



Taiwan, 26-30th October 2019

I had a week beyond the half term that I needed to use up, and tempted by numerous stunning photos of endemics on the internet I decided I could do worse than head to Taiwan for a few days. Originally this was planned as a pure photography trip with a friend, however he ended up not being able to come and the trip therefore became a birding trip. As it turned out the photography was exceedingly hard in the largely forest habitat, but the birding was so exciting that this didn't matter in the slightest.

In just over four days of birding I saw nearly all the endemics and a large number of Taiwanese sub-species that may one day get elevated whilst I am sat in my armchair. I did not use a guide, and birded from first light to dusk every day, with the exception of one day where I had to take a painful mid-morning break to get a new tyre fitted to my hire car.

Logistics

- Four and a half days of birding in late October which is one of the drier months on this largely tropical island, but a longer trip due to complicated travel arrangements.
- **Getting there:** I flew from Stockholm via Doha and Hong Kong on Qatar Airways and Cathay Pacific. There are quicker ways of getting there, and cheaper, but I got to travel in extreme comfort and experienced no jet lag at any point. However I left London (on a separate ticket that straddled the long-haul flights) on Thursday morning and did not arrive in Taipei until after dark on Friday, albeit that I had a nice day of tourism in Stockholm. On the return I left Taipei mid-afternoon on Wednesday and arrived home in London on Thursday evening. This included a night in a fantastic hotel next to a souk on the outskirts of Doha. I love travel and I love birding, and I don't mind more of the former at the expense of the latter. Die-hard listers will likely want to get there faster and there are a number of options that would perhaps give you a couple of hours birding near Taipei on the first afternoon and allow for positioning to the central mountains that evening.
 - The flight to Doha from Stockholm left at 11pm, therefore in theory I could have left far later from London and still made it. However this is a very risky strategy as if you are not present in Stockholm for the departure your entire ticket is cancelled. It is not Qatar Airway's fault that British Airways (or whoever) did not get you to Stockholm on time; you are simply deemed a no-show. This is the risk of buying cheaper airline tickets from European cities, therefore I left London early to ensure plenty of time for screw-ups. In the event there were none and I had an excellent day in Stockholm. On the way back the worst that could happen

is that you miss your flight back to London and have to buy another one, so I baked in zero contingency. Everything went smoothly.

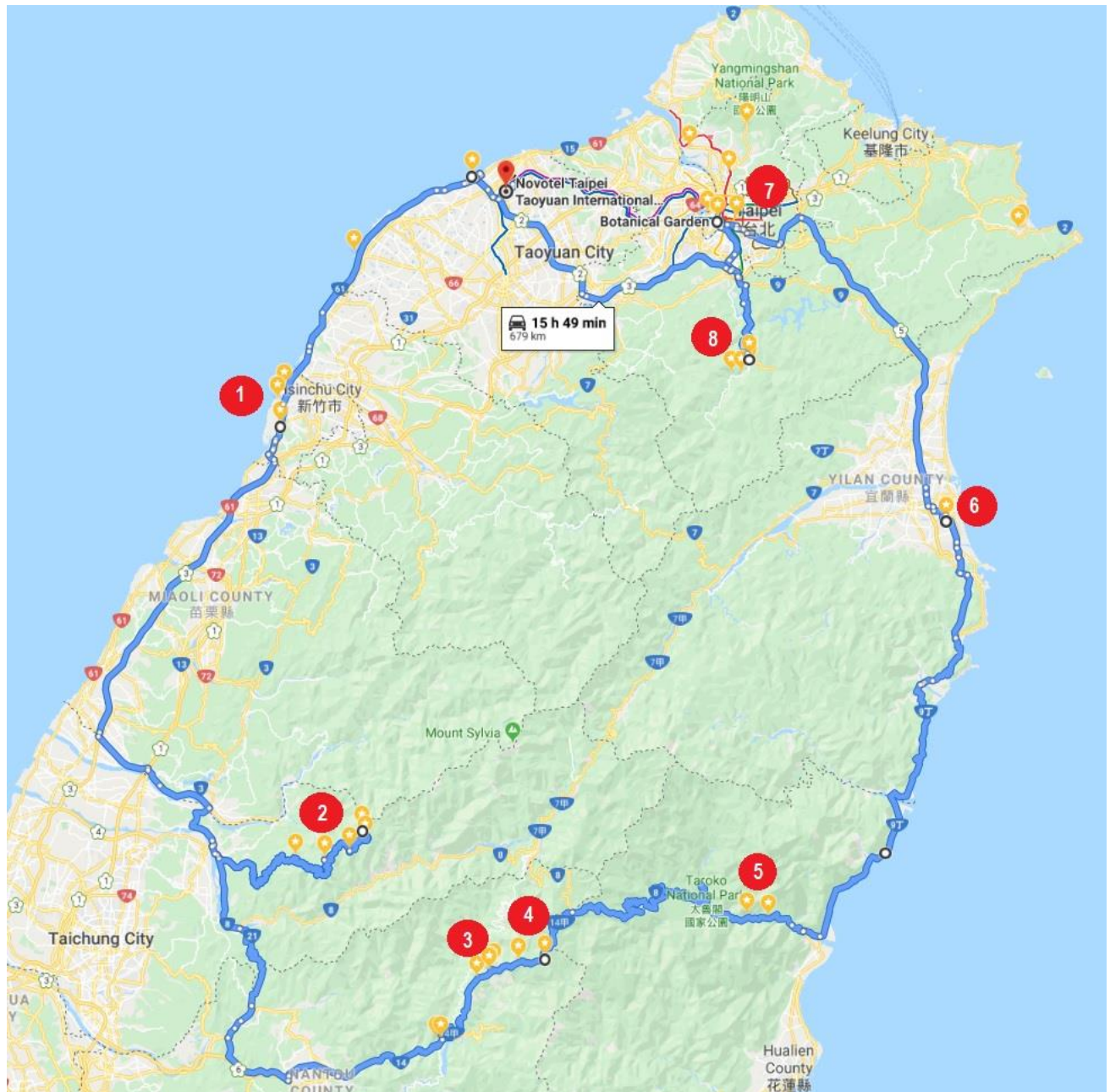
- **Car Hire:** I hired a Ford Focus automatic from Avis for five days which cost about £300, on the expensive side of destinations. I added a wi-fi router for an additional £12, which meant I paid no roaming charges. It is essential that you have an International Driving Permit to rent a car in Taiwan. These are available from larger UK Post Offices for £5 and require a passport photo. Note that Taiwan does not seem to appear on the list of destinations that require one, therefore the counter staff will probably tell you that you do not need one. Just insist.
- **Driving:** Generally exceptionally easy when I had all four tyres, and though I could not read many of the road signs the sat-nav (simply Google Maps on my phone) got me to all destinations and birding sites flawlessly.
 - Many of the freeways are toll roads, but there are no barriers or toll booths. Hire cars all come with a tag and you settle up at the end. I drove a large loop of approximately 850km around the northern half of Taiwan and racked up a bill of only £4.
 - The Taiwanese are not the greatest drivers. Sitting in the outside lane on the freeway is accepted, and thus there is a lot of undertaking and weaving about. On mountain roads drivers seem to have no particular concerns about overtaking on blind bends, nor taking a racing line or a nice wide oncoming turn. I came to expect this after a short while. Keeping alert will keep you safe. Beware of roadside rocks....
 - In Taipei in particular be very aware of mopeds, of which there are thousands coming at you from all directions.
- **Parking:** There are no parking meters, instead Parking Wardens will come along and place a ticket (not a fine!) on your windscreen after a short while, and continue to add tickets at whatever time unit is relevant until you leave. You can then pay these tickets off at a number of convenient shops, such as 7-11s, which are everywhere in Taiwan
- **Accommodation:** Other than the first night where I stayed at the airport before collecting my hire car the following accommodation I did not book in advance as I wanted to remain flexible in the event of bad weather in the various mountain ranges which are susceptible to rain and poor visibility at all times of the year. With the exception of Wushe and Wulai which are very touristy, there are limited hotel options in the areas where birders will spend most of their time. Knowing this I packed a sleeping bag and slept in the car on two of the nights, which also meant I could be birding at first light. Softer birders may consider booking into Anma Lodge at Daxueshan, although this needs to be done well in advance. Google helped me find hotels on the other nights, which were £40-£50 per night.
- **Language:** In Taipei you can get by with pidgin English. In rural areas you are very much on your own, however Google is marvellous at translating into Mandarin and both displays the text and speaks it. Note that Mandarin is not the only language in Taiwan and you may come across someone who is a Hokkien speaker. I am guessing this is what happened to me once or twice, and I reverted to basic sign language which is universally understood.
- **Money and Prices:** The Taiwanese currency is the TWD. At the time of my visit I got about 40 to the pound. Cash machines are abundant, and generally found in most 7-11s or Family Marts. Hotels were pleasantly cheap, food even more so. Parking in central Taipei cost about 50 TWD per hour, and a full tank of fuel for the car cost 1500 TWD. A new tyre was 2400 TWD.... My total spend including the tyre over the five days was just under £300.

- **Food:** Armed with a few basic Mandarin phrases and an uncanny ability to replicate the sounds that animals like ducks and chickens make, I ate excellent and cheap food. Roast duck, vegetables and rice one evening cost 80 TWD. The most expensive meal I ate was the equivalent of £7 in a restaurant near Wulai. 7-11s provided breakfast and lunch. Generally this was sushi or a pot-noodle. In the UK if you can still find a 7-11 it will be shit. In Taiwan they are a fundamental part of life and completely excellent. Pot noodles came in a million varieties, cost next to nothing, and the 7-11s all have boiling water and microwaves on standby for customers.
- **People:** Extremely friendly and helpful, especially in times of need, and lots of smiling. The chap who fixed my tyre made me a coffee and his wife insisted on making up my pot noodle. Everyone says hello, either in Mandarin “Ni-hao”, or in English if they can manage it, and change is returned with a small bow.
- **Health and Safety:** Taiwan is one of the safest countries in Asia, at no point did I feel in any danger whatsoever wandering around with tons of optics, nor leaving stuff in the car.
- **Literature:** I used the Birds of East Asia by Mark Brazil which was all I needed. It is admittedly a little bulky, but it will fit into a cargo pocket if you bend it a bit. Field guides are supposed to be abused. Various trip reports of the web were consulted, especially on the main areas like Daxueshan and Wushe-Wuling, and in Richard Rae’s who happens to be a mate of mine and did a similar solo trip in 2012. The ever-fabulous EBird.org helped me work out what had been seen recently at these sites, and when time was tight helped me work out where my remaining targets were concentrated.



Hehuanshan Pass

Birding Areas



Hsinchu (1)

- Jincheng Lake and surrounding area good for **Ducks** and **Waders** (24.810249, 120.910903)
- Shuiziyuan Park – Good scrub habitat (24.796643, 120.916935)
- Xiangshan Wetlands – coastal mudflats good for **Waders** (24.783767, 120.914912)

Daxueshan Mountain (2) - the premier birding destination on the island, anywhere along the road is good. The road up starts at 24.247637, 120.832194.

- Km 6 – a roadside stop above a stables, good views of **Taiwan Hwamei** (24.233890, 120.877924)

- Km 11.5 – a roadside stop above agricultural area was good for **Collared Finchbill** and **Grey Treepie** (24.220592,120.892322)
- Km 14.5 – take the minor road on the right heading down the river through bamboos. Trails either side of the bridge good for birding, particularly downstream. Good site for **Taiwan Scimitar Babbler**, **Brown Dipper** and **Plumbeous Redstart** (24.239214,120.909600)
- Km 23 – regular **Swinhoe's Pheasant** stake-out (24.246602,120.935405)
- Km 35 – past the entrance booths track 210 to the left of small temple can offer good forest birding (24.245458,120.974852)
- Km 50 – lots of trails, I found the area around the small lake to be the best, with **Taiwan Fulvetta**, **Flamecrest** and **Steere's Liochichla** aplenty (24.282674,121.027152)

Wushe to Wuling (3-4)

- Km 15.5, the “Blue Gate” trailhead is on the northern side of the road, and there is plenty of space to pull a car off the road. On eBird this is known as “Ruiyan River Major Wildlife Habitat – Shuigan Trail 0-3km”. Good forest birding, I found lots of **Flycatchers** along this section (roughly 24.097183,121.181050)
- Km 18, a side road to the north with a Police Station on the corner (24.105453,121.197522) leads down to the “Continuation Trail”, which is an extension of the aforementioned “Blue Gate” trail. There is a small spot to park at about 24.111226,121.196307. On eBird this is the same as the above, except 3-5km. Excellent forest birding, the only place I found **Taiwan Wren Babbler (Cupwing)**, **Taiwan Barwing** and **Taiwan Shortwing**.
- Km 24 (Yuanfeng) – a small rest area where I found various montane species (24.117961,121.237117)
- Km 29 (Kunyang, Hehuanshan Mountain) – amazing views of **White-whiskered Laughingthrushes** and **Taiwan Rosefinch** (24.122638,121.272377)

Taroko National Park (5) – almost anywhere along Route 8 has potential, and the landscape scenery is breathtaking.

- 7.5km east of Dayuling on route 8 – a random stop produced **Mikado Pheasant** feeding by the road (roughly 24.185371,121.351678)
- Luoshao – good spot along the river for general birding (24.205566,121.451795)
- Buluowan Service Area – excellent birding on both the lower and upper terrace trails, as well as around the car park. Lots of Tits (24.170502,121.574243)

Yilan (6)

- Lizejian / Wusheirjian Wetlands – excellent paddyfield habitat filled with **Waders**, **Ducks**, **Egrets** and **Raptors** (24.659980,121.818578)

Taipei / Taoyuan (7)

- Botanic Gardens – exceedingly busy but the site for **Malayan Night Heron**. Lots of potential for a couple of hours (25.032654,121.508821)
- Huajiangyanya Natural Park – Wetland Area within convenient distance of the Botanic Gardens (25.039023,121.493591)
- Xucuogang Wetlands – wader habitat, various ponds and mangroves (25.087850,121.175995)

Wulai (8)

- Laxa Trail – from the multi-storey car park bear right over the first bridge and then turn immediately left along the right bank of the eastern fork of the river. After about 400m take some steps on your right at 24.862263,121.554417 and bird the lanes around the cemetery. Birds everywhere, including flocks of the **Taiwan Blue Magpie** 24.860580,121.553685
- Road to Wulai Falls 24.861541,121.551366. Good birding all the way to the falls and beyond, lots of mixed flocks and numerous **Taiwan Whistling Thrush** along the river. I walked to about 24.839742,121.538513

Itinerary

Day 1: Collected hire car at 8am and birded my way down the west coast, the site of particular note was Jincheng Lake and the surrounding agricultural area near Hsinchu City. Arrived Daxueshan Mountain at around 1pm and birded my way up to km 50 by dusk. Overnight in the car at km 50.

Day 2: Daxueshan all day, birding down from km 50 to the start, then drove to Wushe in the evening. Hotel east of Wushe on northern branch of the 14.

Day 3: Early morning birding the “Blue Gate” trails, however several hours lost due to tyre issues that could only be sorted out at Puli. Afternoon up to the Wuling Pass / Hehuanshan Mountain, and then down to Taroko Gorge. Overnight in the car at Luoshao.

Day 4: Birded from Luoshao down to Taroko entrance via Tianxiang and Bulowan. Afternoon stops at the Lizejian/Wushierjia Wetlands at Yilan, and then onwards to Taipei where I stopped briefly at the Botanical Garden and then birded the Huajiangyanya Natural Park alongside the Tamsui River until dusk. Evening drive to Wulai where I found a reasonably priced hotel.

Day 5: Birded Wulai all morning, firstly the Laxa trail on the eastern branch of the river, and then along the western branch of the river up to approximately Xinxian. Then back to Taipei for a 2pm flight.

Day by day account

Day 1

I picked up the hire car from Avis as soon as they opened and was relieved to find that my paperwork was all in order and that the international driving permit had not been in vain. I then drove a short distance to the coast to start birding. The first site, Xucuogang Wetlands, was not actually that promising but it was good to finally start birding. The sandy promontory had roosting **Kentish Plover**, **Sanderling** and **Dunlin**, and the mangroves and pools had various egrets and my first **Light-vented (Chinese) Bulbul** and **Eastern Yellow Wagtails**. I did not linger here and continued down to Hsinchu where there were a cluster of sites I wanted to visit.

The first of these was Jincheng Lake, which had my first **Eastern Spot-billed Ducks**, **Teal**, **Wigeon** and **Shoveler**, and numerous **Redshank**, **Greenshank**, **Black-winged Stilt**, **Little Ringed Plover** and a single **Common Sandpiper**. The list was coming along nicely already but what I needed was Asian species rather than the stuff I can get in Europe. This was rectified in the paddyfields surrounding the site, which had **Black Drongos** and **Red Turtle Doves** perched on the wires, and a **Swinhoe's Snipe** in a field. Whilst pondering the **Snipe** ID a large pipit sounding like a sparrow flew across my field of vision – it was of course a **Richard's Pipit**, and I got good scope views of that too.



Chinese Bulbul (L), Black Drongo (R)

At nearby Shuiziyuan Park I investigated some scrubby habitat which had some **Munias**, a **Long-tailed Shrike**, **Oriental Magpies** and in the skies above, my first **Striated Swallows** and **Pacific Swifts**. **Common Mynas** were everywhere.

By now it was mid-morning and whilst I had a nice start with perhaps 40 species, it was time to start getting serious. I stopped at a 7-11 for provisions and then drove south to Taichung to pick up the road to Daxueshan Mountain. This took about two hours but was easy enough. The road starts off in the town but gradually narrows and starts winding, and a very large pheasant sculpture tells you that you are nearly there. It was soon after this point that I found my first proper birds, a flock of **Grey-chinned Minivets** in yellow and scarlet-orange, chasing each other round the trees.



Grey-chinned Minivet

The road up the mountain has helpful green signs marking off the kilometres, and at about 14.5km I turned right down a minor road to the river. Leaving the car at the bridge I walked upstream along the right bank, quickly finding a **Brown Dipper** which was a surprisingly chunky bird. Other birds here included **Oriental Turtle Dove** and **Daurian Redstart**, and hundreds of huge Orb-Weaver Spiders.



Taiwan Hill Partridge (L), Brown Dipper (R)

At Km 23 there is a parking area and this is a well-known spot for **Swinhoe's Pheasant**. I joined the small group of people hanging around, many with cameras, and understood that a short while earlier a male had been seen up the slope on the other side of the road. I had no idea about the timings but I felt it was worth waiting. It was probably about half past two in the afternoon and I had plenty of time. Shortly after this it all kicked off, and two female **Swinhoe's Pheasant** came to the forest edge on the downward slope. Remarkably (or not, this may be a regular occurrence) they were then joined by two **Taiwan Hill Partridge**, and for good measure a **Steere's Liochicla** popped out. Endemic overload! The male **pheasant** had obviously been lingering above the road as it flew across and down the slope, but in fact there were two as shortly after than I spotted another. It looked like it wanted to cross but a barrage of tourist photographers put paid to that and it turned

tail and returned from where it came. Nonetheless, to get **Swinhoe's** and especially the **Partridge** so quickly was great news and in the event they were the only ones I saw all trip. A group of European birders arrived, keen to see the **Partridges**, and their tour leader introduced himself as Richard Foster, a guy I had been conversing with on Twitter prior to arriving. He offered me some useful gen on the area which was great.



Swinhoe's Pheasant

At Km 35 there is an entrance gate to the higher levels in the Park (24.244564,120.974995). This closes at five and I wanted to get through to be able to stay the night so I motored on, stopping only for a small group of birds which turned out to be **White-eared Sibia**. Once though (300 TWD) I walked track 210, the start of which is about 75m beyond the entrance booth and next to a small temple. It is fenced off to vehicles but people are free to nip past the gate and bird the path. At this time of year it gets dark by about 5.30, and as this was approaching I didn't see much here as it was very gloomy, but got my only **White-tailed Robin** of the trip.



White-eared Sibia

After this I drove up to Km 43 and had dinner at the restaurant next to Anna Lodge (24.255388,121.007127). This buffet seems only really to be for people staying at the hotel but they were happy for me to contribute 300 TWD and have some food and tea. Others may have a different experience. After this I drove up to Km 50 and tucked the car away in the lower car park (24.279132,121.025070), broke out the sleeping bag, and tried to get to sleep in a variety of different positions, none of which were very successful. A Ford Focus is just a little bit small. A real bonus here, at 2500m, was the presence of a toilet with a heated seat!

Day 2

I woke up at 6am and it was perfectly light! Somehow I had managed to sleep for hours and hours, and now needed to get cracking. I went and had a wash at the toilet block, had a 7-11 pastry, and went birding. I was hoping for **Mikado Pheasant**, often seen around this area at first light, but my dreams went unfulfilled. Walking the track that goes up to the lake behind the visitor centre I encountered a flock of **Taiwan Yuhina**, followed quickly by two **Collared Bush Robins**. Around the lake were mixed flocks of small birds flitting through the pines, **Green-backed Tits** and **Coal Tits** (race "ptilosus" which have a really pronounced crest), but best of all **Flamecrests**, another Taiwan endemic. Also here were my first **White-whiskered Laughingthrush**, a **Taiwan Fulvetta** in some bamboo, a female **Vinaceous Rosefinch** and a group of **Steere's Liochicla**. The commonest birds were **Nutcrackers**, always a good sign.



Coal Tit (L), Steere's Liocichla (R)

Walking back down to the visitor centre I took a new path, track 230 (24.290399,121.025508). This is also closed to vehicles and is a known site for the **pheasant**, but after walking about 2km all I had to show for it were more **Flamecrests**, **Green-backed Tits** and a **Large-billed Crow**. Surprisingly quiet, and despite the lengthy list of endemics I had seen I returned to the visitor centre rather disconsolate as on such a tight timetable it looked like my one and only opportunity for **Mikado Pheasant** had passed. By now it was 10am and the first coaches were arriving, depositing crowds of brightly-coloured and extremely noisy tourists all keen to go and enjoy the great outdoors. It was time to leave. I tried my luck at the km 48 car park, even walking up to the watchpoint (24.265866,121.033828) and back, but still no **Pheasants**. Barely any birds at all actually, it was absurdly quiet.



Flamecrest

Things picked up at around km 37 (roughly 24.251143,120.984155). I had been stopping frequently wherever there was space to pull the car over, and in the trees below the road and thus at eye level I found a large mixed flock. This was dominated by **Taiwan Yuhina**, stunning **Black-throated Bushtits** and **Green-backed Tits**, but in amongst them was a smart **Taiwan Yellow Tit** – the only one I would see. Accompanying this flock was a **Rufous-faced Babbler**, a number of **Rufous-faced Warblers**, a couple of **European Nuthatches** and a pair of **Grey-chinned Minivets**. It was a great half an hour, and it was also around here that I saw my first **Ashy Woodpigeon**, a bird I was to hear far more often than see.



Tawian Yuhina (L), Black-throated Bushtit (R)

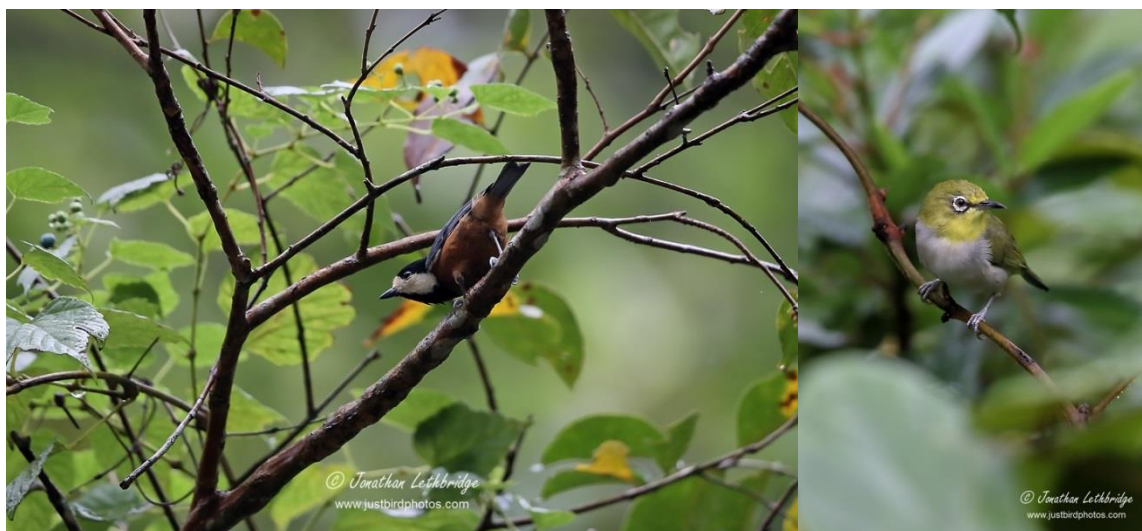
Descending further to km 35 I met Richard Foster and his group again on track 210, who advised that it was a dead as yesterday. They had stayed outside the park and were birding their way up, and advised that the downstream path at km 14.5 had been good earlier in the day. I bypassed km 23 which was a total zoo and went back to the river and walked the track along the north bank to 24.237713,120.907103. Here I found my first **Taiwan Scimitar Babbler**, an **Arctic Warbler**, and a pair of **Plumbeous Redstarts**. Better than this I also flushed three **Taiwan Bamboo Partridge**, again the only ones I was to see all trip. Nearly back at the car I noticed a large raptor high overhead – **Indian Black Eagle**!



Taiwan Scimitar Babbler (L), Plumbeous Redstart (R)

Back on the main road by the Dadong Police Station I stepped into the edge of a garden to observe a busy tree (**Varied Tits** and **Himalayan Black Bulbuls**). A resident came out to see what I was doing, and turned out to be French. She was living with an American and a Taiwanese lady, and they were all doing kibbutz-style agricultural tourism. The Taiwanese girl had never used binoculars before and it was special treat to see her reaction when she got the **Bulbuls** in view. I was invited in for soup and cup of tea which was really nice, and had an extremely good chat with some very interesting people. It is little asides like this which really help make a trip.

I made a further stop at km 11.5 (24.220592,120.892322) which gained me **Collared Finchbills**, a group of **White-rumped Munias**, and a noisy group of **Grey Treepies**. One final stop at around km 6 (24.233890,120.877924), just above a stables, had several **Taiwan Hwamei**, loads of **Swinhoe's White-eye**, and my first **Taiwan Barbet** perched in a dead tree.



Varied Tit (L), Swinhoe's White-eye (R)

In the failing light I drove to Ren-ai Township, a good two hours away, to get in position for the next day. Along the way I managed to order a nice roast duck meal and found a tolerable B&B to stay in. It had been a long day, shame about the Pheasant but what can you do? My list of endemics was already looking very decent, and I was in prime habitat for more.

Day 3

Up early again and quickly drove the 9km to the start of what is known as the Continuation Trail, or Kilometres 3-5 of the Blue Gate Trail. This is at 18km (again the road is marked with distances), about 600m down a side road to the north which has an obvious Police Station at the top. I drove down to where I thought the trail cut across this road but could not find it, and so turned the car around thinking I must have missed it. This is when disaster struck. The road was surprisingly busy at 6am, and is mostly very narrow. On the way back up I had to take evasive action from a blue truck that was hurtling down and in doing so there was a tremendous bang as I went over a rock that must have been hidden under roadside vegetation. It felt really bad, and I limped up to the main road and pulled over to inspect the damage. There was a horrible noise coming from the right hand side of the car which I presumed was either my tyre deflating or some vital liquid leaking from a sheared pipe. Getting out the noise was in fact coming from a drain that I had parked on top of and not the car, however my tyre was shafted, with a tennis ball sized protrusion on the side wall. My plans today included driving over the highest road pass in Taiwan, there was no way I could risk that in this state. I checked the boot for a spare but there was just an empty well - thanks Avis. What to do? It was 6am and nowhere would be open, so I just left it there next to the Police Station (which was closed) and went birding.

The start of the Continuation Trail was in fact just a little further down from where I had turned around, and despite the car problem weighing rather heavily on my mind, I was into great birding immediately. Almost the first bird seen was a **Taiwan Wren Babbler (Cupwing)**. It was in near darkness by the side of the damp trail and called incredibly loudly. I managed to get bins on it as it hopped in the leaf litter and then it teleported away. There was nowhere it could have gone but it literally vanished into thin air and I couldn't find it again.

About a kilometre further on I found a **Taiwan Barwing** creeping around a tree, and very close by a **Taiwan Shortwing** in the bottom of a bush. What a spot this is! I followed the trail to where it ends in a large landslide, and found another **Shortwing** and another **Cupwing** here. The **Cupwing** was again in leaf litter, and this time I saw what the other one had done. I was only about six feet from it when it popped out of the leaf litter, gave a loud buzzing call, and then dove about 2 feet horizontally back into the leaf litter and vanished. I remember a **Lancey** doing something similar on Shetland once. Unfortunately I didn't get a single photo along here, the birds were impossible and it was virtually dark!



The Blue Gate Trailhead

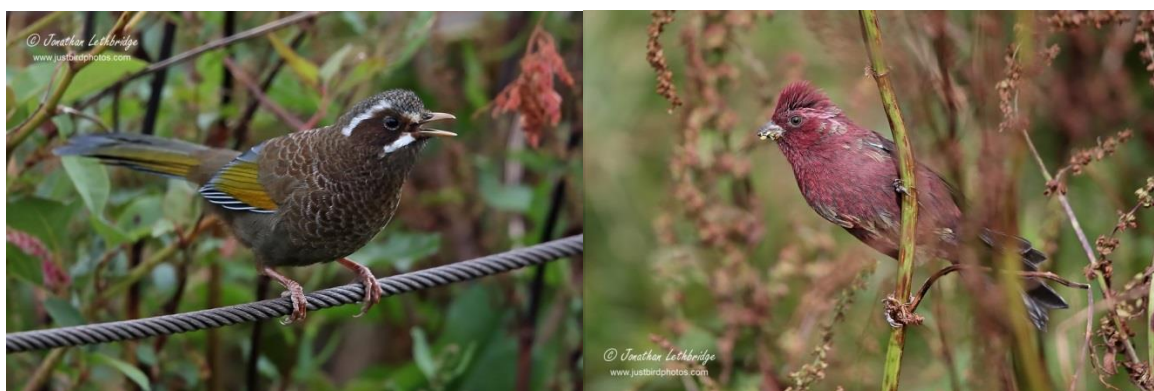
As good as the birding was, the tyre continued to play on my mind and I knew I had to get it sorted before I did anything else. It was now 8am and probably things like garages would be opening. Back up at the Police Station there was a Policeman, and I showed him the wheel. At least it was an obvious issue I could point at, as my Mandarin extends as far as “rice” and things like that and not “I need a replacement tyre please”. He went into the station, got his phone and spoke some Mandarin into it. I was hoping he was calling a good friend of his who ran a local garage, but actually he was just using Google Translate as I had been doing, and his phone soon told me that it was “advisable that I go to a car repair factory as soon as possible”. Quite. There was nothing in the direction I wanted to go, so I limped back towards Wushe and stopped at a petrol station. A bit of gesticulating occurred and I established, once again via Google, that there was “a car repair centre 15 minutes down the road”. Remarkably I managed to find this without the tyre giving out, but the owner just shook his head and said “Puli”, which is a township a further 40 minutes down the mountain.

I nursed the car to Puli, which was a lot bigger and had lots and lots of car repair places to try. I chose one of the red dots amongst a gaggle of dots in case I had to try several, but the first place I stopped at was perfect. It was run by a husband and wife team who got to work straight away whilst

I went to a nearby 7-11 for cash. When I came back the car was jacked up and the new tyre being prepared so I had time for a pot noodle as an early lunch. The garage had a hot-water cylinder as most places in Taiwan seem to, but as I started to make it it was literally ripped out of my hands and prepared for me, and then I was ushered towards a sofa (yes, the garage had a sofa), sat down and given a set of chopsticks. The car was soon back to four wheels again for a very reasonable 2400 TWD (c£60 – KwikFit it ain't) and the owner pressed a cup of coffee into my hands and waved me on my way. It took over an hour to get back to the birding trails. I had lost two hours and forty minutes of birding as a result, but I felt hugely upbeat now that this was resolved. Sometimes this is just what happens and you just deal with it. I did see another **Indian Black Eagle** along the way though.

This time I birded the first section of the Blue Gate Trail, starting at km 15.5. Mid-morning this was **Flycatcher** central. **Vivid Niltava**, **Ferruginous Flycatcher** and **Snowy-browed Flycatcher** all showed well, along with lots of **Black-throated Bushtits**. There were at least three **Ashy Woodpigeon** along this trail as well, but the views were very difficult.

By now it was midday – I had hoped to be at the Hehuanshan Pass by now! I raced back to the car in double-quick time and started heading up. I made slow progress as I felt compelled to stop everywhere and have a quick look and listen. This gained me a **Yellow-bellied Bush Warbler** at around km 24, but actually the best birding was at km 29 just below the pass. Here, on the edges of a large car park, were some very tame **Vinaceous Rosefinches** and **White-whiskered Laughingthrushes**. Nearby a family party of **Grey-headed Bullfinches** were in a pine tree, the only ones I saw. I spent a long time here trying to find **Golden Parrotbills** in the bamboo as well as **Alpine Accentor** on the rocks, all to no avail. Now I had a problem. My plan had been to be at Tarako by 3pm to find **Styan's Bulbul**, and then drive to Yilan after sunset, but there was no way I was going to make it. I could either forgo the **Bulbul**, or stay overnight in Taroko, get it first thing, and then spend two hours of daylight getting to Yilan. I chose the latter as I also wanted to see Taroko Gorge in the daylight. It would mean cutting out some of the sites around Taipei but would probably not cost me any species.



White-whiskered Laughingthrush (L), Vinaceous Rosefinch (R)

Decision made, the pressure was slightly off now, and I could bird through towards Taroko in a reasonably leisurely fashion, stopping off at places that looked good. In doing so I finally got some sort of photo of a **Black-throated Bushtit**, and improved upon **Flamecrest** and **Yuhina**. I also added **Asian House Martin** to my list at another random stop, getting out of the car and hearing the characteristic farty noises from the sky above. This tactic of frequent stops really paid dividends

about 7.5km after Route 14 becomes Route 8. At another passing place I stopped at briefly, this time more to admire the view in the late afternoon sunshine, I became aware of leaf litter noises from the other side of the road. I had not yet got out of the car, and turning around in my seat I saw three **Pheasants** feeding on the verge. A male and two females, surely **Swi**.....wait a minute! I grabbed a record shot quickly and then consulted the field guide. They were **Mikado Pheasants**! I took a few more shots before the birds disappeared up the slope and from view. All my tyre woes were forgotten in that instant. Had I not hit that rock, had I not spent that time getting to Puli and back, would I have stopped at this point at this time of day? Richard Foster had said that **Mikado Pheasant** was a possibility on the other side of the pass, but had said early and I had assumed I had no chance. Yet here I was having clawed back probably the biggest tick, one of the hardest birds on Taiwan, the one that all the tours have to build in back-up stops for. I was cock-a-hoop!



Mikado Pheasant

I had dinner at Tianxiang and browsed eBird for a while to see where the best spot for **Morrison's Fulvetta (Grey-cheeked)**, one of my remaining targets in the area, was. Luoshao apparently, so that is where I drove and slept.

Day 4

I birded both sides of the river from the road at first light. The east side was better, with lots of **White-eyes** and **Collared Finchbills**, and finally **Morrison's Fulvetta**. I had in fact seen them before but had consistently misidentified them! There were also two **Taiwan Barbets** closer to the village and a **Rufous-browed Babbler**. The other side had a large number of **Himalayan Black Bulbul**, and good views of a troop of **Formosan Macaques**. I also added **White** and **Grey Wagtail** on the road, and **Large-billed Crows** were numerous. Today I was definitely keeping to time no matter what, and so carried on down to Taroko having got the bird I needed.

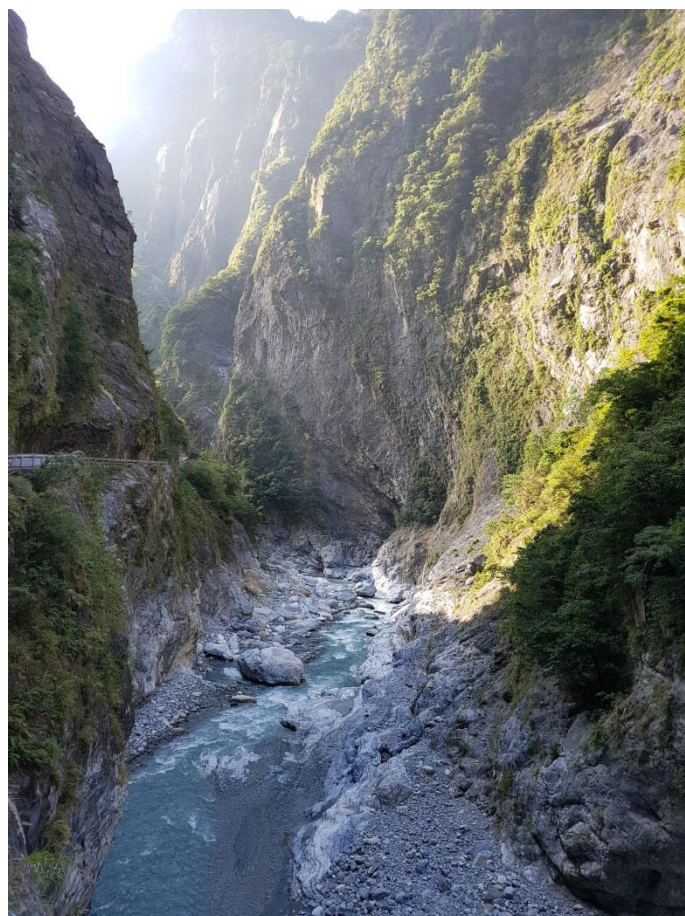


Morrison's Fulvetta (L), Collared Finchbill (R), Grey Wagtail (Bottom)

At Tianxiang I stopped to look at a bird that had been perched in the middle of the road at the exit from a tunnel, and in looking for it (it was a female **Plumbeous Redstart**) I chanced upon my first **Taiwan Whistling Thrush**. It was enormous, I hadn't appreciated from the field guide how large they are. Dead pleased with this, another critical endemic, my next roadside stop produced the hoped-for **Styan's Bulbul**, as well as the first **White-bellied Erpornis**, which is another potential split one day. There were also some **bulbuls** that may have been hybrids between **Styan's** and **Chinese (Light-vented)**; their ranges overlap here.



Styan's Bulbul (L, right hand bird), Taiwan Whistling Thrush (R)



Taroko Gorge

I then drove through the gorge which was breathtaking. Unbelievable in fact. Everywhere I stopped was a magnificent view, generally accompanied by a singing **Plumbeous Redstart** – I think I saw eight in Taroko in the space of two hours. One of my first versions of my itinerary had missed this area out on the basis that there was almost a total crossover of species between Daxueshan and Wushe-Wuling, and had Daxueshan been more productive I might never have come this way and seen this. I was glad that I had.

At Bulouwan Service Centre I concentrated on the lower and upper Terrace trails. The lower had the most birds, including some mixed flocks which contained **Arctic Warbler**, **Black-naped Monarch**, **Taiwan Yuhina** and **White-bellied Erpornis**. Yet another **Taiwan Whistling Thrush** called from down the slope. The upper meanwhile had at least four **Taiwan Barbets** feeding in a fruiting tree, and a nice flock of **Taiwan Sibia**. Back in the car park I tracked down a calling **Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker** in with a flock of **Varied** and **Green-backed Tits**. There were also plenty of **White Wagtails** and **Pacific Swallows** cruised overhead. This was a place I should have devoted more time to, but I simply couldn't – **Malayan Night Heron** and **Taiwan Blue Magpie** were important birds to get and I had less than a day to go. Reluctantly I drove down to the coast road and headed north towards Taipei.





Daurian Redstart (Top), Black-naped Monarch (L), Taiwan Barbet (R)

The journey as far as Yilan took forever, more than three hours. There were an inordinate number of works traffic lights and single file traffic. There is a huge construction program underway, which looks to be to do with drilling a series of huge tunnels down the east coast to replace large parts of the winding coast road that I was on. When complete it should make the east coast route very much faster but at the time of writing it made it a lot slower. Still, the scenery was nice, and at some point I saw a **Crested Serpent Eagle** cruising around.

I broke the journey at Yilan, arriving at around 1pm rather than midday as I had hoped. Drastic measures and all that, but this meant my time at the Lizejian Wetland complex was restricted to an hour. This was enough to add quite a few new birds to the trip list, but not to fully explore the area. It was a good site for raptors, with **Chinese Sparrowhawk**, **Osprey** and a hovering **Black-winged Kite**. There were stacks of **Egret** and I amused myself by trying to ID **Intermediate Egret** without referencing other **Egrets**. This was a lot harder than I thought, in the end I did have to find one standing next to a **Great White Egret** to be absolutely certain. Then again, je ne regrette rien.... I found several **Marsh Sandpipers**, flushed a **Yellow Bittern** from one of the many bunds that separated the small flooded fields, and a solitary **Whiskered Tern** fished near the main bridge.



Eastern Spot-billed Duck (L), Intermediate Egret with GWE foreground (R)

In the end I managed to drag myself away after an hour and a quarter and made for the Taipei Botanical Garden which I reached by about half past three. I found a parking spot directly next to the entrance which was extremely fortunate. I wasn't at that stage quite sure what the ticketing arrangements were, but the birds came first and I resolved to deal with it later. In short just find a space, you can pay at your convenience. I didn't have the field guide, so I used the Collins App to show people a photo of a **Black-crowned Night Heron**, hoping it was close enough. One of them dutifully led me to....a **Black-crowned Night Heron**. Doh! In the end it did not take long to find a **Malayan Night Heron** myself in the northern part of the garden, just pottering around in a flowerbed – remarkable! I took a few photos and then headed back to the car – for a moment my heart was in my mouth as there was a ticket on the windscreen but I soon worked it out, you just take it to a 7-11 and pay it there. It appeared to be 50 TWD per hour.



Malayan Night Heron. Adult (L), Juvenile (R)

I then drove through very busy traffic to Huajiangyanya Natural Park, also known as the Taipei Geese Protected Area. I had found this area on eBird and it looked very good. I parked the car right next to the site, and also right next to...another **Malayan Night Heron**, this time a juvenile bird, wandering across the grass next to a busy street without a care in the world! There seemed to be a twitch going on, as I could see a row of birdwatchers and tripods a short distance away. No doubt it would prove to be some kind of European dross that I had zero interest in! I was spot on as it happened, as they were all looking at a **Eurasian Spoonbill**! I seem to have form with this species in the wrong location, I found one on Barbados once. I would have much preferred it to be a **Black-faced Spoonbill**, but at least I had seen that species before in Hong Kong. Anyway, all the locals were rather excited, and one of them also pointed out another rarity to me, a **Bean Goose**. Good birding, with lots of **Waders**, **Egrets** and **Mynas** in some excellent habitat, but the only new birds beyond the 'rarities' that I could add were **Black-collared Starling** and **White-breasted Waterhen**.

That concluded my birding for the day. With a flight at about 2pm the following day, the only endemic species that I could still hope for around Taipei was the **Taiwan Blue Magpie** which was most likely around the village of Wulai, which is a hot-springs and spa destination about half an hour south of central Taipei in the foothills. I drove there through a very lively Taipei district called Wanhua, and had an excellent meal about half way there. The hotels were a little more expensive in Wulai than I had hoped, but I bargained the Karuizawa down to 2000 TWD which is about £50 when I couldn't pay by credit card as their machine was broken. The parking attendants were on point, getting a ticket on my car within ten minutes, and as it was a "per day" rate, another at an impressive 19 minutes past midnight that I discovered the following morning!

Day 5

Make or break in light drizzle. This appears to be *the* spot for the endemic **Taiwan Blue Magpie**, and I could not contemplate going home without it on my list. The latest entry in eBird had been about two weeks ago, with a flock of ten on the Laxa trails. These are only just outside the village on the eastern fork of the river, but I didn't even need to go that far. I heard some very Magpie-like clucking just past the school, i.e. within about three minutes of leaving my hotel. A large flock of birds were in a tree right by the side of the road, and one by one they flew out, perched on an overhead wire, and then flew across to perch in a dead tree where a record shot enabled me to count 13 birds, as well as two **Grey Treepie**. Superb!



Taiwan Blue Magpie

This put me rather at a loss. What should I do now? With no obvious new species at Wulai, what I should have done was to return to Taipei and try out some other areas I had marked down, such as the Yehliu peninsula which is great for migrants. This was only an hour away, but would have put me the wrong side of Taipei for the airport. I was also motivated by my 12pm check out, which would allow me to get out of my wet birding gear, have a shower, and pack up ready for the journey home. This is what I ended up doing, and so continued birding Wulai for the rest of the morning.

The Laxa trails are a series of paved lanes between the two branches of the river. They are partly residential (for both the living and the dead!) but the jungle has really rather taken over and as a

result they are really good for birding. I saw stacks – yet more **Whistling Thrush**, a flock of 70+ **Grey-chinned Minivets**, many more **Black Bulbul**, and some good mixed flocks. There were also three more **Taiwan Blue Magpie** and quite a few **Grey Treepie**.

Once I had exhausted this area I went back through the village, observing **House Swifts** overhead, crossed over the second bridge, and walked the minor road called Wenquan Street/Pubu Road all the way to Xiaxia Falls where there is a small suspension bridge. I took my trip count of **Whistling Thrush** to double figures along here, and there were many more mixed flocks of **Yuhina**, **Varied Tit**, **Rufous-capped Babbler** and so on.

Back at the hotel I had half an hour in which to get sorted out, pay my parking bill (not at the 7-11 this time, rather at the multistorey in the centre of the village), and drive to Taipei International Airport which took about an hour. I stopped a few times on the way down for raptors, nearly every single one being a **Black Kite**, with one **Osprey**. At one point closer to the city there were about two dozen sat on some lamp posts. I gave the car back, decided not to mention the new tyre I had bought them, and started the long trek home via Hong Kong, Qatar and Sweden. It had been an excellent trip all in all which in my opinion, bar the wasted time sorting out the car, could not really have gone much better.

The tour group I had met were spending 12 days here, including a trip to Lanyu Island, and whilst they would undoubtedly see the whole lot I felt that I had been super-efficient. I looked up the cost of a tour run by a well-known company and was staggered to see it come in at £3500 without flights! £4000 for a single supplement! This put a whole new perspective on my trip! Opinions vary on what the true endemics are, but per Wikipedia the only one I missed was **Taiwan Bush-warbler**. Other birds that are treated as endemic full species by some (and that are certainly unique to the island) but that I didn't see were **Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler**, **Black-necklaced Scimitar Babbler**, **Rusty Laughingthrush**, **White-throated Laughingthrush** and **Island Thrush**, the Taiwan subspecies of which has a white head and is a potential split. There is also **Taiwan Green Pigeon** on Lanyu Island, albeit that this is also resident in the Philippines. A shame I suppose that I couldn't manage the clean sweep, but I am not really a world lister in that sense and it was simply a pleasure to be outdoors and having to work really hard to identify birds. I have always loved going back to basics.

Trip List

Bold = widely recognised endemic

Bold Italics = treated as endemic by some authorities

Asterisk = subspecies unique to Taiwan

#	Species	Sub-species	Location
1	Taiwan Hill Partridge		2 km 23 Daxueshan
2	<i>Chinese Bamboo Partridge</i>	<i>sonorivox</i> *	3 km 14.5 Daxueshan
3	Swinhoe's Pheasant		2m 2f km 23 Daxueshan
4	Mikado Pheasant		1m 2f Taroko NP
5	Bean Goose (Tundra)		Huajiangyanya Natural Park, Taipei
6	Eurasian Wigeon		
7	Eastern Spot-billed Duck		most wetland areas

#	Species	Sub-species	Location
8	Northern Shoveler		
9	Eurasian Teal		
10	Little Grebe	<i>philippensis</i>	Jincheng Lake
11	Sacred Ibis		
12	Eurasian Spoonbill		Huajiangyanya Natural Park, Taipei
13	Yellow Bittern		Lizejian Wetlands, Yilan
14	Mayalan Night Heron		1 Huajiangyanya, 1 Taipei Botanic Garden
15	Black-crowned Night Heron		
16	Eastern Cattle Egret		
17	Grey Heron		
18	Great White Egret		
19	Intermediate Egret		
20	Little Egret		
21	Great Cormorant		
22	Osprey		1 Lizejian Wetlands, 1 Wulai
23	Black-winged Kite		1 Lizejian Wetlands
24	Black-eared Kite		20+ near Taipei
25	Crested Serpent Eagle		Wushe
26	Crested Goshawk	<i>formosae</i>	route 9, south of Yilan
27	Chinese Sparrowhawk		1 Lizejian Wetlands
28	Indian Black Eagle		1 km 4.5 Daxueshan, 1 Wushe
29	White-breasted Waterhen		
30	Moorhen		Huajiangyanya Natural Park, Taipei
31	Black-winged Stilt		
32	Little Ringed Plover		
33	Common Snipe		
34	Swinhoe's Snipe		fields around Jincheng Lake
35	Redshank		
36	Greenshank		
37	Marsh Sandpiper		
38	Terek Sandpiper		
39	Common Sandpiper		
40	Sanderling		
41	Dunlin		
42	Whiskered Tern		Lizejian Wetlands
43	Rock Dove		
44	Ashy Woodpigeon		3-4 along Blue Gate Trails, also Daxueshan
45	Oriental Turtle Dove	<i>orii</i>	
46	Red Turtle Dove		
47	Spotted Dove	<i>formosana</i>	
48	Pacific Swift	<i>kanoi</i>	
49	House Swift	<i>kuntzi</i>	Wulai, above the main village
50	Taiwan Barbet		1 km 4.5 Daxueshan, 2 Luoshao, 4 Buluowan
51	Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	<i>kaleensis</i>	Buluowan, in the car park
52	Grey-chinned Minivet	<i>griseogularis</i>	20-30 Daxueshan, 70+ Wulai Laxa Trail
53	Long-tailed Shrike		
54	Black Drongo	<i>harterti</i> *	
55	Bronzed Drongo	<i>braunianus</i> *	
56	Black-naped Monarch	<i>oberholseri</i> *	Buluowan, Lower Terrace
57	Taiwan Blue Magpie		13+3 Wulai Laxa Trail
58	Grey Treepie		6 Daxueshan, 10+ Wulai
59	Oriental Magpie	<i>sericea</i>	
60	Spotted Nutcracker		common at km 50 Daxueshan
61	Large-billed Crow	<i>colonurum</i>	common at Wuling and Taroko
62	Green-backed Tit	<i>insperatus</i> *	
63	Yellow Tit		1 km 37 Daxueshan
64	Coat Tit	<i>ptilosus</i> *	common at km 50 Daxueshan
65	Varied Tit	<i>castaneoventris</i> *	frequent in mixed flocks in most mid-level habitats

#	Species	Sub-species	Location
66	Grey-throated Martin		
67	Barn Swallow	<i>gutturialis</i>	
68	Pacific Swallow	<i>namiyei</i>	
69	Asian House Martin	<i>nigrimentale</i>	
70	Striated Swallow		
71	Black-throated Bushtit		common in mixed flocks at mid-high elevations
72	Collared Finchbill	<i>cinereicapillus</i> *	
73	Chinese Bulbul	<i>formosae</i> *	
74	Styan's Bulbul		small groups at the eastern side of Taroko NP
75	Himalayan Black Bulbul	<i>nigerrimus</i>	
76	Yellow-bellied Bush Warbler	<i>concolor</i> *	5+ at the highest elevations at Wuling
77	Arctic Warbler		
78	Rufous-faced Warbler	<i>fulvifacies</i>	
79	Taiwan Scimitar Babbler		2-3 kms 4.5 to 14.5 Daxueshan, 1 Wulai
80	Taiwan Wren-babbler (Cupwing)		2 Continuation Trail, Wushe
81	Rufous-capped Babbler	<i>praecognita</i>	
82	Taiwan Hwamei		2 km 4.5 Daxueshan
83	White-whiskered Laughingthrush		common at high elevations at Daxueshan and Hehuanshan
84	Steere's Liocichla		common at high elevations
85	Taiwan Barwing		1 Continuation Trail, Wushe
86	Dusky Fulvetta	<i>brunnea</i> *	
87	Taiwan Fulvetta		1 km 50 Daxueshan
88	Morrison's Fulvetta		common in mixed flocks at mid-high elevations
89	Taiwan Sibia		Daxueshan and Buluowan
90	Taiwan Yuhina		common in mixed flocks at mid-high elevations
91	White-bellied Erpornis	<i>griseiloris</i>	
92	Swinhoe's White-eye	<i>simplex</i>	
93	Flamecrest		Track 230, km 50 Daxueshan, common E of Wuling Pass
94	Eurasian Nuthatch		
95	Javan Myna		
96	Common Myna		
97	Black-collared Starling		
98	Taiwan Whistling Thrush		4+ Taroko, 6+ Wulai
99	Taiwan Shortwing		2-3 Continuation Trail, Wushe
100	Collared Bush Robin		2 km 50 Daxueshan
101	Daurian Redstart		
102	Plumbeous Redstart	<i>affinis</i> *	numerous along any water-course, 20+ seen during trip
103	White-tailed Robin	<i>montium</i>	Track 210, km 35 Daxueshan
104	Ferruginous Flycatcher		Blue Gate Trail
105	Snowy-browed Flycatcher	<i>innexa</i> *	Blue Gate Trail
106	Vivid Niltava	<i>vivida</i> *	Blue Gate Trail
107	Brown Dipper		1 km 14.5 Daxueshan
108	Tree Sparrow		
109	White-rumped Munia	<i>swinhoi</i>	
110	Scaly-breasted Munia	<i>topela</i>	
111	Eastern Yellow Wagtail		
112	Grey Wagtail	<i>melanope</i>	
113	White Wagtail		
114	Richard's Pipit		fields around Jincheng Lake
115	Vinaceous Rosefinch	<i>formosanus</i> *	common at Hehuanshan Mountain
116	Grey-headed Bullfinch	<i>owstoni</i> *	4 km 29 Wuling Pass / Hehuanshan Mountain