

Taiwan

with notes on Chinese Crested Tern

2-5 July 2004

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Chinese Crested Tern – note the pale upperparts, yellow-orange bill with black tip as well as wing-tip pattern.

General

We were five dedicated birders from China and Hong Kong that went to see one of the rarest birds in the world – the Chinese Crested Tern. Having though to be extinct since the last confirmed reports in 1937, it was rediscovered in 2000 when a film team found them breeding on the Taiwanese Matsu Islands, just off the Fujian coast of mainland China.

The complete history of the species can easily be found on the BirdLife International web-site. It was found breeding in a tern colony on a small rock near Matsu Islands in 2000. Hong Kong birders visited in 2001, but failed to find them. In 2002 and 2003, a few birds were again found by visiting birders.

The trip was exemplary organised by Graham Talbot from Hong Kong, who has described all the necessary logistics in a separate detailed report (“Matsu Taiwan”) to be published on Internet.

We first went to the site where they were seen in 2003, but failed to find any Crested Terns at all. Therefore we searched the island where they were found in 2000 and found at least one pair. Then we visited another island where we discovered at least three pairs. Altogether we saw a minimum of 10 and maximum 12 birds. Needless to say, it was a magic moment to be able to watch this ghost-like species. No doubt it must still occur at some other places along the Pacific rim, although a survey by Chinese ornithologists failed to find them along the nearby Fujian coast in May 2004.

After successfully finding the terns so quickly, we went birding on the Taiwan mainland, although a very recent typhoon turned our luck. We were not able to go to the mountains where virtually all the endemics occur. Landslides had destroyed all the roads to the good birding sites. We had to focus on low and mid altitude forests and thus only bagged a few of the specialities and endemics. Nevertheless, the trip was dedicated for the tern and anything on top of that was a bonus!



The happy CCT team with the first tern island in the background. From left to right: Graham Talbot, Chris Campion, Bjorn Anderson, Nick Moran and Joakim Hammar.

Itinerary

2/7

I flew from Beijing to Hong Kong on a Friday afternoon, where I met up with Jocke and Nick. The other HK birders had already arrived at Taiwan earlier in the week. The typhoon that hit Taiwan the same day, was dumping so much rain that we had to circle for some time over Taipei before getting clearance to land, certainly not a good omen for the tern. Eventually on firm ground, we took a taxi to downtown Taipei, where we checked in at the prebooked hotel for a short night sleep.

3/7

T-day, up early in order to catch the flight almost back to mainland China. The domestic airport was located just minutes from the hotel. Around 7 in the morning we were airborne and flew across a rough sea with high swell. We arrived Matsu Island after less than one hour and were met by the hotel staff. The town is very small and the drive to the hotel was only two blocks away. There we left all our luggage and the staff arranged for the boat-man to come to the harbour on the other side of the small island. After some

obligatory discussions about prices, times, etc we were soon driven to the harbour. From there it is just possible to see some terns over the island where they were seen in 2003. Disappointingly, there were not so many terns on this island and most of them seemed to be Bridled and Black-naped...

Until only a few years ago, foreigners were not allowed to visit Matsu Island at all and thus our passports were duly checked. In fact, the islands are located so close to the Chinese mainland that the Chinese mobile operators network works there. After some time the boat-man showed up with his djonk and we set off to the island. Our expectations were not on top as we could not find any breeding Great Crested Terns at all. Some compensation in the form of spectacular views of Bridled, Black-naped and Roseate Terns. We quickly decided to go to an island in the area where they were discovered in 2000. En route we saw quite a few Great Crested Terns, so we knew they would be somewhere...

At one other island we passed, we again found lots of breeding Bridled and Black-naped Terns, but no Great Cresteds. Eventually we came to the target island and our expectations rose, as we at a distance could see lots of Great Crested Terns on top of the cliff. The swell was high and it was difficult to check all the perched terns in the packed colony. While on the leeward side of the island, I suddenly saw a very pale tern flying over the highest part of the rock and quickly the others were on to it and our hopes were sky-rocketing. It soon disappeared beyond the crag and it was a few minutes until we saw it again. Then we had flight views for a few times over the island and sometimes fairly close to the boat, even photographed with 4x magnification. Every time it seemed to land, it returned to the same spot leading us to believe that it had either a mate or chick around. At one occasion one bird returned with a fish to this spot. From the windward side, it was barely possible to see the place, although the swell prevented us from making clear observations.

At one time an obvious pair was seen flying together around the island and at the same time a third adult was seen on top of the island.

Realising that the views would not improve due to the viewing conditions, we decided to continue to a fourth island where we had seen terns at a distance. Halfway there, another pair was seen flying over the open water and then still another pair came flying close to the boat towards the island we were heading to. Once at this island we quickly saw a few birds on the deck. Altogether we estimated that there were three obvious pairs plus one more adult (all seen at the same time). We now had smashing views of flying and perched birds for as long as we wanted!

Happily we returned to the harbour and drove back to the hotel. We had by now decided to fly back to Taipei with the first available flight and thus had to negotiate with the hotel staff about paying only for the one room where we had left our bags.

At the airport we found ourselves being waitlisted as something like 130+ on the two available flights. Astonishingly, one of our most subtle approaches to the staff yielded the result that we were all of a sudden granted split seats on these two flights! The three of us never having been to Taiwan before, took the first flight at 15.45 in order to drive to the Taiwanese mountains for endemics and two of us took the later flight.

At Taipei domestic airport we arranged a car from a nearby rental agency and were soon on our way speeding south along the freeway on the west coast. Aiming for the town of Wushe we found ourselves driving in the dark and rain until the road was blocked by a police-car. Now our luck turned away and it was painfully apparent that the road had been swept away by a landslide. This was only 13 km short of Wushe!

An attempt to go to nearby Anmashan yielded in principle the same result as we were strongly advised not to go on some of the smaller roads. The typhoon had swept across the island just one day ago and a few people had been killed in resulting land-slides. It

was now well after midnight and needless to say we were quite disappointed. We now decided to go for some of the lowland specialities instead, saving the highland stuff for a visit next year. The only problem was that it required a drive back and beyond Taipei, which was 3-4 hours backtracking! Jocke and Nick took turns behind the wheel and at dawn we were at Wulai Scenic Area in the foothills just south of Taipei.

4/7

At the crack of dawn when we drove along the river towards Wulai, we stopped and immediately heard two Formosan Whistling-Thrushes. One soon came out and showed off for me and Jocke, while Nick was so freshly awaked that he missed both bins and concious! Luckily we saw several more during the morning. Next target bird was Formosan Magpie and we soon found one and then two along the road-side near one of the villages. With both expected endemics under the belt, we spent some time in the forest until we decided it was time to go to the Botanical Garden in Taipei. It is really hard to believe that this tiny park can hold such a gem as Malayan Night-Heron, as it is tucked away in the very centre of this large city. Nevertheless we were quickly shown one motionless bird that performed brilliantly. Before leaving the Garden, we watched two recently-fledged Crested Goshawks near their nest, as well as another Night-Heron sitting on its nest.

As we could not go to the high mountains, Jocke decided to fly back to HK, so we drove to the airport and also had a lunchstop there. Then Nick and I continued up through the lower mountains south of Taipei to a place called Mingche. The road was very narrow and winding and it took three hours to reach the place, although we did some stops along the way when the rain paused. Much to our surprise we found that Mingche had a newly built, fairly luxurious lodge, which we quickly settled for (not that there were any alterantives!). Some early evening birding yielded the endemic White-eared Sibia, Taiwan Yuhina and Steere's Liocichla.

5/7

We got up a dawn, with the strategy to slowly drive along the road and look for Taiwan Partridge at the edges. Although we were the first car on the road for a significant amount of time, we did not succeed in this attempt. We saw more Sibias, Yuhinas and Liocichlas, but not any more endemics. In the late morning we came by the turn-off to Lalashan Forest Reserve and decided to try it for an hour. It is located 14 km from highway 7 and has some really interesting forest. We failed to add any more endemics, although met some birders who has seen Yellow Tit. To our rescue, we at least had good views of a large flock of White-throated Laughingthrushes moving through the forest edge. At 9.30 it was time to head back to Taipei and leave the car before going to the airport. We both returned to HK, where I flew back to BJ and Nick continued on to new adventures in a totally different part of the world.

Weather

The weather was very pleasant with shorts and sandals being the convenient dressing code around the clock. The thing with Taiwan is that it can rain, and rain a lot. This is especially true after a typhoon has passed, as was the case for us. It is therefore very unpredictable what the road conditions will be like. Add to this the possibility of erathquakes damaging the roads.

Site descriptions

Matsu Islands

These islands belong to Taiwan, but are located very close to the Fujian coast of mainland China. There is no access from the mainland, so one has to get across to Taiwan first. From Taipei there are about a handful of flights each day to the old airport (that we used). There is also a new airport, where there are probably also a handful of flights per day. This latter airport is located on a different island, which is easily accessible by a ferry in between. Actually, the distances are so short that it does not matter which island one flies to. It should also be possible to charter a boat from any of the islands for visits to the tern colonies.



The first island where we found Chinese Crested Terns (one, probably two pairs).



The second island where we found Chinese Crested Terns. One bird is at the arrow.

Wulai Scenic Area near Taipei

Wulai is easily accessible from freeway 3 just south of Taipei. The area consists of low elevation mountain forest and a valley with a river. Along this river (stream) it seems that Formosan Whistling-Thrush is rather easy. Wulai also has another low elevation endemic, the Formosan Magpie, which is not easily seen in the mountains.

To get to Wulai, go along freeway 3 and turn off at the Xindian Interchange (east of the river crossing). Then go south on road 9 and follow the signs for Wulai Scenic Area for another ca 15 km. We asked a local guard for the magpie by just pointing at the book and he recognized it and pointed us in the right direction.

Botanical Garden in Taipei

Famous among birders for its resident Malayan Night-Herons, which seems to be virtually guaranteed. There is no entrance fee, so probably access is possible any time of the day. It is located in central Taipei near CKS Memorial Hall.

Mingche

Mid altitude (700-1100 m) broad-leaf forest south of Taipei. I have difficulties in describing the exact directions, as we only had a map with Chinese characters. Anyway, access is by going south on freeway 3 and find your way to highway 7 that runs across the mountains. Mingche is located a long way east along this highway 7, about 1.5-2 hours drive on a narrow and winding road after leaving highway 3. One of the pleasant things with Mingche is that it has a modern lodge with small, but comfortable, huts to stay in.

Lalashan Forest Reserve

Another mid-altitude site at around 1400-1500 m with broad-leaf forest. The site is clearly sign-posted along highway 7, about half an hour west of Mingche. Lalashan has some very nice forest with high trees. We only visited briefly a late morning, which does probably not do it justice.

Providing one can get access to the higher mountains e.g. around Wushe, it is probably not worth spending any time on neither Mingche nor Lalashan.

Birds

Great Egret, *Ardea alba modesta*
Several around Taipei.

Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta garzetta*
Common around Taipei.

Pacific Reef-Heron, *Egretta sacra sacra*
A few on Matsu Island.

Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis coromandus*
Common around Taipei.

Black-crowned Night-Heron, *Nycticorax nycticorax nycticorax*
A few at Wulai near Taipei.

Malayan Night-Heron, *Gorsachius melanolophus*
One performed well at the photo session in the Botanic Garden in Taipei. Also another bird at a nest at the same place.



Malayan Night-Heron

Sacred Ibis, *Threskiornis aethiopica*
Two near Taipei. Escaped population.

Oriental Honey-buzzard, *Pernis ptilorhynchus* ssp
One carrying prey at Wulai near Taipei, one at Mingche and one at Lalashan.
According to literature, this species does not breed on Taiwan, but is only an uncommon migrant and winter visitor. However, according to a local birder there are now a number of confirmed breeding records in northern and central Taiwan.
Which subspecies that is concerned, I cannot know at this point.

Crested Serpent-Eagle, *Spilornis cheela rutherfordi*
One near Mingche.

Crested Goshawk, *Accipiter trivirgatus formosae*
Two juveniles at nest in the Botanic Garden in Taipei were well photographed.

Black Eagle, *Ictinaetus malayensis malayensis*
One flew nicely across the valley at Wulai near Taipei.

Chinese Bamboo-Partridge, *Bambusicola thoracica sonorivox*
Pairs heard at Mingche and between Mingche and Lalashan.

Eurasian Oystercatcher, *Haematopus ostralegus osculans*
One at the second CCT island.

Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*

Three at the island with the Crested Terns.

Black-tailed Gull, *Larus crassirostris*

Two at the Crested Tern island.

Great Crested Tern, *Sterna bergii cristatus*

2500+ in two colonies off the Matsu Islands.

Chinese Crested Tern, *Sterna bernsteini*

10-12 adults (at least one respectively three pairs in two different colonies) off the Matsu Islands.



Chinese Crested Terns

Roseate Tern, *Sterna dougallii bangsi*

100 in two colonies off the Matsu Islands.

Black-naped Tern, *Sterna sumatrana sumatrana*

100+ in four colonies off the Matsu Islands.

Bridled Tern, *Sterna anaethetus anaethetus*

200+ in two colonies off the Matsu Islands.

Ashy Wood-Pigeon, *Columba pulchricollis*

One at Mingche and a probable at Wulai near Taipei.

Red Collared-Dove, *Streptopelia tranquebarica humilis*

Common around Taipei.

Spotted Dove, *Streptopelia chinensis formosana*

Several on Matsu Island and on Taiwan.

White-bellied Pigeon, *Treron sieboldii sororius*

Five at Wulai and two near Mingche.

Large Hawk-Cuckoo, *Cuculus sparverioides sparverioides*

Three at Mingche.

White-throated Needletail, *Hirundapus caudacutus formosana*

One at Lalashan.

Fork-tailed Swift, *Apus pacificus kanoi*

100+ at the first CCT island off Matsu Island.

House Swift, *Apus nipalensis kuntzi*

Common on Taiwan.

Black-browed Barbet, *Megalaima oorti nuchalis*

Common at Wulai, Mingche and Lalashan.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica gutturalis*

Common on Matsu Island and in the Taiwan lowlands.

Pacific Swallow, *Hirundo tahitica namiyei*
 A few at Wulai near Taipei.

Striated Swallow, *Hirundo striolata stanfordi*
 One at a gas station in the middle of the night on northwestern Taiwan.

Asian Martin, *Delichon dasypus nigrimentalis*
 10 at Lalashan.

Gray-chinned Minivet, *Pericrocotus solaris griseogularis*
 Two at Wulai and 40+ at Mingche.

Light-vented Bulbul, *Pycnonotus sinensis formosae*
 Common both on Matsu Island and Taiwan.

Black Bulbul, *Hypsipetes leucocephalus nigerrimus*
 10 at Wulai and common at Mingche. Very grey wings contrasting with black body.

Brown Dipper, *Cinclus pallasii pallasii*
 A pair on the way to Mingche.

Blue Rock-Thrush, *Monticola solitarius ssp*
 One at the jetty at Matsu Island and one near Mingche. The former of these being a fully adult bird with entirely blue underparts. The second being an immature male (or moulting?) and neither showing any rufous belly.

Formosan Whistling-Thrush, *Myophonus insularis*
 10 at Wulai and a few along the way to Mingche and seven along the way from Mingche.

Rufous-faced Warbler, *Abroscopus albogularis fulvifacies*
 Common at Mingche and Lalashan.

Vivid Niltava, *Niltava vivida vivida*
 Two males and a female at Mingche and one at Lalashan.

Plumbeous Redstart, *Rhyacornis fuliginosus affinis*
 One on the way to Mingche.

White-tailed Robin, *Cinclidium leucurum montium*
 Common at Mingche and Lalashan.

White-throated Laughingthrush, *Garrulax albogularis ruficeps*
 15-20 in a flock at Lalashan. Complete chestnut cap, large white throat and white under tail-coverts distinguish it from the mainland subspecies.

Rusty Laughingthrush, *Garrulax poecilorhynchus poecilorhynchus*
 Three plus two near Mingche. Much darker and duller than the mainland subspecies with less prominent blue orbital patch.

Steere's Liocichla, *Liocichla steerii*
 Common at Mingche and several at Lalashan.

Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus erythrocnemis erythrocnemis*
 One near Mingche.

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus ruficollis musicus*
 Two at Wulai.

Rufous-capped Babbler, *Stachyris ruficeps praecognita*
 Several at Wulai and common at Mingche and Lalashan.

Dusky Fulvetta, *Alcippe brunnea brunnea*
 One heard at Wulai.

Gray-cheeked Fulvetta, *Alcippe morrisonia morrisonia*
 Common at Mingche and Lalashan.

White-eared Sibia, *Heterophasia auricularis*
 10 at Mingche. One of the smartest endemics.

Taiwan Yuhina, *Yuhina brunneiceps*
Common at Mingche and Lalashan.

White-bellied Yuhina, *Yuhina zantholeuca griseiloris*
Two at Wulai, several near Minche.

Vinous-throated Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis webbianus bulomachus*
Ten at Mingche.

Green-backed Tit, *Parus monticolus insperatus*
One at Mingche and one at Lalashan.

Varied Tit, *Sittiparus varius castaneoventris*
One, probably four, near Mingche.

Japanese White-eye, *Zosterops japonicus simplex*
Common at Wulai, Mingche and Lalashan.

Black Drongo, *Dicrurus macrocercus harterti*
Several around Taipei.

Bronzed Drongo, *Dicrurus aeneus braunianus*
Four at Wulai.

Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius taivanus*
One near Mingche.

Formosan Magpie, *Urocissa caerulea*
Two at Wulai in the early morning was a nice find.

Gray Treepie, *Dendrocitta formosae formosae*
10+ at Wulai.

Large-billed Crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos colonorum*
Several at Mingche and along the road to there. Different plumage and head-shape compared to the mainland.

Crested Myna, *Acridotheres cristatellus formosanus*
Several around Taipei.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus saturatus*
Common.