

Sichuan and Tibet, May 11-28 2016

Ian Reid and Tom Bedford



SMRY and I established a “tradition” in 2008 of going on a major foreign birding trip in even years. We had been good to this sequence, starting with PNG in '08, Philippines in '10, Venezuela in '12, a reprise of Philippines (with a cheeky Thailand extension thrown in) in '14. An imminent birthday divisible by 10 loomed in 2016, but with SMRY and wife also divisible by 10, he and his family were headed to India on a “Tigers or bust” trip (fab encounters with multiple tigers but also f***ing expensive, so in some respects, Tigers *and* bust) so I put some thought into what I might do without the usual team. I gave Steve three vetoes – places he would prefer we do together at some unspecified point in the future – and his picks were: Peru, Eaglenest/Bhutan and New Guinea (cunningly managing to group both West Pap and the PNG highlands). Fortunately he had not thought to circle the entirety of the central Asian mountains.

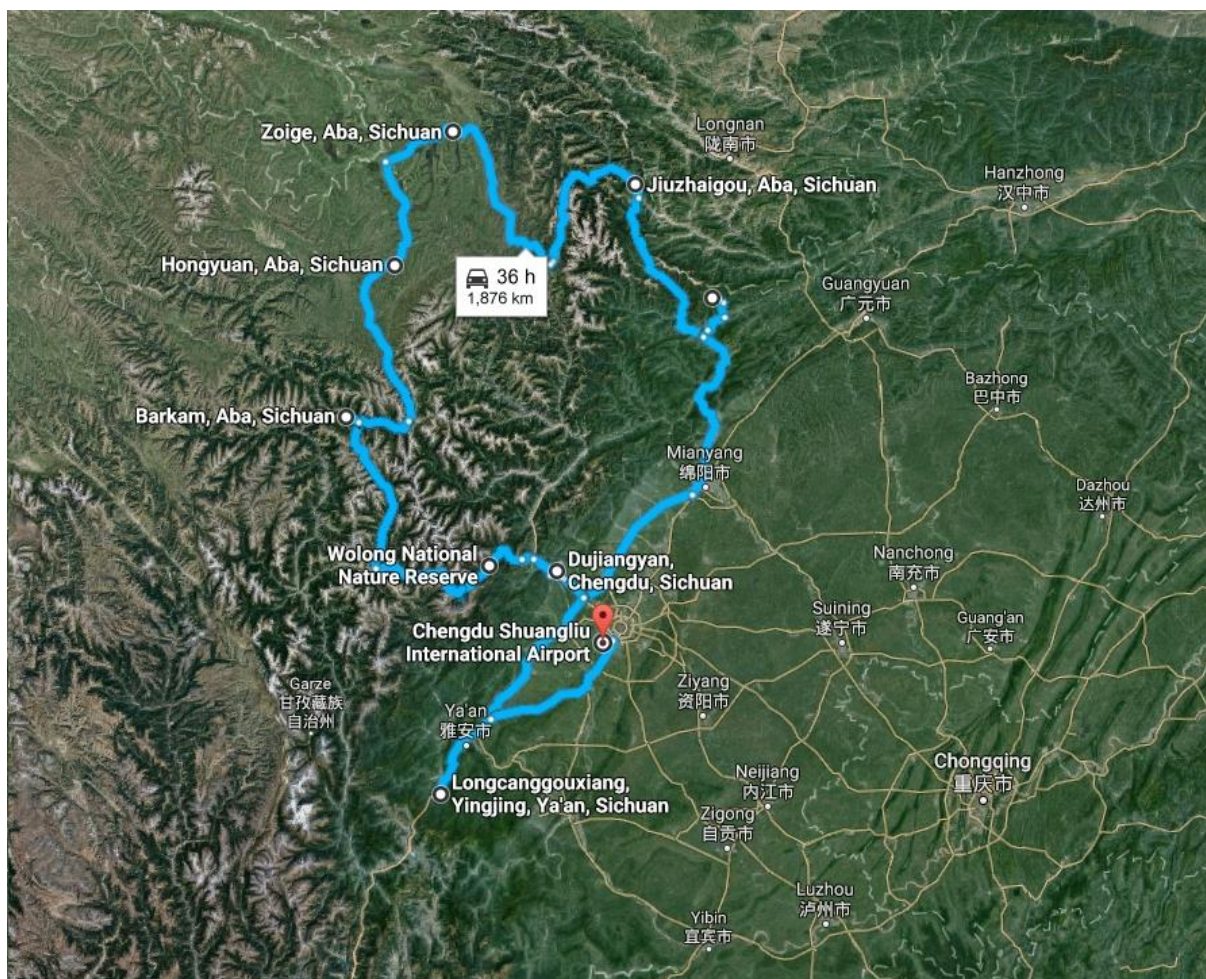
After a brief flirtation with some other possibilities (not least Sulawesi and Halmahera), I began planning for a trip to Sichuan in south west China, a destination that offered a range of scenic mountain sites, an unrivalled selection of *galliformes* and robins (both *luscinia* and *tarsiger*), and – when I looked deeper – a superb supporting cast with good selections from families such as rose-finches, parrotbills, laughing-thrushes and leaf-warblers. It also seemed to be “doable” in two weeks, the upper limit that the kitchen-pass specified. Fairly settled on the destination, I contacted Tom Bedford, long-time birding/twitching partner from Oxford (and companion on my Poland 2011 trip) and was delighted when with hardly any persuasion he was signed up.

Next task was to find a guide. It's barely possible to do China independently, so (after a few false starts) I contacted Sid Frances, an ex-pat Welshman living in Chengdu and well-known local bird guide. Sid was not available – he had a better offer from 4 well-known world birders that clashed with our dates – but put us in touch with Roland Zeidler his colleague and business partner. Roland was available on similar terms to Sid; we'd pay Roland a daily fee plus our expenses, and he would drive, take care of logistics and help find the birds. We had an excellent time with Roland and highly recommend him. As well as knowing the sites, birds and bird calls and songs very well, Roland was excellent company. His dry sense of self-deprecating (“German”) humour, passion for the environment, insights into Chinese culture from someone who has lived there for 18 years, and his fluent Mandarin were all bonuses. We both felt that we ended the trip with a friend.

A very early rise is needed for my 6.15am flight from Adelaide to Hong Kong, but an upgrade to premium economy is a very welcome bonus to start the trip. I have a few hours to kill in Hong Kong, then a short 2.5 hour flight north-west from Honkers to Chengdu. I had never

even heard of this city before I started researching China as a birding destination, and right up to a few weeks before the trip when Roland talked about the perils of trying to drive into Chengdu, I still imagined it to be a smallish, unremarkable city. In fact it is home to more than 10 million people, bigger than Sydney and Melbourne combined. It's also where all iPhones are made; Roland points out the factory close to the motorway not far from the airport.

Our itinerary for the next two weeks is to travel a clockwise loop in the mountainous area to the west of Chengdu, starting south at Loncanggou, heading through Wolong up onto the eastern part of the vast Tibetan plateau, northwest to Jiuzhaigou, then back south to Tangjiahe, ending in Dujiangyan and finally Chengdu.



However our first day agenda is altered before I even arrive. Tom – already birding with Roland on the outskirts of Chengdu – rings me with plan-changing news while I am still waiting for my DragonAir connection in Hong Kong: yesterday, Sid and his group have found a singing Blackthroat in Wolong. This bird, possibly the hardest of the 6 *luscini*a targets, is one for which we have hopes but no firm plan. Last year's site is now inaccessible to all birders (for bureaucratic reasons I never really understood), and while Roland has successfully scouted an alternative area prior to our trip, it will require 2 days in travel and deliver almost no other birds, so we've agreed over email that it would only happen towards the end of the trip if we've been lucky elsewhere. The news of this Wolong record causes a

hasty reschedule – we will travel straight to the site, leaving Longcanggou to the end of the trip.

Tom and Roland meet me when my flight arrives at 10.45pm and we drive immediately the 30-40mins or so to Dujiangyan, where we stay in a comfortable western hotel (the curiously named Shu Yin Intelligent Hotel) quite close to Roland's apartment. I am woken at 2am by a repetitive call that was unknown to me at the time, but which will become very familiar by the end of the trip: Large Hawk-Cuckoo.

May 12, Day 1

At 5.00am the next morning we are loading up our stuff into Roland's Mitsubishi Pajero aiming to be at the Blackthroat trail early morning. Our route from Dujiangyan takes us through the 2008 earthquake zone where 70,000 people lost their lives when an 8.0 magnitude quake hit about 20km from our route, on 12th May 2008, almost 8 years ago to the day. Construction of a new tunnel had the potential to reduce our journey time by some 30-40min, avoiding a bumpy still-quake-damaged road, and Roland navigates us through



White-capped Water Redstart

various roadworks into this tunnel. It is apparent that in China one uses roads and other infrastructure long before they are "finished". The sides of the tunnel are roughly cut, there is no lighting or road-markings, and no other traffic in either direction. As we penetrate deeper into pitch blackness we start to pass various road-building and even tunnel-boring equipment and I imagine us reaching a granite wall any minute. After 10mins, however, I breathe a

sigh of relief as we – quite literally – see light at the end of the tunnel and emerge into a steep forested valley, where we see our first lifers of the trip: **Blue Whistling Thrush**, **Plumbeous Water-redstart** and **White-capped Water-redstart** (or Riverchat). The latter two, both exceedingly smart birds, will prove to be common wherever there is water.

We stop briefly in Wolong to unload our bags and grab some noodles for breakfast, then drive a short distance up to 2000m a.s.l. to ascend a steep forest trail. **Marten's Warbler** flits about in bushes near the car, and we walk briskly up through coniferous forest, where **Grey-headed Bullfinch** and **Mrs Gould's Sunbird** are the first of my targets. Golden Pheasants call regularly but invisibly, and to our frustration a Temminck's Tragopan flushes from near the trail, seen only by Roland. At least this meant they are in the area. We don't even spend much time looking for a Firethroat that sings from near the trail, preferring to get quickly to the elevation Sid had reported the Blackthroat.

After an hour or so walking we have reached the requisite altitude and right on cue Roland indicates he can hear a bird singing. The tension immediately ratchets up, but after a further two hours in which it sings from dense cover, we are no closer to seeing it. Poorly known and hard to see: aptly its latin name is *luscinia obscura*.

We try various spots along the trail and identify at least two Blackthroat territories, picking up a few new species including **Long-tailed Minivet**, **Claudia's Leaf Warbler**, **Grey-hooded Fulvetta** and **Striped-throated Yuhina**. The best of these is our only raptor of the day, soaring quite close to the path. Roland initially calls Golden Eagle, but I run up the track to a more open area and in the binoculars I see heavily barred bulging wings; this is clearly no Goldie. Joining me at my better vantage point Roland now realises it is a fabulous **Mountain Hawk-eagle** – the only sighting of the excellent bird in the whole trip – and fortunately Tom bags a couple of record shots.

We keep coming back to the same spot, a gully just off the trail that has been cleared for electricity pylons. The degraded regrowth seems to be the favoured habitat and a bird sings from close to here regularly. A few times we beat and scramble our way across the gully 50-60m or so but after another unsuccessful foray we sit down by the pylon to regroup.

As I scratch away at hundreds of midge bites on my hands, and ponder the next move my mind is not fully on the job. Out of the blue, Tom excitedly announces "**Temnick's Tragopan!**". He is looking above us into a dense stand of bamboo and hisses that he can see the orange between the stems. This is just the jolt I need and scanning the area above me I too see the fiery glow, and then watch it gradually morph into a still-obscured but unmistakable white-spotted, orange pheasant coming directly towards us. There is a small commotion below me on the slope – Tom falls over as he manoeuvres for a better angle; Roland admonishes: "You're moving too much – it won't come", and even as he said this I see the bird turn and slowly move away, slipping down behind a ridge never to be seen again. Great to have on the list, but we both still *need* much better views.

We eat snacks and again contemplate our next move when suddenly a clear burst of song from incredibly close comes from behind me. I turn to look over my shoulder and there not more than 3m from is a **Blackthroat** right in the open. I hiss to Tom and Roland – "there it is, right behind me!" and they too are instantly on it. For just a few sweet seconds I have a brilliant view with the naked eye, but no time to take a photo or even get it in the binoculars before it has dived back into cover. Even so, this was more than we had hoped for when planning the trip, and certainly more than I'd expected while waiting around for 2 hours. We quietly celebrate and refresh ourselves with even more snacks. Maybe not walk-away views of either, but to have both Temnick's Tragopan and Blackthroat in the bag within 4 hours of starting to bird on this trip is an unimaginably good start.



Heading higher up the trail we pick up more new birds: **Brown-flanked Bush Warbler**, **Vinaceous Rosefinch** and **Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler** are seen but I score no usable images. We then enter a quite long and unsuccessful battle with a White-tailed Robin that stubbornly calls from incredibly dense cover and refuses to show itself. Likewise we cannot get onto a Scale-breasted Wren-babbler that somehow escapes our attention in spite of sounding like it can be no more than 2m in front of us. A **Pygmy Wren-babbler** is more obliging.

At 2500m a.s.l. we have reached signs indicating we are in the core area for Giant Pandas and the track levels out. We know will not see one, but I still enjoy the thought that they could be here. We have endured a slow few hours in the middle of the day, but approaching 3pm I stop for a waz as the others carry on down the trail to check out a small flock in the canopy. More than once in the past a comfort break has produced a cracking bird, and today our slash breaks will produce two major finds. As I finish off I realise that a parrotbill is moving unobtrusively in the branches in front of me. As quickly as I can make myself decent and call the others back. My initial guess (for it is no more than this, so poor has my pre-trip revision been) is Great Parrotbill, but Roland immediately sets me straight – in fact it is the slightly smaller and rarer **Three-toed Parrotbill**, an excellent one to get. As I watch it I realise that it has nesting material and I even find the nest, barely 2m from the track. Tom grabs some video of it on the nest, which Roland suggests must be among the only such footage in existence. Amazingly, less than ½ hour later at a lovely vantage point, I really do find a **Great Parrotbill**.

This spot is the highest and furthest we go today, and we have a vista and birds flitting about in the canopy and in the bushes below us, so we spend about 45 min here: **Coal Tit**, **Yellow-browed Tit**, **Slaty Bunting** and **Sichuan Leaf-warbler** are all added to the list. We are on the verge of heading back and Roland sidles up the track another 50m or so alone, for his own "comfort break". But within seconds, slightly dishevelled, he



appears around the bend, apparently cut off in full stream – "Quick guys, **Firethroat**". "I hope Firethroat is not Roland's nickname for his penis", quips Tom as we rush down the path. There hopping about unobtrusively in the middle of the path in the leaf-litter is this utter stonker. Dullish, dark blue-grey from the back but when it turns, its bright red-orange throat glows as if lit from within, like a chinese lantern. I soak in the view with bins then try to capture the moment to my CF card. Now the lenses are out he refuses to turn back to face us, but I manage a side-on shot in the dark at 6400 ISO. Our first day in China is off to a bang with Blackthroat, Temmick's Tragopan and Firethroat!

The descent to the car is rather quiet. We hear a Spotted Laughing-thrush but cannot coax it into view. At exactly the same spot as we had Pygmy Wren-babbler a small brown bird bombs across the track in front of just as before, and we realise this is because it has flushed from a nest built into the bank on the edge of the trail. We try again for Blackthroat – it seems to be close but again invisible in the thick regrowth – and final new bird for the day is **Barred Laughing-thrush**.

Back at the hotel we enjoy fabulous spicy meal (they don't do any other sort in Sichuan). This is the first time I have ever tried Sichuan pepper, a delicious lemony spice that imparts a tingling, slightly numb feeling on my lips and tongue. I am tempted by our cracking start – with 3 top targets UTB – to have more beer than is wise and also forget to drink water. I will regret this tomorrow.

May 13, Day 2

I wake with a splitting headache, a product of that extra beer and lack of water. Down by the car at 4.30am it's still dark. I fill my water bottle from the stash we have in the back of the Mitzi, down it in one, then refill and consume this on the drive up.

Our destination today is around 3000m a.s.l. at a site known in birding circles as "the Monal tunnel". We have aimed to arrive before dawn in the hope of scoring Wood Snipe, which have roded here in spring regularly for a number of years. Unfortunately we dip, as have (and will) all other tour groups this spring.

Dawn is now beginning to break and before we settle in for our stakeout, I go to replenish my now empty water bottle. Roland: "Not that one, that's my radiator water – it's tap water and has been in that bottle for two years". Oh shit! On the drive up I have just consumed more than a litre of old radiator tap-water. So much for brushing my teeth using bottled water. Gastro would be a disaster and wipe days off our itinerary. With sinking hearts Tom and I both wonder how long I have got before it kicks in. I wander away from the others and lean over the edge of the road, trying to make myself sick in the hope that I can purge before any nasties take hold. I retch but cannot do what's needed. I will have to carry on, presumably with a time-bomb ticking in my guts. I have a sinking feeling in my stomach, but must try to get my mind back on the job. Sigh.

Our first main target here is Chinese Monal, best viewed in the hour from dawn. We stake out the site from 5am and soon after a huge shape with a white rump bombs across the valley and lands out of sight. Excited, we walk quickly and peer down the slope onto a scree where Tom locates a cracking female **Monal**. We are able to view for all of 10 seconds before dense fog rolls in and covered it and pretty much everything else for the next several hours.

With scenic mountains rising to 7500m around us and cracking birds hidden everywhere this is, to say the least, deeply frustrating. A close **Blood Pheasant**, in good light would sport a deep crimson face and blood-stained breast, but for us is just a washed-out silhouette. We struggle with passerines, getting poor, foggy views of **Dark-breasted Rosefinch**, and a female **Streaked Rosefinch**, hearing but not seeing Crimson-browed Finch, and can hear various pheasants, especially Koklass which are very vocal, but invisible.

We grab some breakfast by the car – porridge and fruit and nuts – and scan the slopes above us when gaps in the mist appear (finding zero Monals) but down the mountain we do find a distant group of four **White Eared Pheasant**, looking at range like sheep in a green field. Nice camouflage guys!

Driving down the road in the hope of dropping below the cloud or finding pheasants by the roadside we almost score. At the limit of our visibility I see a large bird on the ground at the end of the crash barrier. Roland brings the car to a halt just in time for me to see the shape slip under the barrier and out of sight forever. Size and colouration make me think Koklass,

but I cannot tick this view, and will come to regret this moment, as the common but hard-to-see Koklass Pheasant is still a glaring omission from our lists after 2 weeks.

A morning that promised so much is turning into a write-off. Finally later on we do find some respite from the fog and start picking up some nice birds. Once the sun appears, raptors take to the skies and we see **Himalayan Griffon** and **Cinereous Vulture** (the former a lifer) cruising along the valley. **Kessler's Thrush** is a lifer and will prove to be fairly common throughout the 2 weeks; **Long-tailed Minivets** bring dazzling colour. We hear, but cannot entice into the open, Chestnut-throated Partridge.

Mid-afternoon we find a roadside tree that is attractive to various passerines, and Roland now demonstrates a party-piece that we will become very familiar with: while playing background excited chattering on his speaker, he whistles the 4-note song of Collared Owlet, bring in all sorts of stuff to check out the commotion and find the mythical owl. Within seconds the roadside vegetation is alive with birds: **Long-tailed Minivets**, **Claudia's**, **Sichuan Leaf**, **Buff-barred** and **Large-billed Leaf Warblers**, **Hodgson's Treecreeper**, **Black-browed Tit**, **Rufous-vented Tit**, **Goldcrest**, **White-collared Yuhina** all put in appearances and our somewhat flagging spirits are revived by this magical, memorable birding moment.

As the afternoon draws on we pick up **Giant Laughingthrush** a big stonking spotty thing that was high on my list of "two star" targets, then get great scope views of a singing **Plain-backed Thrush** (all *zotheras* are good!). Unfortunately we dip on a bird that puts in a very brief appearance: as we try to find a Chinese Fulvetta that Roland has found, suddenly he excitedly announces a Sharp's Rosefinch just above it. Not having found the fulvetta, the directions "just above the fulvetta" are not especially helpful and even before Roland can revise the directions the rosefinch is gone. It doesn't respond to playback and, like Koklass Pheasant, we have missed our best opportunity. Sharp's will become a glaring rosefinch miss – the only "leader-only" bird of the trip.

Late afternoon we set ourselves in the Mitsubishi hide, play a few calls, and then gasp as a vision of long-tailed red and gold drifts into view. Initially obscured by lingering mist, the fog pulls back just enough for us to have cracking views of our bird of the day, a stunning **Golden Pheasant** into view. A narrow trail into the forest here leads us to find a **Himalayan Bluetail**, then one of the best finds – though a somewhat underwhelming experience – a **Blandford's Rosefinch** which I find feeding unobtrusively just to the side of the track. We are only able to identify it from Tom's photos a couple of days later.



At the end of the trail we are pause and then Roland walks ahead up a few steps on a steep slope. Suddenly he is back, breathless: “Temnick’s Tragopan on the trail”. Tom and I scramble up as noiselessly as possible, just in time to see a marvellous blue and orange head cruise above the bushes then disappear. We wait for ages for a reappearance and try playback but to no avail. A pair of **Blood Pheasant** making their way through the forest below us, have us thinking we’ve got the Tragopan again until we get better views.

We arrive back at our comfortable hotel just before dark. A Large Hawk-cuckoo is calling outside, but by the time we have fuffed a bit and got ready for dinner it is too dark outside and we’ve left it too late to track down. Fortunately dinner is delicious and spicy and takes my mind off the day’s dips and my gut, which is mercifully still intact.

May 14, Day 3

We wake to the excellent sight of stars in the sky – yesterday's fog (and rain by the evening) has cleared, and we have high hopes for better views of Chinese Monal. Even better, I have made it through the night without any tummy grumbles. Back up at 3000m we once again wait from pre-dawn and then at about 6.30am I find the huge blue and purple and gold and black pheasant on the top of a rocky outcrop. Tom is also on it quickly and for a few brilliant – but all too short – seconds we enjoy stunning views of a male **Chinese Monal** in full view in the sunshine. Sadly, it takes off down the valley, a fraction of a second before either of us is ready to fire off the cameras.

We also claw back some of the finches we missed yesterday, with good views of **Crimson-browed Finch** and **Dark-breasted Rosefinch**, **Streaked Rosefinch**, **Common Rosefinch**, **Chinese White-browed Rosefinch** , **Red-fronted Rosefinch**, while a **Blue-fronted Redstart** adds a slightly different colour scheme (which will also become common) – orange and blue – to the pink/rose theme. We also score slightly better views of **Blood Pheasant** scampering along the road and picking their way up the slopes. We hear White eared and Koklass Pheasants but still do not see the latter.

Sadly within an hour, and before I have thought to take photos of the scenery and before we have relocated the Monal, normal service is resumed and fog rolls over; we are once again plunged into poor visibility. Roland notes that the reason we – and most tour groups – spend at least 3 mornings here is because on average only 1 in 3 days is cloud free.

We seek better viewing higher up, finally breaching the tree line at around 3500m before travelling up to the Balang pass at 4500m – higher than I have ever been anywhere – and beyond into the next valley. Aided by some breaks in the cloud we pick up all of our target species.

Rosy Pipits (more rose!) dot the road as we ascend, and then over breakfast we scan the slopes at a shade under 4000m and Roland finds a pair of **Himalayan Snowcock**. “There’s no cock like snowcock”, I mutter to myself. Heading even higher we find a stunning **Grandala** in an alpine meadow, its deep blue seeming to emit light from within. **Stresemann’s Pink-rumped Rosefinch** is a cracking addition to our already impressive rosefinch collection, while we also find numbers of **Plain Mountain Finch** and **Brandt’s Mountain Finch**.



This is already turning into one of my best ever birding days, but we still have some star birds to find. We descend into the next valley until we reach a vegetated meadow. Roland pulls over and we scan the tops of the bushes until we find a top trip target, a stunning red-throated stonker, **Himalayan Rubythroat**. We hear up to five birds and see two well, although they are too shy for us to get the ultimate photos we dream of. A **Rufous-breasted Accentor**, and **Alpine Leaf Warbler** do pose well.



Altitude sickness has hit us hard, with perhaps Tom feeling it more than me. I do not feel nauseated, but my head has a vague, slightly hung-over “headachy” feel, and my legs are leaden and I marvel at the stamina of a couple of American cyclists we see ascending.



On our way back to Balang pass we stop again just before the col and go for a walk. This is a site that Roland says is reliable for another goodie, Snow Partridge, and sure enough within a few minutes after a walk of a few hundred metres (that feels like a lot longer) we have homed in to a cracking male **Snow Partridge**. It shows well on the top of a ridge while a mixed flock of **Grandala**, **Mountain Finches**, and **Alpine Accentor**.

Mid-late afternoon we make our way back over the pass and down the road until we are slightly beyond the monal tunnel. Roland pishes out a lifer **Yellow-bellied Bush-warbler**, then we stake out another stonker that we missed yesterday, Chestnut-throated Partridge. We walk up into the forest a short way and then hunker down while Roland plays the call on his ipod. Gradually the responding voices come closer, then, in a narrow channel between trees I see movement, then briefly, an unobstructed view of a male. It stops and calls, wanders around a little, then slopes off. Selfishly I carry on watching with bins, fearful that I will waste valuable viewing time on trying to get crap photos in the difficult dark conditions, but I am grateful that I can hear Tom's shutter clicking next to me, and even more so when I see the stunning image on LCD of his camera; **Verraux's Monal Partridge** seems more special a name than Chesnut-throated Partridge, and indeed this is a huge, long-tailed partridge deserving of a grander moniker.



Verraux's Monal-partridge

Photo by Tom Bedford (c)

Final birds are a **Black-caped Kingfisher** seen on our drive back, and the common but stonking **White-capped Water-redstart**. Another delicious, spicy meal rounds off an awesome day that has included some of my best ever birds, all in incredible, stunning mountain scenery. The weather (and to an extent the birds themselves) didn't provide best opportunities for photos, but that would be nit-picking. I texted SMR Young afterwards: "a day to bring tears to one's eyes: Monal, Blood Pheasant, Snowcock, bagful of Rosefinches, two Mountain Finches, Snow Partridge, Himalayan Rubythroat, Grandala, Verraux's Monal Partridge."

May 15, Day 4

Our final morning in Wolong/Balangshan we ascend once again pre-dawn up to 3000m. Overnight 3in of snow has fallen blanketing everything in white. Hundreds of pipits and finches that were not present the previous two days flush from the roadsides as we drive past. Our hopes are high for an encounter with a Tragopan in the snow, but our luck is not in today. We do have further looks at a male

Monal up at the tunnel. It flies over our heads and lands on the slope above us, but the fog has set in (instead of 1/3 we get 0/3 clear days ☐) and though I can digiscope a shape picking its way, and even “skiing” down the slope a bit, it is a just a colourless silhouette in the mist. We hear the drawn out high-pitched song of a Sharp’s Rosefinch but cannot find the perpetrator.

We set off for the Balang pass again with some trepidation – if the pass is not open we will have an 8 hour detour to negotiate – but fortunately after a km or two we see a truck coming in the opposite direction, a sure sign that the road is passable. Once over the pass we see more finches and pipits, and then below the tree-line see a **Grey-headed Woodpecker** and our only **Chinese Babax** of the trip. **Elliot’s Laughingthrush** are common; we had these on Day 1 also, but it is only today I make much notice, so focused have I been on the cracking robins on offer in Wolong.

In a mixed feeding flock as we approach Rilong we find **Japanese Tit**, **Alpine Warbler**, **Greenish Warbler**, **Bianchi’s Warbler**. Then a few km on, we stop at a vantage point where we can scan across the valley to the town and see that we will be delayed by roadworks. We ask some locals who tell us the road will be re-opened at 1pm. Instead of waiting in the backed up traffic we put the time to good use, waiting in pleasant sunshine with stunning views of the “4 Sisters mountains” and finding **Snow Pigeon** (a most un-pigeon-like flight), **Przevalski’s Nuthatch** and **Collared Grosbeak** before driving down to join the queue of traffic with only a few more minutes to wait before the road opens. Again we don’t waste birding time and view down into fields on our side of the valley, finding **White-throated Redstart**, and **Grey-crested Tit** as well as more **Snow Pigeon**.

Further north we look unsuccessfully for Sichuan Jay but at the lookout we find **Black-eared Kite**, **Himalayan Griffon** and (lifer) **Eastern Buzzard**.

In the coniferous forests it is very quiet and we see very little until early evening, after 5pm. When the bird activity does pick up a little before sunset we find a superbly coloured and superbly named **Crested Tit-warbler**, a vision in chestnut, blue and mauve. We also spend a long time trying to pin down a singing *zothera*. Although almost identical in appearance to Plain-backed, Long-tailed has a distinctly different song, and our bird, which we finally track down, matches **Long-tailed Thrush**.

Final stop is Zhouokeji, an exquisite Tibetan village, and almost the only place we see that appears largely untouched by unaesthetic development. Tom and I jump out of the Pajero, take photos of the temple, wander across the prayer bridge, and are generally tourist dudes for all of 15mins. Roland suggests we head to the next large town, Barkam, for accommodation overnight. A homestay in the beautiful village is possible, but Roland notes it will complicate our travel tomorrow and cost quite a bit more. We opt for convenience and



Crested Tit-warbler

the cheap-skate option of the faceless hotel in Barkam, the purpose built and exceedingly ugly “new capital” of the region. A quieter day bird-wise, but still some quality and there can be worse ways to spend a day than driving through snowy mountains at 3000m a.s.l.

May 16, Day 5

More driving interspersed with birding today, as we continue the drive north to the Tibetan plateau. We stop a few times as we drive north from Barkam finding a few nice birds in degraded vegetation on the roadsides. A **Spotted Bush-warbler** is our first bird, a skulker that I’m delighted shows well for photos – another family where we do quite well over the course of the two weeks. Another addition is **Hodgson’s Redstart**, hanging around an electricity substation. **Eurasian Cuckoo** have been common since we left the very high mountains and today we see them regularly, including on the plateau.



Spotted Bush-warbler

We have noticed in previous days how degraded many of the rivers appear – dammed for hydro and dredged for roadbuilding – and this will be really brought home to us today as we spend the morning looking for Ibisbill. I have seen this amazing wader in China previously, when I twitched the small population north of Beijing in 2009 before a conference, but it is one of Tom’s 3-star birds. We keep our eyes out for a clean stretch of shallow, fast-flowing river with nice round boulders but in most places, even where there is no dredging, the water is still dirty from activity elsewhere. This was sadly symptomatic of the heavy price the environment is paying in China for the “economic miracle”.



Slaty-backed Flycatcher

We pick up **Godlewski’s Bunting** (lifer) and a gorgeous **Slaty-backed Flycatcher** before we arrive at the spot which Roland says is our last but also best chance for Ibisbill – he had birds here last year. But there is now evidence of dredging here too, and despite walking up and downstream for more than a km we find no evidence of Ibisbill. A **Common Pheasant** is the only reward here before we head for the plateau.

As we ascend we spend time on the final ridge, finding some of the best birds of the day. A scruffy **Lammergeier**, sails past with some **Himalayan Griffon**, and an **Upland Buzzard**. On our way up to a spot just below the crest, one of Roland’s regular sites, we are passed by a monk on a motorbike (not often one gets to say that!). Here we find two crackers, **White-browed Tit-warbler** (there are 4 here) and **White-browed Tit**, a beautiful creamy and buff bird that takes some finding, but which shows well when we do track it down. While we are looking for Tits we see our first **Hume’s Warbler** and **Eastern Crowned Warbler**.

Most unusual bird here is an **Oriental White-eye**. The disbelieving guide says we are way too high up for white-eyes, but I finally get him onto it. We conclude it is most likely a release from the monastery.



White-browed Tit



White-browed Tit-warbler

Photo by Tom Bedford (c)

The scenery changes as we arrive on the plateau itself. Long straight roads lead through flat grassland, surrounded by rolling hills, and dotted with Yaks and tented tea-shops with brightly coloured bunting. Meadows and roadside streams and ponds promise somewhat “easier” birding.

We almost immediately find our first **Daurian Jackdaw** and a few distant **Azure-winged Magpie**. I also saw this taxon, split from the Iberian birds, in Beijing, but it’s a lifer for Tom. At a roadside stream we find one of Tom’s most-wanted, a (Tibetan race) **Citrine Wagtail**, a stunning looking bird. Spring is in the air, evidenced by mating **Redshank**, and stately pairs of **Black-necked Cranes** – we find three pairs, one of my top targets for the plateau.

Along the road we scan various ponds, finding a few nice list padders like **Black-winged Stilt**, **Ruddy Shelduck** and **Common Merganser**. Black Redstart and Tree Sparrow compete for space on the ridge line of a lean-to hut, and **Siberian Stonechat** flit from bush to bush. A young **Golden Eagle** cruises by.

The sight of a group of weird westerners sporting binoculars and curbing-crawling through the grasslands is too much for some of the local constabulary who pull us over. While Roland deals with this in his fluent Mandarin, Tom and I use the time productively, finding a pair of **Pere David’s (Plain) Laughing-thrush**, a bird that has irritatingly eluded us despite a lot of effort earlier in the day.

We drive through the township of Hongyuan looking for starlings, of which there are 4 or 5 potential species, but this year numbers are way down and we will leave the plains without a single starling of any species. As usual, dinner in a local restaurant is hot, spicy and delicious!

May 17, Day 6

From Hongyuan we headed north across the grasslands to a spot famous in birding circles as one of the best places to see a stunner in pink. Various known as Przevalski’s Rosefinch, Przevalski’s Finch, Przevalski’s Pinktail and sometimes even Bunting, this species has taxonomists in a tizz. It’s a beauty and so we are making a side trip this morning to a regular site.

We begin with a scan of an area of water outside the town and find **Ferruginous Duck**, **Brown-headed Gull**, **Common Tern** (with several of the latter perched on wires, a really unusual sight). We scan a few quarries on the way out, hoping for Eagle Owl but do not find one. We make do with a **Little Owl**, and also pick up **Blyth's Pipit** on wires and a few **Twite** on some farm buildings. At one of the quarries we come across our first **Ground Tit**, another bird that gets the juices of the taxonomists flowing. To me it looks and behaves less like a tit and more like a small Hoopoe Lark. A **Rock Sparrow** here poses nicely, showing off its yellow throat. This is the first time I have seen Rock Sparrow since Spain in the late 90s!

As we drive north a huge raptor crosses the road and we fire off record shots and hope we'll be able to id it later. First thoughts are an Aquila, probably Eastern Imperial, but maybe Steppe (I hope for the latter, having seen the former in Austria in '06). Weeks later, when Tom posts his blog to birdforum, we finally discover it is neither, but it is pointed out to us that it is in fact an immature **Pallas' Fish Eagle!** As it cruises off into the distance we see another raptor swoop towards it, then another. It is being harassed by a pair of **Saker Falcons**, another of my top targets for the plateau.



On our way to the finch site we climb over a pass where **Himalayan Griffions** are sitting about on a stinking, retch-inducing pile of yak carcasses. They seem well posed for cracking pics but we fail to stop in time and my ultimate photo is ruined by a rolling vehicle. By the time we have come to a standstill the birds have shifted and a couple have taken to the air.

Mid-morning we arrive at the site, clamber up a steep bank and immediately have brief, but tickable views of **Tibetan Snowfinch**. We can't tempt it back for better views and photos, and it is a shame that this turns out to be our only encounter of the trip. Nevertheless we press on, and after about an hour finally run into the **Pinktail**. Initially it is elusive but our perseverance and patience is rewarded as we get better and better and eventually walk-away views of the beauty.



Another quarry here is Tibetan Partridge. We walk up and down the steep hills hoping to hear a bird, and eventually one responds to Roland's playback, but won't come closer. I suggest that we walk towards it – surely it will flush and we will at least get flight views. Super-genius plan Reido – this works exactly as predicted and we get nice, if brief views of a pair of exquisitely marked **Tibetan Partridge**. They have not gone far so Roland now clambers up and around. Meanwhile, Tom and I wait down the valley a bit, cameras the ready. As soon as Roland gets too close for comfort, the partridges flush and initially fly directly towards us, but as soon as they see a pair of dudes waiting they bank to the right and sail over a ridge never to be seen again. Tom has grabbed a couple of record shots and I have nothing, zilch, nada.

We return to the car and retrace our steps, stopping at another small valley north of the road where we have lunch and search successfully for another specialty of this area and add to one of the many cool “family collections” available in Sichuan, **Robin Accentor** (so far we have had Alpine and Rufous-breasted, but we hope for Maroon-backed later in the trip). In fact we find a Robin Accentor almost immediately, and then chase it, and a few **Ground Tit**, around the hillside while Roland prepares some lunch.

After lunch we head back past the rotting yaks and vultures (sadly they are not in such close attendance now) and turn northwards, destination Zoige. The journey takes us along an awful road currently under construction for much of its length (it is a replacement for a road only a few years old which was so poorly built it is already falling apart – as this one probably will too with so many cars and trucks driving on the unfinished surface) through more spectacular scenery of flat green meadows surrounded by rolling brown hills. En route we pass a boggy meadow where we stop and soon are able to scope a number of stonking **Tibetan Lark**. This is a monster of a lark, even bigger than Black Lark and basically the size of a Thrush. It's spring, so the males are trying to impress the one or two females we can see, making short display flights.



Black-necked Crane

We carry on beyond Zoige towards Flower Lake where we scan the fields inhabited by maybe a million Pika: small, cute guinea-pig-like rodents. Where there is this much flesh, there will be predators, and sure enough we find a **Tibetan Fox** and more **Saker**. We also find the two remaining snowfinch species, **Rufous-collared** and **White-rumped** as well as more **Black-necked Cranes**.

We do not go down to Flower Lake to pad our lists, but instead take dinner at a small roadside restaurant by the turnoff to the lake. A **Horned Lark** puts on a wonderful performance, approaching us to within a metre. We end the day spotlighting for cats, though all we find is more **Tibetan Foxes**. At a known stakeout for Pallas' Cat we dip initially, then meet some locals on the way out. They show us iphone pictures they have taken earlier in the day, but then overexcited, lead us, chatting loudly, right up to the den. Unsurprisingly given the noise they are making, all we see was a distant shadow

moving off up the hillside and over a ridge. After a productive but very long day it is dispiriting to end on a dip, and then have an hour back to civilisation. Once back in Zoige (Chinese name Rouergai) we check into the amusingly named “Le Grand Large Hotel” where we will have two nights.

May 18, Day 7:

After a day in the grasslands on yesterday, today we return to the forests, just to the east of the plateau. There is no imperative for a pre-dawn start, so we are picking up Roland's Pajero as the sun starts to rise, and a flock of **Greylag Geese** flies over.

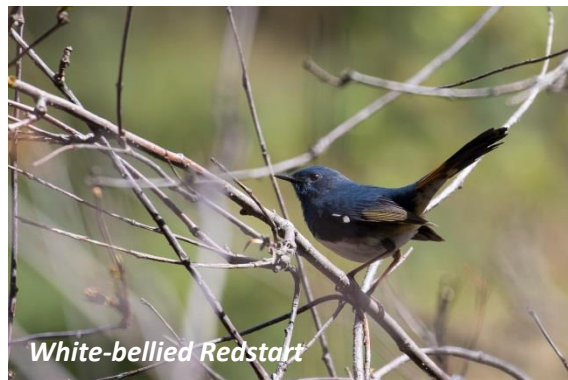
It takes around an hour to get to our stake-out in the pines where we view from one side of the valley to the other, yielding scope views of distant **Blue Eared Pheasants**. Our best of the morning comes later as we climb up the into the conifer forests behind us. Soft mosses cover fallen trunks underneath classic pines, with **Red Crossbills** calling from above. If not for **Blood Pheasants** moving slowly up the gullies in the open understory and **Blue Eared Pheasants** calling we might supposed we are in Abernethy forest.

Quickly we find a cracking **Maroon-backed Accentor**, ubiquitous Leaf Warblers of a few species (including **Greenish** and **Two-barred Warblers**), and common **Slaty-backed Flycatchers**. **Eurasian Sparrowhawk** and **Upland Buzzard** soar above the pines.

We then walk up and down a trail without seeing much until we clamber up a narrow side-trail that borders a scrubby area and the older forest. Here we hit a purple patch. First we have a protracted battle with a pair of skulking **Sukhatchev's (Snowy-cheeked) Laughing-thrush**, which circle us for several minutes (we win, though with only record shot photos),



Three-banded Rosefinch



White-bellied Redstart

then Roland finds a stunning **Three-banded Rosefinch**. A **Himalayan Bluetail** perches in the pines. One of the birds of the day is a stunning **White-bellied Redstart** which flies in close and poses wonderfully.



Sichuan Jay

Later as we walk up through the pines themselves we come across one of the top targets here: we are about to head down a new trail when a largish dark bird drops to the ground from a low branch and I realise this is the rare and endangered **Sichuan Jay**. There are 3 birds here, one of which prods about on the ground a few metres in front of our lenses. We trudge back downhill through a denser part of the forest hoping to flush a grouse, but only

hear the whirr of wings once and have no sightings.

After lunch in the local village about 20min down the road we head for another coniferous forest site. Roadside birding yields **White-winged Grosbeak**, which are easily heard but

bloody difficult to see or photograph, as well as **Tibetan Siskin** and **Yellow-streaked Warbler**. As we pass a monastery we string Hill Pigeon, but this is not tickable.

We have taken our time with this drive, but it has not been wildly productive, but by late afternoon are approaching Roland's next potential grouse site. We stop on the bumpy, windy road to check out a mixed flock and find **Crested Tit-warbler** and **Greenish and Two-barred (Greenish) Leaf Warblers**, and by 6pm we exploring another stunning pine forest.

In the soft evening light the moss-covered ground looks like a fairy-tale setting. We walk "birdlessly" for a few hundred metres, and Roland is on the verge of suggesting we turn around when Tom announces:

"Chinese Grouse on the track". I turn back to where we had been heading to see a female grouse walk out nonchalantly out onto the track. The track is not wide and it does not stay long, but we have had a fantastic view. Shame that my pics are rubbish. Laughing at our good fortune, suddenly we realise a stunning male has followed it onto the track. I am transported back to Bialoweza Forest (Poland 2011) where Tom and I had the closely related Hazel Grouse.



The day might have ended perfectly had we scored with Pere-David's Wood Owl late evening / night but despite putting in the hard yards and the conditions being cool and still, we hear not a peep. Here we did flush another Grouse (crap views) and also found **Chinese Fulvetta** (clawing this bird I missed on day 2) and **Bianchi's Warbler**. But it is particularly galling to find out that Sid's group a few days later had a very responsive pair in exactly the same spot. Who knows what the difference was?

The walk back to the car, up a steep slope in the complete dark, at 3000m a.s.l. was the most draining hike I have ever done, and was followed by a 2 hour drive on horrendous roads back to Zoige.

May 19, Day 8:

Another travel day, but this one is enlivened by a certain jewel-throated robin. We begin the day with a dip on Tibetan Grey Shrike at a site that where there has been a bird regularly for the last 5 years, but we do find **Tiger Shrike** on the outskirts of the village. Our destination for the end of the day is the famous Jiuzhaigou Natural Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site and Sichuan's most famous natural tourist attraction.

On the scrubby slopes as we leave the plateau we stop for one of the trip's top targets. A scramble down one promising-looking aforementioned "steep scrubby slopes", a quick burst of playback and soon we are



enjoying a stunning **Siberian Rubythroat**. Mostly it sings from deep cover, but a few times pokes itself out into fuller view, it's bright red-orange throat glowing as if lit from within. Although overall less strikingly marked than Himalayan Rubythroat, its beacon throat seems even more prominent for the more subdued rest of the bird. We stop at a few other spots en route, trying 3 other sites, and find a total of 7 birds, though it is the first that has yielded the best views.



We arrive early afternoon at another site for Wood Owl. Roland assures us he has had daytime birds here regularly. Apparently the birds will often respond to playback even in the daytime. Two years earlier, Roland explains, he brought a group with Pete Morris to this exact spot and they'd had a daytime Wood Owl being hassled by a Kessler's Thrush. This story makes our dip even harder to swallow. We hear Blue Eared Pheasant, and a pair of **Grey-headed**

Bullfinch feed in a cherry tree, the first time I have properly taken note of how striking the male is.

We stop a few times on the final descent to Jiuzhaigou. First, at one sharp bend that Roland has clearly birded before, we score a **Chinese Nuthatch**, then make a detour up to a quiet, pretty area off the main road. We hope for Chinese Thrush here, but can only find **Chestnut** and **Kessler's**.

On arrival in Jiuzhaigou for the night we are hit full-on by the trappings of Chinese tourism – the string of villages at the base of the park have been transformed into Disneyland meets Vegas, with theme parks and – once night falls – flashing neon everywhere. We find Roland's usual hotel, settle in and take our meal at the next door restaurant.

May 20, Day 9:

Access to the park in Jiuzhaigou is limited to after 8.30 which is awful for birding, but at least affords a welcome lie-in for once. We arrive at the entrance well before 8.30 and bird nearby, looking unsuccessfully for a Black-streaked Scimitar Babbler. Closer to the time we push our way through a gaggle of women all desperate to sell us a pink selfie stick, then leave Roland to it, grateful for his local knowledge and language skills that not only bag us the first tickets, but also score a place on a workers' bus before the rest of the punters have been allowed into the park. As Tom and I wait for the buses while Roland gets tickets I claw back the common but sweet-looking **Sooty Tit** as a flock flits around bushes nearby.

Apart from the stunning scenery, the main reason birders come here is for the incredibly rare and beautiful *Luscinia Ruficeps* (same family as Nightingales), or Rufous-headed Robin. We spend all day searching two sites that have held territories in previous years but hear and see no sign. In fact, as far as I know the news for 2016 was not good at all – no birds were seen at all this year by any groups. Sadly, it seems, a bird that was already teetering on the brink of extinction just got closer ☐.

With this major dip hanging over our heads it is difficult to appreciate the scenery and the good birding we do have. Near the first alleged Robin site we find our first **Chinese Leaf Warbler** (song like...) and an **Indian Blue Robin**. It is dark in the forest and we can't pin it down for photos, though later in the day another performs much better at the second Robin site. While we wait in vain for any snatches of the beautiful, haunting song of the robin (it is from the same family as Nightingale), we find **Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher** and **Slaty-**



Chestnut-headed Tesia

backed Flycatcher, Bianchi's Warbler and, temporarily giving up on the robin we tape in and have a great encounter with the mini-pitta-like **Chestnut-headed Tesia**.

Finally we knock it on the head. There is one more potential site to try so we try to flag down a bus from our spot about 6km up the valley. Roland warns us that it might be tricky because the drivers are under strict instructions not to stop. Fortunately the 3rd or

4th that comes past does stop and takes us down to the village where we can get another bus up the next valley to alleged Robin site number two.

A boardwalk takes us over a shallow mossy lagoon with crystal clear water to a path that skirts a stunning blue lake. Several hundred metres along at a spot clearly well-known to Roland, we sneak off the trail when no one is looking and walk a couple of hundred metres up into the forest. We sit quietly and hope for a snatch of song or something to renew our faith, then have some lunch while we wait some more. A noise up the trail reveals the presence of birders, and a few moments later we meet the unfeasibly fit and good looking Jonathan and Giovanna, South African pro-birders on an extended tour of Sichuan. They



grip us off with their tales of "cruplung views" of Temmick's Tragopan at Tangjiahe (we have yet to go here so hopes are now high) and Pallas' Cat – at exactly the bloody spot we dipped – Bastards! We are somewhat relieved not to be gripped off by them with the Robin, but in equal measure concerned that they too have dipped.

Actually they are really nice, friendly people and we will bump into them again a few times when Jonathan will display his birding prowess (turns out he is #10 in the list of world birders with 8715 species to his name). Hmm. Fit, good looking, lucky *and* a good birder. We secretly hope for a weakness but never find one ☐.

After lunch Roland enlivens proceedings by bringing in a few birds in with his Owlet impersonation: **Coal Tit, Grey-crested Tit, Green-backed Tit** and **Great Spotted**

Woodpecker. The pick of the bunch are **Per-David's Tit** and **Dauids' Fulvetta**, both named after the Catholic missionary and naturalist Amand David who first described various Chinese species to Western science. As we leave the site somewhat disconsolate at our second Rufous-headed Robin dip, an **Indian Blue Robin** gives great views.

We emerge at the tip of the lake we have circumnavigated where it tumbles over petrified fallen logs into the next lake. We admire the scenery, gawk at the totally unselfconscious locals dressed up ready and posing for selfies, and pick up a few birds to boot, of which **Crimson-breasted Woodpecker** and **Bar-tailed Treecreeper** are new.

Having dipped on the Robin, we aim to give ourselves one more shot, first thing next morning. Because of the park rules forbidding overnight stays, the only way to accomplish this is to score a clandestine room. Roland takes us to a shop front where he knows the owners and we are led through the shop along a dark corridor, through a few more sneaky doors and emerge to a verandah that has 2 or 3 "motel-style" rooms attached. We dump our stuff and head out to grab a bus back up the mountain.

As we wait for a bus to hail, we hear Sharp's Rosefinch, and try very hard to claw this missing rosefinch back but to no avail. We do find a striking **Rufous-bellied Niltava**. Our aim is to get to a site where Roland thinks we have a chance of... but the driver misunderstands the instructions and takes much further than we wanted. What was intended to be a stroll in the evening turns into a 13km route-march. The only new bird we find is **Kloss' Leaf Warbler**.

May 21, Day 10:

Rufous-headed Robins are late migrants and it crosses our minds we are here too early – 3 days earlier than we had planned originally in fact, since our rearrangement to get the Blackthroat has bumped Longcangou to the end, instead of the start of the trip. In the hope a bird may have arrived overnight, our day starts where it left off on day 9, looking unsuccessfully for the Robins.

One of our hosts runs us up the road to the robin site where we find **Nutcracker** but sady no robins. After yesterday's sunshine the weather has decided to be overcast again, but the low cloud-base works in our favour, creating the conditions for the "day of the swifts". The first of these we picked up on our way out of the park, with a group of **Salim Ali's Swifts** (a recent split from Pacific Swift / Fork-tailed Swift), wheeling over the village.

Once out of the park we drive half an hour to Baihe, a steep-sided valley that Roland hoped could produce a few specialty birds that are hard elsewhere. We claw back **Black-streaked Scimitar Babbler**, and eventually get decent views of both **Spot-breasted Parrotbill** and **Long-tailed Rosefinch**, the latter of which we work very hard for. We also hear **Spectacled Parrotbill**. I am the only one to have any sort of view, and this is of the barely tickable, and probably even untickable variety, just before we leave. Other birds here include **Collared Finchbill**, **Vinous-throated Parrotbill**, **White-browed Laughingthrush**, **Black-naped Oriole**, **Grey Bushchat** (both on wires) and the stunning **Red-billed Blue Magpie**.

Tom is a few hundred metres up the road, and I am back at the car helping Roland transfer songs onto a different (and hopefully less temperamental) ipod when I look up and apparently from nowhere, the sky has filled with hundreds of swifts and martins. My heart

skips a beat as I realise amongst the flock are numerous **White-throated Needletails**. I shout up the road to Tom but quickly realise he is already on them, and is already in some kind of post-orgasmic meltdown at the close encounter he has just had with a bird he's longed for, for 40 years. These stunning black and white missiles are (in level self-powered flight) the world's fastest creature, and for half an hour we were treated to a flock of



Needletails that swells to more than 60 – a group this size is unprecedented in Roland's extensive experience birding in Sichuan. Although they spend the summer in Australia they are very rare in Adelaide and I have never seen one previously. They are aerodynamically perfect for fast flight, with cigar-shaped bodies and swept-back scythe-like wings, and – as my pictures witness – a huge challenge to photograph.

From here most of the rest of the day involves a long drive over the “Rhododendron pass” to Tangjiahe. We bird at a few places en route, hoping for Wallcreeper but we are out of luck. I find a **Blue Rock Thrush** at one slash-break, and up on the pass we find a cracking **Black-faced Laughing-thrush**. At two sites, including as we are stopped for 45 mins waiting for roadworks, we hear, but cannot tempt into view, the skulking Moustached Laughing-thrush.

We arrive at Tangjiahe as it is getting dark. Tangjiahe is a huge mountain reserve, preserved for its high density of megafauna including the impressive Takin, a huge beast that is like a cross between a goat and a bison. Above a certain level, away from habitation and even most other human influence is the so-called “core zone” of the reserve. By Chinese standards it is hideously expensive to enter and must be done with a licensed local guide. It is also – apparently – superb for birds, including Przewalski's Parrotbill if one is prepared to walk all day up to 1500m a.s.l. Indeed this is where Jonathan and Giovanna had their cruppling experiences of Tragopan on such a walk.

Roland negotiates with the guards at the entrance then we drive up half an hour to the park hotel where we will stay two nights. It is most impressive (and most expensive) we will stay in. Soon after we arrive it begins to rain, and will continue like this all of the next day.

May 22, Day 11:

Our plan for this day was to hike up several hours into the core zone of the reserve, but the weather makes this not only an unattractive option but potentially unsafe, so we modify the plan to bird in the lower parts of the reserve and around the hotel. This new plan also has the disadvantage of wiping out any possibility of Przewalski's (Rusty-throated) Parrotbill – even if we make it to the core zone tomorrow, our itinerary has no slack to allow us to get to sufficient altitude for the parrotbill and still drive to our next destination – these are the sacrifices and tough choices one has to make in trying to trim what is usually a 3 week tour down to a mere 15 1/2 days.

It is light as we leave our rooms and immediately we find a **Crested Kingfisher**. On our way down we get crap views in the fog and rain of a female **Golden Pheasant**, flushed from the

side of the road as we descend from the hotel in the Pajero, and the wettest **Hoopoe** we have ever seen. We also find our first Takin, grazing in an open area.



Tawny Fish Owl



Tawny Fish Owl

By the river at the patriotically named “Red Army Bridge” we split up and look for a roosting owl, regularly seen here. We have just about given up and Tom and I are chatting like dudes when we hear Roland hissing to get our attention. He has just appeared from across the river and we turn to him; there no more than 5m in front of us, facing away towards the river, is a mammoth **Tawny Fish Owl!** We take a few pics of its back, and then quietly confer over our best strategy. If we attract its attention it might turn to face us for frame-filling photos, but we can guarantee this will last all of 2 seconds before it flushes. Instead we decide to move quietly but swiftly back across the bridge to view from the other side. Unfortunately before we can get any sort of view we see the enormous wingspan of the owl as it drops down, glides across the river then flaps hard to cruise up to a roost far up the cliff on our side. Although it’s now more distant it is also settled and we view through scopes at our leisure. It is not happy in the constant rain, looking very bedraggled. But still, what a bird!

We walk up the road after the bridge for a km or so birding en route. Roland trots out the owl call and brings in a few flocks interested to check out the invisible predator. Overall it feels like hard work, in part because a couple of the birds are very elusive and we struggle for views and definitive id. But when I tote up afterwards we have seen several each of **Coal Tit**,

Japanese Tit, **Green-backed Tit**, and **Claudia’s Warbler** and a nice range of new birds: **Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker**, **Grey-winged Blackbird**, **Ferruginous Flycatcher**, **Brown-chested Jungle-flycatcher**, **Yellow-bellied Tit**, **Black-throated Tit**, **Sulphur-bellied Leaf Warbler**, **Japanese White-eye**, **Rufous-faced Warbler** and **Black-chinned Yuhina**. We hear Alstrom’s Warbler but will have to wait ‘til tomorrow for definitive views.

Back at the hotel we regroup, have lunch and actually decide on a quick snooze. I emerge from my room to find that Tom has found interesting passerines in the courtyard and we hang about until we (and the punters from another tour group) have got onto **Little Bunting**, and **Black-faced Bunting**.

The weather is still poor and we walk uphill from the hotel, not seeing much at all. Our aim is to get to the entrance to the core zone on foot. We will not have time to go in, but sometimes the endangered Golden Langur can be seen from here. We dip.

We see **Blyth's Pipit**, **Asian Koel**, and more **Needletails**, and a few **Brown Dipper** on the fast-flowing river which swells from 18 hours continuous rain almost as we watch it. The highlights are watching a **Chinese Sparrowhawk** catch prey and devour it by the side of the track, and a family of **Tibetan Macaque** which I find sheltering from the rain under and overhanging cliff.

May 23, Day 12:

We wake to good news and bad news. The good is that it has stopped raining. The bad is that the authorities will not allow us to go into the core zone. Actually, at first they will. Then they won't. Then they will. Then they won't. All very confusing and a result of two different bodies, the tourism ministry and the forestry department each having responsibility for the area, and not really talking to each other – and conveying their various decisions to us via dim-witted hotel staff. While they try to sort something out, we begin the day with a walk up into the forest above the hotel.

We walked this stretch the previous evening but it is more pleasant in the dry and we can even see a noticeable drop in water volume spilling down the valley. I am particularly keen to see a forktail, never having previously seen any of this interesting and striking-looking family. Roland helps us find a cracking **White-crowned Forktail**. We walk a slippery loop trail, finding a nice **Slaty Bunting** and then we are teased by **Ultramarine Flycatcher**. It sings regularly from two trees above us but we crane our necks and really struggle to find it. Eventually the beautiful and aptly named flycatcher yields to our persistence. Sadly we dip on the other blue-themed flycatcher here, Zappey's. A Great Barbet is calling from somewhere near in the hotel carpark but we cannot find it or tempt it closer.

Back at the hotel and there is yet another twist: it seems we will be able to go up to a higher level, but not in our own vehicle and not into the core zone. Nevertheless we jump at this, since it will give a chance of some parrotbills, and – importantly – another crack at better views of Temminck's Tragopan, which has become for both us quite crucial. We are driven up in a minibus, keeping an eye out for the alleged landslide which was the ultimate reason we were given for not being able to ascend earlier. We almost miss it as we pass, so miniscule is the damage – one or two rocks and some mud have fallen into the ditch by the side of the road but barely cover any of the bitumen. Either the seriousness got garbled in communication, or it was being used as a pathetic ruse to dissuade us from going and thereby “forcing” the bus driver and a few others to work instead of slacking. We suspect the latter. A large and aggressive-looking Macaque is on the bridge to greet us at the top of the road, but fortunately slopes off without confrontation as set off on our walk.

We stride up a steep, but scenic trail that hugs the banks of a rushing mountain stream (incidentally making it very tough to hear the calls of parrotbills). Close to the top – presumably in the knowledge we are in prime Tragopan territory – Roland drops to the back of our single-file line of 3 for fear of flushing one from the trail and leaving me and Tom with the metaphorical crumbs (again!). 200m on, suddenly Tom stops as a large bird flushes down the valley. I see nothing but Tom clearly feels he is onto something and scans the

forest floor carefully. “I’ve got it! Male Tragopan!”, he announces. I of course demand directions and then scramble to find it. Picking its way through the undergrowth, mostly somewhat obscured, the glowing orange and white spots of a **Temminck’s Tragopan** are unmistakable. I move up a few steps and sit on the track for a low profile, hoping it will emerge on the other side of a dense thicket.

We hold our collective breath. It would be just our luck for it to stay behind the thicket and tease us with yet more slightly unsatisfactory views. But this time our luck is in and it emerges into the clear at about 20m range – although it is dark on the forest floor, we now enjoy the kind of leisurely viewing of the gorgeous creature we’ve been hoping for, as it feeds pretty much in full view either unaware of or unconcerned by our presence. We are both very grateful for our relatively recent camera upgrades, enabling decent pics where our



previous equipment would have been badly wanting.

Flushed with success we bound back down the mountain where Roland has retreated and is waiting. Tom and I pick up **White-throated Laughing-thrush**, **Great Parrotbill** and **Alstrom’s Warbler** along the way. We have not had the best of weather, nor good luck with Chinese bureaucracy or parrotbill, but we have scored with the owl and the tragopan and we can leave in a fairly relaxed fashion, picking up **Daurian Redstart**, **Grey-capped Greenfinch** and **Russet Sparrow** on our way down from the park.

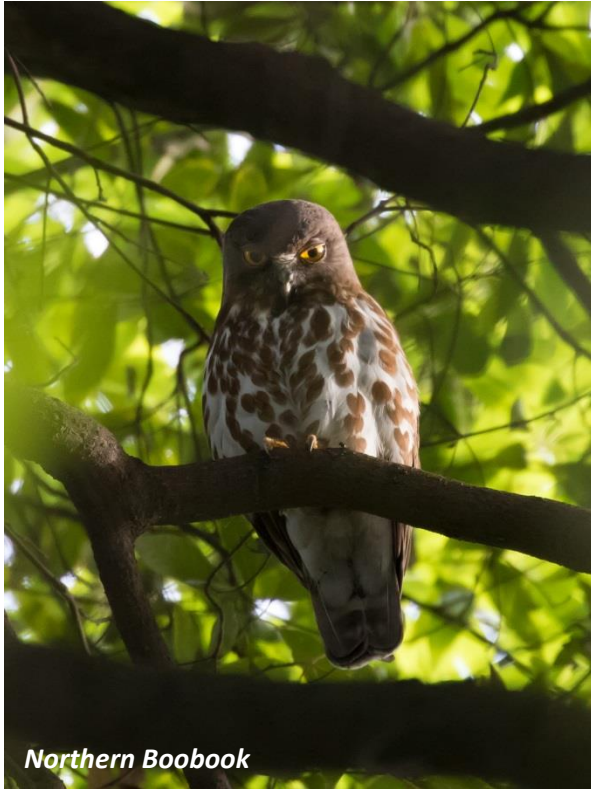
We take lunch at the local village, a beautiful walled town. Old men sit about playing Chinese chess, old women drink tea and stare at these strange, tall western invaders, and I wander the street packed with tiny shops and admire the local produce. Huge sacks of dried mushrooms seem particularly photogenic, and I shrug off the giggles of young girls amused at why anyone would want such a picture. Back in our little café lunch shop we are awe of the skill of the noodle-maker who goes from a ball of dough to long thin noodles by pulling the dough by hand in just a few seconds.

The rest of the day involved a long drive to Roland’s home town, Dujiangyan. We actually do very little birding. We are on the lookout for Collared Crow (unsuccessfully) and at a motorway services we have a comfort break and find our first starlings; these are **Red-billed Starling**.

Prior to my trip, each time I mentioned to any of the numerous Chinese students in my lab that I was going to Sichuan, they all immediately said I must try “Sichuan Hot-pot”. So far we have managed not to come across Sichuan’s most famous dish, but – after we have checked into the aptly named “Shu Yin Intelligent Hotel” – Roland takes us to his favourite

local hot-pot restaurant and we enjoy a fabulous meal. An unsuccessful owling expedition after dinner was disappointing (and long, tiring and ultimately very boring) but failed to dampen spirits too much.

May 24, Day 13:



Northern Boobook

Our first task this morning is to pick up some “easy” birds around the town, before heading south to Longcanggou. In truth I feel almost birded out and ready to come home, especially after yesterday’s unsuccessful owling. Roland, who had stayed in his own apartment close to our hotel, greets us with the serendipitous good news that after our long, fruitless walk the previous night looking for owls, he’d returned to hear a **Northern Boobook** calling outside his bedroom window all night! First stop, then, is a small group of trees outside Roland’s apartment. Amazingly the boobook had roosted there and Roland is able to pick it out for us. It’s amazing how a good sighting can renew one’s enthusiasm, and we potter around the town doing a bit of list-padding, but also seeing some nice birds: **House Swift** wheels about a construction site behind the hotel, a very attractive **Fire-breasted Flowerpecker**

sings from the top of a tree near the owl, and in the University courtyard we find a pair of **Swinhoe’s Minivet** (a lifer) and **Forest Wagtail**.

For the remainder of the morning we travel to some hills outside Dujianyan where we battle, mostly unsuccessfully with some skulkers. A Chinese Bamboo Partridge calls from some long grass. I can see the grass moving as it calls, but only a small fraction of its tail is visible and it refuses to come any closer in response to our ipod. Dusky Fulvetta, a notorious skulker, likewise refuses to perform, even though they seem common from the number of birds we hear singing. An interesting looking raptor soars high above the valley and we are later able to identify from the pics as a **Black Baza**. A group of very flighty **Slaty-backed Forktails** doubles my number of this elegant family while **Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher** posed nicely. It is relaxed but all a bit slow.

At the top of our walk we hear a **Rufous-capped Babbler** which refuses to come into the open. As we walked away I turned back for one last look and it pops out just in time for me to add a stringy tick. It’s amazing how often that happens and it is clear that birds know when you have gone and will check out your departure. On our way back into town for lunch we stop at the bridge over the Mianjiang River and scan the distant rocky islands in the centre of the flow. Amazingly Tom picks out a **Long-billed Plover** scuttling across the island. Once it sits down – perhaps on a nest – it becomes almost invisible.

After lunch we stock up on supplies at the local supermarket, then drive south through tea plantations to the mountains again, to our final destination of the tour, Longcangou. On the slopes as we ascend there is time for **Elegant (Yellow-throated) Bunting** and we finally grab decent views of three cuckoos that have been taunting us voally for the last few days: **Oriental Cuckoo**, **Lesser Cuckoo**, and **Indian Cuckoo**. As we ascend the final couple of km we spy a couple of people we know: it is Jonathan and Giovanna, who have also just arrived. We say hello, but avoid too much conversation about where they and we have been for fear of being gripped off again. As we drive off and round the first bend we come to halt having seen a snake in the road. J&G come running around the bend too to see what we have found, and Jonathan switches into full "Steve Backshall" mode, using his tripod to lift the snake safely away off the road. According to their guide, it is a harmless Eastern Water Snake, but we are taking no chances.

Once settled into our accommodation – which we are sharing with the group we saw at Baihe Valley (Needletail site, see May 21) who are self-guided but driven by Sid's brother-in-law – I head off on a short walk with Roland. Tom – perhaps like me this morning – is almost birded out and stays for a rest. He doesn't miss much. We hear Sichuan Bush-Warbler and Brown-flanked Bush-Warbler, but both will have to wait til tomorrow.

May 25, Day 14:

The bird list for Longcangou is long and impressive, but, partly because of the fatigue of 2 weeks continuous birding, I have Lady Amherst's Pheasant in mind and not much else. Certainly this is our number one target when we set out at 5.30am. We drive up the single road that leads into the park, with the surface getting progressively worse. The park itself is being "transformed" with a resort and panda research station being built at higher altitudes. Unfortunately this has two effects. The first is that the resort will provide a sanitised version of nature that seems to appeal to the Chinese authorities, but completely misunderstands the value of natural habitat for biodiversity – bamboo, for instance, is unsightly and must be removed. The second is that the process of upgrading the road is degrading all the habitat around it because it seems no one understands how to develop with minimal impact.

The weather is not great and gets steadily worse, and the road is a mud-bath. We ascend through the appropriate altitudes seeing nothing, then turn around and repeat the drive back down. Still nothing. We begin the drive back up again and 2/3 way up I see a bird by the side of the track: "**Lady Amherst's Pheasant!** Right-hand side!". The stonking long white tail and gaudy green and red body immediately indicate this is our quarry and Roland slams on the brakes. I have time to fire off a few crap shots through the windscreen as the male Lady Amherst's bolts across the road and into cover.

By playing a soft contact call on my Bluetooth speaker stuck to the windscreen (a \$10 bright pink ebay job that Roland christens my "pinkytoothy") we are able to get it to circle around some distance behind the vehicle. I am tempted to get out, to view back down the road, but decide this might jeopardise the chances of it re-emerging. When it does come back out I can see it through the rather dirty rear window, but Tom can now squeeze off some pictures – almost as crap as my own – before it disappears for good.



We are now relaxed in the knowledge we have at least scored with our top target. This is just as well since the rest of the day is a bit of a write-off. We do score some decent birds such as **Red-billed Leothrix** and **Fire-capped Tit**, but mostly poor silhouette views against an overcast, washed-out sky. We have another brief view of the pheasant – possibly, but not certainly the same bird – as we head down to the hotel for lunch. While at lunch we hear that two of the guys from the

other group have managed a Golden-fronted Fulvetta, a rare and beautiful taxon that is a specialty of Longcangou.

We drive up to the spot they have described, but to be honest the site does not look promising. We dip – it seems likely they just happened to get lucky with a bird moving through. Giving up on the fulvetta for now, we bird the same road and the area around the large “research station” which we think was built as a hotel and never actually used. Nearby we get decent views of **Sichuan Bush-warbler**, and also find **Emei Leaf Warbler** and the attractive **Mountain Bulbul**. A bit higher up we get tickable but obscured views in dense bamboo of another skulking laughing-thrush, this one **Red-winged Laughingthrush**, and in this area we also have our Leothrix and Fire-capped Tit. At another spot we dip on Red-headed Trogon, a rarity in the park first found by Roland a couple of years earlier, but we cannot reproduce this today.

In an open area just outside the main gate we scan wires and find some **Brown Bullfinch** as well as another bird which is too distant to identify in the poor light. Here we bump into Jonathan again. He has been higher up seeing Golden Parrotbills and some other goodies, but we are childish and shamefully gratified to learn that he is gripped off by our Lady Am’s sighting. We give him the gen and he resolves to try the same technique tomorrow. Just as we about to part company, he looks up and sees our unidentified bird on the wires: “**Verditer Flycatcher**” is the confident verdict. Yeah, right. Actually, when we check through scopes back at the car we realise he is in fact right and has just demonstrated his birding prowess.

The weather deteriorates and we beat a retreat to the hotel, where in pouring rain I try to help Roland fix the window of his ageing Pajero. In terms of weather it has been our worst day, and our leanest in terms of birds seen. Thank goodness we’ve seen the pheasant!

May 26, Day 15:

Our final full day! Over dinner the previous evening we have decided that irrespective of the weather we will head to higher altitudes today. Mercifully the rain mostly holds off, but we continue to be blighted by fog and therefore limited visibility. Fortunately today proves “birdier” than yesterday, in spite of the conditions.

Grey-hooded Parrotbill is a speciality of the higher elevations in Longcangou, and we head up the increasingly muddy and poor “road”, bypassing the pheasant altitudes (and not seeing any) until we are into areas where they have been seen in the past. At the first few sites we dip but finally do connect with a bird that has taunted us since day one, **Large**

Hawk-cuckoo. We also find a **Sichuan Treecreeper**, but not before a Hodgson's Treecreeper has led us a merry dance. As we carry on on foot we pick up a few more birds en route to the top, including nice views of **Brown Bush-Warbler** and **Aberrant Bush-Warbler**, making Longcangou a *Locustella/Cettia* capital!

We also finally connect with **Darjeeling Woodpecker** which has eluded us til now. **Himalayan Swiftlet** are found in the skies below the low cloud and we even score a few more **White-throated Needletail**.

We wade through horrendous mud and finally reach the site of the works where they are building a panda research station and resort. At present it comprises a swathe of cleared forest with a few lumps of concrete amid a large mud-pit. We push past and scan the stands of bamboo we find. Sadly we cannot find any Grey-hooded (which is the same result for 3 other groups over these few days) but we do find two other Parrotbills: both **Brown** and **Great** are in the bamboo, along with a **Buff-throated Warbler**, destined to be our 17th and final *phylloscopus* of the trip. This area is also our best chance of the incredibly cute but elusive Red Panda, but when you can only see a few trees 30m away and nothing else your chances are reduced from slim to buckley's.



Sichuan Treecreeper

We give up on the very high reaches of the park and gradually work our way back down. Having heard Roland play the Golden Parrotbill calls on the iPod a few times, my ear is tuned in and I am able to pick it out from some bamboo when I hear the real thing. These incredibly cute, beautiful birds are very responsive, and after no more than a few seconds of playback a **Golden Parrotbill** bounces into view from the dense bamboo thicket.

We also scored better views of **Red-billed Leothrix** and had a great encounter (without pics) with an **Emeishan Liocichla**. We make a diversion to try a site where Roland has had Tragopans previously. It looks horribly degraded and there are no Tragopans to be seen. Mid-



Red-billed Leothrix

afternoon we head off the road onto a steep forest trail that leads through bamboo to some much older moss-covered trees. It is all rather quiet until after walking several hundred metres, Roland's impersonation of a Collared Owlet (with which we were by now very familiar and tolerated only because of the excellent results it produced) magically pays dividends. A few tits and a **Grey-hooded Fulvetta** come in, then as the ranks of birds checking us out start to swell some

goodies appear, such as a **Red-tailed Minla**, the gorgeous **Golden-breasted Fulvetta**, and best of all the rare and elusive **Streaked Barwing**, cryptically marked and rarely seen.

We decide to use the last hours of daylight to look for Forktails. Down by the existing development there is a lake and we take a trail and boardwalk that leads up the steep lake-side. Viewing down to the lake Tom finds a distant but lovely **Spotted Forktail**. Then a bit higher up on the stream that feeds the lake, in a brilliant end to the day we found 3 super-cute **Little Forktails** chasing each other and displaying on the waterfall.



Golden Parrotbill

Mrs Gould's Sunbird

Feeling that our luck is in we do some owling after dinner, but manage only silhouetted flight views of both **Himalayan Owl** (a recent split from Tawny) and an **Oriental Scops**.

May 27, Day 16:

Our flights are both tomorrow, on 28th, and Roland – to his credit – is keen to cram as much birding in as possible. He even suggests a diversion to Erlangshan or Emeishan and some owling before the drive back to Chengdu very late on 27th or even early on 28th. Tom and I, on the other hand, have either seen our targets or consigned them to the dip-list, and have privately agreed that an early evening arrival in Chengdu would give us the chance of a relaxed final evening over a few beverages; just chilling and enjoying the craic would give us just as much pleasure as a few more birds, and remove any stress associated with our flights the next day. I guess this makes us middle-aged dudes, but so what?

Our final morning, then, is spent trying for a few species that have eluded us, most of which continue to do so. The day begins with a dip on Chinese Bamboo Partridge which we hear but still cannot see. We search unsuccessfully for Golden-fronted Fulvetta, a rare and localised (and very sweet) bird that had been seen briefly by others the previous day; we join forces with a group from Hungary but we all leave empty-handed. We also spend an hour or more on the forest floor not seeing a White-tailed Robin, thus bracketing our trip, first and last day, with a “heard-only” of this elusive robin. I feel better when Roland explains that he has never had great views of this species, it is such a skulker (though elsewhere in the world – as I find on my trip to Taiwan in August – it is much easier to see).

We do pick up a few new birds including **Blue-winged Minla** and **Fujian Niltava**, and I have barely tickable flight views of a **Snowy-browed Flycatcher** that circles us, flies past at close range, and calls regularly, but never stays on a perch in view for more than half a second.

Around midday we pack our stuff up at our friendly and reasonably comfortable lodgings just outside the park and headed off for Chengdu. An hour or so at the artificial, manicured Bai Luwan wetland on the outskirts of Chengdu pads my list a bit, but fails to produce a bittern for Tom. As planned, we finished the trip with another excellent meal and several beers.



Gamebirds, Galliformes		
1	Snow Partridge	14/5 Balangshan: 4 seen not far from the Balang pass at 4400m a.s.l.
2	Tibetan Snowcock	14/5 Balangshan
3	Chestnut-throated Partridge	14/5 Balangshan
4	Tibetan Partridge	17/5 near Zoige
5	[Chinese Bamboo Partridge]	24/5 near Dujiangyan, 27/4 Longcangou
6	Blood Pheasant	13, 14, 15 Balangshan, 18/5 Baxi
7	Temminck's Tragopan	12/5 Wolong, 13/5 Balangshan, 23/5 Tangjiahe
8	[Koklass Pheasant]	13-15/5 Balangshan
9	Chinese Monal	13-15/5 Balangshan
10	White Eared Pheasant	13/5 Balangshan
11	Blue Eared Pheasant	18/5 Baxi, h.o. on 19/5 at Wood Owl dip
12	Common Pheasant	various
13	Golden Pheasant	13/5 Balangshan, 22/5 female Tangjiahe
14	Lady Amherst's Pheasant	23/5, 2 males at Longcangou
15	Chinese Grouse	18/5 near Baxi
Geese&Ducks, Anseriformes		
16	Graylag Goose	18-19/5 Zoige
17	Ruddy Shelduck	Various sites on Tibetan plateau
18	Mallard	A few
19	Feruginous Pochard	17/5, 4 at Zoige
20	Common Merganser	16/5, 17/5

Woodpeckers, Piciformes		
21	Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	22/5 Tangjiahe
22	Crimson-breasted Woodpecker	20/5 Jiuzhaigou, 22/5
23	Darjeeling Woodpecker	26/5 Longcangou
24	Great-spotted Woodpecker	
25	Grey-headed Woodpecker	15/5 en route to Rilong
Barbets		
26	[Great Barbet]	23/5 h.o. final morning Tangjiahe
Kingfishers, Halcyonidae		
27	Black-capped Kingfisher	14/5 Wolong
28	Crested Kingfisher	22/5, 23/5 Tangjiahe
Dollarbird & Hoopoe		
29	Common Hoopoe	22/5 Tangjiahe
Cuckoos		
30	[Fork-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo]	Heard on 24/5
31	Asian Koel	21-24/5, seen on 24/5 Tangjiahe
32	[Lesser Coucal]	
33	Large Hawk Cuckoo	Heard lots of places, finally seen 26/5 Longcangou
34	Eurasian Cuckoo	common
35	Himalayan (Oriental) Cuckoo	Various, seen well on 24/5 Longcangou
36	Lesser Cuckoo	24/5 Longcangou
37	Indian Cuckoo	24/5 Longcangou
Swifts		
38	Himalayan Swiftlet	26/5 Longcangou first unequivocal sighting
39	White-throated Needletail	60+ on 21/5 Baihe near Jiuzhaigou
40	Fork-tailed Swift	27/5 apparently in the south it is this taxon
41	House Swift	24/5 Dujiangyan
42	Salim Ali's Swift	21/5 Jiuzhaigou, in the north it's Salim Ali's
Owls, Eulen, Strigiformes		
43	Little Owl	17/5 near Hongyuan
44	Northern Boobook	24/5 Dujiangyan
45	[Oriental Scops Owl]	h.o. Dujiangyan and Longcangou UTFV
46	[Collared Scops Owl]	h.o. Dujiangyan
47	Tawny Fish Owl	22/5 Tangjiahe
48	Himalayan (Tawny) Owl	26/5 flight views Longcangou

Pigeons, Columbiformes		
49	Rock Pigeon	
50	Snow Pigeon	15/5, 12 near Rilong
51	Oriental Turtle Dove	
52	Spotted Dove	
Cranes		
53	Black-necked Crane	16/5 6 near Hongyuan, 17/5 4 near Zoige
Quails and Rails		
54	White-breasted Waterhen	
55	Common Moorhen	
Waders, Limikolen		
56	Common Redshank	A few on the plateau
57	Long-billed Plover	24/5 Dujiangyan
58	Black-winged Stilt	16/5 plateau
Gulls and Terns		
59	Brown-headed Gull	A few on the plateau
60	Common Tern	A few on the plateau
Birds of Prey – Accipitridae and Falconidae		
61	Black Baza	24/5 Dujiangyan
62	Black-eared Kite	15-18/5 common en route to and on the plateau
63	Pallas's Fish Eagle	17/5 juv on the plateau
64	Lammergeier	16/5 2 en route to plateau
65	Himalayan Griffon	13/5 6 at Balangshan, seen regularly on the plateau
66	Cinereous Vulture	13/5 2 at Balangshan
67	Chinese Sparrowhawk	22/5 Tangjiahe
68	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	18/5 Baxi
69	Himalayan Buzzard	17/5 near Zoige 18/5
70	Eastern Buzzard	15/5 en route to Rilong
71	Upland Buzzard	16-18/5 plateau
72	Golden Eagle	16/5 juvenile
73	Mountain Hawk Eagle	12/5 Wolong
74	Common Kestrel	
75	Saker Falcon	17/5 3+ on plateau
Grebes and Cormorant		

76	Little Grebe	
77	Great Cormorant	
Herons and Storks		
78	Little Egret	
79	Great Egret	
80	Cattle Egret	
81	Grey Heron	
82	Chinese Pond Heron	21/5 Tangjiahe
Shrikes		
83	Tiger Shrike	19/5 Zoige
84	Brown Shrike	
85	Long-tailed Shrike	
86	Grey-backed Shrike	common
Crows, Oriole		
87	Eurasian Jay	21/5 Jiuzhaigou
88	Sichuan Jay	18/5 2+ at Baxi
89	Red-billed Blue Magpie	
90	Azure-winged Magpie	
91	Black-billed Magpie	
92	Common Raven	
93	Spotted Nutcracker	21/5 Jiuzhaogou
94	Red-billed Chough	common
95	Daurian Jackdaw	16/5 plateau
96	Large-billed Crow	
97	Black-naped Oriole	21/5 3 at Tangjiahe
Minivets		
98	Swinhoe's Minivet	24/5 Dujiangyan
99	Long-tailed Minivet	12/5 and lots of other times
Cuckooshrikes, Drongos, Flycatcher-shrike		
100	Black Drongo	
101	Hair-crested Drongo	
Fantails, Paradise (Fairy) Flycatchers		
102	Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher	24/5 Dujiangyan
Thrushes		

103	Blue Rock Thrush	21/5 en route to Tangjiahe
104	Blue Whistling Thrush	12/5 first lifer, seen various sites
105	Plain-backed Thrush	13/5 2 at Balangshan
106	Long-tailed Thrush	15/5 en route to Barkham
107	Grey-winged Blackbird	22/5 Tangjiahe
108	Eurasian Blackbird	
109	Chestnut Thrush	Common
110	Kessler's Thrush	Common
Shortwings		
111	[Lesser Shortwing]	26/5 heard only Longcangou

Robins		
112	Himalayan Bluetail	regular at various sites, first on 13/5 Balangshan
113	Siberian Rubythroat	6 between Zoige and Jiuzhaigou
114	White-tailed/Himalayan Rubythroat	2 below Balang Pass on 14/5
115	Blackthroat	12/5, 1 seen well at Wolong, 2 others heard
116	Firethroat	12/5, 1 seen well at Wolong, 1 other heard
117	Indian Blue Robin	20/5 2 at Jiuzhaigou
118	[White-tailed Robin]	12/5 and 27/5 heard only

Redstarts		
119	Black Redstart	fairly common on the plateau
120	Hodgson's Redstart	16/5 seen well en route to the plateau
121	White-throated Redstart	15/5 Balangshan and a few other places, 18-20/5
122	Blue-fronted Redstart	14/5 and 15/5 Balangshan
123	Daurian Redstart	22/5, 23/5 leaving Tangjiahe
124	Plumbeous Water Redstart	common
125	White-capped Water Redstart	common
126	White-bellied Redstart	18/5 Baxi

Flycatchers		
127	Ferruginous Flycatcher	22/5, 23/5, Tangjiahe
128	Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher	12/5 Wolong and a few other sites later
129	Slaty-backed Flycatcher	16/5 en route to the plateau and a few other places later
130	Snowy-browed Flycatcher	27/5 poor flight views, heard well, last bird of Longcangou
131	Ultramarine Flycatcher	23/5 Tangjiahe
132	Verditer Flycatcher	12/5 and 25/5
133	Fujian Niltava	27/5 Longcangou
134	Rufous-bellied Niltava	20/5 Jiuzhaigou
135	Brown-chested Jungle-flycatcher	22/5 Tangjiahe

Forktails, Dippers, Cochoas, Magpie Robins etc		
136	Brown Dipper	22-26/6 common
137	Grandala	14/5 Balangshan, also 15/5
138	Little Forktail	26/5 Longcangou
139	Slaty-backed Forktail	24/5 Dujiangyan
140	Spotted Forktail	26/5 Longcangou
141	White-crowned Forktail	23/5 Tangjiahe
Chats, Wheatears		
142	Siberian [Asian] Stonechat	16/5 en route to plateau and lots on the plateau on 17/5
143	Grey Bushchat	21/5 Baihe near Jiuzhaigou
Starlings		
144	Red-billed Starling	23/5 motorway stop en route to Dujiangyan
145	Crested Myna	
Nuthatches, Wallcreeper, Treecreeper		
146	Eurasian Nuthatch	20/5, 21/5 Jiuzhaigou
147	Chinese Nuthatch	19/5 near Jiuzhaigou and again morning of 21/5
148	Przevalski's Nuthatch	15/5 near Rilong
149	Sichuan Treecreeper	26/5 Longcangou
150	Hodgson's Treecreeper	13/5 Balangshan, also seen on 18th, 20th, 26th
151	Bar-tailed Treecreeper	20/5 Jiuzhaigou
Tits		
152	Fire-capped Tit	25/5, 26/5 Longcangou
153	Ground tit	17/5, 18/5 between Hongyuan and Zoige and near the Pinktail site
154	Coal Tit	various
155	Yellow-bellied Tit	22/5, 23/5 Tangjiahe
156	Grey-crested Tit	First seen 15/5
157	Japanese Tit	First seen 15/5
158	Green-backed Tit	12/5 and a few other times
159	Yellow-browed Tit	12/5 Wolong
160	Sichuan Tit	16/5 en route to plateau, 18/5
161	White-browed Tit	16/5 en route to plateau, and 2 more on 17/5
162	Pere David's Tit	20/5, 21/5 Jiuzhaigou
163	Rufous-vented Tit	13/5, 14/5, 15/5 Balangshan and also on 18th
164	Black-throated [Bush]Tit	22/5 Tangjiahe
165	Black-browed [Bush]Tit	13/5 Balangshan and again on 15/5
166	Sooty [Bush]Tit	20/5 Jiuzhaigou (while waiting for Roland in the queue to get in)

Swallows		
167	Sand Martin	17/5 on the plateau
168	Eurasian Crag Martin	15/5 and 21/5
169	Barn Swallow	various
170	Red-rumped Swallow	various (mostly in towns)
171	Asian House Martin	13/5 Balangshan and Jiuzhaigou on 20/5 and 21/5
Bulbuls		
172	Brown-breasted Bulbul	21/5, 23/5
173	Chinese [light-vented] Bulbul	23/5 en route to Dujiangyan, and then regularly afterwards
174	Collared Finchbill	21/5 at Baihe near Jiuzhaigou, and regularly afterwards
175	Mountain Bulbul	25/5 Longcangou
176	Black Bulbul	24/5 Dujiangyan
Cisticolas and allies		
177	Plain Prinia	27/5 Bai Luwan wetland outskirts of Chengdu
Tesias		
178	Chestnut-headed Tesia	20/5 Jiuzhaigou and heard 26/5 Longcangou
Cettia + Locustella Warbler		
179	Spotted Bush Warbler	16/5 en route to plateau just outside Barkham
180	Brown Bush Warbler	26/5 Longcangou
181	Sichuan Bush Warbler	25/5 Longcangou (also heard on 12/5, 24/5 and 26/5)
182	Brown-flanked Bush Warbler	12/5 Wolong and heard Jiuzhaigou, Tangjiahe and Longcangou)
183	Yellow-bellied Bush Warbler	14/5 Balangshan and a few places later in the trip
184	Aberrant Bush Warbler	26/5 Longcangou
Tit Warblers		
185	Crested Tit Warbler	15/5, 2 en route to Barkham
186	White-browed Tit Warbler	16/5 4 en route to the plateau, and seen again near Baxi on 18th
Phylloscopus Warbler		
187	Sichuan Leaf Warbler	12/5 Wolong and various places thereafter
188	Emei Leaf Warbler	25/5 Longcangou
189	Chinese Leaf Warbler	heard a few times but finally seen 20/5 Jiuzhaigou
190	Buff-barred Warbler	seen regularly in Balangshan and beyond 13-16/5
191	Hume's Warbler	16/5 en route to the plateau, also on the way to to and in Jiuzhaigou
192	Arctic Warbler	16/5 en route to plateau
193	Greenish Leaf Warbler	15/5, 16/5 Balangshan and Rilong

194	Two-barred (greenish) Leaf W	18/5 Baxi
195	Claudia's Warbler	12/5 Wolong and various places thereafter
196	Eastern Crowned Warbler	16/5 en route to plateau
197	Kloss's Leaf Warbler	20/5 Jiuzhaigou
198	Alpine Leaf Warbler	14/5 Balangshan and 15th, 18th and 19th
199	Yellow-streaked Warbler	18/5 Baxi
200	Dusky Warbler	common en route to plateau on 16th
201	Buff-throated Warbler	26/5 Longcangou
202	Large-billed Leaf Warbler	13/5 Balangshan and heard and seen lots of other places
203	Sulphur-bellied Leaf Warbler	22/5 Tangjiahe
Seicercus & other Warblers, Tailorbirds, Crest		
204	Goldcrest	13th, 18th
205	Rufous-faced Warbler	22-23/5 Tangjiahe
206	Chestnut-crowned Warbler	23/5 Tangjiahe
207	Bianchi's Warbler	15/5 Balangshan, 18/5 Baxi, 20/5 Jiuzhaigou
208	Marten's Warbler	12/5 one the first birds seen at Wolong
209	Alstrom's Warbler	23/5 seen after much effort in Tangjiahe after heard only previous day
Laughingthrushes		
210	White-throated Laughingthrush	23/5 Tangjiahe
211	Plain (Przevalski's) Laughingthrush	16/5 on the plateau near Hongyuan
212	Snowy-cheeked (Sukatchov's) Laughingthrush	18/5 Baxi (seen again on 19th)
213	[Moustached Laughingthrush]	21/5 heard only en route from Jiuzhaigou to Tangjiahe
214	Barred Laughingthrush	12/5 Wolong
215	Giant Laughingthrush	13-15/5 Balangshan
216	[Spotted Laughingthrush]	heard on 12th near top at Wolong and again on 26th in Longcangou
217	White-browed Laughingthrush	seen Baihe near Jiuzhaigou, and the again in Tangjiahe and Longcangou
218	Elliot's Laughingthrush	fairly common, first seen 12th Wolong
219	Black-faced Laughingthrush	21/5 seen on Rhododendron Pass between Jiuzhaogou and Tangjiahe
220	Red-winged Laughingthrush	25/5 Longcangou
221	Emei Shan Liocichla	26/5 Longcangou
Babblers		
222	Black-streaked Scimitar Babbler	21/5 Baihe near Jiuzhaogou
223	Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler	12/5 Wolong
224	Eurasian Wren	13/5 Balangshan
225	[Scaly-breasted Wren-babbler/Chinese Cupwing]	12/5 heard only, 2m away but could not see it!
226	Pygmy Wren Babbler	12/5 Wolong
227	Rufous-capped Babbler	24/5 unsatisfactory brief views at Dujiangyan, heard Longcangou on final morning

228	Red-billed Leiothrix	25-27/5 Longcangou
229	Blue-winged Minla	27/5 Longcangou
230	Red-tailed Minla	26/5 Longcangou
231	Chinese Babax	15/5 2 en route to Rilong
Fulvettas		
232	Golden-breasted Fulvetta	26/5 Longcangou
233	Chinese Fulvetta	18/5 Baxi, heard but not seen Balangshan 13/5
234	[Dusky Fulvetta]	24/5 heard only at Dujiangyan
235	Grey-hooded Fulvetta	12/5 Wolong, Jiuzhaigou and Longcangou
236	David's Fulvetta	20/5 Jiuzhaigou
Sibias & Barwings		
237	Streaked Barwing	26/5 Longcangou
Yuhinas		
238	Stripe-throated Yuhina	12/5 Wolong
239	Black-chinned Yuhina	22/5 Tangjiahe
240	White-collared Yuhina	12/5 Wolong and also at Tangjiahe and Longcangou
Parrotbills		
241	Great Parrotbill	12/5 Wolong and also at Tangjiahe and Longcangou
242	Three-toed Parrotbill	12/5 Wolong
243	Brown Parrotbill	26/5 Longcangou
244	Spot-breasted Parrotbill	21/5 Baihe near Jiuzhaigou
245	[Spectacled Parrotbill]	21/5 heard and UTVs Baihe
246	Vineous-throated Parrotbill	various
247	Golden Parrotbill	26/5 Longcangou
Larks		
248	Tibetan Lark	3 between Hongyuan and Zoige on 17/5
249	Oriental Skylark	common on the plateau
250	Horned Lark	17/5 near Flower Lake
Sunbirds, Spiderhunters, White-eyes, Flowerpeckers, Munias		
251	Mrs. Gould's Sunbird	12/5 Wolong and Tangjiahe and Longcangou
252	Oriental White-eye	16/5 probably release en route to plateau
253	Japanese White-eye	22/5 Tangjiahe
254	Fire-breasted Flowerpecker	24/5 Dujiangyan

Wagtails and Pipits		
255	Forest Wagtail	24/5 Dujiangyan
256	White Wagtail	common
257	Citrine Wagtail	16/5, 17/5 tibetan race on the plateau
258	Grey Wagtail	common
259	Blyth's Pipit	17/5 and 22-23/5 Tangjiahe
260	Olive-backed Pipit	13/5, 15/5 Balangshan
261	Rosy Pipit	14-15/5 Balangshan
Sparrows, Snowfinches & Accentors		
262	House Sparrow	19/5 Zoige
263	Russet Sparrow	23/5 leaving Tangjiahe
264	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	various
265	Rock Sparrow	17/5 en route to Pinktail site
266	Tibetan Snowfinch	17/5 at Pinktail site
267	White-rumped Snowfinch	17/5 en route to Pinktail site and near Flower Lake
268	Rufous-necked Snowfinch	17/5 en route to Pinktail site and near Flower Lake
269	Alpine Accentor	14/5 Balang Pass
270	Robin Accentor	17/5 near Pinktail site
271	Maroon-backed Accentor	18/5 3 at Baxi
272	Rufous-breasted Accentor	14/5 near Balang Pass (Himalayan Rubythroat site) and again at Siberian Rubythroat site
Finches		
273	Grey-capped Greenfinch	23/5 on the way out of Tangjiahe
274	Tibetan Siskin	18/5 near Baxi
275	Twite	17th and 19th on the plateau near Zoige
276	Plain Mountain Finch	14/5 Balang pass, Balangshan, and 100s on 15th
277	Brandt's Mountain Finch	14/5 Balang pass, Balangshan, and 100s on 15th
278	Red Crossbill	15/5 Balangshan, heard at Baxi
279	Brown Bullfinch	25/5 Longcangou
280	Grey-headed Bullfinch	12/5 Wolong and various other sites
281	Chinese [Yellow-billed] Grosbeak	27/5 Bai Luwan near Chengdu
282	Collared Grosbeak	15/5 near Rilong
283	White-winged Grosbeak	18/5 2 near Baxi
Rosefinches		
284	Long-tailed Rosefinch	21/5 Baihe valley near Jiuzhaigou
285	Blandford's Rosefinch	13/5 Balangshan
286	Dark-breasted Rosefinch	13th and 14th Balangshan
287	Common Rosefinch	14th Balangshan

288	Stresemann's Pink-rumped Rosef.	14th and 15th Balangshan
289	Vinaceous Rosefinch	12/5 Wolong
290	Three-banded Rosefinch	18/5 2 at Baxi
291	[Sharp's Rosefinch]	seen by Roland on 12th, heard at a few other sites including Jiuzhaigou on 20th
292	Chinese White-browed Rosefinch	14th and 15th Balangshan
293	Streaked Rosefinch	14th and 15th Balangshan
294	Red-fronted Rosefinch	14/5 Balangshan
295	Crimson-browed Finch	14/5 Balangshan
296	Przevalski's [Pink-tailed] Rosef.	17/5 2 near Zoige
Buntings		
297	Little Bunting	22/5 Tangjiahe
298	Yellow-throated Bunting	24/5 Longcangou
299	Black-faced Bunting	22/5 Tangjiahe
300	Slaty Bunting	12/5 Wolong and 23/5 Tangjiahe
301	Godlewski's Bunting	16/5 en route to plateau and various other sites later

Summary by numbers:

16 days, 6 sites, 73+65+100+160+300+187+250+100+271+215+330+210+180 = approx. 2500km

301 species recorded, 286 species seen, 15 heard only, 201 lifers