

**Birding the China-Vietnam and China-Laos border regions,  
15<sup>th</sup> March – 5<sup>th</sup> April 2006**

**Steve Bale**

Part 1 (of 2), 15<sup>th</sup> March – 24<sup>th</sup> March

Borders have always fascinated me. Particularly those that have rich habitat on the “other side” that is likely to hold any number of species rarely or even never seen “this side” of a political line. China’s 1241km border with Vietnam and 423km border with Laos are of particular interest, because many species that breed in Indochina as far north as northern Vietnam (east or west Tonkin) and northern Laos have at best a precarious foothold in China.



**Vietnam to the left of me. China to my right. Here I am...**

I was particularly keen to see any species of hornbill. According to BirdLife International’s *Red Data Book* of threatened and near-threatened Asian birds, all three hornbill species in the book have been recorded in China. The “near-threatened” Great Hornbill is described as “a rare resident in west and south-west Yunnan and south-east Tibet”; the Brown Hornbill, also “near-threatened”, is captioned as “rare – recorded in southern Xishuangbanna [south Yunnan] and south-east Tibet”; while the Rufous-necked Hornbill is classified as vulnerable. According to the *Red Data Book*, there has not been a record of Rufous-necked Hornbill in China in almost 25 years:

“Mengla [south Yunnan] in 1982”. Intriguingly, a photograph of this species takes pride of place on the Nonggan Reserve’s section of the China Biodiversity Conservation Fund’s website ([www.cbcf.org.cn](http://www.cbcf.org.cn)). Significantly though, Nonggan Reserve is in Guangxi, not Yunnan.

According to various publications, two other hornbill species also occur in China: the Wreathed Hornbill and Oriental Pied Hornbill. These are not “Red Data birds” but, as far as their status in China is concerned, they too have a precarious foothold – at best.

Few, if any, birders have ventured to many of the places I planned to visit. But the paucity of reports was more of an attraction than a deterrent. With so little information available – and very poor and often contradictory maps – I resorted to satellite photographs to identify the areas that could potentially hold a not too unrealistic number of target species. One thing was clear, however: no matter how low or high the species count, travelling alone to the south-western border region of China was always going to be exciting and, above all, an education.

### **Wednesday, 15<sup>th</sup> March 2006**

I left my central Beijing apartment at 6.15am and arrived at the airport 25 minutes later. Flight CA1335 to Nanning, the capital of Guangxi Autonomous Region, left on time at 7.40am. Leaving behind a cool, grey, and relatively birdless Beijing, the plane made a wide circle of the airfield – almost as if the pilot had been ordered to show off the airport’s latest building project, “terminal 3”. Like all of Beijing’s countless construction projects, it is scheduled to be finished by the end of 2007: in good time for the staging of the world’s biggest sporting jamboree – the Beijing Olympics, which will kick off at exactly 8pm on the 8th August 2008 (an auspicious moment as far as Chinese numerology is concerned).

Designed by Manchester-born Norman Foster (aka Lord Foster of Thames Bank) the intricate steel lattice framework is usually described as “the bird’s nest” – but looking down through the Beijing haze that morning it bore an uncanny resemblance to a spilt heap of noodles. At an estimated cost of US\$3 billion, that’s somewhat more expensive than the bowls I would eat as my staple diet for the next three weeks.

After three and a half hours of uneventful flying, the Air China 737 touched down at one of China’s more rustic airports. Nanning “International” Airport (well, it is possible to fly directly to Hanoi and Bangkok from here) is 32km SSW of the city centre. While I was looking for a taxi to take me into Nanning, I noticed an attractive small lake opposite the airport, surrounded by trees and small clumps of vegetation. Urged on by the warmth of the tropical sun I decided to cross the road. And so, by midday, my bins were out and I had at last started to see birds on what was

my first birding trip since my two year old daughter was born. (Thankfully, I had accumulated enough “nappy changing points” to be able to fly to Nanning and beyond.)

The first bird I saw was, perhaps not unexpectedly, a Red-whiskered Bulbul; closely followed by a Chinese Bulbul of the *hainanus* race. Interestingly, of the dozen or so Chinese Bubluls I saw here, about half belonged to this distinctive race, while the other half were the more-familiar and equally distinctive nominate *sinensis* sub-species. No intergrades were seen.

I also saw Magpie Robin; my first Swallows of the year; several *leucopsis* White Wagtails; a few Eastern Yellow Wagtails of the *macronyx* race; dozens of House Swifts; Common Tailorbird; Plain Prinia; and an extremely vocal and showy Yellow-bellied Prinia.

I then worked out an arrangement with a taxi driver to go to the nearby Da Wang Tan reservoir – otherwise known as “Phoenix Lake” – in Da Wang Tan Scenic Area. The price also included a three hour wait; and a drop-off at my city-centre hotel.

Although only 46km from the airport, it took about an hour to get to the reservoir – the single track dirt road for the last third of the distance slowed progress considerably. Phoenix Lake, which is about 100m above sea level, with surrounding hills rising to no more than 328m, was birdless. But the habitat across the other side of the lake (the western shore) looked promising: an attractive mixture of mature deciduous forest and thick undergrowth, hugging a gently sloping hillside. The only problem was that there was not a public road to that area and, apparently, the only access was through villa compounds owned by high-level regional apparatchiks.

Quite often in China, well-formulated plans prove impossible to execute. Equally often in this conundrum of a country, the improbable happens at lightning speed. As I was lamenting the lack of accessible good habitat, a motorcyclist, who had obviously spotted the earning-potential of the only foreigner in miles, stopped and offered to take me across the lake in his boat. Within a minute, a fee for a return trip and two hours of waiting time had been negotiated, and I walked the few hundred yards to where the advertised boat was moored.

After a spluttering start, we were on our way to the other side, and before very long, my decision to head for this arboreal oasis had been vindicated.

A singing Puff-throated Babbler was quickly followed by a Chestnut Bulbul; a flock of Japanese White-eyes; and a spectacularly-marked Sulphur-breasted Warbler. A bulbul showing many of the characteristics of Ochraceous could not possibly have been that southern Thai and peninsular Malaysian species; and was most probably an extremely dull Puff-throated.



Left the lake area at 4.30pm and headed to Nanning – a sprawling city of about 700,000 people, surrounded by a rural population within its two administrative areas of more than twice that number. I checked into the Mingyuan Xindu Hotel, which was luxurious compared with the places I would stay at in the next three weeks. I made good use of the business centre there – booking a train ticket to Pingxiang on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup>.

Central Nanning is a thriving metropolis, boasting several new shopping precincts and the now ubiquitous international brands that, up until just a few years ago, had not reached this deep into China. I resisted the temptation of dining at Pizza Hut; and settled for Guangdong (Cantonese) cuisine instead, although a couple of bottles of Shanghai-brewed Heineken were preferred to the local brew.

#### **Thursday, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2006**

BirdLife International estimates that the global population of White-eared Night Heron numbers between 250 and 999 birds, and is decreasing. The severe fragmentation of southern China's lowland forest, caused by logging and conversion of land to agriculture, has pushed the species to the brink of extinction. Not surprisingly, Birdlife International classifies the species as endangered. Since 1990 it has only been recorded in about a dozen widely-scattered locations in China (as well as two recent records from North Vietnam). At most, only a few birds have been seen at each of the locations. Daming Shan, which is about a 90 minutes' taxi ride north of Nanning, is one of those locations.

The chances of seeing one on a day trip, however, are only slightly higher than zero. The last record – a bird purchased from a market in Nanning and released in Daming Shan – dates back to 1998; while the last naturally-occurring birds – an adult and 2 juveniles – were seen there in June 1994.

Daming Shan – literally “big bright mountains” – stretch for about 100 km from north-west to south-east, with a “width” of about 20-25km, and rise to 1760m at Longtou [Dragon’s Head] Peak. The main tourist area and the only point of easy access is just north of the small town of Liangjiang, 95 km north of Nanning along the G210. At 8.05am, after a 95 minute taxi drive from my hotel in central Nanning, I bought a ticket to enter the reserve at the gate house, which is about a mile east of the main road. The road then rises quickly and penetrates deep into the well-wooded mountains. The entrance gate is at 195m, and within a few kilometres of here – at the 5km marker (from the main road) – the temperature dropped on entering a bank of dense fog.

The fog cleared after two km, as the taxi climbed the mountain at about 50 metres every kilometre. Another thick blanket of cloud lingered from the 15km to the 18km marks (795m to 960m); after which I was literally above the clouds.



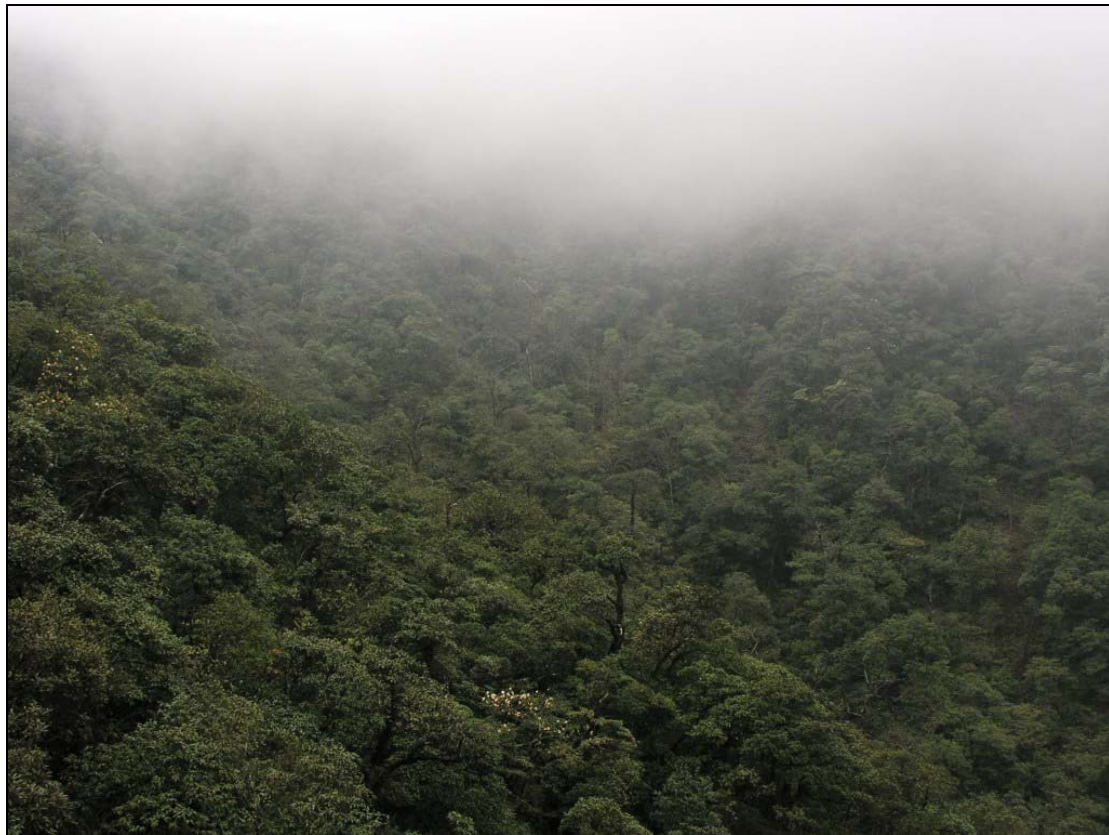
The road went up to 1260m at the 24km marker, and then levelled off for the next kilometre. The views were stunning to say the least. Numerous wind-sculpted crags rose above the primary broadleaved evergreen forest that carpeted numerous inaccessible valleys and gullies.

The majesty of the landscape was enhanced by an Osprey, sitting sentinel-like on the tallest dead branch of a giant tree, before flapping leisurely northwards just as I had pointed my camera at it.

The reserve's hotel lies at the 30km marker and is at about 1200m above sea level. Its open-air restaurant overlooks an attractive small lake, which has been formed by the damming of a mountain stream. An excellent place for a bowl of instant noodles I thought, and for watching Plumbeous Water Redstart resting on the rocks below.

The hotel is at the junction of a 4 way split in the road. Drove north-west – the continuation of the main track – for another few kilometres until the road became a rock-strewn muddy track. The plateau of rough grassland and stunted shrubs here held a singing male Siberian Stonechat and a Common Tailorbird, but nothing else.

The 32km marker was the scene of a frustrating hour spent trying to pin down a bird that was at one point squealing like a Water Rail, and then trilling like a Little Grebe. Tantalisingly, I could hear it rustling through the dense marshy undergrowth fewer than ten metres from me. To add insult to injury, the bird then decided to make a dash across the road just as I had turned to look at something else – I only caught it for a split second out of the corner of my eye as it dived into the undergrowth on the other side of the road. Enough to see, though, that it was a blackish, medium-sized dark-legged rail. It was most probably a Black-tailed Crake, but as I have never seen or heard this species, I won't be claiming it on the strength of this encounter. A Yellow-cheeked Tit here was scant compensation.



I then took the road east of the hotel for 5km, to what is the highest point accessible by road in the entire mountain range – at 1480m. The only problem was that I was in a cloud for most of the drive. I at last managed to break through the cloud's

ceiling at 1400m, but that didn't make any difference as far as the birds were concerned. Whether it was too cold, too early in the spring, or just the wrong kind of habitat, I have no idea; but whatever the reason, I didn't see a bird for over an hour. I had sent the car back to the hotel and walked down the mountain; but saw nothing during the 5km walk. Near the hotel, I saw a distant *ficedula* flycatcher; and a pair of laughingthrushes that were just about visible to the naked eye – they were probably red-tailed, but were too far away to say for sure.

I took the circular footpath north of the hotel that skirted the lake, before climbing to the lookout tower and returning to the road, close to where I saw the mystery crane. Again, very few birds here, and nothing I could get by binoculars on.

The only other birds I saw during the entire day were a Mountain Bulbul; a few Minivet sp.; a few Chinese Bulbuls; a Chestnut Bulbul (at 930m); and a few Great Tits. Nevertheless, despite the paucity of birds, I felt privileged to have been one of only a few Western birders to have visited this magnificent mountain range, which may still hold a remnant population of White-eared Night Heron, somewhere amid the vast network of peaks and crevices. Started the drive back to Nanning at 6pm, arriving back in the city 90 minutes later, shortly after dark.

### **Friday, 17<sup>th</sup> March 2006**

Up at 6.45am; taxi to the railway station; boarded the train for Pingxiang some 20 minutes before its 7.58am departure. Pingxiang is the 'last' Chinese town before the Vietnam border, about 20 km north of the Friendship Pass, where Vietnam-bound tourists and truckers jostle to complete immigration formalities. Most of the fascinating train journey is at an altitude of 100-150 metres and a window seat is a must if you wish to enjoy the spectacle of numerous verdant karst mountains and rock formations, jutting almost vertically from the surrounding agricultural plain. At about 11am the train began to climb, reaching about 290m at 11.25am, before descending just before the 11.50am arrival into Pingxiang.

Negotiated with a local taxi driver to take me to the Friendship Pass – out of curiosity more than anything – and then on to Longzhou, via the newly-opened road that runs parallel with the border. The road just before the pass was blocked with trucks, so I left the car and birded a side road that had few cars, but some good birds. I had excellent views of a male and female Crimson Sunbird of the *tonkinensis* subspecies here. Also, a Black-crested Bulbul, as well as a flock of about 40 Striated Yuhinas. From 2.40pm to 5.30pm took the minor road westwards for about 83km, from Pingxiang to Shuikou. Kestrel and Black-eared Kite seen from the road, but nothing of note at a birding stop at a seriously degraded hillside (walked uphill from 650m to 700m). The seven mynas on wires between Shuikou and Longzhou (35 km) proved to be Crested Mynas, and not the hoped-for White-vented Mynas.



### **Saturday, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2006**

A few days before setting off for Nanning, I received the disturbing news that Longgang National Nature Reserve – the star attraction of this border region from a birding perspective and therefore the primary reason I included Guangxi on my itinerary – had been closed to foreigners because, according to the local travel service representative, who had spoken to the people at the reserve: “a Japanese had been caught stealing plants”.

It proved impossible to contact anyone in officialdom to confirm that foreigners had indeed been banned, but I decided to go nevertheless. And so, without much hope of accessing the reserve, I hired a taxi for a day and set out from Longzhou at about 7am. The reserve entrance can be accessed from a track leading south off the minor road that runs east of the north road out of Shanglong village. Just before the access road, I stopped at a flowering tree that was a magnet for a flock of about 30 Striated Yuhinas and a pair of Black Bulbuls.

I resisted the temptation to tell my driver to drive past the reserve centre and into the heart of the reserve, despite thinking that this would be my only chance of accessing the area. Alas, I decided to play by the rules and not to test the Chinese adage that forgiveness is easier to get than permission. The reserve centre seemed deserted.

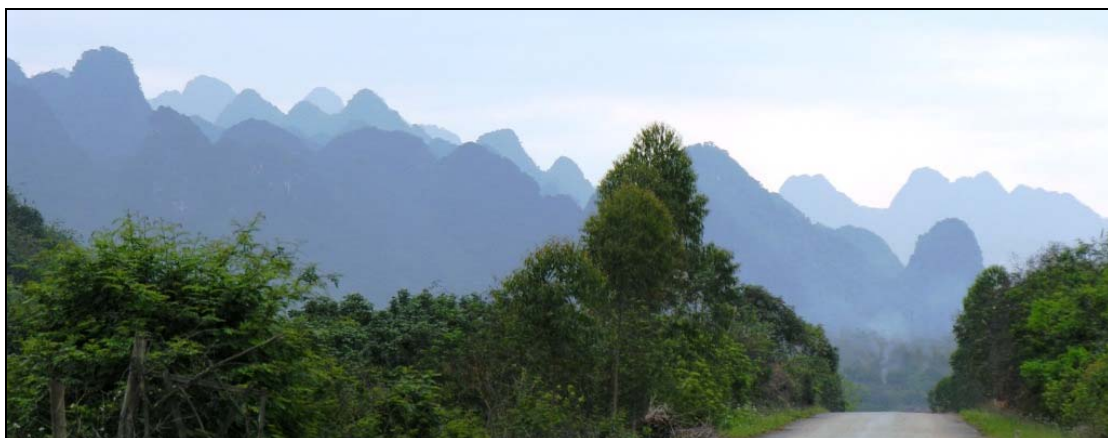


A few loud bangs on the porch door were eventually answered by no fewer than four just-out-of-bed reserve staff. I introduced myself, and asked for a permit to the reserve. After a moment's hesitation, they said that they would have to check with their boss. From eavesdropping on their conversation, it became apparent that they were speaking on the telephone.

The news was that I would have to return to Longzhou for the permit; and that the office there would close at 5pm. I asked them if they were sure that I could get a permit for the following three days, and they assured me that there would be no problem as long as I was there before the office closed. I expressed my gratitude and told them how concerned I had been that foreigners were no longer allowed to enter the reserve (which, incidentally, was also the word locally – even my taxi driver had read this in the local newspaper). After a long embarrassed silence, one of them eventually laughed and said that that was definitely not the case – although it was true, he said, that a Japanese visitor had tried to steal some endemic plants. Unconvinced, I thanked them for their trouble and even persuaded them to give me their boss's mobile phone number – just in case.

Rather than waste the day by returning directly to Longzhou (90 minutes' away), I decided to linger around the access road, which was within the reserve area – even though I had overheard them ordering my somewhat bemused taxi driver to leave the vicinity immediately. If they had told me this directly, I would have argued the point; but as it was I thought that the best policy was a tactical retreat.

The surrounding karst formations were enveloped in a thick mist – creating a hauntingly beautiful vista. I at last awoke to the sad fact that, in this part of China, any mountainside with lush primary vegetation is and always has been inaccessible to man. Frustrating as this was, I took comfort in the knowledge that the near-vertical gradients had, in fact, saved them from the fate that had befallen less-steep hillsides. The 14 local “*shaoshu minzu*” – or ethnic minority nationalities – have eked out an existence over the centuries by cultivating crops on land that was once forested.



Sadly, there was even evidence of recent tree-felling and other habitat destruction within this National Nature Reserve that, according to the State Environmental

Protection Administration of China's website ([www.zhb.gov.cn](http://www.zhb.gov.cn)) hosts 1282 species of plants. The reserve is also home to a population of White-headed Langurs. According to Pan Wenshi, a professor at Beijing University's Life Science Institute, White-headed Langur is one of the rarest mammals in the world, with a population of only 700, confined to just four counties in Guangxi (*People's Daily* 14<sup>th</sup> August 2002). To put that into context, there are about 1590 Giant Pandas in the wild (*China Daily*, 11<sup>th</sup> December 2005). I was lucky enough to see a wild Giant Panda in Sichuan, in 2002, but my chances of seeing the even-rarer White-headed Langur were hanging by a thread.

By now, the threatened rain had arrived – in the form of a particularly penetrating drizzle. I stopped the taxi just out of sight from the reserve centre and walked down a path used by the local sugar cane farmers that ran parallel to the thickly-wooded mountainside. The harvested cane fields were home to Plain and Rufescent Prinias; as well as half a dozen bizarrely named Yellow-eyed babblers, all with gleaming red eyes without a hint of yellow.

Despite the veil of low cloud and the threat of expulsion, I decided to set off east for a three hour walk, within the reserve area. But as I would only view the forest from the 'public' tracks created by the indigenous tribespeople, I had no compunction about being there. The track was at 200m above sea level; climbing to no more than 230m as it connected with the valley to the east. This short climb proved, however, to be one of the most dangerous of the trip – my walking boots were wholly unfit for the task of negotiating the wet rocks that formed the bridge between the two valleys.



My foolhardiness was rewarded with a *schaefferi* Grey-cheeked Fulvetta; a brief and distant view of a small babbler with bright yellow underparts that was most likely a Golden Babbler – but I was too far away to say for sure; a Sulphur-breasted Warbler; 2 Streak-breasted Scimitar Babblers; several Common Tailorbirds; and a Yellow-bellied Warbler. A singing male Hainan Blue Flycatcher brightened up an otherwise lacklustre day.

Arrived back at Longzhou at 3pm and quickly found the reserve's headquarters. I carried on with the charade and, with as straight a face as I could muster, asked for a permit for the following three days. They were obviously prepared and without flinching told me that, unfortunately, because of a recent change in the rules, their office was not able to issue a permit to a foreigner. Foreigners, of course, now had to go to Guangxi's capital, Nanning, for permits – the place I had left the previous day.

I protested, of course, and said that I had been told that I would definitely get one there in Longzhou. They said that I had misinterpreted what their colleagues had said, and that they had simply told me that Longzhou was the place where I would be told how I could definitely get a permit. At this point, I began to see the funny side of Chinese bureaucracy. It would of course have been extremely rude, not to mention discriminatory and the stuff diplomatic incidents are made of to tell a foreigner that he or she couldn't enter the reserve because, well, "you lot" steal plants.

And so, instead, to save everyone's face, an elaborate ruse is created and I am sent on – appropriately for a birder – a wild goose chase to seek permission. I imagined that, had I gone back to Nanning, I would be told that I could only get permission back home in Beijing.

Then again, this conspiracy theory may be completely wrong; even the plant-stealing story may be a misunderstanding or even a complete fabrication. That's the point I am making about Chinese bureaucracy; it's always extremely difficult to find out the real reasons behind seemingly unreasonable decisions. Whatever their reasons, I realised the futility of the discussion; and I politely thanked the officials for their time, and changed the subject to the status of hornbills in their reserve. They assured me that both Rufous-necked and Oriental Pied are doing marvellously. Funnily enough, that's exactly what their website had suggested.

I spent the rest of the afternoon trying to find a disease-free part of the Li River and reasonable habitat to the east of town; but I only succeeded in finding yet another environmental casualty sprawled across China's fast track to economic development. The sad sight of a Greater Coucal foraging amongst a riverside rubbish dump prompted me to call it a day. Enough was enough; I'd had as much of Guangxi's environmental destruction, poor weather and bureaucratic machinations as I could take, and decided to head towards Yunnan three days earlier than planned.

**Sunday, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2006**

My driver of yesterday, Mr Liu, picked me up at 7.35am from my hotel. I liked his driving style: ultra-cautious. Exactly what is required when it is raining and the “B roads” we were attempting to drive on were no more than dirt tracks for most of the way. Inevitably, progress was extremely slow. The 160km to the town of Jingxi took five hours, with only two short stops – to look at a Blue Rock Thrush; and male and female Grey Bushchats. The scenery, though, was fabulous – particularly along the newly opened and well-paved section of road that runs parallel with the Vietnam border, just north of Jinlong. Although obviously built at great expense to boost trading ties with Vietnam, this 30 km stretch of road ironically had very few vehicles.



Just before Jingxi, the highway was blocked for twenty minutes as workmen dug out another road some 100 metres higher than the existing one – presumably to create a one-way system. I got out of the car and walked up to where the man with the “stop” sign sat. He asked me not to walk any further because, he explained, they were using a big earth-moving machine to excavate the hillside above, and he expected that a few “*da shitou*” (large rocks) would be dislodged.

No sooner had he said this, a crashing sound made me look upwards. I saw a rock, measuring about one metre in diameter, come bouncing down the slope, about 50 metres in front of me. Just before the road, it hit the hillside with such force that it bounced completely clear of the road and on to the slope below it. I was just thanking my lucky stars that I had heeded the workman’s advice, when I realised that the rock was heading straight for a wooden hut perched on the lower hillside.

The people outside the hut must have heard or seen it coming, because they immediately began screaming, “*kuai pao!!*” (run !!). I then saw a middle-aged man literally run for his life out of the path of the bouncing bomb.

Surreally, I could see him pulling up his trousers – bare bottom still exposed – as he ran; and then saw the rock no more than a second later smash through the thin curtain of what I then realised must have been the outside toilet, before continuing on its downhill trajectory.

Perversely, the people who had saved his life and the man who had almost been killed all fell about laughing. The man with the stop sign laughed along with them and wryly told me: “I told you we were expecting a couple of large ones”.



#### **Watch out below**

The tentative plan had been to stay at Jingxi (700 metres above sea level), which offered “excellent and accessible habitat nearby”, according to some locals I had spoken with. They may well have been right, but the weather showed no signs of improving, so I decided that today would be a full travel day instead.

Despite my best endeavour, Mr Liu refused to go any further than the 160 km we had already travelled; so we said our goodbyes and, at 12.30pm, I flagged down a local taxi to take me across the border into Yunnan – a further 100 km from here – and on to the first town that was likely to have a reasonable hotel: Funing (150km from Jingxi). The new driver was as reckless as Mr Li had been careful. But the generously wide road provided plenty of room for error (only one overturned truck was a good sign).

Despite the width of the road, we still managed to have a few near-death incidents during the two-hour drive to the border – despite my repeated attempts to persuade him not to overtake on blind bends.



One short stop on this stretch of road to calm my nerves enabled me to catch up with Red-billed Blue Magpie; Long-tailed Shrike and Little Egret. The next 50km – to the eastern Yunnan town of Funing – took as long to negotiate as the preceding 100km. The road quite literally took a turn for the worse as we crossed into Yunnan.

An endless convoy of trucks snaked its way through the narrow mountain pass. The rain persisted until we had passed through the range of mountains that straddle the border region. Then, quite miraculously, the sky cleared and the sun shone for the first time on my trip. Yunnan – literally meaning “south of the clouds” – was as good as its promise. I mused that Guangxi – by the same criterion – should be renamed “*yunli*”: literally “in the clouds”.

Arrived at Funing at 4.30pm. I quickly found a good hotel on the north side of town, and dropped off my rucksack. I had spotted a well-wooded hillside, with many mature trees, to the west of town and asked a local taxi driver how to get there. He had no idea, but his friend had; and he kindly drove me through the maze of alleyways to the bottom of the wooded hill. At 800m, the top of the hill was 100m above the surrounding town, and from 4.45pm to 6.30pm I managed to walk around and over it.



**Sunshine this way (“Yunnan [“south of the clouds”] province”)**

The highlight was undoubtedly 2 stunning male Pale Blue Flycatchers, each trying to out-warble the other. Also, about 20 white-eyes flying over; two unidentifiable sunbirds; a singing male Grey Bushchat; a male Rufous-bellied Woodpecker; and a probable White’s Thrush bombed through the undergrowth.

Funing must be one of the most important transit points for trucks in this part of China; with trundling vehicles passing through all night long. If the dust is being blown away from town, as it was during the evening I was there, then it’s actually a very pleasant place to spend an evening. In fact, a lot of thought had been put into the town’s planning. An attractive pedestrian-only area flanked the river; boasting numerous new shops and bars with terraces. The Putian Hotel – my bed for the night – was only a rock’s bounce away from the nightlife, such as it was on this cool March evening.

### **Monday, 20<sup>th</sup> March 2006**

I was picked up at 7.35am by the chap who was so helpful yesterday. He wasn’t a taxi driver, but that didn’t bother me in the least. He was a far better driver than the maniac I’d unfortunately chosen to drive yesterday afternoon’s leg; so the drive was certainly more enjoyable – despite the appalling road conditions for most of the way.

Thankfully, he knew his way around the roadworks to the west of town, which must have saved more than half an hour. Just as well, because the 225km to Wenshan took six and a half hours as it was – including a 30 minute hold-up at small town, where roadworks had reduced the busy road to a narrow, single lane.

The 323 must rank as one of the worst ‘A’ roads in China. The combination of tens of thousands of trucks and narrow mountain roads – up to 1750m – conspired to hold the average speed at about 35km per hour. The final 40km however were covered in double quick time as the ‘B’ road (according to the map) off the 323 had, inexplicably, been transformed into a dual carriageway. And like many new toll roads in China, it had very little traffic.

I checked into the Shuangying Hotel in the centre of Wenshan at about 2pm and I quickly found a taxi driver who assured me that he knew how to get to the best area of forest in the vicinity. He was as good as his word, and after a 15 minute drive he dropped me off at the gate of the Eastern Mountain Forest Park (*Dongshan senlin gongyuan*). From this vantage point (1420m above sea level at the gate) I could see that this was, in fact, the only non-denuded mountain as far as the eye could see. Thankfully, this place had been spared the axe, and as well as some primary broadleaved evergreen forest, there was a variety of attractive habitat, including stands of mature conifers, hillside bushes and undergrowth; and even a reservoir.



I birded here from 3.15pm to 6.45pm. In that time, I must have walked some 15km, seeing no one other than a group of half a dozen tribespeople traversing one of the



numerous mountain trails. Some good birds here, including 2 pairs of Sooty-headed Bulbuls; a very confiding Yunnan Nuthatch at 1600m (in the conifers pictured on page 16); several Black-headed Greenfinches; a few minivets; an *andersoni* Brown-breasted Bulbul; 2 Bramblings; a few Great Tits; Great Spotted Woodpecker; a male Grey Bushchat; 2 Common Buzzards; an Upland Pipit; and a Little Grebe on the reservoir.

I was picked up at the prearranged time by the wife of the driver who had taken me there. Her husband's local accent was so strong that I had really struggled to understand more than a few words of his Mandarin. My ability to communicate with his wife was not much better. Thankfully, she had brought along her 15 year old daughter who was able to translate my Mandarin into the local dialect. Through this medium, I arranged to be picked up at my hotel at 7.30am the following morning and to be brought back to the same place.

## **Tuesday, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2006**

At last, a full day's birding. Went back to the Eastern Mountain Forest Park (*Dongshan senlin gongyuan*), where I spent a happy day. I arrived at the gatehouse as the park was opening at 8am; and left as the park was closing at 7.30pm. In that time, I walked more than 30km, got badly sunburnt on my legs and arms; was impaled on numerous thorn bushes; and ended up with feet so badly blistered that they would still be painful a few weeks after the trip had ended. Thanks to the many good birds, though, the only lasting memory will be of a thoroughly enjoyable day.

A singing Magpie Robin started the ball rolling. I then quickly located the source of a far more melodious sound. A male Black-breasted Thrush was singing from the top of a 15m high tree; as it basked in the warm morning sun. The great views of this superb bird were exactly the kind of thing I had been looking for to start the day. I followed the ridge to the south-east: Brown-breasted Bulbul in more or less the same place as yesterday; Tree Sparrows; numerous Red-rumped Swallows; a female *intensior* Russet Sparrow; a few *tricolor* Long-tailed Shrikes; 3 Yellow-eyed Babblers; Red-billed Blue Magpie; Kestrel; and several Black-headed Greenfinches. Reached the pine belt at about 1550m, where I saw a few *commixtus* "Great" Tits; a *talifuensis* Black-throated Tit; 4 female Long-tailed Minivets; a White-tailed Leaf Warbler; and possibly the same Yunnan Nuthatch as yesterday.

The forest edge and hillside scrub between 1600m and 1700m hosted a very different selection of species: a *vividus* Flavescent Bulbul; several Sooty-headed Bulbuls; a very showy *superciliaris* Hill Prinia; a Brown Bush Warbler; several Olive-backed Pipits; and a rufous morph Common Buzzard circling high at high noon completed the morning's entertainment. As is usually the case wherever one birds, the afternoon was quiet by comparison. But I did manage a few good birds, including a

displaying Oriental Skylark near the peak (at 1740m); a Chinese Babax; a long look at a female Black-headed Shrike Babbler; a few Grey-headed Canary Flycatchers; a male Rufous-bellied Niltava; 2 Little Grebes; 2 Chinese Bulbuls; a male Eastern Stonechat; and a flock of several Yellow-eyed Babblers close to where I saw 3 birds earlier in the day.



Looking westwards to the city of Wenshan and beyond to treeless mountains

### **Wednesday, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2006**

The taxi I had used yesterday arrived at 7.45am as I had prearranged. This punctuality was the determining factor in awarding the drive to Mengzi to Mrs Zhou, despite the communication difficulties. My good feeling about leaving on time evaporated somewhat when she told me that she had to return home to pick up a document that she needed to cross the county line. This much I understood; but the vast majority of what she said was as incomprehensible to me as my Mandarin was to her. Our only ‘conversations’ centred on the altitude – every few minutes she would ask me “how many metres”, and would laugh and shake her head when I looked at my watch to find out.

Mrs Zhou certainly knew her elevations, and had cottoned on to the fact that these were somehow important to me. “This is the highest point on the road (more of a dirt track actually) between Wenshan and Mengzi”, she proudly exclaimed. Respectfully, we stopped. And sure enough, the altimeter showed 1980m. I then spotted a hill top – no more than 15 minutes’ climb up a steep bank – that was topped with a good number of mature conifers. By now, the driving rain had stopped, so I decided to go out on a short excursion. The walk to the top yielded a flock of about 20 Little Buntings and a few phyllosc. The top of the hill was at 2025m, and near here I managed to get good views of a rather wet Buff-throated Warbler, carrying

nesting material. The sun was trying its best to break through a veil of high clouds. And would, in fact, stay out for the next 2 weeks.

Arrived Mengzi at 11.45am, which is 120km from Wenshan. I had intended to change taxis here and continue my journey. I then discovered that my driver had made the most of the opportunity, and had arranged to visit her younger sister, who lived here. They seemed to be up for a trip out and asked me if I wanted to go on to Gejiu – the next sizeable town and 50km closer to Jinping, the day’s destination. I agreed an additional charge for the excursion, and off we went. We arrived Gejiu at 12.30 – too late for a taxi to go to Jinping and be back by dinner. So, not surprisingly, I couldn’t find anyone who wanted to take me there for a reasonable price.

The sisters had spotted that I was struggling to arrange the final stage of the day’s journey and kindly offered to take me all the way to Jinping (a further 170km) for an additional 350 RMB – which was within my price expectation of about 2 RMB per km travelled. A new expressway enabled us to make very good time to Yuanyang. From there, the road became decidedly trickier for the final 77km. We followed the aptly named *Hong He*, or Red River, for 35 km; flanked by luxuriant banana plantations.



From a low-point of 250m we then climbed up to 1955m just before Jinping. Here, I noticed a sign in Chinese that read “*Fenshuiling baohu qu*” (Fenshuiling nature reserve). The habitat looked wonderful. Broad leaf forest covered the steep

mountainside, and very tall deciduous trees could be seen on the plateau that looked to be at about 2500m. The satellite photographs had promised primary forest – and there it was.

Unfortunately, it was getting late, so I had to wait until the morning. Mrs Zhou dropped me in Jinping at 6.40pm. We had journeyed 340km in 12 hours on the road (and 2 hours of stops). She really had earned her 650 RMB. I thanked her, took a souvenir picture, and urged her to have a long rest before getting back on the road again.

I asked a local for advice on where to stay and was directed to the Xilong Hotel, which was quite new and clean. It also had a restaurant next door that served me my first meal of the day.

### **Thursday, 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2006**

Arranged an early pick up outside my hotel and arrived back at Fenshuiling at 8am. The reserve ‘centre’ – nothing more than a run-down building that looked like a toilet block – was staffed by an officious chap who told me that I couldn’t go up the mountain (ie, I couldn’t enter the reserve) because there was an air force radar station at the top and foreigners weren’t allowed to see it. Confronting authority of any kind



in China is futile, so I opted for a conciliatory response. I thanked him from his advice, and told him that I had no intention of going anywhere near the base. I then took a path off to the left of the main track, where I saw some good birds; before returning to the main track and setting off up the mountain (with the intention of finding a way up to the plateau that avoided confrontation with the military).

On the lower trail I saw a Rufous-winged Fulvetta and a frustratingly poor view of a small Parrotbill. Also, Red-tailed Minla; Red-billed Leiothrix; and Yellow-cheeked Tit. Near to the start of the main trail I saw several Minivet sp; an Ashy-throated Warbler; Yellow-browed Warbler; Verditer Flycatcher; Olive-backed Pipit; a male Green-tailed Sunbird (at 2120m); several Whiskered Yuhinas; Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher; and a Mountain Tailorbird at 2155m.

Slightly further up the mountain (at 2170m), a busy ten minutes (10.50am to 11.00am) yielded a singing Rufous-bellied Niltava; a brief look at a Chestnut-headed Tesia – one of China's ultra-skulkers; a Streak-throated Fulvetta; and a resplendent Yellow-throated Fulvetta. Also, a few more Green-tailed Sunbirds near here. I Found a small track at about 2300m that led straight up to the plateau, which enabled me to get to the top without passing the radar base. On the way up saw Great Tit sp.; and Little Bunting. The plateau is at about 2350m and runs north to south. The radar station and baying dogs were to the south so, not surprisingly, I walked north on a small track (that eventually disappeared into a sea of bamboo after about a mile). As expected, the habitat here was excellent, with numerous mature deciduous trees and lush undergrowth.



I spent about three hours exploring this area. It was mid-afternoon, so the birds were few and far between, but managed to see a Stripe-throated Yuhina at 2340m; 2 Maroon-backed Accentors feeding on the ground at 2345m; and a Yunnan Nuthatch (perhaps the most southerly ever seen); a Chestnut-tailed Minla at 2350m; a Yellow-bellied Fantail and a Black-throated Tit.



The only birds of note seen on the way down were several Rufous-winged Fulvettas, in a loose flock at 2035m; a Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher and a White-throated Fantail. My driver, Mr Guo, was at the rendezvous point at the agreed time of 6.45pm. Sunny and warm all day, although a somewhat brisk wind had sprung up at 11am.

### **Friday, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2006**

Arranged an earlier pick up than the day previously and arrived at the reserve centre at 7.35am – obviously before the official I had met yesterday had got out of bed. So, unchallenged, I quickly set off on the walk to the top – the idea was to get there as early as possible.

A good view of a White-browed Fulvetta (of the grey-crowned *valentinae* subspecies), seen at 2000m, got the day off to a good start. The description from my notebook reads as follows: “long, narrow white super. bordered by thin black lateral crown stripe; greyish underparts; speckled throat; white edges to secondaries; grey scapulars, crown and mantle.” In a couple of hours’ desk research on the Internet, I could find no other China record of this sub-species. According to *The Birds of South-East Asia* (Robson 2000) *valentinae* is found in West Tonkin in Vietnam, which lies approximately 5 miles to the east of where I saw the bird (hence the positioning of the radar station at the highest point on the China-side of the once-fractious border).



**A typical scene on the road near Jinping**

Also a male and female Rufous-bellied Niltava; several Red-billed Leiothrix; half a dozen Green-tailed Sunbirds (equal numbers of males and females); 2 Yellow-cheeked Tits; a few Mountain Tailorbirds; a few Ashy-throated Warblers; an unidentified female *ficedula* flycatcher; and a Chestnut-tailed Minla. I saw a Short-tailed Parrotbill at 9am, when I had reached 2150m. This is almost a thousand metres higher than the elevation described for this species by Robson.

Made my way to the plateau by 10am, where I found a Whiskered Yuhina, White-tailed Nuthatch, Blyth's Leaf Warbler, Red-flanked Bluetail; a few Japanese White-eyes; a Maroon-backed Accentor (in more or less the same place I saw two the day before); a Stripe-throated Yuhina, Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher and an Olive-backed Pipit. I walked down the mountain during the mid-afternoon lull in bird activity. My taxi was waiting next to the "toilet block" of a reserve centre, which was unmanned.

Back to the ramshackled town of Jinping, and then on to the small village of Baimahe (*White Horse River*), which was the "last" dot on the road to the east – stopping abruptly just before the border with Vietnam. I climbed to the top of a hillock at about 4.30pm and looked across the valley towards Vietnam. Over the border, I could clearly see an old man smoking a pipe while an even older-looking woman was chopping firewood outside of their log cabin.

The thick black smoke from their chimney merged with the grey mist shrouding the denuded hillside, just behind the house. A few hundred metres from there, an old lorry tore through the red-dust road, generating its own mushroom cloud of pollution. Despite their cultural differences, Vietnam and China clearly have much in common.

The only bird of note I saw in this area, a Hobby, flew over my head and after a few wing beats was over Vietnam. After a few more wing beats, it merged with the low grey cloud that had enveloped the bare hillsides on both sides of the border.