

Gaoligongshan, Western Yunnan, China

30 November – 4 December 2005



Joakim Hammar, Jesper Hornskov, Chris Campion and Chris Gladwin at the lower clearing in the early morning sun

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General

This is a report from a four day trip to Gaoligongshan, one of the most exciting forests for birding in China. Gaoligongshan is a north-south mountain range in Western Yunnan along the border with Myanmar. Jesper had been to the area several times before and I went once in 2004, but we were both keen on going back for more birding. It was not difficult to summon a few good friends like Joakim Hammar and Chris Campion from Hong Kong and Chris Gladwin from Singapore, so everything was set for a trip of great fun and good birding.

Many of the eastern Himalayan species just about make it into China in these mountains. To the east is the mighty and very low altitude Salween river that puts an effective barrier from a topographic point of view. To the east of the Salween there are, on the other hand hardly any natural trees left, so even without the Salween, there is no room for forest birds. However, we birded in fantastic forest from altitudes of 2000 m to 2400 m in brilliant sunshine and saw plenty of the key species of the area including such a gem as Gould's Shortwing. We had what was most likely a pair that performed stunningly well, once even sitting right out in the open on a mossy branch showing the tiny silvery stars on the underparts. Other scarce or seldom-seen birds of China included Black-headed Shrike-Babblers, Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler, Cutias, Scaly and Grey-sided Laughingthrushes, Gold-billed Magpies, Rusty-flanked Treecreeper, Plain-backed Thrushes and Nepal Martins.

Itinerary

30/11

We arrived almost simultaneously at Kunming airport in three batches, Jesper and me from Beijing, Jocke and Chris C from Hong Kong and Chris G from Singapore. The only part that did not arrive on time was CG's luggage, so he and Jesper went on a quick shopping trip in Kunming, while the rest of us enjoyed a beer. The flight from Kunming to Luxi (or Mangshi or Dehong or whatever it is called) in western Yunnan was on time and we landed at 20.00. After a nice dinner-stop along the way, we arrived at the hotel somewhat after midnight.

1/12

We left the hotel at 6.40 and drove up to the first clearing, where we had breakfast and birded for the first hour of daylight. Dawn was at 7.30 and the sun did not come out and warm us until 8.00. Then we spent the entire day birding along the main trail up to the upper clearing at 2300 m. In the afternoon we walked along the trail beyond that clearing but found very few birds. The highlight of the day was naturally the incredible sighting of the Gould's Shortwings that we had during the afternoon. At dusk we were almost back at the lower clearing, where the cars met us.

2/12

Left the hotel again at 6.40 and drove to the shelter halfway up the main trail. After a quick breakfast in the dark we started walking up the small trail that was a shortcut to another trail leading through extensive primary forests. The entire day was spent along that trail at altitudes of 2200-2350 m, where we birded almost all the way to an old bridge. The cars were then meeting us at dusk at the lower clearing.

3/12

This day we left even earlier at 5.45 and walked in the dark from the same starting point as yesterday in order to reach another clearing by dawn. Jesper and I spent the entire day along the trail to the old bridge. Jocke, Chris and Chris went back to the main trail by midday and birded along that one until dusk.

4/12

The very last morning was spent halfway up the main trail where we birded from dawn at 8.00 until 10.00, when we unfortunately had to leave for the airport at Baoshan. The flight was on time, so after a quick bowl of noodles we were soon on our way back to Kunming, where we split up in various directions. Luckiest of all was probably Jesper, who had the opportunity to stay at Gaoligongshan for another week, adding birds like Streak-throated Barwing, Gold-naped Finch, Wood Snipe, Fulvous Parrotbill, ... This place seems to have an infinite number of good birds!

Weather

All days were entirely clear, but somewhat cool in the mornings and just a bit windy during early afternoons. Most of the time I just carried a fleece jacket, although gloves were sometimes useful.

Birds

Unless explicitly mentioned, these are all my personal sightings. Others in the group obviously recorded more individuals and also a few more species, most of which are mentioned below between square brackets. The subspecies are mostly assigned based on literature, rather than actual field characters.

Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*

About 40 along the Salween River 4/12.

Black-shouldered Kite, *Elanus caeruleus vociferus*

One along the Salween River 4/12.

Crested Goshawk, *Accipiter trivirgatus indicus*

One soaring 1/12 and one displaying in nice comparison with a Besra 4/12.

Besra, *Accipiter virgatus affinis*

One pair at the lower clearing 1/12 and one 4/12. [Also one by JHo 3/12]

[Eurasian Buzzard, *Buteo buteo refectus*

One seen by JHa 1/12, two 2/12 and one 3/12.]

Black Eagle, *Ictinaetus malayensis malayensis*

Single birds (a pair?) seen several times 1/12, also in display flight, and one 3/12.

Mountain Hawk-Eagle, *Spizaetus nipalensis nipalensis*

One seen from the lower clearing the first morning.

Hill Partridge, *Arborophila torqueola batemani*

Up to 6+ heard and two pairs seen the first day, one of them incredibly well. Another pair was seen well 2/12 when eight heard, four heard 3/12 and two heard 4/12.

Rufous-throated Hill-Partridge, *Arborophila rufogularis intermedia*

Two of which the male was seen going to roost in bamboo 3/12.

Temminck's Tragopan, *Tragopan temminckii*

One female 2/12, one female 3/12 (one female by CC 3/12). According to the locals, only Temminck's Tragopan occurs in this part of the mountains and Blyth's is occurring in the northern part.

Red Junglefowl, *Gallus gallus jabouillei*

One male running away 3/12. Note high altitude.

Speckled Wood-Pigeon, *Columba hodgsonii*

Two [+ seven by the others] seen 3/12. One seen briefly 2/12 was probably a Speckled Wood-Pigeon.

[Barred Cuckoo-Dove, *Macropygia unchall tusalia*
One 3/12 by JHo, JHa]

Green-Pigeon sp, *Treron* sp
Three singles heard 1/12. Wedge-taileds?

Collared Scops-Owl, *Otus lettia lettia*
One heard pre-dawn from the hotel 4/12.

Chinese Tawny Owl, *Strix nivicola nivicola*
One called pre-dawn 3/12 and it or another was heard early the next morning.

[Brown-Wood-Owl, *Strix leptogrammica ticehursti*
One heard by JHa and JHo pre-dawn at the hotel 4/12.]

Collared Owlet, *Glaucidium brodiei brodiei*
One heard 1/12 and another heard 2/12.

Himalayan Swiftlet, *Aerodramus brevirostris innominatus*
One at the upper clearing and a few in the large hirundine flock the first day. The second day one was seen together with some Nepal Martins. [3+2 seen by the others 3/12]

[Fork-tailed Swift, *Apus pacificus ssp*
15 at Ertaipo 3/12 by JHa.]

Swift sp, *Apus* sp
An all dark swift with a deeply forked tail was scoped briefly amongst a large flock of hirundines and a few Himalayan Swiftlets. It was most likely a Dark-rumped Swift, but unfortunately no conclusive field marks could be seen.

Red-headed Trogon, *Harpactes erythrocephalus helenae*
One or two seen along the main trail 1/12 and one 3/12.

Great Barbet, *Megalaima virens virens*
One heard 1/12, one heard 2/12 and one heard 4/12. [One heard by JHa 3/12]

Golden-throated Barbet, *Megalaima franklinii franklinii*
Three heard 2/12 and two seen 3/12.

Greater Yellownappe, *Picus flavinucha flavinucha*
Two at dusk 2/12. Identified thanks to Chris C who carried his scope all day long, only to be used in the final moments of the day. One Yellownappe sp was seen briefly by JHo at the lower clearing the first morning.

Bay Woodpecker, *Blythipicus pyrrhotis pyrrhotis*
Two heard near the lower clearing 1/12, two seen on 2/12, one heard 3/12, one heard 4/12.

Plain Martin, *Riparia paludicola chinensis*
Several along the Salween River, where a large nesting colony (presumably this species) was seen at the large bridge on the way to Baoshan.

[Eurasian Crag-Martin, *Hirundo rupestris rupestris*
Two by JHa and CC 3/12.]

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica ssp*
A few along the way to Baoshan.

Asian Martin, *Delichon dasypus cashmiriensis*
An estimated 200 in a loose flock in the evening of 1/12 [and again by the others 3/12].

Nepal Martin, *Delichon nipalensis cuttingi*
At least 8-10, maybe many more in the large hirundine flock in the evening of the first day. 20 sweeping over the forest 2/12 and five 3/12.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba alboides*
A few along the way to Baoshan.

[Olive-backed Pipit, *Anthus hodgsoni ssp*
One by CG, CC, JHa 3/12.]

Long-tailed Minivet, *Pericrocotus ethologus ssp*
Five heard 1/12.

Gray-chinned Minivet, *Pericrocotus solaris montpellierii*
Four 1/12, seven 2/12, eight 3/12.

Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike, *Hemipus picatus capitalis*
Three 1/12.

Mountain Bulbul, *Ixos maclellandii similis*
Two [five] 1/12 and one [ten] 2/12, [3 3/12].

Black Bulbul, *Hypsipetes leucocephalus ssp*
10+ 1/12, ten 2/12, five 3/12, 20 4/12. Both black- and white headed forms.

[Orange-bellied Leafbird, *Chloropsis hardwickei melliana*
One by JHa 1/12.]

Maroon-backed Accentor, *Prunella immaculata*
One seen on the road when driving down the mountain 4/12 was especially appreciated by JHa.

Plain-backed Thrush, *Zoothera mollissima*

One seen very well on the main trail 1/12. Two together with Long-tailed Thrushes 2/12 and one at the lower clearing 2/12. Cracking views of this rather seldom-seen species in China.

Long-tailed Thrush, *Zoothera dixonii*

At least ten along the main trail 1/12, five 2/12, ten 3/12 and two 4/12. Exceptionally good views when they were hopping along the trails.

Scaly Thrush, *Zoothera dauma* ssp

One seen above the upper clearing and another seen 2/12. Not identified to subspecies, but potentially the Himalayan form that is sometimes considered a separate species.

Chestnut Thrush, *Turdus rubrocanus* gouldi

One heard at the lower clearing 1/12 and three seen around a fruiting tree 3/12 [also nine by the others 2/12.]

Eyebrowed Thrush, *Turdus obscurus*

One flyby 3/12. [Also two seen by JHo 2/12.]

Dusky Thrush, *Turdus naumanni eunomus*

One 3/12.

Gould's Shortwing, *Brachypteryx stellata stellata*

The species that made the trip! Two birds in a densely vegetated gully with a small stream at 2250 m. Unforgettable views of this dreambird! It started with me randomly playing the tape in a few gullies, when suddenly there was a response to the (presumed) contact call. The calling bird moved closer and all of us got alerted. Suddenly there was a movement in the dark undergrowth and we managed to get full, although quick, looks at this rarely seen species. We then managed to lure it into view at least four more times. Once I saw one bird as close as 5 meters, when the others were watching another individual some 10 meters away. The ultimate sighting though, was when one bird jumped up on a mossy branch and just sat there in the open in good light!



CG, CC, JHa and JHo just after having had eye-ball-to-eye-ball views of the shortwing

Chestnut-headed Tesia, *Tesia castaneocoronata ripleyi*

One heard 1/12 and at least two and one seen well 2/12, four 3/12.

Slaty-bellied Tesia, *Tesia olivea*

One seen well along the main trail 1/12.

Buff-barred Warbler, *Phylloscopus pulcher pulcher*

Five+ 1/12, five 2/12 and five+ 3/12

Ashy-throated Warbler, *Phylloscopus maculipennis maculipennis*

10+ 1/12, 15 2/12, five [18] 3/12

Sichuan Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus forresti*

Five 1/12, one 2/12, five 3/12 and one 4/12. Recent split from the Lemon/Pale-rumped Leaf-Warbler, *Ph chloronotus*.

[Pallas's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus proregulus*

Two by JHo]

Bianchi's Warbler, *Seicercus valentini*

Two 1/12, [also three 2/12 and one 3/12 by the others]

Gray-cheeked Warbler, *Seicercus poliogenys*

One [four] 1/12, two [four] 2/12, [two 3/12] and two 4/12

Chestnut-crowned Warbler, *Seicercus castaniceps castaniceps*
 Two 1/12, two [five] 2/12, eight 3/12 and two 4/12

[Broad-billed Warbler, *Tickellia hodgsoni hodgsoni*
 One by JHo, JHa 2/12, two by JHa, CG.]

Black-faced Warbler, *Abroscopus schisticeps ripponi*
 Ten 1/12, 30+ 2/12 and 30+ 3/12

Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, *Ficedula strophinata strophinata*
 One in the upper clearing 1/12 and one 2/12

[Slaty-blue Flycatcher, *Ficedula tricolor diversa*
 One female by JHa]

Large Niltava, *Niltava grandis grandis*
 Four 1/12, three 2/12, two 3/12 and one 4/12

Himalayan Red-flanked Bluetail, *Tarsiger [cyanurus] rufilatus*
 Seven 1/12, five 2/12 and three [ten] 3/12. Sometimes separated as a separate species based on different songs, calls and morphology.

White-browed Bush-Robin, *Tarsiger indicus yunnanensis*
 One seen by JHo and heard by the rest of us 4/12.

Blue-fronted Redstart, *Phoenicurus frontalis*
 Two 1/12.

Daurian Redstart, *Phoenicurus aureus leucopterus*
 Two when driving down the mountain and one along the road to Baoshan 4/12. [One heard 1/12 by JHo]

Spotted Forktail, *Enicurus maculatus guttatus*
 [One by JHo 1/12] One seen and three probable heard 2/12 and three 3/12

Pied Bushchat, *Saxicola caprata burmanica*
 One along the Salween River and one at Baoshan airport 4/12.

Yellow-bellied Fantail, *Rhipidura hypoxantha*
 Four 1/12, two 2/12, two 3/12 and one 4/12

White-throated Fantail, *Rhipidura albicollis*
 Four 1/12, three 2/12, seven 3/12 and two 4/12.

[Spotted Laughingthrush, *Garrulax ocellatus maculipectus*
 Three by CG 3/12]

Gray-sided Laughingthrush, *Garrulax caerulatus latifrons*
 Six together showing nicely 2/12 and one 4/12. [Also two by CG 3/12]

Scaly Laughingthrush, *Garrulax subunicolor griseatus*
 Three skulking away 3/12. [Also two by the others 2/12]

Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush, *Garrulax erythrocephalus woodi*
 Three 1/12, six 2/12 and five 3/12.

Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus erythrocnemis odicus*
 Two heard 1/12 and one heard 3/12.

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus ruficollis similis*
 5+ (several more heard by JHo), 10+ 2/12, ten 3/12 and three 4/12.

Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler, *Xiphirhynchus superciliaris forresti*
 One 2/12 that gave superlative views for as long as we wanted and then another or the same nearby the next morning near the clearing. This species really has a most extraordinary bill, so slender it is sometimes difficult to see amongst the vegetation.

[Pygmy Wren-Babbler, *Pnoepyga pusilla pusilla*
 One seen by the others 1/12.]

[Spotted Wren-Babbler, *Spelaeornis formosus*]
 One by JHa 3/12 was a good find.

Long-tailed Wren-Babbler, *Spelaeornis chocolatinus reptatus*
 One 1/12, five 2/12, three 3/12. Mostly occurring in the well-vegetated gullies.

Rufous-capped Babbler, *Stachyris ruficeps bhamoensis*
 Two 1/12, one 2/12 and two 3/12.

Cutia, *Cutia nipalensis nipalensis*
 A pair of this charismatic species gleaning the branches 2/12.

Black-headed Shrike-Babbler, *Pteruthius rufiventer rufiventer*
 Three males and three females together and two others together 2/12. Two males by JHa and CC 4/12. Excellent views of this beautiful and local species.

White-browed Shrike-Babbler, *Pteruthius flaviscapis ricketti*
 Two [6] 3/12. [Also one by JHo 2/12]

Black-eared Shrike-Babbler, *Pteruthius melanotis melanotis*
 Two 1/12, two 2/12 and two 3/12.

Chestnut-fronted Shrike-Babbler, *Pteruthius aenobarbus intermedius*
Two 2/12.

Rusty-fronted Barwing, *Actinodura egertoni ripponi*
Ten 1/12, 5+ 2/12, two [15] 3/12 and five 4/12.

Chestnut-tailed Minla, *Minla strigula yunnanensis*
Five 1/12, 5-10 2/12 and ten [17] 3/12.

Red-tailed Minla, *Minla ignotincta ignotincta*
Three 2/12 and four 3/12.

Golden-breasted Fulvetta, *Alcippe chrysotis forresti*
Ten 2/12 and one 3/12.

[Yellow-throated Fulvetta, *Alcippe cinerea*
Three by JHo 3/12, which I unfortunately dipped with just a few seconds in spite of a lengthy run]

Rufous-winged Fulvetta, *Alcippe castaneiceps castaneiceps*
Ten 2/12, 50+ 3/12 and three 4/12

Streak-throated Fulvetta, *Alcippe cinereiceps manipurensis*
Two by the clearing 3/12. This taxon is separated by Rasmussen and Anderton as a separate species, Manipur Fulvetta.

Rusty-capped Fulvetta, *Alcippe dubia intermedia*
One [10] 3/12 and two 4/12. [Also six by JHo 1/12].

Gray-cheeked Fulvetta, *Alcippe morrisonia yunnanensis*
30-40 1/12, 50+ 2/12, 60+ 3/12 and 10+ 4/12.

Black-headed Sibia, *Heterophasia desgodinsi desgodinsi*
Four 1/12. [One 3/12].

Beautiful Sibia, *Heterophasia pulchella*
Five 1/12, 10-15 2/12, five [13] 3/12 and one 4/12.

Whiskered Yuhina, *Yuhina flavicollis rouxi*
Two 1/12 and three 3/12.

Stripe-throated Yuhina, *Yuhina gularis gularis*
Two 1/12, 15 2/12 and nine 3/12.

Rufous-vented Yuhina, *Yuhina occipitalis obscurior*
15-20 1/12, three [13] 2/12, 20 3/12.

White-bellied Yuhina, *Erpornis zantholeuca zantholeuca*
Two 3/12.

Grey-headed Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis gularis ssp*
Five 4/12. [15 by JHa, JHo 3/12].

Black-throated Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis nipalensis poliotis*
A flock of 20 2/12.

Black-throated Tit, *Aegithalos concinnus talifuensis*
20 1/12 and five [20] 3/12.

Green-backed Tit, *Parus monticolus yunnanensis*
Three 1/12, one 4/12 [two 3/12].

Yellow-cheeked Tit, *Parus spilonotus spilonotus*
Two 1/12, two 2/12 and six 3/12.

Yellow-browed Tit, *Sylviparus modestus modestus*
Two 1/12, two 2/12 and 10+ 3/12.

Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, *Sitta nagaensis nagaensis*
Two 1/12, two heard 2/12. [one 3/12].

White-tailed Nuthatch, *Sitta himalayensis*
Three 2/12, five [15] 3/12.

Rusty-flanked Treecreeper, *Certhia nipalensis*
One 3/12. Strikingly different from the Brown-throated with much less rufous tail, obvious rufous flanks contrasting with white underparts, very dark cheeks completely surrounded by a pale eyebrow. This species just barely makes it into China in these mountains.

Brown-throated Treecreeper, *Certhia discolor shanensis*
One plus two probables 2/12. [Also three 3/12].

[Gould's Sunbird, *Aethopyga gouldiae dabryi*
Five 1/12 and three 3/12].

Green-tailed Sunbird, *Aethopyga nipalensis koelzi*
10+ 1/12, three [15] 2/12, 10+ 3/12 and three 4/12.

Fire-tailed Sunbird, *Aethopyga ignicauda ignicauda*
17 migrating 1/12. [Also one 3/12].

Streaked Spiderhunter, *Arachnothera magna magna*
One heard 2/12. [One by CC 3/12].

Yellow-bellied Flowerpecker, *Dicaeum melanoxanthum*
One pair was performing well at the lower clearing 1/12, one female by the bridge 3/12

Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, *Dicaeum ignipectus ignipectus*
One [five] 1/12 and two [five] 3/12. [One by JHa 1/12].

Oriental White-eye, *Zosterops palpebrosus*
Two 1/12.

Maroon Oriole, *Oriolus traillii traillii*
Two 2/12. [Also heard by CC 3/12].

Long-tailed Shrike, *Lanius schach tricolor*
A few along the road to Baoshan 4/12.

Ashy Drongo, *Dicrurus leucophaeus hopwoodi*
5+ 1/12, two 2/12 and one [two] 3/12.

Gold-billed Magpie, *Urocissa flavirostris flavirostris*
Three near the upper clearing 1/12. [Also three by CG the nearby outlook]. This is a species with a very restricted range in China.

Red-billed Blue Magpie, *Urocissa erythrorhyncha erythrorhyncha*
Three 1/12 and two 4/12.

Gray Treepie, *Dendrocitta formosae himalayensis*
Two heard 2/12 and two [six] 3/12.

Dark-breasted Rosefinch, *Carpodacus nipalensis*
3 migrating 1/12 and one 3/12.

[Tibetan Siskin, *Carduelis thibetana*
Two by JHa and CC at the lower clearing 1/12].

Brown Bullfinch, *Pyrrhula nialensis ricketti*
Two 2/12 and 2+15 3/12.

Little Bunting, *Emberiza pusilla*
One 3/12.

Yellow-throated Bunting, *Emberiza elegans elegantula*
Three 1/12.