

Yang Xian Shaanxi, China

With notes on Crested Ibis



Crested Ibis, Nipponia nippon

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General

Together with Jocke Hammar and Chris Campion from Hong Kong, we decided to go to see the only remaining population in the world of Crested Ibis in Shaanxi province of central China. Apart from having fantastic views of this ultra-rare, pre-historic looking creature, we saw very few interesting birds. The breeding season being finished and the normal lack of decent accessible forest in this part of the world being the main reasons. Nevertheless, it was a pilgrim trip that we just had to do...

Itinerary

We flew in to Xian from Hong Kong and Beijing respectively on the Friday evening and stayed at the Aviation Hotel just by the airport.

At 10.00 on the Saturday morning we boarded the small Hainan (!) Airlines jet that took us to the small (by Chinese standard) city of Hanzhong in the southern part of the province. After a 40 minutes flight we were met at the airport by the pre-arranged staff of the ibis conservation center.

It took about one hour to drive to the smaller town of Yang Xian where we stopped briefly at the conservation HQ to pick up some local guides. Soon we were off to the Hanzong river where we and the guides spread out to look for the ibises. After only half an hour some ibises were located and the message was quickly spread over the mobiles. We first saw one pair feeding on the forest floor in a tree plantation and could enjoy this mega-bird at length. At the edge of the plantation there was another loose group of ibises feeding in some fields and we had great opportunities to study them on the ground as well as in flight. Mission completed and it was only mid-afternoon.

As it started to rain, we decided to have some lunch before going birding in the nearby hills. While driving to the north of Yang Xian we passed the conservation centre with some big cages where the ibises are being bred and fed. A bit further north we found a single ibis feeding along a small stream near the road.

Due to the rain we could not drive all the way to a place we were told should hold some forest. Therefore we decided to walk up another cultivated valley with some scrubby hill-sides near the village of Si Lang. The very muddy trail lead us through a village where the villagers made big eyes. Although it was not the ideal habitat, nor time of the day, nor time of the year, we did see some nice birds in the late afternoon/early evening. Later we got back to the hotel in Yang Xian and had a dinner in town.

On the Sunday morning, we planned to go to another area with some forest. We set off at 5.00 in the morning, which would allow us one hour until dawn. This time we drove south of Yang Xian and reached the sacred mountain at Shi Guan shortly after 6.00. Spent most of the morning walking up a trail to the mountain top and also along the road in the valley. The scrubby secondary forest was not exactly full of birds, but it was anyway a pleasant morning. Chris even saw an ibis flying along the valley.

Before noon, we left the area and headed back towards Hanzhong. A quick stop to check up a scrubby valley produced only a single call of a Golden Pheasant. By now it was hot and sunny so we opted for a lunch in Hanzhong before the 15.30 flight back to Xian.



Chris celebrating the ibis with fire-crackers

Logistics

I got help from some Chinese friends in Beijing to contact the conservation centre. For some reason there is a need for a permit to visit this area. This permit is approved in Beijing and takes almost two weeks to arrange. This was actually the reason that I cancelled a planned trip last year. However, this time it was no problem and we were granted a visit and were greeted by very good hospitality by the local staff.

Fortunately they had arranged to have a local interpreter, named Sabrina, sent with us, which of course helped immensely, as none of us is exactly fluent in Mandarin. For a foreigner, the easiest way to see the ibises is perhaps to contact her at hzsizizi@tom.com. Note that she is not a professional interpreter or guide, nor a staff of the centre, but merely wants to practice some English. She also knows how to contact the conservation centre to set up the logistics.

Yang Xian is a small town “in the sticks” of China and there are many mountains between Yang Xian and Beijing, so good local knowledge is probably a key to success if one wants to see this charismatic bird. The drawback is of course the cost for doing it, foreigners are charged the enormous amount of 1500 RMB per person including transportation, guiding, accommodation and food. Especially in this part of the world, this represents an incredible sum of money and one can just hope that at least a fraction of it goes to the protection of ibises. At least it creates a huge local business interest for the bird, which in itself is a guarantee that the population will increase. Indeed, this is actually the case, as there are now about 400 birds in the wild according to the information that we got. This is a significant increase from the few tens of birds that remained when it was discovered in 1981. There are also current investigations on trying to locate part of the population to other provinces of China.

Site descriptions

Yang Xian is about 50 km east of Hanzhong along highway 108. Hanzhong is about 280 km southwest of Xian. There are several ways to get to Hanzhong from Xian. One is to do as we did and fly with the only daily flight. This cost 400 RMB one way. There is also the possibility of taking the train, e.g. the overnight one. It probably takes about 8-10 hours and stops in Yang Xian, so no need to go all the way to Hanzhong. Thirdly, there is of course the possibility to go by car across the Qingling mountains. This would in itself be an interesting option if one has the time. There are panda reserves in these mountains such as Foping and Changqing and species like Blackthroat or even Przewalski's

Parrotbill may possibly be found. For us, that was not an option this time, so these species will deserve a special trip later...

Some coordinates that might be of interest:

N33.12,298, E107.35,432	470 m	End of access-road to the river where we looked for the ibises.
N33.12,306, E107.35,039	500 m	The plantation where we saw the ibises.
N33.15,832, E107.33,393	473 m	Stream where one single ibis was seen (see picture below).
N33.19,305, E107.32,828	611 m	End of the trail at Si Lang.
N33.13,557, E107.32,409	464 m	Hotel in Yang Xian.
N33.06,329, E107.35,973	469 m	Sacred mountain at Shi Guan.
N33.03,581, E107.25.513	643 m	Valley with heard Golden Pheasant.



The site where we saw Crested Ibis north of Yang Xian. The ibis is just to the left of the center.



In the immediate surroundings of Yang Xian, there seems to be little interesting habitat left. The entire region is cultivated and in order to find proper forest, one has to go to the Qinling mountains, which is several hours drive away. Changqing and Foping would then probably be the best places to go.

We visited two areas where we found some secondary scrub/forest. At least the area we called Si Lang, north of Yang Xian, is not really worth visiting. In the breeding season, it might be worth spending a morning at the sacred mountain at Shi Guan, which is south of Yang Xian. The local guide claimed that he sometimes have seen Reeves's Pheasant, which could well be true as the habitat looks reasonable. We also briefly heard Golden Pheasant in the same hilly range.

Birds

Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea jouyi*

A few in the river near Yang Xian.

Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta garzetta*

Common almost everywhere.

Chinese Pond-Heron, *Ardeola bacchus*

Fairly common in most areas.

Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis coromandus*

Fairly common in most areas.

Crested Ibis, *Nipponia nippon*

At least 10 birds in the tree plantation and fields along the river a few km east of Yang Xian. One feeding along a small stream north of Yang Xian and one seen only by Chris when flying along the valley at Shi Guan.



Crested Ibises, to the left in winter plumage and to the right moulting out of the grey breeding plumage.

Black Baza, *Aviceda leuphotes wolfei*

One performing nicely at Shi Guan.



Black Baza

Chinese Goshawk, *Accipiter soloensis*
Two at Si Lang.

Besra, *Accipiter virgatus affinis*
One male that caught a dragonfly at Si Lang.

Chinese Bamboo-Partridge, *Bambusicola thoracica thoracica*
Two pairs heard duetting at Shi Guan.

Golden Pheasant, *Chrysolopus pictus*
One heard briefly at midday in a scrubby valley between Shi Guan and Hanzhong.

Little Ringed Plover, *Charadrius dubius curonicus*
A few in sandy rivers around Yang Xian.

Green Sandpiper, *Tringa ochropus*
Total of three in the river near Yang Xian.

Wood Sandpiper, *Tringa glareola*
One in the river near Yang Xian.

Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*
Six flying along the river near Yang Xian.

Oriental Turtle-Dove, *Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*
Common.

Red Collared-Dove, *Streptopelia tranquebarica humilis*
Fairly common in the hills north of Yang Xian.

Common Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus ssp*
One male, probably of this species, seen in the hills north of Yang Xian.

Collared Owlet, *Glaucidium brodiei brodiei*
One heard at Shi Guan.

White-throated Needletail, *Hirundapus caudacutus caudacutus*
About five flying high over Si Lang.

Common Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis bengalensis*
A total of four seen around Yang Xian.

Black-capped Kingfisher, *Halcyon pileata*
A total of three seen around Yang Xian.

Speckled Piculet, *Picumnus innominatus chinensis*
Two at Shi Guan.

Grey-headed Woodpecker, *Picus canus kogo*
A total of three seen in the hills around Yang Xian.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica ssp*
Common along the rivers.

Red-rumped Swallow, *Hirundo daurica japonica*
Common.

Forest Wagtail, *Dendronanthus indicus*
One seen briefly at Si Lang.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba leucopsis*
Common.

Yellow Wagtail, *Motacilla flava tschutschensis*
About ten at the river near Yang Xian.

Richard's/Blyth's Pipit, *Anthus richardi/godlewski*
Ten at Hanzhong airport.

Black-winged Cuckoo-Shrike, *Coracina melaschistos intermedia*
One at the river near Yang Xian.

Collared Finchbill, *Spizixos semitorques semitorques*
Common in most areas.

Brown-breasted Bulbul, *Pycnonotus xanthorrhous andersoni*
Common in the hills around Yang Xian.



Brown-breasted Bulbul

Light-vented Bulbul, *Pycnonotus sinensis hoyi*
Fairly common.

Zitting Cisticola, *Cisticola juncidis tinnabulans*
A few heard singing around Yang Xian.

Blyth's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus reguloides (claudiae?)*
One at Shi Guan.

Seicercus sp

One silent individual at Shi Guan. Strong wingbar, not prominent grey head-sides, weak contrast on black head-stripes. Perhaps a migrating Bianchi's (*valentini*) or something else in this species-swarm...?

Rufous-faced Warbler, *Abroscopus albogularis fulvifacies*
Two at Shi Guan.

Daurian Redstart, *Phoenicurus aureus leucopterus*
A few, including juveniles, seen around Yang Xian.

White-crowned Forktail, *Enicurus leschenaulti sinensis*
A few at Si Lang.

Laughingthrush sp, *Garrulax* sp
Heard singing at Si Lang and could possibly have been Moustached (*cineraceus*).

Hwamei, *Garrulax canorus canorus*
One heard at Shi Guan.

Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus erythrocnemis gravivox*
One pair at Shi Guan.

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus ruficollis intermedius*
One pair seen and several heard at Shi Guan.

Rufous-capped Babbler, *Stachyris ruficeps davidi*
One heard at Shi Guan.

Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, *Alcippe morrisonia davidi*
Common at Shi Guan.

Vinous-throated Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis webbianus suffusus*
20+ at Shi Guan.

Black-throated Tit, *Aegithalos concinnus concinnus*
Two large flocks at Shi Guan.

Yellow-bellied Tit, *Pardaliparus venustulus*
Ten at Shi Guan.

Great Tit, *Parus major minor*
Common.

Japanese White-eye, *Zosterops japonicus simplex*
A few at Shi Guan.

Black-naped Oriole, *Oriolus chinensis diffuses*
Three at Shi Guan.

Brown Shrike, *Lanius cristatus ssp*
One at Xian airport.

Long-tailed Shrike, *Lanius schach schach*
A few around Yang Xian.

Black Drongo, *Dicrurus macrocercus cathoecus*
Common in open areas.

Ashy Drongo, *Dicrurus leucophaeus ssp*
Two at Si Lang.

Hair-crested Drongo, *Dicrurus hottentottus brevirostris*
A few at Shi Guan.

Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius ssp*
Ten at Shi Guan.

Red-billed Blue Magpie, *Urocissa erythrorhyncha erythrorhyncha*
A few at Shi Guan.

Red-billed Starling, *Sturnus sericeus*
A few around Yang Xian.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus iubilaeus*
Common.

White-rumped Munia, *Lonchura striata swinhoei*
A few at Shi Guan.

Oriental Greenfinch, *Carduelis sinica sinica*
Several seen around Yang Xian.

Yellow-throated Bunting, *Emberiza elegans elegantula*
One at Shi Guan.