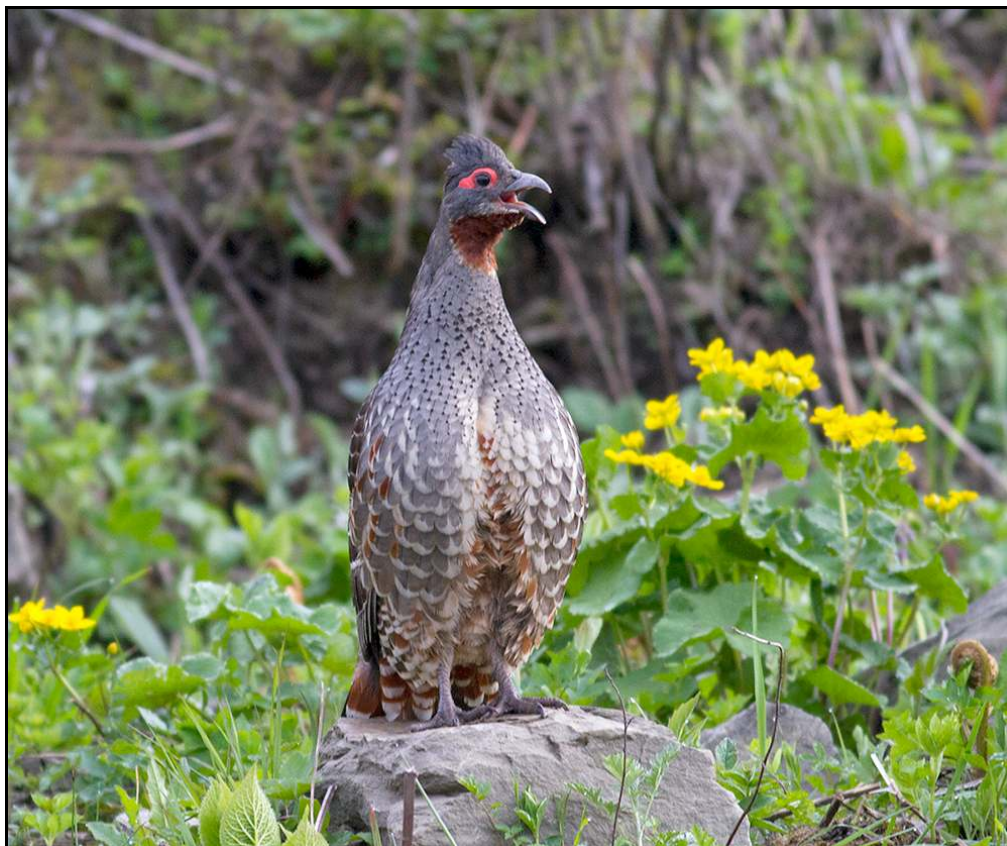




A Tropical Birding CUSTOM tour

Sichuan & the Tibetan Plateau (Qinghai)

24th May – 15th June 2013



*Once again, pheasants largely ruled the roost on this year's tour, often dominating the voting for best birds of the trip. For the first time though, **Verreaux's Monal-Partridge** made it into the top five list, by virtue of its remarkable performance at Balangshan. The overall winner of this traditional end-of-tour competition was however, not a pheasant for the first time, but a songbird (passerine) which beat another of the pheasants, (of which we saw fifteen species from that family), the astonishing Temminck's Tragopan, into that prized position*

Tour Leader: Sam Woods

All the photos in this report were taken on this tour, by Sam Woods.

Introduction:

*This year's tour, despite some last minute hitches (such as the last minute closure of a birding site by the Chinese authorities for tourist development, for the second year running), was highly successful as, by visiting most of the traditional key Sichuan sites, and combining this with a final leg in Qinghai we racked up around **320 species**. With the late closure of Labahe, we slotted in Erlangshan as a replacement, which yielded the "essential" Lady Amherst's Pheasants, in addition to a stunning male **Firethroat** and the endemic **Barred Laughingthrush**. The continuing closure of Wawu Shan also meant we continued to use Longcanggou as a substitute, which produced the local **Emei Leaf-Warbler** and **Emei (Gray-faced) Liocichla**, along with **Chinese Blue Flycatcher**, and other key species outlined below.*

*Out of the 320 or so birds recorded, the list included some of the most prized species in the region: some 15 species from the pheasant family were seen, with quality looks of **Temminck's Tragopans** (ten were seen in one startling morning in Longcanggou), **Chinese Monals** (as many as twelve were seen in a single hour on Balang Shan), and both **Blue and White Eared-Pheasants** to name a few. **Golden Pheasant** was also again seen, at the same site as last year in Wolong, and probably would have made the top five, were it not for the misty viewing conditions at the time. Along with these "true pheasants" came a long list of partridges: **Verreaux's Monal-Partridges** performed exceptionally this year at Balang Shan; a covey of **Snow Partridges** was seen amongst the stunning scenery of Balang Shan on an extraordinary **28-pheasant day (up to 12 Chinese Monals, 6 White Eared-Pheasants, 2***



***Verreaux's Monal-Partridges, 6 Snow Partridges, and 2 Golden Pheasants**); and a trio of partridges were seen in just a few hours near Chaka in Qinghai (**Przevalski's, Tibetan and Daurian Partridges**). Aside from the flagship pheasants there was much more to celebrate besides, including both male **Firethroat** and male **Rufous-headed Robin** seen well by all; the dawn displays of **Wood Snipe** among the beautiful Balang landscape; a heady list of **parrotbills (7 species)**, including the rare **Gray-hooded Parrotbill**, which was seen nesting at Longcanggou, along with **Brown, Great and Golden Parrotbills** there too; **Sichuan Jays** were typically inconspicuous at first, though a group of this scarce endemic eventually showed well on the flanks of the rhododendron-cloaked slopes of Mengbisha; **Mongolian Ground-Jays** were easy and conspicuous on Chaka Flats; and the monotypic family **Przevalski's Rosefinch (Pink-tailed Bunting)** was likewise seen with no trouble in Qinghai's Rubber Mountains and was understandably a major highlight for some; and we should not forget another monotypic family, albeit a much more widespread one, **Wallcreeper**, which made us wait until Qinghai, before we were finally granted such great eye level looks at this, one of the World's classic birds that it was comfortably voted the **TOP BIRD-OF-THE-TOUR**; a continual stream of rosefinches came to us in China's shans, or mountains, with **11 rosefinch species** seen, including the*

stunning endemic **Three-banded Rosefinch** in Jiuzhaigou, and the rare **Sharpe's Rosefinch** on Balang Shan. There was plenty more worthy of mention from the two species of tit-warbler seen well (**Crested and White-browed Tit-Warblers**); the unique splash of color that male **Grandalas** bring to an already incredible scene up on Balang Shan; the stream of **Pallas's Sandgrouse** passing overhead at Chaka on our final morning deep in Qinghai, and the **six different species of snowfinch seen on the same morning**; and the delightful **Scaly-breasted Cupwing** seen so, so well at the new site of the tour, Erlangshan ([photo page 2](#)).

And that was just the birds! The mountain landscapes, excellent food, and excellent service from our local guide (see below), also make this a very enjoyable tour for a variety of reasons. Once again, this tour proved that Sichuan's food, and the much less known food of Qinghai, rival food from any tour on the planet. The food was superb throughout, even in the remotest areas of the tour.

Lastly, a special mention should be made for our "man-in-Sichuan", "Frank", who operated as our local guide and fixer throughout. This meant fixing good food in the field; fixing even better food in the many high standard restaurants visited throughout; and fixing various problems which are merely part of daily life when operating bird tours in a country like China. This ranged from negotiating passed recently erected barriers on Erlangshan (caused by a recent landslide in the area), to investigating the new site of Erlangshan shortly before the tour, when the site of Labahe was closed to all at the time, to finding a way around the many park restrictions in Jiuzhaigou. Frank has become something of a Tropical Birding legend, having worked on these tours since their inception, some eight or so years ago. His warmth and attention to detail are phenomenal, ensuring a comfortable trip for all, and feeding constant, flawless facts about the history, food, and culture of this unique country.

Itinerary:

24th May	-	Du Fu's Thatched Cottage & Giant Panda Centre, Chengdu/night Chengdu
25th May	-	Chengdu to Erlangshan/night near Erlangshan
26th May	-	Erlangshan/night near Erlangshan
27th May	-	Erlangshan to Longcanggou/night Longcanggou
28th – 30th May	-	Longcanggou/nights Longcanggou
31st May	-	Longcanggou to Chengdu/night Chengdu
1st June	-	Chengdu to Gong Gang Ling & Jiuzhaigou/night Jiuzhaigou
2nd- 3rd June	-	Jiuzhaigou/nights Jiuzhaigou
4th June	-	Gong Gang Ling to Maerkang (via Waqie)/night Maerkang
5th June	-	Mengbisha/night Maerkang
6th June	-	Mengbisha to Rilong/night Rilong
7th June	-	Balang Shan to Wolong/night Shawan
8th June	-	Balang Shan/night Shawan
9th June	-	Wu Yi Peng daytrip/night Shawan
10th June	-	Balang Shan to Chengdu/night Chengdu
11th June	-	Chengdu to Xining, Koko Nor & Rubber Mountains(Qinghai)/night Niao Dao
12th June	-	Chaka Flats & West of Chaka/night Chaka
13th June	-	Chaka to Niao Dao/night Niao Dao
14th June	-	Chaka & the Rubber Mountains to Qinghai Lake & Xining/night Xining
15th June	-	Departure from Xining (Qinghai) & Beishan (for late leavers only)

Daily Summary:

May 24th Du Fu's Thatched Cottage & Giant Panda Breeding Center, Chengdu (SICHUAN)

As usual, our tour opened with a rare chance to bird the lowlands, with the sweltering sticky humidity of Chengdu at odds with the rest of the trip, which was to be spent in the somewhat cooler mountains. And so the tour began with a circuit of the best birding sites within Sichuan's capital, Chengdu, a city of 14 million people that many people have never even heard of. We began at the historic site of a famous Tang Dynasty poet, Du Fu. However, before we walked around and admired his thatched cottage for a cultural diversion, we chalked up some key birds, many of which were not to be seen again. These included the delightful **Rufous-faced Warbler**, whose tinkling calls could be heard emanating from its favored bamboo stands in and around the park; a striking **Collared Finchbill** (*photo right*), which allowed close approach as well as photos; and a hulking **Chinese (Yellow-billed) Grosbeak** in the parkland surrounding the cottage grounds.

In the middle of the day we checked out the migrant hotspot of the **Chengdu University Grounds** in the hope of one of their famed rare migrants (after all the site had yielded *Blackthroat* and *Firethroat* in recent springs!), but found little migrant fare in evidence, although did chalk up our first **Oriental (Grey-capped) Greenfinches**, a **White-cheeked Starling**, and yet more **Chinese (Yellow-billed) Grosbeaks**.

Finally, we visited the tourist trap of the **Giant Panda Breeding Centre**, where the pandas were out and about and feeding in their pens; everything panda was noted as available at the souvenir booths; and we even saw some new birds besides, including a confiding **Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler** which was teased out of the bamboo, many roaming parties of tame **Vinous-throated Parrotbills**, tame **White-browed Laughingthrushes** (*photo page 59*), a presumed escape **Silver-eared Mesia**, along with a handful of "Peking Robins", now better known as **Red-billed Leiothrix**, as well as a trip exclusive group of **Grey-cheeked (David's) Fulvettas** and the only **Hair-crested Drongo** of the entire tour. In the evening, we tucked in to the first of many stunning Sichuan dinners, which were to feature heavily in our conversations over the coming weeks, yielding rave reviews over and over again, and showcasing once again what a great tour this is for foodies and birders alike.



May 25th – 26th Erlangshan (SICHUAN)

For the second consecutive year, the development plans of the Chinese government impacted this tour, and took an important birding site off the map; last year Wawu Shan was closed for a number of years of tourist development, which led to the discovery of two new birding sites Longcanggou and Labahe. Both these sites worked very well last year, and so were included within the itinerary for this custom tour, with Wawu Shan remaining closed for the foreseeable future. However, just weeks before the tour, the announcement came that one of the replacement sites, Labahe, (a key site for its phenomenal pheasant viewing, with both Lady Amherst's Pheasant and Temminck's

Tragopan easily seen there), would be closed too. This year Sam did not have the luxury of time ahead of the tour to travel to China early and check out possible new sites, thus it was left to Frank to do this, which led to this site being added to the tour, as a direct replacement for Labahe. Naturally though, Sam was a little nervous, having personally not visited the site earlier.



Before we reached the scenic **Erlangshan** (*photo above*), a bonus bird surprised us at a random roadside rest room stop, when one of the most vocal and recognizable calls in China was heard emanating from the hills behind the gas station. This led us to lock on to a noisy **Chinese Hwamei**, the so-called “eye make-up bird”, which seemed to have been attracted out from its stand of bamboo by the calls of a pet Hwamei in the area, which had been hung up in its tiny cage by a passing truck driver!

Our local man Frank’s indispensability soon became clear at Erlangshan when we were met with the site of a large barrier blocking access to the site, supposedly brought on by a recent landslide, beyond the area we wished to bird. At times the negotiation appeared to be going poorly with Frank clearly tearing his hair out in frustration, although sometime, somehow Frank pulled it off again, and we were through the gate, and on the mountain! The mornings at Erlang Mountain were spent doing “pheasant runs” in the vehicle, slowly coasting the road, with us all huddled towards the front of the van, avidly scanning the dirt road ahead for pheasants. Our principal target was the “Lady A” (i.e. Lady Amherst’s Pheasant), as this was to be our only realistic chance of the tour. On our first morning, with a fair section of road already covered, and the day warming quickly, our hopes were not high. However, after we had made first several stops for calling roadside birds, which included a bright male **Yellow-throated Bunting** (never a given on this tour), pair of bold roadside **Black-streaked Scimitar-Babblers**, and, best-of-all, a stunning male **Firethroat** lighting up a pine tree, we all locked eyes on to a pristine male **Lady Amherst’s Pheasant** that casually strolled across the open, deserted, mountain road. The bird’s disappearance off the side of the road was greeted with open adulation for the performance and notable relief from Sam! **Eurasian Nutcrackers** were also very visible in the area, being noted regularly during our time on the mountain, where we also got our first taste of

a particularly large prominent group of birds in Sichuan; the *leaf-warblers*. SEVEN species from this group were quickly notched up on the mountain, including **Martens's and Yellow-streaked Warblers**, and **Buff-barred, Chinese, Claudia's, Sichuan and Large-billed Leaf-Warblers**. Our first *tit* species was also seen at Erlangshan with the endemic **Yellow-bellied Tit** encountered, along with a striking male **Fire-capped Tit**, if only briefly, for the latter. On the higher sections of pines we found our first *rosefinch* too, (another prominent group on the tour), with a splendid male **Vinaceous Rosefinch** (*photo below, taken later on the tour in Jiuzhaigou*). Erlangshan provided the only **White-browed Fulvetta** of the trip, and our first **Daurian Redstarts, Chestnut Thrushes, (Mrs.) Gould's Sunbirds**, and **Elliot's Laughingthrushes**. Arguably though, the most popular sighting of these first few days was a super **Scaly-breasted Cupwing** (*photo page 2*) that responded spectacularly well to Sam's recording, (although Lisa might dispute this in favor of a certain pair of "water ouzel" species: **Brown and White-throated Dippers**, which were found sharing the same stretch of river).



May 27th Erlangshan to Longcanggou (SICHUAN)

After a final pheasant run on the mountain, where we'd hoped for *tragopans*, but were compensated for to some degree with a young male **Lady Amherst's Pheasant**, showing only hints of the dramatic plumage to come, we had to head north to another, wetter, mountain; **Longcanggou**. Before we left Erlang though, we did also pick up a pair of boisterous **Barred Laughingthrush**, which, like last year, came in extremely close and allowed everyone excellent views; not always the way with this often elusive endemic. There was also just enough time on the mountain before our departure, to add a pair of **Golden Bush-Robins** in some alpine scrub, a male **White-bellied Redstart** singing from a stunted pine tree, and an **Alpine Leaf-Warbler** hanging out near the treeline (a split from **Tickell's Leaf-Warbler**).

On arriving at **Longcanggou**, post the four-hour drive, there was precious little time for birding, although we did add **Black-naped Oriole**, the dramatic **(Red-billed) Blue Magpie**, the striking white-headed form of **Black Bulbul**, and one of the most distinctive songsters in all of Asia, **Asian Koel**. We checked into a traditional style resort, intriguingly named the Forest Tiger Resort, with beautifully carved wooden buildings, and a kitchen preparing sensational Sichuan cuisine.

May 28th Longcanggou (SICHUAN)

This turned out to be the first “landmark” day of the tour. Smarting from having not had a sniff of a tragopan on our first mountain, this stunning *galliforme* was to be the major focus of our first morning on our second mountain at **Longcanggou**. Armed with the latest tips from another bird leader present there (thanks Nick), we stopped in an area where **Temminck's Tragopan** had been seen lately (*photo below*), and Sam was amazed to see a spanking scarlet male standing out in the open on arrival, before most people had even alighted from the vehicle. However, this dazzling bird quickly soon slipped away as it crept slowly, but very deliberately, back into the dense bamboo stand. Moments of tension quickly followed, for no one, bar Sam, had got acceptable views of one of the most-wanted birds of the trip for many; a guide's nightmare. Sam though unleashed his I-Pod, and then suddenly the tragopan strutted out of the bamboo and stood upright and alert, in all its glory, in the open, (when we even noticed another male standing closeby too). The tragopan stood there for so long, we even all managed to ogle it in the 'scope too, every splendid feature of the bird being revealed to us at this time. There was no better way to start our exploration of Longcanggou, and there was a palpable sense of relief at getting this major target bird so



quickly. A number of other top targets followed though; shortly after a pair of **Emei (Gray-faced) Liocichlas** emerged from the relative safety, and obscurity of the bamboo, and leapt up into an open tree, a local species that normally requires more than one attempt to actually *see* it. A **Brown Bush-warbler** also put in a virtuoso performance in the same area too, although was understandably overshadowed by the other, more flashy species! Flushed with this success we moved higher up the mountain, armed with another tip-off regarding a nesting pair of **Gray-hooded Parrotbills**, which paid off within just a few minutes when a pair of these scarce endemic birds flitted into the bamboo around us, showing to us under ten feet away. Continuing higher up the road we reached a marshy area where a **Spotted Bush-Warbler** (*photo page 8*), crept

extremely close to us, and a **Brown Parrotbill** was located as hoped. Up at the higher reaches of the road we also found another endemic tit, with a pair of typically confiding **Pere David's Tits**, while on the way down the mountain, with rain crashing down we added a **Russet Bush-Warbler** to the list, the locally common **Emei Leaf-Warbler**, as well as a gorgeous **Golden-breasted Fulvetta**, always, rightly, a very popular bird on this tour.

May 29th Longcanggou (SICHUAN)

This day dawned gray, misty, rainy and cool, and this certainly seemed to adversely affect the bird activity, with little tracked down for much of the morning aside from a **Kloss's Leaf-Warbler** (a split from *White-tailed Leaf-Warbler*), a showy **Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler** (which we had seen earlier in Chengdu anyhow), a pair of treetop **Himalayan Cuckoos**, and a migrant male **Tiger Shrike**. Our best bird of the morning though was a bulky **Great Parrotbill**, which, arguably, would be better named simply "Giant Parrotbill", such is its size. However, the afternoon was very different with good bird activity and key birds seen, perhaps brought about by the drier and warmer weather at that time. Our day's jinx was broken with a gorgeous male **Chinese (Blue-throated) Blue Flycatcher**, which, while it required some scrambling inside the bushes to see it, put on a great show once we were in place. Having attempted to chase down several calling **Pygmy Cupwings (Wren-Babblers)** earlier in the day, Sam was somewhat relieved when we finally all got great looks at this tiny ball of feathers singing its heart out by a forest stream. However, the afternoon will be best remembered for our foray down a new forest road built in an area with an interesting mix of pine trees on one side and native broadleaf woodland flanking the other. Within the pines the tit-like sounds of a male **Slaty Bunting** were confirmed when a dusky, junco-like male homed into view, and then later down the road a little use of a *Collared Owlet* recording brought in a mob scene. For the first time on this tour we recorded **Ultramarine Flycatcher** and **Red-tailed Minla** as they attended the mobbing group of birds searching for the owl, along with **Blue-winged Minla** and the spectacled **Green Shrike-Babbler**.

**May 30th Longcanggou (SICHUAN)**

For our final, full, day on the mountain, we decided to once again hit the high slopes, and pray for better weather than we had experienced a few days before when, typically, low level cloud engulfed the mountain, making viewing of some birds impossible. The mission on this day was to try and track down a pair of *Sichuan Treecreepers* that I had located there the previous year, a species that has become more difficult with the closure of the best location for it in recent years, (Wawu Shan). Before we reached that area however, we made a short stop in an area of impenetrable bamboo and eked out a popular pair of **Golden Parrotbills**, a bird that the word "cute" seems to have been invented for. On the way up we checked in with the nesting **Gray-hooded Parrotbills** again ([photo page 9](#)), and then got a bunch of passerines riled up at the sound of a *Collared Owlet* recording which brought in **Gray-crested, Green-backed, Yellow-browed and Coal Tits** (here of the crested form), as well as a **Golden-breasted Fulvetta**. The same area held a pair of showy **Darjeeling Woodpeckers**, which was popular among the entire group, Maggie even nominating this sighting as one of her top five birds of the tour. A couple of skulkers were seen



on the higher parts of the mountain, with first a hyperactive **Chestnut-headed Tesia** circling us, and then a **White-browed Shortwing** showing to all. We also encountered our first buzzards of the tour, with several **Himalayan (Common) Buzzards** perched on the dead fir trees up top, and also a surprise pair of **Takin** moving through the brush proved that even a beast of this size can move with remarkable haste when it wants to. Having had no luck with a response from the highly desired *Sichuan Treecreeper* at the given spot we decided to lunch there, downing some hot packets of instant rice to warm us, while we surveyed the area for *treecreepers*. A short scare resulted in us finding our first **Hodgson's (Eurasian) Treecreeper** of the tour, and the local *Rhododendron* bushes held a

striking **Black-faced Laughingthrush**. However, it seemed, as like last year that the *Sichuan Treecreeper* was going to elude us again. At least last year we had the weather to blame, when a thick blanket of cloud obscured our view of the trees that they favor. This year, while we lunched the day was bright and clear, even allowing us crisp views of a calling treetop **Large Hawk-Cuckoo**, which is so often the "great tormentor" on this tour, by virtue of its loud maniacal calls and difficult to observe nature. Finally, with not a peep out of the treecreeper we began to head down, although a short time later, with Sam still playing in desperation, a **Sichuan Treecreeper** called back! The group quickly re-assembled, after which a game of cat-and-mouse ensued between birder and bird, until eventually one popped up on a close dead fir tree, bringing clear views, and relief, to us all. The long 5-mile round trip was now justified and worthwhile. It turned out to be a great day for parrotbills, what with our first Golden Parrotbills, repeats of **Gray-hooded and Brown Parrotbills**, and then a small group of close **Ashy-throated Parrotbills** brought the curtain down on our days birding.

May 31st Longcanggou to Chengdu (SICHUAN)

We had one final morning to mop up what we could before returning to Sichuan's capital for another night. Therefore we checked the active area where we had enjoyed such a great flock a few days before and scored again with **Ultramarine Flycatcher**, **Red-tailed and Blue-winged Minlas**, and also found a **Chestnut-crowned Warbler**, **Mountain Bulbul**, and a female **Slaty Bunting** in the area. Other mobbing parties brought in a handful of **Emei Leaf-Warblers** too. On the way up we finally nailed down a male **Snowy-browed Flycatcher**, although one of the birds of the morning was a big flashy woodpecker, of which Sichuan does not have an abundance like some parts of tropical Southeast Asia; we heard a raucous pair of **Bay Woodpeckers** which showed their obvious distaste of my recording by flapping in noisily and perching on some large forest limbs and trunks. On the way up the mountain we again bumped into some **Temminck's Tragopan** chicks (*photo next page*), which on this occasion did *not* scramble quickly off the road but remained well positioned for photos at the verge. However, bird of the morning was arguably the **Little Forktail** that we found foraging next to a small waterfall. Over lunch on site, in the field, we observed another pair of **Great Parrotbills** and the now familiar territorial **Brown Bush-Warbler**. Another, this time less shy, party of parrotbills, **Ashy-throated Parrotbills**, rounded out both the morning and our time at Longcanggou for this year.

June 1st**Chengdu to Gong Gang Ling & Jiuzhaigou (SICHUAN)**

Although this was to be a long travel day it was not to be without avian incident, as on the journey between Chengdu and Jiuzhaigou in northern Sichuan we passed through the high mountain pass of **Gong Gang Ling**, which would provide some excellent birding. By mid-afternoon (and after picking up our only **Blue Rock-Thrushes** and our first **Pacific Swifts** of the tour), we were birding some agricultural areas, where local Tibetans toiled in the fields alongside **Ring-necked (Common) Pheasants**, here in their true native home. Unfortunately though, the hoped-for Sichuan (Songar) Tit was not home, and we would have to try again for that later, and so we moved on to the spruce-cloaked mountain pass. Some low scrub at the forest edge brought first looks at a male **Himalayan Bluetail** (recently split from *Red-flanked Bluetail* or *Orange-flanked Bush-Robin*), and the low buzzing notes of **Chinese White-browed Rosefinches** soon led us to these smashing birds. We were really hoping to bump into a feeding flock in the area too, as this might hold our prime target in the area, and, as we worked through a bird party that held **Gray-crested and Rufous-vented Tits** and **Goldcrest**, someone soon located our main target in the area: a pair of stunning **Crested Tit-Warblers**. This tiny bird can be surprisingly difficult bird to keep track of as it moves quickly through the tall spruces with the other flock members, though not on this occasion, good weather and good fortune favored us, and we left that day with all of us getting prolonged looks at this pink, purple, white and blue bird. We also picked up our first Slaty-backed Flycatcher in the area, but at this time could not locate the hoped-for Maroon-backed Accentor, and so would return to that beady-eyed songbird later on the trip.

June 2nd**Jiuzhaigou (SICHUAN)**

This was to be the first of two days within this incredibly scenic park, which boasts spectacular landscapes, and have led to its status as a UNESCO World Heritage site and a World Biosphere Reserve. Jiuzhaigou (roughly translated meaning the “Valley of Nine Villages”), stretches 180,000 acres, and is literally littered with scenic lakes and waterfalls, and ancient forests, with intriguing names like “Five-colored Pond”, “Panda Lake”, “Sleeping Dragon

Lake”, “Arrow Bamboo Lake” and the “Primeval Forest”. The steep entrance fee (some \$50USD per person!) to the park is worth it alone for the stunning landscapes, of which the Pearl Sholes waterfall is particularly notable, although, of course, we were here for much more besides. While we waited for Frank to work out our morning plan as the park was springing to life at the rather civilized opening time of 07.00am, we birded the, then empty, parking lot. Knowing this would be wall-to-wall with people later in the day we considered ourselves fortunate to pick up a **Spectacled Fulvetta** and **Chinese (Song) Thrush** while we waited for our tickets to get in, and enjoyed further views of the local **Daurian Redstarts**, (*photo below*), one of which even posed on the electronic ticket barrier to enter the park.



One of the inhibitions in the park is the need to travel around on park buses, which can make getting to some of the undesignated stops trickier. In most years we had managed to get a local vehicle to drop us where we needed to go, before too many other park staff were around to see it. However, on this day our luck ran out, we just could not get a vehicle to take us to a scenic side-valley, almost the only known breeding site of the rare *Rufous-headed Robin*. And so we were forced to do some long stretches of walking on this day, which we had not planned on, but we were left with little choice. We walked the 4km road to the Keze Valley, picking up some new birds on the way, such as a confiding pair of **Sooty Tits** (another endemic tit, *photo page 30*), a very responsive **Chinese (Snowy-browed) Nuthatch**, and yet another leaf-warbler, this time our first **Hume's Warbler**. Once we reached the robin site just a few people got unsatisfactory (or very satisfactory in Dixie's case) glimpses of the **Rufous-headed Robin** (rather typical for this notoriously elusive robin), while the rest of us had little else bar some further **Pere David's Tits**, and so we vowed to return the next day. In the afternoon we dropped down lower in the park to a lake bordered by large swathes of reeds and found another target, our seventh parrotbill of the tour, **Spectacled Parrotbill**, and saw our second *forktail* of the trip in the form of a **White-crowned Forktail**.

Late in the afternoon a few of us ventured up a steep dry slope overlooking the bustling town-cum-city of Jiuzhaigou, where we found a single **Pere David's (Plain) Laughingthrush** as we'd hoped.

June 3rd Jiuzhaigou (SICHUAN)

This turned out to be one of the best days of the entire tour, and certainly my single best day I had ever endured within the park. Getting on a bus early we were alone and traveling up the road with no other traffic in evidence, when suddenly a **Blue Eared-Pheasant** appeared by the roadside-my first sighting inside the park. In our excitement we encouraged the bus driver to reverse so we get further looks at this dramatic bird, only for the driver to reverse the bus straight into the wall! No bother though, merely pride, and a bumper damaged in the process. So we hopped out of the bus and surveyed up the open strip of grass, longing for the pheasant to re-emerge there, which, incredibly it did; sprinting out of the cover of the low conifers and taking a short run across this open stretch, allowing everyone quality looks in the process!



Next up we had a "date" with one of the trickier of the Chinese endemic laughingthrushes up at Long Lake. This scenic lake, at the highest point within the park, thankfully does get public buses until later in the morning, and so we knew we had a little time there to try and find the bird before the hordes showed up. However, while hearing them proved easy, seeing them was not; our first couple of pursuits just ending in frustration as the birds fell quickly silent and lost interest. However, it turned out to be third time lucky; when at the third attempt, a close **Sukatchev's (Snowy-cheeked) Laughingthrush**, (*photo above*), which John had located briefly feeding on the

path, leapt up in anger in a close tree with the use of a recording of the species, allowing not only good looks but great photo opps of this shy species. We also found our first **Lammergeiers** of the tour at Long Lake with three birds cruising above the craggy outcrops, much to Karen's delight, for which this had been something of a nemesis bird for some time.

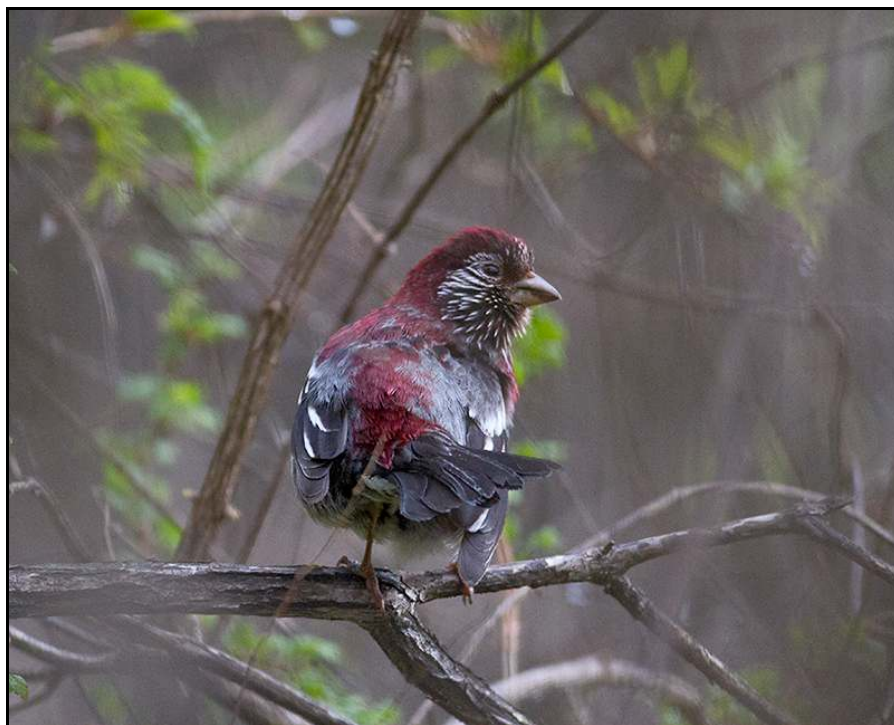


Soon after, the buses started streaming in, and that was our cue to leave for somewhere a lot quieter, and off the beaten track. And so we returned for another concerted effort at pinning down that **Rufous-headed Robin**. Hearing these birds is not difficult, they have a beautiful and rich, nightingale-like song, which could very well be argued for as one of the most attractive songs of all Asian songbirds, and we quickly heard up to 4 different birds. However, only Ken and Tim got the slightest of glimpses, until, after some time (and lunch) in the area, we took a walk deeper into the forest. On hearing another of these rich songsters calling closeby I decided to leave the recording un-

played, as they seemed to show only cursory interest in it anyway at this time. We froze for a while trying to calculate its next move, and then very, very slowly proceeded towards the sound, when John exclaimed that it was ON the trail, where, amazingly it remained for a few minutes, which were long enough for everyone (YES, everyone) to acquire good views of; a rare occurrence indeed. After the sustained effort put in, I challenged anyone NOT to put that in their top five birds; clearly not everyone was listening though, (see Top Five Birds, after the daily summaries). This same area held another **Chinese (Snowy-browed) Nuthatch**, and a small group of showy **Lesser Cuckoos** too, which were particularly interesting, as one of the birds was a bright rusty-red hepatic individual.

After the intense birding and searching for the robin we needed a much-needed break, and **Pearl Sholes** waterfalls provided just such a diversion, as this is arguably the most dramatic landscape feature within the park. While we were admiring, and photographing, the falls at length we also noted some birds, including a lone **White-throated Dipper** perched knee-high in the rapids, and a party of **White-capped Redstarts** foraging at the bottom of the falls, while on the trail back to the bus we found a male **Rufous-bellied Niltava**. Our final stop of the day, and within the park, was to be within the Primeval Forest, which is dominated by tall, ancient spruce trees. A short walk kicked a male **Vinaceous Rosefinch** out of the grass by the parking lot, and the barely audible high-pitched calls of **Maroon-backed Accentor** helped to locate one of these cool birds there too (*photo above*). A bout of rain did not deter the handful of **Dark-sided (Siberian) Flycatchers** from catching flying insects, or us from adding a

Bar-tailed Treecreeper to the list, which was quite satisfactory, having missed this bird in the park the day before. Our final decent bird of the afternoon was small party of **Three-banded Rosefinch**, which included a cerise pink male in their midst (*photo below*).



June 4th Gong Gang Ling to Maerkang (SICHUAN)

This was to be another long travel day, as the road system in earthquake-hit Sichuan still leaves a lot to be desired, and frankly too, we needed to go some way, as we traveled from northern Sichuan south skirting the edge of the Tibetan Plateau, before reaching the Tibetan town of Maerkang. We began with a short stint back at the 3500m/11,500ft-high Gong Gang Ling pass, which we had visited a few days earlier. Our main reason for slotting this in the original itinerary was for a reasonable shot at finding **Blue Eared-Pheasant**, which, although we had seen the day before, we were only too happy to enjoy further, more prolonged views in the early hours of the morning. Little else was seen of note, though John did see a brief **Sichuan Jay**, which was identified retrospectively, and a very confiding **Northern Goshawk** landed in the trees alongside us on several occasions. And so, after admiring more **White-throated Redstarts** and others we hit the road towards the Tibetan Plateau. Shortly after we stopped again for another attempt at the **Sichuan (Songar) Tit** which remained silent and unseen a few days previous, although this time, it appeared on top of the scrub almost immediately. I was keeping my eye out for a spot where the year before I had found a *White-browed Tit* and *White-browed Tit-Warbler*, and was amazed to find another birding group in place when I arrived. There was no sign of the “White-browed Brace”, although we were more than adequately compensated for with a male **Siberian Rubythroat** singing its heart out from the top of the low scrub. A little earlier we were also forced to turn around when someone in the back had spotted a mammal on a hillside that proved to be a **Chinese Serow**!

A little later on I stopped at another, similar-looking, shallow valley sprinkled with low scrub and happily found both **White-browed Tit** and a pair of **White-browed Tit-Warblers** both to be present and showy. Not long after we rose onto the Tibetan Plateau itself, and not long after that were lined up on the roadside with our first **Black-**

necked Cranes within the 'scope. This sighting involved a pair of adults with several rich reddish-brown chicks pacing around at their feet; a great opener for the plateau. For much of the day we traveled through this section of Sichuan's Tibetan Plateau, adding many new birds in the process, as this was our first dip into this habitat: **Black Redstarts** seemed to decorate every fence post or power line (*photo below, taken later on the tour in Qinghai*), although just the one male **Hodgson's Redstart** was found; richly-colored **Ruddy Shelducks** dotted the many ponds and pools on the plateau; the pied forms of **Daurian Jackdaws** passed by regularly; and regular flocks of **Twite** were flushed off the side of the road. A large marsh provided some great looks at a lemon-headed male **Citrine Wagtail**, here of the *calcarata*, black-backed form, which some split off as *Black-backed Wagtail*. This same marsh played host to the huge **Tibetan Lark**, which declared its territorial claim from the top of a power pole. Over lunch in a small, though noisy, Tibetan town, we added several groups of **Azure-winged Magpies** in the local gardens, watched a handful of **Chinese Pond-Herons** pass overhead and perched in the trees, and also observed some local nesting **White-cheeked Starlings**. The rest of our journey was pretty uneventful, with the odd **Eurasian Hoopoe** seen by some flapping lazily over the plateau, and masses of **Common Cuckoos** adorning the power lines-some 100+ were seen that day! In the early evening we arrived in **Maerkang**, admiring the picturesque Tibetan settlements on the edge of town, the extraordinarily extravagant Tibetan-style decorations within our hotel lobby, and I lobbied for the best food thus far of the tour.



June 5th Mengbishan near Maerkang (SICHUAN)

Mengbishan is a spruce-laden mountain, with an underlayer of beautiful, blooming pink *Rhododendrons* that rises up to 3900m/12,800ft-high at a mountain pass, not far from the large Tibetan town of Maerkang. While it offered second chances at some already missed species (*Chinese Babax* and *Blood Pheasant* for example), it also offered up our best chances of some key endemics in the region (e.g. *Chinese Fulvetta* and *Sichuan Jay*). Chief among these was *Sichuan Jay*, a rare and local, and very inconspicuous, jay of high altitude spruce forests. Unlike many other jays it is

far from conspicuous and not particularly vocal, meaning they are often hard to locate, even here at the best site in the region. I had drilled into the group that this bird was the key “stress bird” for the day (i.e. target bird), and Ken as clearly paying attention; we had barely been out of the vehicle for five minutes and he announced he had a **Sichuan Jay**! Unfortunately though, the bird had other ideas, and quickly dropped off the large spruce tree it was using and quickly disappeared downslope! The notable thing about this action was that it was before most people had managed to get any kind of look at it. With this early success (for Ken anyway), I think most people in the group felt that my claims that the jay can often be difficult were false. However, after a further four hours of searching, with no further sniff of the jay, the harsh reality was setting in!



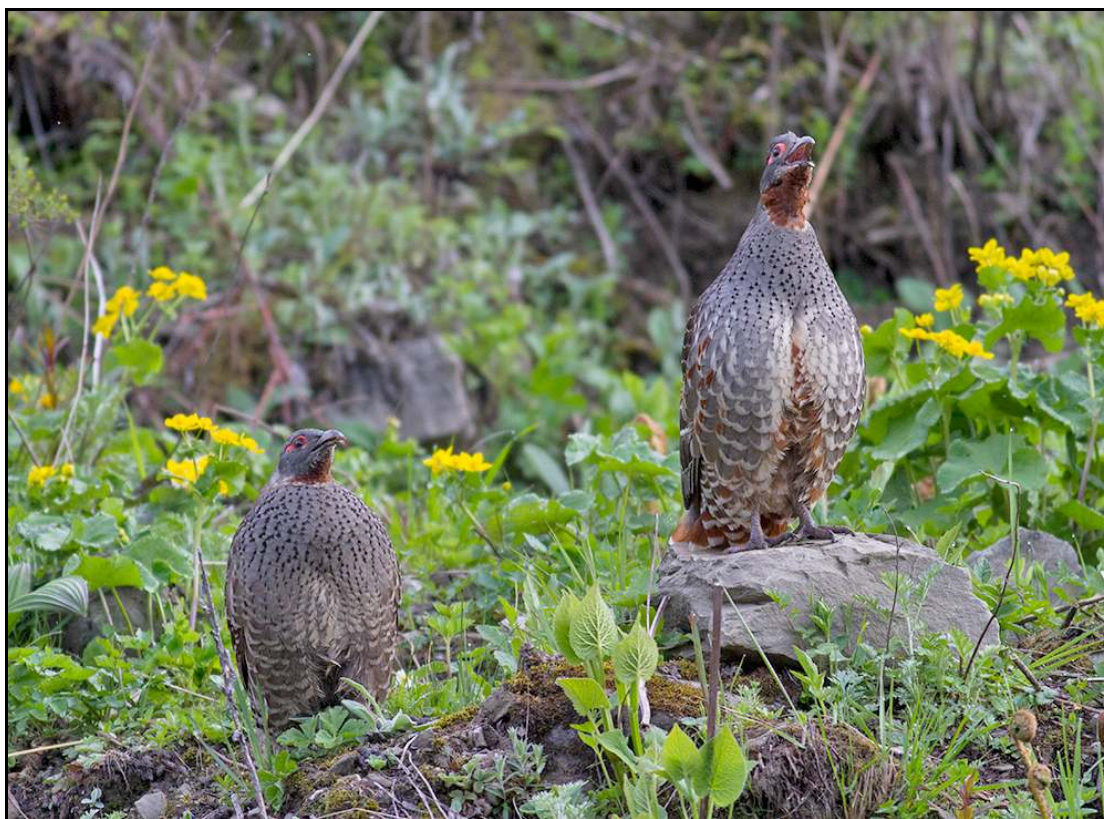
Indeed, the morning was pretty slow for a while, save for a view of a male **Blood Pheasant** passing through a grassy strip between the spruces and *rhododendrons*. Although, Frank saved the morning, by finding some parties of **White Eared-Pheasants** “grazing” the distant slopes. Another notable addition before the morning ended was our first **Giant Laughingthrush** of the tour, the true giant among the group, and the largest of them at some Late in the morning, with the lack of birding activity a distinct and open frustration we ventured high to the pass, where the usual “prayer trash” was evident, with many prayer flags which had seen better days, hanging from a small temple at the highest point. This did allow us to add **Rosy Pipit** to the list at last, and then a little lower down; we found one of our key target birds, **Chinese Fulvetta**, hanging out in a patch of alpine scrub. It felt that this may have marked a change in our fortunes, and so, while Frank prepared some more hot food for the field, we sauntered slowly down the road, from the place where Ken had seen that jay so many hours earlier. As Sam walked ahead of the group he picked up a large bird foraging in a dead tree, although the trunk of the tree hid its identity, until, suddenly, out popped a **Sichuan Jay**! This time though, the bird was more cooperative than earlier with a troop of them remaining in the area long enough for everyone to lap up every feature, including the striking ochre-colored bill that is not illustrated in the standard field guide for the region! We tucked into our noodles re-significantly energized after this.

After lunch we added few new birds, although managed to track down a singing **Chinese (Song) Thrush** for those who had missed them earlier in Jiuzhaigou, and even took time out to photograph the many pretty blooms within the hillside *Rhododendrons*, (photo above). Other notable birds during the day included **Chinese White-browed**

Rosefinch (typically particularly common and conspicuous at Mengbishan), **Chinese Beautiful**, **Common and Three-banded Rosefinches**, our first **Rufous-breasted Accentors** and **White-winged Grosbeaks**, and some further **Himalayan Bluetails** singing from the treetops.

June 6th Mengbishan near Maerkang, to Rilong (SICHUAN)

Like the day before on the mountain, the birding proved to be quite slow in general, save for a couple of early **Collared Grosbeaks**. The last of these a striking male, came in close and landed in the nearest tree to us. The other major addition of the morning was a **Przevalski's Nuthatch** that flitted from spruce to spruce and allowed us some fantastic views of this recently split endemic species, (endemic to W China, split from *White-cheeked Nuthatch*). We also enjoyed further views of both **Maroon-backed Accentors** and **Rufous-breasted Accentors**, before, post-lunch with a **Moupin Pika** (a small mammal), for company. In the afternoon, we had a rather unfruitful search for *Wallcreeper* in the gorges near Rilong, checking an area where they bred last year with no success, apart from adding **Hill Pigeon** to the list for many. We vowed to continue our search for the wallcreeper when we reached Qinghai, on the final leg of the trip.



June 7th Balangshan, Wolong (SICHUAN)

There are many, and often strange, challenges, in operating a China tour, mostly brought on by illogical and irrational government decisions regarding tourist development, and the management of their natural areas. Balang Shan provides on such a challenge, as it has done in recent years. The regulations stipulate that no vehicle over 8-seats capacity is permitted on the mountain, which provides something of a problem for visiting bird tour groups, who handle it in one of two ways: split into two smaller, less comfortable vehicles, or try to sneak in under cover of darkness. The latter was our chosen option, which we did at the ungodly hour of 04:00am. As it turned out though

we needed to leave at this time, to ensure we had a realistic shot at tracking down *Wood Snipe* while displaying for their short periods of display in the half light of dawn. I had the GPS co-ordinates from last year's tour for the snipe, and so felt confident we would arrive, and be in place for the snipe in good time. However, on arriving there, their distinctive rasping display sounds could not be heard on arrival, in spite of our near-perfect timing. After a while, with nothing further heard, we moved on down the road and heard them a little lower than they were located the previous year, although by that time we only heard their final display run of the morning, before we had got to see them, and therefore had to accept another ungodly early start for another attempt at this bird.



Moving even lower down, we parked up at the side of the road, at the traditional site of one of China's most impressive pheasants, the Chinese Monal. This site has been reliable over the years, although the monal is notoriously temperamental, with some years proving them to be easy, and others offering only meager chances at finding them. Thankfully, this year, and this morning, proved to be a great one for the bird, with up to a dozen different **Chinese Monals** seen! This included some very close males, with their richly iridescent feathers catching the light just right on many occasions, revealing a myriad of colors ranging from indigo to electric blue to gold and bronze. We

got to observe them at close range for some time, while our closest groups of **White Eared-Pheasants** also attracted our attentions. Indeed, this area is famed for its extraordinary diversity of pheasants, and quality pheasant-viewing opportunities, which were displayed to maximum effect on this day. While the harsh and raucous dawn calls of the local **Koklass Pheasants** were the only trace of them we were to have on this day, we also heard the loud duets of a pair of **Verreaux's Monal-Partridges** (also known as *Chestnut-throated Partridge*, [photo page 17](#)) emanating from the roadside. Having had some frustrating run ins with this species earlier at Mengbishan, we were keen to track them down, after the disappointments there, and so moved towards the close calls of the birds. As we got well within viewing range Tim alerted us to one of the partridges pacing deliberately upslope towards the verge, and with a little playback we got to see them duetting in the open, with a yellow flower-sprinkled alpine meadow for a scenic backdrop; quite the moment on the tour, even with the tough competition of this day alone. Not long after we switched our attentions to songbirds with the addition of a deep blue and orange male Blue-fronted Redstart standing sentry at the roadside.

We then moved higher on the mountain, well within view of the crisp white snowcaps on the surrounding slopes, on the lookout for even higher elevation species. On the way up the road we noted a solitary **Brandt's (Black-headed) Mountain-Finch** ([photo above](#)), feeding in a small yard by a road mender's hut, and picked up plenty of **Plain Mountain -Finches** too (the decidedly commoner of the two mountain-finches), as well as observing both species of choughs in (**Red-billed and Yellow-billed/Alpine Chough**) whirling flocks by the roadside. In this

same area some calling Snow Partridges had us frantically scanning the scree-covered slopes for the culprit, although only John got the most cursory glances of one during that time. With this method failing, Sam tried another option: he would climb up the slope and try to wrangle the covey into view to the group gathered below, and armed with scopes. This worked, eventually, after some initial frustrations where Sam could see five birds in plain sight, but no one down below could. However, in the end the group saw six birds, and we then moved on even higher, once Sam had recovered from his substantial high-altitude exercise! Once we reached the heady heights of the pass itself, at nearly 4600m/15,000ft, we were on the lookout for the hardest species of them all, including Red-fronted Rosefinch and Grandala. The former was strangely inconspicuous and would have to wait for another day, although Maggie did put us onto our first splendid male **Grandala**, perching on a power line to ensure we could all see him of course! This is one of the classic high altitude “Himalayan” species. Up at the pass itself we also tracked down some small groups of **Snow Pigeons**, which always appear so clean, and smartly dressed compared with the other members of this group, and took in our first **Alpine Accentors** of the tour, bringing our tally from this family to three, with still two further species very possible on the latter Qinghai leg of the tour. Moving on down over the far side of the pass we had one specific songbird in mind, the spectacular **Himalayan (White-tailed) Rubythroat**, which would have completed a nice brace with the Siberian Rubythroat encountered earlier on the tour near Jiuzhaigou. Finding the spot was too tough, although finding the bird which was calling took a little more effort, although after hiking off the road, and scanning the low scrub we picked him up, singing from a low stunted bush. After our exertions for the rubythroat we were a little late for Frank’s lunch, with the hot noodles a little overcooked, much to his frustration, although all who climbed for the rubythroat agreed it had been worthwhile! A strange sighting in the same high altitude area was a lost looking **White-breasted Waterhen** walking among the bright yellow poppies and boulder-strewn slopes!



In the late after we finally checked into our rather basic hotel (the best hotel in town after the devastating 2008 earthquake which rendered the high-end hotel in town unsafe and obsolete), checked in with the police (a new requirement for all visiting tourists), and visited a local monastery. The visit to the monastery, which is busy being

restored to its former glory following the same 2008 earthquake, was not however for the cultural aficionados in the group bus was bird-based decision. For the last couple of years Golden Pheasants had been spotted foraging on the surrounding slopes in the late afternoon, and we hoped that we could confirm the continuation of this tradition. Actually, having bumped into Frank Lambert and his tour group earlier we knew they were still being seen there, and that this represented the best chance for this extravagant pheasant on the tour. We scanned continually, and then, at around 6:30pm the bright golden-yellow “helmet” of a male **Golden Pheasant** was picked up behind a low bush upslope. We waited impatiently, and finally, this super male then walked out onto the open slope for all to see, with a female later also being seen in the same area by Maggie at least too. This was a fitting end to a truly marvelous day of birding that only Balang Shan can provide, one of the world’s top birding spots for sure.

June 8th - 9th Balang Shan & Wu Yi Peng, Wolong (SICHUAN)



The following two days probably provided some of the most frustrating birding days of the tour, hampered by a combination of low activity and poor weather (which probably caused the drop in activity). On the first day we returned to **Balang Shan** to try and track down some of the missing regulars, such as *Red-fronted Rosefinch*, *Tibetan Snowcock*, and *Black-browed Tit*. However, in spite of some serious effort to find all, we could only track down **Red-fronted Rosefinch**, with a final brick-throated male seen near the pass. The weather plagued us, with our fruitless snowcock searches having to be restricted to the brief clear spells between the bouts of low cloud, rain and mist. The visibility also thwarted our second attempt at the *Wood Snipe*, where our timing and positioning were perfect, were it not for the blanket of low cloud preventing us from actually seeing any of the calling snipes. Some compensation for our long efforts in the field on the mountain in sub-par conditions were provided with a female **Golden Bush-Robin**, some further male **Grandalas** (always a highlight, come rain or shine),

and a new mammal for the tour, spotted by keen-eyed Lisa, a **Chinese Goral** munching on vegetation by the roadside near Beimuping.

On the other day we took a hike up to the site of the former Giant Panda research station at **Wu Yi Peng**, near the village of Wolong, a station that at one time (*in the 1980s*) had been used by the famed American mammalogist George Schaller. This had been inserted into the original itinerary as a back up site for Firethroat, Barred Laughingthrush, Great Parrotbill, and Temminck’s Tragopan, among others, all of which we had seen at sites earlier on the tour. However, we still opted to hike up there, for the final chance at some last minute lifers around Wolong. The God’s were, sadly though, against us on this day, with the trail work done recently to the main trail, combining with the miserable rainy weather to make for a difficult day up there. We did manage to track down a male **Firethroat** again, and also got great looks at a **Great Parrotbill** again (*photo above*), but could not find the hoped-for *Three-toed Parrotbill*. Ken and I also managed extreme close-ups of a male **Temminck’s Tragopan** perched in a

trailside tree, and a few of us added a female **White-browed Bush-Robin** to the trip list, while we all enjoyed further looks at **Crimson-breasted Woodpecker**, **Hodgson's (Eurasian) Treecreeper**, and **Stripe-throated Yuhina** up there. Arguably though, the most significant sighting of the day though came back at the bottom of the trail at the day's end, when, finally, a **Chinese Babax** decided to respond to my overtures, a pair of which came into the surrounding trees. This had fast become the bogey bird of the tour, and Sam had begun to fear the worst, a babax-less tour!



June 10th Balang Shan, Wolong (SICHUAN)

The final birding day of our Sichuan leg of the tour was again to be among the high mountain scenery, flower-sprinkled meadows, and pheasant-loaded terrain of **Balang Shan**. And we were in for a treat. It had snowed overnight, but the day dawned clear and bright; just the conditions needed for a third, and final, punt at the Wood Snipe. By dawn we all had low looks at one of three calling **Wood Snipe** as it whooshed low past us, making a distinct whirring sound as it passed us. This was good opener, and was followed quickly after with a male Koklass **Pheasant** that sailed over the road, and low over people's heads. The final addition of the morning was the rare and difficult **Sharpe's Rosefinch** that also showed up, post-Koklass. However, perhaps the biggest feature of the day was one of the most spectacular areas for birding on Earth draped in snow in early spring, so the yellow poppies were cloaked in snow, and as the morning wore on made for wonderful photos of the contrast between the bright blooms of spring and the cool vestiges of winter provided by the melting ice and snow. We also enjoyed much better looks at a lower foraging group of **Snow Partridge**, more male **Grandalas** brought strong color to the snow-dusted slopes, and our first **Golden Eagle** was noted gliding above the dramatic snowscapes. We also observed some large groups of **Brandt's (Black-headed) Mountain-Finches**, probably displaced from higher up by the recent snows, one of which was feeding on front of a roadside hut. Although the quick way to Chengdu was now open to us, the road condition was still appalling and the number of vehicles on the road brought many delays, and led us to abandon our plans to bird *Qingchenshan* as we'd hoped due to the many time constraints imposed by this. And so we ended our time in Sichuan, with a final, fine selection of delicious Sichuan food, and celebrated Dixie's upcoming birthday with a custom-made cake, organized by ever-attentive Frank, fashioned into the image of a Giant Panda!

June 11th Chengdu (SICHUAN) to Xining, Qinghai Lake & the Rubber Mountains (QINGHAI)

Our Sichuan birding was done, and now it was time to move onto Qinghai, and its very different Tibetan Plateau experience. We flew out of Sichuan's capital (Chengdu, population 14 million), and into Qinghai's capital, Xining, a small city by comparison with just 2.2 million people, but a long a history dating back thousands of years, when it used to be a major commercial hub on the Northern Silk Road connecting China with Tibet and the west. Indeed, the relative sizes of the capitals also reflect one major difference between these two beautiful provinces: Qinghai (area 278,000 sq. mi/721,00km²; population 5.6 million) is vastly under populated relative to Sichuan, (area 187,000 sq. mi/485,000km²; population 80.4 million). We barely saw Xining though, as we met with our new, and rather grand, bus (over 30 seats shared between 10 of us!), and our new, Hui, driver, and were soon on another massive Chinese expressway heading in the direction of Qinghai Lake. Culturally, Qinghai is quite different from Sichuan, with greater influences of *Hui* (a Muslim ethnic group), and Tibetan peoples.



In stark contrast to Sichuan the roads were in pristine condition too, and it took little time for us to near the lake, which we birded for a short time before lunch, picking up a substantial batch of birds in a very short time: **Hume's Larks** were found feeding along the sandy lake shoreline, numerous grebes were diving offshore (**Great Crested and Eared Grebes**), with the odd **Red-crested Pochard** and **Tufted Duck** noted in the open waters too, while **Pale Sand Martins** glided overhead. Along the sandy edges we also found the pallid forms of several **Kentish Plovers** (recently split from the New World *Snowy Plover*), and parties of grazing **Bar-headed Geese** were a big highlight in the surrounding, Yak-fertilized, grasses. After enjoying a substantial jump in our list, we retired to a local restaurant for a late lunch, which was rather fortuitous in hindsight, as a large horse event on the plateau brought vast numbers of people to this area, which would have made an earlier lunch near impossible at the time.

Quickly, the group's fears that with a change in province from the world-famous cuisine of Sichuan to Qinghai that our food standards would drop were allayed, as we were served within a local Halal, Hui, restaurant some tasty dishes of roasted lamb seasoned in cumin, and tender cuts of Yak, washed down with buckwheat tea.

After lunch, we headed for the hills, or the mountains to be precise, the **Rubber Mountains** near the town of Heimahe. This was to be a very special stop indeed, as we were to go after one of the prize birds of Qinghai, and indeed of the whole tour, the enigmatic Pink-tailed Bunting, also known as Przevalski's Rosefinch. This odd songbird has recently been placed within its own monotypic family, simply known as Przevalski's Rosefinch due to a unique morphological feature not shared with either buntings or finches: its tenth, or outer primary is not vestigial, but two thirds of the length of the neighboring one. It also possesses a long graduated tail, unlike the other species in those other families of which it was at various times thought to be part of. This elevation to family



level has created quite an interest in the bird, with the growing number of people in the world birding community who are chasing all the bird families on Earth. On top of that it is also a mighty fine looking bird that deserves attention for that reason alone. Although we had time to search for this rose-colored songbird on other days, knowing the gravity of the species for many in the group (Tim's wife, before he departed for the tour, had proclaimed "Don't come home without it!", so obsessed was he with finding it!), I decided to try for it right off the bat, on our first day in Qinghai. We made our way to some low hills, where a layer of dwarf-like shrubs and cactus-like plants covered the hillsides, and walked into the vegetation. Things were relatively uneventful for a while, although we did kickstart our snowfinch list for this leg, with a heady six species on offer, we managed to track down the

commonest (and arguably the most handsome), **Rufous-necked Snowfinch**, (*photo above*), as well as our first **Black-winged (Adam's) Snowfinch**. On entering the dwarf scrub Sam thought he heard the shortest of burst of song from our quarry, but had little time to contemplate this before someone signaled to a vision in pink on top of a neighboring shrub: a fine male **Przevalski's Rosefinch or Pink-tailed Bunting** (*photo, previous page*)! We watched a pair of these odd songbirds on the hillside as they seemed to be nest building in the area, when, at various times, the male would emerge onto the apex of a bush to make sure we had really taken him in. Tim, like the rest of us, breathed a huge sigh of relief, (he could go home to his wife, and we could move on with the rest of the trip). The same hillside also yielded several **Brown Accentors** and an orange-breasted **Robin Accentor** too. Some further brief stops brought one of the only **Salim Ali's Swifts** of the trip (a recent split from *Pacific Swift*), a single **Ferruginous Duck**, and multiple **Hume's Groundpeckers**, now known as **Ground Tits** due to their recently found, and unlikely, affinities with the *tits and chickadees*.



June 12th Rubber Mountains to Chaka (QINGHAI)

With the Pink-tailed Bunting “in the bag”, we had time free to head to Chaka in the morning as hoped, although left a little later than planned after all the rigors of recent travel days and long birding days. On this day we passed through the open plains and pools of the plateau near our hotel and rose through a series of rocky outcrops and shallow scrub-laden valleys to emerge at the top of the 3900m/15,000ft-high **Rubber Mountains Pass**. Although our main goal of the morning was to reach the low flats of Chaka, and try for its star resident, the Mongolian Ground-Jay, we could not resist a couple of stops along the way. Not far from our hotel, after having tipped the group off, about searching for roadside Little Owls, we found one of these diminutive predators nesting in a road sign along the highway. Next up from there we enjoyed several **Tibetan (Henri’s) Snowfinches** singing around the pass itself. As we dropped down from the pass Ken drew our attention to a **Tibetan Fox**, which had recently caught a **Plateau Pika**, and was observed stashing its prey for later at length, before marking the spot. Its recent success was obvious with the pikas in this colony looking alert, and calling agitatedly often at the continuing presence of the fox. A symbiotic relationship exists between the pikas and the **White-rumped Snowfinch** (our third snowfinch of the trip), where the finches use their burrows to nest within.

After dropping down from the chilly mountains, and rocky landscapes around the pass, we emerged onto the open steps of Chaka Flats, a semi-arid, desert like environment. Although, even at this early stage the day was warming considerably, with heat haze evident on the horizons, we set out in pursuit of our main target, the striking *Mongolian (or Henderson’s) Ground-Jay*. The flats were generally quite with little activity at all at first, although after some time a large lark flew up and began displaying overhead, revealing the trademark white wing panels of the **Mongolian Lark**. Returning to an area we had already searched, and the area, where another Tropical Birder, Keith Barnes, had very recently seen the bird on a concurrent custom tour, Sam quickly picked up a distant jay banking over the low horizon; game on! We all readied ourselves for an extended hike across the plains, although that turned out not to be necessary, for, as we crossed the first field one of the **Mongolian Ground-Jays** helpfully hopped up onto a fencepost in front of us. After a time we picked up more individuals and counted five in the

group, which were watched foraging on the ground for some time, using their long, powerful, downcurved bills to probe within the hard, dry soils in the area. Although we had further targets on the flats, we managed only brief views of **Blanford's Snowfinch** before we decided to move on for lunch, and give the flats another try, on another day.

After, another, exceptional, lunch we checked into our recently refurbished hotel (complete with internet, glass-walled showers, and exquisitely clean rooms, and had a short break before heading west out of Chaka. We had decided to try a new birding spot for this tour, for the chance of the rare *Ala Shan Redstart* and a number of other species that would be new for us. As it turned out the redstart bid was a failure, although the site proved productive for much more besides...After getting out of the vehicle and preparing for a significant hike into a shallow valley, virtually the first bird we saw was a spring male **Pine Bunting**. Moving deeper into the valley, and away from the tied up Tibetan dogs, which were in the area to protect the sheep herds, we found our first partridge



of the day with some "crested" **Przevalski's (Rusty-necklaced) Partridges** working their way along the ridgetop, involving half a dozen or so birds. Not long after we walked our way through the dry grass in the valley bottom and disturbed a **Tibetan Partridge**, which yelped and ran up onto some open rocks on the opposite hillside to vent its anger, which put it right in view of all of us! We also had our first looks at a number of Woolly Hares in the area. Working our way into a rocky gorge, we found a handful of **Brown Accentors**, (*photo left, taken at Beishan, later on trip*), Lisa and Dixie lucked into a male **Streaked Rosefinch**, while the rest of us had to be content with more **Chinese Beautiful Rosefinches**,

Godlewski's Bunting, and our first flyover **Eurasian Hobby** of the tour. There were no *Ala Shan Redstarts* found within these juniper-cloaked gullies as hoped, although our time there was far from wasted, with a gorgeous male **Wallcreeper** putting on a great late afternoon performance, making it a good contender for the Top Five Birds of the Trip list to come on the final day. A **Himalayan Snowcock** put in a short appearance, but only allowed a handful of the group to see it before it dropped over the far side of the ridge. On the way back down the valley, at the valley base we, yet again, inadvertently disturbed another group of partridges, and our third new species from this group for the day and tour: **Daurian Partridge**.

June 13th West of Chaka & Chaka Flats to Niao Dao (QINGHAI)

With not everyone getting looks at the snowcock of the day previous, and all of us still chasing the *Ala Shan Redstart*, we chose to return again to the same valley of the afternoon before. Although the birding was good, much the same species were seen, and try as we might we could not find either the *redstart* or the *snowcock*. However, we did once again see three species of partridge: **Daurian, Przevalski's, and Tibetan Partridges**; had further looks at the local **Wallcreeper** bounding over in flight; saw the pair of **Eurasian Hobby** this time; watched a

Golden Eagle cruising within the blue skies overhead; scoped a distant pair of **White-winged Grosbeaks**; and added **Rock Petronia** to the list at the valley bottom on our way out. Our final foray of the day, after another smashing lunch that had dealt us such a good dinner the evening before, was Chaka Flats again, in pursuit of *Pallas's Sandgrouse* in particular. Our attempts to find a sandgrouse went unfulfilled, although we did find an area of small pools which attracted good numbers of birds, like an oasis in the desert, where both **Blanford's and Pere David's (Small) Snowfinch** completed the list of *six snowfinches* possible on the tour. We also had some distant looks at more **ground-jays**, and Sam, unfortunately, was the only one to see a brief **Mid-day Gerbil** on the flats.

June 14th Chaka Flats, Rubber Mountains & Qinghai Lake to Xining (QINGHAI)

For the penultimate day of the tour, and the last official birding day, we decided to split our time between different habitats. A pre-dawn start saw us winging our way west again to **Chaka Flats** in a last, final, desperate, try for the sandgrouse; after which we traveled back east, stopping in the rocky mountainscapes around the **Rubber Mountains Pass**; before, finally we took another final look along the shores of **Qinghai Lake** (aka Koko Nor), before returning to Xining, where the final night of the tour was spent. Having breakfast in the field around the set of same small pools of the afternoon before we again saw a bearded **Pere David's (Small) Snowfinch**, and got surprised by a drop in **Citrine Wagtail**, seeming quite out of place in this desert-like environment. The same area also yielded yet more **Mongolian (Henderson's) Ground-Jays**, defying their reputation as sometimes-tricky birds. We also all managed to get looks at several drop in **Lesser Short-toed Larks** which came in to drink, before we pushed off to another area on the hunt for the sandgrouse, which we had secretly hoped might also use this well-fed pool to come in to drink...

Our earlier start on the flats than our previous visit revealed a much easier time with **Blanford's Snowfinch**, which was much more in evidence on this visit. After flushing a **Lesser Sandplover**, another call reached our ears, and led us to the first, of up to twenty, different **Pallas's Sandgrouse** that passed low over us over the next hour or so. The flats were pretty quiet besides the regular displaying **Isabelline Wheatears**, but Maggie's persistence provided us with extreme close-ups of a **Mongolian Finch** in the area.

Our next stop was to be in an area of rocky outcrops below the **Rubber Mountains Pass**, where I had encountered several pairs of **Güldenstädt's (White-winged) Redstart**. However, Tim cut this idea short, when he glimpsed a redstart by the roadside before there that made us swing the bus around sharpish, which proved him right, and not only that, his observation led us to be able to observe a pair of these chunky redstarts attending to their nest on several occasions. The nest was located right next to a large construction site (of which there are many in China), although this seemed



to have little effect on the redstarts, who went about their business with little show of concern for this. The same area brought us **White-rumped and Tibetan (White-winged or Henri's) Snowfinches** for the day, and it quickly became apparent we were on quite the day for snowfinches, with FIVE species seen before the end of the morning! Our final Rubber Mountains stop provided the final snowfinch on the list of possibles, with a super-confiding **Rufous-necked Snowfinch** to give us a *SIX-SNOWFINCH DAY*! The same area held some final Robin and Brown Accentors for us, before we had to point eastwards and head back towards Xining.

After yet more incredible food, with the spiced, roasted lamb and potatoes being devoured in record time by all, we made one final stop on the edge of **Qinghai Lake**, the largest lake in China (at the size of Rhode Island). Even at this late stage new birds were found with *four new trip birds* added. Flotillas of **Red-crested Pochards**, **Common Pochards** and **Tufted Ducks** were found in rafts offshore; a pair of **Ferruginous Ducks** dabbled closer inshore; several **White-winged (Black) Terns** hawked the lake, and even perched on a spit for longer views; **Whiskered Terns** also joined the mix of terns which were dominated by **Common Terns**; the odd **Pallas's and Brown-headed Gull** were found perched on the edges, with a sole **Black-headed Gull** noted too; **Hume's Larks** were also seen in small clusters along the shore; and a final pair of **Black-necked Cranes** were watched wading in a litter-strewn bay (*photo, previous page*). The three-hour drive back to Xining from there was fairly uneventful aside from a few perched **Upland Buzzards** utilizing the many power poles in the plateau to their advantage.

The lengthy return journey to Xining allowed us time to reflect on the trip, and review the best birds of the trip; the group had been advised earlier to sort through their bird list and pick out their favorite five birds of the trip, in ranked order. And so the debate begun...see below.



June 15th DEPARTURE from XINING/Beishan (QINGHAI)

A few of us (Ken, John, and I), had later flights out which freed up some time to explore a nearby hillside, **Beishan**, a known birding site on the outskirts of the city of Xining. This was an unqualified success, as, even with limited birding time, the small list of specialties was easily found, and our trip list jumped by four birds in just a few hours. First to fall was the one we expected to be the toughest, **Pale (Sinai) Rosefinch**, (*photo, page before*), with Ken and John observing a male feeding along the path, which was then located on a rocky slope further along. While watching this bird we added another two birds, with the first of many **Meadow Buntings** seen (*photo below*), and a couple of **Pied Wheatears** seen hopping along a ridgetop. On the top of the mountain we found a family party of **Pale Rosefinches** feeding in a paddock, which was shared with a family of **Black Redstarts** too. The walls of some old mud buildings played host to yet more **Pied Wheatears** and **Meadow Buntings**, while a small garden held a male **Great Spotted Woodpecker**. The raucous calls of **Pere David's Laughingthrush** were heard and a little playback brought a pair of these birds careening on to an overhead power line (another pair was seen on our way down the mountain). The mountain also proved a great place to view **Ring-necked (Common) Pheasants** which we vocal and common on the mountain. Other notable birds seen up there, with a view of Xining sprawling below, was a small flock of **Common Swifts** (*another new bird*), lots of **Brown Accentors**, and plenty of calling **Common Cuckoos**. All too soon lunchtime loomed, and we descended back into the city, in readiness for our long flights home.

For future tours, we will encourage all tour participants to leave on later flights, and open up the opportunity to visit this fascinating site to them.



TOP FIVE BIRDS OF THE TOUR:**1 WALLCREEPER**- Chaka (Qinghai), 13th June

The first thing to note here is that, for the first time in the history of this tour, a pheasant did not win! However, some background might help. We had spent some hours checking the breeding site of last year's bird at Rilong and failed, and also checking a nearby gorge, known for this bird too, and failed. Failure in finding birds drives birders to new highs; I speak from experience! And so it was with that history that we moved on to Qinghai, wallcreeper-less. A tip-off from Keith Barnes led us to a valley west of Chaka for various birds, with this one right at the top of the shopping list, for I had seen for myself the disappointment of not getting this one for the group in Sichuan, and this was merely among the people who had already seen on before; such is the power of this bird. Then when we walked into a rocky gully near Chaka, Sam spotted something creeping, in the manner that only one species ever creeps, up a vertical slab of rock. He alerted the group, only for said creeper to disappear in an instant, giving a brief flyby as completely inadequate compensation. A few hours passed and we began to descend from the gully in frustration, when finally this cosmic bird flew in, landed on a rock at eye level, and then proceeded to make up for all its previous "misdemeanors" by showing perfectly. Right then, I knew I was watching the BIRD-of-the-TOUR.

2 TEMMINCK'S TRAGOPAN- Longcanggou (Sichuan), 28th May

The amazing thing is that this species has never WON this vote, and last year, even more incredibly it did not make the top five at all! Sanity, however, was restored again this year, with a respectable second place. With the closures of Wawu Shan (from 2012), the research station at Wu Yi Peng in Wolong (making only daytrips currently possible there), and more recently Labahe (from spring 2013), this species continues to challenge leaders to find it, with fewer and fewer sites open to them with the massive drive for tourist development (among many other development projects) in China. We had three sites to hope for this stunning, scarlet, horned pheasant this year: Erlangshan, Longcanggou, and Wu Yi Peng (albeit by daytrip). Erlangshan, a new site for the tour this year, came up blank, and so we moved on to Longcanggou, where other visiting bird groups had mixed successes with this species prior to our arrival: one had completely missed it altogether, another had seen then on several occasions, but only females and chicks, while visiting ornithologist, Per Alstrom (of leaf-warbler fame), had recorded several males in a single morning. And so it was hard to read a lot into that apart from to say we had a shot. We found out a recent spot for them, which later turned out to be the only spot I had ever seen them there before (last year). We made an early morning run up there on our first morning, and Sam was amazed to find a male tragopan staring at him immediately as he got out of the tour bus! The bird quickly slinked back to the forest before all had laid eyes on it, although a short period of playback brought the bird out immediately on to an open slope, where it stood for five solid minutes, with not a branch to obscure it, and plenty of time to soak up every delectable feature. Guides LOVE these moments of avian joy.

3 CHINESE MONAL- Balang Shan (Sichuan), 7th June

You never know quite card this glorious pheasant is going to deal you in Sichuan; some years a piece of cake, others virtually non-existent. Our first visit to "Monal Knoll" this year at Balang Shan was the former, monals were literally everywhere, calling all around with birds flying and feeding on each side of the road and giving incredible views. Up to a dozen different birds were thought to be involved, with a pair close to the road being a personal favorite remaining in the area well past dawn, so that the light could really reveal their full dramatic colors, brought on by their extraordinary iridescence. The sounds, the surrounding scenery, and of course the bird itself, made it an obvious standout moment. Curiously, a few days later we returned to the same spot and did not see a single monal.

4 RUFIOUS-HEADED ROBIN - Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan), 3rd June

I would have been personally offended if this one had not made it in there! It is not often that everyone in the group can claim views of this bird, and good, close, quality views at that. Such is the skulking nature of this handsome and rare robin, which is still poorly known, with little knowledge of its wintering range, and just one site-this park-known to contain just a handful of breeding birds. We recorded four singing males within a wooded valley within the park, although it took some serious work to track the bird down for the entire group, hours invested on both days within the park to finding it, which, thankfully, paid off.

5 VERREAUX'S MONAL-PARTRIDGE - Balang Shan (Sichuan), 7th June

That two birds on this list came from that one day on Balang Shan highlights what a fantastic day we had there, recording up to 28 individual "pheasants" on the mountain that day. These birds reacted dramatically to playback, a pair moving to an open slope and calling in duet back to us, with a flower-sprinkled meadow making for a great backdrop. This bird had never before made the top five, although this bird had never before performed with such "panache".

And here is the list of the other "nominees", which did not make the top five: Lady Amherst's Pheasant, Blue Eared-Pheasant, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Lammergeier, Darjeeling Woodpecker, Grandala, Firethroat, Little Forktail, Przevalski's Nuthatch, Crested Tit-Warbler, Golden Parrotbill, White-throated Dipper, Mrs. Gould's Sunbird, Scaly-breasted Cupwing, Three-banded Rosefinch, Pink-tailed Bunting, Rufous-necked Snowfinch, Golden-breasted Fulvetta, and Maroon-backed Accentor. And, a selection of notable birds that were not even nominated: White Eared-Pheasant, Golden Pheasant, Black-necked Crane, Mongolian Ground-Jay, White-browed Tit-Warbler, Siberian and Himalayan Rubythroats, Giant Laughingthrush, Indian Blue Robin, Chinese Blue Flycatcher, White-winged Redstart, Vinaceous and Chinese White-browed Rosefinches.



This feisty Sooty Tit was seen in Jiuzhaigou

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 September 2012.

*Chinese endemics, Chinese breeding endemics, or proposed endemics to China are marked **endemic** (some, while not currently split within Clements currently are likely to be split in the future and are therefore often listed as endemics by others); heard only birds are marked **heard only**; birds only seen by the guide are marked **guide only**.*

DUCKS, GEESE & WATERFOWL: ANATIDAE

Greylag Goose *Anser anser*

Recorded several times on the Tibetan Plateau in Qinghai.

Bar-headed Goose *Anser indicus*

Commonly encountered on the Tibetan Plateau in Qinghai.

Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*

This handsome duck was commonly encountered in small groups during both areas of the Tibetan plateau visited (Sichuan and Qinghai).

Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*

Small numbers were seen around Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan) and up on the Tibetan Plateau.

Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*

Good numbers of these ducks were seen on a freshwater lake alongside Qinghai Lake.

Common Pochard *Aythya ferina*

Large rafts were noted near Qinghai Lake.

Ferruginous Duck *Aythya nyroca*

Two sightings: a single was seen on Qinghai Lake, and another pair was seen alongside there on another day.

Also known as *Ferruginous Pochard*.

Tufted Duck *Aythya fuligula*

Large rafts were seen in and around Qinghai Lake.

Common Merganser *Mergus merganser*

Just one was seen on the Tibetan Plateau in Sichuan.

Also known as *Goosander*.

PHEASANTS, GROUSE, AND ALLIES: PHASIANIDAE

Przevalski's Partridge *Alectoris magna* **endemic**

Two visits to a valley west of Chaka both raked in coveys of this species, which were both vocal and conspicuous during our time there. Up to six were seen in a visit.

Also known as *Rusty-necklaced Partridge*.

Snow Partridge *Lerwa lerwa*

Seen twice on Balang Shan (Sichuan), with first a distant group of six birds (which required some high-mountain "wrangling" from Sam for the entire group to see them), and later a much closer single bird on our final morning.

Verreaux's Partridge *Tetraophasis obscurus* **endemic**

An extremely tame pair were seen at Balang Shan, which posed for photos as they duetted in the open.

Also known as *Verreaux's Monal-Partridge* or *Chestnut-throated Partridge*.

Tibetan Snowcock *Tetraogallus tibetanus* **heard only**

The most frustrating experience of the tour for sure, not being able to track down one of these high altitude birds, despite many hours of searching, in a wide range of viewing conditions, on Balang Shan (Sichuan).

Himalayan Snowcock *Tetraogallus himalayensis*

One was seen, though unfortunately by a few of the group only, in a dry valley west of Chaka (Qinghai).

Daurian Partridge *Perdix dauurica*

Small groups were flushed at close range, and seen by all, on both of our visits to a valley west of Chaka in Qinghai.

Tibetan Partridge *Perdix hodgsoniae*

A single bird was seen on our two visits to a valley west of Chaka (Qinghai); on the first occasion the bird perched up prominently and allowed scope views before it disappeared over a ridge top.

Blood Pheasant *Ithaginis cruentus*

Only recorded on the one day in Mengbisha (Sichuan), where two different sightings were made, with up to three birds seen in the final group.

Temminck's Tragopan *Tragopan temminckii*

Seen on each of our three full days at Longcanggou, with the best numbers and views on the first day, when ten different birds were seen, including two males. The other sightings included several females and a few groups of chicks, one of which lingered on the road for photos. ONE OF THE TOP FIVE BIRDS OF THE TOUR.

Commemorates Dutch ornithologist, Coenraad Jacob Temminck (1778-1858).

Koklass Pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha*

One male was seen flying low over the road, and the heads of the group, up on Balang Shan (Sichuan), during our final morning.

Chinese Monal *Lophophorus lhuysii* **endemic**

Our best year yet for the species, if only seen on one single morning at Balang Shan (Sichuan), where up to a dozen different birds were seen, for a prolonged period, at close range, after dawn; ONE OF THE TOP FIVE BIRDS OF THE TOUR.

White Eared-Pheasant *Crossoptilon crossoptilon*

One of the easier pheasants in Sichuan, with groups recorded on both Mengbisha and Balang Shan, with a maximum of 6 birds seen at both sites, and our best views coming during that heavenly, pheasant-filled morning on Balang Shan, which also included up to a dozen Chinese Monal, 2 Verreaux's Monal-Partridges, and 6 Snow Partridges.

Blue Eared-Pheasant *Crossoptilon auritum* **endemic**

This year we had our first ever sightings of this large pheasant inside the park at Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan), which, in the excitement to get better views, led the bus driver to back the bus into a wall! Thankfully, only pride and a bumper were damaged in the process. The following day at a nearby pass, Gong Gang Ling, we saw two different parties of three birds, which were enjoyed for a much longer period, with zero damage to our vehicle on this occasion!

Ring-necked Pheasant *Phasianus colchicus*

Good numbers of this familiar pheasant were seen en-route to Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan), and also inside the park there. On the departure day near Xining in Qinghai, John, Ken and I saw many more at Beishan, where they were fairly common.

Also known as *Common Pheasant*.

Golden Pheasant *Chrysolophus pictus* **endemic**

A pair was seen near Shawan in Wolong (Sichuan) one evening. Although the views were prolonged, the misty

weather hampered our prolonged views of the bird, and probably saw off its chances of entering the top five birds of the tour. A further two attempts to improve on this by re-visits to the same site came up blank on both occasions, once due to further bad weather obscuring the hillside from view, and on the other occasions the birds simply failed to appear.

Lady Amherst's Pheasant***Chrysolophus amherstiae***

Traditionally, the best site for the species, Wawu Shan remained closed this year, and to make matters worse, the back up site (which we visited successfully last year for this species), Labahe, was also closed for tourist development this year. This led us to visit a new site, Erlangshan, where we managed two males in two mornings on site, including one adult in full breeding plumage that slowly sauntered across the road. Surprisingly, not voted into the top five birds of the trip, as it usually is.

The name Lady Amherst refers to Sarah Countess Amherst, the wife of William Pitt Amherst, who as Governor General of Bengal, sent the first specimen of this species back to Britain in 1828.

GREBES: PODICIPEDIDAE**Little Grebe*****Tachybaptus ruficollis***

Only recorded on one day of the tour, on a large lake near Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan).

Great Crested Grebe***Podiceps cristatus***

Large numbers of these birds were seen in and around Qinghai Lake.

Eared Grebe***Podiceps nigricollis***

Smaller numbers (compared to Great Crested) were seen in and around Qinghai Lake.

Also known as *Black-necked Grebe*.

CORMORANTS AND SHAGS: PHALACROCORACIDAE**Great Cormorant*****Phalacrocorax carbo***

Large numbers were seen on the Qinghai leg of the trip.

HERONS, EGRETS AND BITTERNS: ARDEIDAE**Gray Heron*****Ardea cinerea***

A few were seen at Du Fu's Thatched Cottage in Chengdu (Sichuan).

Great Egret***Ardea alba***

Just recorded on a journey between Maerkang and Rilong (Sichuan).

Little Egret***Egretta garzetta***

Seen regularly around the sites in Chengdu (Sichuan).

Cattle Egret***Bubulcus ibis***

Scattered sightings in lowland areas throughout.

Chinese Pond-Heron***Ardeola bacchus***

Seen on just two of the days in Sichuan: one was seen inside the park at Jiuzhaigou, and 3-4 birds were seen in the town of waqie on the Tibetan Plateau.

Black-crowned Night-Heron***Nycticorax nycticorax***

A few were seen around Chengdu (Sichuan).

HAWKS, EAGLES, AND KITES: ACCIPITRIDAE**Oriental Honey-buzzard*****Pernis ptilorhynchus***

One was seen in Longcanggou, and another migrating overhead on the journey between Chengdu and Erlangshan.

Black Kite***Milvus migrans lineatus***

Fairly commonly recorded during our short drive through Sichuan's Tibetan Plateau, with just a single bird seen in Qinghai too.

The race involved here is *lineatus*, which some treat as a separate species, *Black-eared Kite*.

Lammergeier***Gypaetus barbatus***

3 were seen at Long Lake in the park at Jiuzhaigou, and another, single, was seen at Balang Shan. (Sichuan).

Himalayan Griffon***Gyps himalayensis***

Seen on nine days of the tour, always in the high mountains, at Gong Gang Ling, the Tibetan Plateau, Mengbishaan, and Balang Shan (Sichuan); and also in the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai.

Cinereous Vulture***Aegypius monachus***

One was seen during a journey in Qinghai.

Also known as *Monk Vulture* or *Black Vulture*.

Crested Goshawk***Accipiter soloensis***

One was seen at Longcanggou (Sichuan).

Eurasian Sparrowhawk***Accipiter nisus***

Recorded at Gong Gang Ling and Mengbishaan (Sichuan).

Northern Goshawk***Accipiter gentilis***

Seen four times on the tour; including at both Gong Gang Ling and Mengbishaan (Sichuan).

Common Buzzard***Buteo buteo burmanicus***

Seen only in Sichuan, at Longcanggou, Mengbishaan and Balang Shan.

This race is considered a separate species on the IOC checklist, named *Himalayan Buzzard*, *Buteo burmanicus*.

Upland Buzzard***Buteo hemilasius***

This large, dark buzzard was recorded in small numbers daily on the Qinghai leg of the trip.

Golden Eagle***Aquila chrysaetos***

One was seen at Balang Shan (Sichuan), and later in the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai.

FALCONS AND CARACARAS: FALCONIDAE**Eurasian Kestrel*****Falco tinnunculus***

Recorded a total of six times on the tour, in both Sichuan and Qinghai.

Eurasian Hobby***Falco subbuteo***

A pair was seen within a valley to the west of Chaka (Qinghai).

RAILS, GALLINULES, AND COOTS: RALLIDAE**White-breasted Waterhen*****Amaurornis phoenicurus***

An odd find was a bird walking around, in view of the snow, at nearly 3600m/12,000ft, up on Balang Shan in Sichuan.

Eurasian Moorhen***Gallinula chloropus***

Only recorded on the one day, when half a dozen birds were noted on a large lake near Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan).

Eurasian Coot***Fulica atra***

Many were found near Koko Nur in Qinghai.

CRANES: GRUIDAE**Black-necked Crane*****Grus nigricollis***

Around ten birds were seen on our day on the Tibetan plateau in Sichuan, including a pair with young, and another

pair were seen on our final full day in Qinghai, near the massive salt lake there.

PLOVERS AND LAPWINGS: CHARADRIIDAE

Lesser Sandplover *Charadrius mongolus*

Two single bird flyovers were seen at Chaka Flats in Qinghai.

Also sometimes referred to as *Mongolian Plover*.

Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*

One was seen by a large salt plant in Chaka (Qinghai), while another 4 birds were seen near Qinghai Lake.

This Old World "form" is now considered a separate species from the New World *Snowy Plover*, *Charadrius nivosus*.

STILTS AND AVOCETS: RECURVIROSTRIDAE

Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*

A single bird was seen on both of our birding sessions around Qinghai Lake.

SANDPIPERS AND ALLIES: SCOLOPACIDAE

Common Redshank *Tringa tetanus*

A handful of birds were seen on the Tibetan Plateau in Sichuan and Qinghai.

Wood Snipe *Gallinago nemoricola*

Bad weather, and bad luck, worked against us this year, and so it took three attempts to get it, (due to no cloud preventing us from seeing the bird on occasion, and the fact that the bird had moved location on the other attempt). However, it was worth it as we all got low flight views as it displayed overhead.

GULLS, TERNS, AND SKIMMERS: LARIDAE

Black-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus ridibundus*

A single bird was seen near Qinghai Lake.

Brown-headed Gull *Chroicocephalus brunnicephalus*

Recorded regularly in wet areas in Qinghai.

Pallas's Gull *Ichthyaelus ichthyaelus*

The most regularly encountered gull on the Qinghai leg of the trip.

Also known as *Great Black-headed Gull*.

White-winged Tern *Chlidonias leucopterus*

An adult was seen on our first visit to an area of freshwater near Koko Nor (Qinghai), and a further two adults and a young bird were seen on our second visit there.

Also known as *White-winged Black Tern*.

Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrid*

At least two birds were seen on a large wetland near Koko Nur in Qinghai.

Common Tern *Sterna hirundo*

The dark-bellied *tibetana* race was regularly seen near Qinghai Lake.

SANDGROUSE: PTEROCLIDAE

Pallas's Sandgrouse *Syrrhaptes paradoxus*

Finally, on our third visit to Chaka Flats (Qinghai), we picked this species up, when up to twenty different individuals were seen passing overhead.

Pallas's refers to *Petrus* (sometimes written as *Peter*) *Simon Pallas*, a German naturalist and explorer who worked in

Siberia and Kyrgyzstan in the late 18th and 19th Century.

PIGEONS AND DOVES: COLUMBIDAE

Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*

Recorded in scattered urban areas throughout.

Hill Pigeon *Columba rupestris*

Recorded in a gorge near Rilong in Sichuan, with further, regular sightings in Qinghai too.

Snow Pigeon *Columba leuconota*

Three sightings on Balang Shan, near the pass, with at least 9 birds on the last occasion.

Speckled Wood-Pigeon *Columba hodgsonii*

John got a few, brief, flyover, sightings around Wolong (Sichuan).

Oriental Turtle-Dove *Streptopelia orientalis*

Just recorded on the one day, at the base of Mengbisha (Sichuan), where at least five birds were seen.

Spotted Dove *Streptopelia chinensis*

Recorded a few times around Chengdu (Sichuan).

CUCKOOS: CUCULIDAE

Large Hawk-Cuckoo *Hierococcyx sparverioides*

Often the “tormentor” of the trip; easy to hear with its strident calls, but painfully difficult to see at times. However, not this year when we had repeated sightings around Longcanggou (Sichuan).

Common Cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*

Seen at a number of sites, including Longcanggou, Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau, Balang Shan, and around the Rubber Mountains and Chaka in Qinghai. On one day up on Sichuan’s Tibetan Plateau as many as 100 birds were seen.

Himalayan Cuckoo *Cuculus saturates*

Heard at Longcanggou, Jiuzhaigou and Wolong in Sichuan, with the only sighting, of a pair, coming at Longcanggou.

Lesser Cuckoo *Cuculus poliocephalus*

Seen several times at Longcanggou, and once within the park at Jiuzhaigou (both Sichuan), which involved three birds interacting with each other, one of which was a bright rusty red hepatic individual.

Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopaceus*

A male was seen shortly after our arrival at Longcanggou (Sichuan).

OWLS: STRIGIDAE

Collared Scops-Owl *Otus lettia* *heard only*

On our one dry night in Longcanggou (Sichuan) we heard two birds calling near our resort, which could not be tracked down.

Oriental Scops-Owl *Otus sunia* *heard only*

Heard on the same night near our resort in Longcanggou (Sichuan).

Little Owl *Athene noctua*

At least three birds were seen in a single morning in Qinghai’s Tibetan Plateau, and another single was seen there on another day. The first bird stood out though, as we found it nesting within a road sign, and from where it looked down at us staring at it, which provided great photo opportunities.

SWIFTS: APODIDAE

White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus*

The fastest flying bird in soaring flight on Earth. Two were seen at Longcanggou (Sichuan) on two separate days.

Himalayan Swiftlet *Aerodramus brevirostris*

Recorded on three days within Longcanggou (Sichuan).

Common Swift *Apus apus*

A small group was seen hawking over the skyscrapers of Xining city from Beishan on the departure day of the tour (Qinghai).

Pacific Swift *Apus pacificus*

Regularly at Mengbishaan, Wolong, and Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan).

Salim Ali's Swift *Apus salimali* **endemic?**

Three singles were seen on the Tibetan Plateau in Qinghai.

A recent split from *Fork-tailed Swift*; its winter range remains unknown.

House Swift *Apus nipalensis*

A few were seen around Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan).

HOOPOES: UPUPIDAE

Eurasian Hoopoe *Upupa epops*

A few were seen by some of the group in flight, from the vehicle, as we traversed Sichuan's Tibetan Plateau.

WOODPECKERS: PICIDAE

Gray-capped Woodpecker *Dendrocopos canicapillus*

Two singles were seen in Longcanggou (Sichuan).

Also known as *Gray-capped Pygmy-Woodpecker*.

Crimson-breasted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos cathpharius*

Singles were seen at Longcanggou and Wu Yi Peng (both Sichuan).

Darjeeling Woodpecker *Dendrocopos darjellensis*

Three were seen, a pair and a single at Longcanggou (Sichuan).

Great Spotted Woodpecker *Dendrocopos major*

One flew over us on the outskirts of Maerkang (Sichuan); another was seen at Beishan (Qinghai) by John, Ken and Sam.

Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius* **heard only**

This massive woodpecker was heard distantly at both Jiuzhaigou and Mengbishaan (Sichuan).

Bay Woodpecker *Blythipicus pyrrhotis*

A very smart woodpecker, a pair of which were seen at Longcanggou (Sichuan).

CUCKOO-SHRIKES: CAMPEPHAGIDAE

Long-tailed Minivet *Pericrocotus ethologus*

A wonderful regular feature of our time in the mountains of Sichuan.

SHRIKES: LANIIDAE

Tiger Shrike *Lanius tigrinus*

One male was seen at Longcanggou.

Long-tailed Shrike*Lanius schach*

A few were seen in Chengdu and Longcanggou (Sichuan).

Gray-backed Shrike*Lanius tephronotus*

Very commonly recorded in most of the high Tibetan areas of the tour (Jiuzhaigou, Maerkang, etc.)

VIREOS: VIREONIDAE**Green Shrike-Babbler***Pteruthius xanthochlorus*

One came in with a mobbing party of passerines (songbirds) at Longcanggou. It was quite a distinguished group, including a male *Ultramarine Flycatcher*, a pair of *Red-tailed Minla*, and a *Blue-winged Minla*.

OLD WORLD ORIOLES: ORIOLIDAE**Black-naped Oriole***Oriolus chinensis*

Just one individual seen on our arrival at Longcanggou.

DRONGOS: DICRURIDAE**Black Drongo***Dicrurus macrocercus*

Recorded half a dozen times or so, including at Longcanggou, on the Tibetan Plateau, and in Wolong, with a group of six birds noted at the latter site.

Hair-crested Drongo*Dicrurus hottentottus*

Just one bird was seen in Chengdu on our first day.

CROWS, JAYS, AND MAGPIES: CORVIDAE**Sichuan Jay***Perisoreus internigrans**endemic*

A group of four birds was seen at Mengbisha (Sichuan).

Eurasian Jay*Garrulus glandarius*

Two birds were seen at Erlangshan (Sichuan).

Azure-winged Magpie*Cyanopica cyanus cyanus*

At least six birds were seen in the town of Waqie on the plateau (Sichuan).

Blue Magpie*Urocissa erythrorhyncha*

Recorded on six days of the tour, at Longcanggou, and Wolong in Sichuan.

Also known as *Red-billed Blue Magpie*.

Eurasian Magpie*Pica pica*

Seen on eight days of the tour, and recorded in both Sichuan and Qinghai, with birds even seen in Chengdu this year.

Mongolian Ground-Jay*Podoces hendersoni*

Recorded on all three visits to Chaka Flats (Qinghai), with a maximum count of five birds there.

Also known as *Henderson's Ground-Jay*.

Eurasian Nutcracker*Nucifraga caryocatactes*

Commonly encountered at Erlangshan, with others noted at Longcanggou and Wu Yi Peng.

Also known as *Spotted Nutcracker*.

Red-billed Chough*Urocissa erythrorhyncha*

Recorded on nine days of the tour, including at Balang Shan (Sichuan), around Chaka, and at Beishan (both Qinghai).

Yellow-billed Chough*Pyrrhocorax graculus*

A large flock was seen in the town of Songpan, en route to Jiuzhaigou; regular groups were also seen on Balang Shan.

Also known as *Alpine Chough*.

Daurian Jackdaw*Corvus dauuricus*

Recorded on the Tibetan Plateau, both in Sichuan and Qinghai.

Carriion Crow*Corvus corone*

Commonly recorded on the Tibetan Plateau and other open areas.

Large-billed Crow*Corvus macrorhynchos*

Recorded at several forested sites including Erlangshan and Jiuzhaigou.

Common Raven*Corvus corax*

Two groups of these hulking ravens (of the *tibetanus* race) were seen on Sichuan's Tibetan Plateau.

LARKS: ALAUDIDAE**Tibetan Lark***Melanocorypha maxima*

Just the one was seen, singing from a power pole, beside a large marsh near the town of Waqie on Sichuan's Tibetan Plateau.

Mongolian Lark*Melanocorypha mongolica*

Two birds were seen on Chaka Flats (Qinghai), in our successful search for the Mongolian Ground-Jay, one of which was seen in display flight.

Greater Short-toed Lark*Calandrella brachydactyla*

A couple were seen near Qinghai Lake.

Hume's Lark*Calandrella acutirostris*

A handful of these pallid larks was seen near Qinghai Lake, on both of our visits to the area.

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 (Sichuan and Qinghai).

SWALLOWS: HIRUNDINIDAE**Bank Swallow***Riparia diluta*

A few were seen flying over a high mountain pass near Jiuzhaigou of all places.

Pale Sand Martin*Riparia diluta*

Regularly encountered on the Qinghai leg of the trip, especially in the area around Koko Nur.

Eurasian Crag-Martin*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*

Recorded in and around Jiuzhaigou, at Songpan (one of the famous historical sites on Mao's infamous Long March), Rilong, and also around Chaka in Qinghai.

Barn Swallow*Hirundo rustica*

A few were seen en-route between Jiuzhaigou and Maerkang in Sichuan.

Red-rumped Swallow*Cecropis daurica*

Regularly seen at lower elevation sites on the first part of the trip, including Chengdu and Longcanggou.

Asian House-Martin***Delichon dasypus***

Regularly recorded at mountain sites in Sichuan, including Jiuzhaigou, Mengbisha, and Balang Shan.

FAIRY-FLYCATCHERS: STENOSTIRIDAE**Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher*****Culicicapa ceylonensis***

Seen on two days at Longcanggou, and also heard around Wolong and Jiuzhaigou.

CHICKADEES AND TITS: PARIDAE**Songar Tit*****Poecile songarus weigoldicus*****endemic**

One bird was seen again, as last year, not far from Gong Gang Ling mountain pass, outside of Jiuzhaigou in Sichuan. The *weigoldicus* form has recently been found to be genetically distinct from all other forms within what was traditionally considered "Songar Tit", and under the IOC taxonomy is split as *Sichuan Tit*, *Poecile weigoldicus*. The same studies found that the other forms under Songar Tit are not genetically distinct, and should therefore be re-lumped under *Willow Tit*, *Peocile montanus*. Thus it is expected that Songar Tit will cease to be a species, though the form seen here on the tour, will be elevated to a full species, which is endemic to China.

White-browed Tit***Poecile superciliosus*****endemic**

Seen twice during our journey between Gong Gang Ling and Maerkang (Sichuan), with one bird being found within the same spot as a pair of *White-browed Tit-Warblers*.

Pere David's Tit***Poecile davidi*****endemic**

Two pairs were seen at Longcanggou, another pair was seen at Jiuzhaigou, and another was seen at Wu Yi Peng. Also known as *Rusty-breasted Tit*.

Pere David refers to Father Armand David, a missionary from France, who conducted zoological surveys in China in the 19th Century, which uncovered well over 50 new species. The most famous of these expeditions brought the Giant Panda to Europe's (and the western World's) attention.

Coal Tit***Periparus ater***

Recorded in Longcanggou and Wolong (Sichuan).

This involved the crested *aemodius* race, which is quite unlike the familiar, *crestless*, Coal Tit in Britain and Western Europe.

Rufous-vented Tit***Periparus rubidiventris***

Seen at three high altitude forests in Sichuan: Gong Gang Ling, within the park at Jiuzhaigou, and at Mengbisha.

Yellow-bellied Tit***Pardaliparus venustulus*****endemic**

Recorded several times at Longcanggou, and later at Jiuzhaigou, and Wuyipeng also.

Gray-crested Tit***Lophophanes dichrous***

Seen at three sites in Sichuan: Longcanggou, Gong Gang Ling, Jiuzhaigou, and Mengbisha.

Great Tit***Parus major minor***

Seen in the lowlands in Chengdu.

This pallid form is often considered a separate species, *Japanese Tit*, *Passer minor* (it is considered as this by the IOC).

Great Tit***Parus major tibetanus***

Recorded around Jiuzhaigou and Mengbisha in Sichuan, and by Sam, John and Ken at Beishan in Qinghai.

This pallid form, along with *minor* above, is often considered a separate species, *Japanese Tit*, *Passer minor* (it is considered as this by the IOC).

Green-backed Tit***Parus monticolus***

Recorded on 9 days of the tour, in Erlangshan, Longcanggou, Jiuzhaigou, Mengbisha, and Wolong.

Yellow-browed Tit***Sylviparus modestus***

Seen four times within Longcanggou (Sichuan), often being the most aggressive species to respond to a recording of Collared Owlet.

Ground Tit***Pseudopodoces humilis***

First recorded on Sichuan's Tibetan Plateau, though especially common on the plateau in Qinghai.

Having recently been found to be genetically within the tit group, this bird was renamed from its previous moniker, *Hume's Groundpecker*.

PENDULINE TITS: REMIZIDAE**Fire-capped Tit*****Cephalopyrus flammiceps***

A male was seen briefly by some of the group at Erlangshan, with two further females, seen at Longcanggou.

LONG-TAILED TITS: AEGITHALIDAE**White-browed Tit-Warbler*****Leptopoecile sophiae***

A pair were found within a shallow valley on the journey between Gong Gang Ling and Maerkang; the valley also hosted a vocal *White-browed Tit* at the time too.

Also known as *Stolickzka's Tit-Warbler* or *Severtzov's Tit-Warbler*.

Crested Tit-Warbler***Leptopoecile elegans*****endemic**

A pair was seen twice, and well, at Gong Ling, near Jiuzhaigou.

Black-throated Tit***Aegithalos concinnus***

Seen within Chengdu only, on our first day.

Also known as *Red-headed Tit*. This species is known as *Black-throated Bushtit* on the IOC checklist; the family is also called *Bushtits* on that list.

Black-browed Tit***Aegithalos iouschistos***

One of these scarce tits was seen within a mobbing party of songbirds at Longcanggou by John only, unfortunately. This species is known as *Rufous-fronted Bushtit* on the IOC checklist; the family is also called *Bushtits* on that list.

Sooty Tit***Aegithalos fuliginosus***

Two birds were seen inside the park at Jiuzhaigou, and were the only ones seen on the tour.

This species is known as *Sooty Bushtit* on the IOC checklist; the family is also called *Bushtits* on that list.

NUTHATCHES: SITTIDAE**Chestnut-vented Nuthatch*****Sitta nagaensis***

Two singles were seen at Longcanggou (Sichuan).

Przevalski's Nuthatch***Sitta przewalskii*****endemic**

A super bird, one of Sam's favorites of the tour, was seen on Mengbisha (Sichuan).

This was recently split from *White-cheeked Nuthatch*, *Sitta leucopsis*.

Snowy-browed Nuthatch***Sitta villosa bangsi***

Two different singles were seen inside the park at Jiuzhaigou.

Also known as *Chinese Nuthatch*.

WALLCREEPER: TICHODROMIDAE**Wallcreeper*****Tichodroma muraria***

Stunning eye level views of a breeding male were had west of Chaka (Qinghai), and John, Sam and Ken also saw a female at Beishan on the departure day of the tour. A monotypic family unlike any other, a stunning bird, with

absorbing behavior, which is always highly-desired by all tour participants, whether they have seen it previously or not, and this group was no different, who voted strongly for this species as the TOP BIRD OF THE TOUR, beating a number of flashy pheasants into top spot.

CREEPERS: CERCITHIIDAE

Eurasian Treecreeper

Certhia familiaris khamensis

Seen four times on the tour in Sichuan; at Longcanggou (where seen just a few trees away from a *Sichuan Treecreeper*), Gong Gang Ling, Mengbisha, and at Wu Yi Peng.

This form, which occurs in India, Tibet, Pakistan and China is split off from the western Eurasian by the IOC, as *Hodgson's Treecreeper*, *Certhia hodgsoni*.

Sichuan Treecreeper

Certhia tianquanensis

endemic

The closure of the best site for the species, *Wawu Shan*, has created challenges for tour leaders to find this bird, although it does occur at both Jiuzhaigou and Longcanggou. We found a pair at the latter site, exactly where I had found it there on my 2012 scouting trip, (though frustratingly could *not* find it on the actual tour there shortly after). This species, which is endemic to the Chinese province of Sichuan, was only first described, from neighboring Wawu Shan, in 1995.

Bar-tailed Treecreeper

Certhia himalayana

Seen on the one occasion at Jiuzhaigou.

WRENS: TROGLODYTIDAE

Eurasian Wren

Troglodytes troglodytes szetschuanus

Seen at the higher reaches of Longcanggou, at Mengbisha and at the pass at Balang Shan.

DIPPERS: CINCLIDAE

White-throated Dipper

Cinclus cinclus

Two sightings in Sichuan, a single at Erlangshan, and another seen by the dramatic falls at Pearl Sholes within the park at Jiuzhaigou; one of Lisa's favorite birds of the trip.

Brown Dipper

Cinclus pallasii

Two were seen at Erlangshan, and another was seen at Longcanggou.

BULBULS: PYCNONOTIDAE

Collared Finchbill

Spizixos semitorques

Easy this year, recorded on seven days of the tour, in Chengdu, Erlangshan, and Longcanggou (where they were even seen from the resort).

Brown-breasted Bulbul

Pycnonotus xanthorrhous

A couple of sightings between Chengdu and Erlangshan.

Light-vented Bulbul

Pycnonotus sinensis

Seen commonly in Chengdu, and on three days around our resort in Longcanggou.

Also known as *Chinese Bulbul*.

Black Bulbul

Hypsipetes leucocephalus

The striking *leucothorax* white-headed race was seen on at least four occasions in Longcanggou.

Mountain Bulbul

Ixos mcclllandii

A single was seen at Longcanggou.

KINGLETS: REGULIDAE**Goldcrest*****Regulus regulus***

Just the one bird was seen, at Gong Gang Ling, in the same flock as a pair of *Crested Tit-Warblers*.

CUPWINGS: PNOEPYGIDAE**Scaly-breasted Cupwing*****Pnoepyga albiventer***

One of the buffy/fulvous morph was seen extremely well by the road at Erlangshan.

Formerly known as *Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler*, although now placed within the newly created Cupwing family, which comprises of just four species. The family and species are still called *wren-babbler* on the IOC list.

Pygmy Cupwing***Pnoepyga pusilla***

Three birds were seen in a single day on Longcanggou, although it took until the third bird for everyone to get good looks at the bird.

Formerly known as *Pygmy Wren-Babbler*, although now placed within the newly created *Cupwing* family, which comprises of just four species. The family and species are still called *wren-babbler* on the IOC list.

BUSH-WARBLERS AND ALLIES: CETTIIDAE**Chestnut-headed Tesia*****Tesia castaneocoronata***

This wonderful forest sprite was seen on two days at Longcanggou.

Rufous-faced Warbler***Abroscopus albogularis***

This delightful warbler was seen once at Du Fu's Thatched Cottage in Chengdu.

Brownish-flanked Bush-Warbler ***Cettia fortipes***

Seen at Erlangshan, and also recorded at Longcanggou and Balang Shan.

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

Two calling males were heard below Beimuping in Wolong, although one of them was only seen in flight at best.

Aberrant Bush-Warbler ***Cettia flavolivacea***

Seen very well on Erlangshan, and later heard around Longcanggou and Wolong.

Yellowish-bellied Bush-Warbler ***Cettia acanthizoides***

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

LEAF-WARBLERS: PHYLLOSCOPIDAE**Dusky Warbler*****Phylloscopus fuscatus***

One was seen in Jiuzhaigou.

Alpine Leaf-Warbler***Phylloscopus occinensis* *endemic.***

Commonly recorded in alpine scrub, in Erlangshan, Longcanggou, Mengbisha, and Balang Shan in Sichuan, and around the Rubber Mountains and Chaka in Qinghai.

This endemic form has recently (2012) been split off from *Tickell's Leaf-Warbler*, *Phylloscopus affinis* under both IOC and Clements.

Buff-throated Warbler***Phylloscopus subaffinis***

A singing bird was seen near Wolong village.

Yellow-streaked Warbler***Phylloscopus armandii***

Several were seen at Erlangshan and at Jiuzhaigou.

Buff-barred Warbler***Phylloscopus pulcher***

A common high elevation leaf-warbler, regularly encountered at Erlangshan, Gong Gang Li, Jiuzhaigou, and Balang Shan.

Sichuan Leaf-Warbler*Phylloscopus forresti***endemic**

Another common high elevation leaf-warbler, recorded at Erlangshan, Longcanggou, Gong Gang Li, Jiuzhaigou, and Wolong.

Chinese Leaf-Warbler*Phylloscopus yunnanensis***endemic**

Seen at Erlangshan, and also recorded commonly by voice at Jiuzhaigou.

Hume's Warbler*Phylloscopus humei*

Seen in both Jiuzhaigou and Mengbisha in Sichuan, where they were common and conspicuous, as usual.

Arctic Warbler*Phylloscopus borealis*

A late migrant bird was seen in Wolong.

Greenish Warbler*Phylloscopus trochiloides*

Numerous at Jiuzhaigou and Gong Gang Ling.

Large-billed Leaf-Warbler*Phylloscopus magnirostris*

A very common sound in the mountains of Sichuan, with birds recorded at Erlangshan, Longcanggou, Jiuzhaigou, Mengbisha, and Wolong.

Claudia's Leaf-Warbler*Phylloscopus claudiae*

This wing-flicking warbler is a common Sichuan bird, which was recorded at a number of sites, including Erlangshan, Longcanggou, Labahe, Jiuzhaigou, Mengbisha, and Wolong.

Recently split off from *Blyth's Leaf-Warbler*, *Phylloscopus reguloides*.

Emei Leaf-Warbler*Phylloscopus emeiensis***endemic**

A highly local leaf-warbler, although locally common at the right elevation, on Longcanggou, where several were seen and many others heard.

Kloss's Leaf-Warbler*Phylloscopus ogilviegranti*

One was seen (and many others heard) at Longcanggou.

Recently split off from *White-tailed Leaf-Warbler*.

Martens's Warbler*Seicercus omeiensis*

Commonly heard at a number of sites, with sightings coming at Erlangshan, Longcanggou, and Wolong.

Also known as *Omei Spectacled Warbler*.

Bianchi's Warbler*Seicercus valentine*

The high elevation *seicercus*, seen at Erlangshan, Longcanggou, and Jiuzhaigou.

Chestnut-crowned Warbler*Seicercus castaniceps*

A few were seen in one morning on the lower slopes of Longcanggou.

GRASSBIRDS AND ALLIES: MEGALURIDAE**Spotted Bush-Warbler***Bradypterus thoracicus*

A calling bird was seen extremely well on the higher slopes of Longcanggou. Others were heard at Gong Gang Ling and Jiuzhaigou.

Russet Bush-Warbler*Bradypterus mandelli*

One showed well, during a heavy rain shower at Longcanggou.

Brown Bush-Warbler*Bradypterus luteoventris*

Seen well on two occasions at Longcanggou.

OLD WORLD WARBLERS: SYLVIIDAE**Golden-breasted Fulvetta***Lioparus chrysotis*

This gorgeous fulvetta was recorded at just the one site, Longcanggou, where it was seen at least three times.

Spectacled Fulvetta*Alcippe ruficapilla***endemic**

While we waited (beside the large LCD screen) to enter the park at Jiuzhaigou, we tape in one of these striking fulvettas.

Chinese Fulvetta*Alcippe striaticollis***endemic**

One was seen on the upper slopes of Mengbisha, with another being seen briefly on Balang Shan too.

White-browed Fulvetta*Alcippe vinipectus*

One was seen at Erlangshan.

Streak-throated Fulvetta*Fulvetta manipurensis*

Seen a handful of times at Longcanggou.

Great Parrotbill*Conostoma oemodium*

Seen twice at Longcanggou, and then again extremely well on our day trip up to Wu Yi Peng (Wolong).

Brown Parrotbill*Paradoxornis unicolor*

Seen twice at Longcanggou, a single, then later a pair in the same area.

Spectacled Parrotbill*Paradoxornis conspicillatus* **endemic**

Two small groups were seen around a lake inside the park at Jiuzhaigou.

Vinous-throated Parrotbill*Paradoxornis webbianus*

Seen first at Du Fu's Thatched Cottage in Chengdu, and then later that day several times at close range within the Giant Panda Breeding Centre in the city.

Ashy-throated Parrotbill*Paradoxornis alphonsianus*

Seen three separate times at Longcanggou.

It has been suggested that this and *Vinous-throated Parrotbill* should be lumped within the same species.

Gray-hooded Parrotbill*Paradoxornis zappeyi* **endemic**

A breeding pair were seen repeatedly visiting their nest to bring food to their young on Longcanggou.

Golden Parrotbill*Paradoxornis verreauxi*

The parrotbill with the biggest impact on the tour, picked by some as one of their BIRDS-OF-THE-TOUR. A pair was seen at close range at Longcanggou.

YUHINAS, WHITE-EYES, AND ALLIES: ZOSTEROPIDAE**Stripe-throated Yuhina***Yuhina gularis*

This funky bird was seen a couple of times on the higher slopes of Longcanggou, and again on the trip up to Wu Yi Peng.

White-collared Yuhina*Yuhina diademata*

Recorded at Erlangshan, Longcanggou, Jiuzhaigou, Balang Shan, and Wu Yi Peng.

Chestnut-flanked White-eye*Zosterops erythropleuru*

Recorded at three sites: Erlangshan, Longcanggou, and Jiuzhaigou.

FULVETTAS AND GROUND BABBLERS: PELLORNEIDAE**Gray-cheeked Fulvetta***Alcippe morrisonia davidi* **endemic**

Three birds were seen late in the day in the Giant Panda Centre in Chengdu, our only sightings of the tour.

This form, *davidi*, which is confined to SC China, is split from Gray-cheeked, and renamed *David's Fulvetta*, *Alcippe davidi*, on the IOC checklist.

LAUGHINGTHRUSHES: LEIOTHRICHIDAE**Chinese Babax** *Babax lanceolatus*

Normally a given on this tour, it was strangely difficult this year, with just a single pair seen (though seen well), after many earlier attempts elsewhere, in Wolong.

Pere David's Laughingthrush *Garrulax davidi* **endemic**

A bird was seen by the few who made the climb up a steep hillside above the town of Jiuzhaigou. Another two pairs of birds were seen very well on Beishan, by John, Ken and Sam on the departure day, as they had later departing flights than the rest of the group.

Also known as *Plain Laughingthrush*.

Pere David refers to Father Armand David, a missionary from France, who conducted zoological surveys in China in the 19th Century, which uncovered well over 50 new species. The most famous of these expeditions brought the Giant Panda to Europe's (and the western World's) attention.

Sukatschev's Laughingthrush *Garrulax sukatschewi* **endemic**

Often very difficult to see, and shy, like the majority of the Chinese laughingthrushes, however, this year we had great looks at a bird (albeit at the third attempt of the morning), in Jiuzhaigou.

Also known as *Snowy-cheeked Laughingthrush*.

Named after Russian Vladimir P. Sukachev, a merchant, explorer and collector in China during the years 1884-1887.

Spotted Laughingthrush *Garrulax ocellatus*

A bird was seen on the day trip up to Wu Yi Peng.

Barred Laughingthrush *Garrulax lunulatus* **endemic**

We got crisp looks at a pair of these often-shy birds on Erlangshan one morning.

Giant Laughingthrush *Garrulax maximus* **endemic**

Seen well on Mengbishan, and later seen again up on Balang Shan.

Buffy Laughingthrush *Garrulax berthemyi* **endemic** **heard only**

A distant bird was heard downslope while we were at Erlangshan.

This has recently been split off from the Taiwan form, which is now called *Rusty Laughingthrush*, *Garrulax poecilorhynchus*.

Chinese Hwamei *Garrulax canorus*

A fortuitous roadside stop for restrooms, en-route to Erlangshan from Chengdu led to us finding a pair of these noisy laughers behind the gas station.

This has recently been split off from the endemic form on Taiwan, which is now called *Taiwan Hwamei*, *Garrulax taewanus*.

White-browed Laughingthrush *Garrulax sannio*

The easy Sichuan laugher, with birds easily seen and photographed (as usual) within the city of Chengdu.

Elliot's Laughingthrush *Garrulax elliotii* **endemic**

One of the most abundant and widespread laughingthrushes, being seen regularly through the tour, at a numerous highland sites, (e.g. Erlangshan, Longcanggou, Gong Gang Ling, Jiuzhaigou, Mengbishan, and Wolong).

Black-faced Laughingthrush *Garrulax affinis*

One was seen on the higher slopes of Longcanggou over lunch one day.

Red-winged Laughingthrush *Garrulax formosus*

One of the trickiest laughingthrushes to see well; they are reasonably common by voice at Longcanggou, although only Ken managed to get a decent look at one of the ones we tried to tape in.

Silver-eared Mesia *Leiothrix argenteauris*

An escapee in Chengdu was a shock, causing a little excitement for a while!

Red-billed Leiothrix***Leiothrix lutea***

Regularly recorded at Longcanggou, and also seen a few times in Chengdu also (both Sichuan).

Previously known as *Peking Robin*.

Gray-faced Liocichla***Liocichla omeiensis*****endemic**

A common bird by voice at Longcanggou, where a pair were seen well during our first amazing morning there.

Also known as *Emei Liocichla*.

Blue-winged Minla***Minla cyanouroptera***

Singles were seen on two days in Longcanggou.

Red-tailed Minla***Minla ignotincta***

A pair was seen in Longcanggou (Sichuan), which appeared within a mobbing party coming to the recording of a Collared Owlet. The same party also contained a *Green Shrike-Babbler*, *Blue-winged Minla*, and a male *Ultramarine Flycatcher*. One of the same pair was found again the next day, when another male was found elsewhere.

BABLERS: TIMALIIDAE**Rufous-capped Babbler*****Stachyris ruficeps*****heard only**

Frustratingly only heard at close range at the Giant Panda Breeding Centre, in Chengdu.

Black-streaked Scimitar-Babbler ***Pomatorhinus gravivox***

A pair was seen well on our first morning in Erlangshan (Sichuan). Others were heard around Jiuzhaigou and Wolong.

A recent split from *Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler*.

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler ***Pomatorhinus ruficollis***

Great looks came on our first afternoon, at the Giant Panda Breeding Centre in Chengdu, and another was also seen well on the lower slopes of Longcanggou (Sichuan).

OLD WORLD FLYCATCHERS: MUSCICAPIDAE**Dark-sided Flycatcher*****Muscicapa sibirica***

Recorded at four Sichuan sites: Longcanggou (3 times), Jiuzhaigou (up to four birds one afternoon), Gong Gang Ling, and Mengbishi.

Also known as *Siberian Flycatcher*.

Ferruginous Flycatcher***Muscicapa ferruginea***

Two singles were seen at Longcanggou.

Oriental Magpie-Robin***Copsychus saularis***

Only recorded around Chengdu, and on the journey from there to Erlangshan, the following day.

Blue-throated Flycatcher ***Cyornis rubeculoides glaucicomans*** **endemic**

Hearing few this year along the road at Longcanggou (Sichuan) during a rainy and cool day there, we went straight into the understory for the first one we heard close enough, and after a time, all got great looks at the orange-and-blue male in song.

Split on the IOC checklist as *Chinese Blue Flycatcher*, *Cyornis glaucicomans*, and then a Chinese breeding endemic.

Fujian Niltava***Niltava davidi*****heard only**

Heard on two days near the road at Longcanggou.

Rufous-bellied Niltava***Niltava sundara***

One male was seen well, after a short "illegal" off-trail walk, at Jiuzhaigou; another male was seen on the walk up to Wu Yi Peng.

Verditer Flycatcher*Eumyias thalassinus*

Seen a couple of times at Erlangshan and Longcanggou, and by a few people at Wolong too.

White-browed Shortwing*Brachypteryx Montana*

A male showed to all on Longcanggou (Sichuan).

Rufous-headed Robin*Luscinia ruficeps**endemic*

Arguably one of the most difficult birds to *see* in Sichuan. After a long concerted effort over two days within the park at Jiuzhaigou (the *only* known breeding site for the species), we all got quality looks at a male that hopped along an open trail in front of us all; Hallelujah! Its wintering range is still no known. A rare, local, difficult, and handsome species that was voted as one of the TOP FIVE BIRDS-OF-THE-TRIP.

Indian Blue Robin*Larvivora brunnea*

Another stunningly beautiful robin. A frustrating bird showed only in parts, and only to some, at Erlangshan. However, we all got superb looks at Longcanggou; others were heard around Jiuzhaigou and Wolong.

White-bellied Redstart*Luscinia phaenicuroides*

Heard at a number of Sichuan sites (e.g. Jiuzhaigou, and Gong Gang Ling), with sightings coming at Erlangshan (a singing male), and Longcanggou (a female).

Blue Whistling-Thrush*Myophonus caeruleus*

Recorded on four days of the Sichuan leg of the tour, with sightings at Erlangshan and Rilong.

Little Forktail*Enicurus scouleri*

A surprise find on Longcanggou, where it was found feeding by a small waterfall. One of the nominees for the TOP FIVE BIRDS-OF-THE-TOUR, although did get enough votes to make the final top five.

White-crowned Forktail*Enicurus leschenaultia*

One was seen low down within the park at Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan).

Firethroat*Calliope pectardens*

Great views were had early on, while at Erlangshan, where a male posed in a pine tree. Another male was seen bay some of the group on the walk up to Wu Yi Peng. A number of others were heard this year: near the village of Shawan, and three to four males were heard up on Balang Shan (Wolong). One of the nominees for TOP FIVE BIRDS-OF-THE-TOUR, although it never made the final five.

Siberian Rubythroat*Calliope calliope*

A super, singing male was found in some roadside, alpine scrub as traveled between Gong Gang Ling towards the Tibetan Plateau (Sichuan).

White-tailed Rubythroat*Calliope pectoralis*

We found s stunning male in the shadow of the spectacular Balang Mountain. This completed a brace of two male singing male rubythroat species on the tour. Also known as *Himalayan Rubythroat*.

White-tailed Robin*Larvivora brunnea**heard only*

Heard less than usual, with just one heard in Longcanggou.

Grandala*Grandala coelicolor*

Seen on our three days at high altitude on Balang Shan, with at least ten different birds seen on one of those days, including a number of spectacular males. One of the nominees for the TOP FIVE BIRDS-OF-THE-TOUR, although it did not get enough votes to make top five.

Himalayan Bluetail*Tarsiger rufilatus*

Another gorgeous flycatcher seen on four different days in Sichuan; at Gong Gang Ling, and Mengbisha. This was formerly in a wider species known as *Orange-flanked Bush-Robin* or *Red-flanked Bluetail*. The northern populations are now considered separate under the name *Red-flanked Bluetail*, *Tarsiger cyanurus*.

White-browed Bush-Robin *Tarsiger indicus*

A female was seen by a few people during the steep climb up to Wu Yi Peng.

Golden Bush-Robin *Tarsiger chrysaeus*

A pair was seen on Erlangshan, and another female was found on Balang Shan.

Ultramarine Flycatcher *Ficedula superciliaris*

An immaculate male was a surprise find at Longcanggou, though was seen in the same area on two consecutive days. The bird came in with *Green Shrike-Babbler*, and *Red-tailed and Blue-winged Minlas*, as part of a mobbing reaction to the playback of a *Collared Owlet* recording.

Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher *Ficedula strophciata*

Recorded at three Sichuan sites on the tour: Longcanggou, Jiuzhaigou, and Wolong.

Slaty-backed Flycatcher *Ficedula hodgsonii*

Two male birds were seen on Gong Gang Ling pass, near Jiuzhaigou, and others were seen inside the park, and on Mengbishan.

Snowy-browed Flycatcher *Ficedula hyperythra*

A male bird was seen on the lower slopes of Longcanggou.

Slaty-blue Flycatcher *Ficedula tricolor*

A female was seen a couple of times on Longcanggou.

Blue-fronted Redstart *Phoenicurus frontalis*

This handsome high altitude redstart was seen first on our pheasant-filled morning on Balang Shan, where this species was seen on a number of occasions; others were seen in the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai.

Plumbeous Redstart *Rhyacornis fuliginosus*

A rapids loving redstart, found in the mountains, and always in the vicinity of fast-moving rivers. They were recorded regularly within this habitat throughout the tour in Sichuan (recorded on 11 days).

White-capped Redstart *Phoenicurus leucocephalus*

Another river redstart, recorded regularly through the tour in the mountainous areas, on 11 days. Most regular in and around Jiuzhaigou, with over ten birds seen on some days there.

Also known as *White-capped Water Redstart* or *Riverchat*.

Hodgson's Redstart *Phoenicurus hodgsoni*

Just one black-throated male was seen on the Tibetan Plateau in Sichuan.

White-throated Redstart *Phoenicurus schisticeps*

Three birds at Gong Gang Ling were our first sightings; they were also seen regularly during our time in Mengbishan. In Qinghai a handful of individuals were seen west of Chaka.

White-winged Redstart *Phoenicurus erythrogastrus*

Hats off to Tim who found a male from a moving vehicle while we descending the Rubber Mountains, which led us to a nest of the species. We were then able to observe the male and female returning to feed the young at the nest on numerous occasions thereafter.

Also known as *Güldenstädt's Redstart*.

Black Redstart *Phoenicurus ochruros*

The common redstart on the Tibetan Plateau, both in Sichuan and Qinghai, with hundreds of individuals seen.

Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus aureoreus*

Recorded on eight days of the tour; at Erlangshan, Jiuzhaigou, Mengbishan, and Wolong. One male even hopped nonchalantly along the electronic ticket barrier as we entered the park at Jiuzhaigou.

Blue Rock-Thrush *Monticola solitaries*

Three were seen on the journey between Chengdu and Jiuzhaigou.

Siberian Stonechat***Saxicola maurus***

Frequently encountered on the Tibetan Plateau in Sichuan, and also seen a few times in the Rubber Mountains (Qinghai).

Recently re-split from *European Stonechat*, *Saxicola rubicola*.

Gray Bushchat***Saxicola ferreus***

Just one female was seen at the base of Erlangshan (Sichuan).

Pied Wheatear***Oenanthe pleschanka***

Around six birds were seen by Ken, John, and Sam during a short visit to Beishan on the edge of Xining city on the departure day, when they have later departing flights than many of the others.

Isabelline Wheatear***Oenanthe isabellina***

Seen in good numbers around Chaka in Qinghai.

THRUSHES AND ALLIES: TURDIDAE**Long-tailed Thrush*****Zoothera dixonii******guide only***

One was seen by Sam only as he was leading the group down a narrow trail below Beimuping.

Eurasian Blackbird***Turdus merula sowerbyi***

Only recorded on one day, around Chengdu.

The race involved, *sowerbyi*, is larger than its western counterparts, and is often referred to as *Mandarin Blackbird*, a proposed split.

Chestnut Thrush***Turdus rubrocanus***

A commonly encountered thrush, seen on 11 days of the Sichuan leg of the tour, including at Erlangshan, Jiuzhaigou, Mengbisha, and Wolong.

White-backed Thrush***Turdus kessleri***

Seen at Erlangshan, on Sichuan's Tibetan Plateau, at Balang Shan, and in small numbers in the Rubber Mountains and Chaka in Qinghai.

Also known as *Kessler's Thrush*.

Chinese Thrush***Turdus mupinensis******endemic***

Two were seen feeding on the roads inside the park at Jiuzhaigou; another bird was seen singing at length from the treetops at Mengbisha.

Also known as *Chinese Song Thrush*.

STARLINGS: STURNIDAE**Crested Myna*****Acridotheres cristatellus***

Just a few were seen along the highway near Chengdu, and another was seen briefly within the city itself.

White-cheeked Starling***Sturnus cineraceus***

Two sightings: one in Chengdu, within the university grounds; and a breeding pair on Sichuan's Tibetan Plateau.

SUNBIRDS: NECTARINIIDAE**Gould's Sunbird*****Aethopyga gouldiae***

A stunning little bird, seen regularly in Erlangshan and Longcanggou (Sichuan).

Formerly, and better known, as *Mrs. Gould's Sunbird*.

ACCENTORS: PRUNELLIDAE**Alpine Accentor** *Prunella collaris*

Seen on two days up on Balang Shan, near the Pass where a maximum of five birds were seen on one day.

Robin Accentor *Prunella rubeculoides*

Three sightings around the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai, including at the Pink-tailed Bunting site.

Rufous-breasted Accentor *Prunella strophciata*

Seen a couple of times on Mengbisha, and then again on Balang Shan.

Brown Accentor *Prunella fulvescens*

Seen on four days in Qinghai; especially common around the Rubber Mountains, near Chaka, and on Beisha, by Xining.

Maroon-backed Accentor *Prunella immaculate*

Great views of a bird were had inside the park at Jiuzhaigou, with other singles seen at Mengbisha.

WAGTAILS AND PIPITS: MOTACILLIDAE**Citrine Wagtail** *Motacilla citreola calcarata*

Five birds were seen on our day on the Tibetan Plateau in Sichuan, with two lemon-headed males involved. In Qinghai, we had one surprise encounter in the dry desert-like environment of Chaka Flats, where it visited a pool that also held *Pere David's Snowfinch* and *Lesser Short-toed Lark*.

The race involved, *calcarata*, possesses a jet black back, unlike the pale gray-backed northern birds, and is therefore considered a separate species, *Black-backed Wagtail*, by some.

Gray Wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*

Recorded regularly at the start of the tour, when it was seen on seven of the first eight days, around Erlangshan and Longcanggou.

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba alboides*

One of the most widespread species on the tour, recorded on all but a few days. The subspecies involved was *alboides*, sometimes split off as a separate species, *Himalayan Wagtail*.

Rosy Pipit *Anthus roseatus*

Regularly seen in the high mountains of Balang Shan, Mengbisha (both Sichuan), and the Rubber Mountains (Qinghai).

Olive-backed Pipit *Anthus hodgsoni*

A few were seen at Erlangshan, and then later at Gong Gang Ling and Balang Shan.

UROCYNCHRAMIDAE: PRZEWALSKI'S ROSEFINCH**Przevalski's Rosefinch** *Urocynchramus pylzowi* **endemic**

Not a rosefinch or a bunting, but in its own monotypic family, by virtue of a strange morphological feature: its final, tenth primary is not vestigial like other songbirds. The lure of a new entire bird family for some makes this a big draw, and Tim, in particular was no different. His non-birding wife (who was not long on the tour), clearly understood this well, as she told him "not to return without it!" Luckily, he did not have to, as we enjoyed a pair of these strange birds on our first afternoon in the Rubber Mountains (Qinghai). Although it did not make the final top five it was nominated by some people in their TOP FIVE BIRDS-OF-THE-TOUR.

Also known as *Pink-tailed Bunting*, or simply *Pink-tailed Finch*.

The name Przevalski commemorates Nikolay Mikhaylovich Przhevalsky, a Russian explorer and naturalist in the 19th Century.

BUNTINGS, SPARROWS, AND ALLIES: EMBERIZIDAE**Slaty Bunting** *Latoucheornis siemsseni*

A male and a female were seen separately in Longcanggou; another was heard singing from the base of the trail up to Wu Yi Peng.

Pine Bunting *Emberiza leucocephalos*

A pristine male was seen at the base of the valley in Chaka one afternoon (two further males were seen by Tom on his way down); another female was seen in the same area the following day.

Godlewski's Bunting *Emberiza godlewskii*

Two birds were seen on the journey between Chengdu and Gong Gang Ling in Sichuan. In Qinghai, they were regularly recorded near Chaka with at least half a dozen birds in a day.

Meadow Bunting *Emberiza cioides*

As John, Sam, and Ken were leaving on later flights than most others they had some times on their hands and so birded Beishan, on the outskirts of Xining, where these buntings were abundant and conspicuous.

Yellow-throated Bunting *Emberiza elegans*

In a great year for buntings, a male of this species caused us to stop the bus on the first pheasant run up Erlangshan. Three birds were seen in all that morning there.

SISKINS, CROSSBILLS, AND ALLIES: FRINGILLIDAE**Plain Mountain-Finch** *Leucosticte nemoricola*

Many were seen up on Balang Shan in Sichuan, while just a single bird was seen on the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai.

Black-headed Mountain-Finch *Leucosticte brandti*

Good numbers were seen up on Balang Shan on our snowy day up there, when, presumably, many individuals came down lower in altitude, pushed down by the spring snows. Our best looks came by a "road mender's" hut, where a small flock gathered to scavenge scraps with little fear for human activity alongside.

Also known as *Brandt's Mountain-Finch*.

Mongolian Finch *Bucanetes mongolicus*

One was seen foraging at close range on the flats at Chaka on our final full day of birding of the entire tour. This same area proved fruitful for sandgrouse with around twenty birds seen there too.

Dark-breasted Rosefinch *Carpodacus nipalensis*

Not too obvious this year (unlike most years), when a male was seen inside Jiuzhaigou, and another was seen by John at least at the "Monal Knoll" on Balang Shan.

Common Rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrurus* Seen twice on the tour; three were seen one day on Mengbishaan, and a further single bird was seen on Balang Shan.

Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch *Carpodacus davidianus*

A male was seen on Erlangshan, and a few others were seen on Mengbishaan; a low number for this tour in Sichuan; another handful of sightings came around Chaka in Qinghai.

Pink-rumped Rosefinch *Carpodacus eos* *endemic*

Just two birds were seen; one near Jiuzhaigou, and another on Mengbishaan.

Vinaceous Rosefinch *Carpodacus vinaceus*

Four sightings of males, at three different sites in Sichuan: Erlangshan, Longcanggou, and Jiuzhaigou.

Pale Rosefinch***Carpodacus synoicus***

An impromptu visit to the hills overlooking Xining on the departure day, for those with later flights, led John, Sam and Ken to get great looks at two groups of these birds; the second group included at least three males and a female.

Also known as *Sinai Rosefinch*.

Three-banded Rosefinch***Carpodacus trifasciatus* *endemic***

A good tour for the species this year, with four birds seen within the Primeval Forest in the park at Jiuzhaigou, and then two further singles (both strawberry-colored males), were seen on Mengbishan.

Sharpe's Rosefinch***Carpodacus verreauxii* *endemic***

Always a rare and difficult species to find, we were very lucky to have a male bird land on a close tree, at eye level, on Balang Shan, not long after both *Koklass Pheasant* and *Wood Snipe* had been seen in the area. This was recently split from *Spot-winged Rosefinch*, *Carpodacus rhodopeplus*.

Chinese White-browed Rosefinch***Carpodacus dubius* *endemic***

Recorded at three sites in Sichuan: Gong Gang Ling, Mengbishan (where particularly conspicuous and common), and on Balang Shan.

White-browed Rosefinch was split into two a while ago, with the other, Himalayan, species now known as *Himalayan White-browed Rosefinch*, *Carpodacus thura*.

Streaked Rosefinch***Carpodacus rubicilloides***

Just recorded in Qinghai, where only Lisa and Dixie found a male in a valley west of Chaka.

Red-fronted Rosefinch***Carpodacus puniceus***

Two separate males, and a female, were seen near the pass at Balang Shan in Sichuan. This striking and large rosefinch, is one of the highest breeding songbirds on Earth, occurring up to an elevation of 5700m/18,700ft.

Oriental Greenfinch***Chloris sinica***

Three were seen in the Chengdu University grounds (which included juvenile birds), and another two were seen inside the Giant Panda Breeding Centre in the city too. Another was seen at Longcanggou in Sichuan, and a final bird was seen by John, Sam and Ken on the departure day, when they birded Beishan on the edge of Xining city (Qinghai).

Also known as *Gray-capped Greenfinch*.

Red Crossbill***Loxia curvirostra***

One short sighting of a male at Mengbishan by Sam and Lisa at least.

Twite***Carduelis flavirostris***

Commonly found on the Tibetan Plateau, in both Sichuan and Qinghai.

Tibetan Serin***Serinus thibetanus***

Half a dozen birds were seen at the Primeval Forest inside Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan).

Also known as *Tibetan Siskin*.

Gray-headed Bullfinch***Pyrrhula erythaca***

Seen at four sites in Sichuan: Erlangshan, Longcanggou, Gong Gang Ling, and best of all at Jiuzhaigou, where both males and females fed low.

Yellow-billed Grosbeak***Eophona migratoria***

Only seen in Chengdu, one our first day, where a handful of birds were seen in Du Fu's Thatched Cottage, Chengdu University, and just outside the Giant Panda Breeding Centre.

Also known as *Chinese Grosbeak*.

Collared Grosbeak***Mycerobas affinis***

Great views were had of a striking male at Mengbishan one morning. Another pair were seen more distantly the same morning there too.

White-winged Grosbeak***Mycerobas carnipes***

Several groups were seen and heard at Mengbishan near Maerkang; another pair was seen west of Chaka in Qinghai.

OLD WORLD SPARROWS: PASSERIDAE**House Sparrow*****Passer domesticus***

Not common on this tour, just a single bird was seen in the city of Jiuzhaigou.

Russet Sparrow***Passer rutilans***

Just recorded on the one day around Erlangshan (Sichuan), when about six birds were seen in all.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow***Passer montanus***

A common mostly urban species, encountered at a number of different spots.

Rock Petronia***Petronia petronia***

A pair were found breeding on Chaka Flats, and a few others were seen in a valley west of there (Qinghai), another pair were seen on the journey back to Xining from Heimahe.

Also known as *Rock Sparrow*.

Tibetan Snowfinch***Montifringilla henrici*****endemic**

Small, though conspicuous, groups, were seen on two different days, around the pass in the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai.

Split from *White-winged Snowfinch*, and also known as *Henri's Snowfinch*.

Black-winged Snowfinch***Montifringilla adamsi***

Several were seen at the Pink-tailed Bunting site in Qinghai, and others were seen nearer the pass in the Rubber Mountains.

Also known as *Adam's Snowfinch*, and, confusingly, also as *Tibetan Snowfinch* (a name shared with the above species also)!

White-rumped Snowfinch***Montifringilla taczanowskii***

A few were seen on two days in the Rubber Mountains in Qinghai, when they were encountered around *pika* colonies as usual.

Pere David's Snowfinch***Montifringilla davidiana***

This bearded snowfinch was seen on two different days, in the same area of Chaka Flats (Qinghai). Two birds were visiting one of the few waterholes in the area (which also attracted *Blanford's Snowfinch*, a male *Citrine Wagtail*, and a *Lesser Short-toed Lark*).

Also known as *Small Snowfinch*.

Pere David refers to Father Armand David, a missionary from France, who conducted zoological surveys in China in the 19th Century, which uncovered well over 50 new species. The most famous of these expeditions brought the Giant Panda to Europe's (and the western World's) attention.

Rufous-necked Snowfinch***Montifringilla ruficollis***

The most abundant snowfinch in the Rubber Mountains (of Qinghai), where they are also remarkably tame at times. Recorded regularly in this area.

Blanford's Snowfinch***Montifringilla blanfordi***

Small numbers were seen on Chaka Flats (the land of the *Mongolian Ground-Jay* and *Pallas's Sandgrouse*), in Qinghai. Also known as *Plain-backed Snowfinch*.

WAXBILLS AND ALLIES: ESTRILDIDAE**White-rumped Munia*****Lonchura striata***

Just a single small flock was seen in the Giant Panda Centre in Chengdu.



Tibetan prayer flags adorn many high mountain passes and Holy areas in Sichuan and Qinghai.

MAMMALS**SCIURIDAE: SQUIRRELS****Pallas's Squirrel*****Callosciurus erythraeus***

Seen at Erlangshan and Longcanggou in Sichuan.

Himalayan Marmot***Marmota himalayana***

Seen on seven days of the tour: on Sichuan's Tibetan Plateau, at Balang Shan, in Qinghai's Rubber Mountains, and near Chaka (also Qinghai).

Siberian Chipmunk***Tamias sibiricus***

Seen at the Primeval Forest inside the park at Jiuzhaigou (Sichuan).

MURIDAE: OLD WORLD RATS AND MICE**Mid-Day Gerbil*****Meriones meridianus******guide only***

Unfortunately, just Sam got this one, on the flats at Chaka (Qinghai).

OCHOTONIDAE: PIKAS**Plateau Pika*****Ochotona curzoniae***

Many were seen in large colonies up on the Tibetan Plateau in Qinghai, one of which was being terrorized by a *Tibetan Fox*.

Moupin Pika***Ochotona thibetana***

A couple of singles were seen on Mengbishan in Sichuan.

LEPORIDAE: RABBITS & HARES**Woolly Hare*****Lepus oiostolus***

Seen four or five times in the Chaka area (Qinghai).

CANIDAE: DOGS & FOXES**Tibetan Fox*****Vulpes ferrilata***

Ken found a fantastic animal on the far side of the Rubber Mountains Pass, where it was seen having just caught a *Plateau Pika*, which it was then seen to stash underground. Presumably the same animal was seen a few days later around the same pika colony.

MUSTELIDAE: WEASELS, BADGERS, MARTENS, AND OTTERS**Mountain Weasel*****Mustela altaica***

guide only

Sam had one of these ginger weasels on Balang Shan (Sichuan).

CERVIDAE: DEER**Tufted Deer*****Elaphodus cephalophus***

One was seen, albeit briefly, at Mengbishan; another was seen at Balang Shan.

BOVIDAE: CATTLE, ANTELOPE, CATTLE, BISON, BUFFALO, GOATS & SHEEP**Takin*****Budorcas taxicolor***

Two of these enormous beasts were seen at Longcanggou (Sichuan). For such a large beast they proved their speed quickly, crossing from one hillside to another in no time at all.

Chinese Serow***Capricornis milneedwardsii***

One was seen on the journey between Gong Gang Ling and the Tibetan Plateau (in Sichuan).

Chinese Goral***Naemorhedus griseus***

Lisa found one of these goats feeding on a hillside near Beimuping (Sichuan).



The stunning cuisine of both Sichuan and Qinghai make this tour appealing for foodies.

And some other photos from the tour...



The amazing scenery at Balang Shan (especially after it snows), combines with incredible birds like Chinese Monal, White Eared-Pheasant, Grandala, Red-fronted Rosefinch, and Himalayan Rubythroat to make this Sam's favorite guiding day anywhere.



John searches for snowcocks, Snow Partridges, Grandalas and Co. on Balang Shan



A Little Owl stares down at us from its road sign nesting hole on Qinghai's Tibetan Plateau



This scenic lake in the stunningly beautiful Jiuzhaigou Valley played host to Spectacled Parrotbill



White-browed Laughingthrushes were seen easily on our day around Sichuan's capital, Chengdu



This tour was about pheasants, and even the so-called "Common" ones are fine looking!



Kung Pao Chicken, where it originated, in Sichuan



Our final, snow-cloaked, morning on Balang Shan, made for some wonderful photography opportunities