

# Julianshan, Jiangxi, China

(With notes of White-eared Night-Heron)

17-19 March 2006



*Specimen of White-eared Night-Heron at Julianshan NNR (photo by JNNR)*

**Björn Anderson**

## **General**

The sole purpose of this trip was to try to find the mysterious White-eared Night-Heron. Since the habitat was trashed at nearby Chebaling in Guangdong in 2005, this species has been very hard to connect with (although it was no easy game there either!). Fortunately it seems that Julianshan National Nature Reserve in the very southernmost part of Jiangxi is now making the big headlines with regular sightings of this enigmatic bird. I was lucky enough to have unusually good views of two birds feeding together at dusk and observation details are described in this report.

The trip would not have been successful hadn't it been for Mr Liao at the Nature Reserve as well as the three keen and kind birders (Ganliqing, PT and Echo) from Shenzhen who let me go with them. Last but not least my friend Liuyang from Beijing helped in setting up all necessary connections!

## **Itinerary**

### 17/3

After conducting my business in Shenzhen, I was kindly picked up by Ganliqing and his friends at 13.30. We were soon heading north on the express-roads, which took us all the way to Heping in only three hours. From there we took a newly built road across the mountains and headed north again. From then on it was on small mountains roads to the township of Jiulianshan, where we picked up Mr Liao and necessary supply for the weekend. The plan was to arrive at the WENH site before dusk and it was a nervous drive the last part when the sun was setting. By 18.55 we arrived at the hotel at the Nature Reserve and from there it was a five minutes drive to one of the spots. By then it was almost dark and it was apparent that we had missed the time-slot with a mere 15 minutes! With only one more evening to spend, it was a nerve-wrecking sleep, especially as Mr Liao said that there had been no confirmed sightings in the mornings. Nevertheless the alarm clock was set at 05.00...

### 18/3

By 5.30 I was positioned at the site and waited for something to happen. Then suddenly at 6.00 one heron (possibly a WENH) flew low over the canopy and rounded a large tree and disappeared. After that frustrating fly-by, I enjoyed a couple of brief bullet-like sightings of a Blyth's Kingfisher. Together with the other birders we walked slowly back to the hotel and had some noodles before driving to a different part of the reserve. We then spent several hours birding altitudes of 600-1000 masl in good forest. As it was in the middle of the day, the forest was rather quiet and no remarkable birds were found. In the late afternoon we were back at the hotel and I walked along the river to site B, which was supposed to be the best area for WENH. I sat for a couple of hours at the edge of the river waiting for dusk and herons to arrive. Later the others arrived and we crouched down next to some trees and waited. At 18.30 the evening show started when a White-eared Night-Heron flew across the river and landed out of view in some high trees. I personally only glimpsed the bird before it disappeared, but it certainly raised my heart frequency to red-flag levels. Five minutes more of waiting and it dropped down to the river and started to feed and was later joined by a second bird! We watched the birds for another 15-20 minutes until it was all dark and then left the area happier than kids on Xmas eve.

### 19/3

I was curious about the possibilities of locating the day roost of the WENH, so I walked to site B before dawn (arrived at 5.30) and waited for the first light. Unfortunately no herons were about and I spent some time working the trees bordering the river where they had appeared the night before, although with no result. A Blyth's Kingfisher zipped past, but otherwise no further sensations materialized. At 8.30 we had brecky at the hotel and then left the area and drove back to Shenzhen. This time we took a slightly different route, which turned out to take half an hour longer. At Shenzhen airport I rebooked to an earlier flight and returned to Beijing.

## **Weather**

The weather was fair and dry most of the time, except for the minutes before the crucial time-slot for the WENH, when it rained for half an hour. The temperature was very pleasant and no fleece-jacket was necessary.

## Logistics

I was fortunate enough to be invited to join some Shenzhen birders, which I very much appreciated. The quickest way to reach Jiulianshan is naturally by car. Another option is to take the train to Dingnan and from there try to arrange transport to the Nature Reserve.

## Site descriptions

Jiulianshan is a mountain range stretching from southernmost Jiangxi and southwest to northern Guangdong. The small town Jiulianshan is in Jiangxi and about five hours drive from Shenzhen. From Shenzhen it took us three hours to reach Heping on excellent expressroads. From Heping there is a newly built road that cuts across to road 105 and from there one continues north until the turn-off to the left to Jiulianshan. From this town it is a small road, which is just about to be sealed with concrete, leading to Daqiutian in Jiulianshan Nature Reserve.

The reserve has a very nice hotel with splendid rooms the size of a small apartment and 24 hours hot water. Why on earth it has been built beats me, but I have seen this sort of oversized accommodation at many remote nature reserves in China. Bear in mind though that the opposite is far more common! There are no special permits required, but an entrance fee of 20 RMB, a small guiding fee and a hotel cost of 250 RMB including three meals a day. The Nature Reserve can be contacted at 0797-3591426.



Map showing the southern tip of Jiangxi.

My birding was mainly done around the hotel as well as along the track parallel to the river leading to an abandoned factory (site A) and then continuing as a trail beyond that to site B. One afternoon was spent climbing through good forest to 1000 masl at a place several km before reaching the hotel (site C). This site is at a huge sign for the Nature Reserve (with a poor picture of WENH), a green metallic fence and a small hut.

## Notes on the White-eared Night-Heron

The White-eared Night-Heron is a very little known bird occurring in southeast China and northeast Viet Nam. Its known distribution is described in detail by Professor He Fenqi (in press). Most recent observations have been of flying birds at dusk and very little have been published on the behavior. These notes could therefore shed some more light on this enigmatic bird.

### Observation details

The first bird appeared at 18.30 in the evening on March 18 and it probably exited from some 10 meters high trees next to the river. At 18.30 it was dark enough to barely see colors. It flew across the river and landed out of sight in some 15 meters high trees. After about five minutes it dropped down to the edge of the river and quickly started to feed. After a few minutes it was joined by a second bird and they were then feeding side by side and flew across the river a couple of times. At about 19.00, when it was almost completely dark, one bird was seen flying upriver and with that the performance was over.

### Description

The first bird seemed all dark and in the twilight I struggled to see any white markings on the head and instead was surprised to find several pale bars (or row of spots) on the folded wings like an immature Black-crowned Night-Heron. It was also slightly spotted with pale on the central flanks. Apart from these characters, it was not possible to see any further details. The second bird seemed all dark but showed two strikingly white areas on the sides of the head and throat. Both birds showed identical structure with a fairly long and slender neck that was held like a Little Egret when feeding. The neck was not short and thick like a “true” *Gorsachius* Night-Heron. The legs were surprisingly long and not short like the other *Gorsachius*. In “The Herons Handbook” by Hancock and Kushlan (1984) there is a painting of an adult female, which apparently is said to be similar to the adult male. Based on this, we concluded that the first bird we saw was an immature, probably in its second calendar year. This would mirror the plumage development of Black-crowned Night-Heron. However this judgment is only tentative as so little is known about the species and it may be possible that it was in fact an adult female. Our general descriptions are also supported by photographs of the specimen found at Jiulianshan (He Fenqi in press and also published in this report).

### Calls

When the second bird appeared, a low single grunting call was heard several times. This we interpreted to be a contact call, as the birds were then very close to each other.

### Feeding behavior

Both birds were mostly feeding in the open water at the edge of the river. Sometimes the birds were standing still and stalked a fish(?) and sometimes they walked quickly in the water like a Little Egret. At least on two occasions a fish (presumably) was caught.

### Habitat

The river was rather gently flowing, but there were some places nearby where the water flowed more quickly. The two areas which the herons favored were covered with stones and pebbles (maximum size about 40-50 cm). We did not see them feeding in any muddy or sandy areas of the river bank. The sides of the river were covered with forest, mostly secondary with stands of larger trees up to 15 meters high. The depth of the river was probably maximum 1-1.5 meters and the herons were mostly feeding in water of a depth of 1-2 dm.

### Taxonomy

Although our observations were of rather short duration and in poor light, I must question the placement of White-eared Night-Heron in the genus *Gorsachius*. The structure of WENH is very different from Japanese and Malayan Night-Herons, with a much longer and slender neck as well as much longer legs. The feeding behavior is, according to my available literature, not at all similar to the other two *Gorsachius*, which are said to feed mostly on the forest floor rather than in rivers. This is also supported by one personal observation of a Malayan Night-Heron in Taiwan. More study is certainly needed of this unknown species. Peters in “Check-list of the Birds of the World” (1931) placed WENH in a monotypic genus *Oroanassa magnifica*, and maybe that could be justified.

### How to see the White-eared Night-Heron

Jiulianshan may currently offer the best possibility in the world to see White-eared Night-Heron. Even though the species is certainly under-recorded in a fairly large range in southeast China, it today remains rare and threatened. Anyone interested in seeing it should contact Jiulianshan National Nature Reserve (see phone number above) and hire a guide in order to minimize the pressure on the birds.



*Specimen of White-eared Night-Heron in the HQ of Jiulianshan NNR. Photographs to the courtesy of Professor He Fenqi (right) and Jiulianshan NNR (left). Note e.g. the structural differences compared to the Malayan Night-Heron below.*



*Malayan Night-Heron, Taiwan, photo by Bjorn Anderson*

## Birds

Little Grebe, *Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei*

Two in a dam near Jiulianshan town .

Striated Heron, *Butorides striatus actophilus*

One in the river near the hotel.

White-eared Night-Heron, *Gorsachius magnificus*

Two birds were seen at site B and details are described above. At 6.00 in the morning of the same day when I was keeping watch at site A, a smallish dark heron flew low along the river at tree-top level. Through my bins I could not see any colors, although the size and shape may indicate WENH.

Mandarin Duck, *Aix galericulata*

One female between site A and B and two pairs by the bridge south of the hotel.

Crested Serpent-Eagle, *Spilornis cheela ricketti*

One flushed in the forest between site A and B.

Black Eagle, *Ictinaetus malayensis malayensis*

One adult cruised the ridges at site C.

Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus interstinctus*

One near Shenzhen.

Chinese Bamboo-Partridge, *Bambusicola thoracica thoracica*

About five pairs heard around site A and B and one pair seen when flying across the river.

Ring-necked Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus torquatus*

Two females near Jiulianshan town .

White-breasted Waterhen, *Amaurornis phoenicurus phoenicurus*

Two by the bridge south of the hotel.

Large Hawk-Cuckoo, *Cuculus sparverioides sparverioides*

5-8 heard calling around site A, B and C.

Greater Coucal, *Centropus sinensis sinensis*

Two heard near the hotel.

Mountain Scops-Owl, *Otus spilocephalus latouchi*

8-10 heard calling during the nights between the hotel, site A and B. As usual this bugger escaped me trying to see it. I have heard many across Asia, but never seen it!

Collared Owlet, *Glaucidium brodiei brodiei*

5-10 heard calling.

Asian Barred Owlet, *Glaucidium cuculoides whitelyi*

Two heard around site A and B.

Red-headed Trogon, *Harpactes erythrocephalus yamakanensis*

One heard between site A and B.

Blyth's Kingfisher, *Alcedo hercules*

Two sightings of one at site A and one sighting at site B. All made of birds flying past.

Common Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis bengalensis*

Three between site A and B.

Great Barbet, *Megalaima virens virens*

At least five heard calling.

Black-browed Barbet, *Megalaima oorti sini*

One heard at site C.

Rufous Woodpecker, *Ceulus brachyurus fokiensis*

One pair near site A.

Grey-headed Woodpecker, *Picus canus sobrinus*  
Three at site A and at the hotel.

Bay Woodpecker, *Blythipicus pyrrhotis sinensis*  
One heard at site C and one heard at site B.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica gutturalis*  
Several around the hotel and along the way to Jiu.

Red-rumped Swallow, *Hirundo daurica japonica*  
Several around the hotel and along the way to Jiu.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba leucopsis*  
About five at the hotel and site A.

Grey Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea robusta*  
One at site B.

Olive-backed Pipit, *Anthus hodgsoni yunnanensis*  
A total of 30-50 seen mostly around the hotel.

Grey-chinned Minivet, *Pericrocotus solaris griseogularis*  
Widespread sightings of at least 15 birds.

Collared Finchbill, *Spizixos semitorques semitorques*  
At least ten around the hotel.

Red-whiskered Bulbul, *Pycnonotus jocosus jocosus*  
Five around the hotel and site A.

Light-vented Bulbul, *Pycnonotus sinensis sinensis*  
Several seen in secondary scrub.

Chestnut Bulbul, *Hemixos castnonotus canipennis*  
Common.

Mountain Bulbul, *Ixos maccllellandii holtii*  
Two near site B.

Brown Dipper, *Cinclus pallasii pallasii*  
One at site B.

Blue Whistling-Thrush, *Myophonus caeruleus caeruleus*  
One at site B and one near site C.

White's Thrush, *Zoothera dauma aurea*  
One near site C and two at site A.

Chinese Blackbird, *Turdus mandarinus ssp*  
One at site A.

Lesser Shortwing, *Brachypteryx leucophrys carolinae*  
One heard near site A.

Hill Prinia, *Prinia superciliaris ssp*  
A total of 15-20 in scrubby areas.

Asian Stubtail, *Urosphena squameiceps*  
One seen near site A and one heard near site C.

Brownish-flanked Bush-Warbler, *Cettia fortipes davidiana*  
Three seen between site A and B.

Pallas's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus proregulus*  
15-20, many of them singing.

Yellow-browed Warbler, *Phylloscopus inornatus*  
Three near site A.

Daurian Redstart, *Phoenicurus aureus ssp*  
Three along the road between Jiulianshan town and the nature reserve.

Plumbeous Water-Redstart, *Rhyacornis fuliginosus fuliginosus*  
One near site C.



Slaty-backed Forktail, *Enicurus schistaceus*  
A total of five near the hotel and site B.

White-crowned Forktail, *Enicurus leschenaultia*  
One at site B and two at the bridge south of the hotel.

Common Stonechat, *Saxicola rubicola maurus*  
One near Jiulianshan town .

Grey Bushchat, *Saxicola ferrea*  
One near Jiulianshan town .

Lesser Necklaced Laughingthrush, *Garrulax monileger melli*  
One heard at site C.

Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush, *Garrulax pectoralis picticollis*  
10+10+5 between site A and B.

Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus erythrocnemis abbreviatus*  
One heard at site C and three groups of 2-4 birds between site A and B.

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus ruficollis stridulus*  
Frequently encountered around site A and B.

Rufous-capped Babbler, *Stachyris ruficeps davidi*  
Commonly heard and a few seen.

Red-billed Leiothrix, *Leiothrix lutea kwangtungensis*  
A total of about 20 around site A and B.

Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, *Alcippe morrisonia hueti*  
Very common.

Striated Yuhina, *Yuhina castaniceps torqueola*  
One at 1000 m at site C.

Black-throated Tit, *Aegithalos concinnus concinnus*  
A total of ten around site A and B.

Great Tit, *Parus major commixtus*  
Two at site A.

Long-tailed Shrike, *Lanius schach schach*  
A few along the road between Shenzhen and Jiu.

Red-billed Blue Magpie, *Urocissa erythrorhyncha erythrorhyncha*  
A total of 10 around site A and B.

Grey Treepie, *Dendrocitta formosae sinica*  
About five at site A.

Crested Myna, *Acridotheres cristatellus cristatellus*  
Common around Shenzhen.

Black-collared Starling, *Gracupica nigricollis*  
Two near Shenzhen.

Eurasian Siskin, *Carduelis spinus*  
A flock of around 50 on both days at the hotel.

Yellow-billed Grosbeak, *Euphona migratoria ssp*  
Three near site C.

Tristram's Bunting, *Emberiza tristrami*  
10-15 at site A.

Black-faced Bunting, *Emberiza spodocephala spodocephala*  
Three at site A.