

SICHUAN and TIBETAN PLATEAU 2012

31st May to 18th June 2012

HIGHLIGHTS

Either for rarity value, excellent views or simply a group favourite.

- | | | |
|------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| • Crested Ibis | • Black-necked Crane | • White-bellied Redstart |
| • Lammergeier | • Eurasian Eagle-owl | • Grandala |
| • Snow Partridge | • Saker Falcon | • Gansu Leaf-warbler |
| • Tibetan Snowcock | • Ibisbill | • Crested Tit-warbler |
| • Verreaux's Monal-partridge | • Wood Snipe | • Sukatschev's Laughingthrush |
| • Blood Pheasant | • Snow Pigeon | • Emei Shan Liocichla |
| • Temminck's Tragopan | • Salim Ali's Swift | • Rufous-tailed Babbler |
| • Blue Eared Pheasant | • Hume's Ground-tit | • Golden-fronted Fulvetta |
| • Chinese Monal | • Tibetan Lark | • Przewalski's Nuthatch |
| • Blue Eared-pheasant | • White-tailed Rubythroat | • Tibetan Grey Shrike |
| • Golden Pheasant | • Firethroat | • Sichuan Jay |
| • Lady Amherst's Pheasant | • White-throated Redstart | • Three-banded Rosefinch |

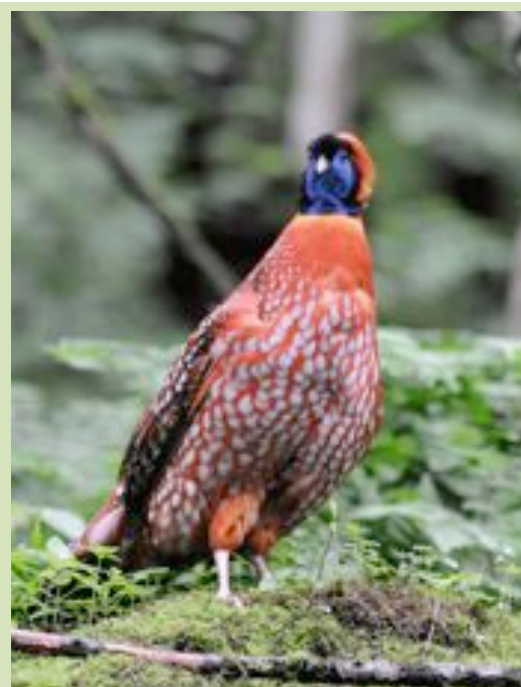
Leaders: Nick Bray and Tang Jun

SUMMARY:

Sichuan lies in the very heart of China and is situated on the eastern edge of the vast Tibetan Plateau. It is a huge province, the size of France and hosts the richest concentration of Chinese specialities and endemics in this vast country. There is a remarkable wealth of birdlife waiting in its rich evergreen and temperate forests, alpine meadows, mighty snow-capped mountains and grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau which form some of the most spectacular scenery of any bird tour! Our unique and special two-week tour visited the mountains of Labahe, Balang Shan, Mengbi Shan, the Tibetan Plateau, and finished with a post-tour extension to Shanxi Province for the amazing Crested Ibis. In all we recorded 275 species which included 54 endemic, near endemic and breeding-endemics. Amongst a very special selection of spectacular species the bird of the trip was Temminck's Tragopan and families very well represented included 14 'galliformes', 25 species of warbler, 28 species of babbler and 9 species of Rosefinch.

Days 1 - 2 31st May - 1st June

Following an overnight flight from London via Hong Kong we eventually arrived at Chengdu in the early afternoon. After meeting Tang Jun we drove to a restaurant for lunch before



This Temminck's Tragopan was seen extremely well at Labahe. In fact the male was very aggressive and displayed in a perfect setting of moss-covered boulders amidst ancient forest no more than 15 metres from his admiring audience.

paying a visit to Yuantan Park where despite the number of people and noise managed to notch up a few birds. First up was **Chinese Blackbird**, looking and sounding different to the blackbirds back in the UK. A few **Vinous-throated Parrotbills** showed very well, as did a cracking **Yellow-billed (Chinese) Grosbeak**, **Collared Finchbill** and several **White-browed Laughingthrushes**. With plenty of **Chinese Bulbuls**, a few **Black-throated Tits**, **Himalayan Swiftlet**, and a few other common species we had made a decent start and with most of the target species seen headed to our nearby hotel for a much needed rest before dinner.

Day 3 Saturday 2nd June

We left Chengdu early and headed out across the Red Basin, a huge area of lowland cultivation, stopping to check out a small wooded area beside a river. What a great move this turned out to be as a displaying **Forest Wagtail** was seen, quickly followed by a pair of **Swinhoe's Minivets** and a very fine **Tiger Shrike**. A small flock of **Ashy-throated Parrotbills** also came into view along the narrow stream, and as we watched them a very bright male **Yellow-rumped Flycatcher** flew in. With a couple of **Grey-headed Canary-flycatchers** and **Asian Paradise-flycatcher**, **Oriental Greenfinch** and a pair of **Chinese Grosbeaks** seen as well, along with some commoner species things were going well. Moving on, we checked out some sites for **Hwamei** but only succeeded in getting an **Asian Drongo-cuckoo** and **Brownish-flanked Bush-warbler**. So by now it was late morning and we headed to a nice little restaurant in Ya'an for another great meal before driving further west to Labahe. The road went for miles through a spectacularly scenic river valley with huge, forest-clad mountains on either side and we then stopped to watch a **Brown Dipper** feeding in the tumbling river. Also here was a **Spangled Drongo** and a very tape-responsive **Alstrom's Warbler**. Once inside the reserve we walked a few kilometres along the road and despite the misty and drizzly conditions managed decent views of **Dark-sided Flycatcher**, the endemic **Yellow-bellied** and several **Green-backed Tits**, a wing-flicking **Claudia's Warbler** and a heard only **Bianchi's Warbler**. A large flock of **Asian House-martins** and **Himalayan Swiftlets** held one or two **Pacific Swifts**, and a few **White-throated Needletails** also put in an appearance. Other birds seen included **Blue Whistling-thrush**, **White-capped** and **Plumbeous Water-Redstarts**, **Japanese Tit** and **Red-billed Blue-magpie** before reaching our accommodation for the next four nights, set amidst superb forest at 1950m.

Day 4 Sunday 3rd June

We headed up the mountain early this morning in two jeeps, stopping after just a couple of kilometres when a male



This single track road takes you up through fantastic habitat and into the mountains at Labahe.



Golden-breasted Fulvetta showed really well around our cabins at Labahe.

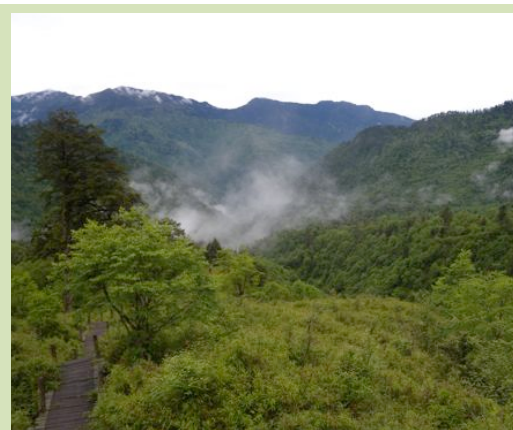


Emei Leaf-warbler is one of the key target species at Labahe.

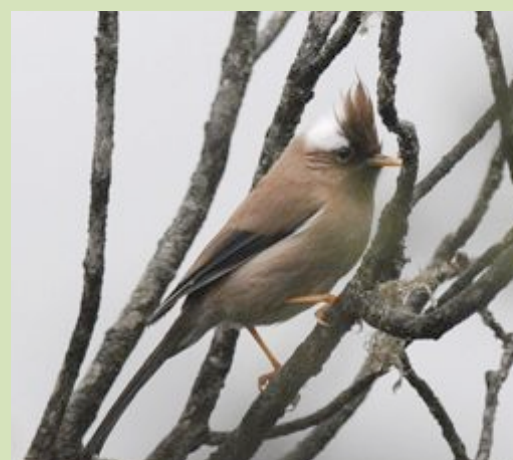
Temminck's Tragopan crossed the track in front of us. It fed briefly beside the road before walking up the slope and out of sight, only to be refound by Jo a little later perched about 20 metres above us on a small ridge. It remained for around twenty minutes, ample time to study it through the scope, despite the mist which frustrated us for most of the day. So what a great start and we continued with a few sightings of **Lady Amherst's Pheasant** as well as we drove ever higher along the bumpy dirt road. A herd of **Golden Takins** below the road caused our next stop, and we also had a **Crimson-breasted Woodpecker** and the first of two **Brown Parrotbills** to be seen today, before reaching the end of the road and the start of the boardwalk. With a persistent drizzle and accompanying mist and low cloud continuing for the whole day it was a particularly frustrating affair but we soldiered on admirably and were suitably rewarded for our efforts with some quality birds. We began with our first attempt at **White-browed Shortwing** which would ultimately prove fruitful later in the day. The forest was ringing to the sound of warblers and we notched up the common **Claudia's Warbler**, followed by **Large-billed** and **Sichuan Leaf-warblers**, and eventually **Bianchi's Warbler**. We followed the boardwalk for quite a way and then went quite steeply downhill where an **Oriental Cuckoo**, flock of **Speckled Woodpigeons**, **Elliot's Laughingthrush**, **Aberrant Bush-warbler**, **Long-tailed Minivet** and **White-collared Yuhina** were the highlights. Returning a couple of hours later we added **Yellow-browed Tit** to our list before eating our picnic lunch in the rain! With the weather looking to continue horrible for the rest of the day we decided to head lower down and the couple of kilometres produced **Large Hawk-cuckoo**, **Grey-backed Shrike**, **Ferruginous** and **Rufous-gorgeted Flycatchers**, **Gould's Sunbird**, **Grey-headed Bullfinch**, and best of all an **Emei Shan Liocichla** was lured in for great views. We eventually reached our cabins around 4pm and after a much needed hot coffee checked out the immediate vicinity culminating in a grandstand performance by a pair of **Golden-breasted Fulvettas** who were accompanied by a confiding **Rufous-capped Babbler**.

Day 5 Monday 4th June

We left the rather tricky decision of whether to venture back up to the top of the mountain or head lower down until breakfast this morning. As we gathered at Tang's cabin just before 6am it did seem that the cloud was higher than yesterday so took the gamble to head up to the top boardwalk and our decision was vindicated by the great view across to the surrounding mountain tops which were clearly visible. We wasted no time in heading along the boardwalk and spent the whole morning in rather patient manner scouring the surrounding area. A slow start began with all of the usual warblers being seen including **Sichuan Leaf-warbler**, but a **Buff-barred Warbler** was new



The view from the boardwalk is very impressive.



White-collared Yuhina proved to be very inquisitive.



White-bellied Redstart is a real skulker, but we were fortunate to get several good views at Labahe.

for us as it sang from a close pine tree, whilst a pair of **Chestnut-bellied Rock-thrushes** were present in the valley below us. A few **Brown Parrotbills** were present in the dense stand of bamboo that borders the whole boardwalk, but we were more intent on finding the apparently elusive fulvous variety which remained inconsiderately absent throughout the morning. However, when a **Firethroat** began singing nearby all of our attentions diverted to searching for this much-wanted cracker! In fact it took just a few seconds for John to raise his binoculars and find it perched on a low branch in a pine tree where it remained for ages. We set the scope up and enjoyed prolonged views of the whole bird and were able to appreciate the stunning plumage of this usually shy and skulking species, which can be a very tricky bird to get a decent look at under normal circumstances. Shortly afterwards a **White-bellied Redstart** began singing and knowing it would remain invisible in its bamboo home we took a narrow, muddy trail made by the Takins towards the bird. It was definitely a stubborn one but after some time it kindly hopped up onto some tree roots and began to sing for a little while before melting away. The last bird of the morning was a mega, when a pair of **Rufous-tailed Babblers** were found skulking around a fallen tree but eventually showed reasonably well, even copulating at one stage right in front of us! After a picnic lunch we walked back up to the top and as fortune would have it, came across a small group of **Fulvous Parrotbills** feeding beside the boardwalk. After several minutes of great views we left, seeing a brief **Grey-hooded Fulvetta** along the way before walking down the mountain road, getting decent looks at **Bianchi's Warbler** and several more **Spotted Nutcrackers** before reaching the area where we had the liocichlas yesterday. There was no sign of them today, but a **Fujian Niltava** was a surprise and as we tried to relocate it following a Houdini act we came across a male **Lady Amherst's Pheasant** to add to the nice views from earlier today. Several **Elliot's Laughingthrushes** were seen, followed by a fine male **Blue-fronted Redstart** before we took a side trail. This proved to be a good move as we saw a pair of **Chinese White-browed Rosefinches**, another **White-bellied Redstart** showed well, as did a fabulous **Chestnut-headed Tesia** that sang its little heart out beside the track. But with dark clouds looming and a few spots of rain it seemed our day was over, but how wrong can you be? Very as it turned out when a **Brown Bush-warbler** responded pretty well to the ipod, and then a sprightly **Fire-capped Tit** was scoped as it visited its nesting hole. But the major surprise was a **White-shouldered Starling** found in a nearby tree which is apparently a late migrant and possibly the first record for this site. With a very brief view of **Black-faced Laughingthrush** to add to our earlier sighting and another **Grey-headed Bullfinch** perched on top of a pine tree we then headed back down to the hotel in the jeeps. A spur of the moment decision to walk the final couple



A heavily cropped image of one of the star birds of the tour – Firethroat.



This Chestnut-headed Tesia was very bold and displayed just a few metres away from us.



White-shouldered Starling was an unexpected find at Labahe.

of kilometres turned out to be of almost divine intervention as within a couple of minutes we were face-to-face with an extremely territorial male **Temminck's Tragopan** that came down the hill to get a closer look at us. He then proceeded to display aggressively by rapidly flapping his wings before moving from one prominent position to another above us before finally flying up into a tree. A female was also present but barely warranted a second glance, so mesmerised were we by this beautiful orange and blue apparition and found it hard to drag ourselves away, but we left them in peace and headed down for an early dinner.

Day 6 Tuesday 5th June

We headed down the mountain and spent the morning walking along a trail that zigzagged its way into the hills and we turned up a number of very good birds and another mega as well, but more of that later. The habitat was fantastic with beautiful valleys complete with mist rising out of the river and rolling forest-cloaked hills more reminiscent of eastern Europe. We began with a surprise find in the shape of the endemic **Slaty Bunting**, several of which were seen during our walk and an excellent way to begin the day. The demure **Brownish-flanked Bush-warbler** was then called in, before we tried to catch a glimpse of a singing **Chinese Song Thrush** which was only seen in flight, as was a **Wedge-tailed Green-pigeon**. A **Barred Laughingthrush** was a surprise and it was a shame that a **Spotted Laughingthrush** couldn't be enticed closer, although a flock of **White-throated Laughingthrushes** was a nice find. Meanwhile a fine **Elegant Bunting** sat out in the open for all to admire and another **Fujian Niltava** appeared briefly, and there was also **Streak-breasted Scimitar-babbler**, a pair of **Chinese Babax** sat up nicely in a tree at the back of a clearing and **Chestnut-vented Nuthatch** all seen. We concentrated on the numerous stands of bamboo as we knew that the endemic and rarely-seen **Golden-fronted Fulvetta** had been seen here recently, but all we found to start with was numerous **Golden-breasted Fulvettas** and **Rufous-capped Babblers**. The distinctive trilling song of an **Emei Leaf-warbler** was soon tracked down and we also found another couple a little later as well. But when we reached just about as far as we could walk and had to think about turning back, a pair of endemic **Grey-hooded Fulvettas** appeared, and after a while a third bird appeared in the shadows behind them. It took a little time to confirm the fact we had an endemic and mega **Golden-fronted Fulvetta** in front of us, but it didn't linger too long and allowed most of the group to get onto it. Wow! Heading back down to the waiting coach we picked up **Kloss's Leaf-warbler** and **Buff-throated Warbler**, along with some previously mentioned species to round off a good morning's birding. In the afternoon we drove back down the mountain to a lower elevation and quickly picked up **Marten's Warbler** singing beside the road



The undoubted highlight of the trip was this very aggressive male Temminck's Tragopan at Labahe. We had such close and prolonged views on our way back down the mountain – a real privilege.



Grey-hooded Fulvetta is another key species at Labahe.



Kloss's Leaf-warbler was just one of 13 phylloscopus warblers seen during this tour.

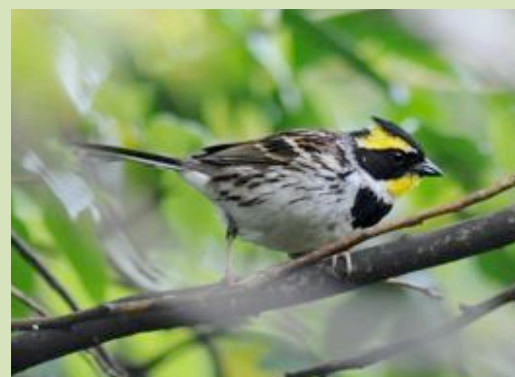
and giving some relatively decent views. As we drove back to our cabins, Jo picked up a **Mountain Hawk-eagle** soaring along the side of the hills. And upon arrival back at base we staked out the bamboo and were rewarded with 3 **Golden Parrotbills** to round off a great day's birding.

Day 7 Wednesday 6th June

We left the mountains at Labahe this morning after one last try for **Golden Parrotbill** that resulted in a few of the group getting another glimpse. The drive down to the lowlands was certainly spectacular and we didn't really stop anywhere too long, just getting a brief flight view of a **Grey-faced Woodpecker**, along with **Yellow-bellied Tit** and a few other common species along the roadside. Breakfast was typically Chinese in the nearest town and then we headed across the arable landscape, which was still quite 'birdy' as we had a confiding **Rufous-faced Warbler** and a **Chinese Goshawk**, before calling in a **Chinese Bamboo-partridge** that flew down the hillside towards us. A **Russet Sparrow** also put in an appearance here, whilst both **Indian** and **Eurasian Cuckoos** called in the distance. Moving on we drove through spectacular gorges with huge peaks dominating the skyline and saw our first **Himalayan Griffon Vultures** soaring over in this dramatic landscape, and continued our best raptor day so far with a few **Himalayan Buzzards** later in the day. Stopping for fuel produced a fine **Daurian Redstart** found by Brian C, and our lunch stop added **Blue Rock-thrush** in a large town. A nice sighting came when stopping to look at yet more vultures soaring over some lofty peaks, both **Godlewski's** and **Black-faced Buntings** were found perched on the roadside telegraph wires. With time passing all too quickly we made a number of relatively quick stops, first of all when a **Wallcreeper** flew across the road in front of us and gave amazing views as it fed on the slope below us before treating us to an aerial display for several minutes. At this spot we also called in a **Yellow-streaked Warbler** and had a brief view of an **Alpine Leaf-warbler** as well. A few **Hill Pigeons** followed, along with **Eurasian Crag-martin**, **Blue-fronted Redstart** and **Elliot's Laughingthrush**. And before the Jianshan Pass amidst nice pine forest we found **Rufous-vented Tit**, a few **Hodgson's Treecreepers** and a confiding **Yellow-browed Tit**, whilst a few **Kessler's Thrushes** were present on the pass. As we approached Balangshan the local police stopped us proceeding any further and we had to spend the night in Rilong and await further instructions in the morning!

Day 8 Thursday 7th June

Well Tang had smoothed any potential problems during the course of the evening, so a 4am start saw us driving up towards Balangshan Pass, arriving half an hour before dawn in order to be in place to witness the amazing display of **Wood Snipe**. After



This Elegant Bunting was a nice surprise at Labahe.



Claudia's Warbler in action! The wing-flicking is typical of this species.



Wallcreeper is always nice to see and this pair were nesting right beside the road.

a few minutes the distinctive call started, followed by the sound of the wind rushing through their wings and we eventually saw several birds displaying across the clear sky. Once it was fully daylight the display was over so we drove down the mountain a short distance to scan the surrounding hillside for our main target of the day, the spectacular **Chinese Monal**. After several minutes of scanning Tang picked up 4 **White Eared-Pheasants** feeding on the hillside above us and we had great views in the scope. But the minutes were ticking by and no monals were showing, so we wondered if they weren't around today. With a brief **Collared Grosbeak**, singing **Chestnut Thrush** and a **Dark-breasted Rosefinch** to distract us things weren't too bad, but all of a sudden a dark shape sat on a rock way up on the hillside turned its head! There it was, a beautiful male **Chinese Monal** in all its glory and what a view through the scope with a beautiful golden nape and iridescent plumage it certainly is an amazing bird. We picked it up a little while later and were able to watch it for a further twenty minutes in nice sunshine as it fed on the grassy slope before disappearing into the low scrub. As we were watching this a **Spotted Bush-warbler** called from the verge above us but remained hidden from view. So then we left here and headed right up and over the pass in search of **Tibetan Snowcock** but we were hampered by a thick mist and would have to leave this bird for another day. However, we did pick up **Plain Mountain-finch**, both **Alpine** and **Red-billed Choughs**, **Rosy Pipit**, **Rufous-breasted Accentor** and Brian P spotted a lone **Snow Pigeon** tucked away amongst some rocks which we all managed to get on. So we then headed down to find some clearer weather, making several stops and had **Snow Partridge**, **Alpine Accentor**, **Lammergeier** and many **Himalayan Griffons** before our lunch stop. Afterwards we walked along the road getting **Vinaceous Rosefinch**, **Himalayan Bluetail**, **White-browed Fulvetta**, **Sichuan Leaf-warbler** and **Grey-headed Bullfinch** as well as a few other birds but generally it was rather quiet. So we drove down to the river valley and staked out a site for **Golden Pheasant** which necessitated constant scanning of some clearings on the hillsides above us. During our two hour vigil we had great comparisons with both **Buff-barred** and **Yellow-streaked Warblers** constantly vying for our attention, as well as our best views of **Chinese Babax**. Eventually, and just as we had reached the end of our patience Peter spotted a cracking male **Golden Pheasant** walking across a clearing to finish off a successful day despite the frustrating weather.

Day 9 Friday 8th June

We got back to the monal site by first light with the intention of getting **Koklass Pheasant** but despite several calling birds in the immediate vicinity none were on view, but we did see a few more **White Eared-Pheasants** again. So we headed through the tunnel and tried our luck with **Verreaux's Monal-partridge**, again with the same result. However, **Common**, **Chinese**



There are many great birds to be seen on the impressive Balangshan.



Balangshan is undoubtedly one of the most exciting mountains in Asia for birding.



A close view of Himalayan Griffon Vulture on Balangshan.



Yellow-streaked Warbler was seen a number of times on this tour.

Beautiful and Chinese White-browed Rosefinches were present, and we also saw a pair of **White-winged Grosbeaks** before heading up to the top in search of **Tibetan Snowcock**. As we got higher we found ourselves in low cloud and visibility was once again severely restricted, so after a few abortive attempts at checking the area only resulted in nice views of **Red-fronted Rosefinch** we drove over the pass. Lo and behold it was clear on this side and even warm! So we staked out one particular area which had **Grandala** and flocks of **Brandt's Mountain-finches**, but it wasn't until a while later that a **Tibetan Snowcock** was found by yours truly on a walkabout and dragged everyone across country (despite the altitude) to view a huge open area set back away from the road. Unfortunately this bird had gone by the time we had everyone assembled, but another one flew across the slope a little later and ran up into the scree allowing a few people to get on to it. There was also a **White-tailed Rubythroat** and **Rufous-breasted Accentor** here to keep us occupied for a while. But we needn't have worried as a little later Tang found one on the slope above us and we had cracking views in the scope as it fed on a grassy area for quite a long time. Needless to say, after all the hours spent searching, everyone was elated with this and even caused an early 'picnic' lunch. Afterwards we drove lower and as well as enjoying the warmth and sunshine feasted our eyes on a superb singing **White-tailed Rubythroat** close to the road, as well as both **Streaked** and **Pink-rumped Rosefinches**, and a confiding **Alpine Leaf-warbler**. Leaving here we drove back over the pass and down through thick low cloud and only stopped for birding when we had descended into clearer weather. As we took a short walk along the road, Graham spotted a **Maroon-backed Accentor** feeding unobtrusively on the forest floor, whilst a **Grey-crested Tit** did the opposite and gave 'in your face' views right in front of us. And we ended the day with a **Slaty-backed Flycatcher** before returning to the hotel in Sawan Village.

Day 10 Saturday 9th June

We left the hotel in the rain and headed one last time up into the mighty Balangshan where we headed for the monal site, arriving just before first light. The weather rapidly became clearer and the views across to the other mountains were very impressive indeed but our main focus was the hillside above the road where Tang had seen a **Koklass Pheasant** yesterday. There was nothing doing here and with a couple other tour group showing up we made a hasty retreat from all the chattering and walked along the road. What a good move this turned out to be as first a **Giant Laughingthrush** appeared and then we had amazing views of a **Spotted Bush-warbler** that responded very aggressively and flew across the road a few times, perching right out in the open, calling away. Just around the corner we heard a **Verreaux's Monal-Partridge** calling and spent some time trying to call it in, but when it was spotted on the top of the hill we finally realised



One of the delights of birding on Balangshan is seeing the stunning White-tailed Rubythroat.



Another of the major prizes at Balangshan is Red-fronted Rosefinch. It took some finding this year but we found a pair below the pass.



Alpine Leaf-warbler was seen at a few sites. This is a recent split from Tickell's Leaf-warbler.

it wasn't as close as we thought it was! The view in the scope was very nice and it remained calling for a long time, whilst further along the same ridge a female **Chinese Monal** was also seen. A **Blue-fronted Redstart** was then seen bringing food into its small young in a nest beside the road and as we watched this a fine male **Blood Pheasant** began calling nearby. This must have been one of the most responsive ever as it came straight in and showed very well, even running across the road twice. Then a random bit of tape playing resulted in a superb male **Golden Bush-robin** flying in and perching right in front of us. A **Himalayan Bluetail** also put in an appearance, and a **Chinese Fulvetta** showed briefly but we knew we'd see that later in the trip. So moving further up the mountain we had fine looks at several **Snow Partridges**, giving much better views than before. And when a close pair of **Tibetan Snowcock** were spotted as we drove higher, we knew we were having one of those special days you get once in a while! The pair of snowcocks fed on the grassy slope above the road totally unconcerned by our presence and we soaked up the views, only getting distracted by another pair of **Snow Partridges** and a cracking male **Streaked Rosefinch**. Once over the pass and down the other side of the mountain we made a few brief stops before checking out the traditional site where **Wallcreepers** nest and a fine adult male was feeding just 20 metres above the road as soon as we arrived. However, a flock of 20+ **Black-browed Tits** here was something of a distraction and they were accompanied by a lone **Sichuan Willow Tit**. After lunch in Rilong we set out on the long drive to Maerkang where would stay for the next three nights.

Day 11 Sunday 10th June

We spent the whole day on the slopes of the beautiful pine clad Mengbishan on the hunt for the very difficult **Sichuan Jay** – made even more tricky by the number of other groups and birders going to the same spot and blasting out the call! Needless to say these birds are no longer tape responsive and there was no sign of them throughout our two-day vigil. But there are a number of other special birds here and overall we did very well indeed. We began with an attempt at **Koklass Pheasant** which resulted in a calling male flying right over the leaders' head and past the group. The first of many **Blood Pheasants** to be seen today appeared here as well and got the day off to a good start. So we drove up higher and parked beside the road for our picnic breakfast and as the mist lifted and the day warmed up plenty of birds began to sing, mainly **Buff-barred Warblers** and a few **Alpine Leaf-warblers** amongst others, but the distinctive buzzy song of a **Hume's Warbler** led us to great views of this little sprite. But when a **Crested Tit-warbler** was spotted, everything else paled into insignificance compared to this little beauty. A **Long-tailed Thrush** was then seen and the first of many **Himalayan Bluetails** was much appreciated. After spending several hours on the jay vigil, some respite was needed so we



This cracking male Golden Bush-robin was a nice surprise.



We were lucky to have close views of Tibetan Snowcock a couple of times on Balangshan.



A lovely little group of Black-browed Tits gave prolonged roadside views.

walked down the road and soon found our first **Chinese Fulvetta** and **Slaty-blue Flycatcher**. Then a **Przevalski's Nuthatch** appeared and sat on top of a small pine tree where it remained for several minutes – what a bird! As we watched this a **Black Woodpecker** flew in and landed in a dead tree nearby for a few seconds before launching itself off into the safety of the forest, and even came back for a second view just moments later. There was also a few **Rufous-vented Tits**, **White-winged Grosbeak**, **Goldcrest** and a confiding **Giant Laughingthrush** that refused to go away. As we drove back down the mountain a **Black-capped Kingfisher** was seen perched on telegraph wires beside a fast-flowing stream to end another good day.

Day 12 Monday 11th June

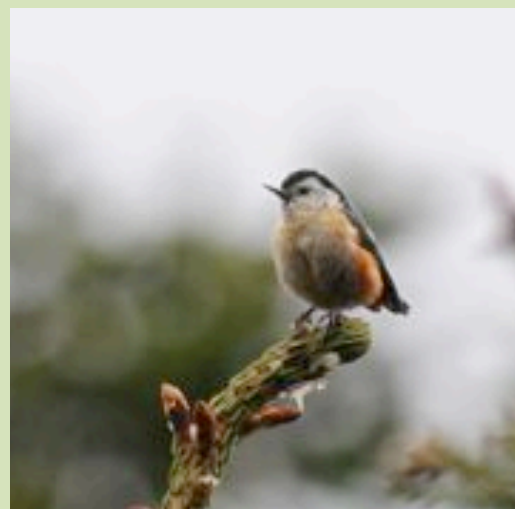
We returned to Mengbishan just after first light and again targeted **Koklass Pheasant** at the same site as yesterday, this time resulting in a pair crossing the road in front of us and scurrying up the slope above the road. And this despite the fact that there were none calling when we arrived and spending 10 minutes in light drizzle with no prospect of success whatsoever – well that's birding! Then we headed higher in search of the elusive jay, which again proved elusive to us despite spending most of the day in the last known spot. Upon arrival we were greeted by a heavy snowstorm which abated after a while and then in total contrast found ourselves in strong sunshine an hour or so later, which was very welcome indeed. We did find a **Bar-tailed Treecreeper** which was new for the trip and had decent and much closer views of several **Verreaux's Monal-partridge** that were calling raucously from the hillside above us. A **Maroon-backed Accentor** also showed to some of the group and we also had further views of a beautiful **Crested Tit-warbler** that was quietly feeding amongst the pine trees. There was also **Rufous-vented Tit**, **Rufous-breasted Accentor** and several **Himalayan Bluetails** amongst others to keep us occupied before we headed down to a small local 'restaurant' for a late noodle lunch. We then spent the afternoon walking along the road but this turned out to be pretty quiet, although we did have nice views of **Yellow-streaked Warbler** and other previously seen species. A quick photo stop at a traditional Tibetan village was made en-route to our hotel later in the afternoon as well, resulting in **Oriental Turtle-dove**, **Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch** and a **Rufous-bellied Woodpecker** being seen.

Day 13 Tuesday 12th June

The drive from Maerkang up to the Tibetan Plateau and our eventual arrival at Roergai always produces a wonderful variety of birds and passes through some of the most amazing scenery of any birding tour. Today was no exception and provided an appreciative group with a mouth-watering selection of very



Blood Pheasant is relatively common in Sichuan and we had wonderful views on Mengbishan.



Przevalski's Nuthatch at Mengbishan.



This was a very confiding Giant Laughingthrush and one of the prizes on Mengbishan.

good birds, with everybody contributing and continuing what had become a very jovial tour. So after driving through a spectacular gorge for many kilometres with a fast-flowing mountain stream tumbling alongside us we had breakfast at a roadside restaurant, and finally gave up counting **White-capped Water-redstarts** when the total exceeded 30 by 7.30am! How can you get any better than an **Ibisbill** being the first goodie of the day? Peter spotted something along the river that warranted a quick 8-point turn and sure enough there it was, on a rocky island mid-stream and is a bird not normally seen on this route through Sichuan. How lucky were we? Our next stop saw us scanning some bushes where **Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch** was present, although the sight of a **Pere David's Laughingthrush** scuttling between the bushes was a little more to our taste. A little further along and we were watching our first **Azure-winged Magpies** flying back and forth across the road, as well as several **Daurian Jackdaws** and some **Oriental Skylarks** in the fields as well. Roadside birding from a moving vehicle is never easy but a nice male **Hodgson's Redstart** prompted a hasty exit from the coach and after a bit of a search we relocated it perched on the telegraph wires, and we also had a **White-throated Dipper** here as well. As the road wound its way ever higher we reached the Tibetan Plateau and the scenery became spectacular with wide open vistas and beautifully shaped hills all the way across the horizon. One of the major birds up here is **Black-necked Crane** and it didn't take long for us to find the first of exactly fifty to be seen today, with one group of fifteen very close to the road. The other key bird is **Hume's Ground-tit** which proved to be quite common the further into the plateau we ventured. Every time we stopped to look at something we found more new birds, so when a **Common Tern** was spotted we also picked up **Citrine Wagtail**, **Brown-headed Gull**, a soaring **Black Stork** found by Graham, and several lovely **Twite**. **Black-eared Kite** was becoming increasingly common, and we continued the raptor theme with a female **Amur Falcon** perched on telegraph wires being something of a surprise, and several huge **Upland Buzzards** as well. However, pride of place went to a stunning **Saker Falcon** spotted by eagle-eyed Peter again and as we scoped it on a telegraph pole we noticed a nest nearby in a small cliff with 3 young. What an unbelievable sighting. But we were definitely on a roll today and when we finally nailed the endemic **White-browed Tit**, as luck would have it a huge **Eurasian Eagle-owl** flew up from the bank above us and into a small quarry where we watched it fly around several times before perching on the top where it was mobbed by a **Kessler's Thrush**! Wow! We also counted 11 **Little Owls** as we drove along, as well as **Black Redstart**, **Siberian Stonechat**, plenty of **Ruddy Shelducks**, and finished the day with a small group of **White-rumped Snowfinches**. In the evening we drove to a restaurant in Roergai and celebrated in style!



Crested Tit-warbler showed very well on Mengbishan. Certainly one of the star birds of any Sichuan tour.



It was a real surprise to find this Ibisbill which proved to be very confiding.



Hume's Ground-tit is a key species on the Tibetan Plateau.



White-browed Tit on the Tibetan Plateau.

Day 14 Wednesday 13th June

It was a cold start to the day as we waited patiently on the road that borders Baxi Forest, an area of mature pine forest at the edge of the Tibetan Plateau. The sun didn't really peak through the blanket of cloud so we really enjoyed our hot coffee this morning as we waited for **Blue Eared-Pheasant** to show. And show it did, but not before a couple of hours of nervous waiting during which time we scanned the openings in the forest and the hillside above the trees. Some **Black-eared Kites** kept us entertained, as did a pair of **Godlewski's Buntings** and **White-throated Redstarts**, but we only half-heartedly glanced at them. Eventually Graham spotted a pair of pheasants slowly walking through the forest below our vantage point and they crossed several open areas on their route and which prompted some frantic directions and some anxious moments until everyone finally got onto them. It was such a relief to finally get this bird and we could then enjoy our birding as Pete picked up a **Three-banded Rosefinch** which Frank had seen earlier, and then a **Eurasian Wryneck** was scoped as well. But when a **Sukatschev's Laughingthrush** began calling we couldn't believe it when it repeatedly showed in some bushes in the narrow valley below us, and even came up to within ten metres of us briefly. Then we drove lower down and walked into the forest where **Chinese Leaf-warblers** were common, and we also saw several **Grey-headed Bullfinches** and a **Golden Eagle** flew over. Returning to Roergai for lunch we checked out a site for **Chinese Grey Shrike** but sadly found a dead adult beside the road. So after lunch we drove to Flower Lake, checking out every **White-rumped Snowfinch** colony along the way for something rarer but only succeeded in finding numerous **Hume's Ground-tits**, and a rather amazing sighting of an adult **Rosy Starling** which is way off course and a vagrant here. At the lake we were soon watching a huge **Tibetan Lark** in the short grass and when it took flight and chased a **Common Redshank** it wasn't that much smaller! A monster indeed! Several new birds for our list were waiting for us on the lake as we scanned from a viewing platform, such as **Common Coot**, **Great Crested Grebe**, **Gadwall**, **Northern Pintail**, **Red-crested** and **Common Pochards**, **Tufted Duck** and **Wood Sandpiper** – just like being back in the UK! Some **Black-necked Cranes** were patrolling the edge of the marsh accompanied by some small chicks, whilst **Greylag Goose** and lots of **Ruddy Shelducks** were also present. Leaving here we continued our snowfinch hunt but just got more cranes, this time 'dancing' quite close to the road and was marvellous to watch. A last-minute decision to recheck the shrike site resulted in Pete again spotting the bird, when a **Chinese Grey Shrike** was scoped on the hillside above us. What a way to finish a day full of quality sightings.



Up on the plateau this Eurasian Eagle-owl was seen being mobbed by Kessler's Thrush.



The majestic Black-necked Crane is a prominent feature on the Plateau.



Sichuan Tit – a recent split from the Songar Tit complex.

Day 15 Thursday 14th June

We returned to Baxi Forest this morning having loaded the luggage aboard the coach and began with a walk in the forest where we followed a narrow trail. After a couple of circuits of the same area we were rather dumbfounded to come across a party of 7 **Sichuan Jays** in a rather unexpected fashion. After all of our searching previously we were understandably elated with this sighting and celebrated in exuberant fashion! So following breakfast we drove lower, seeing another pair of **Blue Eared-pheasants** walking across a grassy slope before walking alongside a small stream through pine forest which was very pleasant as the sun was shining and **Chinese Leaf-warblers** sang all around. Roger managed to catch up with **White-bellied Redstart** and there was also **Slaty-blue Flycatcher**, **Elliot's**, **Pere David's** and **Giant Laughingthrushes**, **Sichuan Tit** and a few other things seen before we reached an open area. Here we scoped an **Olive-backed Pipit** perched on top of a tree and then an unfamiliar warbler song caught our attention. Like a bolt of lightning out of the blue the bird in question turned out to be a totally unexpected **Gansu Leaf-warbler** and a quick burst from the ipod confirmed this. In fact there were another two birds singing in the same small area and we spent quite some time watching them, noting the spotting on the carpal area and single obvious wingbar bordered by black above. Wow! Leaving here we headed back up the valley and some of the group managed flight views of **Chinese Grouse** when Tang and Nick walked through an area of low bushes and pine trees. Then we checked an area of low bushes where a pair of fabulous **White-browed Tit-warblers** performed exceedingly well for us at close quarters, along with *weigoldi* **Dusky Warblers** and **Hodgson's Redstart**. So that was it and time to say goodbye to the Tibetan Plateau and we enjoyed our last looks at **Black-necked Crane** amidst the spectacular scenery, also noting a male **Amur Falcon** on the telegraph wires before dropping lower through the hills. A superb singing male **Siberian Rubythroat** singing from the top of a bush was our last good bird of the day as we continued our journey to the next hotel in our Sichuan adventure.



In a secluded valley we found a few pairs of Gansu Leaf-warbler breeding.



White-browed Tit-warbler (female)



Siberian Rubythroat is always a delight.

Day 16 Friday 15th June

Another morning and another pine forest, this one just south of **Jiuzhaigou**. Again, we had brief views of **Chinese Grouse** for some of the group despite several more hours waiting and searching in great habitat. A **Spotted Bush-warbler** showed very well down to a metre or two, and a **Przevalski's Nuthatch** was also seen, along with **Chinese Fulvetta**, **White-bellied Redstart**, **Long-tailed Thrush** and other more regular birds. But by 10am we had to leave and set out on the long drive north-east towards Shanxi Province, arriving at our hotel later in the evening. All we saw on the drive were lots of **Blue Rock-thrushes**, **Russet Sparrow**, **Brown Shrike**, **Brown-breasted**



Spotted Bush-warbler showed very well.

Bulbul, Vinous-throated Parrotbill and White-browed Laughingthrush during our brief rest stops. However, the countryside was truly spectacular as we drove for several hours through a scenic river valley surrounded by tall peaks and we were aware of how far off the regular tourist/birding circuit we had ventured. How exciting!

Day 17 Saturday 16th June

A four hour drive took us to Yangxian where we checked into a nice hotel and then had a delicious dumpling lunch in a restaurant along the high street. At 2pm we met up with a chap who works for the Crested Ibis Reserve and we drove out into a narrow valley surrounded by pine trees and scrub, and followed a narrow lane alongside the rice fields in search of one of the rarest birds in the world. Classified as Endangered by BirdLife International the tiny population of **Crested Ibis** numbered maybe just 7 individuals in the 1980's has now risen to almost 1,000 individuals (500 individuals according to BirdLife International) and this is the only place in the world you can see wild birds. It is certainly a long way off the regular birding circuit following yesterdays drive and another morning travelling but we were finally here. Our first sighting was of a couple of birds below us in a rice field, an adult and juvenile, and was a huge relief to get to grips with! Amazingly, when they were feeding these huge pale birds could almost disappear when their heads were down but then the adult stood up and walked onto a raised bank revealing his blood red tipped bill and shaggy crest. We worked the rest of the valley and saw up to 21 birds including many fine adults, and on several occasions birds flew past us at close range and some landed in the trees opposite us. One pair even flew down through the valley towards us and the adult landed on the rice paddies immediately below us giving superb views. Definitely one of the major highlights of a tour brimming with quality birds and a fine way to round off proceedings. Other birds here included **Grey-capped Woodpecker, Collared Finchbill, Red-billed Starling, Russet Sparrow** and a very nice **Chinese Sparrowhawk** watched hunting over the rice fields on numerous occasions. So that was it and all that remained was to have a huge banquet in the evening and prepare for the long drive to Chengdu.

Day 18 Sunday 17th June

Yes a long drive to Chengdu indeed, almost ten hours in all but we eventually arrived around 6pm and enjoyed our final meal together before flying back home the following day.

Nick Bray



Chinese Fulvetta at Gonganglin Forest.



En-route to the Crested Ibis site.



So this was what all the fuss was about. A 10 hour drive, an overnight stay and another 4 hour drive to see the rare Crested Ibis.