

# Dali, Yunnan, July 5-11 2021 Birding Trip Report

by Michael W. (photos by Noah W.)

**Trip Summary:** This is a summary of a trip to Dali, Yunnan during which I took daily trips to different birding sites and found 76 species of birds. I hope that this kind of trip report can fill a gap for those who aren't able (because of cost or time) to join a professional birding tour, but who want to explore accessible birding areas on their own.

**Below are basic summaries of the following birding sites:**

1. Ximatan Cableway, Cangshan
2. Erhaiyue Wetland Park
3. Wuwei Temple
4. Gantong Cableway, Qingbi Stream, and the Jade Belt Road, Cangshan
5. Dali Old Town Rookery

## 1. Cangshan Mountain (苍山), Ximatan Cableway (洗马潭索道), July 5 (10:30am-12:30pm)



From Dali old town, you can catch a taxi for a short (10 minute) drive to the entrance of the cableway. The opening time of the cableway was a bit unclear, but at the latest it is 9:00am, perhaps a little earlier? Tickets are sold at the park, or can be purchased online in advance. When we went, it was necessary to show a health code on your phone and wear masks to enter. After entering, you board a minibus that takes you up to the actual cableway entrance. The cable cars each hold up to 8 passengers, are completely enclosed, and are quite quiet and smooth. Unfortunately, you won't be hearing much birdsong on your way up, but the views are quite lovely, and at least in the cars we rode in, the windows were clear enough. At the 1/2-way point, all passengers get out of their cable car and then immediately get back in line for the second leg of the journey up to the top. All told it was probably 30 minutes of actual time in the cable cars.

Upon reaching the top around 10:30am, the temperature difference was drastic, perhaps about 7-10 degrees, whereas at the bottom it had been around 20. Our group was surprised at how cold it felt, and were also hampered a bit by the light air. We had bought an oxygen canister which was helpful, but we still felt the effects of the high altitude (we live basically at sea level). It was obvious that not everyone was feeling the effects so strongly, and there are heavy coats which can be rented at the top (along with oxygen).



Before we even began to walk down the steps and out of the cableway station area, we spotted several **Fire-tailed Sunbirds** flitting around on the low vegetation, their bright red and yellow colors jumping out among the silver and green of the bushes and fog. A couple **Eurasian Nutcrackers** came by one of the picnic table areas looking for dropped snacks, providing close looks. In the same spot we also first heard and then saw a **Gray-sided Bush Warbler**.

We began to slowly walk down the steps, passing platform #1 without any birds. At platform #3 there are a number of picnic tables to sit at as well as a refreshment stand selling hot drinks and snacks. While resting there, a group of **Black-faced Laughingthrushes** scoured the area for crumbs, including one that actually stuck its head into an abandoned bowl of ramen noodles! Additional birds coming by at close range to look for food were some **Dark-breasted Rosefinches** and a lone **Elliot's Laughingthrush**. A **Chestnut Thrush** flew



quickly past overhead. Just past platform #3 a stream crosses under the walkway. At that spot we saw some type of female Shortwing (uncertain where Himalayan or Lesser) briefly appear in the area around the stream.

From that point we made our way back as we were actually quite cold. Certainly venturing on would have yielded more birds, but that was all for our day. Returning we saw some of the same species of birds. Unfortunately, as of July 2021, it is not possible to stop at the 1/2 way down point and walk on the trails or connect with the Jade Belt Road, as there is construction work being done due to landslides. One could only walk out onto a little overlook/platform area at the 1/2-way point, and then get back on a cable car to continue to the lower cableway station. We didn't see any birds there, though it certainly seemed like it had the potential to yield some additional species.

There were few walkable trails at the base of the cableway station that, though the nearby Movie Station (admission is included in your cableway ticket) looked like it could be walked. We did catch a brief view of **Verditer Flycatcher** from the front steps of the cableway entrance.

The price of admission for the round-trip cableway is expensive (300 yuan/adult). If we were to do it again, we would come a bit more prepared for the weather (we had brought extra layers and light coats, but no gloves or heavy coats). The day we went it was clear at the bottom of the mountain, but at the top there were waves of fog blowing through which made it harder to see birds and more uncomfortable. The weather is hard to predict from the bottom for sure. Even so, we were happy to see a number of life birds that just can't be seen at lower elevations. Hopefully in the future, this cableway will again be better connected with the other trails in Cangshan.

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S91274324>

2. Erhai Yue Wetland Park (洱海月湿地公园) July 6 (9:40am-12:20pm); total distance walked 1.5 miles. Visited again July 8.

From the Dali old town area, about a 20-minute taxi ride (20-30 yuan) lands you at the 洱海月湿地公园 wetland park on the edge of 洱海. The park has free admission and there is no sort of gate or ticket check, so presumably it is open 24 hours. At the main entrance area there are bathrooms, and main paved trails lead north and south (parallel with the lake) as well as one which heads straight towards the water.

Our group first traveled north, wandering off the wide, bricked path on smaller trails that led into some wooded areas with a small canal running through. We quickly got fleeting glimpses of our first **Grey-headed Swampphen** and spotted a number of **Long-tailed Shrikes**. We continued to walk north paralleling the lake, and were surprised when a couple of **Black-streaked Scimitar Babblers** quickly passed through trees nearby providing decent views. Eventually, when walking north you begin to get overlooks of the lake itself, where there were **Little Grebe** families scattered, along with smaller numbers of **Eurasian Moorhen** and a few **Eurasian Coot**. Some **Black-crowned Night Herons** were flying past. In the marsh reeds and grasses, some reed warblers were heard and seen, along with **Plain Prinia**.



When we reached a platform overlooking the lake (which appeared to be the end of the official park area) we turned around and walked back south towards the bathrooms/main entrance. Had a **Eurasian Hoopoe** fly over along with a **Black**



**Drongo**. Upon returning to the main entrance, we walked east toward the lake on the main trail, crossing over a bridge and after a short time found ourselves coming out towards the lake. On the left was a small marsh platform overlook, straight ahead was the edge of the lake itself, and to the right is a boardwalk that extends for a couple hundred yards out through the marsh. From the lake edge, scanning out over the lake again yielded numerous grebes, moorhens and coot, and we were pleasantly surprised to find a distant lone **Great Crested Grebe**

farther out on the lake. No doubt in winter this area would be excellent for waterfowl.

The boardwalk area provided some nice closer views of the water birds and there were several **Cinnamon Bitterns** along with a couple of **Yellow Bitterns** that were perching and flying around the area. We spotted a few more **Gray-headed Swampphens** as well. The other end of the boardwalk ends at a small street from which you can call a taxi/Didi car as well (you could also enter the park directly from that road if desired).

eBird checklist: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S91331967> and <https://ebird.org/checklist/S91424324>



3. **Wuwei Temple (无为寺), July 7, 2021 (7:08-11:35am; 2.5 miles total walking). Visited again July 10.**

From Dali Old Town, we caught a Didi car for a short 10-minute ride to the temple parking lot, which is just a gravel lot, at the far side of which is a small shed/guard stand (without any people when we went). The trail begins there, crosses a small stream, then passes through a much more official and beautiful arch (where we quickly saw our first of many **Verditer Flycatchers**). After that you can choose to take one of two paths to make your way uphill to the temple area. The distance from the entrance to the temple area is not far (perhaps 500m?) but took us the better part of an hour to walk because of stopping for birds. The left path takes you on a higher



route which presumably would provide a little bit more of a treetop level view of the forest. The right path crisscrosses the stream, with much of the path being on rocks. We chose the lower (right) path as we were hoping to come across a forktail. Interestingly enough, in the early morning we didn't see a forktail, but encountered at least two **White-crowned Forktails** on the return trip around 11:00am. The trail up to the temple had good numbers of birds, with small waves occurring including species such as **Ferruginous Flycatcher, Speckled Piculet, Gray-capped Woodpecker, Black-throated Tit**, numerous **Gray-headed Canary Flycatchers**, etc.

When you reach the temple area, if you stay to the left (can follow some signs towards the bathrooms) it will take you around the south side of the temple complex where after passing a guard area and gate (again no one was there early in the morning) you will come out on a mountain road. This area was quite birdy. If you take a slight left at the road, it will actually take you down the mountain; so we took a hard right to head uphill. It was only a short walk before we got a quick glimpse of a young male and female **Lady Amherst's Pheasant** crossing the road, followed by a quick look at a male a few minutes later. Another bird wave kept us busy for quite a while. Besides already mentioned species, there were **Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler, Rufous-capped Babbler, Rusty-capped Fulvetta, Black-headed Sibia, Blue-winged Minla, and White-throated Fantails**. We were also surprised by a calling **Lesser Cuckoo**, a bird that we hadn't seen reported previously in the area.



**Ferruginous Flycatcher**

We only walked up the mountain road for perhaps 500m before turning around when it started pouring rain; however, the trail continues for quite a long way ascending the mountain. We did get wonderful looks at a female pheasant that popped out on the road and walked around for a minute.

On our return, we mostly retraced our steps and were happy to see both male and female **Gray-winged Blackbird** in the area just below the temple.

This really was one of my absolute favorite birding locations. The combination of free entry, open access (no opening/closing hours), easy access by taxi, beautiful trails, and lots of birds really makes for a great combination. My visit was on a weekday and for the first couple hours we encountered less

than 10 people including workers at the temple (there were quite a few more people on the Saturday when we returned, but still not a lot). Heading back on the trail we encountered a few more people, but overall it is just not a heavily traveled place, making it all the more peaceful. Those who are experts at identifying local birds would have added a number of species to the list. As it was we were happy to find more than 30 species.

eBird checklists: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S91379714> and <https://ebird.org/checklist/S91519985>

#### 4. Gantong Cableway, Qingbi Stream, and the Jade Belt Road (感通索道, 清碧溪, 和玉带云游路), July 8, 2021 (10:00am-2:00pm)



From the old town area, it's less than 15 minutes to the cableway entrance area where tickets can be bought on-site (or purchased online in advance). When you purchase the cableway ticket, you also purchase entrance to the Cangshan Mountain area; for an adult ticket it costs a combined 115 yuan. The entrance process was pretty quick and the ride up in the 6-person max cableway cars took about 13 minutes to the upper station. After getting off and out of the station just before 10am, we followed the signs for 清碧溪 (Qingbi Stream), descending some flights of stairs past a huge chess board to reach the stream level, where a few **Plumbeous Redstarts** were feeding around a pool edge. Looking up the canyon, there was a large colony of nesting **Nepal House Martins** zipping in and out (there may be Asian House Martins as well though I couldn't pick any out). Walking up the stairs took us closer to the nesting birds, and eventually back to the

cableway station, where we saw some **Rusty-capped Fulvettas** and **Rufous-capped Babblers**. **Himalayan Swiftlets** can also easily be seen by scanning the air overhead in the canyon.

After a brief rest, we headed up the set of more than 250 steps from the cableway station towards the Jade Belt Road, a path which (when all is open) stretches for a pretty 11 km or so along the side of the mountain. As of summer 2021, the area of the Jade Cloud Road in the middle (near the Ximatan Cableway connection) is closed, so when you come up the Gantong Cableway, you have to return down the same way. As we reached the Jade Belt Road a couple of **Mrs. Gould's Sunbirds** give us a quick look. We turned right to head north along the path and it wasn't long until we hit a wave of birds that included **Yellow-browed Tit**, **Grey-headed Canary Flycatchers**, multiple leaf warblers, **Blue-winged Minla**, **Chesnut-tailed Minla**. We ended up walking about 1.2km north on the path before turning around and retracing our steps. Much of the path was pretty quiet in terms of birds, but we did manage to find several **Eurasian Nutcrackers**, a couple of **White-collared Yuhinas**, **Black-headed Sibilas**, **Collared Finchbills**, etc.

For those traveling to this area, be advised that the weather can change very quickly and it's best to be prepared. During our visit, the weather alternated between bright sun and feeling quite warm, to pouring rain, to feeling quite chilly—this all in the middle of summer. Please don't assume the weather in Old Town is similar to that on the mountain.

The Jade Belt Road itself was an easy walk, but as I mentioned to get up to it from the cableway does require a series of 250+ steps. Getting down to the stream level at the Qingbi Stream also requires a number of steps. The area around the cableway and stream seems like it could be quite full of tourists, though once you reach the Jade Belt road, things are much more quiet, as many of the tourists merely come up the cableway, look around and head back down.



eBird Checklists:

- Qingbi Stream, Part 1: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S91474928>
- Jade Belt Road: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S91474927>
- Qingbi Stream/Cableway Station, Part 2: <https://ebird.org/checklist/S91474926>

## 5. Dali Old Town Rookery, July 11 (9:00-9:30am)

At the north edge of old town, there is a thriving rookery with nesting **Cattle Egrets**, **Little Egrets**, and **Black-crowned Night Herons**. Were probably 150 birds or more present. The nests are in trees along Zhonghe Lu (中和路) near the corner with Yeyu Lu (叶榆路), and can easily be observed from the street.

eBird checklist:

<https://ebird.org/checklist/S91576700>



Transportation in Dali is quite convenient using the Didi app to hire cars. Even from less traveled locations like the Wuwei Temple, I never had to wait more than 10 minutes for a driver to arrive. If you drove your own car, it might open up even more possibilities in terms of where you could go, especially on Cangshan.

## Species Summary:

1. <b>Lady Amherst's Pheasant</b> <i>Chrysolophus amherstiae</i>	Wuwei Temple
2. <b>Little Grebe</b> <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
3. <b>Great Crested Grebe</b> <i>Podiceps cristatus</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
4. <b>Rock Pigeon</b> <i>Columba livia</i>	City area
5. <b>Spotted Dove</b> <i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>	City area
6. <b>Lesser Cuckoo</b> <i>Cuculus poliocephalus</i>	Wuwei Temple
7. <b>Himalayan Swiftlet</b> <i>Aerodramus brevirostris</i>	Qingbi Stream
8. <b>House Swift</b> <i>Apus nipalensis</i>	City area
9. <b>Eurasian Moorhen</b> <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
10. <b>Eurasian Coot</b> <i>Fulica atra</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
11. <b>Gray-headed Swampphen</b> <i>Porphyrio poliocephalus</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
12. <b>Ruddy-breasted Crake</b> <i>Zapornia fusca</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
13. <b>Yellow Bittern</b> <i>Ixobrychus sinensis</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
14. <b>Cinnamon Bittern</b> <i>Ixobrychus cinnamomeus</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
15. <b>Intermediate Egret</b> <i>Ardea intermedia</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
16. <b>Little Egret</b> <i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park; Rookery
17. <b>Cattle Egret</b> <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Rookery
18. <b>Chinese Pond-Heron</b> <i>Ardeola bacchus</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
19. <b>Black-crowned Night-Heron</b> <i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park; Rookery
20. <b>Eurasian Hoopoe</b> <i>Upupa epops</i>	City area
21. <b>Common Kingfisher</b> <i>Alcedo atthis</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
22. <b>White-throated Kingfisher</b> <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
23. <b>Speckled Piculet</b> <i>Picumnus innominatus</i>	Wuwei Temple
24. <b>Gray-capped Woodpecker</b> <i>Yungipicus canicapillus</i>	Wuwei Temple
25. <b>White-throated Fantail</b> <i>Rhipidura albicollis</i>	Wuwei Temple
26. <b>Black Drongo</b> <i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park

27. Long-tailed Shrike <i>Lanius schach</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
28. Eurasian Nutcracker <i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>	Ximatan; Jade Belt Road
29. Gray-headed Canary-Flycatcher <i>Culicicapa ceylonensis</i>	Wuwei Temple; Jade Belt Road
30. Yellow-browed Tit <i>Sylviparus modestus</i>	Jade Belt Road
31. Green-backed Tit <i>Parus monticolus</i>	Wuwei Temple; Jade Belt Road
32. Japanese Tit <i>Parus minor</i>	Wuwei Temple
33. Plain Prinia <i>Prinia inornata</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
34. Clamorous Reed Warbler <i>Acrocephalus stentoreus</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
35. Barn Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Wuwei Temple; Erhaiyue Wetland Park
36. Nepal House-Martin <i>Delichon nipalense</i>	Qingbi Stream
37. Crested Finchbill <i>Spizixos canifrons</i>	Qingbi Stream; Jade Belt Road
38. Brown-breasted Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus xanthorrhous</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland; Wuwei Temple; City
39. Sooty-headed Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus aurigaster</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland; Wuwei Temple; City
40. Gray-sided Bush Warbler <i>Cettia brunnifrons</i>	Ximatan
41. Black-throated Tit <i>Aegithalos concinnus</i>	Wuwei Temple
42. Black-browed Tit <i>Aegithalos iouschistos</i>	Wuwei Temple
43. Spectacled Fulvetta <i>Fulvetta ruficapilla</i>	Wuwei Temple
44. Stripe-throated Yuhina <i>Yuhina gularis</i>	Jade Belt Road
45. White-collared Yuhina <i>Yuhina diademata</i>	Jade Belt Road
46. Indian White-eye <i>Zosterops palpebrosus</i>	Wuwei Temple; City area
47. Rufous-capped Babbler <i>Cyanoderma ruficeps</i>	Wuwei Temple; Rufous-capped Babbler
48. Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler <i>Pomatorhinus ruficollis</i>	Wuwei Temple
49. Black-streaked Scimitar-Babbler <i>Megapomatorhinus gravivox</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park; Wuwei Temple
50. Rusty-capped Fulvetta <i>Schoeniparus dubius</i>	Wuwei Temple; Qingbi Stream
51. White-browed Laughingthrush <i>Ianthocincla sannio</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park; Wuwei Temple
52. Black-faced Laughingthrush <i>Trochalopteron affine</i>	Ximatan
53. Black-headed Sibia <i>Heterophasia desgodinsi</i>	Wuwei; Jade Belt Road; Qingbi Stream
54. Blue-winged Minla <i>Actinodura cyanouroptera</i>	Wuwei; Jade Belt Road; Qingbi Stream
55. Chestnut-tailed Minla <i>Actinodura strigula</i>	Jade Belt Road
56. Chestnut-vented Nuthatch <i>Sitta nagaensis</i>	Wuwei Temple
57. Bar-tailed Treecreeper <i>Certhia himalayana</i>	Wuwei Temple
58. Chinese Blackbird <i>Turdus mandarinus</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
59. Gray-winged Blackbird <i>Turdus boulboul</i>	Wuwei Temple
60. Black-breasted Thrush <i>Turdus dissimilis</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park
61. Chestnut Thrush <i>Turdus rubrocanus</i>	Ximatan
62. Ferruginous Flycatcher <i>Muscicapa ferruginea</i>	Wuwei Temple
63. Oriental Magpie-Robin <i>Copsychus saularis</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland Park; Wuwei Temple
64. Hill Blue Flycatcher <i>Cyornis banyumas</i>	Wuwei Temple
65. Verditer Flycatcher <i>Eumyias thalassinus</i>	Wuwei Temple
66. Blue Whistling-Thrush <i>Myophonus caeruleus</i>	Qingbi Stream
67. White-crowned Forktail <i>Enicurus leschenaulti</i>	Wuwei Temple
68. Plumbeous Redstart <i>Phoenicurus fuliginosus</i>	Qingbi Stream
69. Daurian Redstart <i>Phoenicurus aureus</i>	Wuwei Temple
70. Fire-tailed Sunbird <i>Aethopyga ignicauda</i>	Ximatan
71. Mrs. Gould's Sunbird <i>Aethopyga gouldiae</i>	Jade Belt Road; Qingbi Stream
72. Russet Sparrow <i>Passer cinnamomeus</i>	Wuwei Temple
73. Eurasian Tree Sparrow <i>Passer montanus</i>	City area
74. White Wagtail <i>Motacilla alba</i>	Erhaiyue Wetland; Wuwei Temple; City
75. Dark-breasted Rosefinch <i>Procarduelis nipalensis</i>	Ximatan
76. Black-headed Greenfinch <i>Chloris ambigua</i>	Wuwei Temple; City area