

Taibaishan, Shaanxi, China

26-29 May 2005



... in search of Blackthroat

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General

This is a report from a “twitch” based on 100 years old gen! One of the least known birds in China is the beautiful Blackthroat, of which extremely little is known. Myself, Jocke Hammar and Chris Campion were all keen on finding this gem. However, our information was limited to say the least and mostly based on the following quote from the Red Data Book.

“*Shaanxi* Taibai Shan (Tai-pai Shan), Qinling (Tsinling) Shan, four adult males collected “half way up”, late May and July 1905 (Hartert 1907b, specimens in AMNH and BMNH).”

“He who dares wins”, so loaded with much hope, we decided to spend an extended weekend on this mountain, the highest in eastern China. The number of visiting birders to the Qinling mountain range has so far been very few and therefore we saw the trip also as an exploratory visit. As it turned out, we did not find the target bird, but anyway had some great birding in a very scenic area.

Highlights

We recorded a number of interesting birds like Temminck's Tragopan, Blood and Golden Pheasants, the recently described Sichuan Treecreeper on its most northeasterly site so far, ten species of Phylloscopus warblers, at least three species of Seicercus warblers, sympatric occurrence of the still sometimes lumped Spotted and Pere David's Bush-Warblers, Indian Blue Robin, Golden Bush-Robin, nesting Spectacled Parrotbill, Sooty Tit and Slaty Bunting. Rather interestingly, we also noted that the local Goldcrests had a completely different song and seemingly a slightly different plumage...

Itinerary

26/5

We arrived simultaneously in the evening at Xian airport from Beijing and Hong Kong respectively and were met by Mr Lei and guide Ms Zoe. Within minutes we were leaving the airport in their new Great Wall jeep. After a swift and comfortable ride on the express road west from Xian, we arrived at the small village of Tangyu after only 1.5 hours. We checked in at the pre-arranged hotel and went to bed dreaming of stunning views of Blackthroats.

27/5

Woke up early, i.e. 4.00, by the sound of Common Cuckoo, Large Hawk-Cuckoo, Lesser Cuckoo and Grey Nightjar. The entrance gate to Taibaishan Forest Park was only about a km from the hotel, but unfortunately did not open until 6.00 or 6.30 depending on the peak season. We therefore spent almost one hour around the gate listening to at least six calling Golden Pheasants and several Eastern Crowned Warblers.

At 6.15 we set off up the mountain. We wanted to reach high altitudes as soon as possible so drove rather quickly. Golden Pheasants were calling along the way in the lower parts of the valley. A quick stop at Hong Hua Ling at almost 2300 m yielded a nest-building pair of Spectacled Parrotbills and a nice chorus with Chinese Leaf-Warblers as lead vocalists. From here we continued up to Xiabansi at more than 2700 m. At this elevation we could however find no bamboo and the highest area we noticed any bamboo was around 2500 m. From Xiabansi we took the cable car to Shangbansi at over 3100 m. From the cable car I heard a singing Sichuan Treecreeper, a very distinct species only very recently described from Sichuan and here probably at the northeastern most point of its range. Later we heard and saw at least two more individuals slightly below Shangbansi.

The habitat around and above Shangbansi was probably not very interesting from a Blackthroat point of view as it lacked good understorey and especially bamboo. Instead we started to walk slightly downhill through the rhododendron forest. A pair of Blood Pheasant was joined by an extra male and they all slowly walked past us at point blank range. Sichuan Treecreepers were singing as was a couple of Goldcrests. The latter having a song very different from "normal" Goldcrests. We worked our way through the mixed forest diagonally downhill in order to cover ground and traverse through different vegetation zones. No sign of any Blackthroat, but loads of Greenish and Hume's Warblers as well as numerous Red-flanked Bluetails. After having crashed through the forest for quite some time we suddenly came across a paved trail. This led us through nice forest all the way down to just above Hong Hua Ling. This walk took us most of the day and we rounded it off with walking down past Hong Hua Ling and a couple of kilometers below that. Initially we had planned to stay at Xiabansi, but as it was only a short drive away and the accommodation at Hong Hua Ling was seemingly good enough or better, we decided to stay overnight there. As we had been in the forest all day, only eating the local "socks", we all enjoyed the nice dinner spiced up with some donkey meat and Bowmore.



Chinese Leaf-Warbler with its galloping song that was heard throughout the days at mid to high elevations.

28/5

Jocke came up with the idea that Blackthroat, being a *Luscinia*, perhaps sings at night. Up predawn and positioned us in a nice area of bamboo at 2400 m. Needless to say, this did not pay off. We birded this area in the early morning until driving up to Xiabansi and deciding to walk the trail along the ridge that would take us back down to Hong Hua Ling. At first this trail climbed to well over 2900 m and then followed the ridge for most of the time. Added some birds for the trip-list like Golden Bush-Robin, Spotted Bush-Warbler, White-winged Grosbeak and had some good views of the local Goldcrests. Along this trail we did not find any bamboo at all. The last part of the trail was extremely steep and was made by cut foot-steps in the sometimes not far from vertical mountain side.

Once we were back at Hong Hua Ling, we had an early lunch while there was a short rain shower. After having recharged our batteries, we started walking down the main road to about 1800 m elevation. Good views of Indian Blue Robin, Slaty Bunting and not so satisfactory views of the trilling *Seicercus* warblers.

In the mid afternoon we called for Mr Lei to catch us up and drive further down the road. We then birded the area between KM 5 and 8 until dusk, in the hope of finding Moustached Laughingthrush, which has been seen in this area. Plain-tailed Warblers Eastern Crowned Warblers, Manchurian Bush-Warblers and Golden Pheasants were recorded but not much else. By dusk we were back at Hong Hua Ling for our last night and another nice dinner.

29/5

We were up slightly before dawn around 5.00 and after a quick bite we drove down the main road in search of Golden Pheasant. They totally eluded us and the only pheasant we saw was a female Temminck's Tragopan. At one point I also briefly heard a Pere David's Bush-Warbler singing when we drove past it. It then did not take us long before we had eyeball-to-eyeball views of it. We then heard a couple of more individuals along the drive. We actually drove all the way down to the first gate before turning around and stopping at KM 5. We then spent the entire morning until 11.00 in the area between KM 5 and 8, but we still dipped on Moustached Laughingthrush. At 11.00 we left Taibaishan and drove back to Xian airport. The journey was quick, only 1.5 hours, and the only interesting bird along the road was a Tiger Shrike.

Weather

The weather was with us for most of the time, which is far from guaranteed at this time of the year. Very comfortable temperature and we only had the occasionally raindrops. One day was rather windy. On the top of the ridges at about 3000 meters elevation, the deciduous trees were still growing the new leaves, whereas in the valley at below 2000 meters it was full summer. The top of the mountain at ca 3700 meters still had some snow, although the summit is out of reach for foreigners and probably also rather birdless.



Grey-headed Bullfinch

Logistics

Jocke had arranged everything via Internet. He got in contact with a local travel agent named Ecotours, which proved to be absolutely excellent. The manager of the company, Mr Lei and the guide, Ms Zoe, were very professional, efficient and most of all very nice persons. We all enjoyed their company and expertise. Mr Lei was especially knowledgeable in all the nature reserves right across the Qinling and Min mountain ranges.

Ecotours can be contacted at www.wildgiantpanda.com or at ecotour@wildgiantpanda.com. If planning a trip to the Qinling Shan, we could warmly recommend their services.

Site descriptions

Taibaishan is the highest mountain in the Qinling Shan. Only a few mountains in this range reach the altitude of 3000+ meters. So far, rather few birders have visited Taibaishan, but given its proximity to Xian, this is likely to change. Taibai Forest Park is very easy to visit, only 1.5 hours from Xian, good accommodations and food supply. In order to find Blackthroat, it may however be necessary to venture off to other places on the mountain and this requires more careful planning and permits.



Map of Taibai Shan Forest Park. Note that south is “up”.

Comments on Blackthroat

We know for certain that we did not hear any Blackthroats singing. Even though we did not spend a lot of time in this part of Taibaishan, we believe that it is not likely that it occurs in the accessible parts of Taibaishan Forest Park. The reason for this statement is that there are only rather small areas of bamboo and these are mostly below 2500 meters. Of course, the information on preferred habitats for this species is extremely limited. Given that it is closely related to Firethroat and a few of the historical records are in bamboo, we assume that it should be looked for primarily in bamboo, most likely at rather high elevations.

Alternative sites where it should be looked for are:

- the southern slope of Taibaishan where there is extensive bamboo up to at least 3100 m. This is a military area and requires permits as well as walking 5-10 hours, excluding five hours drive from Xian.
- the northern slope of Taibaishan, but in the area within the Nature Reserve east of the Forest Park. This is also military area and requires special permits.
- Changqing Panda Reserve, north of Hanzhong (Crested Ibis area), which apparently has bamboo up to around 3000 m.
- Baishuijiang on the border with Gansu province. This is ten hours drive from Lanzhou. This site could also be highly interesting to check for Przewalski’s Parrotbill, another species of which virtually nothing is known.

Needless to say, the Qinling and Min mountains will see us back next breeding season, most likely at Baishuijiang...

Birds

The following list is mostly my personal observations, although I have added a few species that were noted only by Jocke and Chris.

[Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea* ssp

Three between Taibaishan and Xian.]

Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta garzetta*

One in the river at low elevation.

Sparrowhawk sp, *Accipiter* sp

Singles at high elevation.

Eurasian Buzzard, *Buteo buteo japonicus*

A pair at Shangbansi.

Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus interstinctus*

One at KM 5.

Blood Pheasant, *Ithaginis cruentus sinensis*

Two males and a female together above Xiabansi at 2900m. A real show as they slowly wandered past us at very close range.

Temminck's Tragopan, *Tragopan temminckii*

One female by the roadside at dawn at 2000 m. Surprisingly none heard calling.

Golden Pheasant, *Chrysolophus pictus*

Common between the first and second gates. Probably 25-30 heard, but none seen, although we did not put in any effort other than driving along the road after dawn.

Spotted Dove, *Streptopelia chinensis chinensis*

A pair at the second gate and more common at low elevations outside the park.

Large Hawk-Cuckoo, *Cuculus sparverioides sparverioides*

About 10-15 heard.

Common Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus canorus*

One heard at Tangyu village.

Himalayan Cuckoo, *Cuculus saturatus saturatus*

At least three heard from the ridge. Calling with the four-syllable song: hu, ho-ho-ho, different from the northern form species.

Lesser Cuckoo, *Cuculus poliocephalus*

Several heard all the way from Tangyu to the ridge.



Lesser Cuckoo

Asian Koel, *Eudynamys scolopacea chinensis*
About ten from the second gate and below.

Chinese Tawny Owl, *Strix [aluco] nivicola nivicola*
One heard at dawn at 2400 m and one heard at dawn at Honghualing. The typical double-hoot call of the Chinese forms.

Grey Nightjar, *Caprimulgus indicus jotaka*
One heard at Tangy village and one heard and another seen on the road pre-dawn at Honghualing.

Fork-tailed Swift, *Apus pacificus kanoi*
Sometimes seen in large flocks.

Black-capped Kingfisher, *Halcyon pileata*
Two at lower elevation.

White-backed Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos leucotis tangi*
One above Xiabansi.

Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos major stresemanni*
Three seen at low and mid elevations.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica gutturalis*
Several between Xian and Taibaishan.

Asian House Martin, *Delichon dasypus cashmiriensis*
Two flocks seen, one low and one high.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba leucopsis*
Several at low elevations.

Grey Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea melanope*
About ten seen, low- high elevations.

Long-tailed Minivet, *Pericrocotus ethologus ethologus*
5-8 at mid-high elevations.

Collared Finchbill, *Spizixos semitorquatus semitorquatus*
About five at low elevations.

Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus yunnanensis*
One heard at Shangbansi, one heard and seen below Shangbansi and three heard and seen along the ridge. The song of this form is completely different from those in Europe. It is more reminding of a sort of *phylloscopus*. The plumage seemed to differ in the wing pattern, with a lack of whitish bases to the primaries.

Brown Dipper, *Cinclus pallasii pallasii*
Four seen at low and mid elevations.

Winter Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes szetschuanus*
About five heard around Xiabansi and the ridge.

Rufous-breasted Accentor, *Prunella strophiatea strophiatea*
One at Xiabansi.

Blue Whistling-Thrush, *Myophonus caeruleus caeruleus*
Common at low elevations.

Chestnut Thrush, *Turdus rubrocanus gouldi*
Three between 2400-2700 m.

Manchurian Bush-Warbler, *Cettia canturians*
Two heard around KM 5.

Brownish-flanked Bush-Warbler, *Cettia fortipes davidiana*
Fairly common at low elevations.

Yellowish-bellied Bush-Warbler, *Cettia acanthizoides acanthizoides*
About five heard between Shangbansi and Xiabansi.

- Spotted Bush-Warbler, *Bradypterus thoracicus przewalskii*
Four at 2700-2800 m at Shangbansi and along the first part of the ridge. Two of them really showing well and singing out in the open. The song is a fast three-syllable tchi-tchi-tchzzzzzz.
- Pere David's Bush-Warbler, *Bradypterus davidi davidi*
Four below Xiabansi at around 2100-2200 m. Also this species behaved well and responded well to the tape. The song of this form is a repeated single buzz, clearly different from the previous species.
- Yellow-streaked Warbler, *Phylloscopus armandii armandii*
Two at 2300 m above Xiabansi.
- Buff-barred Warbler, *Phylloscopus pulcher pulcher*
Five at the ridge and around Shangbansi.
- Sichuan Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus forresti*
One at the ridge at 2800 m.
- Chinese Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus yunnanensis*
Very common from about 2200 m and above. The two song-types of this species were heard almost constantly throughout the day.
- Hume's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus humei mandellii*
Very common from about 2400 m and above. Commoner higher up, where this species, together with the previous, made up the constant background. Also this species has two different song types.
- Arctic Warbler, *Phylloscopus borealis ssp*
One heard at the first gate was probably a migrant.
- Greenish Warbler, *Phylloscopus trochiloides obscuratus*
Very common from Xiabansi and above. Commoner higher up. The song of this form is clearly different from *viridianus*, by being shorter, fuller and not so complex. Mostly showing a large square greater covert wingbar and a narrower median covert wingbar, similar to *plumbeitarsus*. The bill seems to be darker than *viridianus*, although still somewhat pale inner lower mandible.
- Large-billed Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus magnirostris*
Common from 1800-2200 m, where its typical song was constantly heard.
- Eastern Crowned Warbler, *Phylloscopus coronatus*
Fairly common from the first gate to KM 5. The song is very similar to e.g. Japan, although it was consistently only a three-note song: tschui-tschui-dzzzzheee.
- Blyth's Leaf Warbler, *Phylloscopus reguloides claudiae*
Only two identified at about 2100 m.
- Plain-tailed Warbler, *Seicercus soror*
Common between KM 5-8, 700-900 m.
- Bianchi's Warbler, *Seicercus valentini*
Common between 2200-2700 m.
- Omei Warbler, *Seicercus omeiensis*
Common between 1800-2200 m. At least two identified on basis of trilling song and complete eye-ring unbroken at the rear. Call-note a single or double soft "du" or "du-du". We cannot exclude that any of the others were not Grey-crowned (*S tephrocephalus*), which is also reported by Martens from this mountain range.
- Rufous-faced Warbler, *Abroscopus albogularis fulvifacies*
About five around KM 5.
- Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, *Ficedula strophinata strophinata*
One at the ridge at 2800 m.
- Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, *Culicicapa ceylonensis calochrysea*
About five heard at mid elevation.

Indian Blue Robin, *Luscinia brunnea brunnea*
Seven around 2000 m.

Red-flanked Bluetail, *Tarsiger cyanurus rufilatus*
Common at high elevations.

Golden Bush-Robin, *Tarsiger chrysaeus chrysaeus*
One male at the ridge at 2800 m.

Daurian Redstart, *Phoenicurus aureus leucopterus*
Several at high elevation and one at KM 5.

Blue-fronted Redstart, *Phoenicurus frontalis*
Two between Xiabansi and Shangbansi.

White-capped Water-Redstart, *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus*
Fairly common at mid elevation.

Plumbeous Water-Redstart, *Rhyacornis fuliginosus fuliginosus*
Common at mid elevation.

White-bellied Redstart, *Hodgsonius phaenicuroides phaenicuroides*
5-10 heard at 2200-2400 m.

Forktail sp
Two heard at low elevations. White-crowned?

Hwamei, *Garrulax canorus canorus*
Two at KM 5.

Elliot's Laughingthrush, *Garrulax elliotii elliotii*
About five at 2300-2500 m.

Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus erythrocnemis gravivox*
At least five heard around KM 5.

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus ruficollis (intermedius?)*
At least three heard at low elevations.

Rufous-capped Babbler, *Stachyris ruficeps davidi*
About five at low elevations.

Streak-throated Fulvetta, *Alcippe cinereiceps fessa*
Two at 2300 m and two higher up.

White-collared Yuhina, *Yuhina diademata*
A few at mid to high elevation.

Spectacled Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis conspicillatus conspicillatus*
A pair building a nest at Honghualing.

Vinous-throated Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis webbianus suffusus*
Fairly common at low elevations.

Black-throated Tit, *Aegithalos concinnus concinnus*
Several flocks at low elevations.

Sooty Tit, *Aegithalos fuliginosus*

One at 2400 m was showing at a distance of one meter.



Sooty Tit carrying food

[Rufous-vented Tit, *Periparus rubidiventris beavani*

One seen by Jocke and Chris at the ridge.]

Yellow-bellied Tit, *Pardaliparus venustulus*

One at 2200 m.

[Grey-crested Tit, *Lophophanus dichrous dichroides*

Two seen by Jocke near Xiabansi.]

Green-backed Tit, *Parus monticolus yunnanensis*

About ten at low-mid elevation.

Eurasian Nuthatch, *Sitta europaea sinensis*

One between Honghualing and Xiabansi.

Sichuan Treecreeper, *Certhia tianchuanensis*

Three, maybe four, between Xiabansi and Shangbansi. This species was very recently described from a few sites in west-central Sichuan. Subsequently it has been found in northern Sichuan (Jiuzhaigou) and last year also in Shaanxi at the same site where we recorded them. The song is completely different from Eurotreecreepers. A rather short (1-2 sec) falling trill, prrrrrrrrrr, or prrrrrr-r-r-r-r-r. We were all familiar with the song from Wolong and Wawushan in Sichuan.

Tiger Shrike, *Lanius tigrinus*

One between Taibaishan and Xian.

Brown Shrike, *Lanius cristatus lucionensis*

One between Taibaishan and Xian.

Grey-backed Shrike, *Lanius tephronotus tephronotus*

Three below Shangbansi.

Hair-crested Drongo, *Dicrurus hottentottus brevirostris*

Two near KM 5.

Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius sinensis*

About ten at low elevation.

Red-billed Blue Magpie, *Urocissa erythrorhyncha brevivexilla*

Fairly common at low elevation.

Eurasian Nutcracker, *Nucifraga caryocatactes macella*

Fairly common in the high elevation coniferous forest.

Large-billed Crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos colonorum*

At least two at low elevation.

Carrion Crow, *Corvus corone orientalis*

At least one at low elevation.

White-cheeked Starling, *Sturnus cineraceus*

Common between Taibaishan and Xian.

Russet Sparrow, *Passer rutilans rutilans*

A pair at KM 8 and several around Tangyu.

Common Rosefinch, *Carpodacus erythrinus roseatus*

One heard singing at the ridge.

Vinaceous Rosefinch, *Carpodacus vinaceus vinaceus*

About five around Shangbansi and the ridge.

Oriental Greenfinch, *Carduelis sinica sinica*

Two between Taibaishan and Xian.

Grey-headed Bullfinch, *Pyrrhula erythaca erythaca*

About ten above 2400 m, mostly around Shangbansi.

White-winged Grosbeak, *Mycerobas carnipes carnipes*

One at 2900 m at the ridge.

Slaty Bunting, *Latoucheornis siemsseni*

Two males (one recorded when singing) and another heard bird at 1900 m.



Singing Slaty Bunting

Godlewski's Bunting, *Emberiza godlewskii omissa*

A nesting pair at KM 8.