

## Taiwan, August 2016

Ian Reid



A conference meeting in Taipei gave me a chance of a bit of birding beforehand, and the possibility of adding to the impressive list of 2016 galliformes that I had begun to accumulate in Sichuan in May. Taiwan hosts quite nice array of “gettable” endemics and other interesting species. I originally time-budgeted for 5 days but realised closer the time this was impossible to justify either domestically or work-wise so shortened it considerably. I would arrive on an overnight flight, and once on-site I would have an afternoon, a full day, and then a morning before I had to be in Taipei for the meeting.

I looked into guides – Taiwan seems well-served for knowledgeable guides – but emboldened by chatting with Martin Kennewell and Jonathan Newman, I decided to save the money and bird solo.

### General info for the independent birder

**Sites:** There are various well known sites in Taiwan but I had time only to concentrate on one, and decided on Dasyueshan Forest (GPS 24.241279, 120.979112) which holds most of the high altitude endemics and other goodies. The slopes on the way up are also good for a few more endemics but I was unlucky with accommodation, timing and weather for the lower birds. I also spent one afternoon at the Taipei Botanic Garden when the meeting unexpectedly finished a few hours early. This site is well-known for Malaysian Night-heron, but I didn’t see any here. But then, I didn’t look since I had seen a number easily on the NTU campus in the previous two days walking to and from my meeting!

**Timing:** August is far from ideal. Of course I didn’t have a choice about the conference timing and was well aware I would be beyond the optimal time of May/June. Fairy Pitta is not an option once it has stopped singing, but the endemics are all possible. I dipped on White-browed Bush-robin and the endemic race of White-browed Shortwing (considered by many to be a full species). Otherwise I got most of what I was after high up on the mountain. One factor I had not counted on though, was that the two endemic pheasants were in moult, so the tails of the Swinhoe’s and Mikado males were not as spectacular as at other times.

**Car hire:** through rentalcars.com, was with local company Hotai. It wasn’t cheap, but not stupidly expensive ether. The car, a Toyota Vios was perfectly adequate, and came with free GPS. I was

picked up at 7am from the airport and taken to the depot about 10min drive away. For a fee of TWD1300 (much the same as a taxi fare) the same driver dropped me at my hotel at the National Taiwan University campus on Friday afternoon. An international licence is needed for car hire in Taiwan.

**Mobile phone:** I decided to buy a local SIM. There are a few vendors at the left-hand end of the arrivals hall (when facing the exit). When my flight arrived at 6am, none was manned, and ominously they all had “8am opening” indicators on their respective desks. However by the time I had worked out where I needed to meet the rental car people and grabbed some cash from an ATM, I noticed at 6.45 there was someone on one of the stands. I bought a package for TWD450 that gave me 6 days with unlimited data. I used this for google maps as a supplement to the GPS, for ebird on a few occasions, as well as for my work later in the week.

**Gen/field guide:** Having been in China in May I had a copy of the meaty McKinnon *Field Guide to the Birds of China* that includes Taiwan. The plates aren't the best but it was serviceable. Taiwan is well served by ebird.org with lots of locals entering their sightings. I also referred to several trip reports on cloudbirders, notably the ones by Catherine McFadden and Peter Jordan (thank you!). I also found much useful info at <http://birdingtaiwan.blogspot.com.au/2012/04/dasyueshan.html> and at <http://www.birdingintaiwan.com/>

**Accommodation:** Having decided I would only have time to bird one site, I settled on Dasyueshan Forest. A Chinese colleague at work helped me book two nights at the Anmashan Lodge which is in the park itself. He translated the webpage for me, navigated through the various menu options to make the booking, and then rang to confirm a couple of days later.

I had a comfortable room in one of the cabins, and the accommodation entitled me to eat at the restaurant for breakfast and dinner. I had dinner both evenings, but the food was underwhelming. Moreover, and this needs to be written in bold:

**THERE IS NO BEER AVAILABLE AT THE LODGE!!!**

That is important because the lodge, at km 40, is within the park which is gated at km 35. You cannot get into the park after 5pm and can't leave before 7am. Even if you could, it's a 90min drive to the nearest 7-11 or FamilyMart. If I had known this beforehand, I would have stocked up before I headed up the mountain. I would also have stocked up more on things for lunch and snacks – and even breakfast (which was also underwhelming at the lodge). The visitor centre at the lodge has a small gift shop with snacks, but the “café” at km50 was not open when I was there, and didn't look especially welcoming anyway.

I went for two nights at the lodge because, speaking no Mandarin, I wanted to minimise the things that could go wrong with accommodation. In retrospect a better itinerary would be to stay low down on day 1, birding up to the park gates to take in the lower elevations and the Swinhoe's Pheasant site at km23, and then stay at the lodge night two. This is what a few trip reports with guides describe, but I didn't fancy my chances of finding lodging so pre-booked both nights at Anmashan Lodge.

**10/8/16**

My overnight flight arrived a bit late into Taiwan but I still made it through immigration and collected my bag well before I could pick up my hire car at 7am. Waiting around was frustrating but unavoidable, and once I had the car I plugged the destination into my GPS and cruised down the freeway that runs the length of the island on the west coast. About 2 hours later I found the road that leads up to Dasyueshan and drove up to km 17 where I did my first birding. As others have pointed out, along the 50km of this road almost all the key birds of Taiwan can be seen. At my first pull-off a Taiwan Barbet called. I did not look very hard for it and failed to see it, but I did score my first lifer of the trip, the lovely **Steere's Liocichla**.

I was keen to get higher up into pheasant territory (the well-known km23 being my first destination), thinking I could devote the return journey in around 48 hours to birding the lower stretch. This was a mistake since it poured with rain on my way back two days later and I consequently missed a few gettable endemics like the endemic scimitar babblers.

Just shy of km23 I stopped and chased a familiar song into the forest. In Sichuan we had dipped on **White-tailed Robin** on our first and last days as skulking birds stayed well out of sight. Here, however they proved deliciously easy and I found 3-4 on my first foray.



I finally arrived at the famous km23 just before noon. There were several photographers in attendance, as well as 3-4 female **Swinhoe's Pheasant** pecking at grain just below the carpark, as well as a couple more very smart **Steere's Liocichla**. I spent a round 3 hours here hoping for a male pheasant, but waited in vain. However while waiting I picked up various other goodies. A little way up the road a mixed flock of tits comprised mostly **Black-throated Tits** (which I had seen in China in May) but I was also able to





pick out one of the endemic **Yellow Tit**. **White-eared Sibia** were fairly common and I also found **Taiwan Yuhina** and a **Taiwan Whistling Thrush**. Eventually at about 3pm I decided to give up on the male pheasant and head up to the lodge.

Having checked in to my comfortable room I carried on up the mountain, and called in briefly at km43, the site famed for Mikado Pheasant. I didn't stop here long, aiming to come back later in the early evening, but bird higher up while I

still had the chance. I reached the top car park (km50, GPS 24.279054, 121.026088) at about 1630. The weather had deteriorated somewhat and there was rain about. I found a small flock of **Taiwan Rosefinch** and **Brown Bullfinch**, though only the female Rosefinch posed for pictures.



A little way down the hill I parked again at an obvious carpark (GPS 24.268661, 121.030709) and walked a steep trail up into the forest to a lookout. I saw few birds on the walk, but once at the top a juvenile **Collared Bush-robin** kept me on my toes, and I enjoyed an encounter with my first of the pretty and very tame **White-whiskered Laughingthrush**.

As I approached the carpark on my descent I was drawn to some activity high up in a conifer and landed bins on my first – and only – **Flamecrest**, a sweet, gorgeous little bundle of endemic kingletness. I called in briefly at the Mikado site but there was no activity and the weather had become poor again so I rolled down to the lodge.



Dinner was a buffet in a large communal hall. I ate various underwhelming dishes and made some notes of the day's birds before retreating to my room for an early night. As is often the case, a long flight, followed by a long day driving and in the field had left me without the energy for owling!

**11/8/17**

I was up early and parked in the fog at km47 at first light. Nothing. Then more nothing. Then at 9am a shape appeared and through the fog morphed into a female **Mikado Pheasant**. She scratched

around at a few seeds that were still on the verge, left by photographers from previous visits. **Taiwan Rosefinches** and **White-browed Laughingthrushes** and at least two species of squirrel (unidentified) also visited this spot grateful for the free meal. Disappointingly though, I had now seen both of my target pheasants without seeing a male.



At 10am I wandered up the road a bit and was distracted by the song of a Taiwan Cupwing which I could hear up by the top of a steep bank. Failing to attract it any closer with playback I decided to try and climb up, but managed only 10-15m, of the 50-60 required before realising this was a fool's errand – it could go horribly wrong with a slip or fall down the 45deg embankment, and my chances of actually seeing the bird were

minimal. I beat a precarious but careful retreat to the road.

A little higher up, still on foot, another Cupwing sang and this time was much closer and seemed to respond to my playback. But I could not get a view to it, even though at one point it seemed like it must be no more than a couple of metres away. Damn you skulkers!

A **Taiwan Yuhina** kept me entertained before I walked back to the car to resume my (unsuccessful) pheasant vigil. At 11am, bored with waiting at the Mikado site, I decided to head higher up the mountain. **Grey-headed Bullfinches** and **Taiwan (Vinaceous) Rosefinches** were again obvious, then I found a female **Collared Bush Robin**. I walked one of the obvious trails away from the car-park and buildings (right-hand side as one arrives, behind the visitor centre and toilets) and ran into a mixed tit flock including many **Black-throated Tit** and a few **Coal Tit**, and then spent ages – on hunch – pursuing a thin call that I felt must be good. My hunch was right and when it finally hopped out onto the track I could feast on a cracking male **Collared Bush Robin**.





I now drove back down to the lodge where I managed to find various snack-type foods like biscuits in the visitor centre shop, and I stocked up on these for lunch and for breakfast the next day. Back up at the Mikado site 30min later I ate my snack lunch in the car. I alternated between using the car as a hide, hoping that a bird would emerge, and walking up and back peering down into the beautiful moss-covered forest hoping to see movement on the forest floor. A few tourists came and went, and at 3pm I saw another (or the same female). Again I grew tired of waiting and soon after the female had departed I drove back up to the top and this time walked the trail to the left, behind the (still closed) café. A Yellow-bellied Bush Warbler took a long while to track down but was a nice addition to the trip list, then further along this trail I heard and briefly saw **Golden Parrotbill**, **Taiwan Rosefinch** and had brief but very nice views of yet another endemic, **Taiwan Fulvetta**.

At 5pm I returned once again to km43 for what I imagined would be my final crack at a male Mikado. Half an hour later I was becoming pretty despondent – I had put in many hours over the period from 6am and seen 2 female pheasants, one or two other species, and a few random tourists who occasionally wander around hopefully and see nothing. A lifer (and endemic target) **Taiwan Barwing** picked up my spirits somewhat. I scanned roadside again and there was another random tourist,

walking through the area making sure no pheasants would come out. I went back to trying to locate and photograph the Barwing (I failed). I then looked up again and the chap was pointing his camera at something off in the forest. "What can he be looking at?" I think to myself, "it's probably just a very tame White-whiskered Laughingthrush". But I raised my bins to look down the road so *I could see the LCD on his camera* and there filling his screen was a stonking blue and red pheasant!!! I rushed down the road to where it had slunk behind the undergrowth and beckoned him to retreat – we were blocking its path across the road to where the grain had been spread. He obliged, we backed off 10m and, as I predicted, it popped out across the road and treated us to a fabulous show. The fact that this male was lacking in the tail-feather department is a bit of a disappointment, but it was still a stunning velvet cushion of a thing.



He was joined by a female a few minutes later and I enjoyed a wonderful 30mins or more with the pair. During this time I also picked up the **Taiwan Barwing** again, though the light had been dimming the whole while and my record shots are badly blurred.

A final wander up the road also yielded an unexpected dividend: a few tits and yuhinas flitted about in roadside trees but I was drawn to the song of yet another cupwing. All of a sudden, it appeared in front of me put on a brief show, then disappeared again.

After yet another mediocre meal at the lodge I decided to take a walk around the grounds hoping for an owl or two. I failed to find any owls



but did have some great encounters with 3-4 Giant Squirrels.

**12/8/16**

I rose earlyish and skipped breakfast, but I was aware that I may not be able to get lower down the mountain until the park office, a few km below the lodge, had opened. As I drove past the small police station near the lodge 3 roadside pheasants flushed. I screeched to a halt, realising these were Swinhoe's and one was a male. Sadly it slunk off down a steep slope and I was unable to relocate it.

I drove as quickly as the speed limit allowed to km23, admiring the stunning views from the mountain road as I descended, and stopping briefly once or twice for photos. There were a few cars already in the pull-off but few people. Where were they? I found out soon enough following a pair of photographers who headed down the road. I arrived at a switchback a few hundred metres along where several photographers were popping away with the shutters as 3-4 female **Swinhoe's** strutted about in front of them and Taiwan Partridge blared out from a speaker belonging to one of the photographers. I took a couple of pics but I didn't need the female, and didn't appreciate the "crowd" or the outrageous playback, so I walked back up to the car and birded alone. In fact staying away from the small crowd yielded great dividends, and I wandered back and forth up and down the road a number of times over the next few hours.

**White-eared Sibia** and **White-tailed Robin** were again very much in evidence, and a pair of **Vivid Niltava** (a spotty juvenile and an adult) perched prominently in trees above the carpark. A **Taiwan Whistling Thrush** gave much better views today than yesterday (though still not performing well for photos). Once the gaggle of photographers had dispersed I walked back down the road and stationed myself just in time for a male **Swinhoe's Pheasant** to stride out into the road, followed by his harem of 4 females. They gave a great show for me until they flushed when a car came past. He was moulting but at least had retained one of his long, white tail feathers, unlike the other males I saw.



I found yet another tailless male **Swinhoe's** stalking quietly in dense undergrowth within a few metres of the road just above the carpark, and then when I returned to the switchback I found a group of 5-6 **Taiwan Partridge**, also eager for a free feed now that the people (and their intrusive playback) had gone.



Some gen from a local sent me back up the road in the car to just beyond the tunnel where I was able to track down yet another endemic, **White-throated Laughingthrush**. I found a few more lower down at my final stop.

I had intended to bird lower down as well during the afternoon, but soon after I emerged from the forest into the more disturbed lower altitudes where I planned to search for Hwamei and Scimitar Babblers, the weather closed in and it began to rain. I grabbed some lunch in Dongshi and then drove back to Taipei in what was often torrential rain, in plenty of time for the opening function of my conference meeting at National Taiwan University.

13-14/8/17



I had been told that Malaysian Night-heron, a tough bird elsewhere, was somewhat easy in places like the Taipei Botanical Gardens. Not this had not prepared me for how easy and confiding they would be on the campus of NTU, where, as I walked with colleagues from our university hotel to the meeting rooms, a juvenile was hunting for worms in a manicured garden by a campus road. In fact I wasn't paying attention and one of my non-birding colleagues

pointed it out. Taken aback I explained to my somewhat disbelieving colleagues that he'd just "found" a particularly tricky and rare bird!

We were particularly efficient at this meeting and finished with a couple of hours to spare in the afternoon. Our hosts strongly recommended we visit the Imperial Palace Museum. I would have done so had I known (or bothered to find out) how significant this is – when the CCP Red Army defeated the Nationalist KMT in the aftermath of WWII, the Nationals took as many of the Imperial treasures as they could and retreated to Taiwan; the Imperial Palace Museum therefore contains the world's finest collection of treasures of one of the world's oldest civilisations. Instead I caught a taxi to the Taipei Botanical Gardens and spent about half an hour wandering the gardens, and then an hour and a half staking out a nest hole where some photographers were stationed. No-one spoke any English, but I was glad for the wait when finally a **Taiwan Barbet** (which I had heard but not seen on the lower slopes of Dasyueshan) returned to feed a chick at the nest.

