

Wolong Sichuan, China

July 4-7, 2003

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General

Sichuan supports many of the Chinese endemics and Wolong is certainly one of the three main places to visit in this province. The others being Emei Shan and Jiuzhaigou. I planned to spend a week at Wolong in early May, but due to travel restrictions because of SARS, that trip was cancelled. Eager to spend at least a few days birding at Wolong, I opted for an extended weekend trip instead. Most birders visit Sichuan in May and June, so I was not anticipating the same bird activity as most birds would certainly have finished their breeding and thus singing. However, the mornings were actually quite good, although many of the birds did not respond to playback as would probably be the case earlier in the season.

Wolong is a large area and to cover it properly one needs at least five to seven days. It also needs to be taken into account that rain and fog is very frequent. I spent one day at Balangshan and the pass, then one day at Wujipung and then finally half a day at Balangshan again. Next time I will spend another day at Wujipung (probably stay overnight at the guesthouse), one full morning at the slopes above Sawaun and a morning looking for Chinese Monal at around 3500 m.

Highlights

Many good birds were seen and it may be difficult to pick out a few. Top five would probably include White-eared Pheasant, Firethroat, Wood Snipe, Great & Spectacled Parrotbills. Others may be Golden-breasted Fulvetta, White-browed Bush-Robin, the phylloscs and laughingthrushes.

Itinerary

4 July

Took the 16.50 flight from Beijing to Chengdu and arrived about 19.30. As I had arranged for a hotel pickup, I was met by a driver and interpreter at the airport. Soon we were off in a little minibus and everything felt as if on track. However, as is often the case in China, something unexpected happens. We found ourselves stuck in an infinite line of cars, most likely because of an accident somewhere ahead of us. It was now 21.00 and still two hours to go to Wolong! After having spent 2.5 hours in the darkness waiting for something to happen, we were eventually on our way again and reached the hotel in Wolong at 01.20. Needless to say I went straight to bed for a couple of hours sleep!

5 July

Up at 4.00 as I did not know when sunrise was and the interpreter claimed that sunrise was at 8, which I of course did not believe. At 4.30 the interpreter knocked on my door and told me there was another problem that had appeared all of a sudden. I was not allowed to go to Wujipung as planned, due to it had been raining too much recently and the hotel was responsible for my safety! Realising that negotiating something at this time of the day would do no good, I quickly decided to go to Balangshan already today. We set off at 4.30 in the minibus and reached the altitude of 3500 m by dawn which was shortly before 6.00. This is the known site for Wood Snipe, but we may have been a few minutes late or it may be that they do not display in July, as I did not see nor hear anything. But see below...

The weather was good with no clouds, so I started to scan the hillsides for pheasants. Soon found a party of 14 White Eared-Pheasants slowly working their way up a slope at 3600 m. Bird activity was fairly good in the morning and I slowly walked/drove uphill towards Balangshan. Found another two White-eared Pheasants, heard Verreaux's Monal-Partridge and some other typical birds of the alpine meadows.

In the late morning we arrived at Balangshan pass at ca 4525 m. Headache was much in evidence and the thin air (mind you, that I just came from Beijing at sea level!) did not allow for any braver climbs. I birded in the area for a couple of hours, seeing Tibetan Snowcock, Snow Pigeon, Grandala, Red-fronted Rosefinch, Alpine Accentor and Plain Mountain-Finch. Both Lammergeier and Himalayan Griffon came low overhead over the pass and gave stunning views. Now wanting to go down to lower altitudes, we drove to 3500 m and I started to walk with the minibus intermittently following me. Walked downhill for several hours, sometimes riding with bus for some km. Birding was rather slow and many cars passed, giving at least three hoots each when two meters away from me. Gave up when I reached the bottom of the valley and returned to the hotel at ca 16.00.

I wanted to climb the mountain slope just above the village, but the interpreter claimed that it would be the same thing as for Wujipung, i.e. absolutely dangerous. Now becoming a little bit irritated, I asked what was really the problem and got the following answers: 1) generally dangerous to go alone I ("well, send a guide to accompany me"), 2) there are tigers that are dangerous ("well, I'd love to see a tiger, however there are certainly no tigers here at all"), 3) there are snakes ("well, I have no problems with that"), 4) there are leeches ("well, just pull them off"). The interpreter now realised that he had to do something, so within a few minutes he came back and said that it would be ok to go to Wujipung in the morning, IF I was really careful. Well, having a family, I had no intentions to not being careful, so a deal was made.

In the late afternoon I just walked out of the village and climbed the hill-slope for a while, but it was late and rather birdless, so I returned to the hotel for dinner and an early evening.

6 July

Left the hotel at 5.50 and arrived at the starting point for Wujipung at 6.00. Had a local man to show me the start of the trail. The trail winds uphill, it is a fairly easy walk if you take the time. I birded slowly uphill and came to the ridge at 8.30, which is a climb from 2000 to 2550 m. On the way up I was fortunate to see both Firethroat hopping on the trail and then circling me while playing its song and Great Parrotbill which nicely came in to playback.

Once on the ridge, the trail is a very easy walk and passes some good patches of bamboo. The distance between where one reaches the ridge and the Wujipung guesthouse (same as the research station in other reports) is probably not more than 1-1.5 km. The trail continues for a few 100 meters to a small creek, and possibly even further. I failed to find any tragopans and the local man at Wujipung guesthouse told me that the best time is early morning. However I found lots of other good birds while walking back and forth along the ridge. The birding here is really excellent and I saw e.g. Mountain Hawk-Eagle, Barred and Spotted Laughingthrushes, more Great Parrotbills, more Firethroats, White-browed Bush-Robin, Streak-throated and Golden-breasted Fulvetta, White-collared Yuhina, Chestnut, White's and Long-tailed Thrushes, Fujian Niltava and loads of phyllosc.

The weather was brilliant with clear skies, until early afternoon when a few drops of rain came. At 14.40 I started the decent and came down at 15.45 and saw some Little Forktails in the river before going with the minibus back to the hotel.

After a quick rest I set off again up the hills above the village, but after a climb of 150 meters, the rain started and very little bird activity was seen or heard. Returned to the hotel for dinner after having seen virtually nothing.

7 July

Up early for a predawn arrival at 3500 m for Wood Snipe. As no breakfast arrived at the room as promised, I feared some problems, so quickly prepared and went to the lobby. As expected, no driver was to be seen and I was met by one of the most frequent words in China: mei you (= Not have). After some apparently convincing argument, the driver was collected and I was on my way only ten minutes delayed. As it happened, it did not do too much as we arrived at the snipe-site 5.15 and no snipes were heard. It was raining and the clouds swept over the mountain ridges, although the visibility was ok. At 5.30, still in darkness, I left the car and immediately heard two or even three Wood Snipes calling constantly overhead. Tried to see them, but apparently they were displaying too high. At 6.00 they stopped and the rain increased.

Drove back downhill to 3400 m and started birding. The rain was constant, but still not that heavy. Continued birding downhill and covered elevations of 3400-3300, 3200-3000, 2800-2600. Best was a flock of Spectacled Parrotbills and Grey-crested Tit at 3100 and Chinese Babaxes at 2800.

At 11.30 I stopped birding and went back to the hotel for packing up and then left Wolong at 13.00. Splendid scenery while leaving Wolong through magnificent gorges for the first of three hours drive back to Chengdu.

Arrived Chengdu at 16.00 and rebooked to a slightly earlier flight back to Beijing.

Weather

I believe I was fairly lucky with the weather, as I had two full mornings of clear sky. Only in the afternoons, there was some drizzle. On the third day, the situation changed and it rained more or less continuously.

Logistics

I booked the trip through a travel agent in Beidaihe. This included pick-up and drop-off at Chengdu airport, a car with driver and an interpreter for one full day to Balangshan and hotel for three nights. The cost for this was 1900 RMB. On site I decided I wanted the car for the two remaining days as well and had to pay 100 RMB for the Wujipung day and 300 RMB for the last Balangshan day. Flight ticket from Beijing to Chengdu was 1980 RMB.

Site descriptions

Hill-slopes above Sawaun (Wolong village)

I did not really bird this area because I was limited with time. It is reputedly reasonably good for Golden Pheasant and Rufous-tailed Babbler. There are apparently at least two trails that lead up to the mountain, but I only tried one of the for a 150 m climb. The trail starts about 40 m north of the Si Tong Yuan Hotel which is in the northeast part of the village. The trail loops and comes back down closer to the Tourist Hotel in the western part of the village. The best map I have seen was in the Ornifolks report from 2000.

Wujipung

Excellent forest birding with nice patches of bamboo. The trail starts at 2000 m and climbs steeply to 2550 m where it levels out and leads a further 1-1.5 km to the research station/guesthouse at Wujipung. From there it continues at least a few hundred meters and possibly even further. It may be a little bit difficult to find the trailhead so you are better off asking someone who can show you. Basically it is a 5-7 minutes drive west from Sawaun in a very small village. There is one larger bridge across the river to a power station. Park there and ask the people at the power station for the trail to Wujipung and better ask them to accompany you to the trail-head. Otherwise try walking back east on a small path along the river in between some small farm-houses. After about 200 m you come to a smaller suspension bridge. Above this there is a fairly large creek coming down from the mountain. Walk up this creek-bed and about 200 m up from the main river you can find a small trail taking off up and left. This winding trail basically follows the power line that goes to the ridge. Keep following this trail and eventually you are bound reach the ridge. There are several strategies you can use. Either walk as quickly as possible in order to get to the ridge as early as possible for maximizing your chances for Tragopans. Or you can bird your way up, which I did and saw Firethroat and Great Parrotbill and some other stuff. Or better off, stay overnight at the guesthouse. I do not know how to arrange this, but ask around and you will probably sort it out easily. Another way of doing it is to bring food and maybe sleeping gear and just give it a chance. The "warden" I met up there was very kind and I do not think it would have been impossible to just stay for a night.

Balangshan

This is brilliant for high altitude birding. The road leads all the way to the pass and beyond. From Sawaun it takes about 1.5 hours to the treeline at 3500 m (best area for White Eared-Pheasant and Wood Snipe). From there it is less than an hour to the pass. Bird as many altitudes as possible, but at least cover the pass at 4500 m, the treeline area at 3500 and the scrubby hillsides between 2800-3500.

The problem most birders seem to experience is low clouds and even rain. Needless to say you won't see any of the Galliformes if it is cloudy so check the weather forecast and do the mountain when the weather seems to be promising.

Birds

Lammergeier 1 immature at very close range at Balangshan pass.

Himalayan Griffon 2 at Balangshan pass and one lower down at 3500 m.

Mountain Hawk-Eagle 1 seen very well soaring over the forest at Wujipung chased by a sparrowhawk. According to literature, this record may be somewhat out of range.

Common Buzzard 2 at 3500 m.

sparrowhawk sp 1 at Balangshan pass and 1 at Wujipung.

Verreaux's Monal-Partridge 1 heard after dawn at 3500 m.

Tibetan Snowcock 1 seen and 1 heard at Balangshan pass.

White Eared-Pheasant 14 together at 3600 m on the opposite slope and a further 2 at 3700 m.

Wood Snipe 2 or 3 displaying between 5.30-6.00 at 3520 m. The site is soon after leaving the forest and where the powerline runs parallel with the road. The birds could be heard at several hundred meters and were roding continuously.

Snow Pigeon 2 at Balangshan pass.

Oriental Turtle Dove 1 at 2800 m.

Large Hawk-Cuckoo 3 heard.

Common Cuckoo 2 heard at 3500 m

Lesser Cuckoo 3 heard between 3200-3700 at Balangshan and 2 at Wujipung.

Fork-tailed Swift fairly common.

Asian Martin fairly common around 2800 m, 3500 m and at Wujipung.

White Wagtail 2 at start of Wujipung trail and two along the main river.

Grey Wagtail several in Sawaun and at Wujipung trail start.

Olive-backed Pipit 1 pair at 3300 m.

Rosy Pipit common above the treeline.

Long-tailed Minivet small flocks seen at around 3500 m, Wujipung and near Sawaun.

Alpine Accentor 2 at Balangshan pass.

Blue Whistling-Thrush 1 at Wujipung trail start and 3 along the main river.

Long-tailed Thrush 5 at Wujipung and 3 at 3300 m.

White's Thrush about 3 at Wujipung

Chestnut Thrush 1 at nest at the Wujipung guesthouse and about 10 between 3400-2600 m.

Kessler's Thrush common on the alpine meadows above 3500 m.

Aberrant Bush-Warbler 5+ between 3200-3400 m.

Tickell's Leaf-Warbler 1 at 3500 m and 2 at 3300 m.

Yellow-streaked Warbler 1+1 at 3300 m

Buff-barred Warbler 1 at 3300 m.

Pale-rumped Warbler 5+ at ca 3300 m and several at Wujipung.

Chinese Leaf-Warbler 1 at Wujipung

Greenish Warbler common above 3000 m and a few lower down.

Large-billed Leaf-Warbler several around 3300 m and at Wujipung, common at 2600-2800 m.

Blyth's Leaf-Warbler common at Wujipung and a few on the mountain.

White-tailed Leaf-Warbler common around 3300 and at Wujipung

Bianchi's Warbler several between 3400-2600 m and common at Wujipung. Presumably this species, but ID only based on altitude.

Slaty-blue Flycatcher 2 females at Wujipung.
Verditer Flycatcher 1 above Sawaun.
Fujian Niltava 1 pair beyond Wujipung guesthouse.
Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher 1 on the way to Wujipung.
Firethroat 1 heard at 2200 on the way to Wujipung, 1 pair at 2400 on the way to Wujipung, 2 pairs on the ridge at Wujipung and two at 3135 m.
White-browed Bush-Robin 1 pair beyond Wujipung guesthouse.
Blue-fronted Redstart common on the alpine meadows
White-capped Redstart 10+ in the main river and on the alpine meadows
Plumbeous Redstart 20+ in the main river and Sawaun village
White-bellied Redstart 2 below the treeline and one female at 2600 m.
Grandala 3 at Balangshan pass
Little Forktail about 10 in the main river between Sawaun and the Wujipung trail start. All but one were juveniles.
Spotted Laughingthrush 1 pair beyond Wujipung guesthouse and 1 along the ridge at Wujipung.
Barred Laughingthrush 1 where the Wujipung trail reaches the ridge.
Giant Laughingthrush 10+ between the treeline at 3500 m and down to 3000 m.
Elliot's Laughingthrush common in the scrub below the treeline down to 2800 m and 1 at Wujipung.
Rufous-capped Babbler 5 at Wujipung
Chinese Babax 3-4 at 2800 m at Deng Sheng.
Golden-breasted Fulvetta 3+2 at Wujipung, always near bamboo and came easily to pishing.
Streak-throated Fulvetta about 20 at Wujipung.
White-collared Yuhina about 5 at Wujipung and 10+ between 3300 and 2600 m.
Great Parrotbill 2+1+1 at Wujipung.
Spectacled Parrotbill 5-7 at 3100 m.
Coal Tit 1 at Wujipung. Long crest and hard to believe it is the same species as in Europe.
Rufous-vented Tit 1 at 3500 m.
Yellow-bellied Tit 5 at Wujipung.
Grey-crested Tit 1 at 3100 m.
Green-backed Tit family party in Sawaun, at 2700 m and 3 at Wujipung.
Gould's Sunbird 1 male at 3300 m and 1 female at 3100 m.
Long-tailed Shrike common around Chengdu.
Grey-backed Shrike 10-15 from 3500 m and downhill.
Ashy Drongo 1 at 3300 m.
Red-billed Blue Magpie 2 near Sawaun.
Eurasian Nutcracker frequently heard at Sawaun and Wujipung.
Red-billed Chough 1 at Balangshan pass.
Large-billed Crow 1 at 3500 m.
Plain Mountain-Finch 10+ at Balangshan pass.
Common Rosefinch common above 3300 m.
Vinaceous Rosefinch 2 at 3300 m
Spot-winged Rosefinch 3+1 at 3300 m.
Red-fronted Rosefinch 1 pair at Balangshan pass