

China 4–18 May 2013

Introduction

This was mainly a family trip to China with a side order of birding but this trip report focuses on the birding. My purpose in writing it is to help birders considering a trip to China for the first time. Experienced Chinese hands, or even well-travelled world birders, may not gain much from reading it. My birding consisted mainly of a solid burst of one and half days at the legendary Beidaihe right at the beginning, which was supplemented with a few half-days inserted into the rest of trip. Apart from the excursion to Beidaihe, our trip was city-orientated – we visited Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou and Xi'an. The additional birding came in the form of visits to the parks in Beijing and Shanghai, the Xixi Wetland near Hangzhou and the Great Wall near Beijing.

China is, for a UK bird watcher, a great combination of 1) species that are common in the UK (Magpie, Tree Sparrow, Swift, Barn Swallow, etc), 2) species that are scarce or rare in the UK (such as many of the Siberian migrants that are on their way north in May) and 3) species which are unknown in Europe. If, like me before this trip, you have not been before then even a quiet day's birding by local standards will deliver you a mouth-watering array of lifers. If you really want an intensive introduction to a hot-spot like Beidaihe then I suggest that you go with a tour group such as Wildwings (<http://www.wildwings.co.uk/beidaihe.html>), whose trip reports are amazing. However, I found that even by myself I could pick up some local knowledge fairly quickly and that, combined with some research in the UK, meant that I could still see a great range of birds. At Beidaihe, your experience will be enormously aided by seeking the help of Jean Wang (bsots@263.net) who can work wonders for you. When visiting China, preparation is everything!

As mentioned above, there are some excellent trip reports and accounts of the 'discovery' of Beidaihe and other parts of China as

birding destinations on the internet. These give an idea of the range of species one can see. I then used the field guide to the Birds of East Asia by Mark Brazil, which I bought from Amazon, to check them out (note this does not cover central, southern, northern or western China). It really is worth memorising the separation features of similar species. For example, I briefly saw a male *ficedula* flycatcher with both yellow rump and supercilium in Century Park in Shanghai which I took to be a Yellow-rumped Flycatcher. When I looked at the field guide later I realised that it must have been a different species, but I had insufficient data to identify which of the two or three it could be. If I had known which field marks to look for I could potentially have added another lifer to my trip list.

Logistically, China is actually very manageable nowadays (my wife was there in 1986 and says it has changed out of all recognition). Signage is generally in English (or at least in the Roman alphabet) as well as Chinese and there are usually enough people around who want to help to get one back on track. As with the birds, the trick is to research thoroughly and plan ahead. We used the Lonely Planet guide for planning and help while there (make sure you have the most recent edition). When travelling, it's a good idea to have the name of your destination written in Chinese characters to show people. Likewise a small phrase book with Chinese characters is useful for showing selected phrases to people as a way of communicating your intentions.

The best way to travel is by train. Note that trains, especially high-speed trains, get booked well in advance and you are strongly advised to book ahead (at least three to five days for safety). This can now be done online from the UK – I used <http://www.chinatripadvisor.com/train>, and they delivered our tickets to our hotel in China the day before travel. There are other providers too – you can find out all about the Chinese railway system at www.seat61.com. When you are there, it is worth

buying tickets at the booking offices situated in most cities rather than using the railway station itself which is usually hectic and stressful. Your hotel will know where the booking offices are.

Back to the birds. Lifers of the trip for me were the undoubtedly the Sibes – **Red-necked Stint, White’s Thrush, Siberian Rubythroat, Siberian Blue Robin, Swinhoe’s Robin** and the various warblers (especially **Eastern Crowned**). Added to these were Eastern species such as **Black Bittern, Brown Hawk Owl** and **Black-naped Oriole**. Perhaps the most interesting was the variety of thrushes (five species), flycatchers (six) and buntings (also six). Obviously in the time available I did no more than scratch the surface but I still managed 121 species including 68 lifers!

Summary of Itinerary

Date	Locations Visited (birding in <i>bold italics</i>)
4 May	Arrived at Beidaihe late p.m.; <i>two hours birding</i>
5 May	<i>Birded Beidaihe</i>
6 May	<i>Birded Beidaihe a.m.</i> ; travelled to Beijing
7 May	Travelled to Shanghai
8 May	Visited Shanghai
9 May	Visited Shanghai; travelled to Hangzhou; <i>visited West Lake</i>
10 May	<i>Birded Xixi Wetland</i> ; travelled back to Shanghai
11 May	<i>Birded Century Park, Shanghai</i>
12 May	<i>Birded Century Park, Shanghai</i> ; travelled to Xi’an
13 May	Arrived at and visited Xi’an
14 May	Visited Xi’an
15 May	Travelled to Beijing
16 May	<i>Visited Great Wall, near Beijing</i>
17 May	<i>Birded Summer Palace, Beijing</i>
18 May	Travelled to London

Detailed Itinerary

Saturday 4 May

I landed at Beijing after an overnight flight and immediately bought a SIM card for the cheap unlocked mobile I had brought with me. This proved invaluable. As arranged with Jean Wang, I caught the very comfortable shuttle bus to Qinhuangdao (4 hours) where I was met by her driver holding a piece of paper with my name on it. Then twenty minutes to the Jin Shan Hotel, Beidaihe, collecting Jean on the way. Very easy.

Even though I was jet-lagged, I went straight out for a short walk up to the Friendship Hotel, which has spacious grounds and tolerates birders wandering around them. Things were quiet but there were still three **White's Thrushes**, several **Yellow-browed** and **Dusky Warblers**, a family of **Red-billed Blue Magpies** and what looked exactly like a **Pale-legged Leaf Warbler**. Then back to the restaurant at the Jin Shan, which is the place to find and compare notes with other birders. In this way I met Remco Hofland and his girlfriend Belle and we agreed to team up for a pre-breakfast foray the following morning. Remco is one of the top birders in the Netherlands and has seen nearly 5,600 species so I was incredibly fortunate to be able to learn from him as we birded.

Sunday 5 May

Up at 4:30 to check out Lighthouse Point at dawn with Remco and Belle. There were four species of tern offshore but otherwise it was fairly quiet. Then back to the Jin Shan for breakfast via the Friendship Hotel and a pair of **Elegant Buntings** and a **Grey-backed Thrush**. Remco and Belle went off to the Stone River in search of Little Whimbrel (one of the few Palearctic waders he has not seen) and I took a taxi to the wetland reserve with Jeanie, one of Jean's apprentices.

While Jeanie arranged my permit I checked out the sand flats which were quiet apart from three **Red-necked Stints**, one of which was in full summer plumage, looking like the front quarter of the bird had been dipped in orange-red ink.

Jeanie then dropped me at the Wetland Reserve and the real birding began. First up were several **Olive-backed Pipits** giving great views, **Siberian Stonechats** (which were common throughout my stay in Beidaihe), **Red-throated Flycatchers** (likewise), **Spot-billed Ducks** and **Black-faced Buntings** (which were the default bunting during my stay). When I came to the 'reservoir', a dammed river which forms the western edge of the reserve, a number of marshland species were evident – **Purple Heron, Chinese Pond Heron, Falcated Duck, Garganey, Eastern Marsh Harrier** and **Amur Falcon**. I completed the circuit back to the entrance by heading north into the wooded area and found a large flock of **Vinous-throated Parrotbills**, an **Eastern Crowned Warbler** feeding characteristically low down in the bushes, another White's Thrush and hundreds of **Chinese Penduline Tits** flying around the tops of the trees. Three **Oriental Pratincoles** flew over calling loudly as I left the reserve.

A good route back into town is to walk back to the main road from the reserve entrance, cross the road and descend on to the board walk which skirts the sand flats and follow it west back towards the town. After a kilometre it crosses the 'river' which has been dammed to form the reservoir via a footbridge adjacent to the road bridge, and this is a good vantage point to survey the 'estuary' and the sand flats. A flock of 15 **Marsh Sandpipers** flew over and **Eastern Yellow** and *ocularis* **White Wagtails** picked up insects from the mud.

If one continues west from the bridge the boardwalk soon splits and the left branch takes one through about half a kilometre of woodland and scrub adjacent to the strip of reeds and saltmarsh

that fringe the sand flats. This area clearly has potential. At the far end the boardwalk deposits one on a busy road where it is easy to flag down a taxi. The trick with taxi drivers is to show to the driver the name and address/location of one's desired destination written in Chinese characters, and therefore it is wise to carry one of the Jin Shan Hotel's cards (although this not fool-proof). If all else fails one can call Jean/Jeanie on the mobile and ask if they can provide instructions in Mandarin to the driver.

After a short rest at the Jin Shan I then headed up to the Friendship Hotel and as I walked in to the grounds a brownish bird flitted up onto a branch where it briefly flashed a scarlet throat patch as it scampered upwards – **Siberian Rubythroat!** As I walked slowly round the grounds checking every bird I saw an immature male **Dusky Thrush**, a **Pallas's Warbler** and a **Hawfinch** in the trees.

As it grew dark I wandered the nearby streets and found a large flock of **Japanese White-eyes** in some tall trees and the day ended with a **Daurian Jackdaw** flying over as I came in to the back entrance of the Jin Shan.

Monday 6 May

Remco and I teamed up for the morning and after an un-productive pre-breakfast foray to Lighthouse Point we focused on the sand flats and the adjacent wood/scrub. The sand flats held four more Red-necked Stint and three **Far Eastern Curlew** but the wood was far more interesting: **Little, Tristram's, Elegant** and **Black-faced Buntings**, **Black Drongo**, **Grey-headed Woodpecker**, two more **Daurian Jackdaws** over, ten **Eye-browed Thrushes** and two **Siskin** associating with the multitudinous Chinese Penduline Tits.

Back at the Jin Shan Hotel we found a **Siberian Blue Robin** and another Siberian Rubythroat skulking in the base of the hedges, a **Swinhoe's Snipe** feeding amongst the coal dust in the alleyway by the road and saw two **Grey-faced Buzzards** soaring overhead.

Unfortunately at this point I had to tear myself away to catch the train back to Beijing. Beidaihe had been quiet by its usual standards but even so I had had an amazing one and a half day's birding. I will clearly have to return!

Thursday 9 May

After visiting Beijing and then Shanghai, two of the world's largest cities, we escaped to Hangzhou near Shanghai to see a more traditional side of Chinese life. The West Lake is a famously beautiful and ancient scene of water, islands, woodlands and pagodas. It is also good for birds and as we walked along the paths surrounding the lake we saw a pair of **Ashy Drongos** hawking for insects over the lawns, many **Oriental Magpie Robins** with their Willow Warbler-like song and explosive alarm calls, 3 **Red-billed Starlings**, another Eastern Crowned Warbler and a family party of **Black-throated Tits**. We also briefly glimpsed what I later realised was a Black Bittern flying between islands over the lake.

Friday 10 May

The following day we visited the Xixi Wetland just outside Hangzhou. This is the only national wetland reserve in China and boasts an impressive system of paths and boardwalks that penetrate an area of several square kilometres of woodland, river and marsh (although the muzak emanating from a system of outdoor speakers hidden next to some of the paths was surreal to say the least). Our visit was during the afternoon and one would undoubtedly do better early in the morning before the visitors build up. Even so I had stunning views of **Black-naped Oriole** and a **Brown Hawk-owl**, which perched on a branch just 6 feet over my head.

Xixi (pronounced 'she-she') is also a superb area for water birds and we found an **Intermediate Egret**, many **Night , Striated and Chinese Pond Herons**, **Eastern Cattle Egret**, **White-breasted Waterhen** and fabulous views of a **Black Bittern** in a tree.

Given the abundance of perches and insects, it is not surprising that the main passerine interest centred on **flycatchers**, and we saw many **Asian Brown**, **Grey-streaked** and **Red-throated** with single female **Mugimaki** and **Yellow-rumped**. There were also a couple which seemed to me to match the description of **Dark-sided Flycatcher** in the field guide.

The most interesting passerine was a **Masked Laughingthrush** which lived up to its name as it made its presence felt in a nearby bush. Given the abundance of cover for passerines there were many calls which I could not identify and it would be sensible to learn the most common calls and songs before a visit. For example we heard several *accrocephalus* but had to leave them unidentified.

Saturday 11 May

Back in Shanghai, I had had enough of the main tourist sites and the following day I headed for Century Park in the Pudong area. This is easily reached by subway, as is pretty much anywhere in central Shanghai. This is a superbly-designed park covering a couple of square kilometres and has enough nooks and corners to absorb huge numbers of people and still provide refuge for a good variety of birds. Allow a full day to do it justice and arrive as early as possible (I think it opens at 8:30).

On my first visit there had been rain the night before and there were quite a few migrants present: **Brown Shrike**, Yellow-browed, Dusky and Eastern Crowned Warblers, many flycatchers (including Mugimaki) and Eye-browed Thrush. Best migrant award went to a **Swinhoe's Robin**, not unlike a small *catharus* thrush with the tail of a redstart.

Residents were represented by many **Azure-winged Magpies**, **Long-tailed Shrikes**, **Chinese Grosbeaks** and **Red-billed Starlings**.

Sunday 12 May

I couldn't resist another visit to Century Park, but the night had been clear and most of the migrants had left. Digging out two Tristram's Buntings from some cover in one of the wooded areas took an inordinate amount of effort. Some **White-cheeked Starlings** found in the far north-eastern corner at the end of the visit provided some recompense.

Thursday 16 May

After a rather unrewarding visit to Xi'an and the Terracotta Warriors (not worth it!) we returned to Beijing and took in the other 'must-do' attraction of any visit to China – the Great Wall. Although heavily restored in parts, this is an amazing monument, and if you go to a stretch such as Mutianyu, where the restored wall leads to unrestored sections, you get both the relative ease and safety of walking on the restored sections without too many people and the romance of the crumbling un-restored sections. Be aware that the wall here traverses the ridges of jagged, steep-sided mountains and that some of the steps are up to 60 degrees from the horizontal – not for the faint-hearted! I would definitely recommend conserving your energy by taking a cable-car or chair-lift to the wall from the car park.

In birding terms, the un-restored sections of wall seemed to be far more productive than the restored ones. Just beyond watch tower 23, beyond the western end of the 'Mutianyu' restored section, I saw **Daurian Redstart**, **Radde's Warbler** and Yellow-browed Warbler in just a few minutes. Be aware that walking on the unrestored sections requires good footwear and balance and should certainly not be attempted after rain.

We also found a male **Godlewski's Bunting** singing on a watch tower near the upper end of the chair lift. This looks like a close

relative of the House Bunting and is certainly very confiding. **Large-billed Crows** were also very visible along the wall.

The other place to find birds at the Great Wall is, of course, the skies. It was much harder than I expected to look for raptors because walking up and down the endless steps requires one's eyes to be kept firmly downwards. Even so we saw several **Oriental Honey Buzzards**, two Grey-faced Buzzards and a **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**. It looks as though given time and the right conditions this section of wall should be good for raptor passage.

Friday 17 May

On our final day we visited some standard Beijing tourist attractions in the morning and the Summer Palace in the afternoon. This is not unlike West Lake in Hangzhou, but even more historic (and crowded with visitors). It also has a large area of woodland covering Longevity Hill to the north of the lake, the eastern end of which proved quite productive with a mix of woodland structures providing cover for a variety of passerines, although considerable patience and field craft was required for the more skulking species.

The areas with dense under-storey contained another Swinhoe's Robin, two more Siberian Blue Robins, a very showy Radde's Warbler and lots more Tristram's Buntings. The best views in these areas were obtained by selecting a vantage point with long sight-lines through and into dense cover and keeping still for 10 minutes.

There were different species in the canopy. The tops of some pines near the northern edge of the park held several **Chestnut Buntings** (including a superb male), a loudly 'ticking' Little Bunting and a **Chinese Nuthatch**. It was interesting to see buntings as woodland birds! The tree-tops also contained a flock of **Chestnut-sided White-eyes** and an **Oriental Turtle Dove**.

Systematic list

Key to abbreviations:

CP Century Park, Shanghai, 11-12 May
FH Friendship Hotel, Beidaihe, 4-6 May
GW Great Wall, Mutianyu, Beijing, 16 May
JS Jin Shan Hotel, Beidaihe, 4-6 May
LP Lighthouse Point, Beidaihe, 5-6 May
SF Sand Flats, Beidaihe, 5-6 May
SP Summer Palace, Beijing, 17 May
WL West Lake, Hangzhou, 9 May
WR Wetland Reserve, Beidaihe, 5 May
XW Xixi Wetland, Hangzhou, 10 May

f female
m male
sp summer plumage

No.	Species	Comments
1	Ring-necked Pheasant	Seen/heard in small numbers everywhere
2	Falcated Duck	Pair WR
3	Garganey	10 WR
4	Teal	m WR
5	Mallard	Several WR
6	Eastern Spot-billed Duck	Pair WR; pair XW
7	Little Grebe	Common on water bodies
8	Black Bittern	1 XW; 1 WL
9	Striated Heron	Common XW, CP
10	Night Heron	Common on most water bodies
11	Chinese Pond Heron	Several WR, XW, CP
12	Grey Heron	1 WR
13	Purple Heron	3 WR
14	Eastern Cattle Egret	1 XW
15	Great White Egret	3 WR
16	Intermediate Egret	1 XW
17	Little Egret	Common XW
18	Kestrel	1 near GW
19	Amur Falcon	10 Beidaihe (especially WR)
20	Hobby	1 SF
21	Oriental Honey Buzzard	3 GW
22	Eastern Marsh Harrier	Ringtail WR
23	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	m GW
24	Grey-faced Buzzard	2 JS; 1 GW
25	White-breasted Waterhen	1 XW
26	Moorhen	Fairly common
27	Black-winged Stilt	Common SF and WR
28	Avocet	10 SF
29	Kentish Plover	Common SF
30	Swinhoe's Snipe	1 JS
31	Whimbrel	Common Beidaihe
32	Curlew	3 SF
33	Far Eastern Curlew	4 SF
34	Redshank	Several SF
35	Marsh Sandpiper	15 SF
36	Greenshank	Heard SF

No.	Species	Comments
37	Green Sandpiper	Several SF
38	Common Sandpiper	Several SF
39	Wood Sandpiper	Several SF
40	Red Knot	4 sp SF
41	Red-necked Stint	3-4 SF
42	Dunlin	2 sp SF
43	Oriental Pratincole	3 WR
44	Black-headed Gull	Abundant SF
45	Common Tern	2 LP
46	Gull-billed Tern	1 KP
47	Whiskered Tern	Common Beidaihe
48	White-winged Black Tern	1 LP
49	Feral Pigeon	Common
50	Oriental Turtle Dove	Widespread in small numbers
51	Spotted Dove	Abundant
52	Eurasian Cuckoo	Heard outside Xi'an
53	Brown Hawk Owl	1 XW seen at 2 m range
54	Common Swift	Common
55	Common Kingfisher	1 LP
56	Hoopoe	Common
57	Great Spotted Woodpecker	Common
58	Grey-headed Woodpecker	1 SF; 1 SP
59	Brown Shrike	Common
60	Long-tailed Shrike	Common CP
61	Black-naped Oriole	f XW
62	Black Drongo	Single SF Wood and CP
63	Ashy Drongo	Pair WL
64	Azure-winged Magpie	Abundant in North
65	Red-billed Blue Magpie	Common in East
66	Common Magpie	Abundant everywhere
67	Daurian Jackdaw	1-2 Beidaihe
68	Large-billed Crow	Several GW
69	Eastern Great Tit	Common in East
70	Southern Great Tit	1 WL
71	Yellow-bellied Tit	Flocks Beidaihe and Xi'an
72	Chinese Penduline Tit	Abundant Beidaihe
73	Barn Swallow	Common, especially in cities

No.	Species	Comments
74	Red-rumped Swallow	Abundant Beidaihe
75	Black-throated Tit	Family party WL
76	Chinese Bulbul	Abundant everywhere
77	Dusky Warbler	Common at most sites
78	Radde's Warbler	Singles GW and SP
79	Yellow-browed Warbler	Common everywhere
80	Pallas's Warbler	Singles FH and SP
81	Pale-legged Leaf Warbler	1 presumed of this species JS
82	Eastern Crowned Warbler	Singles WR, SD Wood, WL, CP
83	Masked Laughingthrush	1 XW
84	Vinous-breasted Parrotbill	Common Beidaihe, XW, CP
85	Chestnut-flanked White-eye	Flock SP
86	Japanese White-eye	Flock JS
87	Common Mynah	Common at most locations
88	Crested Mynah	1 presumed of this species CP
89	Red-billed Starling	Common CP
90	White-cheeked Starling	Common CP and Beijing
91	White's Thrush	3 FH; 1 WR
92	Grey-backed Thrush	Imm. m FH
93	Eye-browed Thrush	10 SF; 6 CP
94	Chinese Blackbird	Abundant
95	Dusky Thrush	Imm. m FH
96	Siberian Rubythroat	Single FH, JS and SP
97	Siberian Blue Robin	1 JS, 2 SP
98	Swinhoe's Robin	Singles CP and SP
99	Oriental Magpie Robin	Common WL
100	Daurian Redstart	m GW
101	Siberian Stonechat	Common Beidaihe
102	Grey-streaked Flycatcher	Common WR and CP
103	Dark-sided Flycatcher	2 presumed to be of this species XW
104	Asian Brown Flycatcher	Common at most sites
105	Yellow-rumped Flycatcher	f XW
106	Mugimaki Flycatcher	f CP and XW
107	Taiga Flycatcher	Common at most sites
108	Tree Sparrow	Abundant everywhere
109	Eastern Yellow Wagtail	Fairly common
110	White wagtail	Common; 1 <i>ocularis</i> at SF

No.	Species	Comments
111	Olive-backed Pipit	Common Beidaihe
112	Oriental Greenfinch	Common Beidaihe
113	Siskin	2 f SF Wood
114	Hawfinch	1 FH
115	Chinese Grosbeak	2 WR; 2 CP
116	Godlewski's Bunting	m GW
117	Tristram;s Bunting	f SF Wood; 2 CP; 25 SP
118	Little Bunting	4 SF Wood; 1 SP
119	Elegant Bunting	pair FH; f SF Wood
120	Chestnut Bunting	2 f, 1 m SP
121	Black-faced Bunting	Common Beidaihe; 3 SP