

**Yangsiba, Xining,
South Sichuan, China**
(with notes on how to find Silver Oriole)

2-4 June 2006



Silver Orioles, one of our target birds for the weekend!

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General

Chris Campion and I were both keen to find two key birds of southern China: Silver Oriole and Streaked Barwing. Silver Oriole is a threatened breeding bird of South China and Streaked Barwing is a resident bird of the mountains between southern Sichuan and northern Viet Nam. None of these birds have been seen by any large number of birders and are rather difficult to connect with. The regular site for Silver Oriole at Babaoshan in Guangdong was visited by me for two full days in 2005 without any luck and the question is if it is still a good site for the species. Streaked Barwing has previously been seen occasionally at Emei Shan and irregularly at Laojunshan (where I sorely missed it with 4 hours last year!), but both these sites are at the fringe of its range and therefore not that reliable.

Together with Dai Bo from Chengdu, we arranged to go to a forest near Xining in Leibo county in south Sichuan near the Yunnan border. Dai Bo has previously seen both species at this site and everything was set for a good weekend twitch. Apparently only one other western birder had visited the area previous to us and we felt privileged to be able to go there.

We spent one and a half days along a mountain ridge at Yangsiba near Xining and saw a total of at least ten Silver Orioles and heard one Streaked Barwing on both days. The latter's call was easily recognized by Dai Bo, but unfortunately it called very infrequently so recording was rather impossible.

Other interesting species that we recorded were a heard calling pair of Sichuan Hill-Partridge, plenty of Emei Leaf-Warblers as well as Omei Shan Liocichlas, Red-winged Laughingthrushes, White-spectacled Warblers, Fujian Niltava and Ashy-throated Parrotbills. We also saw two Red-and-white Giant Flying-Squirrels, which looked remarkably similar to Lesser Pandas (!) when sticking only their heads out of their tree-holes.

Itinerary

1/6

We left Chengdu in the afternoon and drove south past Leshan on smaller and smaller roads until eventually reaching the village of Xining after 6h45min. We stopped briefly at a forest corridor near Laojunshan and saw a couple of Rusty Laughingthrushes and heard Red-winged Laughingthrush. In Xining we stayed at the local Forest Bureau station and had a nice dinner in the evening.

2/6

We woke up at 4.30 to some serious rain, so the planned 5.00 departure was delayed for half an hour. It was then a mere half hour drive up the mountain side just above Xining. When the winding road deteriorated at 1250 masl, we started walking uphill. The rain had turned the trail into a stream and what was not streaming was instead muddy. It took us about half an hour to walk up to a saddle at 1500 masl and the rain was by then very light. The clouds that swept in reduced the visibility for much of the day although it was on and off, so birding was not really affected.

We walked along the trail first in a more southerly direction, but it turned out that it led too close to the deforested hillsides. We therefore walked towards north and passed some stands of large moss-covered trees. No Barwings or Orioles were in sight and when we reached the end of the trail at around midday our hopes were falling. A Silver Oriole eventually called extremely distantly from below us and it seemed impossible to get closer. After some contemplation on which strategy to pursue, we decided to follow up on the Oriole lead. We climbed down a few meters and accessed another trail that we anyway had planned to take in the late afternoon. Very soon we ran into a nice mixed species flock where two possible Barwings were seen extremely briefly. While waiting for the flock to reappear, I suddenly spotted a Silver Oriole above us and when playing the mewing call of Maroon Oriole, it quickly responded by flying closer. We were from then on treated to lengthy views of a handful of Silver Orioles flying around us. At least one adult male and a few immature males and female-coloured birds showed off. While watching these, Dai Bo recognized the call of Streaked Barwing calling nearby. The bird called very infrequently from above us, but only Dai Bo once glimpsed what was probably it. In spite of us spending several hours in the area, we did not succeed in anything else than the infrequent calling.

Eventually we decided to move on along this descending trail as we needed to get down to the car that would wait for us in Yangsiba valley (the other side of the ridge compared to where we had ascended from Xining). The trail passed through some good forest and we were treated to many good looks at several Silver Orioles. The trail then suddenly descended into the cultivated slopes and the birding was over for the day. What then followed was a long walk down to Yangsiba valley and the river that eventually led to the pick-up place. There we faced two surprises, a) the planks on the tiny bridge were partly gone and b) the driver on the other side informed us that the car was another 2 km further downstream as a truck had efficiently blocked off the access. All in all it took us four hours of walking from the forest at 1500 masl to the car at 800 masl, which we reached at dusk at 20.00. From there it was another hour to drive around the mountain back to Xining, where we had a well deserved dinner and beer.

3/6

This day we decided to spend in the same forest patch where we had heard the Barwing yesterday. The light rain in the morning soon stopped and we reached the saddle of the ridge at about 6.00. By late morning we reached the spot and then spent the remaining part of our available time in this area. Silver Orioles were only briefly heard and we counted ourselves lucky having had so fantastic views the day before. The Barwing again called irregularly a few times below us, but disappointingly did not allow any recording in spite of me having the recorder on for extensive length of time.

At 12.15 it was time to leave for the one hour walk back/down to the waiting car on the Xining side. Back in the village we had a quick shower and a late lunch before setting off for the return journey to Chengdu at 16.15. The journey felt very long and so thought the driver as he drove like a mad-man, in spite of us trying to calm him down. It was not until half an hour after midnight when we were back at our hotel in Chengdu.



So is it Grey-crowned or Omei Warbler? The eternal question when birding in central China.

Logistics

Our thanks must go to Dai Bo who helped us with arranging everything as well as being a good and knowledgeable companion in the field.

Site descriptions

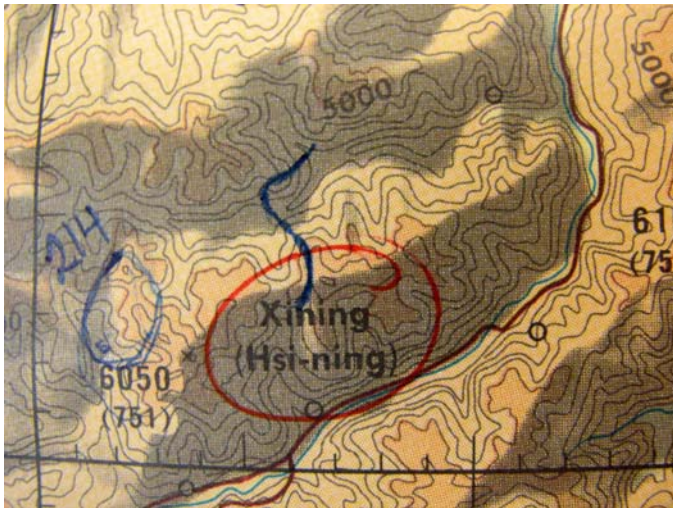
Yangsiba is the name of the valley on the other side of the ridge when crossing from Xining. The ridge dividing these two valleys is still forested with primary forest, although there seems to be no obvious trails leading along the ridge itself. We birded from the saddle and along the trail that runs level at 1500 masl north from the saddle and below the ridge (on the Yangsiba side). This is an old logging trail that runs partly through some good stands of old trees. It also leads through some secondary forest, sometimes with extensive bamboo undergrowth. A few hundred meters before the end of the trail where it reaches the more continuous primary forest, there is a rough descent of 10-15 meters to another trail that continues down to Yangsiba valley. This may not be obvious as it looks like just another minor landslide/muddy stream-bed. It was along this lower trail that we eventually connected with small numbers of Silver Orioles as well as heard the Streaked Barwing.

The Silver Orioles were initially only distantly heard a long way down the Yangsiba valley from the upper level trail. However, when descending to the lower trail we found a large mixed species flock of medium-sized birds and it was in connection with this flock that the first Orioles appeared. Even when the flock had moved on, the Orioles were actively calling and flying around in the canopy, sometimes as many as five birds together. We continued to hear and see them during the mid afternoon and also found some more individuals further along this lower trail. In the late afternoon they often perched a few together in tops of dead trees. Although we spent several hours in exactly the same area in the late morning the day after, we then only heard them a few times.

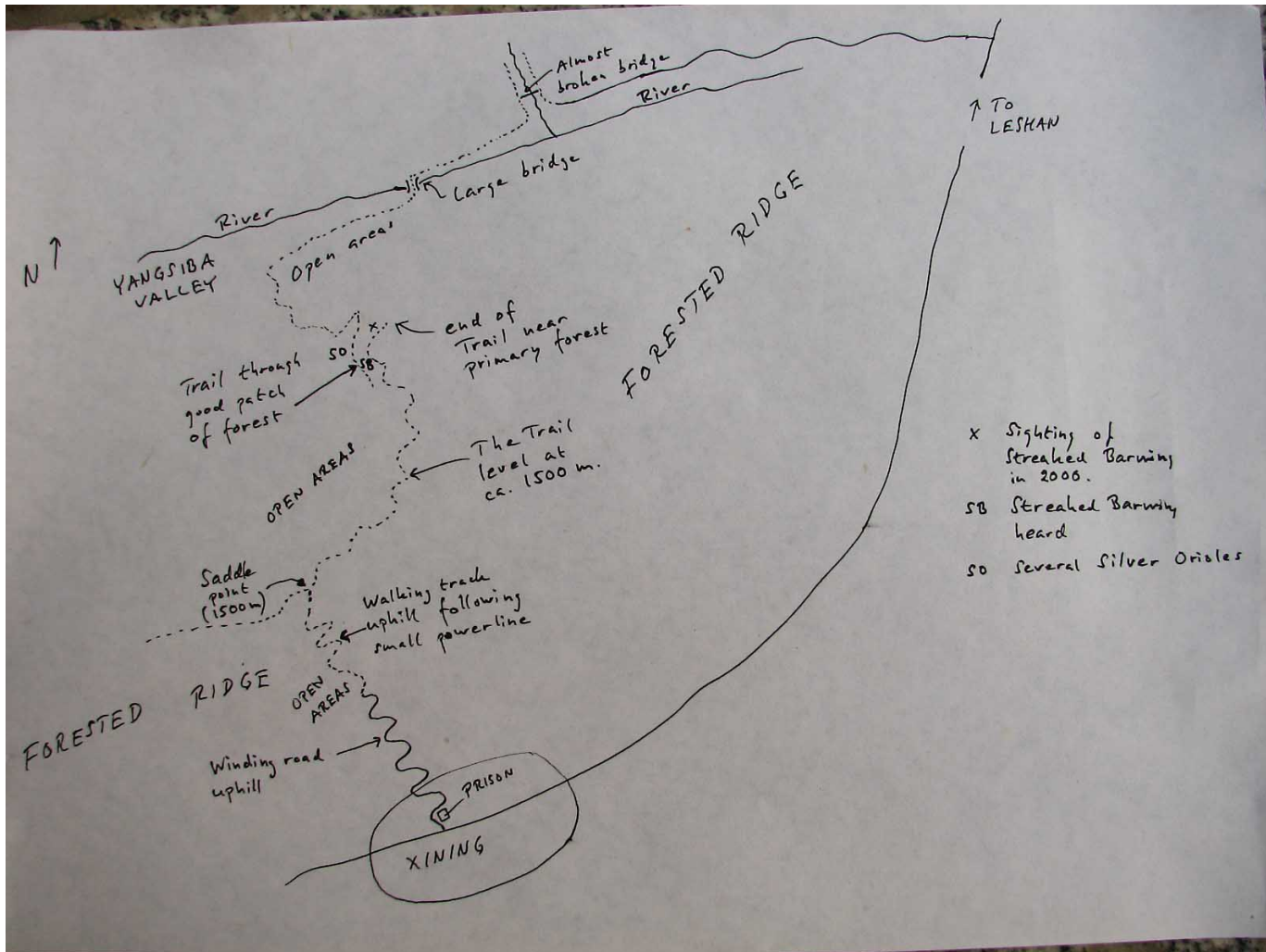
The entire area is not a nature reserve, so no special permits are required. We however, recommend that you inform the local Forest Bureau in Xining. Access is definitely much easier from the Xining side as it is possible to drive all the way up to 1250 masl and from there walk up to the saddle at 1500 masl. From the Yangsiba side it is a steep climb through cultivated land all the way from 800 masl until reaching the forest at 1400 masl.



Map of south Sichuan with Xining in Leibo county close to the Yunnan border.



Topographical map of Xining. The blue line marking the areas we banded. The left blue circle is another forest farm with primary forest that has not yet been banded and may hold Streaked Barwing.



Sketch of Xining and Yangsiba valley.

Birds

Sichuan Hill-Partridge, *Arborophila rufipectus*

One pair heard on both days at the edge of the primary forest.

Chinese Bamboo-Partridge, *Bambusicola thoracica thoracica*

Two sightings on the inbound journey near Laojunshan and 3-4 pairs heard in open areas in Yangsiba valley and Xining side of the ridge.

[Silver Pheasant, *Lophura nycthemera*

One feather found along the trail.]

Wedge-tailed Green-Pigeon, *Treron sphenura sphenura*

One seen flying along the trail and probably another heard nearby.

Large Hawk-Cuckoo, *Cuculus spraverioides spraverioides*

A few heard.

Hodgson's Hawk-Cuckoo, *Cuculus nasicolor*

Two heard along the trail.

Common Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus bakeri*

A few heard and a few unidentified Cuckoos seen.

Oriental Cuckoo, *Cuculus saturatus saturatus*

A few heard calling with the typical four note call.

Lesser Cuckoo, *Cuculus poliocephalus*

A few heard.

Asian Drongo-Cuckoo, *Surniculus lugubris dicruruoides*
One heard in Yangsiba valley.

Asian Koel, *Eudynamys scolopacea chinensis*
One or two heard below the trail.

Oriental Scops-Owl, *Otus sunia malayanus*
Two heard in semi-open areas in the afternoons.

Collared Owlet, *Glaucidium brodiei brodiei*
Two heard along the trail.

Grey Nightjar, *Caprimulgus indicus hazarae*
One heard at Xining village.

Himalayan Swiftlet, *Aerodramus brevirostris innominatus*
A few along the trail.

White-throated Needletail, *Hirundapus caudacutus nudipes*
Three along the trail.

Fork-tailed Swift, *Apus pacificus kanoi*
Five along the trail.

Red-headed Trogon, *Harpactes erythrocephalus rosa*
One heard in Yangsiba valley.

Great Barbet, *Megalaima virens virens*
2-3 in Yangsiba valley.

Grey-capped Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos canicapillus scintilliceps*
5-10 along the trail.

Crimson-breasted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos cathpharius pernyi*
About five along the trail.

White-backed Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos leucotos tangi*
One along the trail.

Greater Yellownape, *Picus flavinucha flavinucha*
1-2 along the trail.

Bay Woodpecker, *Blythipicus pyrrhotis sinensis*
3-4 along the trail.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica gutturalis*
Common in the villages.

Red-rumped Swallow, *Hirundo daurica ssp*
Common in the villages.

Asian House-Martin, *Delichon dasypus cashmiriensis*
10+ along the trail.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba alboides*
One in the Xining valley.

Black-winged Cuckoo-Shrike, *Coracina melaschistos avensis*
Two along the trail.

Minivet sp, *Pericrocotus sp*
One male was seen in flight along the trail.

Brown-breasted Bulbul, *Pycnonotus xanthorrhous andersoni*
A few along the journey.

Mountain Bulbul, *Ixos mccllellandii holtii*
One along the trail.

Black Bulbul, *Hypsipetes leucocephalus leucothorax*
Two white-headed pairs along the trail.

Blue Whistling-Thrush, *Myophonus caeruleus caeruleus*
Two in Yangsiba valley and a few long the journey.

Brownish-flanked Bush-Warbler, *Cettia fortipes davidiana*

Common in both open areas and along the trail.

Russet Bush-Warbler, *Bradypterus seebohmi melanorhynchus*

About five heard in the open areas on the Xining valley side.

Large-billed Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus magnirostris*

One heard in Yangsiba valley and two along the journey.

Emei Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus emeiensis*

10-15 heard and seen along the trail, but only found around the saddle and a short stretch further north.



Emei Leaf-Warbler

[Ogilviegrantis's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus ogilviegranti disturbans*

One probable heard along the trail.]

Grey-crowned/Omei Warbler, *Seicercus tephrocephalus/omeiensis*

As usual it is difficult to be certain which species that is involved. We heard and saw lots of *Seicercus* warbler both on the open scrubby hillsides as well as in the forests. At least a few were definitely of this species pair due to the trilling end of the song and complete eye-ring. However, at least one bird was recorded and photographed that had a slightly broken eye-ring in the front (not above the eye like *affinis*) and this bird had a very pale grey crown in sharp contrast to very black crown-stripes all the way from the bill to the nape. We heard birds that called either with the short soft "dju" or the longer "trrruut". All birds were observed between 1300-1550 masl.

White-spectacled Warbler, *Seicercus affinis affinis*

Many confirmed birds were heard and seen well and presumably this species was rather common. Identified by broad yellow (in spite of the name!) eye-ring that had a large gap above and slightly in front of the eye. The call note was very different from the above species pair and the same as I have heard from other sites in southern China.

Chestnut-crowned Warbler, *Seicercus castaniceps sinensis*

About five heard and seen along the trail.

Rufous-faced Warbler, *Abroscopus alobularis fulvifacies*

Two heard along the trail.

Siberian Flycatcher, *Muscicapa sibirica rothschildi*

Two seen along the trail.

Fujian Niltava, *Niltava davidi*
One male seen well along the trail.

Chinese Blue-Flycatcher, *Cyornis glaucicomans*
About five heard around the saddle, but not further along the ridge. Occurred in the same areas as the Emei Leaf-Warblers.

Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher, *Culicicapa ceylonensis calochrysea*
About ten along the ridge.

Oriental Magpie-Robin, *Copsychus saularis prosthopellus*
One along the journey.

Plumbeous Water-Redstart, *Rhyacornis fuliginosus fuliginosus*
One in the Yangsiba valley.

White-crowned Forktail, *Enicurus leschenaultia sinensis*
One along the trail.

Grey Bushchat, *Saxicola ferrea*
Two near the saddle.

Rusty Laughingthrush, *Garrulax peocilorhynchus ricinus*
One pair along the journey.

Red-winged Laughingthrush, *Garrulax formosus formosus*
One heard along the journey and one heard along the trail.

Omei Shan Liocichla, *Liocichla omeiensis*
Heard at two occasions along the trail.

Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus erythrocnemis decarlei*
One heard along the trail.

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus ruficollis eidos*
Frequently heard and a few seen along the trail.

Pygmy Wren-Babbler, *Pneopyga pusilla pusilla*
Four heard in Yangsiba valley and along the trail.

Red-billed Leiothrix, *Leiothrix lutea lutea*
Common in both scrubby areas and in the forests.

White-browed Shrike Babbler, *Pteruthius flaviscapis ricketti*
One pair along the trail.

Green Shrike-Babbler, *Pteruthius xanthochlorus pallidus*
One heard singing along the trail.

Streaked Barwing, *Actinodura souliei souliei*
One bird was heard calling infrequently on both afternoons along the trail. The call was identified by Dai Bo who has heard the species many times before, but due to the infrequent song bursts it was impossible to obtain a recording for playback confirmation. The song was a series of 4- ca.8 harsh whistles on the same pitch, similar in quality to other Barwings.

Golden-breasted Fulvetta, *Alcippe chrysotis swinhoii*
Singles and pairs were seen about five times in bamboo along the trail.

Grey-headed Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis gularis fokiensis*
A total of about ten seen along the trail.

Ashy-throated Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis alphonsianus alphonsianus*
About five on the open scrubby slopes on the Xining side.

Yellow-bellied Tit, *Pardaliparus venustulus*
About ten along the trail.

Green-backed Tit, *Parus monticolus yunnanensis*
Common along the trail.

Yellow-cheeked Tit, *Parus spilonotus rex*
About five along the trail.

Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, *Sitta nagaensis nagaensis*

5-10 along the trail.

Gould's Sunbird, *Aethopyga gouldiae dabryii*

One male seen along the trail.

Japanese White-eye, *Zosterops japonicus simplex*

About five along the trail.

Silver Oriole, *Oriolus mellianus*

At least ten of this seldom-seen species were observed along the trail. At least one adult male, 2-3 immature males and a bunch of female-coloured birds were seen.

Long-tailed Shrike, *Lanius schach schach*

Two seen in the Xining valley.

Hair-crested Drongo, *Dicrurus hottentottus brevirostris*

About five seen along the trail.

Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius sinensis*

At least three seen along the trail.

Red-billed Blue Magpie, *Cissa erythrorhyncha erythrorhyncha*

About ten in the valleys and along the trail.

Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica sericea*

One in Xining.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus obscuratus*

Common in the villages.

Yellow-throated Bunting, *Emberiza elegans elegantula*

Two in the scrubby areas on the Xining side.

Mammals

Red-and-white Giant Flying-Squirrel, *Petaurista alborufus*

Two sticking out their heads from their holes high up in old trees.