

Taklamakan Desert*
&
Tian Shan

Xinjiang, China

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In search of the Biddulph's Ground-Jay

** Taklamakan, means roughly “If you go in, you will never come out”*

General

This short trip to Xinjiang in northwestern China was entirely dedicated to finding the endemic Biddulph's (or Xinjiang) Ground-Jay. As mission was completed the first morning, I was also able to boost my China list with some nice central Asian birds like White-winged Woodpecker, Saxaul Sparrow, Desert Lesser Whitethroat, Barbary Falcon, Azure Tit, Red-fronted Serin, Black-throated Accentor and Booted Eagle.

Itinerary

I left Beijing on the Friday evening with the 19.10 flight to Urumqi (pronounced Oromotchi), the capital of China's northwest province Xinjiang. After a late arrival, I checked in at the Aviation Hotel just near the airport. The flight time is almost four hours, to compare with the flight time to Sweden, which is just over eight hours. In spite of the huge distance from east to west in China, there is only one time zone, very convenient!

Korla, being the second largest town in Xinjiang, has about eight daily flights, so I connected with the first one at 8.00 on Saturday morning. After a scenic one hour flight across the Chinese part of Tian Shan, I landed as scheduled at Korla airport and was met by the prearranged local driver and English-speaking guide.

We were soon off, heading south to Yuli county bordering the Taklamakan desert. The area is completely covered with farmland, mostly cotton fields and long rows of poplar trees. Road conditions are near to perfect. However, the ever-present Chinese surprise came when I suddenly realized that we were heading to a Lopnur village, instead of the area I intended to visit. Fortunately thanks to my GPS, I discovered this fairly quickly and only lost an hour until we were on track again. Never take anything for granted! To be honest, this slight detour produced the only White-winged Woodpecker, so in hindsight was not too bad.

Now heading southwest of Yuli town it did not take long before I suddenly saw a Ground-Jay flying between some sand-dunes! Ting, ting, ting!!! (means Stop in Chinese) and there it was, perched on a phone post for a short while before flying to its mate in the dunes. I speedily posted myself on top of one of the highest sand-dunes and could consume absolutely crippling views of this enigmatic species. Pure magic! It was a pair that flew back and forth between the dunes and played a bit of hide and seek, but was all the time easy to follow as they called frequently. After a while they suddenly vanished among the dunes and were not to be seen again.



Biddulph's Ground-Jay

By now it was almost midday and got rather hot. As I had found the Ground-Jay further north than I expected, I decided to continue southeast along the main road in order to find more. The wind picked up and it then became rather hazy. The road follows the Tarim River (the largest inland river in China) and most of the area is covered in plantations, mostly cotton-fields. I managed to find a few patches of sand-dunes along the way, but failed to locate any Ground-Jays. We passed Regiment 31 and 32 and eventually turned around at Regiment 33. These regiments are huge farms with settlements located centrally.

After a quick dumpling lunch in Regiment 31, we returned towards Yuli and stopped en route a few times for birding. At one spot I found a party of Desert Lesser Whitethroats and at another spot I saw flocks of Saxaul Sparrows, but again no Ground-Jays. We also stopped at the site where I had seen the Ground-Jays, but they were not to be found and by now I very much realized how lucky I had been by seeing the first flying bird!

As there were not much else of bird-life in the desert, I decided to head back to Urumqi already this evening, planning to go birding in the Tian Shan next morning. We arrived Korla airport at 17.30 and I took the 18.25 flight to Urumqi, where I checked in at Aviation Hotel. Strangely enough I found that it was a different Aviation Hotel from last night. Surprise, surprise, but it had the same form, fit and function to a slightly lower cost, so not much to bother about. When living in China, one soon realizes that one will never understand everything, it's just not worth trying!

In the evening I pre-booked a taxi to take me to Tian Che Hu (Heavenly Lake) in the mountains. I had practically no gen on this site at all, so I just decided to give it a go for a morning.

Punctually, the taxi driver showed up at 6.30 as agreed and we were off to the east on a perfect express-road. After 20 km the car started to sound alarmingly and the oil-lamp was flashing like a Vermillion Flycatcher. Sic! The driver was however not so concerned, so we continued until after a while when he decided to stop and pour more oil in the engine. When taking off again, I had a strange feeling that this would not resolve the problem and surely enough, it did not take more than a km until the warning lights came on again. We continued very intermittently on the express-road for quite a while until he apparently decided to keep driving. I quickly came to the conclusion that my birding session this morning would be shortened at both ends; arriving late at site and for security reason starting the return trip to the airport significantly earlier than planned...

Eventually we arrived at the mountain lake at 8.30 and I boarded the tourist bus to take me the last switchbacks to the scenic area. It was decidedly cool at 1900 m, but soon the first rays of sun increased the temperature as well as the bird activity. The species I was hoping for, Red-mantled Rosefinch, was nowhere to be seen, but I had some very nice sightings of Black-throated Accentors, Red-fronted Serins, Azure Tit, and personata White Wagtail. I spent a couple of hours birding along the edge of the spruce forest and scrubby hill-sides along the winding road back down to the car-park.

At 11.00, after a final stop in a scrubby ravine, we returned towards Urumqi. The car had surprisingly recovered and the return trip was uneventful. Boarded the 14.45 flight back to Beijing, content with two very nice days of birding in a seldom-visited part of the world.

Weather

The weather was dry and sunny all the time. Most of the time the temperature was very comfortable and even rather hot during the midday hours.

Site descriptions

Biddulph's Ground-Jay site

Biddulph's Ground-Jay is reportedly found to be still rather common in the interior of the Taklamakan Desert. In 1995 a new highway was opened across the desert, so with some time to spare, this species should not be difficult to connect with. Maybe even there are some Vaurie's Nightjars awaiting rediscovery out there? However, the Ground-Jay also occurs readily along the edges of the desert and over the last decades, birders have found them around Puhui and Yuli counties, south of Korla. The foremost expert in this species must be Professor Ma Ming in Urumqi, who also gave me some important advice in finding it. There are some published notes in OBC bulletins and Forktail, that definitely are worth reading, especially when it comes to preferred habitat etc. In short, it basically only occurs in soft sandy desert with scrubby vegetation consisting of reed, tamarisk and desert poplar.

Due to my still limited Chinese, I opted for pre-arranging a car with English-speaking guide, in order not to hassle with taxis. In retrospect, I would not do that again, as the cost is not really justified. I paid 1140 RMB for a full day and the taxi fare is only 1 RMB per km. The distance to the Regiments is about 150 km so the service was a real rip-off, but that's the way it is when short of time and language skills. Taxis should be easy to find at the airport and it is easy to follow road 218 to Yuli and further southeast.



Habitat at the site for Biddulph's Ground-Jay

Tian Che Hu (Heavenly Lake)

This site is a very scenic tourist spot. I visited fairly early on a Sunday morning and although not so crowded by then, I surely met loads of buses filled with screaming tourists on my return decent. The habitat is scrubby hill-sides, spruce forests and mountain crags, many of them snow-covered. I had no gen for this site, but merely birded along the forest edge for a couple of hours. From Urumqi airport it takes a little bit more than an hour with a car, the distance being almost 100 km to the south-east. I paid the taxi driver 300 RMB for the round trip, excluding express-road and entrance fees



Panorama over Tian Che Hu near Urumqi

Miscellaneous coordinates:

N41.40.803, E086.11.892	Start of highway at Korla near the airport.
N41.10.692, E086.08.483	Turn-around point towards village
N41.17.363, E086.16.456	Yuli town
N41.06.475, E086.29.376	870 masl. Site for Biddulph's Ground-Jay and Saxaul Sparrow. Km post 771.
N40.47.554, E087.13.998	Turn-around point near Regiment 33.
N41.04.663, E086.35.185	Flocks of Saxaul Sparrow.
N43.53.356, E087.29.678	803 masl. Near Urumqi airport
N43.53.868, E088.07.219	1926 masl. Tian Che Hu (Heavenly Lake)

Birds

Greyleg Goose, *Anser anser rubirostris*

Six in a flock in flight south of Korla.

Black Kite, *Milvus migrans lineatus*

One south of Korla and rather common between Urumqi and Tian Che Hu.

Long-legged Buzzard, *Buteo rufinus rufinus*

At least two which looked like classic Long-legs. Also up to 10 unidentified Long-legged/Upland.



Long-legged Buzzard

Booted Eagle, *Aquila pennatus*

One dark phase between Tian Che Hu and Urumqi.

Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus interstinctus*

Three at Tian Che Hu.

Barbary Falcon, *Falco peregrinoides*

Fantastic close-up views of one eating from a prey at Tian Che Hu.



Barbary Falcon

Eurasian Collared-Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto decaocto*

Two south of Korla.

Little Owl, *Athene noctua orientalis*
One between Urumqi and Tian Che Hu.

White-winged Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos leucopterus*
One flying towards a poplar growth southwest of Yuli.

Crested Lark, *Galerida cristata magna*
Two on the expressroad between Tian Che Hu and Urumqi.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica* ssp
A few migrating southwards.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba personata*
Two in flight south of Korla of unid ssp. One female personata at Tian Che Hu.

Grey Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea melanope*
Three at Tian Che Hu.

Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus tristis*
Five in spruce forest at Tian Che Hu.

Winter Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes tianschanicus*
One at Tian Che Hu.

Black-throated Accentor, *Prunella atrogularis huttoni*
About 10 in spruce forest and scrubs at Tian Che Hu.

Mistle Thrush, *Turdus viscivorus bonapartei*
Common at Tian Che Hu.

Desert Lesser Whitethroat, *Sylvia minula* ssp
Three together in semidesert south of Yuli and another at in desert poplar in sand-dunes. The group was calling with the Blue Tit-like call.

Pied Wheatear, *Oenanthe pleschanka*
Five south of Yuli.

Desert Wheatear, *Oenanthe deserti oreophila*
One south of Korla.

Songar Tit, *Poecile songara songara*
About 10 at Tian Che Hu.

Coal Tit, *Periparus ater rufipectus*
Common in spruce forest at Tian Che Hu.

Azure Tit, *Cyanistes cyanus tianschanicus*
One plus a small group at Tian Che Hu.

Isabelline Shrike, *Lanius isabellinus arenarius*

The most common bird in both agricultural and desert areas.



First winter Isabelline Shrike

Eurasian Nutcracker, *Nucifraga caryocatactes rothschildi*

About five at Tian Che Hu.

Biddulph's Ground-Jay, *Podoces biddulphi*

A pair 27 km south of Yuli.

Carrion Crow, *Corvus corone orientalis*

Eight south of Yuli and two at Tian Che Hu.

Common Raven, *Corvus corax subcorax*

Two at Tian Che Hu.

Saxaul Sparrow, *Passer ammodendri stoliczkae*

About 30 at one site south of Yuli and two 27 km south of Yuli at the Ground-Jay site.



Male Saxaul Sparrow

Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus dilutus*

Small numbers in the villages south of Korla.

Red-fronted Serin, *Serinus pusillus*

A few flocks at Tian Che Hu.