to pick up our first of many “Jiuzhaigou” birds in the area... A short trail was alive with birds in spite of the afternoon rains, with the extremely handsome Chinese White-browed Rosefinch quickly found, along with the spritely and cartoonish Rufous-vented Tit (a big favorite among the group, and John in particular), and a striking male White-throated Redstart that helpfully used the tips of small spruces to show off its sharp-dressed plumage. Leaf-warblers here were dominated by Buff-barred and Greenish Warblers, with the odd extra Tickell’s too. A male Himalayan Bluetail with his indigo blue upper side and fiery orange breast sides was also popular amongst this flurry of new birds. A passing tit flock held our attention for some time, as this was where our main quarry was likely to be, and sure enough after sifting through leaf-warblers, Rufous-vented, Green-backed and Gray-crested Tits we did latch onto a male Crested Tit-Warbler giving its kinglet/crest-like calls, and doing a good job of trying to sneak past us. Tom though, among others was left hoping for further looks at this pastel-colored endemic, due to the rains and heavy mist making color definition challenging to say the least. And so we would return to this “tit” later on the trip...The early afternoon flurry was impressive, and so it continued into the late afternoon when first a beady-eyed, junco-esque Maroon-backed Accentor and then a gorgeous male Slaty-backed Flycatcher both putting in late afternoon appearances, afterwhich we headed to the chaotic Tibetan tourist town of Jiuzhaigou with a distinct spring in our step. This was meant to be a travel day, although our afternoon experience and outbreak of new birds disputed this and made it feel very far from this indeed.
June 3 Jiuzhaigou

This visually spectacular park is literally littered with scenic lakes and dramatic waterfalls with intriguing names like Five-colored Lake, Rhinoceros Lake and Pearl Sholes Falls. Tens of thousands of Asian tourists flock here each year to view this amazing natural valley, although do not let this put you off, for as we are birders we have some neat tricks to avoid the crowds! When we arrived at park opening time (the civilized hour of 07.00am) it was hard to believe this was one of the most popular Sichuan tourist attractions, which suited us perfectly, although the large TV screen at the park entrance and automated gates with the latest technology to pass through your rather expensive ticket betrayed the fact that this was one massive operation compared with many more subdued western parks. **Eurasian Crag Martins** were nesting by the entrance, while **Daurian Redstarts** used the roofs of houses as prominent perches while we waited to enter and Frank went through the formalities of ticket-purchasing. A fleet of buses was waiting for the onslaught of the days tourists, hungry for some truly unique settings of the natural world, although we sneaked in ahead of these late risers, and managed (once again with the masterful aid of our adaptable local guide Frank), to find a small vehicle that would take us off the beaten track and away from the crowds. While Frank got to work on the vehicle arrangements we birded a colorful Tibetan village—one of the few remaining in the park (which has been systematically cleared of many of its residents over the years), decorated with multicolored, gaudy, yet attractive Tibetan settlements adorned with large brassy prayer wheels, and ever-present, vividly-colored, prayer flags continually fluttering even at these low wind levels. The trees were alive with birds, mostly leaf-warblers of course (usually Claudia’s), although a party of Chestnut-flanked White-eyes was also present, as were several low-foraging Sooty Tits, yet another endemic tit for our burgeoning list of this popular group of songbirds. An explosive call on the far side of the road had us dropping the tits for an explosive bird: a scarlet and blue **Indian Blue Robin**, which was quick to investigate the seeming intruder within its territory (i.e. my I-Pod).

We bundled ourselves, discreetly into a small vehicle and stopped near a narrow, little known valley (which is usually absent from the myriad of maps of the park available at the bustling entrance stores, and were soon alone, **just us and the birds**. As soon as we alighted from our vehicle the reel of songs of **Chinese Leaf-Warbler** reached our ears and pretty soon an angry individual came into to check out the overtures of my I-Pod. Strategic use of a Collared Owlet tape once again brought in a flurry of songbirds, angry at this fake owls presence (although once again the owl itself appeared non-existent). Checking the trees closely above we noticed a band of tits coming in and soon picked out the hoped for **Pere David’s Tit**, a handsome and striking endemic “chickadee”. Better still was the **Chinese (Snowy-browed) Nuthatch**, which had been taunting us from the treetops, finally came into view and flitted nervously on a dead limb, letting everyone take in its features this time round.

Once the owlet tape was stopped the road fell quiet again, and so we moved away from the woodland edge and entered the forest itself. Walking an abandoned boardwalk a movement under the walkway had me chasing a never-identified thrush, only for a male **Rufous-headed Robin** to dramatically appear where the thrush had momentarily been moments earlier! The robin was soon on its heels though and avoided all but my stares at the time, so I put the recordings into action, whereby this beautiful songster quickly began singing its rich, melancholy song back. We moved in closer and the bird seemed close at hand and incredibly I quickly found it sat in the open at eye level— a rare thing for this notoriously elusive passerine. Luckily, Mark was not far behind and also enjoyed great looks at this master skulker before it dropped from view and showed no further interest in us or my recording. And so we entered the valley, which, in spite of a lengthy walk, produced little else of interest after several **Gray-headed Flycatchers** and a **Bar-tailed Treecreeper**, constant rain dogging viewing at the time.
On returning to the trailhead we were wet through, as the combination of constant rain and an overgrown, little used trail had left us soaked, but did pick up another new “leafer” (as they became affectionately known), in the form of a Hume’s Warbler. And so we headed back towards the hotel with just a few hardy birders in the group opting to bird a steep, dry scrubby hillside above town for some other specialties. Initial searches for the trail were confusing, as they had landscaped the area, making the trailhead distinctly less obvious than in the past, though finally Mark, Brian and I prevailed and were soon on the right track. We were grateful that the rain had relented, and it is remarkable how the climate can be so markedly different inside and outside the park on the very same day. At last our clothes began to dry out. Before we began our ascent though, Brian and Mike spotted a pair of Brown-breasted Bulbul sitting in town, our only sightings of the tour. On climbing a few hundred meters up this steep trail we scoured the scrub for any of our quarry. The easiest was, you guessed it, yet another leaf-warbler: Yellow-streaked Warbler, which excitedly came in to check us out at close quarters. We had to wait longer for our main targets, although finally both Spectacled Fulvetta and Spectacled Parrotbill came in for choice encounters. The Black-streaked Scimitar-Babblers calling intermittently in the same area unfortunately did not do the same and gave only distant looks before we could get the ‘scope on them. The Pere David’s (Plain) Laughingthrushes in the same area were more co-operative, a pair of which huddled together on a branch for long enough to scope them up and ensure they were well and truly on the list.

After yet more enticing cuisine in the hotel, where we tried to artfully dodge the “lethal” Sichuan numbing peppers hidden carefully within (something we had become quite used to by then!), we checked the rocks around the hotel and came up with a calling Gray Nightjar fluttering around the cliff face as hoped.
June 4 Jiuzhaigou

For our second day in the park we visited some other areas inside, which were equally, or arguably, even more stunning in terms of scenic beauty than those visited previously. Once again Frank ensured we beat the crowds to Long Lake, and had the place to ourselves for a short time, save for a few staff (probably wondering how we made it up there so early). A male Vinaceous Rosefinch was waiting for us perched prominently on a towering spruce tree, although this was not what we were looking for. Another endemic laughingthrush was our target, and an off-tricky one at that. However, on this morning the bird behaved, and we all got cracking looks at a Sukatschev’s (Snowy-cheeked) Laughingthrush. And Mark even fired off a couple of shots of this difficult to photograph species! (photo page before) We were off to a flying start, before rain once more cascaded down on us. Descending down to the well-named Many-colored or Five-colored Lake we kicked White-throated Redstarts and Elliot’s Laughingthrushes off the boardwalk ahead of us, and took the park bus down to the same valley where we had been the day previous. As soon as we got off the bus (and before even that Frank had the snacks ready-fast indeed) a Black Woodpecker had been spotted in a large dead spruce, which was later also visited by a Great Spotted Woodpecker also. We then tried again for Jiuzhaigou’s headache bird, the Rufous-headed Robin, and as is typical with this master skulker it popped up for a short time, during which only Tom and Sam got eyes on it, although for that magical moment Tom got great looks at this super songster, which then did its regular disappearing act. By that point time was wearing on and we had to think about lunch and so began walking down the valley towards Zechawa, managing to find a friendly bus driver who picked us up, even if we were well away from the official park stops (something that many are all too unwilling to do unfortunately). We then had our only bad sit down meal of the trip, although to be fair this was not Frank’s fault, and he did predict this, as he had no control over the immense, official, park buffet.
After lunch we took the eastern arm of the park roads up to the Primeval Forest, where the massive towering spruces and dark understory were straight out of Lord of the Rings. Sadly the birds were not quite so magical, a Prezwalski’s Nuthatch calling for a short time and never showing any interest in coming in. However, we did pick up our first Tibetan Serins of the trip, massing in a large spruce tree. For a finale to our time in Jiuzhaigou we went for a scenery stop, knowing that no visitor to this wonderfully scenic park cannot leave without a view of what, for me, is its centerpiece: Pearl Sholes, (photo page before, Thomas Olsen), where multiple waterfalls drain across rocks and tumble over trees rooted within the falls. Better still though we picked up a new bird in the form a friendly White-throated Dipper that literally stood on the boardwalk between groups of people passing noisily by (photo left, Mark Gawn). Another male Slaty-backed Flycatcher also provided a backup cast in the same area. For those who missed the steep hill the day before, another foray close to our hotel produced further views of Yellow-streaked Warbler, Spectacled Fulvetta and Spectacled Parrotbill, as well as further poor views of those dastardly Black-streaked Scimitar-Babblers again!

June 5 Gong Gang Li to Maerkang

This day was full of contrasts, starting brightly, then fading fast, and then hitting a flood of new birds that did not stop until nightfall. And with a huge shock right near the end, which stopped the car and our hearts for a moment...

We began the day at the 3800m/12,460ft-high Gong Gang Li pass just outside Jiuzhaigou. Here we had a clear game plan: get there for first light and scan intensely for pheasants feeding on the slopes at the quiet time of dawn, when less traffic and people would be on this popular road to scare them away. This meant leaving the hotel with a paltry packed breakfast from the hotel (this is one thing they do not do well in China, packed food), and layering up for the brutally cold dawn. The day dawned with icy rain coming down too adding to the hardship of being up at this ungodly hour. We parked up and walked to prime position, where we had a good overview of the surrounding hillsides. I immediately made a sweep with my binocs on the near hillside and my eyes landed right on a Blue Eared-Pheasant. I quickly alerted the group and over the next half hour or so we ogled a pair of these dapper birds, before we retreated back to the mini-bus where Frank was waiting with very welcome cups of tea and coffee for us. After a break, and once we were beginning to feel our limbs again, we went for a walk through the spruces which revealed very little indeed, and so we returned to the pass for a final scan around before we “set sail” for another large Tibetan town, and indeed one of my favorite Tibetan towns, Maerkang. I took a cursory glance at a near slope and once again my bins landed on another, different, and much closer, pair of Blue Eared-Pheasants! We then watched them filling the scope for another thirty minutes while tourist traffic roared by and they showed...
no nerves of this whatsoever. This of course brought me uncomfortable, impossible to answer, questions about why we got up so early!

Once we had had our fill, this time in decent light, and warmer weather, and at closer range, we left the pheasants to continue “grazing”, and headed southwest onto the Tibetan Plateau, a sea of grasslands studded with lakes and pools and surrounded on all sides by towering snow-toped peaks, which brought a swathe of new birds...

Our first stop was brought about when Eugenia spotted a party of Daurian Jackdaws foraging on the verge, and so we pulled over and observed them for some time. Noticing an intriguing patch of scrub on the opposite side of the road we investigated and tried a call of White-browed Tit, whereupon a stunning White-browed Tit appeared on a close bush. Knowing they are often in the same spots we then also tried the call of White-browed Tit-Warbler and were soon watching a fantastic purple, pink, blue and white male of this species too! (photo below, Sam Woods) This was clearly shaping up to become another “big” day. Our next stop brought us another landmark bird…pulling over for a potential Hume’s Groundpecker, which uncharacteristically went to ground thereafter, we scanned the surrounding plateau where Mark quickly put us onto a regal pair of Black-necked Cranes which had a pair of bright gingery chicks following close behind their heels. Mike was beaming, he was closing to nailing his last crane species on Earth and stated this bird was the whole reason he came to China in the first place. Multiple stops followed as we could not resist stopping for anything that moved for fear that it would be a new bird for us. One stop produced a Godlewski’s Bunting along with our first Hume’s Groundpecker going to and fro from its nest hole, (now known remarkably as Ground Tit, as it has been incredulously relocated within that drastically different family), and a marsh stop produced a hulking Tibetan Lark and a delicate, lemon-yellow Citrine Wagtail, while other stops produced Ferruginous Pochard, and Black Stork. Even our lunch in Waqie was good with Hoopoe, Azure-winged Magpie, and Twite in the surrounding gardens to distract us from some more amazing Chinese culinary concoctions, here in the middle of nowhere!

Towards the close of the day we emerged off the plateau and climbed up into spruce covered mountain slopes once more, and it was here that the most memorable sighting of the day came. Weaving along a mountain road within a steep-sied river valley (which Sichuan has an endless abundance of) my eyes caught a large black shape at the roadside. I blinked, my mind not really conceiving of what my eyes were very clearly seeing, and then once we were within merely a few meters of this large animal I screamed “BEAR!”; finally my brain had caught up with my visual apparatus! We piled out of the car and looked on as an Asiatic Black Bear dropped down towards the water, took one look at the rushing torrent and then came back towards us, and what now comprised tens of Tibetans too, which with some sort of telepathy had descended rapidly onto the scene once word had got out about the bear. A lone guy on a scooter who had realized what we were seeing was probably to blame for the rather noisy, excited scene that then
ensued after the gathering. For this reason the bear thought better of climbing the banks again and dropped down once more towards the water, took to the water and with remarkable ease crossed the turbulent waters, before climbing out onto the opposite slope and slowly crawling back into the forest. This whole period went on for at least fifteen minutes, when it felt as if time stood still, and no one had taken a breath. With the bear out of sight our excitement poured out of us in a rush of words and recollections as we worked our way along the valley towards Maerkang, promising “no more stops” (time was waning), although Mark defied this when he found a welcome roadside Black-capped Kingfisher, and our only one of the trip. At the end of the day we checked into our Tibetan hotel, which came with a resplendently decorated lobby, a guest list of monks, and, the now widely expected, impeccable Chinese food.

June 6 Mengbishan (Maerkang)

After yesterday’s “vacation” in the sprawling grasslands of the plateau we were back on familiar territory today-birding a quiet mountain road cutting through marvelous spruce forest with a shrubby understory dominated by Rhododendrons, many of which sported soft pink blooms. Our dawn try for Koklass Pheasant left us wanting with a bird not even heard, let alone seen. However, red-faced Blood Pheasants were friendlier giving us great looks as they crossed the road and various rhododendron-flanked clearings. A quick scan of the alpine meadows on the mountains alongside also produced the ghostly white form of a White Eared-Pheasant grazing in the open in the low light of dawn. Chinese White-browed Rosefinches were pleasantly common at this site and gave us repeated looks, which no one was complaining about at all. Indeed rosefinches were the group of the day with four species seen, including Pink-rumped Rosefinch and the endemic Three-banded Rosefinch too. Other additions included several roaming parties of White-winged Grosbeaks, and a single pair of Spot-winged Grosbeaks that were missed by most who merely assumed they were to be another group of white-wingeds before Mark took a closer look at them. Weather again dogged proceedings in the early part of the day, and strangely led us to go higher to the pass where the sky was clearer and the rain less intense. This proved a smart move as we then got onto our first impressive Giant Laughingthrush of the trip as well as a shock male Blandford’s Rosefinch, Sam’s first sighting on this tour. The afternoon weather was markedly better with the clouds parting and rain kept to a minimum. On our way down we stopped in an area particularly rich in rhododendrons that turned up the hoped-for Chinese Fulvetta (photo right, Sam Woods). Better still came a short time after, when a strange call from the spruce pricked my ears with interest, and a short burst of tape later a fine pair of ivory-billed Sichuan Jays was perched above us, our main target bird, and often one of the hardest birds to find on this tour. Other new birds on the mountain for us included Common (Himalayan) Buzzard, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Goldcrest, and Rufous-breasted Accentor. We also enjoyed a low flyby from the enormous Black
Woodpecker, which made Tom happy as he’d been badly placed for our original sighting at Jiuzhaigou, earlier on the tour. Late in the day we also caught up with our first Chinese Babax, which came up high in the trees to search for an unseen intruder in its territory.

June 7 Mengbishan (Maerkang) to Rilong (Wolong)

The first part of the day was spent back at Mengbishan, (photo below, Thomas Olsen), searching for the final few missing birds (and it really was just a few by then), before we headed over the pass and through dry gorge country before eventually arriving on the edge of Wolong reserve for an extended stay.

New birds were hard to come by at Mengbishan as expected with just a few of the trickier species remaining, and so we enjoyed repeat views of humungous Giant Laughingthrushes bounding comically along the mountain road, more troops of White Eared-Pheasants working the distant mountain slopes, while mixed flocks held an array of tits, including Gray-crested and Rufous-vented Tits, and eventually a fantastic male Crested Tit-Warbler which finally gave Tom the looks he was after of this endemic mountain gem. It proved a diverse day for redstarts with 6 species seen by the close of business (male Hodgson’s and Blue-fronted en route, Daurian Redstart also along the way, Plumbeous and White-capped Redstarts beside the rivers as always, and White-throated at Mengbishan). A Darjeeling Woodpecker also made an appearance, as did further White-winged Grosbeaks too. A new addition came in the form of a super responsive Long-tailed Thrush, which unfortunately never landed quite where we could see it, the striking underwing in flight having to suffice for our best views of this bird. We returned to the encounter of a near miss with a noisy rabble of Verreaux’s Partridges from the day before, and it
did not take long for them to start noisily calling back, and this time we had our position all worked out so all got looks at them. The other new addition we had combed the road for high and low over the past day and a half, I had frankly all but given up on by then. I had not had a sniff of one, either by sight or sound. So with stomachs rumbling we took a lunch stop along the road where I deliberately placed ourselves by the last place I had seen a *Chinese Song Thrush*. I played the sultry song a couple of times, received no reply, and so settled down for a familiar lunch of hot noodles. Then, a little while later, the rich song of a *Chinese Song Thrush* came through the air to greet us, and a quick survey of the treetops revealed the bird was perched up in an open tree, covered in beautiful white lichen. And there it remained until we left for our next destination. It left it late, but it did not matter, we had got it!

![Bird Image]

Although little birding was planned in the afternoon as we needed to travel to the next spot, we had just enough time when we arrived for a final target bird, and a very special target bird. A dry rocky outcrop in the mountains above Rilong town provided the site, and we pulled up and waited, hoping a bird we had received a tip-off about was still nesting and still active this late in the day. I warned all that it might just be a long wait; I should have kept my mouth shut. We had been there barely five minutes when a broad-winged bird with rich crimson wing flashes came flying in and landed on the rocks low down in front of us. The sooty black throat revealed it was the adult male in the pair, and he clearly had food for his chicks in its bill. We watched it scurry nervously across the rocks, before this wonderful *Wallcreeper* suddenly disappeared into a crevice within this small rockface (*photo above, Thomas Olsen*). Moments later it re-emerged and quickly took flight to a far off boulder field, leaving us all more than a little satisfied with the remarkable close-ups we had just had of this mega mountain bird.

Eugenia then put us onto a small party of birds in the near scrub, which turned out to be another group of adorable *Black-browed Tits* foraging at eye level!

**June 8 Balang Shan (Wolong)**

Another early start, and big day, loomed for us on this day, as we looked to go to mighty Balang Shan, a site I frequently refer to as my single favorite days guiding of any tour...significantly though, *when the weather is right*. And at the lofty altitude of 4500m/15,100ft it is frequently wrong, frequently *very wrong*. As we approached our first site on the mountain, which promised a pheasant or two we hoped, the low cloud rolled in and out, suggesting it may indeed be one of those challenging days up on the mountain. I scoured for a site that I had not visited for a while as we descended from the pass, checking a few incorrect, but identical spots, before hitting the jackpot just in time: a pair of roding *Wood Snipes* clearly audible from the bus indicated I was in the right spot. We jumped out fully aware that the dawn light was improving all the time, and our chances of these birds continuing to rode diminishing with it. A few flybys from the snipes merely frustrated as only a few others and I caught brief glimpses, and I feared the worst. However, moments later two separate snipes gave lower flights and were clearly visible.
whizzing through the air above us, with the mountains as an impressive backdrop to their spring displays. Mark was beaming at this unexpected bonus bird and so was I...last time I looked for this bird it meant an even earlier departure time from the hotel! Meanwhile Jackie and the rest of us admired the vibrant blooms of poppies present on the hillsides: large yellow poppies dominated, with smaller blue and red ones dotted about the hillsides too. This proved to be a very popular year for foreign birding tours visiting China, and two other birding groups were already at the Chinese Monal site when we arrived, bringing scenes somewhat reminiscent of a British twitch! We felt like we were late on the scene, although that accusation would be hard to angle at us considering we left the hotel at 04.00am! The news though was not encouraging—not a monal in sight. However, the low cloud was moving in and out regularly and hampering viewing and so we were not about to give up just yet. We did manage to find another couple of “pheasants” while we waited, with a couple of Snow Partridge on a high hilltop, and a close pair of White Eared-Pheasants. My life was made a lot easier when another guide present, James, hailed a monal, and soon enough our ‘scope was angled towards a male Chinese Monal standing sentry from a large rock, where the subtle blue iridescence across its back became ever clearer as the light improved. And there he stood for what seemed like an age, and comprised of repeated scope looks for all.

After we had thoroughly soaked up this large pheasant we decided to head to higher elevations on the mountain and get to work on those high and hardy mountain birds, which can be the most difficult to find by virtue of the ever-changing, and often ever-challenging, mountain weather. Not far up the road though a group of Dark-breasted Rosefinches and Rosy Pipits forced us to pull over before we had even begun. As we ascended towards the prayer-strewn covered pass at Balang Shan we were cloaked in cloud making our journey seem a little futile in near zero meters visibility. However, up in mountains like this the weather can change in an instant and I was banking on this. Indeed, this is how it turned out; we arrived at the pass and the clouds would part for a while then meet again, and so we merely concentrated our efforts in these wonderfully scenic gaps in between moments of poor visibility. Up at the pass itself we quickly found Plain Mountain-Finch and admired the larger hordes of Brandt’s Mountain-Finches, flocks of which were swirling through the skies above regularly. Down on the ground several small groups of beefy Red-fronted Rosefinches were surprisingly easily found, with several brick red throated males standing out among them. The mountain meadows played host to several small groups of Grandalas, a very popular, thrush-like, mountain bird by virtue of the deep blue male, several of which were memorably present. We also found (well, Tom found), a group of half a dozen Snow Partridges, this time a little lower down and closer where we could actually make out the deep burgundy striping on their fronts, in the moments of clarity between the cloud breaks. Alpine Accentors were also numerous up there, regularly picked up clambering around the rocks, or using an outcrop as a song post. Large slow-moving shapes in the skies above proved to be Himalayan Griffons, passing by with barely a wingbeat. While checking the scree slopes and meadows...
surrounding the pass we chanced upon several foraging Snow Pigeons, which blend in remarkably well with the surrounding rocks, and could be often lost from site when they merged skillfully with their backgrounds.

We were rapidly cleaning up all the high mountain birds on our target list, although with one, notable exception: snowcocks. In spite of this I opted to drop down the other side of the pass to where the low scrub begins once more, and have a pre-lunch try for another dashing mountain bird, the gorgeous Himalayan (White-tailed) Rubythroat (photo page before, Thomas Olsen). My first, usually ever reliable, spot came up blank and my nerves began to kick in: what was happening? So I dropped down a few bends in the road and tried an identical looking spot, whereupon several rubythroats replied to my I-Pod, and soon after we were admiring a smashing male using a prominent rock as a song post. Although the looks were to say the least “decent”, a few of us moved in for better looks while others started lunch proceedings. We were not to be disappointed when we got much closer looks at a spiffing male singing its heart out from the top of a low bush. On the way back to the car we heard our first, though distant, snowcocks, and we made a mental note to try for them after lunch. However, despite our hunger growing, another bird group had other ideas, as they called us over from a couple of bends up. This could only mean one thing, snowcocks, and so we bundled into the van, put lunch to one side and raced up to them. On arrival a calm Nick and his group generously pointed towards their ‘scopes and put us straight on to a Tibetan Snowcock! If popular tour years are always like this, I’ll take them in a heartbeat!

With such a roaring success coming from the high areas, we chose to go down much lower in the late afternoon, and try for another, very special pheasant indeed. We arrived in plenty of time, set up the telescopes and scoured the hillsides and bushes for any hints of movement. While we waited we added yet another “leafer”, as Buff-throated Warblers were especially abundant at this site. We also had more Sooty Tits and Martens’s Warblers there too. Then several hours later, when hope and stamina in the group was visibly waning, Jackie exclaimed she had one, a male Golden Pheasant had just flown down the hillside, in full, beautiful sight of her! We quickly checked the bush that it had perched towards and found it feeding within. All of us got brief, but clear, looks before it melted back into the foliage once more. It was a look, but not the best one. And so we stayed put. Then as the day chilled considerably and the light levels began to drop a bright figure came onto an open slope: another male Golden Pheasant. And this time it lingered for us all to have long, long scope looks and cherish the encounter fully. What a day we had had for pheasants in particular: Golden Pheasant, White Eared-Pheasant, Chinese Monal, Tibetan Snowcock, and Snow Partridge. And that’s not to mention the Grandalas, rosefinches, rubythroats, and others that lightened the day too. I think most people were convinced beyond doubt that Balang Shan was a very special place indeed by the end of this day.

June 9 Beimuping (Wolong)

With yesterday’s high elevation successes our main missing target birds were now all to be found on the lower slopes, and so of course, that’s where we focused our attentions...the area around the monument at Beimuping and a little higher. So once again we found ourselves at the monal site at dawn with several other tour groups assembled too, and we were back in “twitching” mode again. Although we were not here for the Chinese Monal, we did see it again, and this time with a dowdy female in tow too. The distant Snow Partridges were also present again also, as well as a lone Blood Pheasant that boldly emerged from cover. A new raptor came in the form of a young Northern Goshawk perched on a wire at the forest edge. However, we were really here for a much more subtle bird, that we had only heard in this area the day before...Spotted Bush-Warbler. I reached for the I-Pod to begin the hunt but was beaten to the punch by another guide in the area. No bother though, as the bird came in, and we all got to see it-thanks Sid! A little further down the road, we picked up a few mammals a short time after
dawn with first another grazing **Takin** on a distant hillside, and a **Hog Badger** running for cover on a near slope. A little further down the road towards the monument we finally found a male **Collared Grosbeak** lighting up the top of a tall spruce, a bird that had been plaguing us for days with its calls until that point. A few further bush-warblers were seen too, with a super-confiding **Aberrant Bush-Warbler**, and a less than confiding **Gray-sided Bush-Warbler** which came literally screaming in to my tape, very nearly taking my head off in the process, and then went to ground, never to be seen again despite several further attempts. We decided to have lunch by a good lookout where we could both admire the surrounding, towering mountains, and also scan the skies for raptors. This proved fortuitous in a few ways. It turned out a local Tibetan couple had moved in and were in the cooking business, meaning we could abandon the usual instant noodles for some hot potatoes and spicy chicken. While we munched on these, our target species, **Lammergeier** sailed over us several times, involving both adults and young birds, along with several low-flying squadrons of **Himalayan Griffons** too. After lunch we renewed our search for the elusive **Golden Bush-Robin** which we had searched long and hard for to no avail so far (photo below, Sam Woods). However, we were not to be denied and a stunning male came in extremely close and more than made up for the previous anguish this beautiful bird had caused. A small flock of **Snow Pigeons** wheeled through the air in this area too. Walking further down to work off our lunch we found nothing new, but found a **Yellow-streaked Warbler** and had wonderful views of a pair of **Chinese Fulvetas** glaring eyeball to eyeball with us.

![Bird Image](image-url)

In the afternoon we had a change in tack and birded some open country on the edge of the village we were lodging in, where we added **Collared Finchbills** (by the dozen), **Mountain Bulbul, Red Collared Dove** (which only Mike had seen up until that point), and **Fire-breasted Flowerpecker** to our bird list. The area was also pumping with...
Blue Magpies too. Another late afternoon attempt at the “Goldies” was a resounding failure and made us appreciate the luck we had enjoyed the day before even more!

The night ended with a traditional Sichuan hot pot, where we all threw in an array of meats and vegetables, and spices to produce a dish full of flavor, and sustenance in readiness for our upcoming hike to Wuyipeng the following day.

June 10       Wuyipeng day trip (Wolong)

This was to be the toughest day of the trip physically. As the former panda research station at Wuyipeng has recently been demolished (for future rebuilding), there was no option but to day trip the area, making for a tougher day than when staying there as we would have to undertake both the climb and descent in a single day. This involved an ascent of 600m in altitude over four kilometers or so. We were all feeling it by the end of the day, although the birds we got up there softened the blow of the strenuous hike.

Our first significant bird of the day came towards the top of the climb before, with much relief, we reached the plateau, which made for easier walking and better birding, where we found a growling pair of Great Parrotbills. A Rufous-bellied Niltava was also reactive to playback affording some great views, and others merely frustration, as they were blocked from its landing points. Reaching the plateau a Collared Owlet tape was deployed once more, and brought in a mobbing party of tits, which largely comprised of some very confiding Sooty Tits. Not long after, and once we had re-energized with some snacks promptly provided by Frank as always, we heard our main target specialty, Barred Laughingthrush. I quickly warned the group to be on the lookout for it coming in quietly, and to temper their expectations in terms of views as this is a very tough laugh to see well. Eugenia was quick to pick it
up bounding fast upslope across the forest floor, although it moved past us all with barely a feather seen. I played the call back again and remarkably we then enjoyed several long, long looks at them as they came in to investigate, defying my early warning, which I was all too pleased about, and even affording Tom some photo opps! Flocks of tits were evident up on the plateau with Coal, Yellow-bellied, and Pere David’s Tits being seen. One of these flocks also yielded our only Chestnut-vented Nuthatch of the trip. A firm favorite for the group that day was a small party of Stripe-throated Yuhinas, which were frequenting a large stand of rhododendrons along the trail. Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher was also seen along the trail, and we also picked up our first cupwing (Scaly-breasted Cupwing), a new family comprised of several small former wren-babblers. Later in the day we also had cracking looks at a second species within this group, the ever so tiny, and near tailless Pygmy Cupwing. While some of us plowed further on from the site of the former research station in a failed pursuit of more birds, Mike played it cool, avoided a tough trail, and found a tough bird, in the form of a pair of Spotted Laughingthrushes. On the way down as well as the Pygmy Cupwing, Mark, Brian, Tom and I had an amazing encounter with our second Firethroat of the trip (photo above, Thomas Olsen), which reacted to my overtures by coming into a tree just a meter or so away form us and singing with its famous throat in full, fantastic view. The last notable bird of the day was found when we reached the end of the trail and we noticed a Chinese Babax perched on a roadside wire.

June 11  Wolong and Beimuping

This was one of the least successful, and outright frustrating days of the tour by virtue of a landslide close to our hotel, which restricted us from doing much at all until the afternoon, when it was finally cleared. Forced birding in the lower reaches of the valley around the village of Shawan produced more Collared Finchbills, great views of several Chinese Babaxxes, and another coal-black male Slaty Bunting. In the afternoon, with the landslide more or less cleared we managed to move away from the village, and headed up on the road to Balang Shan, once again finding another male Chinese Monal, more confiding Chinese Fulvettas, the same male Golden Bush-Robin (this time joined by his female partner), a tame pair of noisy Giant Laughingthrushes, (photo next page, Thomas Olsen), and several Chinese White-browed Rosefinches and Dark-breasted Rosefinches.
June 12  Beimuping to Qingchengshan & Chengdu

A final period of birding was available back at Beimuping before we needed to get on the road towards Chengdu. Luck was in our favor though as the earthquake devastated route to Chengdu, the shortest route back, was open and drivable on this day thanks to a period of dry weather over the past few days meaning there was minimal chances of landslides. The payoff for this was that we had some time to go birding, rather than spending the entire day car-bound. Our time around Beimuping was pretty uneventful, save for three Chinese Monals (our fourth sighting of this species on the tour!), a Verreaux's Partridge that was observed pacing around an open scree slope, Aberrant Bush-Warbler, and then “at the death” a mega bird in the form of three Crimson-browed Finches foraging in some alpine scrub-a lifer all round, guide included.
This seemed like the perfect time to leave and head east towards Chengdu, with a new stop planned at the holy Taoist mountain of Qingchengshan, where we hoped to fill some gaps from the lowlands, as we had spent only limited time there thus far. Our first bird we found on alighting from the vehicle on this crowded mountain was a new addition, with a party of Japanese White-eyes, followed closely by a Brown-breasted Flycatcher perched on an open branch. Black Bulbuls were very much in evidence even allowing photos to be taken (photo below, Sam Woods). Less conspicuous was a Dusky Fulvetta teased out of the undergrowth in a parking lot. Other new birds included an Asian Drongo-Cuckoo perched on a high overhead cable, and several Sulphur-breasted Warblers in full song. Nesting Blue Magpies and Hair-crested Drongos also provided entertainment, as did the abundant Black-naped Orioles in the area, and a familiar bird from the lowlands of Chengdu, the cute Vinous-throated Parrotbill. Although one of the most crowded sites of the trip, being full of pilgrims climbing the mountain even at this late hour of the day, we certainly were not complaining at five new species for the trip list, at a site we had only slotted in the night before knowing we now had the option of traveling along this route, permitted only by the recent fortuitous weather.

June 13 Chengdu (Sichuan) to Xining, Koko Nur & Rubber Mountains (Qinghai)

This was to be our final “big” day of the tour, with a sudden rush of new birds to the list, as we moved for the last leg from the province of Sichuan to Qinghai, and a whole new Tibetan Plateau experience... An early start was required to get us out of the hotel and onto the first flight of the day to Qinghai. There was no time though to be stunned by the metropolis of Xining, considered a small city in China with “just” 2 million people, as we needed to head west towards the largest salt lake in China, Koko Nur or Qinghai Lake, (surface area of more than 1700 square miles), and to the Rubber Mountains beyond. Skyscrapers now dominate the skyline of Xining, a place that was once a major stop off on the Northern Silk Road. After meeting with our driver we were soon heading west on an amazingly smooth, paved expressway. By the afternoon we were birding a freshwater lake bordering the sea-like Koko Nur, and were adding birds thick and fast. It seemed that every field had their own large flock of Hill Pigeons “grazing” within them, and every grassy pasture had an attendant, bounding party of comical Hume’s Groundpeckers (or Ground Tits as they are now officially known), as this was clearly the most common bird in the area.
The edge of the lake held large flocks of Graylag and Bar-headed Geese, (photo below, Mark Gawn), the latter of which were rightly so a big hit with the group by virtue of their striking plumage. The waters themselves held flotillas of grebes and ducks, including Great Crested and Black-necked (Eared) Grebes, Common Goldeneye, and Tufted Duck in addition to many Great Cormorants fishing for prey. The gravelly edges of the lake also played host to pallid Isabelline Wheatears and sand-colored Hume’s Larks. Out over the water Mark was quick to locate a very striking White-winged Tern hawking, as only marsh terns can, over the open lake. Checking a narrow marshy inlet paid off for the pair of Red-crested Pochards dabbling alongside a drake Common Pochard, while several Whiskered Terns hawked insects above them, picking them off the surface of the water, though these were outnumbered by the Common Terns and gulls in the area. Brown-headed Gulls were common in the area, although could not hold a candle to the breeding dress Pallas’s (Great Black-headed) Gulls that were a striking and welcome daily feature of birding this area. Brian and Mark were swift to latch on to a raptor scything through the air across the flats and the lake edge, which proved to be a very popular Eurasian Hobby on the hunt.

Presumably it was looking to pick off one of the abundant Pale Sand Martins, another new bird for us, that were hawking around the lake.

Moving a little further on, we worked closely with Keith Barnes’s notes, as this other “Tropical Birder” had been in the area in recent weeks and had some top-notch tip-offs of the whereabouts of some key species for us. And so we checked out a small Tibetan settlement, and worked the paddocks and surrounding grasslands, searching for one of the scarcer snowfinches in this area (of which there are remarkable abundance of, some SIX species!) Little was evident, and despite the fact we were busy looking down for snowfinches one of the group was quick to look up and notice a low flying Saker Falcon whipping low through the air above, proving another popular raptor for the group. Eugenia had “form” with this species, clearly being some kind of nemesis bird, so her delight in getting it was patently written all over her beaming face. Not long after this Jackie drew our attention to a snowfinch feeding in the grass with a prominent black “beard”: Pere David’s Snowfinch, precisely the one we were after! It was in the nick of time as shortly after we had all latched on to it, a local Tibetan came out who was atypically clearly unhappy at our presence in the area, and so we quickly moved out of there. This is far from typical of Tibetan people though who are usually characterized by an infinitely curious nature, and an unabashed willingness to interact and have a tryout of our optical equipment.
With most of the waterbirds in the bag, and the Pere David’s under the belt, it was time to push on for the Rubber Mountains, where a very, very special bird indeed awaited. This though was another one hundred kilometers further on, something that would be intimidating on the poor roads within Sichuan province, but here in Qinghai with their amazing infrastructure a hundred kilometers simply flew by. We arrived to extraordinary scenes: even though we were well below the pass (some five to ten kilometers or so ahead) a long, long, line of trucks was backed up all the way to the pass, something we were to learn was all too familiar in this trade bottleneck that leads all the way to the holy city of Lhasa. Trucks loaded with the latest Toyota cars, masses of construction equipment (the whole of China feels like it is under construction after all), and each and everything a store could hold, were parked up, engine off and ready for a long, long pause in their journey, as a long truck had got stuck negotiating the narrow bends near the pass, which is clearly not up to handling the level and type of traffic that passes through the area every day, 365 days a year. Anyway this was of little bother to us as we had reached our destination, we now simply had to climb up into the thin scrub layer coating the hillsides on the edge of the valley. As we climbed to the scrubline we got our first clean looks at the most abundant, and arguably most handsome, snowfinch in the area, **Rufous-necked Snowfinch**. Not much further on we noticed a bird come up nervously on to the top of the scrubby bush ahead of us, sporting a broad orange band across its mid-riff: **Robin Accentor (photo right, Thomas Olsen)**. Less bold, and less conspicuous was our fifth and final accentor of the trip, the relatively dowdy **Brown Accentor**. All good birds, and all very much appreciated. However, we were after something on another plane entirely from them, a quirky and confusing bird, with a checkered taxonomic history. We checked one narrow, shallow valley, and then another but merely found further accentors and nothing out of the ordinary. I feverishly checked through Keith’s pinpoint directions again and wondered where we had gone wrong, when it hit me: we had been checking the wrong, though neighboring valley. With renewed vigor I relayed this to the group and we stepped into the next shallow valley, whereupon an interesting, if tricky to hear accurately, call reached our ears and peaked our interest. I scanned the tops of the scrub when my “bins” came upon a long-tailed bird sitting up prominently on the far ridge...**this simply had to be it, didn’t it?** I did not dare to state this though at this stage, but frantically grabbed for my ‘scope, and quickly aimed it at this intriguing silhouette in the hope that color would start coming through with the greater magnification. Sure enough there was no mistaking the rich rose-splashed throat and undeniably pink tail, leading to its other name and misnomer: **Pink-tailed Bunting (for it is not a bunting at all)**. It’s now official Clements name is no less misleading either: **Przevalski’s Rosefinch (for it is not a rosefinch either)**, but in its own unique monotypic family! **Photo next page, Sam Woods** Over the next hour or so we watched this bird and another male reveal why it is neither a rosefinch or a bunting-it is way too long-tailed for either, and partakes in a remarkable courtship flight, exposing it’s rich pink tail in the process, dive bombing to the ground more in the manner of a pipit than a
rosefinch or indeed a bunting. A fantastic bird that was extremely popular, even with the pheasant load we had achieved. Indeed this odd bird managed to push a few of these more predictable “trip birds” out of the top five, such was its allure and remarkable performance. The smashing endemic **White-browed Tit**, which was seen shortly after (my personal favorite tit of this trip by some way), was almost forgotten in the afterglow of the bunting/rosefinch or whatever it is! After all the fun of this day we had to accept we needed to get to the hotel and call it a day at last, and so we headed towards our lodging with the usual mantra uttered by me not believed by anyone (least of all me): “no stopping”. However, a roadside pika colony (an adorable Tibetan rodent) made me go back on my word (to no one’s surprise), as pika colonies often attract snowfinches who have a symbiotic relationship with these animals, often nesting within their colonies. I was not too surprised to find a **White-rumped Snowfinch** just moments later as I’d hoped and the reason I chose to stop, although another **Pere David’s Snowfinch**, also associating with a pika colony was less expected. The stop also led to us seeing another **Black-necked Crane** passing majestically by in flight, presumably on its way to roost somewhere nearby. A glorious and fitting end to another great birding day.

![Bird Image]

**June 14  Chaka Flats & The Rubber Mountains**

With the undoubted success in finding almost all of our main targets the day before, this day was then free to go after something I personally, and many of the group too, really, really, wanted to see... **Mongolian Ground-Jay**. However, hearing that a recent tour had needed SIX hours to find one, we were not presuming this was going to be a slam-dunk just yet!
Passing over the Rubber Mountains Pass (with the usual ever-attendant line of trucks backed up for miles), the habitat changed markedly, the moist grasslands giving way to flat, semi-desert like plains stretching all the way to the shores of the enormous Chaka Salt Lake, the place where we hoped to find “our” jay...

With such a vast expanse of seemingly endless habitat for the bird it was hard to narrow down where to look, were it not for some up to date notes from Keith’s recent venture into the area! And so we spread out in the line and walked the flats scouring everything that moved. Early on one of the first things that moved was a new bird for us, a Blandford’s Snowfinch, which was quite common on the flats, although was the only place we found it on the tour. We even managed to find a pair of begging chicks being fed by some doting adult birds while there. Our fourth snowfinch, with just a couple waiting for us at higher elevations to go... We planned a six-hour vigil with the bird and assumed we would be eating in Chaka for lunch, based on this plan. However, Eugenia had other ideas and just over an hour into our search she simply shouted "I'VE GOT IT!" There was no doubting what “it” was, and so we quickly moved towards Eugenia before realizing a brilliant Mongolian Ground-Jay was sitting out prominently on a fence post (photo below, Sam Woods), in plain sight of us all! We thanked Eugenia and set about watching a pair of these fascinating jays as they ran fast along the ground, much in the manner of a Hoopoe Lark than a jay, before one of the pair flicked up onto a fencepost again and nonchalantly preened at length in front of us, clearly oblivious to the elated scenes created by it. Then suddenly it dropped off the post revealing that striking black and white wing pattern as it did so, and then sprinted into some scrub and was soon out of sight. While most of us recovered from the sighting Mark kept his senses sharp and skillfully picked up a pair of Pallas’s Sandgrouse flying over us on call, and got us all on to them, a bird we really did not expect to find on this tour at all—thanks Mark!!!

A few further forays into this desert area produced little more of interest, aside from both Greater and Lesser Short-toed Larks, we worked hard and found nothing more and had to accept, what with a heat haze thickening, and birds slowing down, we may be better placed to head to higher altitudes and try for those birds we needed up there, where activity levels are more constant through the day. And so, after a stop in an unspectacular looking Muslim restaurant which served (unsurprisingly with Frank at the helm) spectacular food of a very different nature to that we had experienced in Sichuan, less oily, less spicy but still bursting with absorbing flavors setting our taste buds alight, we moved up into the Rubber Mountains, where we stopped around a rocky outcrop and surveyed the scree, alpine pastures and outcrops for songbirds. It did not take long to find a striking Tibetan Snowfinch (recently split from White-winged, and confusingly named “Tibetan” Snowfinch despite this being a name commonly used in reference
to another, conspecific species, the Black-winged Snowfinch!), and a number of Black-winged Snowfinches, along
with, of course, even more Rufous-necked Snowfinches (photo below, Sam Woods). Along with the odd White-
rumped Snowfinch hanging around a different Black-lipped Pika colony later in the day, we peaked at five
snowfinches for the day! A boggy pass provided us with views of Black-winged Snowfinches fighting over human
food scraps, and further sightings of the humongous "maximum" lark, otherwise known as Tibetan Lark, as well as
a Golden Eagle gliding above on the hunt over the open rock faces.

Moving a little lower down we moved into an area of large rocky outcrops and rocky pastures, on the hunt for a special
restart in particular, which we eventually found nesting in the outcrop we focused on! In all we saw three
White-winged Redstarts, the pair attending a nest which clearly had some chicks hidden within (by virtue of
their frequent visitation with food claspers in their bills), and another male which caused the original male some
consternation at its presence in the area, initiating some high speed chases between the two of them. We also
noted a Lammergeier nest that Keith had alerted us to in his recent information, complete with a large
blackish juvenile perched within. An overhead wire also provided a perch for some Pale Sand Martins that gave
both close-up studies of this bank swallow impressionist, as well as good photo opps. On the way back to our
comfortable hotel in Niao Dao we made a stop when a pair of Blyth’s Pipits were spotted feeding by the roadside,
our only ones of the trip, which created the usual stir among passing locals who stopped their motorcycles
suddenly, turned back and came to look through our telescope. I put it on a Bar-headed Goose for spectacular
affect, although the husband seemed unimpressed by what he must consider a very common daily sight up there!
While stopped there “mammal man” Mark struck again, who quickly put us on to a Tibetan Fox slinking through a
field behind. We thought that was that, as we headed back to the hotel, stopping for what was planned as a brief
scan on the edge of town. Of course initial plans changed when a Pallas’s Fish-Eagle was found perched alongside
the river though. We hurriedly moved towards it, with low black clouds and thunder promising a rapid change in
the weather was imminent, putting up a fantastic Little Owl as we did so which then flew up onto a prominent pole
to be admired by all. All too soon the rain moved in en-masse, and we retreated to the sanctuary of the bus, tails
between our legs, but happy we had made the effort to get better looks at this rare, pale-headed eagle. We had planned to look for Mongolian Larks near our hotel, although the Pallas’s hold up and the significant change in weather meant that we had to accept that it would have to be put on hold until the following day...
June 15  Rubber Mountains & Koko Nur to Xining (Qinghai) & Chengdu (Sichuan)

For our final day we had just a few targets in mind, with the top of the list occupied by one very special lark indeed. Now I know a lark does not sound exciting to many (apart from Keith Barnes perhaps who made a PhD out of them), but Mongolian Lark breaks the mold, being BIG, having rich rufous areas, and a strikingly bold white wing pattern in flight, which makes them cool both on the ground and in the air, where larks are at their most graceful and seemingly in their most natural element. Luckily for us this monster lark can be found close to our hotel. We parked up by an area thick with tussocks of grass and surveyed the scene: there were larks everywhere, and the air was rich with lark songs proclaiming spring had definitely arrived. However, none of them were Mongolians-
Greater and Lesser Short-toed, Tibetan, and Horned Larks, and Oriental Skylarks all present in numbers. Then Mark noticed a large lark perched close by, and before he had the chance to exclaim, the Mongolian Lark took to the air, exposing its trademark white wing flashes (photo below, Mark Gawn). Unfortunately before much of us had managed a decent look it was in a distant field and using the tussocks well to hide from us. So we tried a little further up the road in the hope of finding another territory instead.

![Mongolian Lark](MGawn)

This was not easy as it sounded though as at that time a massive herd of goats blocked our way and, once they’d got passed us, we had a minefield of goat droppings to negotiate as we walked along the road! We had little luck and then noticed a Mongolian Lark perched on an overhead wire, right back where it had been before! We turned about face and trudged through the droppings back to where we began, where a pair of Mongolian Larks put on quite a show and revealed all too well why this vies for the title of World’s Top Lark: we scoped them feeding on the ground at close range, we watched as the male bird even used a fencepost to call from in front of us while fanning his seductive wings out beneath him, and Mark even managed to capture the very essence of this bird in flight, when it is at its most impressive...Another “bearded” Pere David’s Snowfinch was a nice find nearby too.
After this lark fest we returned to an area below Rubber Mountain Pass (picking up a small party of Common Mergansers—a new trip bird—en route and admiring the same Pallas’s Fish-Eagle again which had not budged an inch since the passing rainstorm of the afternoon before), where we quickly picked up more Robin and Brown Accentors, and admired another male White-winged Redstart pouncing on prey hiding within the rocky crevices from an overhead wire. But none of this was new, or what we were seeking. Then there it was, a bright pink finch using a small shrub as a perching post: a super male Streaked Rosefinch, lightly dusted with frosty white markings across its bourbon rose-colored underside. Our third White-browed Tit of the tour also popped up briefly nearby too. A short final walk brought us an incredible look at one of the local nesting adult Lammergeiers that passed so low overhead that the famed “beard” could be seen that lends it its other name (Bearded Vulture), photo below Mark Gawn.

We also noticed on this other side of the “redstart” outcrop that there was an Upland Buzzard nesting prominently just a stone’s throw from the Lammergeier chick. After admiring some extraordinarily tame Twite close by, we climbed back into our bus and headed back towards Xining, making another, final brief stop at the vast Qinghai Lake on the return journey, where we enjoyed repeat performances from Red-crested Pochard, Whiskered Tern, Hume’s Lark, and admired recently fledged broods of the local Great Crested Grebes, as well as picking up the very final new bird of the trip in the form of a Common Swift among the more expected, and now quite familiar, Salim Ali’s Swifts hawking above the lake which we had seen over the last days, during this absorbing time up on the Tibetan Plateau of Qinghai.
Regrettably any trip has to come to a close, and with some 312 or so birds tallied, we forced ourselves to hit the road back to Xining, where, pre-flight back to Chengdu, we enjoyed a final farewell meal, where the Snow beer flowed (as usual), the phenomenal food no longer surprised (it had been daily after all), we thanked Frank for showing us some very cool corners of his unique country, and always finding great food for us, no matter how far from civilization we were, and no matter how remote the place seemed to be! Before we knew it we had to leave for the airport, where discussions got under way about the best trip birds. I had asked everyone in advance to consider his or her top FIVE birds of the trip and so expected everyone to be well prepared. What unfolded was the most difficult selection process for working this out of any tour I have led, as barely anyone agreed, and a vast array of choices were made amongst a very individual group, that agreed on little in this aspect, and made my job extremely tricky! I also got an earful about how top five just did not cut it, as this made everyone’s task of narrowing down to just five birds nearly impossible. But I guess this merely served to show how great a trip it had been. I mean I had to make my own top five, and found myself tossing and turning and changing the order regularly. And so the upshot of this is we had a long list of many tied species, which led to an unwieldy, top SIXTEEN birds!!! I have to therefore produce this here and respect the group’s wishes, hoping this will simply illustrate that for a region that is not especially diverse (relative to some other parts of Asia for example, and of course vastly outnumbered in tropical South America), there are many extremely cool birds to be had...I should also say that the top sixteen birds contains a few non-birds, as frankly these were so good it would be an absolute travesty to omit them, as they were every bit as popular as some of their avian counterparts!

1= Golden Pheasant - (Wolong area, 8th June)

This was a bird that I, as a guide, was sweating on, as they had been exceptionally difficult since the earthquake, where their usual haunts at Shawan (Wolong) seemed to be ever less reliable. On my last tour we just happened to chance across a pair crossing a trail that the two people on my tour were well placed to see. I know well even if this lucky sighting were to happen again the chances of a larger group all seeing it were much slimmer. Thus when we received news of a regular feeding area in Wolong, we simply had to check it out. I expected little-I mean it was difficult to conceive of reliable, or even easy, Golden Pheasants on this tour after all. However, after Sam glimpsed a flying female, and after hours of waiting in the late afternoon-evening when the groups (and my) attentions were fading, Jackie kept her nerve and was stunned to lock onto a male gliding down the slope. She followed the bird into a tree and we quickly got the telescope trained on the dark recesses of this sprawling shrub, which allowed us all to get short views of the male feeding within it before it disappeared once more. We were pleased, though not everyone (bar Jackie who got the greatest looks of anyone after all) was overwhelmed. Then a short time later a gold and scarlet shape appeared on an open slope above us-another, clearly visible male. And this one allowed us all repeat looks as it fed unconcernedly in the early evening chill. A stunning sighting, which Frank got just as much joy out of as did the birders among us.

1= Lady Amherst’s Pheasant - (Labahe, 31st May & 1st June)

To see two pheasants top the list is no surprise, when you see them as well as we did. We had just two mornings to try and get this one, and the group was fully aware of this. We also had to squeeze into a single park jeep in order to drive the road, due to strict (and rather silly) park rules, knowing that this provided the best option, for NO ONE would want to be in a second jeep at this point. Then there was the small matter of where everyone would be positioned in the jeep, as clearly not every position was ideal, or offered the same viewing possibilities. There was no other way to resolve this than have a random draw and assign positions from that, which we duly did. However, we needn’t have worried. In two mornings drives, and one afternoon drive we sighted this dandy bird four times.
On two of these occasions he gave everyone an eyeful of his extravagant plumage, and left no one in the group with any doubt there were witnessing one of the World’s great birds. In a word: awesome.

3= Blue Eared-Pheasant - (Gong Gang Li, 5th June)

Another top position filled with another flashy pheasant, but again, for sheer views it would have been a disgrace for this bird NOT to be in here. We left our hotel well before light, knowing we had one shot at this bird, and knowing that dawn provided our very best chance, when these mountain pheasants sometimes become brazen and emerge from their usual deep cover to feed on open alpine slopes. We arrived to less than perfect weather conditions, knowing we had to brave them to give us our best shot. And so we raised our collars against the icy winds at the pass, and umbrellas against the near freezing rain, and braved the elements. I prayed the bird would be there and it would not take long as I could tell that this would be hard to endure for too long. We made our way to a good lookout and I took a quick scan of the close slope, where my eyes locked immediately onto a Blue Eared-Pheasant standing in the open, with its partner hiding behind the smallest of shrubs nearby! They were not meant to be that easy! We watched them at length for half an hour, at which time our bodies could take no more of the icy rain and brutally cold winds, and we took to the bus for welcome coffees and teas all round. A few hours later, and having seen little else, and with our long journey to Maerkang looming, we opted to have one last scan for other birds up at the pass. By now it was considerably warmer, the rains had left us, and the morning was bright and clear (ish). Very different from what greeted us at dawn. A short cursory glance brought me eyeball to eyeball with another pair of Blue Eared-Pheasants. This time in better light, and much closer, making me feel foolish for having dragged everyone out of bed so early, and made them suffer in the brutal early morning temperatures. We watched these again for a further half hour or more (when they were still present), when they literally filled the scopes. Fan-bloody-tastic!

3= Przevalski’s Rosefinch (Pink-tailed Bunting) - (Rubber Mountains, 13th June)

This enigmatic species that is neither rosefinch nor bunting, but sits alone within its own monotypic family named simply “Przewalski’s Rosefinch”, was one of the great surprises of the tour, surpassing everyone’s expectations (guide included). Better looking than the field guides would suggest and incredibly distinctive in shape (notably long-tailed), and coloration, with a bold pink tail visible even at a great distance. But what made the sighting all the more sublime was the nature of the bird, a beautiful rosy male was seen giving pipit-like display flights around us, dropping down to the scrub with his most prominent feature, the long pink tail, fanned and cocked as he did so. Great moments are made of birds like this, doing interesting displays such as these. A very popular bird indeed, so much so that it beat a few pheasants into this position, (e.g. note the complete lack of tragopan in this first premier set of birds for the tour!)

3= Bar-headed Goose - (Qinghai Lake, 13th June)

...And this is why I love the top birds of the trip discussions, because you just never know what might creep into the reckoning. If you had said to me before the trip one of the highlights would be a goose I would have laughed at you. However, that is not to say there is anything wrong with this selection, far from it. This is a goose that breaks the mold, and stands out from an otherwise arguably undistinguished crowd; beautifully patterned, and beautifully common up on the plateau in Qinghai province. Common or not it was a worthy selection, but, again note that it beat tragopan into this position, so I am beginning to question whether this bright scarlet horned pheasant is all I crack it up to be?!
3= **Wall creeper**  -  (Rilong Wolong, 7th June)

This was a much more predictable selection than the former one above, and frankly I would have been personally offended if it was not in there! We had a fair chance of finding this enigmatic species on the tour, although I was still shocked to see it the way we saw it. This in large part was due to a tip-off from another friendly bird guide combing Sichuan at the time, who had given detailed information on a nest site, though warned that it was visiting rarely and a long wait might be in order. So we arrived at the small outcrop with this information at hand and settled in for the long wait, only for a wall creeper to come flapping lazily over us in characteristic, hoopoe-like undulating flight, and land on the close rocks at eye level in front of us, within five minutes of our arrival. This black-throated, breeding dress male was carrying a load of insects stuffed into its bill, and was clearly bringing in a home delivery for its young, but took its time to shuffle nervously across the rocks to its nest, nervously flicking its wings as they habitually do, and in doing so revealing the characteristic crimson wing patches that make this bird such a joy to see both on the rocks, and in flight. Once the delivery had been made it came torpedoing out of the nest hole and bounced through the air above us and dropped down into a distant boulder field. Wallcreeper sightings simply do not get better than that, as Tom’s photos provide more than adequate proof of.

3= **Red panda**  -  (Longcanggou, 28th May)

OK, OK, I can hear the protests now...I know this is not a bird but this should not disclude it from being highlighted here, as mammals are not second class citizens relative to birds and clearly the group got more of a kick out of this than many of the birds on the trip (leaf-warblers anyone?), and therefore this should be highlighted front and center. Mark has to be commended for his supreme coolness in announcing he had a Red Panda. He was so cool in fact that everyone barely reacted, thinking they had misheard! Just before the mist rolled in we had wonderful views of this ruddy “panda” as it slept within a tree, waking momentarily to reveal its trademark patterned white, and undeniably cute, face. A little later the mist rolled in once more, as it does frequently in Sichuan’s shans, and the panda was lost from view, cloaked in cloud. Another was seen by just a few of us at Labahe although this sighting did not hold a flame to the original sighting, on only the second day of the tour.

8= **Temminck’s Tragopan**  -  (Labahe, 31st May)

*Finally*, the tragopan makes it just inside the top ten – remarkable! This is one of Sichuan’s classic pheasants, which has in recent years become increasingly difficult at the traditional site of Wuyipeng in Wolong reserve. To make things tougher this year, the other site where you can get occasionally lucky, Wawu Shan, was closed, and the traditional place to stay at Wuyipeng, the research station, had been demolished. This left Wuyipeng only available as a long day trip, meaning the tragopan was likely to be near impossible there. However, industrious birders with intense focus on targets soon led to the “rediscovery” of a site known to a handful of Chinese birders-Labahe, which turned out to be even more reliable for tragopans than it was for Lady Amherst’s Pheasants, the same stretches of road offering the chances to see both of these much sought-after birds. Having scouted at Labahe just days before we went there, and having been driven by a keen-eyed pheasant enthusiast as a driver then, I had earmarked some hot spots for them. Approaching our first one, not ten minutes into our drive I alerted the group to be on their guard, and asked the driver to slow the jeep to a crawl. I had barely finished with these preparations when a large pheasant was noted standing at the roadside. Panic ensued as the mist ensured views were poor, and people writhed to get an angle on the bird from their difficult, in-jeep positions, a near-impossible task. Finally, and knowing that tragopans are far more open to this than Lady A’s, we decided to quietly emerge from the jeep but keep behind it using it as a shield between us and the tragopans, (it was soon evident there was a pair). This
worked well, the gorgeous polka-dotted red male initially freezing and looking nervous and fidgety, but then quickly calming down, and foraging in the open, when scopes were trained, and all intricate details of his finest plumage were absorbed. Amazingly at one point another male appeared behind us, and clearly thought we were blindsided, but as soon as we all swung around to face it, the tragopan noticed and scammed up the hillside with remarkable ease when needed. The birds were watched for well over thirty minutes and everyone got excellent looks, you simply cannot ask for more.

8= **Golden Bush-Robin** - (Balang Shan, 9th & 11th June)

This one had me nervous before the tour had even begun, what with the usually nailed on site of Wawu Shan summit being out of bounds, I was not quite sure where I was going to find it. After coming up blank at a few likely spots, the nerves were also clearly evident in the group too. Then one afternoon, along a stretch of road and had tried just that morning, I finally got a bird to respond, and how it responded, a gaudy male coming in calling and repeatedly climbing on the top of the alpine shrubbery in plain sight of us all. It is a great bird and is worthy of selection, although I expected Firethroat to get a higher ranking, though in this strange year the Firethroat was made to look easy, perhaps a little too easy to work its way onto this list, and the bush-robin gave impressions of trickiness. Perhaps it was that “last chance saloon” feeling of our chances slipping away only to get it right near the death that made this close-up study that bit sweeter?

8= **Gray-faced (Emei) Liocichla** - (Longcanggou, 30th May)

This was another species whose appeal may have been different to the group had we not tried so long, and so hard, for it. To make matters worse, we heard many of them, but this notoriously shy laughingthrush made us wait until our final try, when suddenly there it was close by the roadside, where it then remained for what seemed like an age, which caused a massive sigh of relief all round. To add to its allure, it is also an endemic, and a highly local one at that, confined to just a few mountains in southern Sichuan.

8= **Sichuan Jay** - (Mengbishan, 6th June)

This one got the vote more on endemic status, rarity, and trickiness to find, rather than looks (as evident from John’s controversial and derogatory comment that it rather resembled a female cowbird!) Something, which I think, even the less keen jay fans in the group would argue with. But John’s point was taken; it is a dull bird with little coloration to lend it appeal (it is basically all sooty gray with a pale ivory-colored bill). But there’s something you should know about this jay, it is missable, very missable. Indeed, this year it seemed that this site was not producing regular sightings at all, with at least three other tours missing it there. Knowing this it felt a huge relief to get it, and get it so well too. The voters in the group clearly had not expected it to be a slam-dunk either, hence the nomination here.

8= **White-browed Tit-Warbler** - (Gong Gang Li to Maerkang, 5th June)

Unless you have seen this bird it may be hard to appreciate quite how handsome it really is. People often obsess about the Crested Tit-Warbler, but are often more impressed with this tit-warbler, which is daubed with subtle pink, pastel blues, rich rufous, and pure white, making a real treat to the senses when it comes in close, as it invariably does. Seen just yards from where we saw our first White-browed Tit just moments before. So part of the allure of this bird is that it always surprises, and stands way above expectations provided by all too often dowdy field guide illustrations. Perhaps it is simply un-illustratable?
Citrine Wagtail - (near Waqie, 5th June)

This nomination was in part at least born out of something very personal for Mark (one of the voters on this one), as it had been his personal nemesis for some time. And so there was no better way to break this hoodoo by making a personal find of a bright lemon-yellow spring male foraging along the edges of a large marsh up on the Tibetan Plateau. Within the relative dullness of this sprawling landscape a male Citrine Wagtail is like a small prick of light at the end of the tunnel; it stands out!

Golden-breasted Fulveta - (Labae, 31st May)

It is not often that you would expect a fulveta within a top five anywhere (now confusingly split between several different families), although this species is markedly different from the rest of the group that is largely comprised of dull, brown, unremarkable, babbler-like birds. This one though is bright yellow below, dusky gray above with a smudge of white on the side of the head, and a vivid gold flash in its wing. To top all of that off, this bamboo dweller can often be found in company with another extremely cool species, the Fulvous Parrotbill, which is exactly how we found this bird at Labahe: from the chattering of a very confiding pair of Fulvous Parrotbills.

Mongolian Ground-Jay - (Chaka Flats, 14th June)

Birds from the corvid, or crow, family, rarely make headlines in Asia, as they are dull featureless birds (take the Sichuan Jay for example which I fully expected to be ignored in this top list!) However, ground-jays are so different from others in the group they hold an allure all of their own. They also all seem to dwell in some of the less visited regions of the Asian steppes, making them seem far off and mystical. Unlike many crows and jays they are as their name suggests, ground-dwelling, and sprint on the ground in search of prey more in the manner of a lark or even courser than a corvid. To add to all of this mystique, they also possess large pied markings in the wing, making them equally striking and irresistible in flight. Lastly, arguably part of the appeal may also be the Mongolian Ground-Jay occurs in what appears to be open barren steppe-like desert, which can be largely birdless at times, and then this beast appears, changing the nature of the scene entirely. We were not really officially down to look for this one as we thought we would have our hands full within the time trying to find Pink-tailed Buntings and others. However, after a whirlwind first afternoon in Qinghai, where we sped around and quickly racked up our targets, a space opened up to try for this enigmatic Asian bird, and we were all in full agreement we should go for it. This may also have added to the wonder of the bird, as we were never sure if we were going to get for it until the last minute. Having heard that a recent tour at Chaka had spent SIX hours trying to track its star bird down, we headed out there for dawn with the long game in mind. We thought this bird may come down to a battle of stamina, though Eugenia had other ideas and found one nonchalantly sitting on a fence post just over an hour after we begun our search! We saw them perched, scampering courser-like across the ground, and displaying those bold wing patches in flight. For most, this was their first ground-jay, and we got to soak it up from each and every angle.

Asiatic Black Bear - (near Maerkang 5th June)

Arguably THE shock find of the tour (and there were a few others...Black-tailed Gull in Chengdu, Red Panda, and so on), as getting a bear anywhere in Asia is always a rare and exciting thing. There is simply no easy way of doing it; all comes down to simple, random, blind luck. We were driving along a winding mountain road, after a long day picking up our first birds of the plateau. By now we had risen into one of those steep, spruce-laden gorges of which Sichuan seems to have an endless abundance of. I glanced at the side of the road and my eyes were met with something I just could not comprehend: a bear standing brazenly in full view just a few meters from the car.
Finally, my brain and eyes coordinated and I announced it. We quickly jumped out of the car as it soon descended the slope on seeing our van. Luckily for us, and unluckily for the bear, we were at the top of a very steep back that led directly into a fast-flowing river. Its fur was matted from a recent crossing of this presumably, although it showed no keenness to get back into the water. But this did allow us more prolonged looks I am sure than if it had a clear-cut escape route. A passing Tibetan on a scooter was equally excited, which we did not give much thought, until within three minutes around thirty people had turned up alerted by the seemingly insignificant “scooter guy”. I was not expecting scenes reminiscent of a British twitch to emerge out of this scenario in remote Sichuan! Finally, the bear decided that there was nothing for it but to simply walk directly towards the assembled crowd. This brazeness allowed me a photo, though my comfort levels dropped when it showed such audacity and we readied to jump back onto a very close, waiting bus! However, the bear thought better of this in the end, turned around slowly, and dropped into the water, when it skillfully negotiated what appeared to humans like fatal rapids, and was soon shaking off water on the opposite bank, before walking into the forest, and vanishing from sight.

![Black-browed Tit, Rilong](image-url)
BIRD & MAMMAL LISTS

BIRDS:

The taxonomy of the bird 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 up until August 2011.

DUCKS, GEESE, AND WATERFOWL: ANATIDAE

Graylag Goose \textit{Anser anser}
Recorded in good numbers during our three days on the plateau in Qinghai province.

Bar-headed Goose \textit{Anser indicus}
A very popular, and commonly encountered, bird on the three days we spent in Qinghai, with good numbers seen on all three days. A great looking goose, and if this needs proving a few people picked this as ONE OF THE BIRDS OF THE TRIP.

Ruddy Shelduck \textit{Tadorna ferruginea}
This handsome duck was commonly encountered in small groups during both areas of the Tibetan plateau visited (Sichuan and Qinghai).

Mallard \textit{Anas platyrhynchos}
Small numbers were seen around Jiuzhaigou and up on the Tibetan Plateau.
Red-crested Pochard    *Netta rufina*
A pair of these pochards was seen near Koko Nur (Qinghai).

Common Pochard    *Aythya ferina*
A single male and single female were seen in Qinghai.

Ferruginous Duck    *Aythya nyroca*
A pair of these handsome ducks were seen near Waqie on the Tibetan Plateau in Sichuan.

Tufted Duck    *Aythya fuligula*
Double figures were seen on the freshwater lake bordering the much larger, and saline, Qinghai Lake.

Common Goldeneye    *Bucephala clangula*
A few were noted near Koko Nur in Qinghai.

Common Merganser    *Mergus merganser*
Three bird (two drakes) were seen near Niao Dao (Qinghai) on our final day.
Also known as “Goosander”.

**PHEASANTS, GROUSE, AND ALLIES: PHASIANIDAE**

Snow Partridge    *Lerwa lerwa*
Seen three times up on Balang Shan, with a couple of sightings coming while at the Chinese Monal site, and Tom skillfully picked out a better group of some half dozen birds up near the spectacular pass itself.

Verreaux’s Partridge    *Tetraogallus obscurus*
At least one of a very vocal pair was seen well on Mengbishan near Maerkang, and another more distant bird ventured well into the open near the Chinese Monal site on Balang Shan.

Tibetan Snowcock    *Tetraogallus tibetanus*
The high altitude bird that gave us the most hassle on Balang Shan, although thanks to Nick Bray and his group for pointing one out to us that was well worth delaying lunch for, and came hot on the heels of Himalayan Rubythroats, Grandalas, Chinese Monal, Snow Partridges, Red-fronted Rosefinches, Wood Snipes, Snow Pigeons, and White Eared-Pheasants during a memorable morning on Balang Shan.

Chinese Bamboo-Partridge    *Bambusicola thoracicus*
With the forced changes to the itinerary that came about this year (due to the closure of Wawu Shan), I accepted I just did not have a great site for this bird on this year's itinerary, though hoped we would pick up enough other “compensation”. However, I needn't have worried, late on our very first afternoon, at a very crowded Giant Panda Breeding Center in Chengdu, a pair of bold partridges walked out onto an open paved path in front of us, narrowly missing several large, noisy, flag-bearing groups of tourists coming through!

Blood Pheasant    *Ithaginis cruentus*Arguably the only “easy” pheasant in Sichuan. And so it proved again with multiple good sightings coming on Mengbishan, and another seen strolling in the open on a set of slopes that also boasted several Chinese Monals and Snow Partridges that morning!

Temminck’s Tragopan    *Tragopan temminckii*
The newly visited site of Labahe was a roaring success for this species this year (brought about by the closure of Wawu Shan from visitors for the foreseeable future), with two sightings each on both our days in this notable “pheasant park”. The first sighting will be long remembered as we were able to watch a single male of this horned pheasant for over thirty minutes, by ‘scope, by bins, in ever-improving light conditions, and preceded our first Lady Amherst’s Pheasant sighting by a matter of minutes.
Koklass Pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha* HEARD ONLY
Frustratingly heard only around both Mengbishan and Balang Shan despite several very early rises specifically to target this bird. It seemed everyone was missing it this year!

Chinese Monal *Lophophorus iluysii*
A remarkably easy year-arguably the easiest ever- for this notoriously temperamental species, (some years it is also super hard in the very same area!), with sightings on all four of our visits to the main area for it, including a late afternoon sighting of a male one day. A maximum of two males and a female were seen on one morning.

White Eared-Pheasant *Crossoptilon crossoptilon*
Another species, like the Blood Pheasant that is generally relatively easy (weather permitting of course at these high altitudes). This was the way it turned out too with several sightings distantly of this ghostly bird on Mengbishan, and another much better viewing of a pair at the Chinese Monal site that also produced that bird that morning along with Snow Partridge.

Blue Eared-Pheasant *Crossoptilon auritum*
Two wonderful sightings of this much sought-after pheasant at Gong Gang Li in a single morning, both of which permitted prolonged scope looks for thirty minutes or more. So-called walk away views. The second sighting was the best as the light had improved, along with the weather, by 8am, and so the pair were sitting close in beautiful light, completed unconcerned by us ogling them at length! I yearned for my old digi-scoping gear at this point.

Ring-necked (Common) Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*
Great to see this handsome beast where it truly belongs, in its native China. A maximum of ten were seen on one day close to the pass at Gong Gang Li, near Jiuzhaigou.

Golden Pheasant *Chrysolophus pictus*
Great looks were had late one afternoon close to Wolong village. A gliding female was first seen by Sam, and followed by some super flight looks at a male picked up by Jackie who then put us onto this male feeding in a low bush for us all to get onto. However, the better views for most of us came when the first chills of the evening air were evident and a bright male walked onto an open slope above us allowing beautifully prolonged scope looks.

Lady Amherst’s Pheasant *Chrysolophus amherstiae*
A brief scouting trip to check out alternative sites to Wawu Shan (what with this being closed) just before the tour led me (and many other guides) to the park of Labahe, a scenic, steep-sided valley that turned out to be simply fantastic for pheasant lovers. We had four sightings both of tragopans and Lady A’s there, both of which led us to crisp, clear looks at these marquee birds, making this an unmissable site, (assuming the pheasants continue performing in this exemplary fashion).

**GREBES: PODICIPEDIDAE**

Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*
A few were seen in Chengdu, and a few more on Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau too.

Great Crested Grebe *Podiceps cristatus*
Masses of these birds were on a large freshwater lake near Koko Nur in Qinghai, some of which had recently fledged chicks.

Eared Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*
Also known as Black-necked Grebe. A few birds were seen on both of our searches of the freshwater lake near Koko Nur in Qinghai.
STORKS: CICONIIDAE
Black Stork  
*Ciconia nigra*
Mark found a group of five birds on Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau.

CORMORANTS AND SHAGS: PHALACROCORACIDAE
Great Cormorant  
*Phalacrocorax carbo*
Huge numbers were seen on the Qinghai leg of the trip.

HERONS, EGRETS AND BITTERN: ARDEIDAE
Great Egret  
*Ardea alba*
Just recorded around Chengdu.

Little Egret  
*Egretta garzetta*
The official bird of the city of Chengdu, which mistakenly in sometimes referred to as a crane by locals! Again, only recorded in the lowlands around Chengdu.

Cattle Egret  
*Bubulcus ibis*
Scattered sightings in lowland areas throughout.

Chinese Pond-Heron  
*Ardeola bacchus*
Five or so sightings were had on the tour, almost all coming on journeys between sites in the mountains, near fast flowing rivers.

Black-crowned Night-Heron  
*Nycticorax nycticorax*
A few were seen around Chengdu, and a few other chance flyovers were had on a couple of journeys between some of the low-lying sites.

HAWKS, EAGLES, AND KITES: ACCIPITRIDAE
Oriental Honey-buzzard  
*Pernis ptilorhynchus*
Two or three were seen in Longcanggou, including one bird in display flight above the forest canopy.

Black (Black-eared) Kite  
*Milvus migrans lineatus*
Fairly commonly recorded during our short drive through Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau.

Pallas’s Fish-Eagle  
*Haliaeetus leucophybus*
A shock find close to our hotel in Niao Dao (Qinghai) was one of these pale-headed fish-eagles loafing by a river. It was clearly spent as we found it again there the following morning, although heavy thunderstorms overnight may well have encouraged it to stay!

Lammergeier  
*Gypaetus barbatus*
One of the World’s classic, and most distinctive raptors, this “bonebreaker” was seen on Balang Shan (with a maximum of 6 birds in one day), and a nesting pair(and juvenile) gave great looks in Qinghai’s Rubber Mountains.

Himalayan Griffon  
*Gyps himalayensis*
Recorded regularly up on Balang Shan and in Qinghai’s Rubber Mountains, with at least half a dozen birds in one single day.

Chinese Goshawk (Sparrowhawk)  
*Accipiter soloensis*
One flew low over us at Longcanggou.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk  
*Accipiter nisus*
Recorded a couple of times on Balang Shan, and also on Mengbishan.

Northern Goshawk  
*Accipiter gentilis*
One bird was seen at the Chinese Monal site on Balang Shan early one morning.
Common (Himalayan) Buzzard  
*Buteo buteo burmanicus*
Recorded regularly in small numbers on Mengbishan and Balang Shan.

Upland Buzzard  
*Buteo hemilasius*
Recorded with frequency around Qinghai’s Rubber Mountains, with half a dozen in one day, and even a nesting bird found. Another was also seen during our day passing through a plateau area in Sichuan.

Golden Eagle  
*Aquila chrysaetos*
A single bird was seen on Balang Shan (Sichuan), and another in Qinghai’s Rubber Mountains.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS: FALCONIDAE

Eurasian Kestrel  
*Falco tinnunculus*
Eugenia had a single bird up on the Tibetan Plateau.

Amur Falcon  
*Falco amurensis*
An immature of this migrant bird was seen hanging around the entrance to Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage in Chengdu.

Eurasian Hobby  
*Falco subbuteo*
One scythed low through the air past us near Koko Nur in Qinghai, a much-appreciated lifebird for Brian!

Saker Falcon  
*Falco cherrug*
Not long after the Eurasian Hobby, this beechier falcon flew low over us, bringing a very happy lifebird for Eugenia, who clearly seemed happy to finally catch up with this bird.

RAILS, GALLINULES, AND COOTS: RALLIDAE

Eurasian Moorhen  
*Gallinula chloropus*
Two were seen near Jiuzhaigou. Note that this Eurasian form is now considered separate from the American forms, which are now known as

Eurasian Coot  
*Fulica atra*
Many were found near Koko Nur in Qinghai.

CRANES: GRUIDAE

Black-necked Crane  
*Grus nigricollis*
Mike’s whole reason for visiting Sichuan was to pick up this regal species, which we did as we crossed a short area of Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau. Our first sighting was the very best, involving a pair plus two attendant, and very ginger, chicks. Another nine or so other birds were seen that day, and a single was also seen near Niao Dao in Qinghai.

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES: SCOLOPACIDAE

Common Redshank  
*Tringa tetanus*
A few boldly marked, and vocal, breeders were found up on the Tibetan Plateau in Sichuan and Qinghai.

Wood Snipe  
*Gallinago nemoricola*
We arrived just in the nick of time to see two birds giving their early morning roding flights at Balang Shan, which preceded our first monal of the day by minutes. A popular moment on the tour for many.

GULLS, TERNs, AND SKIMMERS: LARIDAE

Brown-headed Gull  
*Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*
A very commonly recorded species around wet areas in Qinghai.
Pallas's (Great Black-headed) Gull  *Ichthyaetus ichthyaetus*
A super, distinctive, and in breeding dress highly attractive, gull, which was very common around wetlands in Qinghai.

Black-tailed Gull  *Larus crassirostris*
Definitely qualifies as a shock find in Chengdu, where any gull is unusual: one was seen slowly flying over us at the Chengdu Giant Panda Breeding Centre on our first afternoon.

White-winged Tern  *Chlidonias leucopterus*
One of these graceful and strikingly patterned terns was seen near Koko Nor (Qinghai).

Whiskered Tern  *Chlidonias hybrid*
A few of these marsh terns were seen hawking over a large wetland near Koko Nur in Qinghai.

**SANDGROUSE: PTEROCCLIDAE**

Pallas's Sandgrouse  *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*
Mark put us all onto a pair of these birds as they flew over us at Chaka Flats (Qinghai).

**PIGEONS AND DOVES: COLUMBIDAE**

Rock Pigeon  *Columba livia*
Recorded in scattered urban areas throughout.

Hill Pigeon  *Columba rupestris*
Very commonly encountered in agricultural areas up on Qinghai’s plateau country, with another small flock seen as we traveled to Gong Gang Li too in Sichuan.

Snow Pigeon  *Columba leuconota*
Three sightings around Balang Shan, a couple up around the pass, and another much lower near Beimuping.

Speckled Wood-Pigeon  *Columba hodgsonii*
Recorded on seven days of the tour, and especially numerous around Labahe and Wolong this year.

Oriental Turtle-Dove  *Streptopelia orientalis*
Just the one sighting, of a flock of 7 birds on Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau.

Eurasian Collared-Dove  *Streptopelia decaocto*
One was seen up on the Tibetan Plateau near Waqie (Sichuan).

Red Collared-Dove  *Streptopelia tranquebarica*
Just the two sightings on the tour: one was seen by Mike as he sat in the front of the jeep, on the way up the track at Labahe, and another for all of us on the edge of Shawan.

Spotted Dove  *Streptopelia chinensis*
Recorded a few times around Chengdu only.

Wedge-tailed Pigeon  *Treron sphenurus*
A single bird showed well in the park at Labahe.

**CUCKOOS: CUCULIDAE**

Large Hawk-Cuckoo  *Hierococcyx sparverioides*  **HEARD ONLY**
The tormentor of the trip, heard on many days, seen on none!

Common Cuckoo  *Cuculus canorus*
Seen a handful of times on the trip: at Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage, Jiuzhaigou, and around Balang Shan and Wolong.
Himalayan Cuckoo  *Cuculus saturates*
Seen first by some at Longcanggou, although much better views came for everyone at Labahe.

Lesser Cuckoo  *Cuculus poliocephalus*
Heard at a number of sites, although only seen at Longcanggou on several occasions.

Asian Drongo-Cuckoo  *Surniculus lugubris*
One was seen calling from an overhead cable at Qingchengshan.

Asian Koel  *Eudynamys scolopaceus*
A female type bird was seen from our resort at Longcanggou.

**OWLS: STRIGIDAE**

**Little Owl**  *Athene noctua*
Two birds were seen in Qinghai, including one right on the edge of the town we were staying in, while we were watching a Pallas’s Fish-Eagle.

**NIGHTJARS AND ALLIES: CAPRIMULGIDAE**

**Gray Nightjar**  *Caprimulgus indicus jotaka*
One was spotlighted near our hotel in Jiuzhaigou.

**SWIFTS: APODIDAE**

**White-throated Needletail**  *Hirundapus caudacutus*
This the fastest flying bird in soaring flight on Earth as seen in Longcanggou, Jiuzhaigou, and Maerkang, with a party of 30-40 birds being the largest group at the first site.

**Himalayan Swiftlet**  *Aerodramus brevirostris*
Recorded on around five days including within Longcanggou, Labahe, and Jiuzhaigou.

**Common Swift**  *Apus apus*
One was seen hawking near Qinghai Lake on our final day.

**Pacific Swift**  *Apus pacificus*
Regularly recorded on the tour from Longcanggou to Labahe to Jiuzhaigou.

**Salim Ali’s Swift**  *Apus salimali*
A number of small groups were seen hawking over the Tibetan Plateau in both Sichuan and Qinghai. A recent split from *Fork-tailed Swift*.

**House Swift**  *Apus nipalensis*
A few were seen on the journey between Chengdu and Jiuzhaigou.

**TROGONS: TROGONIDAE**

**Red-headed Trogan**  *Harpactes erythrocephalus*
A male was seen all too briefly, unfortunately, at Longcanggou.

**KINGFISHERS: ALCEDINIDAE**

**Black-capped Kingfisher**  *Halcyon pileata*
Mark found one of these striking kingfishers from the car en-route to Maerkang.
HOOPOEs: upupidae

Eurasian Hoopoe  Upupa epops
One was seen over lunch in a garden at Waqie, on Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau.

WOODPECKERS: picidae

Gray-capped Woodpecker  Dendrocopos canicapillus
1 of these pygmy-woodpeckers was seen at Longcanggou.
Crimson-breasted Woodpecker  Dendrocopos cathpharius
Singles were seen at Longcanggou and Labahe.
Darjeeling Woodpecker  Dendrocopos darjellensis
Three were seen, all singles: Longcanggou, Jiuzhaigou, and Mengbahan.
White-backed Woodpecker  Dendrocopos leucotos
Two were seen by some briefly in Longcanggou.
Great Spotted Woodpecker  Dendrocopos major
One was seen inside the park at Jiuzhaigou, and another was seen on the Tibetan Plateau near Waqie.
Black Woodpecker  Dryocopus martius
This massive woodpecker was seen first at Jiuzhaigou, and later again at Mengbahan.
Gray-faced Woodpecker  Picus canus
A rather elusive bird was only seen well by the few, at Labahe.
Bay Woodpecker  Blythipicus pyrrhotis
A distant bird was heard calling at Longcanggou.

Cuckoo-shrikes: campephagidae

Long-tailed Minivet  Pericrocotus ethologus
A wonderful regular feature of our time in the mountains, and one of John’s favorite birds of the trip.

SHRIKES: laniidae

Tiger Shrike  Lanius tigrinus
A pair were seen in a village below Longcanggou.
Brown Shrike  Lanius cristatus
A single confiding bird was seen around a Tibetan village, inside the park at Jiuzhaigou.
Long-tailed Shrike  Lanius schach
Four or five sightings on the first leg of your tour in the southern shans.
Gray-backed Shrike  Lanius tephronotus
Very commonly recorded in most of the high Tibetan areas of the tour (Jiuzhaigou, Maerkang, etc.)

Old World orioles: oriolidae

Black-naped Oriole  Oriolus chinensis
Recorded at just two sites: Longcanggou and Qingchengshan.

DROngos: dicruridae

Black Drongo  Dicrurus macrocercus
Five or six sightings were had in some higher open country, usually on journeys between the main birding sites.
Hair-crested Drongo  
*Dicrurus hottentottus*
A wonderful bird was seen at Labahe, a nesting bird was found at Qingchengshan, and another was seen badly on the “Long March” up to Wuyipeng.

**CROWS, JAYS, AND MAGPIES: CORVIDAE**

**Sichuan Jay**  
*Perisoreus internigrans*
An obliging and vocal pair were seen at Mengbishan.

**Eurasian Jay**  
*Garrulus glandarius*
Several sightings came at Longcanggou, with others also seen at Jiuzhaigou.

**Azure-winged Magpie**  
*Cyanopica cyanus cyanus*
Three birds were seen over lunch in the Tibetan town of Waqie.

**(Red-billed) Blue Magpie**  
*Urocissa erythrorhyncha*
Recorded on 11 days of the tour, where they were especially vocal and conspicuous at Longcanggou and Wolong.

**Gray Treepie**  
*Dendrocitta formosae*
A group were seen at Longcanggou, and another single was seen on a car journey near Labahe.

**Eurasian Magpie**  
*Pica pica*
A few were seen during our day up on Sichuan’s Tibetan plateau, and others were seen in the Xining area in Qinghai.

**Mongolian Ground-Jay**  
*Podoces hendersoni*
This stunning and striking terrestrial jay was a major target for us during our visit to Chaka Plats, in Qinghai. We formed a line and got ready to spend a good part of the day searching for the species. Thankfully, Eugenia had other ideas, and soon found one of these smart jays preening itself in the early morning sun on a fencepost! It soon dropped to the ground, revealing its striking wing markings, when it was joined by another another bird and they soon begun foraging. This pair was seen very well, and a couple of others were seen briefly in the same area later on. Undoubtedly, ONE OF THE BIRDS OF THE TRIP.

**Red-billed Chough**  
*Urocissa erythrorhyncha*
Recorded on five days of the tour, including on the plateau area below Gong Gang Li, and also in the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai where nesting birds were noted.

**Yellow-billed Chough**  
*Pyrrhocorax graculus*
Amazingly only recorded on the one day of the tour a little below the pass at Gong Gang Li, where a large flock of tens of birds were watched wheeling around in the sky.

**Daurian Jackdaw**  
*Corvus daururicus*
Only recorded on our two visits into Tibetan Plateau country, both in Sichuan and Qinghai.

**Carrión Crow**  
*Corvus corone*
Commonly recorded on the Tibetan Plateau and surrounding areas.

**Large-billed Crow**  
*Corvus macrorhynchos*
Recorded at a number of forested sites throughout including Labahe and Jiuzhaigou.

**Common Raven**  
*Corvus corax*
Just the one, of the hulking Tibetan race, was seen near Waqie on Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau.
### LARKS: ALAUDIDAE

**Tibetan Lark**  *Melanocorypha maxima*
A few were seen around the plateau and Rubber Mountains in Qinghai, and another was seen near Waqie on the Sichuan's section of the plateau.

**Mongolian Lark**  *Melanocorypha mongolica*
Larks are not usually a group that stands out at the tour end, although Mongolian lark is far from your typical lark: big, bold, and with striking white wing patches this is lark worth getting out of bed for! We had outstanding views of up to 4 birds on our final morning near our hotel in Niao Dao (Qinghai), watched doing display flights and calling from close fence posts with nothing hindering the view. A great last morning bird!

**Greater Short-toed Lark**  *Calandrella brachydactyla*
A few were seen near Chaka in Qinghai.

**Hume's Lark**  *Calandrella acutirostris*
A few of these sandy, pallid, larks were seen on all of our three days in Qinghai.

**Lesser Short-toed Lark**  *Calandrella rufescens*
A few were seen near Chaka in Qinghai.

**Oriental Skylark**  *Alauda gulgula*
Commonly encountered on the Tibetan Plateau where birds were in full song and undertaking regular display flights.

**Horned Lark**  *Eremophila alpestris*
Commonly seen up on the Tibetan Plateau.

### SWALLOWS: HIRUNDINIDAE

**Bank Swallow**  *Riparia diluta*
A few were seen by some of the group over Longcanggou, and others were seen near Qinghai Lake.

**Pale Sand Martin**  *Riparia diluta*
Regularly encountered on the Qinghai leg of the trip, in the area around Koko Nur.

**Eurasian Crag-Martin**  *Ptyonoprogne rupestris*
Recorded regularly around Jiuzhaigou, (where they were even nesting on the park HQ), and also in the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai.

**Barn Swallow**  *Hirundo rustica*
Scattered sightings on the tour, recorded on five or more days.

**Red-rumped Swallow**  *Cecropis daurica*
A few were seen at lower elevation sites like Chengdu, Longcanggou, and Qingchengshan.

**Asian House-Martin**  *Delichon dasypus*
Regularly recorded at mountain sites throughout the tour, on all but a four days of the tour.

### FAIRY-FLYCATCHERS: STENOSTIRIDAE

**Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher**  *Culicicapa ceylonensis*
Seen at just two sites (although heard at more): Jiuzhaigou and Qingchengshan.
**CHICKADEES AND TITS: PARIDAE**

**Songar Tit** *Poecile songarus weigoldicus*
Sometimes the local race, of which is rumored to be the only genetically distinct race within the Songar Tit complex, is referred to as “Sichuan Tit”. Three birds were seen near Gong Gang Li, with another seen at Gong Gang Li itself.

**White-browed Tit** *Poecile superciliosus*
A very handsome endemic tit, recorded three times on the tour, including twice in the Rubber Mountains at a site that also boasted the enigmatic “Pink-tailed Bunting”.

**Pere David’s (Rusty-breasted) Tit** *Poecile davidi*
Another handsome endemic tit, which was seen first in Jiuzhaigou when a bird came in with a mobbing party to investigate my Collared Owlet tape. A mobbing party that also contained both Chinese Leaf-Warbler and Chinese Nuthatch in the mix. Others were also seen during our “Long March” up to Wuyipeng in Wolong.

**Coal Tit** *Periparus ater*
Recorded at Labahe, Jiuzhaigou, and Wolong.

**Rufous-vented Tit** *Periparus rubidiventris*
Recorded at Gong Gang Li, Jiuzhaigou, and Mengbishan.

**Yellow-bellied Tit** *Pardaliparus venustulus*
Recorded several times at Longcanggou, and later at Jiuzhaigou, and Wuyipeng also.

**Gray-crested Tit** *Lophophanes dichrous*
Seen at Labahe, Gong Gang Li, Jiuzhaigou, Mengbishan, and at Beimuping.

**Great Tit** *Parus major minor*
Seen in the lowlands at Chengdu and Qingchengshan.

**Great Tit** *Parus major tibetanus*
Recorded around Jiuzhaigou and Gong Gang Li.

**Green-backed Tit** *Parus monticolus*
Recorded at many sites and on many days of the tour including Longcanggou, Labahe, Jiuzhaigou, and Wolong.

**Yellow-browed Tit** *Sylviparus modestus*
Seen several times at both Longcanggou and Labahe, when invariably attracted with a mobbing party to an owl tape. On one occasion in Longcanggou they had a pair of Fire-capped Tits for company too.

**Ground Tit (Hume’s Groundpecker)** *Pseudopodoces humilis*
First recorded on Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau, and particularly commonly encountered on the Qinghai leg of the trip.

**PENDULINE TITS: REMIZIDAE**

**Fire-capped Tit** *Cephalopyrus flammiceps*
A pair came in with a party of Yellow-browed Tits to mob a Collared Owlet tape at Longcanggou.

**LONG-TAILED TITS: AEGITALIDAE**

**White-browed Tit-Warbler** *Leptopoecile sophiae*
A super purple, pink and blue male was seen in scrubby country on the journey between Gong Gang Li and Maerkang.

**Crested Tit-Warbler** *Leptopoecile elegans*
Three sightings were had of this beautiful songbird: a pair were seen at Gong Gang Li, and then single males were seen for short periods on two days at Mengbishan.
Black-throated Tit  
*Aegithalos concinnus*

Seen in the lowlands at Chengdu and Qingchengshan.

Black-browed Tit  
*Aegithalos iouschistos*

Two groups of this scarce tit species were seen: first at Labahe, and then later by the wallcreeper spot in Rilong. On both occasions the birds hung around and gave us all some stellar looks.

Sooty Tit  
*Aegithalos fuliginosus*

Recorded first in Jiuzhaigou, and then near Wolong village, and also up at Wuyipeng too.

**NUTHATURES: SITTIDAE**

Chestnut-vented Nuthatch  
*Sitta nagaensis*

One was seen around Wuyipeng.

Przevalski’s Nuthatch  
*Sitta przewalskii*

HEARD ONLY

Frustratingly only heard in the Primeval Forest within Jiuzhaigou.

Snowy-browed (Chinese) Nuthatch  
*Sitta villosa bangsi*

One came in with a mobbing party of tits and leaf-warblers at Jiuzhaigou.

**WALLCREEPER: TICHODROMIDAE**

Wallcreeper  
*Tichodroma muraria*

Stunning eye level views of a breeding male were had at a nest site near Rilong late one afternoon.

**CREEPERS: CERTHIIDAE**

Eurasian (Hodgson’s) Tree creeper  
*Certha familiaris khamensis*

Up to four birds were seen in a day at Longcanggou, including a nesting pair with chicks.

Bar-tailed Tree creeper  
*Certha himalayana*

Just the one was seen along a rather wet and miserable trail at Jiuzhaigou.

**WRENS: TROGLODYTIDAE**

Eurasian Wren  
*Troglodytes troglodytes szetschuanus*

One was seen on Mengbishan and another on Balang Shan by Jackie during a pit stop!

**DIPPERS: CIÑLIDAE**

White-throated Dipper  
*Cinclus cinclus*

One came in and perched on a busy boardwalk at the staggering Pearl Sholes falls within the park at Jiuzhaigou.

Brown Dipper  
*Cinclus pallasii*

A party of three birds opened our day one morning at Longcanggou.

**BULBULS: PYCNONOTIDAE**

Collared Finchbill  
*Spizixos semitorques*

This handsome bulbul was seen a number of times in and around Wolong village, and others were also seen at Qingchengshan.

Brown-breasted Bulbul  
*Pycnonotus xanthorrhous*

A pair of these attractive bulbuls were seen in the town at Jiuzhaigou.

Light-vented (Chinese) Bulbul  
*Pycnonotus sinensis*

A common lower elevation bulbul seen in Chengdu and also at Longcanggou and Qingchengshan.
Black Bulbul *Hypsipetes leucocephalus*

The striking white-headed race was seen around Longcanggou, Labahe, and Qingchengshan.

Mountain Bulbul *Ixsos mcclellandii*

A single bird was seen on the edge of Shawan in Wolong.

**KINGLETS: REGULIDAE**

Goldcrest *Regulus regulus*

Seen several times in the tall spruces around Gong Gang Li and Mengbishan.

**CUPWINGS: PNOEPYGIDAE**

Scaly-breasted Cupwing (Wren-Babbler) *Pnoepyga albiventer*

A brace of “cupwings” were seen during our day trip to Wuyipeng, this species, and the smaller Pygmy Cupwing.

Pygmy Cupwing (Wren-Babbler) *Pnoepyga pusilla*

One was seen very well on our descent from Wuyipeng.

**BUSH-WARBLERS AND ALLIES: Cettiidae**

Chestnut-headed Tesia *Tesia castaneocoronata*

This wonderful forest sprite was seen well at Labahe.

Rufous-faced Warbler *Abroscopus albogularis*

This tinkling warbler was seen around Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage in Chengdu.

Brownish-flanked Bush-Warbler *Cettia fortipes*

The distinctive song of this bird was a familiar and common backdrop to our birding in the mountains, where it was seen at Longcanggou and Jiuzhaigou.

Chestnut-crowned Bush-Warbler *Cettia major* HEARD ONLY

Only heard, at distance, on one afternoon at Beimuping.

Aberrant Bush-Warbler *Cettia flavolivacea*

Seen very well on at least three occasions: at Longcanggou and Beimuping.

Yellowish-bellied Bush-Warbler *Cettia acanthizoides*

This tiny bird with the powerful song was seen at Longcanggou.

Gray-sided Bush-Warbler *Cettia brunnifrons*

 Barely seen as it shot straight for me when I played back to it, only for it to go to ground thereafter and never sing again!

**LEAF-WARBLERS: PHYLLOSOPIDAE**

Tickell’s Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus affinis*

Recorded at a number of high elevation sites including Gong Gang Li, Mengbishan, Beimuping, and in the Rubber Mountains.

Buff-throated Warbler *Phylloscopus subaffinis*

Locally common at just one site near Wolong, where seen regularly singing from a small larch plantation.

Yellow-streaked Warbler *Phylloscopus armandii*

Several sightings were had on a steep scrubby hillside above Jiuzhaigou, and another was seen near Beimuping.
Buff-barred Warbler *Phylloscopus pulcher*
A common high elevation leaf-warbler, and regularly encountered around Gong Gang Li, Jiuzhaigou, Mengbishan, and Beimuping.

Sichuan Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus forresti*
Another common high elevation leaf-warbler, seen at Longcanggou, Labahe, Gong Gang Li, Mengbishan, and Wuyipeng.

Chinese Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus yunnanensis*
Only seen at Jiuzhaigou, where they are a common leaf-warbler.

Hume's Warbler *Phylloscopus humei*
Although first seen at Jiuzhaigou, they were much more numerous at Mengbishan.

Greenish Warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides trochiloides*
Numerous around Jiuzhaigou, where they were seen regularly. Also seen at Beimuping and Mengbishan.

Large-billed Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus magnirostris*
A very common sound in the mountains of Sichuan, with birds seen at Labahe, Longcanggou, and Beimuping.

Claudia's Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus claudiae*
This wing-flicking warbler is a common Sichuan bird which was seen at a number of sites, including Longcanggou, Labahe, Jiuzhaigou, and Wuyipeng.

Emei Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus emeiensis*
At the right elevation a locally common bird by voice on Longcanggou, which was seen on three occasions.

Kloss's Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus ogilviegrandi*
One was seen (and many others heard) at Longcanggou.

Sulphur-breasted Warbler *Phylloscopus ricketti*
A few of these brightly marked leaf-warblers were seen in Qingchengshan.

Plain-tailed Warbler *Seicercus soror*
Just the one was seen, at Longcanggou.

Martens's (Omei Spectacled) Warbler *Seicercus omeiensis*
Commonly heard and a number of sites, with sightings coming at Wolong, Labahe, and Longcanggou.

Bianchi's Warbler *Seicercus valentine*
The high elevation *seicercus*, seen at Longcanggou, Labahe, Jiuzhaigou, and Beimuping.

Chestnut-crowned Warbler *Seicercus castaniceps*
One was seen on the slopes of Longcanggou.

**GRASSBIRDS AND ALLIES: MEGALURIDAE**

Spotted Bush-Warbler *Bradypterus thoracicus*
A calling bird was seen well near Beimuping on Balang Mountain.

Russet Bush-Warbler *Bradypterus mandelli*
One showed extremely well, while singing back to us, at Labahe.

Brown Bush-Warbler *Bradypterus luteovenalis* HEARD ONLY
Unfortunately, only heard at distance on the upper slopes of Longcanggou.
OLD WORLD WARBLERS: SYLVIIDAE

Golden-breasted Fulvetta  Lioparus chrysotis
One was seen at Longcanggou, and a stunningly cop-operative pair were seen in company with some very confiding Fulvous Parrotbills at Labahe. This latter pair was very popular in particular.

Spectacled Fulvetta  Alcippe ruficapilla
A pair of these handsome fulvettas (which are massively more impressive than indicated in the guides), were seen on both of our visits to a scruffy hillside above the town of Jiuzhaigou.

Chinese Fulvetta  Alcippe striaticollis
We enjoyed a good run on this species this year, with four sightings in all, one from Mengbishan, and the other three coming from Beimuping on Balang Shan.

Streak-throated Fulvetta  Fulvetta manipurensis
Recorded regularly at both Longcanggou and Labahe, and later another was at Wuyipeng too.

Great Parrotbill  Conostoma oemodium
This massive and impressive parrotbill was seen twice on the tour: first at Longcanggou, and then another pair was seen very well along the trail up to Wuyipeng.

Brown Parrotbill  Paradoxornis unicolor
Two sightings were had at Labahe, one of which seemed to involve a nesting pair, where both birds were observed carrying food.

Three-toed Parrotbill  Paradoxornis paradoxus
I had found this bird on the top of Longcanggou during my scouting trip a week earlier there, and was chuffed to bits to find it in the very same stand of bamboo, mixed with flowering rhododendrons. Sam also saw another around the shell of the site that was the former Wuyipeng Research Station (now demolished).

Spectacled Parrotbill  Paradoxornis conspicillatus
A single bird was seen well on our two visits to a steep scrubby hillside above Jiuzhaigou town, which was our 8th and final parrotbill of the tour.

Vinous-throated Parrotbill  Paradoxornis webbianus
Fairly commonly encountered around the Giant Panda Breeding Centre in Chengdu, and others were also seen at Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage in Chengdu, and at Qingchengshan.

Ashy-throated Parrotbill  Paradoxornis alphonsonianus
One or two birds were seen in the grounds of Chengdu’s Giant Panda Breeding Centre.

Fulvous Parrotbill  Paradoxornis fulvifrons
These delightfully cute parrotbills were seen down to literally centimeters at Labahe, in a mixed group with the gorgeous Golden-breasted Fulvetta.

Golden Parrotbill  Paradoxornis verreauxi
Another small and undeniably cute parrotbill, with richer colors and bolder markings than the higher ranging Fulvous, and therefore arguably even better looking! At least four different groups were seen at Longcanggou.

YUHINAS, WHITE-EYES, AND ALLIES: ZOSTEROPIDAE

Stripe-throated Yuhina  Yuhina gularis
This funky bird brought the roof down on the climb up to Wuyipeng, and arguably got more praise than the main target there, Barred Laughingthrush!

White-collared Yuhina  Yuhina diademata
Recorded in the higher areas of Longcanggou, Labahe, Beimuping, and Wuyipeng.
Chestnut-flanked White-eye  
*Zosterops erythropleuru*

Seen a couple of times around Loncanggou, although better looks were had by all in the park at Jiuzhaigou.

Japanese White-eye  
*Zosterops japonicas*

Recorded on one day only, at Qingchengshan, where they were seen a few times in a couple of hours there.

**FULVETTAS AND ONE GROUND BABBLERS: PELLORNEIDAE**

Gray-cheeked Fulvetta  
*Alcippe morrisonia*

Only seen at the two lowland sites visited within Chengdu.

Dusky Fulvetta  
*Schoeniparus brunea*

This elusive fulvetta showed pretty well at Qingchengshan one afternoon.

**LAUGHINGTHRUSHES: LEIOTHRICIDAE**

Chinese Babax  
*Babax lanceolatus*

First seen at Mengbkishan, and then was later encountered around four times around Wolong, with some great views had in local gardens and perched on overhead cables.

Pere David’s (Plain) Laughingthrush  
*Garrulax davidi*

Mark found a couple en-route to Gong Gang Li that showed briefly, and another pair were seen on a steep hillside above Jiuzhaigou, which allowed us to scope them and observe them preening for a time.

Sukatschev’s Laughingthrush  
*Garrulax sukatschewi*

Often devilishly difficult to see and one of the most elusive of this elusive family, although not this year it seems. We made a special trip up to Long Lake in Jiuzhaigou early one morning to try and find this one. After the shortest burst of playback as bird answered almost immediately and before we knew it was perched slap bang in the open by the road, allowing Mark to even fire off a couple of rounds (of photos). Also known as Snowy-cheeked Laughingthrush.

Spotted Laughingthrush  
*Garrulax ocellatus*

Mike seem to have the gift for this one, seeing it at both Labahe and having a pair to himself at Wuyipeng also; meanwhile most of the rest of us had no views or poor views at best!

Barred Laughingthrush  
*Garrulax lunulatus*

Often the “pimpernel” of the Sichuan laughingthrushes, although after Eugenia picked up a bird creeping towards us we were rewarded with some stellar views as first one of the pair, and then another perched in the open just before crossing the trail, making for a rare treat with this bird compared with other recent times.

Giant Laughingthrush  
*Garrulax maximus*

One of the classic Chinese endemics, which was seen well around Mengbishan first, and later again at Beimuping, where a calling pair snuggled up together on an open branch one afternoon.

Rusty Laughingthrush  
*Garrulax berthemyi*

Mark was fortunate to see one of these handsome laughingthrushes at Longcanggou.

Chinese Hwamei  
*Garrulax canorus*

Unfortunately, this laughingthrush was only heard during an afternoon search on our journey back from Labahe to Chengdu, the bird remaining entrenched deeply within a bamboo thicket.

White-browed Laughingthrush  
*Garrulax sannio*

Undoubtedly the easiest of the Chinese laughingthrushes to see, and so it proved on this tour, when we saw them very easily around the Panda Breeding Centre in Chengdu, and where it would be fair to call them “tame”!
Elliot’s Laughingthrush  
*Garrulax elliotii*

The most regularly recorded of the laughingthrushes seen on fourteen different days, including at Longcanggou, Labahe, Jiuzhaigou, Gong Gang Li, Mengbishan, and Beimuping.

Black-faced Laughingthrush  
*Garrulax affinis*

A single bird was seen at Longcanggou.

Red-winged Laughingthrush  
*Garrulax formosus*

One popped up at close range at Labahe for a short time, and Tom at least was well-placed to get a good look, while most of us were less fortunate.

Red-billed Leiothrix  
*Leiothrix lutea*

Also known as PEKING ROBIN. Frequently encountered on the first leg of the tour, including within Chengdu, and at Longcanggou.

Gray-faced (Emei) Liocichla  
*Liocichla omeiensis*

One of the key species on the first leg of the tour, which was heard very frequently around Longcanggou. Our first encounter there involved a very fast-moving pair that never settled for anyone to get decent views. Several days were spent chasing calling birds thereafter before we finally, right at the last minute, got cracking looks at a single bird that lingered in full view for some time, much to Sam’s (and everyone else’s) obvious relief!

Blue-winged Minla  
*Minla cyanouroptera*

Two birds were seen in Chengdu, at the Giant Panda Breeding Centre.

**BABBLERS: TIMALIIDAE**

Rufous-capped Babbler  
*Stachyris ruficeps*

One was seen well at Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage in Chengdu.

Black-streaked Scimitar-Babbler  
*Pomatorhinus gravivox*

A recent split from Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler. Seen a couple of times, if only briefly, at Jiuzhaigou.

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler  
*Pomatorhinus ruficollis*

Great looks came on our first afternoon, at the Giant Panda Breeding Centre in Chengdu.

**OLD WORLD FLYCATCHERS: MUSCICAPIDAE**

Dark-sided Flycatcher  
*Muscicapula sibirica*

Recorded on four days of the tour, in Longcanggou and Jiuzhaigou.

Brown-breasted Flycatcher  
*Muscicapula muttui*

A single bird was seen during an afternoon visit to Qingchengshan.

Ferruginous Flycatcher  
*Muscicapula ferruginea*

Seen once at Longcanggou, with a further two sightings at Labahe.

Oriental Magpie-Robin  
*Copsychus saularis*

One was seen at the Giant Panda Breeding Centre in Chengdu.

Blue-throated Flycatcher  
*Cyornis rubeculoides glaucicomics*

An often touted split as *Chinese Blue Flycatcher*, not yet adopted under Clements.

This bird was very tough this year, with the better part of a day at Longcanggou going by with regular hearnts but none seen except in fleeting flight, until late in the day when we beat our way into the bamboo in desperation and only then did we get some choice close-ups of this handsome bird.
Rufous-bellied Niltava  
*Niltava sundara*
Another flycatcher that proved to be elusive; our first two records involving singles at both Longcanggou and Labahe, with the former being seen well by Eugenia only. However, one did come in close on a number of occasions on the trek up to Wuyipeng, which afforded most, although not all, in the group good views.

Verditer Flycatcher  
*Eumyias thalassinus*
Seen a couple of times at Longcanggou, and again once at Wuyipeng.

White-browed Shortwing  
*Brachypteryx Montana*
Common by voice at Longcanggou and Labahe, but very hard to get a look at during our first attempts. Finally, on our last morning at Labahe, and our final shot at the bird, a male popped up on to an open branch and finally ended our frustrations!

Rufous-headed Robin  
*Luscinia ruficeps*
Arguably one of the most difficult birds to see in Sichuan. This year was no different, with only Sam, Tom, and Mark getting looks at this handsome “master skulker”, although we did all get good views of it. The rest of us had to be satisfied with its beautiful and remarkable, nightingale-like, song.

Indian Blue Robin  
*Larivora brunnea*
Another stunningly beautiful robin, though thankfully more common and easier to see than its Rufous-headed cousin. We heard many, and saw one, immaculate male on our first morning inside the park at Jiuzhaigou.

White-bellied Redstart  
*Luscinia phaenicuroides*
One of a long line of skulkers that we heard many times before we saw it, being heard at Longcanggou, Labahe, Mengbishan, and Gong Gang Li. We finally saw a dusky blue male hopping around the mossy floor near the Primeval Forest inside the stunningly scenic Jiuzhaigou National Park.

Blue Whistling-Thrush  
*Myophonus caeruleus*
Seen seven times on the tour, including in Longcanggou, journeying between sites, and at the base of Qingchengshan.

Firethroat  
*Calliope pectardens*
This delectable flycatcher was remarkably easy this year (quite out of character!), with two smashing sightings of gorgeous males: first at Labahe when Brian quickly locked onto a calling bird before I had even popped the I-Pod, and another incredibly aggressive bird came in to within inches of Tom, Brian, Mark and I on the walk down from Wuyipeng. Remarkably, and in spite of such first class showings of this dazzling bird, NO ONE had it listed in his or her top five birds; perhaps not a poor reflection on the bird itself but more an indication of the strong list of species contending for that list.

White-tailed Rubythroat  
*Calliope pectoralis*
I much prefer the more evocative alternative name: *Himalayan Rubythroat*. We found several stunning males in the shadow of the spectacular Balang Mountain. Indeed the first male was so good, yet tantalizing that a few of us walked cross-country to get true close-ups of this striking rubythroat (is there any other kind!?)

White-tailed Robin  
*Larivora brunnea*
Typically elusive, with several heard (at Longcanggou and Wuyipeng), although only Eugenia got any kind of look at it.

Grandala  
*Grandala coelicolor*
Birds like this are the reason that birding at Balang Shan is so special; the males are deep, deep purplish-blue, which set among a high mountain alpine slope in bloom, with towering peaks for a backdrop makes for quite the scene. Around ten birds were seen near the pass at Balang Shan, including a number of dazzling purple individuals.
Himalayan Bluetail  
*Tarsiger rufilatus*
Another gorgeous flycatcher. Surprisingly few seen, with a pair at Gong Gang Li being the most noteworthy, and just one other seen, inside Jiuzhaigou.

Golden Bush-Robin  
*Tarsiger chrysaeus*
With the closure of Wawu Shan (where they are generally a given), I had a little concern for finding one. Many places appear good for it, and yet many places drew a blank, before finally landing a striking male at Beimuping, which on the second occasion we stopped to admire him, was joined by a female too. A really neat bird.

Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher  
*Ficedula strophiata*
Some great looks were had at Labahe, where three were seen on one day, and one on another. Another single was seen on the walk up to Wuyipeng too.

Slaty-backed Flycatcher  
*Ficedula Hodgsonii*
Seen on three days of the tour, with our first good sighting involving a wonderful powder-blue back male which closed a rainy, but very birdy, afternoon at Gong Gang Li. Others were seen within Jiuzhaigou over the following two days too, and involved both males and females.

Blue-fronted Redstart  
*Phoenicurus frontalis*
This handsome high altitude redstart was seen first as we passed through the edge of the Tibetan Plateau en-route to Maerkang, with others sightings coming at Mengbishan, in the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai, but most regularly at Beimuping. Seen on over ten days of the tour.

Plumbeous Redstart  
*Rhyacornis fuliginosus*
A rapids loving redstart, found in the mountains, and always in the vicinity of fast-moving rivers. With the abundance of these in Sichuan province it was regularly recorded, seen on eleven different days of the tour.

White-capped (Water) Redstart  
*Phoenicurus leucocephalus*
Another river redstart, recorded regularly through the tour in the mountainous areas, and again recorded on more than ten days of the tour.

Hodgson's Redstart  
*Phoenicurus Hodgsoni*
One of the scarcer redstarts on this diverse tour for this colorful group, recorded on just three days: a female at Jiuzhaigou, another female at Gong gang Li, and then finally a gorgeous male on the way to Rilong.

White-throated Redstart  
*Phoenicurus schisticeps*
Another beautifully colored redstart, seen on five days of the tour; at Jiuzhaigou, Mengbishan, Beimuping, and Gong Gang Li.

White-winged Redstart  
*Phoenicurus erythrogastrus*
Also known as Gülstenstäd’ts Redstart. This beefy redstart was seen on two days near the Rubber Mountains Pass in Qinghai, where up to three birds were seen, (including two males which were seen regularly chasing one another). A nest was also found on the one day, which was being regularly attended by both the male and female carrying food into the nest.

Black Redstart  
*Phoenicurus ochruros*
Only recorded in the Tibetan Plateau areas of the tour (in Sichuan and Qinghai), where it was regularly encountered, invariably perched on a roadside fence, or nesting in a rock face.

Daurian Redstart  
*Phoenicurus auroraeus*
Seen on six different days of the tour, including on our journey to Jiuzhaigou from Chengdu, around Jiuzhaigou itself, and around the village of Wolong.
Blue Rock-Thrush  
*Monticola solitaries*

A few by the roadside made us break our journey between Chengdu and Jiuzhaigou, and another one was seen as we traveled between Maerkang and Rilong.

Stonechat  
*Saxicola torquatus*

Recorded on three days around the Tibetan Plateau.

Gray Bushchat  
*Saxicola ferreus*

Just recorded on three days of the tour; beside our hotel in Longcanggou, near Labahe, and near Wolong village.

Desert Wheatear  
*Oenanthe deserti*

A single bird seen near Chaka Flats was unfortunately only seen by Sam.

Isabelline Wheatear  
*Oenanthe isabellina*

Seen in good numbers on all of our three days around the Rubber Mountains of Qinghai.

### THRUSHES AND ALLIES: TURDIDAE

Long-tailed Thrush  
*Zoothera dixoni*

Just the one sighting of a very tape-responsive bird at Mengbishan that unfortunately would not settle for long enough for anyone to get a decent look at.

Eurasian Blackbird  
*Turdus merula sowerbyi*

This large form of the blackbird possesses an unusual call and is therefore often touted as a split, sometimes referred to as “Mandarin Blackbird”. Several were seen in parkland by Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage in Chengdu.

Chestnut Thrush  
*Turdus rubrocanus*

A pleasantly common thrush in and around Jiuzhaigou and the lower slopes of Balang Shan, where they were seen regularly.

White-backed (Kessler’s) Thrush  
*Turdus kessleri*

Recorded on four days of the tour, with the first coming shortly before we saw our first Chestnut Thrush close to Gong Gang Li Pass.

Chinese (Song) Thrush  
*Turdus mupinensis*

Chasing a probable that shot under the boardwalk in front of us at Jiuzhaigou turned to nothing when a *Rufous-headed Robin* popped up out of almost the same spot, and made us rapidly change our focus! Another couple of probabilities in the same area led to nothing and so it was left to Mengbishan to try and produce this one. After a day and a half and time waning things were looking sketchy. However, I decided to have lunch at a spot I have had it before, realistically not expecting much in the heat of the day. However, before long a soft, melodic song reached our ears, and we quickly searched for the culprit, who was found perched on a high snag, and continued to sing until we left some fifteen minutes later! The relief was palpable in both guide, and group!

### STARLINGS: STURNIDAE

Crested Myna  
*Acridotheres cristatellus*

Just a few were seen from the bus as we sped along the bright shiny new highway linking Chengdu with the road to Longcanggou.

### FLOWERPECKERS: DICAEIDAE

Fire-breasted Flowerpecker  
*Dicaeum ignipustum*

A single bird was seen on the outskirts of Wolong village.
SUNBIRDS: NECTARINIIDAE
Gould's Sunbird  *Aethopyga gouldiae*
A popular bird that was seen on seven days of the tour, with daily sightings at Longcanggou.

ACCEPTORS: PRUNELLIDAE
Alpine Accentor  *Prunella collaris*
A minimum of eight birds was seen up at the pass at Balang Shan, with some birds observed singing from the tops of the boulders up there.

Robin Accentor  *Prunella rubeculoides*
A handful of birds were seen on each of our three days in the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai, along with cracking looks at many of them as they perched up in the low scrub.

Rufous-breasted Accentor  *Prunella strophiata*
Two or three birds were seen on Mengbishan, with another three birds seen in a patch of scrub shared with several stunning *Himalayan Rubythroats* up on Balang Shan.

Brown Accentor  *Prunella fulvescens*
Half a dozen birds were seen during our search for the Pink-tailed Bunting in Qinghai, and another three birds were seen nearby on another return visit there.

Maroon-backed Accentor  *Prunella immaculata*
This handsome, junco-like, accentor with the bright beady yellow eye, was seen at Gong Gang Li, inside Jiuzhaigou, and finally at Beimuping.

WAGTAILS AND PIPITS: MOTACILLIDAE
Citrine Wagtail  *Motacilla citreola calcarata*
A dream moment came for Mark who found his nemesis bird on a small marsh near Waqie on the Tibetan Plateau. Not only did he find one, but also he found a spanking citrus yellow male to boot. There were actually two males located in the same area, which proved to be our only ones of the tour. Unsurprisingly with his long history of trying to track one down coupled with the dashing looks of the bird, this was one of Mark’s personal highlights of the tour.

Gray Wagtail  *Motacilla cinerea*
Recorded on six days of the tour, around Longcanggou regularly, and then later in Qinghai once.

White Wagtail  *Motacilla alba*
Recorded regularly throughout the tour.

Blyth's Pipit  *Anthus godlewskii*
Two birds were seen foraging near Niao Dao in Qinghai.

Rosy Pipit  *Anthus roseatus*
Seen on six days of the tour at the following sites: Gong Gang Li, Jiuzhaigou, Mengbishan, and Beimuping.

Olive-backed Pipit  *Anthus hodgsoni*
Seen on two different visits to Mengbishan, and others were seen on a number of occasions around Beimuping.
UROCYNCHRAMIDAE: PRZEVALSKI’S ROSEFINCH
Przevalski’s Rosefinch  *Urocynchramus przewalskii*
This odd bird, now widely considered within its own *monotypic* family, was found on our first afternoon in Qinghai, close to the Rubber Mountains Pass. Not only did we all get fantastic looks at the male posing on a bush top, but we also got to see his best and most famous feature (which lends it its other name: “Pink-tailed Bunting”) as it was spread and cocked in display flight, parachuting down close to us, and creating quite a stir among all of us in the process. In all, three birds were seen in the area, two bright pink males, and a female. ONE OF THE BIRDS OF THE TRIP.

BUNTINGS, SPARROWS, AND ALLIES: EMBERIZIDAE
Slaty Bunting  *Latoucheornis siemsseni*
This junco-like bunting can be tough to track down, though not this year, when we enjoyed two great views of slaty males: one at Labahe, and another in the town at Wolong.

Godlewski’s Bunting  *Emberiza godlewskii*
One was seen as we crossed the Tibetan Plateau en-route to Maerkang from Jiuzhaigou.

SISKINS, CROSSBILLS, AND ALLIES: FRINGILLIDAE
Plain Mountain-Finch  *Leucosticte nemoricola*
A handful of birds were seen up at the pass at Balang Shan, when they were outnumbered by the many flocks of *Black-headed Mountain-Finches* wheeling around in the air that day, and a few others were seen near the Rubber Mountains Pass in Qinghai.

Black-headed Mountain-Finch  *Leucosticte brandti*
Also known as *Brandt’s Mountain-Finch*. Well over a hundred birds were seen at Balang Shan Pass, where a number of high-flying flocks were flying around and lading on distant alpine slopes.

Crimson-browed Finch  *Pinicola subhimachala*
A “last minute wonder” from our final time on Balang Shan, where three birds were found, two of which appeared to be young males and the other a female. A rare bird and lifer for guide, and entire group, alike!

Blanford’s Rosefinch  *Carpodacus rubescens*
A good find was a pair of these scarce finches at a pass on Mengbishan.

Dark-breasted Rosefinch  *Carpodacus nipalensis*
_seen on three days of our days up on Balang Shan, with a maximum of three birds seen in one day._

Common Rosefinch  *Carpodacus erythrinus*
_Flocks were recorded on five of our days in the high mountains: around Gong Gang Li and in the Beimuping area on Balang Shan._

Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch  *Carpodacus davidianus*
Just a single flock of at least eight birds were seen on the journey to Jiuzhaigou from Chengdu.

Pink-rumped Rosefinch  *Carpodacus eos*
_A few groups were seen around Mengbishan._

Vinaceous Rosefinch  *Carpodacus vinaceus*
_Seen at three different sites: a female was seen first at Longcanggou, then a pair was found at Labahe, and finally a single male was seen at Long lake inside the park at Jiuzhaigou._

Three-banded Rosefinch  *Carpodacus trifasciatus*
_A single male was seen on Mengbishan._
Chinese White-browed Rosefinch  *Carpodacus dubius*
A pleasantly common and vocal species in the high mountains, recorded regularly around Mengbishan and on Balang Shan in particular, with other sightings at Gong Gang Li too.

Streaked Rosefinch  *Carpodacus rubicilloides*
The final lifebird of the trip for many was a trio of these rosefinches in the Rubber Mountains of Qinghai, which included two extremely confiding males in the group.

Red-fronted Rosefinch  *Carpodacus puniceus*
This chunky rosefinch can be difficult to find, often due to inclement weather up on Balang Shan, although we were lucky to have a first day there with regular clear spells between bouts of low cloud, allowing us to pick up this handsome finch fairly quickly up at the pass itself, where at least three birds (two males) were seen well.

Oriental Greenfinch  *Chloris sinica*
Also known as Grey-capped Greenfinch. A single bird showed well on our first afternoon in Chengdu (at the Panda Breeding Centre), another single was seen near Longcanggou, and another six or so birds were seen on the journey between Chengdu and Jiuzhaigou.

Red Crossbill  *Loxia curvirostra*
A group of four birds was found at Longcanggou.

Twite  *Carduelis flavirostris*
Two confiding birds were seen feeding beside a restaurant in Waqie on Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau, and several other groups were seen around the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai.

Tibetan (Siskin) Serin  *Serinus thibetanus*
Half a dozen or so birds were seen at the Primeval Forest in Jiuzhaigou, and another single was seen very well on Mengbishan.

Gray-headed Bullfinch  *Pyrrhula erythaca*
Seen on eight days of the tour, at Labahe, Gong Gang Li, Mengbishan, Beimuping, and Wuyipeng.

Yellow-billed (Chinese) Grosbeak  *Eophona migratoria*
At least four birds were seen in Chengdu parkland near Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage.

Collared Grosbeak  *Mycerobas affinis*
This strikingly handsome grosbeak was seen twice up on Balang Shan, around Beimuping, males being involved on both occasions.

Spot-winged Grosbeak  *Mycerobas melanozanthos*
A pair were seen by Mark and a few others on Mengbishan.

White-winged Grosbeak  *Mycerobas carnipes*
Fairly conspicuous in our time on Mengbishan, where several groups were seen on both of our days on the mountain.

OLD WORLD SPARRROWS: PASSERIDAE

Russet Sparrow  *Passer rutilans*
First seen from our resort at the base of Longcanggou, with further sightings on the journey between there and Labahe. Also seen on the journey between Labahe and Chengdu.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow  *Passer montanus*
A common mostly urban species, encountered at a number of different spots.

Rock Petronia  *Petronia petronia*
Recorded in small numbers on all three of our days in Qinghai province.
Tibetan Snowfinch  *Montifringilla henrici*
Formerly known as *White-winged Snowfinch*, from which this was recently split. Seen near the pass in the Rubber Mountains.

Black-winged Snowfinch  *Montifringilla adamsi*
Small groups were seen on two days around the snowfinch-rich Rubber Mountains of Qinghai.

White-rumped Snowfinch  *Montifringilla taczanowskii*
Recorded on all three of our days in the Rubber Mountains area of Qinghai, with birds being found around Black-lipped Pika colonies, which they regularly nest within.

Pere David’s Snowfinch  *Montifringilla davidiana*
This attractive, bearded, snowfinch is arguably the scarcest snowfinch species on the Qinghai leg of the trip. However, in spite of this, singles of this species were seen on four occasions, including one which was very near our hotel in Niao Dao.

Rufous-necked Snowfinch  *Montifringilla ruficollis*
The most abundant snowfinch in Qinghai, regularly encountered on all of our three days in the area. One curious individual even came in to pick up fallen bread crumbs around our feet!

Blanford’s Snowfinch  *Montifringilla blanfordi*
Recorded in good numbers I the dry country of Chaka Flats in Qinghai, while searching for the enigmatic Mongolian Ground-Jay.

**WAXBILLS AND ALLIES: ESTRILDIDAE**

White-rumped Munia  *Lonchura striata*
Just a single bird was seen at Du Fu’s Thatched Cottage in Chengdu.

**MAMMALS**

**CERCOPITHECIDAE: OLD WORLD MONKEYS**

Tibetan Macaque  *Macaca thibetana*
These sturdy monkeys were seen feeding close to our jeep at Labahe.

**SCIURIDAE: SQUIRRELS**

Siberian Chipmunk  *Tamias sibiricus*
Recorded at Jiuzhaigou.

Himalayan Marmot  *Marmota himalayana*
One was spotted en-route to Jiuzhaigou, as we skirted the edge of the Tibetan Plateau, and a number of them were seen on Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau during our single day crossing this area.

**OCHOTONIDAE: PIKAS**

Black-lipped Pika  *Ochotona curzoniae*
This cute animal was seen regularly during our three days in Qinghai, where their colonies were frequented by various snowfinches (e.g. *White-rumped Snowfinch*), some of which have a symbiotic relationship with this mammal, nesting within their burrows.
LEPORIDAE: RABBITS & HARES

Woolly Hare  
*Lepus oiostolus*

Two were seen around Chaka Flats, and a few others were also noted near our Niao Dao hotel (Qinghai).

ALIURIDAE: LESSER PANDA

Red Panda  
*Ailurus fulgens*

This, the only extant member of this family, was seen first in Longcanggou, and then, remarkably, again (by some at least), in Labahe. The first sighting was simply fantastic, and surely one of the overall highlights on the tour—certainly Sam was adamant this was the true winner of the “thing” of the trip, and I don’t think Eugenia would disagree! It came, rather nonchalantly, when Mark casually remarked that he had a Red Panda, almost apologetically, as at the time we were looking for a White-backed Woodpecker. Of course, absolutely no one was concerned that we were being distracted from our woodpecker hunt, and we soon all lapped up this handsome, richly-colored mammal in the ‘scope. It turned out Mark could not have found this at a better time, as, after we had all enjoyed repeated looks in the telescope, and even seen it facing us, as it awoke from its slumber for short periods, the mountain clouds rolled in and completely obscured the animal from view for the rest of the day! Another, was seen by Mark, Sam, and Brian, as it fled into thick cover, in Labahe, located by our keen-eyed, and nature-loving, official park jeep driver. ONE OF THE BEST SIGHTINGS OF THE TRIP.

CANTIDAE: DOGS & FOXES

Tibetan Fox  
*Vulpes ferrilata*

One was seen, and found by Mark (again, who found the lion’s share of mammals on this tour!), near to Niao Dao in Qinghai.

URSIDAE: BEARS

Asiatic Black Bear  
*Ursus thibetanus*

A shocking sighting on the way to Maerkang, came when a bear was found scavenging among some roadside rubbish en-route. Sam could barely believe his eyes, and stuttered the words “bear!” before we jumped out to view this animal as it toyed with the idea of crossing the river below us, then (a little worrying to be honest), turned tail and headed straight towards us and a now excited crowd of thirty or so Tibetans, before finally thinking better of this, dropping down to the river and powerfully plowing through to the far side where it soon “evaporated” into the tall spruce forest. For Sam at least, for whom this constituted his first bear sighting anywhere, ONE OF THE SIGHTINGS OF THE TRIP.

MUSTELIDAE: MUSTELIDS

Hog Badger  
*Arctonyx collaris*

One was seen walking across an alpine meadow shortly after we watched the Chinese Monals at Balang Shan.

CERVIDAE: DEER

Central Asian Red Deer  
*Cervus affinis*

One was seen in the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai.

Tufted Deer  
*Elaphodus cephalophus*

Three sightings were made: Sam saw one ever so briefly at Labahe, then another was seen by Mark, Brian and Sam above the town of Jiuzhaigou, and a final sighting came near the village of Shawan in Wolong.
BOVIDAE: CATTLE, ANTELOPE, SHEEP & GOATS

Takin  
*Budorcas taxicolor*

A dozen or more of these huge beasts was seen in Labahe foraging on a steep slope, which were visible for some time. The group included at least one impressive large male in its midst. Another surprise sighting occurred at Balang Shan, where a single animal was seen grazing a distant slope.