

# **Finding Pheasants**

**A journey to Sichuan Province and the Tibetan Plateau  
in search of pheasants and their supporting cast,  
8<sup>th</sup> – 30<sup>th</sup> May 2007**



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**Sichuan is blessed** with a wealth of bird life. The jewels in the province's resplendent avian crown are surely the 20 species of breeding *galliformes*: Snow Partridge (monotypic genus *lerwa*); Tibetan Partridge (a "*perdix*"); Necklaced Hill and Sichuan Partridges (of the genus *arborophila*); Mountain and Chinese Bamboo Partridges (of the genus *bambusicola*); Verreaux's and Szechenyi's Monal-Partridge (the world's only two *tetraophasis*); Tibetan Snowcock; Severtzov's Grouse; and the most precious of the gems, eleven of China's 28 species of pheasants: Blood Pheasant, Temminck's Tragopan, Koklass Pheasant, Chinese Monal, Silver Pheasant, White Eared-Pheasant; Blue Eared-Pheasant; Reeve's Pheasant, Golden Pheasant, Lady Amherst's Pheasant, and various not-so-common races of the Common Pheasant.

Sichuan is immense – about three and a half times the size of England – and so, with “only” 23 days there, we had to restrict our primary objective to a modest nine of the province's eleven species of pheasant (Reeve's and Silver would probably have required several more days in even further-flung parts of the province). Of the other *galliformes*, we set our sights on Snow and Tibetan Partridge; Verreaux's Monal-Partridge; Severtzov's Grouse; and the tantalisingly-named Tibetan Snowcock. So, 14 species in all.

23 days for 14 species. Not too challenging you may think. But, such is the difficulty of getting to and then finding some of them, we would have been well-satisfied with seeing half of the 14. But, thanks to a combination of hard work, perseverance and the most important factor, good fortune, our expectations were far exceeded...

### **Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day One**

**Our flight from Beijing** arrived at Chengdu airport at about 5.30pm – an hour later than scheduled. We introduced ourselves to Mr Zhang, our waiting driver, and within a few minutes we were heading for Wawu Shan – China's very own “Table Mountain” – some 110 miles to the south. Following a noodle-stop at a restaurant run by our driver's wife, we continued on our way in worsening weather. The billiard-table-smooth four lane motorway had long since given way to a pot-holed, narrow single-carriageway, which deteriorated with each mile we drove south. The best that could be said of the final 20 mile stretch is that it was work-in-progress. The average speed dropped to about 15 miles per hour as our driver did his best to negotiate the crater-strewn dirt track that, supposedly next year, would become a magnificent highway linking the capital of Sichuan with Wawu Shan in Hongya county. Also, by that time, the numerous roadside construction projects that were spilling on to the track – house bricks, doors from what would be shops, tiles that would top numerous hotels, and cement sacks that would be turned into restaurants – would also be complete. In the meantime, however, there was every chance that our microlight *mianbao che* (bread van) would disappear into one of the fathomless road puddles.

Just as we were beginning to think that we may get through this gargantuan building site in one piece, the sudden compression of our spines and an explosion of air signalled that our journey would take longer than we had feared. Mr Zhang went out to survey the damage. The muttered expletives were a sure sign that the damage was serious. He told me that the

wheel, as well as the tyre were “*pohuaile*” or, in other words, they were knackered. It was an oily-black night and raining hard, so it was not at all difficult for us to comply with his instruction to stay inside the stricken vehicle. Mr Zhang hauled out the replacement wheel and went to work. The sound of the torrential rain against the van’s roof was punctuated with much banging, clanging and cursing. Incredibly, we were back on the “road” in ten minutes. Mr Zhang’s face, though, was still as black as the night outside. It brightened considerably, however, when I told him that we would pay for a new wheel and tyre.

We arrived at the Wawu Shan Hotel (at about 4,000 feet above sea level) at about 11.30pm – a couple of hours later than I had written into the itinerary but, all things considered, we had done well to get there on the same day.

### Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day Two

**We had driven from Chengdu** yesterday mostly in darkness, and so had seen very few birds (only **Feral Pigeons**, **Swallows**, and egrets), and so we were keen to get the day off to a good start. The early walk up the road that runs parallel with the river, beyond the entrance gate (which would not open before 8am) yielded only a single identifiable bird (**Yellow Wagtail**). The darkness of the miserable night had only begrudgingly given way to a half-light that made birding difficult to say the least. Looking on the bright side, it wasn’t raining, we mused. But, then again, we were in Sichuan – a place where if it’s not raining, then it’s about to rain.

We loaded our bags into Mr Zhang’s van and, at just after 8am, were the first to buy tickets to enter “Wawu Shan National Forest Park” – a place close to the heart of the Song dynasty poet, Su Dongpo; and, according to the tourist literature: “The kingdom of water, the heaven of caves, the world of flowers, the cradle of snow, the homeland of clouds, and the museum of animals and plants.” Indeed, Wawu Shan is reputed to hold some 3,500 species of plants. Several of these have been found nowhere else on earth.

One of Wawu’s biggest ornithological draws is Lady Amherst’s Pheasant, which has, in May at least, regularly been seen near to the ten-yard-long bridge at about 5,450 feet (about three miles from the entrance). We drove very slowly past there, but didn’t see it.

Our first stop was at 5,480 feet, where we at last started to see a few birds: c10 **Himalayan Swiftlets**; a circling **Besra**; the first two of four sightings of **Needletailed Swifts**; a **Blue Rock Thrush**; and a **Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher**. Our next stop, at 5,740 feet, enabled us to see perhaps the same two Needletailed Swifts, but much closer than the earlier sighting, and also several **Green-backed Tits**.

We then drove back down the mountain to try again for the “Lady A”. This time we were in luck. Driving up the mountain, just past the short bridge, I spotted the improbably-long silver tail of a male **Lady Amherst’s Pheasant** quite close to the right-hand side of the road. Unfortunately, I was in the back of the vehicle, and couldn’t get my binoculars on it. Bob, who was in the front of the car, saw it reasonably well however (describing it as a sub-adult male). Funnily enough, a few weeks before, in Yunnan’s Gaoligong mountains, I had seen my first “wild” Lady A – a spectacular adult male, only ten yards in front of me – but had also failed to get any kind of a binocular-view of it. By the

way, I use “wild” to describe birds that are in their natural geography and surroundings, as opposed to the ones in zoos or indeed the feral birds I’ve seen in Bedfordshire, England.

We then had good views of a male **Goshawk**; the first of many **Claudia’s Leaf Warblers**; a brief view of a **Chinese Babax**; a flock of c15 **White-collared Yuhinas**; a few “**Eastern**” **Great Tits**; a vocal **Greenish Warbler**; and a **Large-billed Crow**.

We checked into the sprawling Gongtong Hotel, which litters Wawu Shan’s mid-elevations (at 6500 feet). Our original plan was to return down the mountain to look for various lower elevation species, but the clearing sky and improving visibility prompted us, instead, to take the cable car to the top of the mountain. Wawu’s weather in May is often poor, and so with only three full days there we felt that we had to grasp the first chance of a dry, clear “top”.

The bushes next to the steps to the cable car station held four **Emei Shan Liocichlas**. The ride to the top was uneventful – not a bad thing considering that the cable spanned about 2000 vertical feet and crossed numerous long “drops”. We arrived at the top station (at 8,550 feet) and decided to follow the well-maintained path to the right that penetrated the forest of giant Emei Firs *Abies fabri*. A glistening sea of rhododendron bushes in full flower lit up the understorey; while bamboo thickets reminded us that we were, in fact, a long way from a Norfolk country estate.



Some excellent birds were seen during the very slow, five-hour walk (about one mile at elevations between 8,550 and 8,850 feet): a few **Long-tailed Minivets**; a party of ten or so **Fulvous Parrotbills**; two pairs of **Grey-crested Tits**; a few **Ogilvie-Grant’s Warblers**; a path-side **Rufous-breasted Accentor**; a male **Slaty-blue Flycatcher**; three **Elliot’s Laughingthrushes**; several **Rufous-vented Tits**; a total of about ten **Streak-throated Fulvettas**; a **Crested Coal Tit**; several singing **Large-billed Leaf Warblers**; two female and

one stunning male **Golden Bush Robin**, a male and female **Grey-headed Bullfinch**, a **Eurasian Jay**; a few **Sichuan Leaf Warblers**; several **Buff-barred Warblers**; a few **Bianchi's Warblers**; and the top prize – two trilling **Sichuan Treecreepers**.

We took the cable car down the mountain at about 5.30pm. At the bottom we saw a flock of three **Speckled Wood Pigeons**, flying above the canopy. A walk close to the hotel and a mile or so down the road yielded several **Grey Wagtails**; an **Olive-backed Pipit**; a **Stonechat**; two **Golden-breasted Fulvettas**; a **Red-billed Blue Magpie**; a **Plain-tailed Warbler**; a **Red-billed Leiothrix** for Bob; and a **Verreaux's Parrotbill** for me.



### Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day Three

A **pre-breakfast walk** along the footpath below the dilapidated blue-roofed building, which presumably used to be the hotel before the chalets were built, was good exercise, but not terribly good for birds. Other than a **Rusty Laughingthrush**, nothing of note.

We left our big bags in the hotel, where we would return the following day, and packed a smaller bag to take up the mountain. The undergrowth opposite the chalet held a Red-billed Leiothrix and the first of ten White-collared Yuhinas we would see during the day. A *seicercus* warbler near to the cable car station was either a Grey-crowned Warbler or an Emei Shan Spectacled Warbler, and is therefore best referred to as a **“Golden-spectacled” Warbler**. While I take my hat off to those who can confidently identify, say, all of the 6 or more species of Sichuan-occurring “spectacled” warblers without a field DNA-testing kit, I have to say that I would rather invest more time searching for pheasants – and other birds that will stick in my memory until my dotage – than agonising over the completeness of a spectacled warbler’s spectacle or the thickness of its lateral crown stripe. Each to his or her own. Talking of

which...

The cable car ride was more pleasant than yesterday's. One reason for this is that I had told them to turn off the wretched "mando-pop" music that was being piped along the entire length of the ride. The other reason is that I saw a female **Temminck's Tragopan** fly across the path of the cable car in front of me and land in full view on the higher branch of a tree to my right (at about 2,200m). I watched it for only a few seconds, though, before I put my binoculars down and shouted the directions to Bob in the cable car behind me. But to no avail.

After arriving at the top at about 8.30am, we decided to take the path to the left towards Yuan Xi Kou and then to the Xiang Er Hotel, where we would spend the night. Worryingly, the weather was deteriorating. The tree-tops were shrouded in mist, and bird activity was nowhere near that of yesterday. Despite the worsening conditions, we managed to see c10 Streak-throated Fulvettas; several **Stripe-throated Yuhinas**; a few Greenish Warblers; several Buff-barred Warblers; four **Moustached Laughingthrushes**; two pairs of Long-tailed Minivets; two males and a female Grey-headed Bullfinch; several Rufous-vented Tits; a Crested Coal Tit; and two **Rufous-gorgeted Flycatchers**. Additionally, I managed to get glimpses of a **Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler**; a **Black-faced Laughingthrush** and an **Aberrant Bush Warbler**.

By midday, visibility had worsened considerably. On reaching the hotel, we could see no more than 30 yards in front of us. After checking in, we set out for Yang Xi Kou and then to the Lian Xi waterfall. Implausibly, the conditions worsened. At 3pm the rain began to fall in earnest. And yet the fog thickened. We could only see the small number of birds that were fewer than 20 yards from us: a **Darjeeling Woodpecker** on the roof of a wooded hut; **White-capped Water Redstart** near to the stream that fell into a waterfall; a few Grey-crested Tits; several Stripe-throated Yuhinas; a few Green-backed Tits; a male Golden Bush Robin; a Eurasian Jay; a few Sichuan Leaf Warblers; two or three Ogilvie-Grant's Warblers; and a Bianchi's Warbler. By 5pm, conditions had deteriorated to the extent that we returned to the hotel to dry out.

#### **Friday 11<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day Four**

**The rain hammered** against the windowpanes all night long. The wind picked up considerably before dawn broke, which helped to improve visibility, but still the rain refused to ease. It was far too wet to emerge from the chalet, although a **White-capped Water Redstart** and an interestingly-marked pair of **Scarlet Rosefinches** were seen from the sanctuary of the accommodation; and a **Hobby** surprised us as we were eating breakfast. The rain had not eased by 11am, but we ventured out nevertheless. The plan was to complete the outermost "circular walk", but the track from the Lian Xi waterfall to the Tai Qing temple was fenced off. This forced us to walk the central footpath via the Xiaoyao bridge instead. We walked for an hour before seeing our first birds of the day: a pair of Grey-headed Bullfinches.

With Sichuan Treecreeper safely in our memories from yesterday's sortie, the main "plateau target" was now Grey-hooded Parrotbill. The "table top" of Wawu Shan is the species only known global stronghold, with 18 pairs in 2003 in no more than 60 hectares,

recorded by a Birdlife International-supported “BP Conservation Programme” survey. Alas, the rain didn’t stop until 2pm – 23 hours after it had begun; and we had to be at the bottom cable car station at 4pm to rendezvous with our waiting van that would hopefully act as our mobile hide, facilitating another encounter with the majestic Lady “A”. And so, our “pheasants first” mantra meant that we only had about 90 dry minutes to see Grey-hooded Parrotbill and a host of other birds that had been sheltering from the storm. Unfortunately, that particular parrotbill remained hidden – as did the several species of bush warbler that inhabit the plateau – but we did see quite a few birds in the short amount of birdable time that was available, including: four or so Long-tailed Minivets; five Rufous-breasted Accentors; five Elliot’s Laughingthrushes; several Rufous-vented Tits; three Grey-crested Tits; several Streak-throated Fulvettas; two Crested Coal Tits; three Eurasian Jays; up to six Darjeeling Woodpeckers; a **Tickell’s Leaf Warbler**; a male **Vinaceous Rosefinch**; and excellent parrotbill consolations in the form of four Fulvous Parrotbills and a single **Brown Parrotbill**.

The cable car descended into thick cloud and it began to rain again. Our questionable decision to leave the top two hours before we had to was suddenly even more questionable. By the time we reached the lower station it was raining heavily. We retrieved our bags from the chalet and set off down the mountain. As luck would have it, there was a dry level at about 1900m, where Bob was able to catch up with the characterful Verreaux’s Parrotbill. We saw a Red-billed Blue Magpie at about 1800m – within the Emei Leaf Warbler’s narrow altitude band. But it was murky and drizzling here, and all was quiet. Interestingly, the Wawu Horned Toad, which is found nowhere else on earth, is also found here at about 1800m.

We continued for another mile to the area where we had seen a Lady A the day before yesterday. At about 4.30pm, while driving very slowly, I saw a male Lady Amherst’s Pheasant on the extreme right hand side of the road. This time, instead of melting into the undergrowth, it walked right into the middle of the road – no more than 20 yards in front of the van. This bird was an adult male – a little bit wet perhaps, but still an incredible sight and certainly well worth the parrotbill, half-dozen species of bush warbler, and other odds and ends we had perhaps traded for it.

It seemed that our best chance of better weather was further down the mountain, and so we descended to about 1500m where we found a track to the left. I made arrangements for the van to pick us up at 7pm on the road below this point, and we set off to explore the track. Other than finding a very vocal perched **Large Hawk Cuckoo**, we saw very little here. The walk down the mountain road was slightly more productive in that we saw c30 **Chestnut-sided White-eyes**, as well as a **Chestnut-crowned Warbler** at about 1400m.

We got back to the Wawu Shan Hotel – where we had spent the first night – for a well-deserved dinner and refreshments. Mr Shan, our driver for the remainder of the journey, who had driven from Wolong, arrived at the hotel at about 9pm. He told me that the tunnel between Chengdu and Wolong would be closed to uphill traffic at midday (until midnight) and, therefore, we would have to set off at 4am the following morning to be sure of getting through it.

## Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day Five

**The alarm call** of my Nokia at 3.30am signalled the start of what was destined to be a very long day. Encouragingly, Mr Shan was waiting outside of the hotel exactly on time with the engine running. It took about two hours to negotiate the pot-holed dirt track that we had come to grief on a few days before. Then at last, just before sunrise, with palpable sighs of relief all round, we at last connected with the main road northwards. After a few unscheduled circuits of a small town about thirty miles south of Chengdu, we were again back on the right road, and managed to get to the tunnel at about 10am – two hours before the one way system was to be switched from up to down. As we waited for the traffic to move into the tunnel, we saw c30 **Asian House Martins**.

We moved cautiously through the tunnel, which housed another construction project. After a further two hours, we turned left alongside the river towards Wolong, onto yet another road-widening scheme. The road is a sore on the landscape. To make matters worse, since my visit in 2002, a network of hydro-electric dams has been built along the Pitiao river, which the road follows. Consequently, the once-raging river was dry at various points. Perhaps not coincidentally, no forktails were seen (a few White-capped Water Redstarts and several **Plumbeous Water Redstarts** were the only birds of note).

Mr Shan stopped suddenly and pointed out two pandas lolling on rocks on the other side of the river. My initial incredulity vanished when Bob pointed out that they were, sadly, surrounded by the tall wire fence of the Wolong Giant Panda breeding centre – the world's panda-breeding capital. About 100 Giant Pandas are housed here (more captive pandas than are in the rest of the world's zoos and facilities combined). Thankfully, even more survive in the surrounding 770 square miles of the Wolong Nature Reserve, which holds almost 10% of the total wild population of approximately 1,500 animals.

We checked into the Wolong Hotel at 12.45. I had stayed there in 2002, when it was one of only a few hotels in the town that were open to foreigners. Nowadays, many more hotels have sprung up to cater to the burgeoning demand for panda-driven ecotourism – the backbone of the town's economy.

Despite the onslaught of panda-tourists, Wolong has managed to preserve much of its small-town charm and the surrounding area retains, at least for the time being, all of its magic. According to the legend of the local blue-and-white-garbed Qiang people, a dragon was so struck by the beauty of the valley and the snow-capped peaks that flank it, that it sat down to admire the landscape and, fully contented, fell into an eternal sleep. It remains to be seen, however, just how much the “crouching dragon” – the literal meaning of “*wo long*” – will be disturbed by the opening of the new, fast road from Chengdu. Indeed, the number of people visiting the “Wolong Valley” could well increase nine-fold from 200,000 per year, *nationalgeographic.com* states.

It is likely that pressure on the town's infrastructure and the area's ecosystem will further increase if the planned construction of the “Panda Mountain ecotourism destination” goes ahead. The proposal is to spend between US\$ 7 to 8 million on building a tourist attraction that would sit next to the existing panda reserve, just south of Wolong. The US-China Environmental Fund (USCEF) promotes Panda Mountain as “12,000+ sq/mtrs of integrated lodging, educational, restaurant and retail facilities” that will yield a “net income of US\$9.2



million in [the] first five years and US\$13.6 million in [the] first seven years". The plan is to open Panda Mountain before the start of next year's Olympics, so that it will be able to capitalise on the expected overflow of Beijing-bound Olympic tourists that will be whisked from Chengdu airport to Wolong in less than two hours on the new wide road.

The increasing tourism activity in the vicinity obviously concerns UNESCO, which excluded Wolong from the area that was designated a world heritage site in 2006. The evaluation report of May 2006 which advised the decision making body that the site met the criteria for acceptance as a "natural" world heritage site, also recommended that the State Party should "undertake an independent expert review of the existing [Wolong Tourism Development] plan, under the direction of the World Heritage Management Office to assess the impacts of the [plan's] proposals on values within the nominated property and to recommend modifications that may be required." I look forward to reading the environmental impact assessment report that emerges from this review.

The "Sichuan Giant Panda Sanctuaries" – comprising seven nature reserves and nine scenic parks in 924,500 hectares of the Qionglai and Jiayin Mountains – is one of only six sites in China to be designated a "natural" world heritage site. It hosts a dazzling array of plant and animals, including some 5,000 and 6,000 plant species – more than any other temperate site. There are in excess of 100 species of rhododendrons alone. Also, according to the evaluation report, there are also 132 mammal species; and more than 365 species of birds. So, literally thousands of reasons, then, why it is critically important that the site is afforded maximum protection.

One of the most spectacular of the site's species breeds in good numbers on the steep hillside that rises literally over the wall of the Wolong Hotel. Hearing a Golden Pheasant is one thing; seeing one is quite another. I chatted with some locals nearby, one of whom told me that he could lead us to a look-out point high above the town – the path to which, I was told, winds through some good areas for Golden Pheasants. Mr Yu, who is a primary school teacher, went home to change into his hill-walking shoes.

We walked quickly up the narrow paths from 6,200 feet to 8,075 feet. Thankfully we had just spent four days mostly above 7,000 feet and so were reasonably acclimatised, but still the sweat poured off. Not many birds for our efforts though: We saw a pair of **White-winged Grosbeaks** at the highest point of our walk; a pair of **Common Pheasants** in a clearing on a wooded hillside across the valley; several Elliot's Laughingthrushes; a few Red-billed Blue Magpies; a flock of c15 **Yellow-bellied Tits** and at least one **Yellow-browed Tit**; a few **White Wagtails**; and a few Green-backed Tits. Infuriatingly, although we heard about 20 different Golden Pheasants – and at one point got to within 30 yards of one – neither of us saw as much as a tail end.

### Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day Six

**Mr Shan was waiting** outside of the front doors of the hotel for us at the allotted time of 4am. He had warned me that the road up the mountain to "post 92" (ie 92 kilometres beyond the turnoff from the main road to Chengdu) would take more than two hours of bone-shaking driving. He was right. The road, which five years before had got me to this point in under

an hour, had been ripped up and was in the process of being widened. The bouncing full beam of our headlights lit up the hundreds of tents alongside the route that housed literally thousands of sleeping migrant workers – many from as far away as Xinjiang Autonomous Region – that were assigned to the numerous teams, each responsible for its own section of road. Fortunately, all of the huge construction vehicles also slept, and we were able to make reasonably good time despite the state of the “road”, arriving at the designated spot – three hundred and fifty yards beyond “post 92” (at 11,350 feet) at 6.30am, just after dawn. Thankfully, this was Mr Shan’s “manor” and he was able to pronounce confidently that we were at the right point even though “92” and every other “post” had been removed (presumably they had been put into storage until next year’s grand reopening).

We scanned the large alpine meadow with our telescopes for our quarry, and within ten minutes I had found the most spectacular bird I have ever seen. The male **Chinese Monal** grazed the upper slope of the hillside; its iridescent plumage lighting up the field of view of the scope and, with it, our morning. Suddenly, the decision to set the alarm for 3.30am seemed a good one. This is not only a rare bird (Birdlife International classifies it as “vulnerable” with a declining population of between 10,000 to 20,000 individuals); it is also a much sought after China endemic with a range restricted to an altitude band between 10,800 and 14,750 feet within an area of about 26,500 square miles. Another male was found in a different part of the same meadow with a female close by. We watched all three birds climbing the hillside until, at about 7.30am, they sauntered over the brow. For a few moments I contemplated a round of applause, but was brought back to my senses by a couple of road workers who had emerged from their tents to watch two heavy-coated and woolly-hatted Englishmen peering into glass bottles on three legs. They smiled disarmingly and asked what on earth we were doing. I told them that we had been watching “beautiful bright-blue giant mountain chickens” – the literal translation of the name I conjured from thin air (having no idea what Chinese Monal is actually called in Mandarin). I quickly realised that I had probably given them too much information. “How do they taste?”, enquired the Xinjiang migrant with the Caucasian nose. A sensible question when you consider that these people work like mules and earn a pittance. I shook my head and whispered reverently, “protected by the state”... “that’s why we can’t go up there”. He nodded sagely, and with a shrug of the shoulders went to get some noodles instead.

Several more workers approached. Obviously the word was out that there were a couple of crazy foreigners within gawping distance. It’s always an education to listen to the stories of migrant workers, to learn about their life, their journey to the building site, and their thoughts on China-past, present, and future. But we still had a lot of birds to see and the morning would only last a couple of hours longer, so I apologised for leaving so abruptly and promised to be back later for a chat. We got back into the car and managed to get beyond the opening of the new tunnel – just a few hundred yards further up the mountain – just as some of the biggest earth-moving equipment I have ever see emerged from its bowels to block the road.

A few miles up the treacherous road, – which incidentally was expertly driven by Mr Shan, who was clearly more of a rally driver than a racing driver – I noticed several specks of “snow” on the opposite hillside, at least a mile away. This was odd because this snow was at eye level, which at about 12,475 feet was quite a distance below the snowline. I asked Mr

Shan to stop. At first sight through my Leicas, I was surprised to see that some of the snow patches were moving between rhododendron bushes. I then managed to find infinity on the focussing ring and with it the wondrous site of seven **White-eared Pheasants**. We enjoyed them for about half an hour, which was just as well because this was destined to be our only sighting of this species on the trip.

The much-closer hillside to our right held about a dozen **Rosy Pipits**; several **Kessler's Thrushes**; one **Chestnut Thrush**; three or four **Blue-fronted Redstarts**; and a single **Plain Mountain Finch**. A **Himalayan Buzzard** floated over the valley; while a loose flock of ten or so **Red-billed Choughs** were wafted by the breeze several hundred feet above our heads.

We reached Balang Shan pass (at 14,325 feet) and stopped to admire the snowscape and the imposing white tops of the *siguniangshan* or the “Four Girls Mountains”. Legend has it that the mountains are the reincarnation of four sisters who fell in love with the place. The most beautiful of the sisters, the “fourth”, is an ice pyramid rising to 20,505 feet. She stands head and shoulders above the third, second, and first girls who stand to the south of her at 17,569; 17,310; and 16,486 feet respectively. As the number four girl she is regarded as the youngest, as her alternative Chinese names *yaoguniang* and *yaomeifeng* suggest. The Tibetan name, Kula Shidak, pays the area far greater respect. It means abode of the mountain god.



The snow on the other side of the pass thinned quite quickly, and a stop at a lush, snow-free meadow at 13,775 feet yielded a male **Grandala**, glowing in the morning sunlight. We watched this avian jewel at close range – paying little attention to its sombre-suited consort. We then descended to the hairpin bend a few hundred yards below us, which afforded good views of numerous crags and therefore our best chance, we thought, of seeing



Tibetan Snowcock. As luck would have it, as soon as we arrived at the look-out, two **Tibetan Snowcocks** flew across our field of view, no more than twenty yards away at the closest point, and disappeared over the ridge to our left. The obvious plan was to move down to the road below the crags and look up to where the snowcocks had been heading for. From the new vantage point, we watched an adult **Lammergeyer** making the most of the last thermals of the sunny morning.

The melting snow from the mountainside was draining into a large pool at the far side of the steep yak pasture below us. From the roadside, we watched a flock of eight **Snow Pigeons** as they fed on the level pastureland adjacent to the expanse of water. We walked down the hill, having arranged for Mr Yang to wait for us half a mile down the road, near to a mountain stream below the pool. At about 11am, we walked down the pasture to the basin and looked up to the distant crags, where we thought the fly-by snowcocks could be. After ten minutes of searching, my 16x wide-angle Leica eyepiece locked on to a magnificent Tibetan Snowcock, which was standing on an exposed crag. We watched it through Bob's scope at 60x for about 20 minutes. Standing erect, it repeatedly threw its head back to expel its haunting call. The approaching snowstorm did nothing to dent its enthusiasm and I will never forget the sight and sound of this doughty denizen of the high mountains as it continued to strut its stuff in the face of a full-on blizzard.



We drove back to 4,200m, where we found another pair of Tibetan Snowcocks on the rocky hillside, which were much closer than the bird we had just been watching. The male called continuously as its partner, a few feet away, pecked unconcernedly at the bare earth. Other birds west of the pass included a few Rosy Pipits and a bemused **Brown Shrike**.



Mission accomplished, we headed back to lower altitudes in the hope of finding better weather. On the drive down we saw two flocks of several **Alpine Choughs** (the latter, higher flock contained three Grandalas); a colony of c20 pairs of Asian House martins; a single **Golden Eagle**; and a few **Himalayan Griffon Vultures**. A north-bound **Pallas's Warbler** and several **Grey-backed Shrikes** were seen on a short walk around the degraded meadow below the obelisk at 11,025 feet.

Rain was falling intermittently as we walked a footpath at 9,175 feet in the Dengsheng Valley, which runs parallel with the Pi Tiao river, north of where the road leaves the river at a right angle to begin its sharp ascent up the mountain. Birds were few and far between, with only a **Hodgson's Flycatcher**, a few Sichuan Leaf and Golden Spectacled Warblers, an Ashy Minivet, and a few Green-backed and Rufous-vented Tits to liven up the walk. We bumped into two American ladies – our first foreigners of the trip – who bemoaned the loss of their birdwatching tour group's leader (they told us that he had had to return home because the malaria he had contracted on an earlier trip to Thailand had caught up with him).

Mr Yang told us that he had found out that the flow of traffic down the mountain would be stopped just before Wolong at 6pm to allow rock blasting, and so he had to drive quite quickly to get beyond the point by the designated time. We still had time, though, to stop for a **White-throated Dipper** that Bob had spotted on a rock in the centre of the fast-flowing river. Also, a few White-capped Water Redstarts and four Grey Wagtails further down.

We made good time, and were able to sit down for dinner at the Wolong Hotel's excellent restaurant while it was still light.



### Monday 14<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day Seven

**The day started inauspiciously** – there was no sign of our packed lunches at the collecting point behind the tariff board. My fault, because I had naively assumed that the arrangement I had made on arrival would apply to each pre-dawn of our stay. In China, never assume. At least we had a good supply of biscuits and Dove chocolate – our staple diet for the trip.

Mr Yang was again waiting for us with the engine running. We set off at 4.45am in driving rain. The road, now flooded in places, was even more treacherous. I was in the front passenger seat and could not fully appreciate Mr Yang's extraordinary driving skills as he somehow coped with continually random understeer and oversteer. Even though I was developing a good amount of faith in his ability, I must admit that the sight of a straight drop of one hundred or more feet, literally below my window on a particularly slippery long stretch of furrowed mud, was horrifying. Bob would admit later that, at this point, he had his fingers on the driver's side back-door latch, ready to bale out – selflessly ensuring at least that he would survive to tell the wondrous stories of our pheasant-finding to my daughter (his god-daughter) Joanne.

It was still raining when we arrived at the obelisk (at 11,025 feet) at about 7am. The wet conditions didn't seem to concern a party of four **Giant Laughingthrushes**, which showed well on roadside scrub a few hundred yards further up the road. We were continuing our walk up the mountain road when, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed something run across the clearing between two dense patches of scrub. I had no idea what it was but alerted Bob nevertheless, who watched the "next" clearing while I watched the point it had

entered the scrub. After several agonising minutes I was on the verge of consigning whatever it had been to the “ones that got away” file, when Bob latched on to two **Blood Pheasants** – a male and a female – which had emerged into the clearing he was watching. I managed to get good views of the female before she melted into the next column of scrub.

Other birds of note seen on this rain-affected morning included two Olive-backed pipits; a Blue-fronted Redstart; a few **Two-barred Greenish Warblers**; a few Rufous-vented Tits; a bedraggled perched Grey-faced Buzzard, which was some distance from its normal range; two Grey-crested Tits; two Elliot’s Laughingthrushes; a total of nine Himalayan Griffon Vultures, which were all struggling to find any kind of thermal; a Large-billed Crow; five Chestnut Thrushes; three Grey-backed Shrikes; a Dusky Warbler at 10,175 feet; and a small party of fulvetas, which we had only frustratingly brief views of.

We drove back to the hotel at the start of the Dengsheng Valley at 9,175 feet and followed the same footpath as the day before. Five years before I had seen Little Forktail here, but today we had to make do with several Sichuan Leaf Warblers; a few Large-billed Leaf Warblers; an Olive Backed Pipit; a Chestnut Thrush; and a Blue Whistling Thrush.

We left the valley at 2pm, and drove back to Wolong so that we could again attempt to actually see a Golden Pheasant. Thankfully, the road had dried considerably and we were able to make good time, stopping only once – just before Wolong – where we saw two **Chinese Pond Herons**. After the exhausting excursion on our first day, when we had failed to see Golden Pheasant despite walking up and down 1,875 vertical feet, we decided to work the hillside right next to the hotel. A Golden Pheasant was calling within earshot of my hotel room, which overlooked the hillside. The first hour was spent crawling around and chasing calling shadows, when at last the spectacularly-plumaged male **Golden Pheasant** eventually became tired of playing hide and seek. We managed to enjoy several prolonged, close encounters with this astonishing bird as it crept from one bush to another.

Now that Wolong’s speciality had been seen well, we could afford to have an early dinner and, after yet another exhausting day, an early night.

### **Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day Eight**

**Wolong is on the outer strand** of the Qinghai-Tibetan climatic belt, which is characterised by long snowy winters (from November to March) and relatively cool wet summers. Rainfall varies considerably by altitude range, but whatever height you are at the chances are that it’s going to be wet. The panda research station at Wuyipeng, which was set up in the early 80s thanks to a grant from the WWF (wildlife not wrestling), is one of the wetter places in the area. Doctor Schaller, who led the WWF’s panda research effort, recorded 2,520mm of precipitation there in 1985. And so, with that in mind, we were less than surprised to be met by a torrential downpour as we emerged from our hotel at 5.30am on the day we walked up to the Wuyipeng research station, where we would stay for two nights.

Mr Shan took us to the small settlement, a few miles beyond Wolong, where he parked the car before escorting us through the narrowest of alleyways, over a rickety suspension bridge, and on to an indistinct footpath that would lead to the main trail up the mountain. We bade farewell to Mr Shan, who by now must have been totally convinced of our insanity,

and at 6.30am began the steep climb up the slippery path. An hour or so later, at about 7,700 feet, we heard the distinctive call of Golden Pheasant and didn't have to wait long before the male showed very well indeed – at one point walking on to the track and weaving its magic only ten yards in front of us. Somehow, the seclusion and glorious silence of this place – the only sound was the soft, rhythmic patter of rain against leaves – made the experience even more spell-binding. The Golden Pheasant we had seen a few days before within earshot of our hotel had suddenly lost some of its gloss. Perhaps the story that the “hotel pheasants” had been released there to promote ecotourism was true after all. That said, my first sighting of a male there still beats the birds I've seen in the Brecks and at Sandringham in Norfolk by several country miles. But this one, seen only a few hundred yards from where my wife and I had seen a wild panda five years before, was simply off the measuring scale. Or so I thought...

Then at 9.10am, some 400 yards beyond and ten minutes after the start of the Wuyipeng “plateau” (8,375 feet), I saw something that reclassified Golden Pheasant and just about every other bird I have ever seen. I alerted Bob to the movement at the side of the track, some twenty yards in front of us. The male Temminck's Tragopan strolled across the track, pecked unconcernedly for a few moments, before continuing up the hill. Amazingly, only two birds had been seen during the two and a half hour ascent in the pouring rain – a male Golden Pheasant and a male Temminck's Tragopan.

The footpath from the start of the ridge to the panda research station extends for a mile through a mixture of superb habitat, including sky-scraping deciduous trees, extensive tracts of bamboo, and tall conifers. The steady rainfall kept things quiet, but we did manage to see a few “Golden-spectacled” Warblers, two **Nutcrackers**, a **Rufous-capped Babbler**, two male **Mrs Gould's Sunbirds**, several Green-backed Tits, and two **Chestnut-vented Nuthatches**.

Mr Xu, the station's administrator and cook, welcomed us with warming cup of tea. I would later find out that Mr Xu had been there for 15 “seasons” – from about April to September – and was very much the reason why a run-down, cold and damp research station was actually a pleasant place to stay for a few days. We met two American gentlemen, one of whom had been there for three days, but had seen “absolutely nothing” and not even any sign of the wild panda he had come to see. “Not as easy as the Grizzlies back home,” he bemoaned. He asked me for my honest appraisal of his chances of seeing one in The Valley of Heroes (*Yingxiong Gu*), which would be the next stop on his tailored “panda tour”. His guides had radio-tracking equipment, and many of the local pandas are “wired” so, on that basis, I told him that I thought his chances were “reasonable” (although I made it clear to him that my view counted for nothing as I knew absolutely nothing about Wolong's pandas – despite a brief encounter with one five years before).

After tea, we walked the plateau trail back to the start of the descent to civilisation. Halfway along, the slightly brighter sky at about 2pm encouraged a feeding flock to stick around for about 15 minutes, in which time we were able to latch on to a male **Green Shrike Babbler**, the first of two **Sooty Tits**, a Yellow-browed Tit, a few Claudia's Leaf Warblers, a Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, a couple of Buff-barred Warblers, two Sichuan Leaf Warblers, three Long-tailed Minivets (including one male), several Green-backed Tits, a male Slaty-blue Flycatcher, and a Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher. Thereafter, the increasingly damp conditions made birding less productive, but we still managed to see a few good birds, including a male



**Rufous-bellied Niltava** at 3.30pm, and two Golden-breasted Fulvettas at 3.45pm which were almost-immediately followed by two **Great Parrotbills** that entertained for several minutes.

After cooking an excellent meal, Mr Xu sat down for a chat. I asked him how many tourists have actually managed to see a wild panda. “*Hen shao*” (very few) he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Are these tailored panda-finding tours all they are cracked up to be,” I asked casually. It was clear from Mr Xu’s frosty reaction that I had clumsily hit a nerve. “If they are there, my colleagues will find them,” he replied tersely. Well, I certainly couldn’t refute the impeccable logic of his response. I kicked myself for appearing rude and apologised for any offence I may have caused, but my next conversational gambit succeeded only to dig myself deeper into the hole I had single-handedly excavated. “How is the panda that was released here last year... he must be six years old now.” Mr Xu looked at me quizzically. It was clear from his response that the “disappearance” of Xiang Xiang – the first captive bred panda to be released into the wild – was a major embarrassment. “Bitten and frightened away by the wild pandas,” he said. “Where did it go,” I asked. Mr Xu continued to size me up – was I really a birder, or was I a reporter sent to uncover the truth about Xiang Xiang? Mr Xu thought for a few moments. “His transmitter stopped working,” was his final word on the matter. This sounded very much like a euphemism for “he’s dead”, and so I decided to spare both of our blushes and steer well clear of any more panda-talk.

When back in England I would discover that the official word from Xinhua, the government-controlled news agency, was that Xiang Xiang, died after sustaining “serious internal injuries”. The report says that he “may have fallen from a high place while fighting with wild pandas”. Even more mysteriously, the body was found on the 19<sup>th</sup> February, but the news would not be released until the 31<sup>st</sup> of May, when Xinhua reported that “officials attributed the long delay in publicizing Xiang Xiang's death to the need for a full investigation”. This could be interpreted as “yes, we are indeed unhappy that the officials in Wolong tried to keep it quiet.”

“Do you like watching English football?” I enquired, gesturing to the six foot diameter satellite dish outside the window.

### Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day Nine

**After a restless night** in a sleeping bag that is far too small for me, I was awoken just before dawn by a most beautiful song. I thought it may be a Firethroat, but would later check my MP3 player and find out that it wasn’t. Whatever it was, the intense melodious bubbling was every bit as wonderful as a Nightingale’s song. As dawn broke, it shut up. And all attempts to see it would prove futile. Another Sichuan mystery.

It was still quite cool, but at least it was dry as we set off along the main plateau footpath. At 6.55am a **Ferruginous Flycatcher** perched out in the open near to the start of the path. The “outward” walk added the first few of twenty Claudia’s Leaf Warblers we would see during the day; two Chestnut-vented Nuthatches; the first three of four Green-backed Tits; the first few of eleven Sichuan Leaf Warblers; the first of two Yellow-browed Warblers; several Golden-spectacled Warblers; two Long-tailed Minivets and at least two Nutcrackers.

At 9.45am we eventually managed to get excellent views of the first of two

**Crimson-breasted Woodpeckers**, which had been giving us the run-around. Further up the track we saw a Buff-barred Warbler; c6 Rufous-gorgeted Flycatchers; three singleton Sooty Tits; a Crested Coal Tit; two **Spectacled Parrotbills** – one of which was carrying nesting material; and the first of three **Himalayan Red-flanked Bluetails**, including a distinctively-marked male. Just before lunch, at 12.55pm, Bob chose exactly the wrong time to go back to the chalet. No sooner had he disappeared, a **Himalayan Cuckoo** flew to an exposed perch to mark its territory.

After lunch we walked the footpath that starts behind the compound. At 1.15pm, we managed to get an excellent view of a splendid **Barred Laughingthrush** no more than a hundred yards from the beginning of the track. Thereafter, birds were very few and far between. In our four hour walk, we saw a Green Shrike Babbler, an unidentifiable Fulvetta, two Slaty-blue Flycatchers, two Hodgson's Flycatchers, a female **White-browed Shrike Babbler**, and a male Mrs Gould's Sunbird. I had hoped that the track would lead upwards, but it hugged the valley at about the same altitude before becoming too difficult to follow. An **Indian Nightjar** hawked over the tops of the trees behind the compound – hopefully a portent of finer weather to come.

#### Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day Ten

**Dawn broke clear**, bright, and several degrees warmer than yesterday. We walked the main plateau trail (about 8,375 feet) very slowly, hoping to get better views of Wuyipeng's main avian prize, Temminck's Tragopan. The experience that followed beggars belief.





At 6.40am I spotted a male just below us to our right, which we managed to see well for about five minutes. Then, about 7.15am, what was probably the same male walked out on to the track, no more than ten yards in front of us. We watched, spellbound, as it strutted about majestically, completely oblivious to our presence. At one point it stood bolt upright and began to inflate its considerable frame. We were hoping that this would be a precursor to a full display, but just as we settled ourselves for the show to end all shows, he thought better of the idea and went back to browsing the lush grass on the side of the path. But the performance, even without the grand finale, was staggering. We watched for a full half-hour before the bird eventually melted away in the dense scrub of the slope above the track. It was here that I took the tantalising shot that appears on the first page of this travelogue. More was to come. Perhaps the same male was seen a little further down the track from 8.15am to 8.35am, as well as a brief view of the object of its desire – a sombre-suited female.

The snow-coated alpine meadows in the distance shimmered against a cobalt blue sky. A gentle breeze was now blowing from the south-west. And the increasing warmth of the climbing sun further reinforced my view that all was well with the world.

Shirt-sleeved birding at a relaxed pace was the order of the day. The Tragopan's

supporting cast that morning, in order of appearance, were: a Rufous-capped Babbler (7.03am); a few Claudia's Leaf Warblers; a few Rufous-gorgeted Flycatchers; a Golden-spectacled Warbler; a Crimson-breasted Woodpecker (8.10am); another look at a Barred Laughingthrush (8.20am); a pair of Rufous-bellied Niltavas (8.25am); Sichuan Leaf Warbler; no fewer than four Ferruginous Flycatchers; Large-billed Leaf Warblers; a calling Himalayan Cuckoo (8.50am); several Green-backed Tits; a much-appreciated **Spotted Laughingthrush**, which was found by Bob at 9.23am; a female Chestnut Thrush (9.30am); a **Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler**, which Bob caught sight of on a log next to the path, but which eluded me; a low-flying Golden Eagle (11am); and a Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher (11.39am). Mr Xu had prepared another excellent lunch for us and we told him of our Tragopan-experience. We packed our rucksacks, settled the bill, and bade farewell to Mr Xu and one of the great places in China.

We walked slowly along the main path, seeing very few birds in the heat of the day. A Chestnut-vented Nuthatch (1.36pm); a Yellow-bellied Tit (1.45pm); and another close-up of a Great Parrotbill near to the start of the descent to civilisation. The air temperature increased as we lost altitude and bird activity ground to near-zero. A Crested Coal Tit (3pm) and a few **Chestnut-flanked White-eyes** (4.20pm) were the only passerines. A group of three **Pacific Swifts** (3.14pm) enlivened what was still a very pleasant downhill hike.

Our driver, Mr Shan, was waiting for us at the prearranged time and place and we were back at the hotel in Wolong before 6pm. An early night followed an early excellent dinner. I set the alarm for 3am – giving us enough time I thought to get to the Wood Snipe roding area before sunrise. As we would find though, in these parts, nature has a tendency to cock a snook at even the best laid plans...

### **Friday 18<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day Eleven**

**Mr Shan was waiting** with the engine running as we emerged from the hotel at 3.30am. We made good time to the start of the steep ascent and were well on course for our rendezvous with the Wood Snipe, which can sometimes be seen above the alpine meadows near “kmp 94”. The first sign that all was not well was a large, unlit truck parked in the middle of the road ahead of us, with lights off. Mr Shan succeeded in waking the driver. From the resigned tone of their conversation and the body language of Mr Shan I guessed that we were in for quite a wait. The prognosis was not good. Obviously loosened by the recent heavy rain, a rock had fallen on to the road in front of us. I walked the 100 yards or so to the scene, and was astonished to see a rock “the size of a house” embedded into the road's surface. Actually, it was the size of quite a small house, but my report back at least managed to get across the magnitude of the problem.

I convinced myself that action was called for, without having the foggiest idea about what action that might be. I explored further up the road beyond the obstruction and found a workman's camp and an early-rising chef. Mr Li, who is one of a dozen from the same village in northern Gansu, is clearly an early riser. Equally clearly, his colleagues aren't. “They start at Eight.” “Eight?”, I queried, looking at my watch and dismissing any thoughts of Wood Snipe from my mind. We had been stopped at 5.10am, the time was now 5.30am.

I tried pleading and bribery in equal measure, but Mr Li was having none of it. “I daren’t wake them,” he said, “They would be really upset”. “Just wake the driver of the earth-mover,” I countered. “If you like, point him out, and I’ll wake him up.” Mr Li thought this was funny and for some reason didn’t think I was serious. “I’ll do what I can,” was his final say on the matter, which was of course was a polite way of telling me to sod off.



I decided to leave the matter in the hands of Mr Shan, who thought that it would be cleared within the hour. It wasn’t. Bob and I walked up the mountain to look for some birds, while keeping one eye on the proceedings below us from various vantage points. We stretched our legs for about 3 hours (from 5.45am to 8.40am), seeing Himalayan Red-flanked Bluetail, three **Buff-throated Warblers**; several Olive-backed Pipits; two **Hill Pigeons**; a few Long-billed Warblers, Chestnut Thrushes, Elliot’s Laughingthrushes and two White-collared Yuhinas and a pair of **Pink-rumped Rosefinches**, which were calling noisily from a roadside bush. Also, we saw a few Long-tailed Minivets and Grey-backed Shrikes, a frisky **Eurasian Cuckoo**, and a few Large-billed Crows.

At about 8.30am, we heard the low, distant rumble of an approaching convoy, signalling that the road had at long last reopened. Mr Shan was the second driver to appear. As we jumped in, he wasted no time in telling me what I had become resigned to more than two hours before: “The earth-mover driver didn’t start work until 8am.”

Balang Shan sparkled in the brilliant mid-morning sunshine. We climbed over the pass to the alpine meadows where, on our previous visit, we had seen Grandala. The target this morning, though, was Snow Partridge. I had hoped to see them pecking around on the shale near the road – as a number of other visitors here had – but our late arrival had scuppered any chance of this. I couldn’t persuade Bob to climb up to the ridge above us, but was determined to have a go nevertheless. I managed to get to 14,425 feet – only about 500 feet

above the road – before I decided that the time (and my lung capacity) would be better utilised elsewhere. At least I had wonderful views of Grandalags (two males among the six); a Rufous-breasted Accentor and about a dozen **Alpine Accentors**.

The other high altitude species that graced our optics here were eight Himalayan Griffon Vultures (including a group of six); several Blue-fronted Redstarts; a few Red-billed Choughs; another Hill Pigeon; two Snow Pigeons; and two very obliging Tibetan Snowcocks, which called from the ridge just above us.



We said our farewells to the Balang Shan pass at 1.15pm and headed for alpine pastures new. We passed through the tacky tourist town of Rilong with its souvenir stalls and dormitory-style hotels as quickly as we could. A little way beyond there, the turn-off to the Four Girls Mountains signalled the end of the roadworks – which had begun shortly after Chengdu, some 200 miles back. Mr Shan looked pleased as he slipped into fourth and top gear for the first time in days. From then on, we made rapid progress, reaching Xiao Jin in double-quick time, where we took the minor road to the right near its impressive *stupa*, or *chorten* in Tibetan if you prefer. This marble-white domed repository for sacred Tibetan Buddhist artefacts projects a calming spirituality over this heavily policed small Tibetan town. The minor road follows the river that is carved into a 100 mile-long north-south valley; along which we saw c20 **Crag Martins**, several White Wagtails and two White-capped Water Redstarts, a few Blue Whistling Thrushes, and a solitary **Black-capped Kingfisher**.

After two hours, the straining engine signalled that the climb had become steeper and I looked back to see that the road had left the riverside and we began to climb the mountain ahead of us. After another forty minutes, at 6.45pm, we reached the 4,050 m Mengbi Shan pass. Out of the car we gulped down the cold, rarefied air while admiring the splendid scenery. Unidentifiable calls rang out from the dense conifer forests below the meadow that



rolled down the mountain in front of us. Several Kessler's Thrushes hopped between the hummocks and a male White-winged Grosbeak perched on a roadside pine tree.

It is clear from the habitat that can be seen on the drive down Mengbi Shan that this place is likely to hold many of the specialities we have come to see. The wonderful habitat, accessible thanks to the almost-deserted mountain road, is within a short distance of a thriving Tibetan community.



The harmonious coexistence of man and nature is surely testament to the non-exploitative Tibetan culture. Stately, painstakingly-decorated traditional houses light up the village of Zhoukeji, which nestles in the Suomo river valley. The most impressive of the houses, the Grand Zhoukeji Tibetan Mansion, was commandeered by Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai when the First Red Army passed through the area on their 8,000 mile “Long March” to avoid Chang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang (KMT) forces. It’s hard to believe that they stayed in better accommodation on their 370 day flight from Yudu in Jiangxi to Yan’an in Shaanxi Province.

Zhuokeji is bisected by Highway 317. This long and winding road starts life on the outskirts of Chengdu and meets Highway 109 just shy of Lhasa. The 109 is an even longer and more winding road that goes all the way to Beijing. But that’s another story.

Three miles north of Zhuokeji, the 317 enters the Tibetan town of Barkam, which the Chinese call Maerkang. Barkam is the political centre of the Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, which comprises 13 counties. The region – one of three autonomous prefectures in Sichuan – is better known and certainly better remembered by its Mandarin name of “Aba”. It is home to about 850,000 people, the majority of which (53 per cent) are Tibetans. “Han” people – who are the dominant race in China’s lowlands – already account for about a quarter of the population here. Barkam, at 2670 metres, enjoys relatively



oxygen-rich air, and is therefore an ideal staging post for lowlander tourists on their way to tick-off the “grassland experience”.

Mr Shan drove us to the centre of the thriving town, where he gestured to his “recommended hotel”, which overlooks the fast-flowing river. There was obviously some financial gain for him to be had by our staying there, but the hotel looked reasonable enough (except for the ten flights of stairs and lack of lift that is) and so I was happy to nod my





consent. The driver reward scheme must be highly developed because Mr Shan even has a “loyalty card”, which he handed over to the receptionist before she checked us in. She presumably added a few “foreigner-points” to his account.

After checking in, I arranged to meet Bob in the hotel foyer an hour later. This gave me enough time for a spot of exploring. I walked about two miles north (to the edge of town) and back via the backstreets. Maerkang is a melting pot of Tibetan and Han culture. Monks in vermilion gowns rub shoulders with young women wearing fashionable tops and sporting chic bags – some of which bear an uncanny resemblance to Luis Vuitton special editions (at a hundredth of the price no doubt).

We found a restaurant next door that serves both Tibetan and Sichuan food and, importantly for me, some local beer.

### **Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day Twelve**

**We arrived back** at the Mengbi Shan pass at 6.45am. Highlights here were a few Blue-fronted Redstarts; a Plain Mountain Finch; 3 Kessler’s Thrushes; a Rosy Pipit; scope views of a calling male as well as a female **Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch**; several **Chinese White-browed Rosefinches**; a few Great Laughingthrushes; a Buff-barred Warbler; a White-winged Grosbeak; a **Wren**; and a distant **Eastern Cattle Egret**.

We walked down the deserted mountain road. At 9.45am (at 3870 m) Bob managed to get his binoculars on a male **Severtzov’s Grouse**, which flew across to our side of the road and landed momentarily. I was delighted that he had managed to see this rarely-seen



“Chinese Grouse”, but alas I saw nothing more than a whirr of wings and the hummock where it has stood for a couple of seconds.

We continued down the mountain to about “kmp 20” at 3760m. Although it was sunny and windless, we saw remarkably few birds in the next few hours. The highlight (again for Bob only, as I couldn’t get on to it) was a male **Crested Tit Warbler**, which fed in the canopy of some old roadside conifers alongside a few **Goldcrests** (which I did see). Other birds included a Rufous-vented Tit; a few Tickell’s Leaf Warblers; a Large-billed Crow; a Himalayan Buzzard; three (including two male) **White-throated Redstarts**; a few Pacific Swifts; Greenish Warbler; one male Hodgson’s Flycatcher; a few Elliot’s Laughingthrushes; a Himalayan Griffon; and a treecreeper that looked like the “familiar” Eurasian variety, but is now thought by some to be worthy of the promotion to **Hodgson’s Treecreeper**. Another reason to look forward to the invention of a field DNA testing kit. After all, studying a DNA spectrograph is bound to be far more satisfying than identifying birds using eyes and common sense. For some at least.

I had an interesting conversation with a lady who owns a small bar overlooking the main road and the river that flows behind it. Miss Wu is from Zhejiang province, south of Shanghai; is 28 years old; and moved to Barkam two years ago. I asked her why she had decided on a Western look for her bar, when the other popular night spots I had seen had opted for more of a traditional Tibetan theme – presumably to attract the ever-increasing number of Han tourists and businesspeople. She looked at me as if I had just fallen out of the sky, and banged my head in doing so. “Places with Tibetan themes charge six yuan for a bottle of local beer. I charge ten yuan for a bottle of international beer. We both sell at three times more than we pay for it. But I make two and a half yuan per bottle more than

they do.” I swallowed the mouthful of Budweiser I had been storing while listening to the exemplary lecture on retailing economics. “I’ll drink to that”, I said, as I placed another “blue Mao” – a 10 yuan note – on the table.

### Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day 13

We were at “kmp 28” (3950m) at 6.35am – within a few minutes of sunrise and well before many birds were active. We saw several Rufous-vented Tits; a few Buff-barred Warblers; four White-winged Grosbeaks and a Rufous-breasted Accentor. We walked down to kmp 24 (3,800m) by 7.15am, where there was much more activity. In the next 45 minutes we saw three Tickell’s Warblers; two Grey-backed Shrikes; a Chestnut Thrush; three (including two male) White-throated Redstarts (perhaps the same birds as yesterday); several Elliot’s Laughingthrushes; a **Eurasian Sparrowhawk**; two Goldcrests; a rather nice **Tiger Shrike**; and a male and female Chinese White-browed Rosefinch.



We moved back up the mountain – to kmp 25 – where the sun was beginning to strike the tops of the tall conifers. An unfamiliar call – repeated numerous times from within the densely-packed trees – intrigued and frustrated in equal measure. Then, at long last, at 8.45am, a dark bird, which looked very much like a jay, broke cover and flew over by head and out of sight (from where I was standing). Unfortunately, I hadn’t managed to get my binoculars on it, although I was certain I knew what it was. Bob, who was some 80 yards ahead of me, saw the **Sichuan Jay** land in front of him, and beckoned me over. Unfortunately, I misunderstood his directions and put my binoculars on to the “wrong” tree.

By the time I scanned the branches and pleaded “where is it?” the bird had flown. Bob, who thought I was “on” the bird, had watched it fly thinking that I too was watching.

The Tibetan Gods decided that some form of compensation was in order, which appeared magnificently above our heads a few moments later in the form of a raucous **Black Woodpecker**. Even I couldn’t miss this one. The giant raven-black woodpecker powered over us. At its closest approach, no more than forty feet away, it unleashed the contents of its clearly oversized bowels. Just as the white paint bomb thudded against the road, almost within splattering distance of our boots, the bird let out a frustrated yelp – as if cursing its poor aim.

The sun was climbing quickly in a cobalt blue sky; there was little or no wind; bird song echoed all around the forest. I could sense that it was going to be a memorable day.

And I wasn’t disappointed.

We returned to the house below the pass, where Mr Yan, a sort of forestry protection officer who also kept the road free of fallen stones and rocks, lived. Mr Shan knew him from his trip to the same area last year, and so had someone to talk with. Mr Shan had suggested that we walk all the way down the valley by following the footpath beside the river, which would eventually take us to the road – several miles below. I had looked at the footpath from the “exit” point on our way up the mountain, and thought that it was a well-worn track and that we would be able to make it down without getting hopelessly lost.

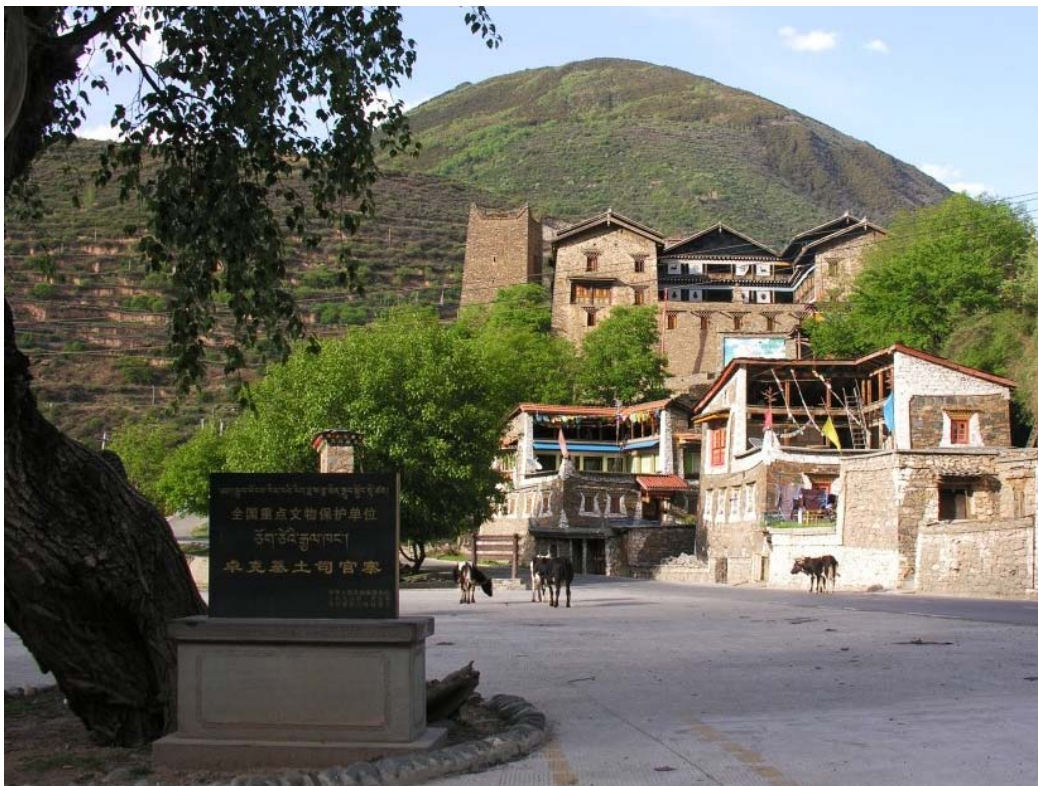
And so, at 9.55am, we started the descent that would take us down 800 vertical metres (from 4,000 to 3200). There were many tame Kessler’s Thrushes in the meadow just below the house, and I lingered too long as I tried to get a photograph of a sunlit male. Bob kindly reminded me that the morning was slipping away and that I still hadn’t seen the grouse – not to mention the Verreaux’s Monal-Partridge. Bob’s hurry-up call was well judged, as 30 minutes later and 150 metres lower, I spotted a male Severtzov’s Grouse amongst the trees that we were able to approach to within thirty feet. We then saw it was with a female, and watched the two birds for several minutes at extremely close range as they pecked around the bases of some medium-size conifers. (I would see another female, 100 metres below here, 50 minutes later.)

At 12.45pm (at 3,600 metres) I was walking just ahead of Bob, when I flushed a **Verreaux’s Monal Partridge** from an area of light scrub no more than 25 feet away. The bird flew only a few feet above the ground, arched round to its right and disappeared into much-denser undergrowth. I was horrified when I realised that Bob hadn’t seen it. Incredibly, just as we had swapped positions, with him taking the lead to look for it, another bird flew from the same area. This time, Bob also saw the easily diagnostic tail pattern as the bird repeated the same flight path of the one I had flushed only moments before. We then spent a fruitless hour trying to relocate the silent birds. Nevertheless, we were happy that we had at least got so close to one of China’s most sought-after endemics.

At 3pm (at 3475 metres) we found another of central China’s endemics. The **Weigold’s Tit**, or Sichuan Willow Tit as some call it, fed at the top of some low bushes just in front of us. In all, we would see five birds – two pairs and a singleton – in the next three hours. At 3.45pm (at 3450 metres), patient observation of a flurry of rosefinches on the path ahead of us enabled us to get good views of a male and two female **Red-fronted Rosefinches**.



At 4.45pm (at 3410 metres) we enjoyed incredible views of another one of China's rarely seen birds. A pair of gaudy **Père Bonvalot's Tits**, aka Black-browed Tits, paraded in front of us for several minutes. Other birds seen on the descent from the pass were five Hodgson's Flycatchers; a Crested Coal Tit, a few Rufous-vented Tits; two Himalayan Red-flanked Bluetails; a few Sichuan Leaf Warblers; two Claudia's Leaf Warblers; a Dusky Warbler; a Golden-spectacled Warbler; and a Yellow-streaked Warbler (at 5.10pm at 3375 metres).



The excellent birding meant that our progress was inevitably slow. That combined with the difficult walking in some parts – where it was difficult to trace the path – meant that we were about half an hour late (6.30pm instead of 6pm) at our rendezvous point with Mr Shan, who must have been genuinely concerned about us (because we had never been even a minute late before this).

After dinner – at the same restaurant next to our hotel – I couldn't resist having a closer look at the Tibetan-themed bar I walked past the night before. Han tourists – a group of ten men wearing cowboy (or perhaps “yakboy”) hats – were whooping with delight as seductively-clad Tibetan folk dances (probably also Han Chinese) gyrated on the dance floor. Two of the men tried dancing with them, but were far too drunk to stand up. One, the pot-bellied drunk, made a lunge towards the tallest dancer, who sidestepped him with all the aplomb of a matador avoiding a charging bull. He didn't see the parry coming and continued, head-down, towards an inevitable encounter with the unyielding dance floor. The circus clown staggered to his feet, bowed towards his ring-side admirers, before slipping again on the spilled beer. Surreally the girls continued their dance, threshing imaginary wheat and tilling make-belief soil in time to the haunting yodel of a Tibetan village girl singing a lament for her long-lost lover.



I had seen enough and walked the short distance back to my hotel. The surreal tenor of the evening was maintained by a young lady, clearing the worse for having too much to drink, who was bent double on the leather sofa in the hotel foyer. Her moaning was intermittently interrupted by a sickening retching sound, closely followed by the tell-tale noise of her vomit hitting the sides of a plastic bucket, which was hidden behind her long brown-dyed hair.



She really did sound ill. So much so, her gentleman friend – who was also drunk – asked the concierge if he thought “they” should call an ambulance. On seeing me, the concierge shook

his head and shrugged his shoulders as if to say “bloody tourists”.

### Monday 21<sup>st</sup> May 2007 – Day 14

**We left Barkam at 7am**, heading east again; this time though we continued past the turn off to Mengbi Shan and on to the village of Shuamalukou, where we turned north off of the 217 before climbing steeply onto the grasslands. After about an hour of engine-stress, the road quite suddenly began to level out and there, one bend later, was verdant pastureland that seemed to be laid out like a never-ending green carpet, funnelling between mountain ranges to the east and west. The altimeter showed 3,600 metres – breathtaking in more ways than one. This, then, is the Tibetan Plateau: the ancestral and spiritual home of the Tibetan people, which is two-thirds the size of Europe and twice the size of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR). It is worth noting that two thirds of Tibetans live on the Tibetan Plateau outside of the TAR.



The birdlife, also, has an ethnicity of its own. During the drive to Diongxi (Hongyuan in Mandarin) we saw 23 species of birds that we hadn't encountered elsewhere on the journey: 30 **Black-eared Kites**; a **Goosander**; c20 **Oriental Skylarks**; c30 **Ruddy Shelducks**; a single **Oriental Crow**; five **Daurian Jackdaws**; c20 **Tree Sparrows**; several **Tibetan Magpies** (of the distinctive *bottanensis* race or species); a "**Przewalski's**" **Stonechat** (again take your pick whether this should be regarded as a species); five immature **Night Herons** flying over; several orange-breasted *rufiventris* **Black Redstarts**; a **Curlew Sandpiper**; c20 **Common Redshanks**; c20 **Shorelarks**; an obliging pair of **Severtzov's Tit-Warblers** on stunted hillside bushes; a migrant **Grey-backed Citrine Wagtail**; two **Père David's**



**Laughingthrushes**; a very well behaved **Tibetan Grey Shrike** in the large area of scrub adjacent to (and west of) kmp 145; two **Black-necked Cranes**; c60 **Twite**; a **Pacific Golden Plover**; two **Crested Larks** on the marshes just before Diongxi at 1.50pm; and a **Collared Dove**.

Other birds included several Kessler's Thrushes; a Chestnut Thrush; a few Grey-backed Shrikes; a few Swallows; several Himalayan Griffons; a vocal Yellow-streaked Warbler (in the same scrubby valley as the Severtzov's Tit-Warblers); a Chinese Pond Heron; and a Eurasian Cuckoo.

The journey to Diongxi had not been without its problems. Mr Shan's car's inners were not up to the same standard as its always-shiny paintwork. The car had broken down once outside of the hotel in Barkam and three times on the plateau. A heart-pounding push managed to remedy the problem each time, suggesting that the battery was at fault. Pushing a car at 3,600 metres is certainly not recommended – even though the plateau is as flat as a proverbial pancake and the road is amazingly well-paved.



It is indeed odd to be in the proverbial middle of nowhere, with only a herd of yaks for company, and be driving on such a good road. The huge investment by the Sichuan government is literally underpinning their effort to create a “Greater Jiuzhaigou tourist area,” which creates a triangle of tourist attractions from the Hongyuan and Ruo’ergai grasslands; to the first bend in the Yellow River at Jiuqu; and on to the main reason for coming to the area, Jiuzhaigou – one the most popular tourist destinations in China. The road network has carried some 5.5 million tourists to “Aba” in the two years following its completion in December 2003, and is set to convey even greater numbers of mainly Han-Chinese tourists in the next few years.

We left the marshes just south of the town a few minutes before the heavens opened and arrived in Diongxi at around 3pm – in plenty of time to get the car repaired. Bob and I had tea outside a restaurant next to the rough and ready garage that Mr Shan had quickly found. The restaurant was owned by Ms Lai, a tall, elegant lady from a small town south of Chengdu, whose two year-old son, Bei Bei, was a delight. Thankfully, the restaurant stocked a variety of green tea – much loved by the Han Chinese – and not the yak-butter variety that is one of the specialities of Tibet. I had tried this once before – several years ago, halfway between Lhasa and Qomolangma (Mount Everest) – and had decided that once would be enough.



Mr Shan reported that the garage was trying to find a replacement battery, and so we checked into the nearby hotel on the southern edge of town. The restaurant was deserted, except for the dozen or so *fuwuyuan* (waiters and waitresses), who stood in a line next to our table, watching our every mouthful. Kongka, which lies at 3,465 metres above sea level, is one of those Tibetan towns that is best forgotten. Numerous run-down shops and restaurants sprawl down the only significant road in town – the main road to Zoige, or Ruo’ergai in Mandarin. At least there was a small supermarket that stocked our staple diet: Snickers and Dove chocolate bars and an assortment of plain and extra plain biscuits. I was reassured that not all of the non-Tibetan influence is negative.

### Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> May 2007 – Day 15

**The sun was shining brightly** as we headed out of Kongka at 7am. Our first stop by the road just outside of town to watch a flock of nine “**Tibetan**” Ravens and several Daurian Jackdaws was interrupted by a patrolling police car with flashing blue lights, driven by a

stern-faced officer with mirror shades. He said nothing and didn't gesture, but Mr Shan's quick response and copious kow-towing told me that this road – despite the absence of early-morning traffic – was a clearway. I smiled at the officer and waved. He nodded his acknowledgement without changing his expression, before speeding away into the distance.



Various stops to survey the grasslands yielded a total of about 40 Twite, 50 orange-breasted Black Redstarts, approximately 100 Oriental Skylarks, around 20 Shorelarks, several White Wagtails, 20 Grey-backed Shrikes, two Crested Larks, and 30 Black-eared Kites. **Upland Buzzards** were seen not far out of Kongka as well as two more at kmp 81 (that's the post indicating that Highway 213 – and the junction that's only a few miles from Zoige – is 81 kilometres away); also one at kmp 68, and one at kmp 14.

At kmp 125 I spotted a scrubby hillside that I thought was worth checking out. A black blob on a distant telegraph pole assumed the more familiar shape of a **Black Stork** when it flew. A male Common Pheasant of one of the Tibetan races bolted from its hillside cover. One of the top avian prizes of the plateau – **White-browed Tit** – was seen exceptionally well in the stunted bushes of this valley. We watched a pair, which were obviously holding territory, “courtship feeding” in the bright morning sunshine.

We walked slowly up the hill on the north side of the valley before walking in the rough grass, parallel with the road. There, at 8.45am, at 3630 m, an interesting bird was flushing just ahead of us but for a while refused to allow a binocular-view of it. Eventually, it grew tired of the game, and we were able to see that it was a **Hume's Groundpecker**. This was the first of 25 groundpeckers we would see on the day. Other birds were seen as follows: 1 at 9.15am (at 3575m); two at kmp 108; two at kmp 95; one at 90, 83, 77, and 75; two at 68; one at 64 and 63; three at 54; five at 32; and three birds at kmp 29.

Also at kmp 125, we watched a vocal flock of ten Black-necked Cranes, flapping vigorously over the hillside presumably in search of an early-morning thermal. It crossed my mind that it is not beyond the boundary of possibility that we had seen some of those birds some five years before – on our journey to their wintering grounds at Caohai (the sea of grass) in Guizhou province.

Watching them soar over the Tibetan Plateau was somehow more magical than seeing them within a few yards of our Caohai punt. Two more pairs would be seen later this day: at kmp 95 and 33 (where they have a nest in a shallow depression on a yak pasture).

The hillside also held two **Godlewski's Buntings**, two Scarlet Rosefinches, a Tibetan Magpie, an Olive-backed Pipit, a Eurasian Cuckoo, and 3 Yellow-streaked Warblers.

We had some more great views of a second pair of Severtzov's Tit Warblers. This pair was found in low bushes, about thirty yards east of the road, between kmp 116 and 115 (by the "30" sign), about half a mile before the river bridge. The brilliantly-plumaged male, which literally glistened in the morning sunshine, was too busy adding to its already-full brimming crop of insects to notice our presence.

We stopped whenever we saw something of interest – which was quite often. Additions to the list are **Azure-winged Magpie** (three birds); **Oriental Greenfinch** (2); **Hoopoe** (1); a presumed **Pintail Snipe**; **"Tibetan" Tern** (15, including 5 at kmp 90); **Greenshank** (1 at kmp 90); **Common Sandpiper** (3 at kmp 90, and 2 at 88); **Sand Martin** (2 at kmp 88); a **Black-backed Citrine Wagtail** (1 at kmp 77 and 1 at kmp 68); and a female **Gadwall** at 2.50pm.

Between kmp 125 and 50 we also saw two Redshanks; an Olive-backed Pipit; two Swallows; a Chinese Pond Heron; several Kessler's Thrushes; and around 50 Ruddy Shelducks (including a flock of 39 at kmp 90).



At kmp 50, the otherwise straight main road twists over an elevated rocky outcrop – the high-point of the day's drive at 3,685m. From here, our direction for the next 50 kilometres would shift to the north-east, ninety degrees east of the direction we had travelled in the last 50 km.



The only vantage point in many miles afforded magnificent panoramic views of the surrounding grassland and a snaking tributary of the Yellow River (*Huang He*), which marks the border of Sichuan and Gansu provinces. It is the only rocky area within sight and so I was hopeful that we could see a snowfinch or two among the rocks. The snowfinches were in fact much easier to see than I had imagined – a pair of **Adam's Snowfinches** have set up home in a burrow about 12 feet above the high-point of the road. Not content with the fleeting views of the bird or birds disappearing into the hole, I struggled up the rocks on the other side of the road, to 3,780 metres, where I was able to watch up to three birds feeding on invisible grass seeds a few yards in front of me. The roadside stop was noteworthy for another reason. Fifty yards before the crest, we found another pair of White-browed Tits – the birds taking turns to take crop fulls of insects into their burrow.

Three **Brown-headed Gulls**; and a pair of Black-necked Cranes nesting at about kmp 33 (with 5 peckers near there) completed an excellent day. We met the 213 – the main road just before 4pm, and within ten minutes we were in the centre of Zoige. We arrived at Zoige (Ruo'ergai in Mandarin) at about 4pm. The concrete town is less than attractive and has little to commend it – except that it is surrounded by the spellbinding wilderness of the Tibetan Plateau.

After checking out a soulless guest house in the centre of the town, I decided that we could do a lot better, and so we drove back to the hotel I had spotted on the way in. The place is cold and quite damp, but the Tibetan architecture of the high-roofed lobby, the intricately carved dark-wood furniture, and the numerous Tibetan decorations and fittings adorning the walls, provides more than adequate compensation.



The lady who runs the place is in her early 40s and has the characteristic ruddy, weather-beaten complexion of a Tibetan. She very kindly allowed us to eat in the upstairs café, where the large picture windows proffered a grandstand view of a spectacular storm. Night fleetingly became day as the contorted molten fingers of the forked lightning repeatedly stabbed the grasslands. The wind strengthened from a howl to a roar. The rain was now being driven almost horizontally into the Tibetan tents in the field next to the hotel. The canvass door of the largest tent – which is presumably a key part of the “Tibetan experience” tourist drive – tore open and became a madly-waving ghostly silhouette when back-lit by the frequent air-bursts of lightning.

Bizarrely, and somewhat annoyingly, the card keys to our rooms had stopped working and we were allocated other rooms until the problem could be sorted out. “It’s the weather,” said the *fuwuyuan* somewhat unconvincingly. Unfortunately, it took until 11pm for the Tibetan lady, the *fuwuyuan*’s boss, to return to the hotel with the only duplicates.

Another exhausting day. I can’t help thinking that the three weeks I spent on the Yunnan-Burmese border – where I walked up to 20 miles a day – shortly before this trip have taken a bigger toll on my mind and body than I could have imagined. The one-week gap between that trip and this – much of which was spent sorting out the logistics of this trip – was far too short. I feel exhausted to the point that it is almost impossible to concentrate on writing. The difficulty is compounded by the altitude here: 3,580 metres. At least I will sleep soundly – until my 6.30am alarm call that is.

**Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2007 – Day 16**

**Zoige is surrounded** by the world's largest area of high-altitude wetlands – some one million hectares. To put it in perspective, that's more than four times the area of England's largest national park, the Lake District; or about twice the size of Norfolk; or if you don't know where that is, almost half the size of New Jersey. Snow-melt from the Himalayas begins to drench the plains from April; and then the rains begin in earnest from May (we can certainly vouch for that).

100,000 men of the 1<sup>st</sup> 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> columns of the Red Army crossed this treacherous area in 1935 on the aforementioned Long March. Many thousands of their number were lost to disease, hypothermia, starvation; as well as attacks by incensed Tibetans, desperately trying to stop the communist armies plundering their livestock and limited stocks of grain. The resistance was futile and the locals' food supplies were depleted to the extent that Mao was moved to a rare display of contrition: "It was our only foreign debt. One day, we must return to the Tibetans what we had to take from them..." he told Edgar Snow. Deng Xiaoping also issued an apology in the same vein: "When the Red Army marched North, they really made the Tibetans suffer. It finished everything they had. They were badly done by. But we had no choice if we were going to preserve the Red Army. We must compensate them." The Tibetans suffered appallingly, as did the Long Marchers. But it was the harshness of the Plateau not the fury of the Tibetans that really punished the Red Army. According to Edgar Snow, the army column, led by Mao, left the grasslands with only 7,000 of the 30,000 men who had entered.



**A cold wind was blowing** and the clouds were heavy with rain as we left the hotel, at 7am. The first three, of the 50 Upland Buzzards we would see during the day, were seen just

north of the town; followed by the first few Black-eared Kites (30 seen during the day). **Taczanowski's Snowfinches** made an appearance 18km further down the road – the first three of c30 we would see during the day; followed by the first few of the 20 Shorelarks and the first of the day's 15 Hume's Groundpeckers. The first of 12 “muscular” **Tibetan Larks** was found at 25km. A **Saker Falcon**, perched on a pole 37km north of Zoige, showed wonderfully for more than 15 minutes (another was seen at 53km).

The rain had intensified by the time we arrived at Daba Lake (9.15am). No cars are allowed on to the reserve. Instead, visitors are transported down well-maintained roads on battery-powered buggies.

The shallow Daba lake lies only a few minutes walk from the drop-off point via boardwalks. We spent from 9.45am to 12.10am on the two platforms overlooking the vast lake and saw an excellent variety of birds: 7 Black-necked Cranes (of the 19 seen on the day); c60 rubirostris **Grey Lag Geese**; 24 Brown-headed Gulls (of c100); c20 **Coot**; c20 **Red-crested Pochards**; 2 **Pochards**; 6 **Black-winged Stilts**; 4 **Whiskered Terns**; several **Mallards**; 4 **Pintails**; 9 Pacific Golden Plovers; 6 Night Herons; two male **Ferruginous Ducks** (of 10); a flock of 8 sand plovers (remarkably, 4 **Greater Sand Plovers** and 4



**Mongolian Sand Plovers**); 1 Plumbeous Water Redstart; 2 Common Sandpipers; 2 **Great Crested Grebes**; a **Great Cormorant**; 2 Eurasian Cuckoos; 4 Ruddy Shelducks; and c10 Tibetan Ravens; and several Tibetan Larks – some enjoying a song flight despite the weather.

We decided to do a little exploring, so set off north of Daba towards Gansu province. About 15km north, the abstract thought of driving to Gansu was scuppered when I saw that the mettle road disappears into a tunnel that was under construction. We took the minor road to the right, which climbs steeply (from 3545 to 3600 metres in a couple of kilometres). I was delighted to discover that there are mature conifers here – and lots of them – covering most of the hillside, with a wide glade separating the two largest stands.





In three hours here (2pm – 5pm) we saw 4 Blood Pheasants (including 2 males) of the distinctively plumaged *berezowskii* race; as well as a single **Tibetan Partridge**; and a close encounter with a male Severtzov's Grouse, which I bumped into while searching for the partridge amongst the conifers. Also, 2 to 4 Olive-backed Pipits, a Blue-fronted Redstart, 3 Giant Laughingthrushes, a few White-throated Redstarts, and a Grey-crested Tit here. On the rocky crag above this area (the 4,000+ metre peak is easily viewed from an easy-to-reach 3680 metres) were 2 Red-billed Choughs; one or two Lammergeyers; 2 Himalayan Griffon Vultures; 3 Pacific Swifts; and 1 or 2 **Black Vultures**.



Other birds of note seen during the day were 2 Black-backed Citrine Wagtails; c10 Grey-backed Citrine Wagtails; c30 Tibetan Terns; a few Sand Martins; c20 Tree Sparrows; a few Gadwall and Redshank; c100 Black Redstarts and c10 Tibetan Magpies.

Arrived back at the “Tibetan” hotel at 6.20pm.



## Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day 17

**Yesterday had been so successful** that there were no “target birds” left for us on the Tibetan Plateau. A good time, then, to venture to Gezangjiaze Pass, which is about a two hour drive east of Zoige. It’s off the plateau of course, so is one of the few times you can write about “descending to the mountains”.

We left at 7am. Plateau birds included a Chinese Pond Heron; a Hume’s Groundpecker one mile east of Zoige; Black-eared Kite (25 seen on the day); a few Upland Buzzards; a Red-billed Chough; c6 Oriental Crows; and a Daurian Jackdaw. We left the 213 and descended to Baxi and Qiuji, before climbing again towards the pass. Birds on this leg included: Grey-backed Shrike; a Chestnut Thrush; a Rufous-breasted Accentor; 4 Elliot’s Laughingthrushes; two pairs of Rufous-vented Tits; and an Olive-backed Pipit. A stop just before the pass yielded a male and female **Streaked Rosefinch** (at 3,690 metres); 2 Rufous Turtle Doves; c20 Asian House Martins; a few White-winged Grosbeaks; 1 Common Pheasant; several White Wagtails; c20 Kessler’s Thrushes; two more Chestnut Thrushes; 2 Blue-fronted Redstarts; c10 Himalayan Buzzards; 4 Red-billed Choughs; 2 Himalayan Griffon Vultures; a Golden Eagle; 2 Himalayan Red-flanked Bluetails; a flock of c20 Pink-rumped Rosefinches; a calling Eurasian Cuckoo; a Chinese White-browed Rosefinch; a female White-throated Redstart; a Goldcrest; a Eurasian Sparrowhawk; 3 Tickell’s Leaf Warblers; and a Crested Tit-Warbler.

The forest here was excellent. The decision to walk down (the way we had come) for about three miles was rewarded with a flock of six Sichuan Jays (at kmp 110) – much to my relief following the sorry tale a few days’ earlier.

No sign of the Blue Eared-pheasant at a “known site” near here, though.

We were back in Zoige by 5pm, soon after finding three juvenile Tibetan Grey Shrikes just east of the town – sitting in a bush by the road, watching the traffic jam. A White-browed Tit in this area was an additional surprise.

The pagoda at Zoige commands the high ground just west of the old town. From afar there seemed to be a good number of trees that would be a magnet in the otherwise tree-less grasslands. We were not disappointed. In one hour there (5.30pm – 6.30pm) we saw an Olive-backed Pipit; a Golden-spectacled Warbler; a Large-billed Leaf Warbler; a Godlewski’s Bunting; 2 Hoopoes; a stunning male **Yellow-rumped Flycatcher**; a *salangensis* **Ashy Drongo**; and a **Naumann’s Thrush**.

## Friday 25<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day 18

**It was time to leave the plateau.** With a heavy heart I brushed my teeth, washed my face, and packed my bags. Even before I could see that things were different, I could sense a change. It was quieter than before; colder too; and it wasn’t quite as dark outside as it should have been at 5.50am. Suddenly, I had an irresistible urge to open the curtains.

It was snowing!



The white carpet that yesterday was the grassland opposite the hotel glowed brightly in the half-light of dawn. No sooner had my eyes become accustomed to this winter wonderland, reminisces of childhood walks in the snow seeped into my consciousness. These romantic notions of winter walks and chestnuts roasting by an open fire were soon returned to the memory vaults, however, when I thought about the journey ahead. We had been planning to cross the Gezangjiaze Pass this morning which, at 3850 metres, was quite likely to be blocked. Then what about the narrow mountain roads beyond there? There was a far easier way to our intended destination, Jiuzhaigou, that wouldn't involve a mountain-crossing – to go “straight down” the 213 instead. But that would deprive us of perhaps our best chance of connecting with the last piece of the game-bird jigsaw – Blue Eared-pheasant. We had so far put together eleven pieces, including seven species of pheasant. “Eleven and seven” are awkward, unmemorable numbers. We simply had to give ourselves the best possible chance of hitting the magic “dozen and eight”. Not least because the number eight is an auspicious number in China, and is closely associated with happiness. It may appear fanciful that I was thinking in these terms, but I would be surprised if anyone who has lived in China for over ten years did not have similar thoughts in these circumstances. After all, success in life, like finding birds, requires quite a slice of luck; so it's as well to have all the help you can muster. “Twelve and eight” it would be.

We put the bags in the car at the pre-arranged time of 6am. Mr Shan had been expecting – and I am sure hoping for – a change of itinerary. He did his best to mask his disappointment when I told him that the itinerary would not change, but he couldn't help muttering an “*aiya!*” (shit!) under his breath. If Mr Shan could negotiate a road-less Balang Shan I was entirely confident that even the high-elevation snow-covered mountain road that abuts Gansu would present no problem to him.

Mr Shan's little car pulled out of the hotel gates and headed eastwards, out of town, down from the plateau, and back to where we had been yesterday. Under the circumstances we made remarkably good time, arriving at the "known site" at 7.45am (kmp 114, which is at 3425 metres). Yesterday morning, there had been relatively few birds here; but today the excruciating cold, ice and snow had somehow conspired to transform this patch into something approaching the bird equivalent of the winter sales.

There were birds everywhere and, unusually for Chinese birds, they were not even slightly concerned about us watching them. So, then, for 90 minutes, we enjoyed the best birding of the trip – even though my feet were so cold that I couldn't feel my toes; and even though we didn't see the hoped-for Blue Eared-pheasant.

Two Sichuan Jays started the ball rolling. These ones were not 100 metres away, playing hide and seek in the tree tops (as per yesterday's flock), they were sitting out on exposed branches, not more than one tenth of that distance away. As is usually the case when something sits still in front of me for minutes on end, I didn't have my camera. I had, not unreasonably, thought that the snow and gloom would have made photography impossible, so had put the camera in the bag, which was needless to say in the boot. No matter, the views were so good that an image was etched indelibly in my mind.

An avalanche of birds then landed in front of us: several Olive-backed Pipits; 2 Rosy Pipits; 5 Rufous-breasted Accentor; 2 Sichuan Willow Tits; 2 Rufous-vented Tits; a male Himalayan red-flanked Bluetail; a Goldcrest; several Kessler's Thrushes; 2 Chestnut Thrushes; 4 male **Three-banded Rosefinches**; 6 Red-fronted Redstarts; a male White-throated Redstart; 5 Elliot's Laughingthrushes; a Tickell's Leaf Warbler; 2 White-winged Grosbeaks; a Grey-headed Woodpecker; Sichuan Leaf Warblers; and 2 **Tibetan Siskins** – all vied for our attention. But where was the Blue Eared-pheasant?

We had a long drive ahead, so reluctantly had to continue on our way. We stopped to move several freshly-fallen boulders that were strewn across the high-point of the pass.





As soon as we were over the other side the weather began to improve. The snow stopped falling and visibly improved markedly. We were now a long way from the “known area” but I was determined to keep looking for “Number 8”. Bob was riding shotgun, but despite still being deep in Indian territory, he was sleeping soundly. I, too, felt extremely tired, but fought desperately to hold my concentration. Surely the snow that covered the numerous forest rides would make it easier to see The pheasant? Tree stump, exposed clump of grass, tree stump, tree stump... I was making a conscious effort to evaluate anything that stood out against the snow...tree stump, exposed clump of grass, tree stump, tree stump, exposed clump of grass, tree stump, pheasant, tree stump...

*TING!!* (STOP!!). The car screeched to a halt. Was I imagining it? The first thing I put my bins on was, I must confess, a tree stump. But, what about the other thing, which I guessed should be just above the stump I was looking at. **BLUE EARED-PHEASANT!!** “Where?!” said Bob, who had been rudely awakened by my “*TING!!*” I was on the back seat on the left, therefore the “right” side of the car; Bob was in the front, on the right, which of course was the “wrong” side and I calculated that he stood no chance of seeing the bird from where he was. I was worried that the bird, which was only a few feet away from the forest edge would make an early exit, so I told Bob to look out of my window. I had never thought of Bob as a contortionist, but in an instant he somehow threw himself acrobatically to wedge next to me, and we were both able to enjoy perhaps a minute’s view of the fantastically-plumaged Number 8 as it pecked around a small patch of exposed grass on the otherwise snow-covered meadow. Then, as befits a mega star, he decided that he had given us enough of a show and nonchalantly strolled into the forest.

Most birders who come to this region don’t manage to see Blue Eared-pheasant, so it’s

worth noting the coordinates of this previously “unknown site”: kmp 89 at 3,240 metres, seen at 12.30pm.

Mr Shan shook his head in disbelief when I told him to turn off the minor road on to what was nothing more than a dirt track. According to my map, this was the scenic route to Jiuzhaigou. The problem was, they were still building it. After twenty or so miles of mud and slush, we at last emerged from the wilderness. At 2170 metres, we had had a good view of a male Hodgson’s Redstart, so the decision to go off road had been somewhat vindicated.

We arrived at the world-famous Jiuzhaigou just after 5pm. All of the visitors, except those flouting the park rules by staying at the Tibetan village inside, have to stay in Chuanzhusi – the “new town” that sprawls across the park’s northern edge. The vast majority of buildings in this sprawling dormitory town are, not surprisingly, hotels – from no star to five. We decided that, after so many days in the wilderness, we deserved a bit of luxury and so booked the Sheraton for the first and last nights of our stay here.

### **Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day 19**

**To further prove** that China is a land of extremes, the plan was to spend tonight and tomorrow (the third night) of our time at Jiuzhaigou in the small Tibetan village of Zechawa – the last surviving “stockaded village” inside the park (the vast majority of the 1000 or so Tibetans who used to live inside the park were relocated after 1991). The reason for wanting to stay here was not to save money – although there’s quite a difference between seventy pounds per person per night and two pounds, not to mention the thirty pounds per person per day we would have to spend on park entrance tickets and bus passes. Be that as it may, the main reason is so that we get to the main birding areas and see the star birds before the park gates open and most of humanity descends on us.

Jiuzhaigou, meaning “nine stockaded villages”, wasn’t well known in China before 1992, when it became a World Heritage Site. In 1984, when admission fees were first charged, it attracted no more than 5,000 visitors that year. Back then the travel-time from Chengdu, the provincial capital (340 kilometres to the south) was about three and a half days. In 1996, a new road shortened the journey to a mere two days. The following year, 180,000 visitors arrived; 600,000 made the trek in 1999.

Visitor numbers have been increasing in line with the growth of the Chinese middle class: in 2002, for instance, 1.2 million people rode the park’s green shuttle buses to the dozen or so designated places, where they would take photos and marvel at the numerous scenic delights. In 2004, the number of visitors doubled to over two million; and in 2007, up to a staggering 20,000 people per day have crammed the walkways and jostled for position between their favourite waterfall and a now digital-camera-snapping friend, colleague, or relation. The authorities have become so concerned about the escalating tourist numbers, particularly during the so-called “golden weeks” – the three week-long holidays designated by the government – that a cap of 10,000 visitors per day was imposed during the October 2007 holiday.

Mr Shan dropped us off at the ticket office at 6.30am, thirty minutes before it opened. He was in a particularly good mood this morning – certainly due to the prospect of a three day



holiday that he would be able to enjoy while we were inside the park. Mr Shan really enjoyed his spare time – and there are bucket fulls of that when you are a birders' driver. Every time we journeyed to a new location, he would be on the phone to his friend or friends in the new port of call, arranging this, that, and, no doubt, the other. Even so, he was always, and I mean always, on time; and he is the best off road driver in Sichuan – and that's saying something. He has also discovered the elixir of life. Maybe it's the 40 cigarettes he smokes a day (never in the car, of course); or maybe it's the water; or some magical potion. Whatever it is, Mr Shan looks at least ten years and perhaps 15 years younger than his actual age.

With a cheery wave, a sprightly Mr Shan, bade us farewell, and went off to enjoy himself.

We were the first in the queue and the first on the green bus. One of the things to note when venturing into the park is that all the maps are "upside down". The main roads are represented as a perfect Y, with Zechawa, where we hoped to find accommodation, just up a little after the left hand fork. But the famous Y map has south at the top and, because it is a Chinese map, there is no bearing to be seen. My brain can't cope with south at the top, so I had to think in terms of an upside down Y. Whichever way you look at it, we got off the bus at the intersection, about 8 miles from the entrance, and walked the half mile or so down the eastern fork to Zechawa village. I had read that this place, in the days when only dozens not thousands of people visited, was the tourist centre and was brimming with guest houses. My calculation was that the people whose guest houses had been officially closed would still have rooms and beds and, crucial to my thinking, be willing to operate under the radar as it were. I also guessed that the first house in the village would be more likely to have the right credentials – given that it was in the poll position in the days when guests used to arrive daily. You are right to think that this hypothesis is dodgy at best and would be more than likely to fall flat on its face. In fact, that's exactly what I was thinking when at 7.30am, I knocked on the door of the first house in the village. A quite beautiful Tibetan lady with sparkling eyes opened the door and stared at me as if I had just landed from Mars.

"Ni hao", hello, I said.

"Zenme le!", "What do you want!"

To be brutally frank, it was not the start I was looking for.

"Women zhao yi zhao shui jiao de difang." "We're looking for a place to sleep," I said gesturing to Bob who was standing on the roadside, some thirty yards behind me.

"Mafan ni, duibuqi." "Really sorry for troubling you so early in the morning."

She waited more than a second to respond, which made me sense that things were not as hopeless as they had seemed at first. I smiled at her, hoping to drive home the ever so slight advantage.

She looked around, and beckoned me in, "Jinqu ba."

Mrs Zechawa – for that's what I will call her for reasons that will become clear – introduced me to her husband, whose eyes were every bit as bright as his wife's, but not quite as sparkly.

Mr Zechawa smiled broadly, "Huang ying ni." "Welcome," he said.

"How many nights would you like to stay?"

"Tonight and tomorrow."

“No problem, let me show you to your room.”

Only slightly concerned about looking a gift horse in the mouth, I asked him if he had a car. “A Honda, it’s Japanese,” he said proudly. I was on a roll. “Could you take us out early in the morning,” I asked. He said that he could, as long as we could travel without... he looked around theatrically... “Being seen.” I too looked around for would-be observers, “No problem,” I whispered.

“By the way, is there any chance you could take us to Long Lake, now? I will of course give you a *xiao fei* [little tip] for your trouble.”

And so that’s how we met Mr and Mrs Zechawa, who would look after us royally for the duration of our stay in the “Nine stockaded villages”.

We arrived at Long Lake, which is at the end of the eastern fork, at 8.15am. The name advertises the long lake, which was shining an iridescent turquoise (because of the high levels of sodium carbonate I presume). The soda water lies at an impressive 3,090 metres, and is the first catchment area of snow-melt that trickles from the mountains that surround it. This is a “known site” for Sukatshev’s Laughingthrush. Alas, it is also a known site for thousands of garrulous tourists. Their whooping and laughter drowned out any chance we may have had of seeing one of the world’s most enigmatic and reportedly secretive birds. Elliot’s Laughingthrush, however, is not shy. Several of them were doing their best to out-shout the tourists in the car park (15 seen during the day).

We decided to find a quieter area. Despite the throngs of tourist, it’s not that difficult to get away from people in Jiuzhaigou. Herd mentality ensures that the boardwalks are very well trodden, but the paths that branch off at various points are virtually deserted. We walked down the boardwalk with the masses for about half a mile, before we found a path to the right (eastwards). Here, we caught up with one of the “misses” of the trip so far, **Slaty Bunting**. A female sat and preened among the upper branches of a smallish conifer. A **Chinese Fulvetta** was another nice surprise in this area. Also, several Three-banded Rosefinches; 6 Chestnut Thrushes; a Yellow-browed Warbler; c20 Asian House Martins; several Blue-fronted Redstarts; 3 Sichuan Willow Tits; a Himalayan Red-flanked Bluetail; 2 Olive-backed Pipits; 2 White-winged Grosbeaks; a female Hodgson’s Redstart; and several Grey-backed Shrikes.

Then, at 1pm, I at last found the hoped-for Sukatshev’s Laughingthrushes which, after an agonising wait, showed very well on the small track in front of us. For the record, it was at 3,045 metres.

A particularly large muck cart followed the Lord Mayor’s show. The only birds of note we saw after 1pm were a Grey-headed Bullfinch, a male Hodgson’s Flycatcher, and several Kessler’s Thrushes.

We took a park bus back to the Y’s-intersection and walked back to the Zechawas. Mrs Zechawa’s sister made a very pleasant dinner, and we chatted for an hour or so before our hosts returned.

A good night’s sleep was had – except, that is, for the 3am disturbance that was caused by an animal wearing clogs with taps that was practicing a dance routine in the loft.

## Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day 20

Mr Zechawa, who was staying at his “main house”, at the other end of the village, arrived back at 6.15am to take us to the Kezegou trail, a “known site” for another of the planet’s extremely rare and elusive birds. We heard the fluty melody – every bit as sweet as a Nightingale’s – as soon as we entered the forest. At 6.40am, in the half-light of the forest floor, I saw something move. I picked up my bins and immediately locked on to the truly stunning **Rufous-headed Robin**. “It’s on the right side of the log,” I whispered urgently. “Which log?”, replied Bob. It’s impossible to describe where something is when the only thing that you can see is the something; so after only watching the bird for a few seconds, I took my bins down so I could literally point it out. Of course, the Robin was having none of it, and in the few seconds it took for both of us to focus on the log, the Robin disappeared. The signs were good, though. Two other Robins were singing within a hundred yards of the first one I had seen, so I was confident that Bob, too, would be able to see what I had, albeit briefly, seen.

There then followed one of the most frustrating days I have spent. It reminded me why I came to dislike twitching. I loved the thrill of the chase, but I hated waiting around for a bird. I would rather walk, go to the pub, read a book, even count starlings, than wait and wait and wait for a movement of branches and leaves. But wait and wait and wait we did. Before long, I was wishing I hadn’t seen it, so I could have been on an equal footing with Bob, so I could have guiltlessly persuaded him to go somewhere else... to the track that climbs out of the Primeval Forest, to Swan Lake, to Pearl Shoals, to climb mountains, to go *anywhere* away from where we were. The arrival of Birdquest made matters worse. Most of their group had seen the bird, but a few hadn’t, so they too waited. Here was I, in one of the most amazing places on the planet, with an entire wilderness to explore, and I was waiting around with a dozen other birders. In the middle of nowhere, I felt claustrophobic. I’m sure if I had given even the slightest clue as to my true state of mind, Bob would have insisted on dragging me away. But I really, really, really wanted Bob to see it; so I was doing my best to re-find it. Some compensation arrived in the form of another confiding Sukatschev’s Laughingthrush – at another previously unknown site; and another female Slaty Bunting.

We waited there until 1pm, which was the pre-arranged time for Mr Zechawa to pick us up and take us to Pearl Shoals (several miles “up” the western road). Our host, it transpired, was busy with “park matters” and had asked one of his friends to pick us up instead.

Pearl Shoals is the most popular drop-off point in the park. Everyone who goes to Jiuzhaigou goes to Pearl Shoals. When we arrived there, it seemed that everyone had decided to go there at the same time. We eventually found the footpath that would take us away from the masses and up to where we hoped to find various goodies. Whatever the reason, whether it was because we were there at the mid-afternoon “quiet time” – or because the area has a low density bird population, or because the river that used to run down the valley had been diverted to keep the pearl-like foaming water of the series of small stepped-lakes that make up Pearl Shoals pearly – there were precious few birds around. The only bird of note seen during our three hour break from bush-watching was a male **Indian Blue Robin** (seen at 2pm). Wonderful as it was.

We got the bus back to the intersection, and persuaded the driver of the Long Lake bound

bus to drop us off at Kezegou. At 4.30pm we went back for a return match with the damned elusive Robin. On entering the forest, we immediately heard the “mockingbird”, a couple of them actually, that continued to tease for the next two hours. A **Père David’s Tit** brightened up the proceedings considerably.

At 6.30pm we started to walk back to our Tibetan chalet. A Rothschild’s Flycatcher was noteworthy.

The Zechawas were entertaining another guest when we arrived back an hour later. A monk in scarlet robes was sipping yak buttermilk tea and watching a popular TV series, which was on one of the fifty channels that are beamed in via the satellite dish next to the house.

The animal wearing clogs with taps performed again at 3am.

### Monday 28<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day 21

**First light, and back again** at Kezegou for another torture session. A White-bellied Water Redstart was seen briefly here, but not much else in the two hours we stuck it out. Bob eventually got a view of the Robin; and with the weight lifted, we continued up the valley to about 2,900 metres, where he found a **Maroon-backed Accentor**. Again, not many birds, but a nice walk up the mountain nevertheless: heard Himalayan Cuckoo; a few Golden-spectacled Warblers; several Chinese Leaf Warblers; a pair of Père David’s Tits at 2,820 metres; a Chinese Song Thrush at 2,825 metres; and a Rufous-vented Tit.

We checked out of our rather snug abode at 11am and thanked the Zechawas for their kindness – they really had looked after us very well.

Mr Shan was waiting for us at the entrance at midday, as I had asked him to.

Follies litter China. One of the oddest is a heliport that was built just to the south-west of Jiuzhaigou. It has a hangar; a six foot high perimeter fence, and a big white H painted on a landing square in the middle of a field. Someone, somewhere, had obviously spent a lot of his (or someone’s) money on this white elephant. There are no people, and certainly no helicopters. Even most of the locals don’t know about the heliport’s existence. We eventually tracked down someone who had heard of it, who happened to be the owner of the restaurant Mr Shan had eaten at for the past two nights. She tried explaining to him where to go, but to no avail. At last, she decided to jump into the car and guide us there.

It was very nice of her, but with the benefit of hindsight she shouldn’t have bothered. In the three hours we were up there, we saw a Richard’s Pipit and a Grey-backed Shrike. It was as dead as a white elephant’s graveyard.

We were back at the Sheraton at 5pm. The crisp white sheets were just a little more comfortable than whatever material my sleeping bag is made of.

### Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day 22

**After a hearty breakfast**, we left the hotel and set off on what would be an extremely long drive to Chengdu. We stopped at the 3,520 metre-high pass Gonggang Ling, at kmp 121, where we saw a pair of **Red Collared Doves** and a dozen Birdquesters, who had seen

everything, they said, except Chinese Monal.

The good weather of the past three days was continuing and the vultures were circling – 12 Himalayan Griffons to be precise.

The road back to Chengdu was torturous. Roadworks, contraflows, stop-signs, half-finished bridges; work-in-progress tunnels; and hold-ups were the order of the day.

Managed to see a few birds on the way: **Blue Rock Thrush** at 2,205 metres; and at much lower altitudes: **Grey Bushchat**; **Black Bulbul**; several **Crested Mynas**; a few **Chinese Blackbirds**; a **Long-tailed Shrike**; several **Chinese Bulbuls** and a **Great White Egret**.

The People's Square in Chengdu is big. It dominates the centre of the city. It's not quite on the same scale as Tiananmen, but it's not far off. This was my 5<sup>th</sup> visit to Chengdu, so I was well aware that there are numerous hotels just to the south of the square, and so that was the place I told Mr Shan to head for. We arrived on the outskirts of Chengdu at 6pm. At 7pm we were lost on the backstreets somewhere east of where we needed to be, and I was losing my patience. Exasperated, I told Mr Shan to stop a taxi and to tell the local driver to lead us to People's Square. This was a huge loss of face for him, which was a shame, but after driving round in ever-decreasing circles I had had enough. The plan worked, and in five minutes we arrived at one of the hotels I had in mind. I told Mr Shan not to worry, and asked if he knew his way out the city. He told me that he would be OK because a friend would be coming over to pick him up. We thanked him for his sterling service and wished him luck. I have no doubt that Mr Shan is one of the few drivers who would have been able to stick to the crankshaft-breaking itinerary I had set.

We celebrated our achievements of the past three weeks at Pizza Hut of all places. And jolly nice it was too.

### Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> May 2007 – Day 23

**Du Fu is a celebrated Tang Dynasty poet**, who spent five years from 760 in what is now modern day Chengdu. He was a prodigious writer, penning something in the order of 400 poems. Du Fu's Cottage and the surrounding pavilions and quiet gardens provide an idyllic place for contemplation, relaxation and meditation. West of the city centre and just a ten minute taxi ride from our hotel it's also an easily accessible place to watch birds. This would be my third visit here. We arrived at first light 20 minutes before the gates opened and saw **Magpie Robin** (the first of several); Chinese Bulbul (the first few of 30) and c10 Tree Sparrows during our wait.

We had an excellent three hours there, seeing c10 Spotted Doves; c20 White-browed Laughingthrushes; 4 Chinese Blackbirds; c20 Vinous-throated Parrotbills; 2 Eurasian Cuckoos; a Black-throated Tit; a Few red-rumped Swallows; 2 Night Herons; 4 or 5 Chinese Grosbeaks; a Little Egret; 2 Long-tailed Shrikes; a Kingfisher; a Rufous-faced Warbler; and a Great Spotted Woodpecker – our 250<sup>th</sup> species of the journey.

The driver that had taken us to the park was waiting for us at midday. We picked up our bags from the hotel and then went on to the airport, where we caught our flight to Beijing.

This was, by any standard, an extremely tiring trip; but the magnificent scenery, interesting people, and wonderful birds combined to make this one of the best travel

experiences I've ever had. Who cares about tiredness and sore feet when there are pheasants to be found and the Tibetan Plateau to explore.

