

## **Birding in Yunnan, 21<sup>st</sup> – 26<sup>th</sup> February 2001**

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The direct translation of Yunnan is '**south of the clouds**'- a tribute to the marvelous year-round climate. A look at the distribution maps of Chinese birds suggests that this province is also blessed with huge potential for year-round birding.

Birding information however - with the notable exception of one extremely comprehensive report - is surprisingly scant. The excellent paper I refer to is by the China-resident birder Jesper Hornskov, who spent a total of 5 months in the province between 1988 and 1999 (covering many areas in western and northern Yunnan, notably Ruili, where he saw 318 species).

The problem, however, was that I wanted to spend a few days in the south of the province - near Xishuangbanna (near to the Laos and Burmese borders). My research turned up very little useful birding information - but that didn't stop me going.

### **Wednesday, 21<sup>st</sup> February, 2001**

Flew from Shanghai to Kunming (about two and a half hours). Arrived mid-afternoon; went to Dianchi Gongyuan (about 30 minutes taxi-ride west of the city and south of the best birding area, Xishan).

Several hundred Black-headed gulls, 2 Oriental magpie robins, 2 Daurian redstarts, 10 Black-throated tits, 12 Brown-breasted Bulbuls, 1 Sooty-headed Bulbul, 1 Plain Prinia, 10 Japanese White-eyes, 5 Pallas' Warblers.

### **Thursday, 22<sup>nd</sup> February, 2001**

40 minute taxi-ride from the city centre to Xishan. This area is a verdant mountain oasis, surrounded by a vast agricultural plain. The best area that I found was on the left of the road going up the mountain (about 400 metres down from the 'dragon's gate' car park - ie at the end of the road up). In fact it is possible to take the footpath from this point all the way down the mountain (a couple of miles). Also, on the right side of the road up, there are various footpaths 'up' that are worth exploring.

The 'left side' wooded area produced Speckled Piculet, 2 Scarlet Minivets, 3 Chinese Thrushes, 2 Red-flanked Bluetails, 2 Blue-fronted Redstarts, Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, 4 Great Tits, Ashy-throated Warbler, 2 Blue-winged Minlas, Spectacled Fulvetta, 15 Rusty-capped Fulvettas, 5 White-collared Yuhinas, and 10 Green-backed Tits. Walked to the top of the mountain (ie through the dragon's gate and up the public footpath to the top), with the objective of finding Godlewski's Bunting. Sure enough, on the rocky plateau to the north, easily found 3 Godlewski's.

### **Friday, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2001**

Back again to Xishan, this time concentrated on the area to the right of the road up - walking all the way 'round' to the area where I had found Godlewski's Bunting the day before.

'New' birds for the trip were as follows: **Common Buzzard**, Brown Shrike, Long-tailed Shrike, 2 White-throated Fantails, Siberian Stonechat, Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, 2 Russet Sparrows (male and female), 25 Little Buntings, 10 Goldcrests, Kestrel, and 200 Swallows. Also, saw a dozen or so species that I'd seen during the previous 2 days: 10 Pallas's Warblers, 15 Rusty-capped Fulvettas, 40 Black-chinned Tits, 4 Scarlet Minivets, 3 White-collared Yuhinas, 4 Daurian Redstarts, Blue-fronted Redstart, 30 Japanese White-eyes, 20 Brown-breasted Bulbuls, a single Godlewski's Bunting, Oriental Magpie Robin, Ashy-throated Warbler, and 2 Blue-winged Minlas.

Finally, back to the same gully as yesterday (400 m down from dragon's gate on the south side of the road). Here, found 4 Maroon-backed Accentors feeding near the top of the footpath (very near the road); and a single Grey-chinned Minivet.

Evening flight from Kunming to Xishuangbanna (Jinghong City) - 50 minutes.

### **Saturday, 24<sup>th</sup> February, 2001**

Stayed in Jinghong. Took a dawn taxi to Yexianggu (literally translated as "wild elephant valley"), which is about 50 km north of Jinghong. This is an area of primary rainforest and has been designated a nature reserve (to protect the last stronghold of elephants in Yunnan - about 300 of which are reportedly in the area). There is a very basic chalet-type guest house in the centre of the reserve (perched on a platform overlooking the river where the elephants often come to drink and bathe). This would have been a great place to stay - unfortunately didn't know about it beforehand.

The best entry point to the reserve is the 'back' east entrance, by the river. Here you can take the circular trail, which runs either side of the river for about 4 miles. The furthest point is the rather quaint elevated 'guest-house'. There is also a cable-car that runs west of here to the 'other side' of the reserve (allegedly offers "good chances" of seeing elephant - just in case you miss them at the river - ie if you are not there at first or last light - which of course I wasn't).

Birded the rainforest from 7.30 am to dusk, at about 6 pm (when the same taxi driver returned to pick me up). This was my first experience of rainforest-birding in China, and I have to say that it was not the 'birdfest' that I imagined it would be. Birds were few and far between (only 20 species that day), but nevertheless Yexianggu is a marvelously relaxing place to spend a day (or three) - and also has the potential to produce some quality birds, on the edge of their ranges. Definitely recommended.

This is the full list of birds seen, in the order that I saw them: Common Kingfisher, 2 **Grey Wagtail**, Black-naped Monarch, Streaked Spiderhunter, 4 Bronzed Drongos, 4 Yellow-bellied Fantails, Blue-whistling Thrush, 50 Asian Palm Swifts, 10 Common Tailorbirds, 3 Golden **Spectacled Warblers**, Black-crested Bulbul, Black-throated Sunbird, male White-rumped Shama, 12 Brown-cheeked Fulvettas, Puff-throated Bulbul, 2 Chinese Green Magpies, White-crowned Forktail, 3 Slaty-backed Forktails, Brown Shrike, Magpie Robin.

### **Sunday, 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2001**

Travelled to the Tropical Botanical Gardens on Hutu Island, in Menglun county, which is about 96 KM south-east of Jinghong. Only managed a couple of hours here. Also, a couple of stops en route (each about one hour).

Saw the following: 20 Himalayan Swiftlet, Chinese Pond heron, male Pied Bushchat, 6 Plain Martin, Greater Coucal, **15 Red-whiskered Bulbul**, 2 males and 1 female Mrs Gould's Sunbird, 300 Swallows, 50 Asian Palm Swift, Long-tailed Shrike, 5 Magpie Robins, Sooty-headed Bulbul.

Back to Jinghong, and then to Banna Senlin Gongyuan (Forest park), which is only about 20 minutes east of the city (stay in the taxi, go through the public park, and go uphill for about 2 miles to the public area at the top - here is a 2 mile circular boarded walkway that goes through one of the few surviving areas of primary rainforest near Jinghong). Only had about an hour and a half before dusk, but in that time managed to find some excellent birds: Paddyfield Pipit, Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, male White-browed Bush Robin, male Rufous-breasted Bush Robin, 3 White-tailed Robins, Yellow-bellied Warbler, Yellow-browed warbler, Limestone Wren Babbler, Green Shrike-Babbler, Olive-backed Pipit, Speckled Piculet, Yellow-bellied fantail, and male White-rumped Shama.

### **Monday, 26<sup>th</sup> February, 2001**

Returned at first light to the same area as I had birded at dusk. In three hours saw the following: Blue-throated Barbet, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, Yellow-bellied Warbler, Streaked Spiderhunter, Bronzed Drongo, male and female Scarlet Minivet, Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, and White-throated Fantail.

Then back to Yexianggu (which is only about 30/40 minutes drive north of Senlin Gongyuan). Birded here for about four and a half hours, in which time I added 6 species to the trip (and life!) list: Mountain Bamboo Partridge, Blue-winged Leafbird, Verditer Flycatcher, Fujian Niltava, Purple Cochoa, and Purple Sunbird. Also saw Black-crested Bulbul, Red-whiskered Bulbul, 4 Japanese White-eye, 2 male White-tailed Robins, 6 Brown-cheeked Fulvetta, and a Golden Spectacled Warbler.

Great shame that I didn't have more time in the area, as it was obvious from the rate that I was still adding species that I had only scratched the surface of the area's potential.

The following areas in the Xishuangbanna region (which reportedly has a species list of 427, including 300 resident species) are perhaps worth a visit (all information is from The Web, therefore please treat with caution)

- Manting Park (near Manting village);
- Manggao Reserve (near Menghai) "242 species of birds", also "wolf, leopard, clouded leopard, Asiatic golden cat";
- Menglun Reserve "80 KM east of Jinghong";
- Shangyong Reserve - 246 bird species, including "4 hornbills, Lord Derby's parakeet, and pheasants;
- Ganlan Basin
- Mengla Tropical rainforest - including Sancha He Forest Park (near Mengla)
- Bepeng Aerial Skyway Park (20 KM north of Mengla) - reportedly has a species list of 280, including 4 hornbills; also "red panda, clouded leopard, and "tiger"