

China

Highlights

9th April to 23rd April 2024 (15 days)

Qinghai Extension

23rd April to 28th April 2024 (6 days)

Trip Report



White-browed Tit Warbler by Paul Varney

Trip report compiled and photos by Tour Leader Paul Varney, unless stated

Tour Summary

China is vast and this highlights tour just touched on some of the amazing habitats and birds that it has to offer. Despite being the most populous country on the planet, there are vast tracts of pristine habitat, rich in birds and wildlife. Starting in south-east China in the province of Fujian, we explored the Minjiang Estuary close to Fuzhou. At this time of the year, shorebirds were migrating north and we found several nice species sporting their bright summer colours. Not so far away is one of south-east China's premier birding locations, Emei Feng and we spent a few days here and were lucky enough to get excellent views of Cabot's Tragopan, a stunning pheasant, as well as Silver Pheasant and some striking Forktails. Moving into another province of Jiangxi, we headed to Wuyuan where we had incredible prolonged views of Pied Falconet, a tiny and striking predator but one of the main reasons for visiting this area is to see the recently discovered Blue-crowned Laughingthrush. They gave us the run around and we just managed to see a small group before we had to leave to catch our plane to Sichuan for the next leg of our tour. Sichuan delivered and the pristine bamboo forest at Wawushan provided one of the real highlights of the trip – Red Panda. We all hoped we would see one and what an animal it was. The forest here also supported 6 species of Parrotbill, we saw 7 species in total on the trip, and some "golden birds", Golden-breasted Fulvetta and Golden Bush Robin which delighted the group. Finally we moved to Wolong to explore the Balang Shan area where we encountered some more montane species including Golden, Blood, White-eared and Koklass Pheasants, Grandala, Rosefinches and the delightful White-browed Tit Warbler. A total of 257 bird species were noted with most giving good views.

Top Birds as voted by the group

1. Golden Pheasant
2. Koklass Pheasant/Blue-crowned Laughingthrush
3. Cabot's Tragopan
4. Blood Pheasant
5. White-browed Tit-warbler

Fuzhou/Minjiang Estuary

We started out China highlights tour by exploring the Minjian Estuary and checking several sites along the estuary produced some notable and rare birds. Top of this list were several Black-faced Spoonbill feeding alongside Eurasian Spoonbills. Black-faced are extremely rare, officially classified as endangered so it was excellent to get the opportunity to view several of these birds. We also found several other sought-after species; Garganey, Eastern Spot-billed Duck and even a pair of roosting Falcated Duck. As the tide raced in, shorebirds starting to gather on the shore, most numerous were Sanderling but we also picked out Whimbrel, Far Eastern Curlew with their extraordinarily long bills, Black and Bar-tailed Godwits, Red-necked Stint, Great and Red Knot, Siberian Sand Plover, and Kentish Plover.

On some of the marshier areas, we found a splendid looking Sharp-tailed Sandpiper and Temminck's Stint. Spotted Redshank and a group of Terek Sandpiper gave good views and checking through the gulls and terns produced Gull-billed,



Black-faced Spoonbill



Male Cabot's Tragopan

Caspian and a few Greater Crested Tern but alas we could not find the extreme rarity Chinese Crested Tern which frequents the beach here in small numbers. Black-tailed and Vega Gull were present in small numbers but more surprising were a small group of dainty Saunderson's Gull. Several herons and egrets were present including Chinese Pond Heron and we also came across Chinese Penduline Tit, Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler, Dusky Warbler, Yellow-bellied Prinia, Masked Laughingthrush, both Eastern Yellow and White Wagtail and Daurian Redstart, Amur Stonechat, and nice views of Black-faced Bunting. One surprise was seeing several Coptodon or Nutria. Not sure if these were being farmed or naturalized but not in the China mammal guide!

Emei Feng

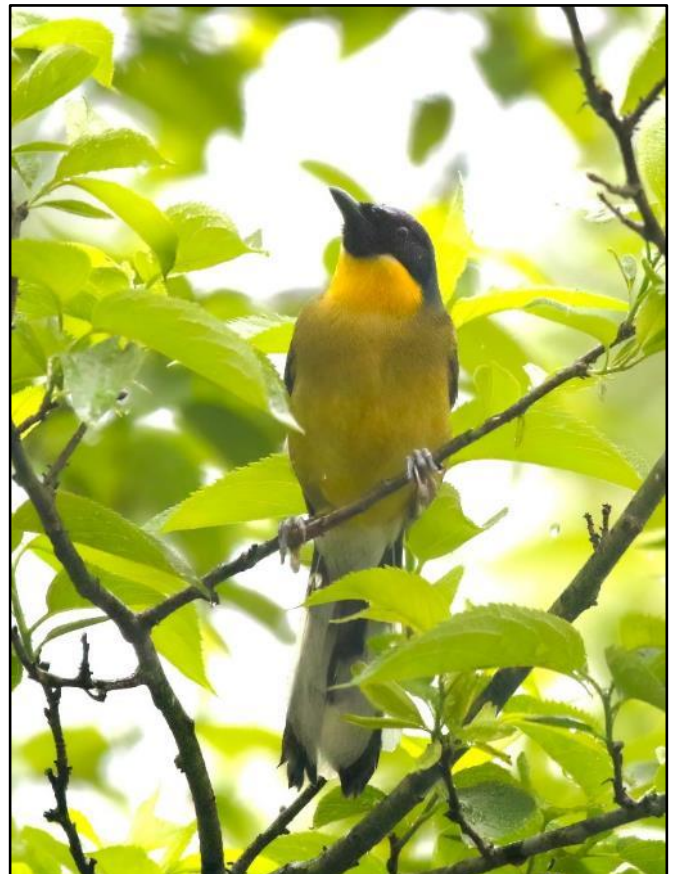
After a final look around the estuary for rare terns, it took most of the day to get to Emei Feng. Our basic accommodation here was reasonably comfortable but the air was cool and damp up here. Waking up on our first morning, we were shrouded in mist and dampness, but we set off birding after some necessary coffee. The lush forest here was a bird paradise but in the misty conditions they were tricky to find. Over the next couple of days, our searching and perseverance produced several nice sightings, top of the list being a stunning pair of Cabot's Tragopan feeding frequently below where we ate – enticed by a few left-over titbits. Also hanging around the accommodation were Chinese Bamboo Partridge, Chestnut Bulbul, Rufous-capped Babbler and Black Bulbul – in this area sporting white heads giving them a striking appearance. Exploring further down the hill and above the accommodation we found several nice species including identifying with good views and their songs; White-spectacled Warbler, Hartert's, Kloss's and Pallas's Leaf Warbler.

Spotted and White-crowned Forktail flushed when we approached water cascading down the hillside under the road – always shy but we obtained some nice views of these striking birds. White-browed Shrike Babbler, Grey-chinned Minivet, Grey-headed Parrotbill, Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler, Indochinese Yuhina, David's Fulvetta and the localised and noisy Buffy Laughingthrush were also encountered. White-necklaced Partridge were heard calling frequently and one came close but was only glimpsed by one person in the group. Silver Pheasants were a bit more obliging, and we saw several male although they were quite shy quickly running away when they saw us. A pheasant that flushed and flew across the road was almost certainly an Elliot's Pheasant, a real key bird to see at this location but it was gone too soon, and we were lucky enough to find one feeding on the road as other groups have. Rufous-faced and Chestnut-crowned Warbler are pleasantly common and gave good views but the much sought after Spotted Elachura called only once distantly and gave us no chance to see it. Striking Yellow-cheeked Tits and Red-billed Blue Magpie were much more obliging though and afforded good views. As we left the higher parts of Emei Feng, we checked out some rice paddies at the bottom and were pleased to find a couple of stunning male Mandarin Duck – so we decided to have breakfast here near the van and found several Little Bunting, Collared Finchbill and a soaring Crested Goshawk. We had to move on to our next destination so boarded the bus and moved on.

Wuyuan

Leaving Emei Feng we had a long drive to reach the area around Wuyuan which is key for seeing some special birds. A compulsory driver rest saw us stop at a highway service and a quick scout round produced a Yellow-browed Bunting.

Further exploration of the fields around the services produced 5 species of Bunting. More Yellow-browed, Black-faced, several Little, Chestnut and a fine male Yellow-breasted. This stop epitomised birding during migration – a chance stop at a services on a highway producing new birds for the whole group. When we finally reached the Wuyuan area, we had our



Pied Falconet and Blue-crowned Laughingthrush



Blue-winged and Red-tailed Minlas

first try at seeing the extremely rare Blue-crowned Laughingthrush, but it ended in disappointment. The birds sometimes come to a garden and can be viewed from a balcony in a local person's house. Unfortunately, not for us today.

Pied Falconet has a fairly wide range but is localised and only found in certain sites. We enjoyed absolutely superb views at close range of a pair – superb views. It was fantastic to be able to enjoy these birds from the balcony, almost at eye level. We worked really hard to find Short-tailed Parrotbill during our time at Wuyuan but to no avail. We did find Vinous-throated Parrotbill, Swinhoe's Minivet, Ring-necked Pheasant (a proper authentic wild one) and Blue Whistling Thrush. Some rather shy Grey-sided Scimitar Babblers made lots of noise but hid themselves incredibly well and then we got news of a delayed internal flight... which gave us a chance to try for the laughingthrush again. Heading back to the site, our local guide got a call advising that some had been seen this morning at a different location, so we headed there instead. As we arrived, it started to rain but we carried on and could only find Great Spotted Woodpecker. We were just about to leave when a laughingthrush appeared above us... it was a Blue-crowned! Then it was joined by 5 other individuals, and we all enjoyed good views of this major rarity. Only known from a tiny area of China, it is estimated that there may only be 200 or so birds on the planet. This boosted everyone and we headed to the airport for our onward flight to Sichuan in good spirits despite the awful weather.

Chengdu and Wawushan

We arrived in Chendgu late in the evening and went straight to the hotel. Next morning we had a walk before breakfast to the nearby people's park and enjoyed excellent close views of White-browed Laughingthrush,



Golden Parrotbill by Joerg Knoch and Red-winged Laughingthrush

Naumann's Thrush, a single Dusky Thrush, and a Eurasian Hoopoe. Several rather smart Black-throated Bushtit and Yellow-browed Warbler were present in the park and Jason regaled tales of a Gould's Shortwing that took up residence in the park for one winter – an incredible record and it just shows that anything is possible anywhere.

Chengdu was a stepping point to get to the Table Mountain, Wawushan. We arrived in the afternoon and took a cable car through the mist to our hotel which was mid-way up the mountain. We tried to go for a



Golden-breasted Fulvetta

walk late in the afternoon, but it was pretty wet outside, and we gave up after a while. After dinner that evening, a Himalayan Owl was calling outside but finding it in the thick fog would be impossible. The next morning, we awoke to similar fog and rain, but we were made of stern stuff so a quick walk near the hotel before breakfast produce excellent close views of Emei Shan Liocichla, a rare and shy species. Wawushan is a wonderful location and despite the weather on the first day we saw some excellent birds. The second day was much brighter, and we added more species, but it was notable that birds were more active in the gloom and the fog of the first day. A cable car up to the top of the mountain takes you to a circular wide paved pathway through fantastic bamboo habitat. This is a haven for parrotbills, and we found 6 species: Great, Brown, Three-toed, Grey-hooded, Fulvous and the tiny Golden. Additionally Grey-hooded Fulvetta, Red-tailed and Blue-winged Minlas, Yellow-bellied and Brownish-flanked Bush Warblers, Claudia's, and Sichuan Leaf Warblers, Rufous-vented, Yellow-browed and Grey-crested Tits were all present and we obtained superb views of Golden Bush Robin and some startlingly beautiful Mrs Gould's Sunbird and Golden-breasted Fulvetta.

Top of everyone's wish list on a visit to Wawushan though is Red Panda. The bamboo forest at the top of the mountain is ideal habitat and they are seen quite frequently up there. We had been looking everywhere and



Red Panda and Golden Bush Robin



Koklass Pheasant by Nigel Hacking and Golden Pheasant

while we trying to find a bush warbler species, Martin in the group casually announced..."I've got a panda!". Sure enough, we all then enjoyed super views through the telescope of a stunning Red Panda – a real moment for all of the group seeing one of these shy and scarce animals. We also added Red-winged Laughingthrush, Black-headed Sibia and on our journey back down, Black-chinned Yuhina, Alström's Warbler, Brown Dipper and Slaty-backed Forktail.

Balangshan

Leaving behind Wawushan, our next destination was Wolong, gateway for the mountains of Balangshan and site of the Giant Panda National Park, although seeing a Giant Panda is pretty unlikely in this area. The birding however, is great. Before we reached our hotel, we stopped behind the Wolong Panda centre and walked up the steep hill which produced Mrs Gould's Sunbird, Ashy-throated Warbler, Grey-winged Blackbird and fantastic views of at least 6 Golden Pheasant including 4 stunning males. Further up the valley, careful scanning of the slopes around the tunnel area, walking our "favourite" poo track (there were a lot of goats!) and searching the area below the high pass, which for us was closed unfortunately, produced many memorable sightings. Raptors are common up here with numerous Himalayan Griffon, several Bearded Vulture and even Cinereous Vulture. Golden Eagle and Upland Buzzard also put in an appearance. Pheasants are a key attraction here and we were



Snow Pigeon

successful in finding numerous White-eared on the slopes, a confiding pair of Blood Pheasant and a chance encounter one morning of 2 Koklass Pheasant sitting on the wall at the side of the road in the snow was a magic moment for the whole group.

The area was rich for birding and over our time here, we managed to catch up with Snow Pigeon, Grandala, Brandt's and Plain Mountain Finch, Sichuan Tit, White-browed Tit-warbler (special birds), Alpine Warbler,

Kesslers (White-backed) Thrush, Maroon-backed Accentor, Dark-breasted, Pink-rumped and Chinese White-browed Rosefinches.

We headed back to Chengdu where we then said goodbye to one of the group with everyone else looking forward to the new birds to be found on the Qinghai extension. The Highlights trip had caught up with some stunning birds and of course a delightful Red Panda – 256 species of bird were seen or heard among some wonderful scenery. China had delivered.

Annotated List of species recorded

For the species list and more photos, please see the eBird Trip Report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/220681>

Mammals

SPINY RATS - Echimyidae

Coypu or Nutria

Myocastor coypus

Several at Minjiang Estuary 10th

SQUIRRELS - Sciuridae

Père David's Rock Squirrel – E

Sciurotamias davidianus

Wawushan on 19th, Balangshan on 22nd

Swinhoe's Striped Squirrel

Tamias swinhoi

Emei Feng 13th, Wawushan – very tame climbing up people legs – 18th and 19th, Balangshan on 21st

RED PANDAS - Ailuridae

Red Panda

Ailurus fulgens

Excellent prolonged views of one on 19th

Qinghai Extension



Przevalski's Finch

Tour Summary

Qinghai, on the high Tibetan plateau is very different from the places we had visited on the China Highlights tour. Largely barren open ground at high altitude, the species we encountered were very different with 5 species of Snowfinch, numerous Bar-headed Geese and stately, Black-necked Cranes. Our first destination though was a nice piece of scrub and pine forest close to Xining which hosted Przevalski's and Chinese Nuthatch, Sichuan Tit, numerous Gansu Leaf Warblers, White-throated Redstarts, and a super Crested Tit-warbler. The open highland habitat is home to some speciality species such as the smart White-browed Tit, range restricted Przevalski's Finch which gave us a bit of a scare but showed very well in the end and steppe specialities like Pallas's Sandgrouse also obliged. A curious Tibetan Fox with its big square head was a nice sighting as we headed towards our accommodation at Chaka and beautiful summer plumage Pallas's Gulls were pleasantly abundant in their chosen haunts. Perhaps one of the most notable features of our Qinghai experience is the abundance of Pika – Plateau Pika were very numerous in certain locations and surprisingly confiding. Great birding in some stunning landscapes, the Qinghai extension produced the goods.

Top Birds as voted by the group

6. Przevalski's Finch/Eurasian Eagle Owl
7. Pallas's Sandgrouse
8. Crested Tit-warbler
9. Pallas's Gull/Przevalski's Partridge
10. Ground Tit/Blanford's Snowfinch/Citrine Wagtail

Xining area



Rufous-breasted Accentor and Przevalski's Nuthatch

Following our morning flight from Chengdu and a quick lunch and rest at the hotel, we ventured out a short distance to a dry river gorge where it transpired there was a lot of new construction work ongoing. As soon as we jumped out of the bus, our key target was discovered on a muddy bank, a pair of Pale Rosefinch. A good start. The valley also held Pied Wheatear, Black and Hodgson's Redstart, Godlewski's Bunting, our first Hill Pigeons and a distant calling Przevalski's Partridge which we couldn't track down. Having exhausted our options here, we moved to Nanshan Park in Xining, popular with locals where we witnessed some impressive kite flying. There were birds here too, Chestnut Thrush, Chinese Leaf Warbler, some delightful Azure-winged Magpies, and a showy Chinese Nuthatch. Tomorrow we would be venturing further into Qinghai looking for more of its' avian delights.

Datong National Forest

Not far outside Xining, we visited Datong National Forest an area of scrub and pine forest. The whole area was alive with birds with White-throated Redstart singing from treetops as we left the bus. Gansu Leaf Warblers



Tibetan Fox by Nigel Hacking



Pallas's Sandgrouse & Rufous-necked Snowfinch

were common and a flock of Red Crossbill “chipped” from the pine trees all around us. Real, wild Ring-necked or Common Pheasant were seen in fields on the way to the forest and heard during our stay and we had the opportunity to get decent views of Sichuan Tit and both Przevalski's and Chinese Nuthatch. A male Himalayan Bluetail showed only briefly but a male and several female Chinese White-browed Rosefinch posed nicely for decent views through the telescope. Just before we left, a male Crested Tit-warbler was found and although it proved elusive for decent photographs, everyone in the group got nice views.

We left Xining behind on our way to Chaka, starting to encounter more upland open plateau habitat. On the way, just from the bus, we saw 11 Black-necked Crane, a group of 9 and 2 other birds, Ground Tit and White-rumped Snowfinch. A group of about 150 Bar-headed Geese were perhaps newly arrived having crossed over the Himalayas only a week or two before. A lucky sighting was a Tibetan Fox hunkered down in a field. When we stopped and reversed, he made a move.

Koko Nor/Heimahe/Chahanuo/Chaka

Before we finally made it to Chaka where we would be staying for the next 3 nights, we crossed over the pass of the Rubber Mountains, Xiang Pi Shan where we were mesmerized by the abundance of Plateau Pika – there were hundreds sitting outside their burrows and dashing around after each other. We also had super close views of Rufous-necked Snowfinch and more White-rumped Snowfinch as well as some obliging Horned Larks.



Pere David's Snowfinch & Blanford's Snowfinch



White-browed Tit & Pallas's Gull

Over the next few days, we explored this high-altitude wilderness exploring mountain scrublands, high peaks, and expansive salt flats. The hillside at Heimaha is a site known for Przevalski's Finch, so we arrived early in the morning with high anticipation about seeing this monotypic species. We started well with Brown and Robin Accentors showing at close range. But then it went a bit quiet, and we struggled to find our target birds. One of the groups almost trod on a pair of Pallas's Sandgrouse but the high altitude meant getting up the slope to where he was in time was beyond all of us! Several Twite were flying around but we were struggling to find our main target. So, we decided to head back to the bus for breakfast, at which moment a pair of White-browed Tits appeared right in front of us, followed almost immediately by our local guide announcing – there's a Pinktail (Przevalski's Finch). Sure enough, a pair put on a great display – 2 of the key birds, just at the last moment. Breakfast tasted better. Over several visits to the salt flats at Chaka we enjoyed good views of numerous Isabelline Wheatear, Humes, Asian Short-toed and Horned Larks, Pallas's Sandgrouse, Blanford's and Pere David's Snowfinch, but unfortunately a Mongolian Ground Jay in the scope didn't stay long enough for anyone else to get on it and despite much searching we could not relocate it.

Heading toward a high valley which our local guide Ivan suggested we explore we discovered a large lake which held numerous Pallas's Gull, Great crested Grebe, and several other water loving species but the valley delivered some special birds. Brown Accentor and Godlewski's Buntings followed us around and we also came across a nice flock of Pine Buntings and Rock Sparrows then got some excellent views of a pair of Golden Eagle. Some Pink-rumped Rosefinches were a nice surprise and a huge Eurasian Eagle Owl flushed from a rocky outcrop – a



Przevalski's Partridge & Eurasian Eagle Owl



Upland Buzzard by Joerg Knoch & Ground Tit

few minutes later we discovered its' mate sitting on a nest. We moved away from where we were standing to minimise disturbing the birds, but the local Red-billed Choughs had discovered the first bird and were giving it a bit of hassle. A calling Przevalski's Partridge eventually gave itself up perching nicely on a rock allowing us to study the plumage differences that differentiate it from Chukar. Heading back toward Xining as we came to the end of our trip, a stop at the pass produced another snowfinch, Tibetan and then we focused on a different group of birds that frequent the area surrounding Qinghai Lake or Koko Nor.

Koko Nor

A Steppe Eagle soaring over the valley was a bit of a surprise but more distant than the Upland Buzzard posing on a nearby telegraph pole. The wetland areas held numerous species of duck we had not encountered previously like Red Crested Pochard, Garganey and Gadwall as well as Black-winged Stilt, Black-tailed Godwit and a tiny Temminck's Stint. Some stunning Citrine Wagtails and obliging Ground Tits were also noted, and we were all wowed by a close flyby Pallas's Gull – they really are stunning in their full summer plumage.

Annotated List of species recorded

For the species list and more photos, please see the eBird Trip Report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/220690>

Mammals

WOLVES, COYOTE, FOXES AND JACKALS - Canidae

Tibetan Fox

Vulpes ferrilata

One sat in a field on the side of the road then scampering off on way to Chaka, near Heimahe on 24th.

WEASELS AND OTTERS - Mustelidae**Altai Mountain Weasel – NT*****Mustela altaica***

Probably one of this species seen near Heimahe on 25th.

DEER - Cervidae**Central Asian Red Deer*****Cervus wallichii***

Three animals, probably this species at Heimahe on 25th

RABBITS, HARES - Leporidae**Woolly Hare*****Lepus oiostolus***

Up to 5 noted at Chaka Salt flats on 25th, 26th and 27th and 2 at Chahanou on 26th

PIKAS - Ochotonidae**Plateau Pika*****Ochotona curzoniae***

Large numbers at Xiang Pi Shan (Rubber Mountain Pass) and also seen at Heimahe and Koko Nor (east end)

Glover's Pika***Ochotona gloveri***

One seen – silvery grey, with large ears on rocks at Chahanou on 26th

SQUIRRELS - Sciuridae**Himalayan Marmot*****Marmota himalayana***

Several seen at Heimahe, Chahanou and Koko Nor

Alashan Ground Squirrel***Spermophilus alashanicus***

One in hills south of Lejiwan, near Xining on 23rd

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