

Baicheng and Xianghai Jilin, China

June 27-30, 2003

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General

This trip was dedicated to finding the extremely threatened Jankowski's Bunting. The three of us, myself, Steve Bale and Brian Elder, took the overnight train from Beijing to the province of Jilin and were then guided by the staff of the Xianghai Nature Reserve during the weekend.

Highlights

Finding a pair of Jankowski's Bunting in the rolling grasslands north of Baicheng was of course extremely satisfactory. What was not that satisfactory was learning that the species is now extinct in its former stronghold in Xianghai, the habitat at the site at Baicheng is vanishing each day as it is turned into agricultural land and last but not least finding out that the pair we saw was predated by a (presumably Common) Cuckoo! The guides told us that there were now only 200 birds in the area (difficult to be sure if that meant Jilin province or the "Baicheng area"). There may be more habitats in nearby parts of Inner Mongolia, but it is very likely that it has already been cultivated or that it is just a matter of time.

Apart from the buntings, we saw 23 Great Bustards and a Mongolian Lark at Baicheng, pairs of Red-crowned and White-naped Cranes at Xianghai as well as interesting species like Chinese Grey Shrike, Oriental Pratincole, Daurian Jackdaw, Mandarin Duck, Pied Harrier, Amur Falcon and Grey-headed Lapwing.

Itinerary

27 June

Boarded the overnight train at Beijing Main Station at 19.48 on Friday evening. Had a few beers before falling asleep as the train slowly went north through the night.

28 June

Woke up far too early and spent the whole morning watching the flat landscape go past before eventually reaching Baicheng punctually at 12.19. After going through the temperature/SARS checkpoint at the station we were greeted by the staff from Xianghai Nature Reserve. One guide, one interpreter, two drivers and a local guide that we picked up along the way assured us that we would be taken well care of.

Within minutes we were on our way north to a military area. The journey took about two hours and we had to drive for a long way out in the rolling grasslands past cultivated land before reaching the real habitat of the bustards and buntings.

After having seen the wanted birds we returned south and drove back through Baicheng and further south to Xianghai. Arrived to the hotel at about 20.00 and had a dinner in the hotel restaurant.

29 June

After a too short night we got up at dawn and started birding at the lake, which is just outside the hotel garden. We then circled the main Xianghai reservoir for a couple of hours before returning to the hotel for breakfast. The nearest we came to Oriental Storks was an abandoned nest that had been used earlier this year.

Next on the agenda was going to the wetlands south of the hotel to look for the cranes. Due to the previous drought, the lake was dry and we crisscrossed the lake with the car, eventually finding both Red-crowned and White-naped Cranes as well as a couple of splendid Pied Harriers. We did not however find any of the two pairs of Demoiselle Cranes.

In the afternoon we went to a nearby lake and looked for more waterbirds, but did not find the hoped for Baer's Pochard, Swan Goose and Asiatic Dowitcher. However, it was good birding and we saw lots of Amur Falcons, Eastern Marsh Harriers, etc. Also managed to get stuck with the 4WD police jeep that we used. Unsuccessfully tried to get it out, but had to give up and go birding instead and the driver went for another vehicle to pull it out.

Before going to the train station at Kaitong we paid a visit to the reserve headquarters and a quick look at the nearby wetland. Then a one hour drive to Kaitong where we had dinner before boarding the southbound train at 19.30.

30 June

Arrived Beijing South Station as scheduled at 14.14 after a loooong journey.

Weather

For the last four years it has been very dry so most of the lakes at Xianghai were actually dried up. During our visit however it was mostly overcast with some rainshowers. Temperature was around 25 C and thus very comfortable. The breeze was in some cases somewhat disturbing when photographing the birds.

Logistics

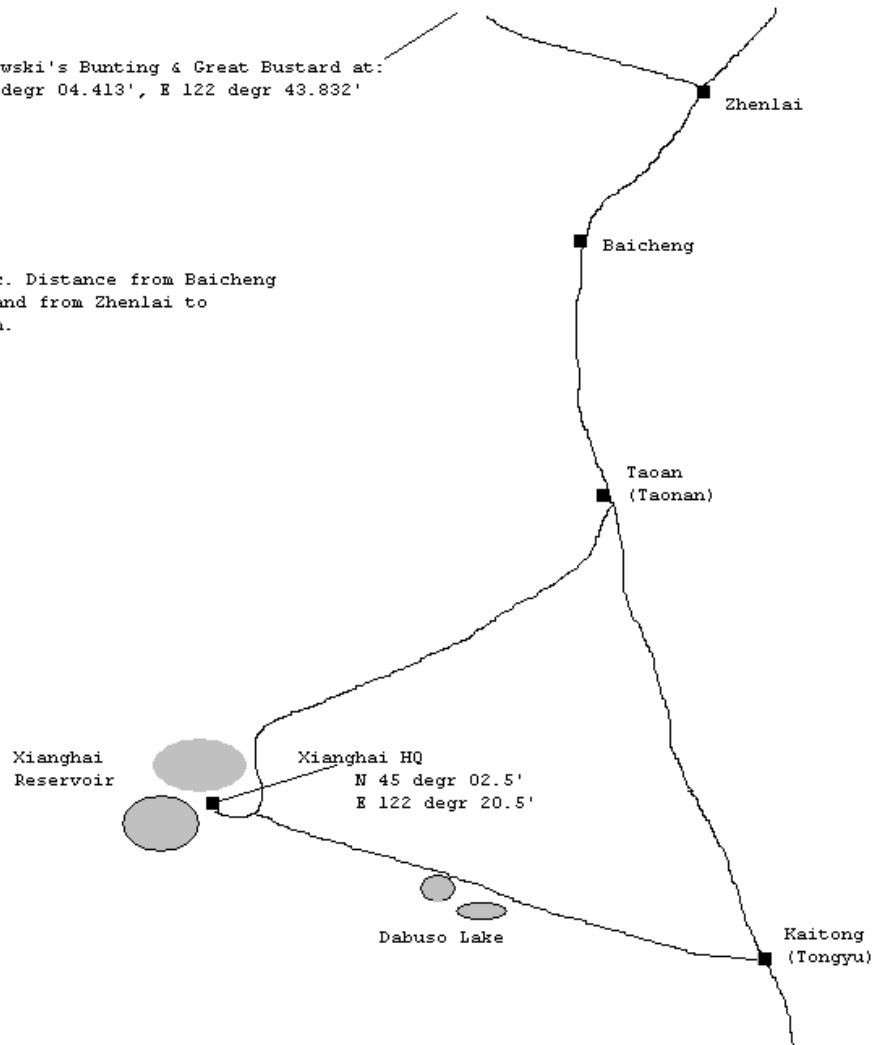
Soft sleeper train tickets from Beijing to Baicheng were about 250 RMB single fare. The train left punctually as always and as there were no changes of train it was a reasonably convenient way of going to Jilin. However, it is clearly an alternative to go by air to either Changchun or Harbin and then by car the last 4-5 hours.

The trip was conveniently organized through a local travel agent in Beidaihe and was 3500 RMB for all three of us including hotel, guides local transportation.

Site descriptions

Jankowski's Bunting & Great Bustard at:
N 46 degr 04.413', E 122 degr 43.832'

Map is only schematic. Distance from Baicheng
to Zhenlai ca 50 km and from Zhenlai to
Bunting site ca 50 km.



Birds

All the birds seen at Xianghai if not stated otherwise

Great Crested Grebe 50+
Little Grebe 5
Great Cormorant 1
Grey Heron common
Little Egret 1 at Xianghai HQ
Great Bittern 1 heard
Common Shelduck 5
Mandarin Duck 8
Gadwall 2

Garganey 2
Mallard 100+
Common Pochard 100
Tufted Duck 2
Eastern Marsh Harrier 4
Pied Harrier 1 pair
Kestrel singles, also at Baicheng
Amur Falcon 50-70, also at Baicheng
Ring-necked Pheasant 5, also at Baicheng
White-naped Crane 1 pair
Red-crowned Crane 1 pair + 1
Common Gallinule 1
Common Coot 15
Great Bustard 23 at Baicheng
Black-winged Stilt common
Pied Avocet 30
Oriental Pratincole 40 and 2 at Baicheng
Northern Lapwing common
Grey-headed Lapwing common
Little Ringed Plover common
Kentish Plover 20
Eurasian Curlew 20 and 20 at Baicheng
Spotted Redshank 10
Common Redshank 10
Marsh Sandpiper 10
Wood Sandpiper 5
Terek Sandpiper 1
Black-headed Gull 50+
Common Tern 50+, both red- and black-billed together!
Little Tern 50+
Whiskered Tern 20+
White-winged Black Tern 30
Oriental Turtle Dove 10
Common Cuckoo 30+
Little Owl 3
Hoopoe 10, also at Baicheng
Mongolian Lark 1 at Baicheng
Asian Short-toed Lark 50
Sky Lark 10
Bank Swallow common
Barn Swallow common, also at Baicheng
Red-rumped Swallow 10
Oriental Reed-Warbler 10+
Chinese Penduline-Tit 10+
Black-naped Oriole 1
Brown Shrike 3

Chinese Grey Shrike 10
Magpie common, also at Baicheng
Azure-winged Magpie 1 nest with pulli
Daurian Jackdaw 1
Rook 100 from the train south of Baicheng
White-cheeked Starling 100+
Tree Sparrow common, also at Baicheng
Meadow Bunting 2
Jankowski's Bunting 1 pair north of Baicheng
Chestnut-eared Bunting 1 pair