

Jiuzhaigou, Sichuan, China

22-24 October 2004

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General

Together with Mats Garlin, a visiting Swedish birding friend, the two of us decided to spend the weekend at Jiuzhaigou. We did not expect a huge species list, but hoped for some stunning landscape with colourful trees in addition to some key species. I had visited Jiuzhaigou in May this year, but then missed a couple of species like Sichuan Jay and Blue Eared-Pheasant, which I was keen on connecting with. As it turned out, the timing was perfectly chosen with an amazingly beautiful scenery and from a birding perspective I got good views of the Jay as well as eyeball-to-eyeball views of a pair of the extremely localized Sukatschev's Laughingthrush.

Itinerary

We arrived at Jiuzhaigou in the Friday evening and stayed at the Sheraton Hotel, which is about one km east (beyond) the main gate to the valley. The next morning we were up early and took a taxi (4 RMB) to the gate in order to catch the first bus to Primeval Forest. During the half hour that we waited for the bus to appear, we enjoyed a calling Chinese Tawny Owl nearby. The subspecies group that occurs in China has a strikingly different call compared to Tawny Owl in Europe. It also has clearly different morphology, e.g the face pattern, so should definitely be considered a separate completely allopatric species.

At 7.08 the first bus left and after some 35 minutes we got off at the carpark at Primeval Forest and started the real birding. Not that there was a fantastic dawn chorus, but a few White-browed Rosefinches, Rufous-breasted Accentors, Elliot's Laughers and some tits were around. We started a walk up through the forest alongside the dry riverbed and soon found a flock of Chestnut Thrushes. A Severtsov's Grouse was flushed and to our delight could be seen on the ground as well. There was however not a single pheasant of any description to be seen and the forest in general was very silent. We kept walking and saw some White-throated and Blue-fronted Redstarts. The hoped for Sichuan Jays were completely missing and we were close to giving up. Then I stopped at the very spot in the forest where I had had a rest in May this year. In the corner of my eye, I suddenly saw a movement and soon got my eyes on a Sichuan Jay just near us! It turned out to be a very silent flock that worked its way through the forest. We could then follow them for a while and got mega-views when they fed both on the ground and in the lichen-clad trees. A mythical bird in a mythical forest! Happy with this success we slowly walked back down without adding any real new birds.

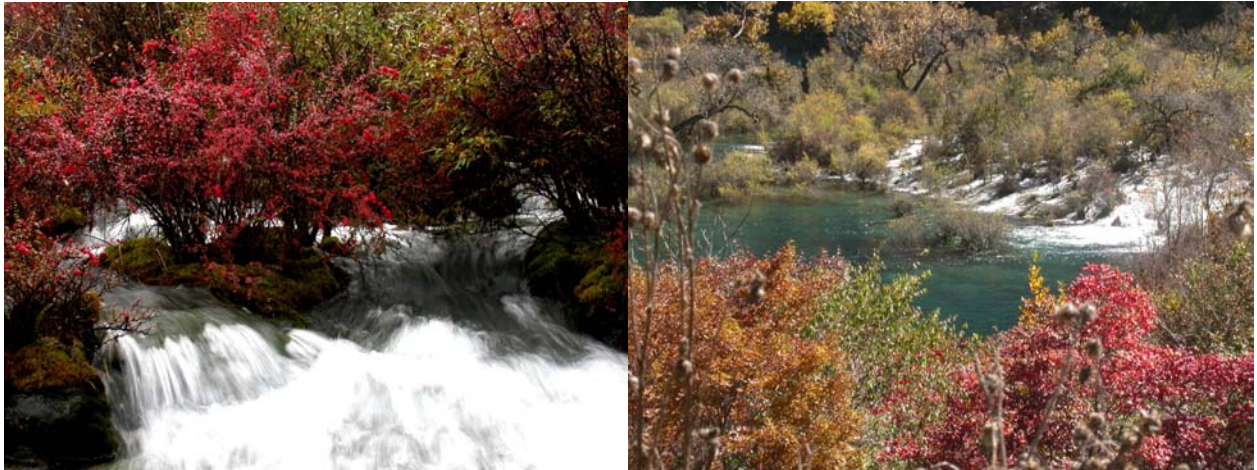


Sichuan Jay

Another of the target birds was Przewalski's Parrotbill that had been seen some 15+ years ago, so we walked down from the carpark, looking for patches of bamboo. Needless to say, we did not succeed in finding it, nor any bamboo either. We covered the areas around Grass and Swan Lakes, before taking the bus down to Colourful Lake, which was living up to its name in full autumn-coloured surroundings.

The afternoon was spent along Panda Lake, where I had seen extensive areas of bamboo in May. Again no parrotbills, but some nice encounters with Bar-tailed Treecreepers, Pere David's Tit and Snowy-browed Nuthatch.

The last stops were made at Pearl Shoals Waterfall and then a couple of stops at the lower valley of Jiuzhaigou, all giving spectacular views in spite of the drizzle. From a birding perspective, the day was nicely rounded off with a flock of the endemic Sooty Tits at the main gate.



Sunday morning it was the same procedure, with the exception that the owl was not calling and that we tried to take the bus to Long Lake instead. The latter caused some major problem as the bus dropped us off at 7.30 at Nourilang (the junction at the “Y-shaped” valley system). Here we waited for another bus to take us up the left (east) fork. No buses were however going our way, so after a while we started to walk and did some birding. Eventually buses were heading up this fork, but much to our frustration they did not stop and pick us up, in spite of only being semi-full! We tried hitch-hiking with the locals, but with the same result. When realizing that no bus would pick us up outside the regular bus-stops, we finally returned back to Nourilang. After waiting for ages, one bus stopped to let some people off and I ran towards it, only to be greeted by a waving hand from the guide inside the bus driving happily away. Someone has said that Jiuzhaigou bus-drivers are a nasty breed and we could certainly agree on that. Eventually well after 9 we got on a bus that took us all the way up to Long Lake. Lesson learned: try to get on the right bus (triple-check!) already at the main gate.

At Long Lake it was stunningly beautiful with snow-covered trees and clear sky. We immediately started to walk up through the forest (to the right, facing the lake) with the hope of finding Blue Eared-Pheasants. The forest was also today very silent and there was not a sniff of any galliform. After having spent a couple of hours searching, we gave up and returned towards the car park. I briefly played the call of Sukatshev’s Laugher at a site where I had seen it in May and: BANG, there it was! We were then treated to crippling views of this extremely restricted-range laugher.



Sukatshev's Laughingthrush

Around Long Lake carpark, we added some more common forest birds and then took the bus back down the valley. Got off at Nourilang where we squeezed into another bus that would surely take us down to the main gate we thought. However, it continued in the direction of Primeval Forest and they would not stop and let us off. After some further struggle with buses, we eventually descended the valley with just one photo-stop.

Back at the hotel by 14.30 and grabbed a taxi to the airport, but stopped for some birding along the way. At the time we arrived the airport, we soon realized that the flight was seriously delayed and that we would dip out on the flight from Chengdu to Beijing. To make a very long story short, we managed by some tricks and serious persuasion to get on the last flight to Beijing and arrived home by one hour after midnight.

Weather

Most of the first day was cloudy with light rain during most of the afternoon. At Primeval Forest at 3000 m the ground was partly covered with snow. The second day was absolutely brilliant with clear sky the whole day. The rain from the day before had turned into a beautiful snowy landscape around Long Lake.



Long Lake in winter plumage

Logistics

We flew with Air China from Chengdu to Jiuzhai-Huanglong airport on the Friday evening and took a taxi (300 RMB being a slight over-price) to Jiuzhaigou and the pre-booked Sheraton Hotel. October seems to be the peak season for this place, so it was extremely difficult to get air tickets as well as accomodation. On the return journey we took a taxi from the hotel which was 250 RMB including several birding stops below Gong Gang Ling.

To drive the 85 km from the airport to the main gate takes slightly more than 1.5 hours. Flight time from Chengdu to Jiuzhaigou is about 40 minutes, but used to be a 8-10 hours dangerous drive before the airport was opened in 2003. The airport also serves Huanglong, which is another very scenic area, although I do not know about birding possibilities there.

The transport system at Jiuzhaigou is not a birders dream. Only the tour buses (and the locals' cars) are allowed to operate within the park. The first bus leaves the main gate at 7.00 and the last one is said to return at 18.00.

Site descriptions

Jiuzhaigou is a famous and well-described tourist and birding destination in central China. From a birding perspective it is almost a must-visit place if one wants to connect with Rufous-headed Robin and Sukatshev's Laughingthrush. Other key species are Sichuan Jay, Blue Eared-Pheasant, Verreaux's Monal-Partridge and there are also records of Przewalski's Parrotbill (but not since the late eighties), Gould's Shortwing and Sichuan Treecreeper. This is of course in addition to a large number of species occurring elsewhere in central China.

Besides the birds, it offers some of the most stunning scenery in China. This of course means that an unbelievable number of tourists visits. There must be tens of thousands of hotel-beds in the area and the whole infrastructure is almost unrealistic.



Birds

Chinese Pond-Heron, *Ardeola bacchus*

One at Long Lake.

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos*

15 in the upper west valley and a few along the road to the airport..

Himalayan Griffon, *Gyps himalayensis*

A total of 40-50 along the road to the airport.

Sparrowhawk sp, *Accipiter nisus/virgatus*

One at Long Lake.

Eurasian Buzzard, *Buteo buteo japonicus*

Two near Nourilang, one at Gong Gang Ling and a pair at Jiuzhaigou airport.

Upland Buzzard, *Buteo hemilasius*

One near Gong Gang Ling.

Golden Eagle, *Aquila chrysaetus daphanea*

One between Jiuzhaigou and Gong Gang Ling.

Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus interstinctus*

One between Jiuzhaigou and Gong Gang Ling.

Severtsov's Grouse, *Bonasa sewerzowi*

One male flushed at 3100 m at Primeval Forest and then seen a few times on the ground.

Ring-necked Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus suehschanensis*

Two males near Jiuzhaigou airport.

Chinese Tawny Owl, *Strix (aluco) nivicola*

One calling frequently at the main gate just before dawn on the first morning. The call is a double hoot, not at all like the European form.

Black Woodpecker, *Dryocopus martius khamensis*

One heard at Long Lake.

Eurasian Crag-Martin, *Hirundo rupestris rupestris*

15-20 above Long Lake.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba ssp*

Two at Nourilang and one at Long Lake.

Collared Finchbill, *Spizixos semitorques semitorques*

Three at Nourilang.

Brown Dipper, *Cinclus pallasii pallasii*

Two in Swan Lake.

Winter Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes szetschuanus*

Several around Primeval Forest.

Rufous-breasted Accentor, *Prunella strophinata strophinata*

Fairly common around Primeval Forest, Nourilang and Long Lake.

Chestnut Thrush, *Turdus rubrocanus gouldi*

15-20 together in Primeval Forest.

Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus yunnanensis*

Fairly common around Primeval Forest.

Pale-rumped Warbler, *Phylloscopus chloronotus*

Two near Swan Lake and two at Nourilang.

Yellow-browed Warbler, *Phylloscopus inornatus*

One near Swan Lake.

Red-flanked Bluetail, *Tarsiger cyanurus rufilatus*

One female-type near Swan Lake and one female at Nourilang.

Hodgson's Redstart, *Phoenicurus hodgsoni*

One below Swan Lake and one at Jiuzhaigou airport.

White-throated Redstart, *Phoenicurus schisticeps*

5-6 together at 3100 m at Primeval Forest and fairly common between Nourliang and Swan Lake.

Blue-fronted Redstart, *Phoenicurus frontalis*

Common around Primeval Forest, Nourilang and Swan Lake.

White-capped Water-Redstart, *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus*

Two near Swan Lake.

Plumbeous Water-Redstart, *Rhyacornis fuliginosus fuliginosus*

Two near Swan Lake and two at the main gate.

Sukatschev's Laughingthrush, *Garrulax sukatschewi*

One pair near Swan Lake car park at the same site as I saw it in May this year.



Sukatschev's Laughingthrush

Elliot's Laughingthrush, *Garrulax elliotii elliotii*

Common.

Streak-throated Fulvetta, *Fulvetta cinereiceps cinereiceps*

One pair near Swan Lake car park.

Sooty Tit, *Aegithalos fuliginosus*

About 15 at the main gate in the late afternoon and a few at Nourilang.

Pere David's Tit, *Poecile davidi*

About five at Panda Lake and a small flock at Nourilang.

Coal Tit, *Periparus ater aemodius*

A few near Swan Lake and Gong Gang Ling.

Rufous-vented Tit, *Periparus rubidiventris beavani*

One at Primeval Forest car park and one near Swan Lake.

Grey-crested Tit, *Lophophanes dichrous dichroides*

Common around Primeval Forest.

Great Tit, *Parus major minor*

A few at Nourilang.

Eurasian Nuthatch, *Sitta europaea sinensis*

About five around Panda Lake and two near Gong Gang Ling.

Snowy-browed (Chinese) Nuthatch, *Sitta villosa bangsi*

One at Panda Lake and one near Gong Gang Ling.

Bar-tailed Treecreeper, *Certhia himalayana yunnanensis*

3-4 at Panda Lake and one near Gong Gang Ling.

Sichuan Jay, *Perisoreus internigrans*

Four together at 3200 m at Primeval Forest (N33'03.621, E103'52.140) was a very good find after having missed them in May.



Sichuan Jay

Nutcracker, *Nucifraga cariocatactes macella*

Two heard at Panda Lake and heard at Nourilang.

Large-billed Crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos tibetosinensis*

Several at Jiuzhaigou and towards the airport.

Beautiful Rosefinch, *Carpodacus pulcherrimus argyrophrys*

One at Nourilang

White-browed Rosefinch, *Carpodacus thura femininus*

Two at Primeval Forest car park and common at Swan Lake.

Grey-headed Bullfinch, *Pyrrhula erythaca erythaca*

Heard at Nourilang and about ten at Swan Lake.

Godlewski's Bunting, *Emberiza godlewski omissa*
One at Nourilang and one at Jiuzhaigou airport.

Chestnut-eared Bunting, *Emberiza fucata fucata*
Two below Nourilang.

Little Bunting, *Emberiza pusilla*
One near Swan Lake.