



A Journey Through the Tibetan Plateau

2 July – 6 August, 2016



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This was truly the trip of a life-time. Indeed it was quite a trip as the following accounts surely indicate. I am enormously indebted to Judith and Alan for the opportunity to design and lead such a very special expedition. It was undoubtedly challenging and, at times tiring. However we got to see a part of the world very rarely viewed by outsiders and some incredible wildlife. The grandeur of the landscapes was enough to provide enough memories forever. We encountered some fabulous birds, some incredible mammals – think huge male Wild Yak and fields of a myriad flowers at every turn. Culturally it was fascinating; clearly our visit coincided with a time of transition. Some of the temples we explored plus the majesty of the Potala Palace were everything we could have hoped for. I should like to extend my deepest thanks to Philip, Mr Lee and Driver Xiao for helping make this journey so remarkable.

DIARY

4 July 2016: Bamboo Park, Chengdu.

5 July: Grounds of Chengdu Panda Breeding Centre; drive to Wolong National Nature (Panda) Reserve; late afternoon at the Lama Monastery. A few hours in the grounds of the Chengdu Panda breeding centre got our birding off to a good start with Vinous-throated Parrotbill and Crested Finchbill to mention but a few. The tiny baby pandas in incubators were rather endearing too.

Emerging from the massive but very modern city of Chengdu our route took us across the flat countryside of the Red Basin, through a very Chinese landscape (or at least one we westerners typically envisage China to be ☺) of an intensively cultivated patchwork of small fields, little villages of old-style cottages and tall clumps of bamboo. Nevertheless, some things seem little changed, whether it be the Chinese peasants working in the fields; the ubiquitous bicycles that still epitomize lowland China or the villagers buying and selling from tiny market stalls. Along the way we encountered a few open country species such as Common Cuckoo, Long-tailed Shrike and Red-rumped and Barn swallows.

As we passed through the rapidly modernizing towns and cities of Sichuan, complete with high-rise buildings and an incredible amount of on-going construction, we gained an inkling of just how massive China's economic boom

actually is. Even the roads are a surprise to newcomers, with long stretches of world-class expressway and some absolutely amazingly good, well lit and well sign-posted tunnels!

Soon after leaving the plains of the Red Basin the pace of our travel slowed. Not least thanks to a massive traffic jam! Here we entered another world—one of towering rock-faces, spectacular crags, and beautiful, cloud-wreathed temperate forests. Our journey shortly after reaching the foothills provided a brutal reminder of the horrendous earthquake that took place right here just a few years ago. The enormity of what the Chinese are attempting to engineer is nothing short of astonishing. In the meantime the road into Wolong is nothing short of diabolical and at times scary.



After arriving at our relatively attractive accommodations within the Wolong National (Panda) Reserve. After settling into our surprisingly pleasant rooms we

explored along the Pitiao River where we encountered the lovely White-capped Redstart alongside the smaller Plumbeous Redstart and Brown Dippers oozling midstream. An area of secondary and plantation evergreen woodland, at 2,265m, surrounding the very attractive Lama Monastery gave us a good if somewhat wet introduction to birding in Wolong and the joys of *Phylloscopus* warblers.

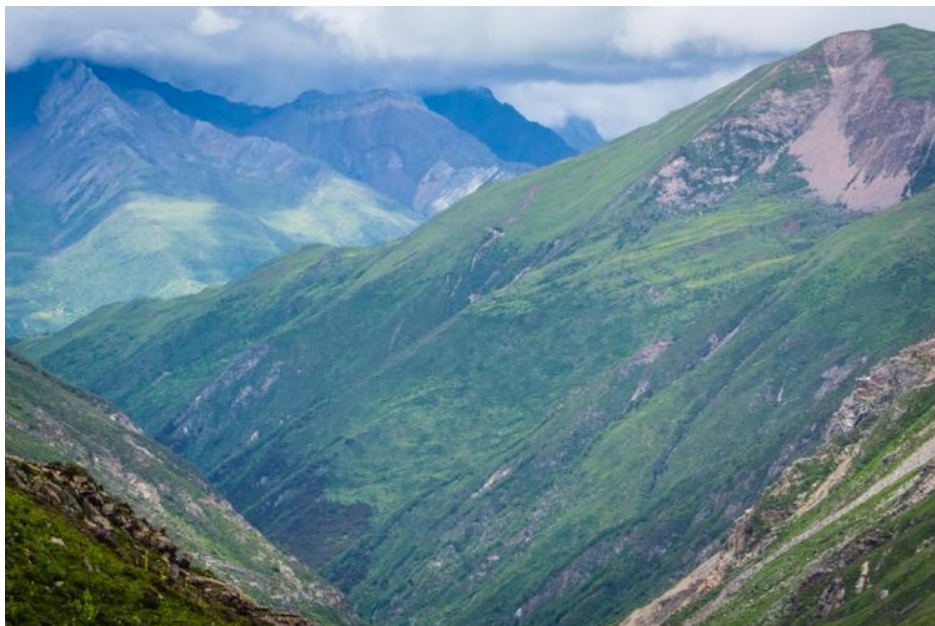
6 July: Balangshan, Wolong. Wolong is one of those places that, at sometime in your life, you just have to visit; it is truly special. World famous as a result of the World Wide Fund for Nature's research and conservation efforts to save the Giant Panda from extinction. Here George Schaller carried out his pioneering work on Giant Pandas in this beautiful region of forested mountains, bamboo thickets, alpine meadows and jagged, snow-covered peaks. If nothing else, the drive up to Balang Shan Pass at 4,500m, surrounded by immense, towering, snow-dusted crags and satin blue skies is "worth the price of admission." From our base at circa 1,900m, we departed early to arrive at the tunnel road surrounded by the calls of Koklass and White-eared pheasants and dense cloud. However we persisted and thanks to some great spotting by Alan we enjoyed superlative views of a covey of White-eared Pheasants working their way upslope. As luck would have it this was a fabulous day in this magnificent and very important reserve. We spent much of the morning working the old road next to the tunnel on Balang Shan at 3,504m, before spending the remainder of the day walking down to 3,200m. Among the many other highlights included spectacular meadows of wild flowers; a male Firethroat, male Golden Bush-Robin, White-maned Serow and Vinaceous Rosefinch.



7 July: AM Lama Monastery area; PM hillside track above Wolong accommodations. A rather wet morning was spent birding the scrub, secondary and evergreen woodland surrounding the attractive Lama Monastery. Highlights included: White-naped Yuhina, Yellow-streaked Warbler together with several



male Gould's Sunbirds. After lunch we explored a track that took us through a most interesting mosaic of farmland and secondary woodland above our accommodations in Wolong. Highlights here included: Crested Finchbill, a family of Daurian Redstarts and some fabulous flowering plants.



8 July: AM Balang Shan; PM drive to Maerkang via Mengbi Shan. Another morning birding from the old road alongside the tunnel on Balang Shan which was rather marred by heavy fog. After breakfast we headed up towards the pass with various stops along the way. As soon as we were free of the cloud we stopped at 3,650m where we immediately found a superb Tibetan Partridge. The stony, Yak-grazed mountains were alive with a multitude of wild flowers such that with every bend (hairpin) we gasped anew as seemingly more spectacular species revealed themselves. At 4,000m we finally saw our first Himalayan Griffon and then at 4,384m we screeched to halt to enjoy three incredible male Grandalas, an Alpine Accentor and a male Red-fronted Rosefinch – purportedly the highest elevation breeding passerine. Wending our way past a throng of domestic tourists at the pass we gradually descended through a series of sharp, switchbacks, huge craggy mountains soaring above us and thanks to Judith a fine specimen of a male Blue Sheep silhouetted on the skyline.

Road works in Rilong delayed us for 40 minutes before driving on through a series of very attractive villages before ascending Mengbi Shan and finally dropping into the attractive County Town (read city) of Maerkang. Our grand hotel over looked the tree-lined river and main road lined with the most ornate street lamps. Today's drive passed the magnificent Yaomei Feng (Mt Siguniang or Four-Sisters) and on through gorge country and old growth coniferous forest was spectacular and we were constantly seeing interesting birds. As we headed further and further away from the influence of the Red basin and its all-pervading culture of Han Chinese we quickly found ourselves in areas with a distinctive Tibetan influence. How nice it was then to find that we were staying at such an elegant and comfortable hotel quite a contrast to the miserable hotel I stayed at in 2013. Philip's ability to find good food and great places to stay is impressive.



9 July: Mengbi Shan. With the entire day at our disposal we drove to a small Yak herders farm located just below the summit. Thereafter we spent the entire day walking slowly down through some lovely old growth forest. Watching the Yak herder family going about their chores; tying up the Yak calves and yelling at the bigger animals was quite a treat. Initially it was rather cold but bird activity gradually increased as the sun appeared. Seemingly out of the blue a magnificent Verreaux's Monal Partridge ran right up to us in delayed response to our tape. Fabulous but all too quick. Happily another pair provided prolonged views as they fed nonchalantly in the forest below. Here too we were treated to fine views of smart Himalayan Bluetails, White-throated Redstart, a group of Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinches kept us company during breakfast whilst further down the road a surprise in the form of a territorial male Red-browed Rosefinch was a nice addition. But overall birding was fairly slow, perhaps most birds were either on nests on attending young and thus especially cryptic.



10 July: Drive Maerkang to Roergai via Hongyuan. This morning we drove out from Maerkang and onto the Tibetan Plateau proper. Passing through some incredible landscapes we followed the impressive Suomo Gorge and its Mingjiang River toward its source via the Zhegu Pass. The unfolding scenic marvels seemed to go on forever with the landscape and the birds changing perceptibly as forests steadily gave way to rolling grasslands and marshes, while the houses took on a distinctly Tibetan architecture. At 10.30hrs, 3,395m we stopped to investigate the old Kang-mar Monastery and the massive rebuilding which was taking place all around it. Indeed a culture in transition. At 3,615m, 32°

16° 56.3' N, 102° 29' 30.4" E we stopped by a patch of scrub and quickly dug out a small mixed flock including: several Dusky Warblers, a handsome male Godlewski's Bunting and our sole Chinese Fulvetta of the entire expedition.



Climbing on to the Tibetan Plateau proper we began soon to encounter yak herders and their charges—real Tibetan cowboys. However, as we were to find a several sites during our journey Chinese summer holidays were in full swing. Garish tent after gaudy tent beckoned potential punters with the opportunity to go horse riding and experience the real Tibet! Happily we soon escaped all this and turned on to a small road, which led to a most wonderful lunch site and an equally fine overlook. Perched on a hill surrounded by wall to wall fields of wild flowers with a 360° view of a broad valley with a decidedly boggy bottom and home to a pair of vociferous nesting Redshanks. No sooner said than done than our first Upland Buzzards hove into view. Truly enormous raptors, we would become very familiar with these birds over the next while. Other birds we recorded here included Horned larks, Siberian Stonechat and Gray-backed Shrike.

Continuing north across this southeastern corner of the Tibetan Plateau we passed through the township of Hongyuan and the first bend of the Yellow River before hitting some truly deplorable road works, which went on for nearly 200km. However, despite this unpleasantness it was hard to take our eyes off the snow-covered peaks and rolling grasslands as every sweeping bend in the road revealed grander and grander scenes. Here the open grasslands of the Tibetan

plateau, crossed by meandering rivers, and dotted with marshes were graced by a deep blue sky that is so typical of remote, high-altitude regions. We spent much of the day exploring these Tibetan grasslands and freshwater lakes. Some of the characteristic birds that we encountered included: Upland Buzzard, Ruddy Shelduck, Ring-necked Pheasant, Common Redshank, Common Cuckoo, the uncommon endemic Chinese Gray Shrike, Horned Lark, Oriental Skylark, Hume's Groundpeckers (now re-characterised as Ground-tits) and our first Tibetan Fox. In some ways the biggest surprise was our delightful and very unusual hotel; cosy, comfortable and warm located on the edge of the less the prepossessing township of Roergai (Zoige); 3,450m.



11 July: Baxi Valley. This lovely valley set at 3,100m is neatly hidden away at the very edge of the Tibetan Plateau. An attractive mix of traditional farm and farmland and extensively evergreen forested slopes supported a number of good birds including: fabulous views of a male Blue-eared Pheasant, an equally stunning male Bevan's or Gray-headed Bullfinch, the endemic Sichuan Tit, Chinese White-browed Rosefinch, another dapper White-throated Redstart, a very territorial Slaty-backed Flycatcher, Rufous-vented Tit and more Elliot's Laughingthrushes. Lunch in a nearby village before yesterday's severe bang on the head (I walked into the open hatchback of our vehicle) obliged us to return early to our attractive lodging.



12 July: AM drive Roergai to Diebu Sika Reserve; PM Diebu Sika Reserve.

From Roergai we headed north on the G213 on a rather cold, damp and desolate morning. Our first snowfinches created our breakfast along with their co-inhabitants the widespread and oft abundant Plateau or Black-lipped Pika. Much to our surprise there was an enormous gathering of Yurts, Yak herders, Yak and motorbikes. Possibly numbering in the several thousand. An amazing site and sound. As we continued north it began to rain, then sleet and finally hail and snow making driving rather interesting especially as we had to negotiate gargantuan herds of goats/sheep being driven along the same road. Gratefully turning off at Hongxingxiang we descended an impressive gorge – hereafter referred to as Diebu Gorge, to another Tibetan village and monastery at 2,524m; 34° 07' 44.0" N, 103° 04' 08.6" E. A brisk walk down to the river found us our only Pere David's Rock Squirrel in addition to: a single male Great Spotted Woodpecker, White-crowned Redstart, Plumbeous Redstart, many Large-billed Leaf-Warblers, 20 Daurian Jackdaw, Azure-winged Magpie and a Hoopoe.

A short distance beyond this stop we turned off to the southeast onto a small farm road and lovely little valley that formed part of the Dieby Sika reserve (2,500m). Birding along the road through a mixture of farmland, scrub and blocks of evergreen woodland we found a good mix of birds including: Chestnut Thrush, Elliot's Laughingthrush, an adult Gray-backed Shrike attending two begging young; and a couple of Oriental Turtle Doves. But undoubtedly the highlight was our first Sika Deer, five grazing unconcernedly on nearby slopes. Further along

the valley bottom we encountered our first White-throated Dipper, a pair of lovely Long-tailed Minivets and several Himalayan Marmots.



Then it was time to get to the heart of things, turning up a steeply graded track we climbed to 2,698m and a very peaceful lunch spot. Barely had we gotten out of the vehicles than a superb male Three-banded Rosefinch sat up for our delectation; 34° 03' 44.0" N, 103° 05' 1" E. How I wished we could have been here early in the morning as it was quite warm and clearly most birds were taking a siesta. After a leisurely afternoon we spent the afternoon birding back down the road through a mosaic of 3m tall shrubs, scrub, open grassland and patches of evergreen woodland. Some of the birds we recorded here included: Common Pheasant - fabulous, the superb Giant Laughingthrush, Common Cuckoo, a territorial pair of Godlewksi's Bunting, overhead two White-throated Needletail in addition to large numbers of unidentified swifts, 4-5 Salim Ali's Swifts, a lovely pair of Daurian Redstarts, several Chinese Leaf-Warblers and to end the day nicely a group of seven Spectacled Parrotbills. However, the day wasn't completely done and as we headed into the city of Diebu we enjoyed fine views of an Ibisbill along an adjacent stream 34° 05' 23.2" N, 103° 09' 34.9" E.

13 July: Drive Diebu to Jiuzhi. Driving back up through Diebu Gorge we passed through an interesting area of Poplars, Willows and big scrub, which may repay future investigation. A couple of brief stops produced a handful of birds including a fine male Long-tailed Rosefinch and one of our only Spotted



Nutcrackers of the trip. Ascending once more on to the Tibetan Plateau we headed north through Helongxingxiang before turning west to the township of Jiuzhi (3,650m). Initially we passed through rolling green hills with the occasional jagged peak coupled with Yak-grazed grasslands with scattered low bushes of startling yellow flowers. The middle part of our journey followed a broad, winding river at which we stopped for a lovely luncheon at 3,439m. Here we were treated to a flock of nine young Common Mergansers disporting themselves along the river whilst Whiskered Terns patrolled overhead. Marmots gamboled in the fields whilst skylarks and Horned Larks played nearby. A large roadside cutting across from us hosted nesting Salim Ali's Swifts and Pale Martins and overhead six enormous Himalayan Griffons patrolled. Further along the road we stopped at a rocky patch of hills where four courting Robin Accentors and six Himalayan Griffons were easy on the eye. Thereafter we battled with some brutal road works whilst still admiring the vast, vast landscape, occasional traditional Yurts and scattered herds of Yak. The vastness, so few people and very few power lines – bliss.

14 July: Drive Jiuzhi to Beiwu (Baiyuxiang). As my notes state 'an absolutely fabulous day'. Departing early just as dawn was barely breaking we gradually climbed to an overlook at 4,084m. From our perch we could look out over a broad valley bisected by a tumbling stream and surrounded by towering, jagged mountains belonging to an un-named massif. A handful of yurts and yak at the head of the valley appeared to be the only sign of human existence. For a while there weren't even any trucks. A Black-necked Crane flew over announcing the

start of new day whilst pikas vied with darling Rufous-necked Snowfinchs for our scraps. And down among the rounded, orange, lichen covered boulders and innumerable flowering alpines, three Brandt's Mountain Finches strutted alongside a gloriously coloured male Streaked Rosefinch. Add to this three Lammergeiers, a juvenile Upland Buzzard, ten Himalayan Griffons, six Groundpeckers, several Alpine Warblers, a Woolly Hare, one Robin Accentor, a White-tailed Rubythroat and several diminutive Pink-rumped Rosefinches and it was quite a scene.



Reluctantly dragging ourselves away from this oh so memorable site we climbed to 4,100m at nesting Red-billed Choughs before descending to a lovely road valley backed by snowcapped mountains and lunch. At 3540m our first Saker Falcon put on a great show as did the pikas among the innumerable wild flowers.

Happily today was also not such a long drive and we had time to investigate a small valley, hereafter known as Beiwu Valley; 3,920m; 33° 18' 38.2" N, 100° 45' 08.5" E. Flat bottomed with marshy patches and a small tinkling stream and surrounded by steep, treeless mountains. Highlights here included: several Twite, a White-browed Tit bathing in the stream, two soaring Golden Eagles alongside Lammergeier and Himalayan Griffons.



Fortunately the accommodations were not as bad as Philip had warned, nevertheless the outdoor privy was pretty dire..... Going to dinner was quite an adventure wandering among the long line of massive overland trucks and 'rough-necks'. It really did feel like the Wild West.



15 July: AM 'Beiwu Valley' then drive to Dari. Returning for breakfast to the Beiwu Valley we dug out our only Tibetan or Kozlov's Butning of the trip along with nesting Black-winged Snowfinches among others. Returning to town we stopped to take in the massively walled and newly built monastery. Driving out of town we quickly found a lunch spot overlooking the Maqu River; 3,653m; 33° 08' 06.4" N, 100° 41' 35.0" E - herd of Yak wading across the river; an Ibisbill flying by whilst circa 20 Griffons soared at eyelevel - sublime. The nearby scrub was disappointing with just two Kessler's Thrushes and a maybe Pink-tailed Finch. The rest of the day was spent doing serious battle with trucks, insane motorists and diabolical road works but we made ... just. Fortunately the hotel in Dari was astonishingly good as was the food at the nearby restaurant.



16 July: Drive Dari to Maduo. Departing Dari at 06.00 we headed out in freezing cold on Provincial Road S205. We followed a broad river valley for 60km+ before stopping at a handy pullover on a slope above the river. As the sun slowly emerged above the ridgeline hordes of pikas and lesser numbers of voles (cf Blyth's Mountain Vole) emerged to sun themselves at the entrance to their burrows. Perhaps not surprisingly 20+ Upland Buzzards were counted in the stretch prior to our breakfast stop.

A further 20km+ brought us into a seemingly rich area of pools associated with a series of small streams at 4,256m. Here we found our only Black Storks of the trip, four in total. Three Black-necked Cranes plus one Red and one Tibetan Fox, 6 Upland Buzzards, Brown-headed Gull, Wood Sandpiper and a single Hoopoe

and Barn Swallow; 34° 12' 34.3" N, 99° 13' 26.6" E. On the other side of the road a gentle slope was covered in flowering plants including a rare *Mecanopsis* sp. From hereon the country was notably drier with increasing amounts of sand culminating in the appearance of low sand-dunes. At 10.15 hrs we turned off on to a dirt track that bisected an extensive low grassy, rocky (small) plain surrounded by massive areas of Plateau Pika burrows. Two pairs of Lesser (Mongolian) Sand Plover quickly had us out of the vehicle and much to the complete astonishment of a couple of locals wandering by we started setting up 'scopes and cameras to photograph these gorgeous birds; so nice to see them in full breeding plumage along with their teeny, weeny chicks.



Further on we entered a relatively narrow valley with steep slopes to the west hosting an active nest with an incumbent young Upland Buzzard; a pair of Little Owls; Robin Accentor and several Groundpeckers. It was getting decidedly hot so we elected to stop for lunch and no sooner had we done so than an Alpine Weasel appeared. For the next 30 minutes or so we watched in fascination as it hunted pikas; in and out of burrows; grabbing its luckless prey before zooming back to its burrow where it presumably was feeding young. Not only a fabulous mammal to see but to experience its hunting prowess was quite something (4,310m; 34° 22' 19.1 N, 99° 13' 19.9" E). Hereafter this site is known as **Weasel Valley**.

Reluctantly taking our leave of this lovely area we continued on towards Maduo. As we crossed today's highest pass at 4,680m there to the north in all her glory was the sacred mountain of Amne Machin, once thought to be the highest

mountain on our planet. The Amne Machin Peak (the highest point of its eponymous range) is located in Maqên County of Golog Prefecture. Its elevation is estimated to 6,282 metres (20,610 ft) and it is ranked number 23 in height among the mountain peaks of China. A part of the range around its highest peak has been declared a section of the Sanjiangyuan ("Sources of Three Rivers") National Nature Reserve. This mountain was known to the ancient Chinese as Mount Jishi (積石山, 积石山, *Jīshíshān*). The massif had long been considered a sacred mountain and a place of pilgrimage, when before the Communist 'liberation' up to 10,000 Golok people would make the 120-mile circumambulation of the mountain each year. The first European to describe the mountain was the British explorer Brigadier-General George Pereira on his expedition on foot from Peking to Lhasa of 1921-2, sometimes reckoned one of the great geographical discoveries of the twentieth century. Pereira, who saw Amne Machin from about 70 miles away, thought its "height must be at least 25,000 feet [7,600 m], and might be anything; it dwarfed all other mountains near it."



However, the massif remained unclimbed until 1960. The Amne Machin mountains had been overflowed by a few American pilots who overestimated the elevation to 30,000 feet (9,100 m). A 1930 article of the National Geographic estimated the peak elevation to 28,000 feet [8,500 m] according to the report of Joseph Rock, an American botanist and explorer who, despite death threats from the Golog Tibetans, had ventured to within 80 km of the mountain. For a while, the mountains were considered as a possible place for a peak higher than Mount Everest. While Rock only downgraded his estimate publicly in 1956 to "not much

more than 21,000 feet", he did give a detailed description of the peaks: The Am-nye Ma-Chhen Range has three prominent peaks; the southern pyramid (second highest) is called Spyian-ras-gzigs (Chenrezig), the Avalokitesvara, of which the Dalai Lama is believed to be an incarnation; the central *lower peak*, a smaller pyramid, Am-nye Ma-Chhen; and the northern, which is the highest, a huge, round, broad dome called dGra-hdul-rlung-shog (Dra-dul-lung-shog) *Victor of enemies wind wing* ... The dome in the north is the highest part, but it is not so imposing as the large pyramid at the southern end. By 1980 Anyi Machen had been resurveyed at 6,282 metres (20,610 ft). (Wikipedia).

Continuing along the S205 we eventually came to a T intersection with National Road G214. Turning south we immediately began to encounter our first Kiang along with groups of Tibetan Antelope. From there to Maduo we just couldn't help ourselves beguiled as we were by this charismatic beats. Wonderful!

Our accommodation in Maduo was something of a pleasant surprise despite taking my skull off as I climbed the stairs to my room. Phillip really does a fine job of finding us the best possible accommodations in some incredibly out of the way places.

17 July: Drive Maduo to Quamalai (Quamarleb): Soon after leaving the village of Maduo we headed southwards, through a spectacular mosaic of wetlands. A huge and seemingly un-named lake to our west was our first stop. I see now that to the west of this lake there are two incredibly enormous lakes, Eling and Zhaling further to the west, which quite literally dwarf our the un-named lake. Too bad it was not possible to investigate the two giant lakes. This first lake was a long, narrow waterbody (north to south) and paralleled our road, the G214. At its



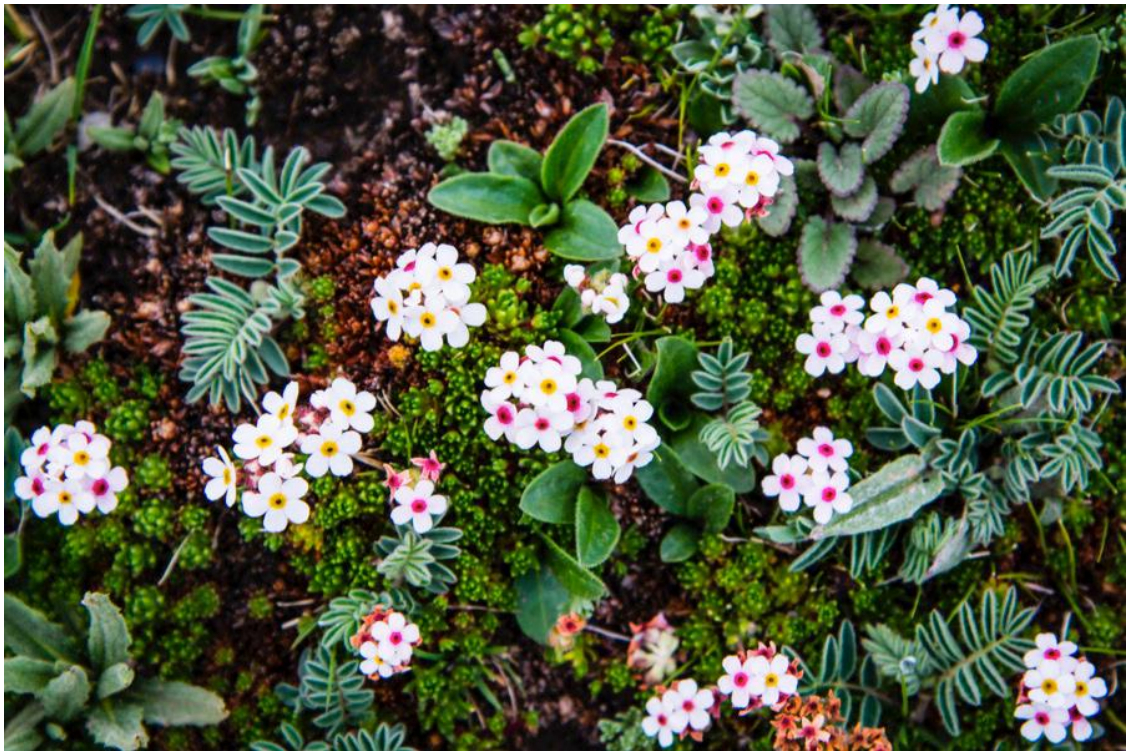
southern end in what appeared to be shallows we observed 800-1,000 Great Crested Grebes attending a colony of circa 400 nests. Other waterbirds recorded here included: Bar-headed Goose, Great Cormorant, Redshank, Common Sandpiper, Pallas's Gull and Brown-headed Gull; 4,234m, 34° 49' 56.9 N, 98° 08' 04.0" E. A second lake harboured: 7 Bar-headed Geese, 20 Ruddy Shelduck, 10 Lesser Sand Plovers, 70 Redshank, 2 Wood Sandpiper, 3 Brown-headed Gull.

We then descended in to vast, broad, ill-defined valley speckled with patches of open water and marshes. Typically accessing the wetlands was very difficult to say the least but with the aid of our 'scopes we were able to see something of biodiversity of the area thanks to the impressive uplifted section of the new road we were travelling on. Nevertheless the area was so vast and the distances so great that we could only glimpse a small proportion of the waterbirds present: One pair of Great Crested Grebes – nesting; one Little Grebe, one male Ferruginous Duck, 2 pairs Black-necked Cranes, 6 Common Coot, Redshank, Wood Sandpiper, 20 Common Terns – nesting and a solitary Citrine Wagtail; 4,235m, 34° 38' 43.7" N, 98° 02' 07.3" E.

Thereafter we continued south, remaining on the G218 before turning northwest onto Provincial Road S308. A magnificent but rather intimidating storm greeted us as we descended a series of hairpins into a delightful, flower enriched valley before entering the township of Quamalai (Quamarleb) at 4,200m and our room for the night.



18 July: Drive Quamalai to Wudaoliang: In a trip that conjured so many superlatives this may well have been our 'finest hour'. Departing Maduo none too soon we immediately headed NNW onto the seemingly infrequently travelled Sanian Road. After crossing a near dry, braided riverbed we quickly began to ascend through a series of increasingly, dry, austere 'hills' crossing three passes in succession: 4,564m (06.46hrs), 4,569m (07.21 hrs) and 4,569 (07.40 hrs). It was a truly wild landscape, completely devoid of trees or even low shrubs and bitterly cold as the sun was not yet above the horizon. Albeit not grand in the sense of the spectacular jagged peaks we had recently become accustomed to it was nevertheless very imposing, perhaps even daunting. Ancient, smooth, rounded ridges, one after the other surrounded us on all sides marked only by the steely colour of massive scree slopes. Shortly thereafter we crossed yet another pass at 4,369m before descending to a broad, flat valley abounding with the most exquisite array of Alpine Plants; the perfect spot for breakfast. Very few birds were present but who cared in the face of such alpine luxuriance.



Continuing on our merry way at 09.40 hrs we passed the village (small town?) of Yege at 4,150m. A classic of its type; not be too unkindly the architecture of these communities is soulless and are greatly at odds with the relative charm of the traditional Yurts which still persist in some parts. But I wonder for how much longer. Communism can be so oppressive; completely lacking in joy and *joie de vivre*. The landscape continued in much the same genre with rather few birds or mammals except for the occasional small herd of domestic Yak. Braided rivers bounded by eroding 15m cliffs upon which our road was perched added some

variation to the theme. Despite the seeming lack of biodiversity and possibly, one might conclude, drabness of the scene I, nevertheless found the utter peace and serenity coupled with the sense of real wilderness quite overwhelming. Patches of different wild flowers and interesting leaf shapes garnered our attention as we crossed more high passes: 4,521m, 4,511m and our highest of the day at the rather breathless 4,644m 34° 68' 29.4 N, 95° 12' 27.4" E. Here and there we encountered huge colonies of pikas, mostly Plateau Pika which in combination with over-grazing by the herds of domestic Yak appeared to cause irreparable damage to the landscape.



Continuing north we descended to 4,369m and a small lake and marshy area; an ideal spot for lunch. Gazing north and west one had a sense of the entire world opening before us; far to the north the massive, ice-capped Kunlun Range dominated whilst to the west the vast Changtang Reserve disappeared in to the far horizon. But in the foreground lay a fabulous array of marshes and lakes amidst a quite indescribably vast plain of sandy grasslands adorned with herds of Chiru, Kiang and Wild Yak. Surely one of the most impressive sights I have ever witnessed.

After a relaxed lunch among snowfinches and Black-necked Cranes we meandered on, stopping wherever the opportunity beckoned (the road barriers made stopping very difficult) for the likes of Chiru, increasingly magnificent landscapes and at long last Wild Yak. Watching a magnificent bull thundering around in a cloud of dust rounding up his harem was quite a spectacle.

Philip's car was found to have a slow puncture so we limped into Budongquan where thank heavens there was a very efficient tire-fixit place. Taking one look at the 'accommodation' and cognizant of the complaints of how noisy others had found the Budongquan 'hotel' we decided to head south for another 120km to the tiny community of Wudaoliang. Despite the lack of running water or usable bathroom the food as had so often been the case was quite good and we secured a good night's sleep at 4,575m.



19 July: Drive Wudaoliang via Mt. Yuzhu Feng and the Kunlun Range to Golmud. Departing as soon as we could we retraced our steps back up the road towards Budongquan. Kiang, Chiru and the occasional Wild Yak began to appear in number so we found a safe place to pull off the road and enjoyed our usual 'al fresco' breakfast whilst photographing Kiang and whatever else came our way.

Surmounted by the ice-capped Kunlun Range to our north the landscape here was virtually devoid of vegetation with only a sparse covering of low grasses and flowering plants. Thus it was especially impressive to see that such habitat could support so many large herbivores. Herds of Kiang seemed very unconcerned by our presence and permitted quite a close approach. Presumably a legacy of the strictly enforced no hunting laws.

Continuing north and east we hurried through Budongquan before slowly climbing the slopes of the massive Kunlun Range with the gigantic ice-cone of

Yuzhu Feng loaming above us. Incredible views of this massive, massive mountain seemingly so close to us of this really were rather overwhelming. Equally huge road works reinvented the definition of chaos as trucks and cars literally fought it out (and became mired) in their efforts to forge ahead. Amusing if not so scary and stressful. We eventually crossed the pass that bisects the Kunlun Range and descended to the strikingly austere, dry and very arid north slopes. Finding a place to pull off for lunch we supped in the shadow of mighty Yuzhu Feng and the Xining to Lhasa Railway. Interesting to note that at this point it is operated by electricity but after Gonghe it switches to diesel operation due to the extreme cold and icing that prevails in winter.



For the remainder of the afternoon the landscape was strikingly barren and dry with just the huge braided riverbed supporting any vegetation. A wander through a rare patch of scrub produced a pair of Black redstarts attending their young; an interesting blue-headed grasshopper and a bejeweled, tiny, sky-blue butterfly. I am sometimes so frustrated that I cannot begin to put a name to these creatures. Similarly I wish there was more time to investigate these areas more thoroughly, however, it was hot and as always we had a long way to go. Looking over my images now I am reminded just how stark the landscape was; sharp jagged rather ugly mountains devoid of any vegetation surrounded us on all sides and gradually formed a river valley or gorge into which we slowly descended. A couple of short stops produced few if any birds or mammals but some very interesting plants and grasses. Then it was back to coping with the lines of gigantic trucks which insist on overtaking in the most frighteningly and dangerous

manner. China's roads are undoubtedly superb, possibly among the best in the world – when they are absolutely completed no overlooked holes; piles of sand or concrete blocks BUT and it's a big but they standard of driving in this country is, in my opinion, the very worst in the world.

Golmud, located at the very southeastern edge of the Talimakan Desert is another massive city and something of a hub for transport heading to Lhasa and Tibet or north to Urumqi. As such it boasted a quite nice hotel with spacious, comfortable rooms, running hot water and a decent shower and loo. Joy!



20 July: Golmud. After so long on the road without a break we elected to take the day off and enjoy the opportunity to relax and recuperate.

21 July: Drive Golmud to Shazhuycum. Departing really a tad too late given how hot and dry it was, we headed east along the G109. With the ever present Kunlun Range towering over us to the south and the seemingly endless Talimakan Desert to the north we finally found a suitable turn-off to the north at 09.30, through a field of wind-turbines Grrrrr (36° 23' 27.2" N, 95° 24' 07.2" E) and quickly finding ourselves in classic desert vegetation. Knee high scrub with small dunes forming around tiny hillocks of Tamarisk. Three superb Henderson's Ground Jays scurrying over the ground as only they can were a delight. Hundreds of burrows suggested that night-spotting here might be worthwhile otherwise our only critter of note was our first Desert Wheatear. Driving further on we passed through a rather bare area before entering an area of very dense

1.5m high Tamarisk; some horribly goat degraded area before finding ourselves in the small Wuzihu wetland reserve; 2,759m; 36° 23' 27.2" N, 95° 22' 41.0" E. The selection of birds here, albeit small, suggests that this may be a valuable oasis for both resident and migrant birds. We recorded: 1 Aquila Eagle sp; 1 Chinese Pond-Heron; 1 Eurasian Coot; 1 Redshank; 10 Common Terns; European Collared Dove; 70+ Common Swift; 6 Isabelline Shrikes; 1 male Oriental Greenfinch; 3 Hume's Short-toed Larks and 21 Citrine Wagtails in non-breeding plumage. However, the surprise was a pair of the recently described Tarim Babbler. What a neat bird.



Back on G109 we continued our journey east still accompanied by the Talimakan to our north and the Kunlun Range, stark, austere in dramatic shades of brown and grey, to the south. Midway through the afternoon we passed an area where great lines of Poplars had been planted at the edge of the Talimakan: 40m north of the road and circa 5-6 lines ca 250m apart marched across the horizon.

Nearing our destination a stop at some 'good-looking' scrub produced surprisingly few birds but our first geckos of the trip. Descending through increasingly better-watered landscape we found our selves passing through some very impressive farmland before entering the city of Shazhuyucum and our home for the night.

22 July: Drive Shazhuyucum via ‘Blue Sheep Valley’ and Donggai Lake to Huashixiazhen. Today we really were in unknown country with the road we followed still in the process of being cut through south to Donggai Cuona Lake. However, Mr Lee seemed to know where he was going so we were in reliable hands. After a seemingly interminable drive and a bit of a near-death experience we finally pulled off into a peaceful, bird rich valley. Just what the doctor ordered.



A delightful morning was spent birding the valley bottom with its small stream and dense 2m high shrubs and nearby cliffs. I doubt we really did the site justice and I would love to go back and camp there for a couple of days. Nevertheless we did manage to find several very nice birds and mammals including: our first Brown Accentor – singing its heart out; three pairs of Common Swifts attending nests in the cliff face; several dramatically coloured Streaked Rosefinches; a flock of six White-browed Tit-Warblers – a pair of adults with their young; our sole Water Pipit of the trip; a pair of Black Redstarts; several Twite; great looks at Chinese Gray Shrike; Black-winged Snowfinches, also nesting in the cliff face; two flighty female Mongolian Finches; Hill Pigeons and Red-billed Choughs also attending nests on ledges on the cliff face; an adult Blanford's Snowfinch feeding young; both Lammergeier and Himalayan Griffon; 30+ White-lipped Deer; numerous Tibetan Gazelle; a lone Wolf on the skyline; many Kiang and a herd of 34 Bharal or Blue Sheep: 3,215m; 35° 54' 05.3 N, 97° 59' 38.8" E. This site is hereafter referred to as **‘Blue Sheep Valley’**



Of course we had to move on, heading south we were astonished to round a bend in the road and be met by the sight of arguably one of the most beautiful lakes imaginable. The colours of the surrounding hills and mountains, laced with ice contrasted exquisitely with the deep satin blue of the lake waters. Thronged with waterbirds it was all too frustrating that a fearsomely barbed-wire fence prevented us from properly investigating the area. Nevertheless the site of Black-necked Cranes and so many waterbirds was a sight to behold and in such a gorgeous landscape.

After negotiating some 'interesting' road works we eventually made it our quite attractive hotel in the town of Huashixiazhen, located at the junction of National Road G214 and Provincial Road S205, which we had passed through on the 16th.

23 July: Drive Huashixiazhen via Er La Pass to Gonghe. Departing very early and having yesterday completed an enormous loop we now found ourselves heading northeast on National Road G214. Ascending a modest pass at 4,300m replete with Tibetan Gazelle we descended to a rather disgusting truck stop 'beloved' of many a birder wanting to explore nearby Er La Pass. At 4,600m it was nearly the highest point of the trip and decidedly uninspiring. Despite the trucks, public toilet, savage dogs and masses of yaks we persisted and much to our astonishment and no little delight quickly found our primary target, the huge Tibetan or Roborowski's Rosefinch. Surprisingly confiding we were able obtain some quite respectable images in addition to watching the antics of Tibetan Snowfinches attending their young. It was also a fun moment to watch the how

the herder family (men and women) cut out their goats/sheep and handle such potential dangerous animals. Those horns are not trivial.



From this high point we gradually made our way to the township of Gonghe via an old and largely traffic free mountain road made redundant by one of China's



spectacular tunnels. Birding was slow but it was pleasant to be able to just relax and take in our surroundings and whatever plants and birds or mammals happened by. Descending to the flat lands at 3,125m we turned north onto a farm road through knee-high grassland. Mid-afternoon is not an ideal time of the day for birding but nevertheless we found several new birds for the list including: Greater Short-toed Lark, an all too brief Mongolian Lark, several Horned Larks and good numbers of Isabelline Wheatears. Once again it was time to head into town, schlep all the bags and bed down for the night.

24 July: Drive Gonghe via Koko Nor to Chaka. Not our most inspiring day. Nevertheless it was fascinating to observe how tens, possibly hundreds of thousands of domestic tourists enjoy their summer vacation along the 'coast' of Koko Nor. But the crowds and the insane driving along the Koko Nor Road did wear us down so it was with great relief that made it in one piece to our hotel in Chaka.



25 July: Chaka (Chakazhen) area. An early visit to the Chaka Flats and salt lake in the forlorn hope of finding sandgrouse of either Pallas's or Tibetan variety was a bit of damp squib. Subsequent investigation suggests that at this time of the year these birds are more likely to be at very high elevations. Pan B Mr. B! We quickly turned around and headed out 70 km to the west through some fascinating desert terrain. Great herds of Camels along the road added emphasis to the fact that we were in pretty arid terrain. Thanks to a superb birders report we found a handy pull-off exactly where the report stated it was and a great place



for lunch. Our drivers then fearlessly headed up the dirt track to the entrance of a sublimely lovely valley (3,535m; 36° 25' 58.3" N, 98° 29' 28.8" E). Heading slowly uphill we followed a narrow stream resounding to the song of Pine Buntings and Brown Accentors. As the valley narrowed, scattered, ancient Junipers appeared and then patches of Juniper woodland on the steepest slopes. A massive Golden Eagle glided overhead as we tried to negotiate the slopes and find the, oh so elusive Alan Shan Redstart. Sadly not a peep of the adults. Thus a good but brief view of a very speckled youngster would have to suffice. Nevertheless the sheer tranquility and beauty of the valley made the pretty strenuous hike well worthwhile. Truly a memorable afternoon.



26 July: Drive Chaka (Chakazhen) via Rubber Mountain to Heimehe, Bird Island and Gangcha. Bearding the dragon once again or rather the crazy, crazy traffic we climbed the pass over so called Rubber Mountain and parked our vehicles in the one possible pull-off we could find. With a good breakfast under our belt we headed through a Yak farm and up yet another valley hopeful. This time we were seriously in luck. Arguably not quite as lovely as yesterday afternoon's tranquil domain this was clearly the spot to be in. Black Redstarts and their young along with Pale Martins, Robin Accentors, Twite and Oriental Skylarks lined our route as we headed slowly ever upwards into a quite well vegetated valley. Barely had I played the tape than a stunning and I mean totally stunning male Pink-tailed Finch sat out not 20metres away and sang his strophes time and time again. Fabulous! And quite a relief too. Here too we enjoyed fine

close views of a pair of Pere David's Snowfinches, White-browed Tits – a catch up for Alan and a superb and most confiding male White-browed Tit-Warbler.



High on a rocky crag we spied some 30+ Himalayan Griffons including several nesting pairs with young. Together with an adult and immature Lammergeier we were treated to stupendous close views of these enormous birds as they seemingly reluctantly left their roost.

Thus it was a happy little group that descended once more into the melee surrounding Koko Nor. Heading west and north we digressed to the important protected area of Bird Island. Quite unrecognizable compared to when I was last here; thousands of people of course; formal ticketing to access the electric vehicles that whisked us away to the far ends of the reserve. Lots of birds but on this one rare occasion it was decidedly cold and wet. Thus we retreated to the quite stupefying bird-hide replete with km long tunnel lines with the most amazingly impressive photographs of the reserve's wildlife. It really was too bad about the weather and that we did not have more time to investigate the place further. However, them's the breaks

Continuing our circumambulation of the immense Koko Nor we gradually found ourselves on the north shore and heading west. For reasons that defy imagination the police refused to permit us to stay at our original destination so on we drove before ending up in a brand new city replete with its own 'Tiananmen Square'. As luck would have it we ended up staying in a lovely, spanking new hotel but had to scurry in the back way just in case the police gave

us any grief. The contortions Philip had to go through on our behalf. But what a astonishingly lovely place to stay.

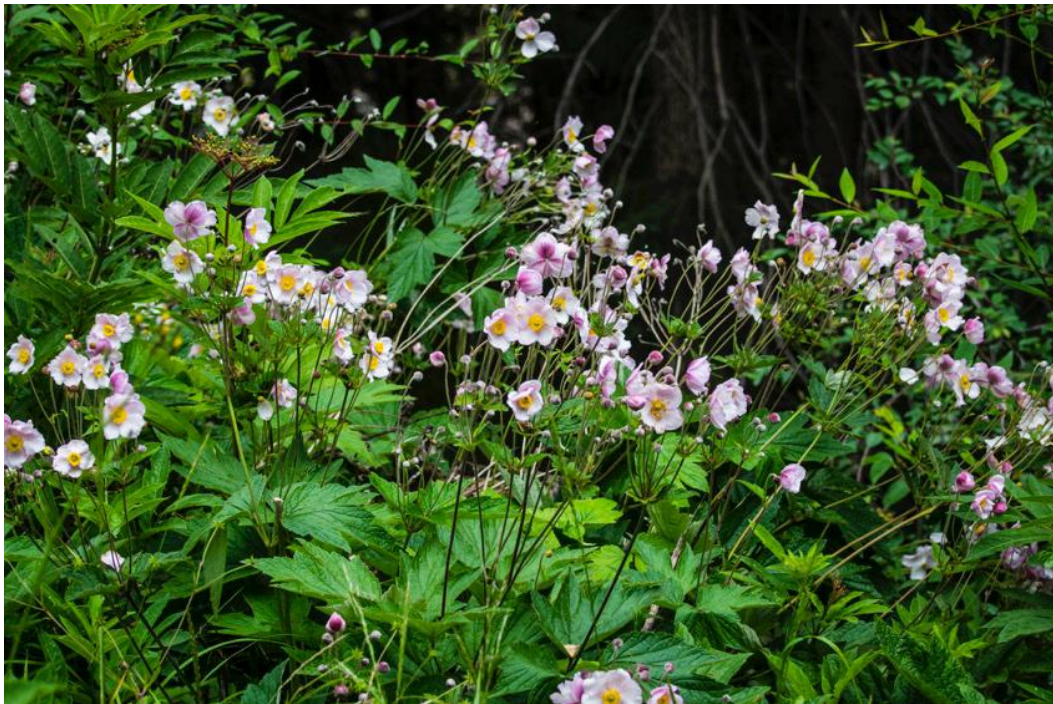


27 July: Drive Gangcha to Huzu Beishan. Philip had the bit between his teeth, god bless him and thus despite several missed turns and unhelpful directions he finally got us to the Prezvalski's Gazelle reserve. And much to our delight we ended up seeing as many 82 of these incredibly rare mammals; circa 15% of the entire world population. Birds were scarce here but we did find several Tibetan Larks, an Isabelline Wheatear or two and a couple of Pere David's Snowfinches.



From Gangcha we quickly found ourselves descending into the quite unrecognizably modern, almost futuristic, city of Xining, capital of Qinghai Province. The complexity and quality of the elevated roads; the massive train station and the high-rise buildings left me flabbergasted. I recall when I was last here staying in one of the few buildings that were more than five stories high. Quite incredible. Without entering the city proper we headed east and then north, passing through some interesting looking farmland before crossing and high pass and descending into a narrow and beautifully forest-lined valley. Alighting from our vehicles at 2,295m we spent the remainder of the afternoon birding down the road through extensive areas of evergreen forest. Birds were few and far between but as the saying goes ‘ what we saw was choice”. In small mixed flocks we found the recently described Ganzu Leaf-Warbler together with ubiquitous Large-billed Leaf-Warbler and one or two Prezvalski’s Nuthatches.

We eventually found our enormous, mausoleum-like hotel at the bottom of the valley and right at the entrance to the reserve we wanted to explore.



28 July: AM Huzhu Bei Shan; PM drive to Xining. Much to our frustration we could not access the Huzhu Bei Shan reserve at dawn so we birded some nearby scrub and farm area before breakfast.

Finally heading into this lovely reserve we almost immediately encountered a flock of ca. 60 Alpine Choughs; such great birds. Climbing steadily through



mature Birch woods that gave way to immense evergreen forest we finally emerged onto a series of enormous switchbacks that took us to the high point at 4,000m. Although the birding was disappointing the wild flowers were impressive and it was fun to see Mr Lee so animated, clambering with his camera to photograph a rare plant. Back at lower elevations we found a small mixed flock which gave good close views of Gansu leaf-Warbler and Willow Tit. Then it was back to Xining and our rather disappointing hotel for the night.



29 July: Xining then early evening train to Lhasa, Tibet. Much of the day was spent shopping and exploring in Xining before boarding our train at 20.00hrs. The organization and modernity of the station has to be seen to be believed. Very impressive.

30 July: Train via 5,200m to Lhasa, Tibet. Woke at dawn to find us in a wild, bleak and seemingly uninhabited landscape. The veritable heart of the Tibetan Plateau. Chugging south we made one brief stop for some VIPs to board and crossed a high point of 5,300m (17,744 feet) and by far the highest point I have ever been outside of an aircraft. The rarified atmosphere was quite discernable! For hour after hour we were treated to a never ending panoply of dramatic, immense landscapes; gigantic glaciers; massive icecaps; gigantic braided river beds and out of the blue, road-workers and uniformed railway guardians standing to attention, saluting the train. Birds were few and far but here there we were lucky enough to encounter groups of Chiru, the occasional Wild Yak and Kiang. At 14.30hrs at ca. 4,500m a large shallow edged lake hosted hundreds of water



birds, frustratingly too distant to identify. All in all a very worthwhile journey despite the abominable food and generally miserable service. In fairness once one young lady cabin attendant decided to be nice to us the service improved substantially. Incidentally the loos were remarkably acceptable given all things.



31 July: Birding the slopes of Xiongsi Nunnery, Tibet. For Judith and Alan this was a very special day. Indeed, as it turned out, for all of us it was a very special day. Driven by our outstanding you driver in a very comfortable and



spacious vehicle we headed out east along the Lhasa valley before turning into the hills and the foot of the track leading to the Xiongsi Nunnery. Unfortunately the road to the nunnery itself was 'out' thus there was no option but to meake the very steep strenuous climb up. At these altitudes (4100m) there was no option but to take our time and so we did. Puffing and panting our way through increasingly thick scrub adorned with Pink-rumped Rosefinches, Giant Babax, lovely Prince Henri's Laughingthrushes and nearer the top, incredibly confiding Tibetan Eared Pheasants. Much to Alan and Judith's surprise they were given a traditional blessing ritual in honour of their special wedding anniversary. Something indeed for the memory books.



We then returned to Lhasa for an afternoon of shopping and exploration. I must say I was quite surprised in many ways by Lhasa. Much more attractive than I anticipated; the old part of the city with its narrow and very confusing passage ways and boutique guest-houses were charming.

1 August: AM Potala Palace; PM exploring Lhasa. The morning was spent exploring the immense Potala Palace along with thousands of devotees and even more domestic tourists. Even one or two foreign tourists; among the very few we had encounter during the entire trip. We also explored the garden of the Potala Palace, which hosted a handful of birds including Tibetan Blackbird and Russet Sparrow. The afternoon provided a little more time explore the city including the all-important XXXXX.

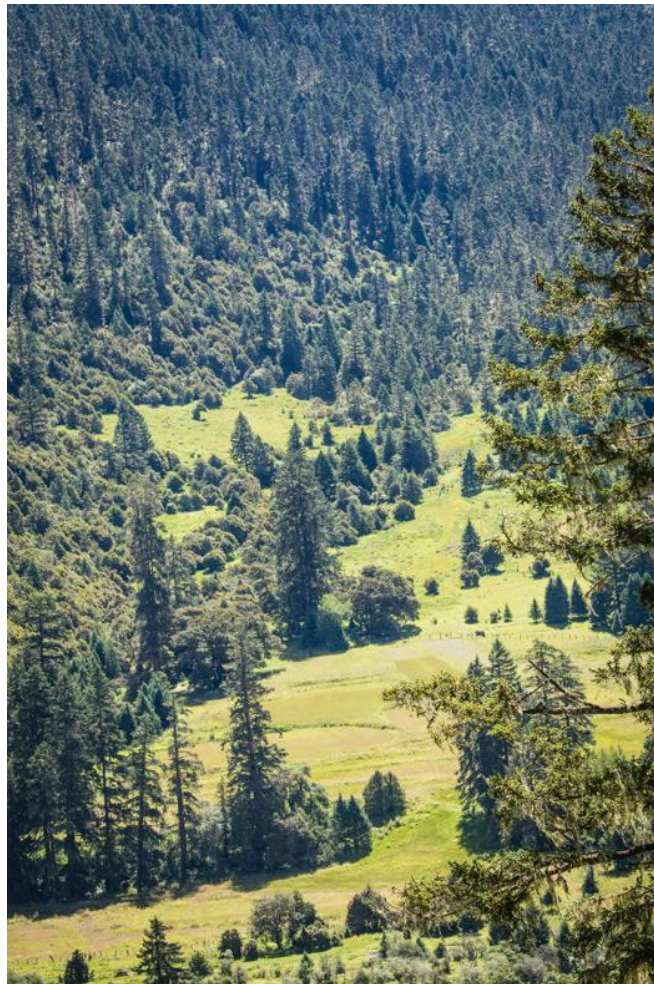


2 August: Drive Lhasa to Nyingchi. Departing early we headed out of the city on a world-class highway heading east and south into the vast tangle of enormous mountains that defines southeast Tibet. An area I had long wanted to visit but until now it was virtually impossible for foreigners. All too soon the good road gave way to a narrow old road and then more of the diabolical road works compounded by masses of trucks and crazy drivers. Too bad as I'm sure we all would have enjoyed being able to relax and take in the scenery. We crossed Bala Pass on Mitra Shan at the dizzying height of 5,013m before descending down into a classic but enormous V-shaped valley. Here the enormity of the road works was quite astonishing, even by Chinese standards. When the road to Nyingchi is completed it will be quite something. Surrounded on all sides by increasingly good-looking forests we eventually found a farm track we could turn

off on to for lunch. Here at the relatively low altitude of 3,945m (29° 53' 54.0" N, 92° 43' 41.3 E) we enjoyed yet another al fresco luncheon whilst birding: we counted 15 Himalayan Griffons soaring over nearby ridges and a single Lammergeier, a lovely male Daurian redstart, ten Common Rosefinchs feeding on the seeds of a farmers crop; several, mostly female, Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinches; as ever Eurasian Tree Sparrows, Prince Henri's Laughingthrush, a Long-tailed Shrike feeding young and the ubiquitous OTD.

Continuing down the valley we continued to enjoy seeing huge areas of forest on the nearby slopes whilst Poplars and Willows predominated on the flat lands. As always I truly wished for more time to explore and document.

The city of Nyingchi would have been a revelation at the beginning of the trip but by now we had become quite used to these enormous, modern cities replete with quite astonishingly nice hotels – a striking contrast to my early days in China when most accommodations were miserable beyond belief.



3 August: Drive via Sarkimla (4,559m) to Lord Derby's Parakeet site (3,146m). It was with an enormous sense of excitement and anticipation that we departed in the dark from our attractive hotel. However, reality quickly set in as we soon found ourselves on yet another half-finished back road. Happily that did not prevail for long and soon we were climbing steeply through some lovely looking forest. Well, as much one could see in the half-light of dawn. Champing at the bit to get out and at least listen to what was out there we quickly arrived at the Sarkimla Pass; 4,559m; 29° 36' 39.3" N, 94° 39' 07.8" E. And there to the south, spread out before us was ridge after ridge the eastern ranges of the great Himalayas. Then as the first shafts of morning light appeared we were astonished to see the huge ice cone of Namche Barwa. At well over 7,000 metres this is the highest mountain in the eastern Himalayas.

Tearing ourselves away from this wonderful surprise we once more descended into the Lulang Valley. A narrow side valley at 3,500m; 29° 43' 41.7" N, 94° 42' 19.1" E, gave us peace and tranquility and yet another gem of a breakfast site. Disappointingly birds were few and far between. Returning to the main valley we continued to follow the road down finally stopping at some fairly good-looking habitat. Again birding was painfully slow but at a small open area we at long last happened on the almost mythical Lord Derby's Parakeet. Fantastic! We had great views of it perched and in flight. A dream come true! Everything after that was gravy. Climbing back up over the pass in the company of yet even more crazy drivers was pretty wearing. Add to that the hundreds of cyclists and I just do not know how our driver, especially someone so young, did it. However, a stop halfway up to view Namche Barwa slowly but surely emerging from the cloud completed a very special day.



4 August: AM Cuomujiri Reserve; PM drive old road to Bahezhen. Yet again Philip came up with a fine alternative plan. Barely 15 minutes drive from our hotel and we were at the entrance to the Cuomujiri Reserve. An old timber license has now been converted into vast and fascinating reserve. Passing through some superb and very interesting areas of bamboo and good mature mixed evergreen forest we eventually climbed to the high point at 4,129m (29° 48' 14.7" N, 94° 25' 09.1" E.). Fortunately we managed to beat the crowds for a few minutes enjoyed the forest-lined lake to ourselves. A semi-habituated Glover's Pika got us off to a great start before we retraced our steps to bird through a flower-covered meadow and then along a superb board walk through some magnificent old-growth forest. Oh that more of the world could be like this. Most of the birds appeared to be in post-breeding mixed flocks and included: Coal Tit, Grey-crested Tit, Large-billed Leaf Warbler, Blyth's Leaf Warbler, Common Rosefinch, Hodgson's Treecreeper, Dark-sided Flycatcher, White-throated Redstart, White-capped redstart, Goldcrest, Slaty-backed Flycatcher and Collared Grosbeak. Other species recorded here included: Tibetan Partridge, White-collared Blackbird, Blue-fronted Redstart and Prince Henri's Laughingthrush.

Unfortunately the day started to warm and bird activity quickly declined, nevertheless we still managed to dig out a handful of birds including: Besra, Plumbeous Redstart, Blue Whistling Thrush and Oriental greenfinch. And then it was back to Nyingchi and up the old road to our hotel in the city of Bahezhen.



5 August: Drive Bahezhen to Lhasa. Evening at the Potala Palace. There was no escaping it, for much of the journey back it was a horrible drive. Battling with the bloody stupid and irresponsible cyclists; completely crazy and I mean insane drivers; massive trucks; incredible road works and diabolical roads left us all exhausted. I simply do not know how our wonderful young driver did it. But he did it without scaring us with his driving whatsoever. An outstanding young man. The irony is that where the roads have been completed they are fabulous and a delight to travel on and generally other drivers behave relatively sanely Go figure.

Happily our journey ended on a wonderfully upbeat note with an evening visit to the Potala Palace and the light and fountain show was quite a spectacle. Perhaps not to the purists like I for one cannot help but think this was a nice coming together of the old and traditional and the new. Thanks Philip.

6 August: Tour ends. Made the long (1.5 hours) drive out to the new Lhasa airport where goodbyes were said and everyone went there separate ways; the end to a truly extraordinary journey.

