

**Tangjiahe Nature Reserve,
Sichuan, China**
(With notes on Przewalski's Parrotbill)



23-26 August 2007

Björn Anderson

General

This report is dedicated firstly to Dong Lei, who rediscovered this mythical Chinese enigma a month ago, and secondly to Jocko Hammar who trail-blazed the way but unfortunately dipped.

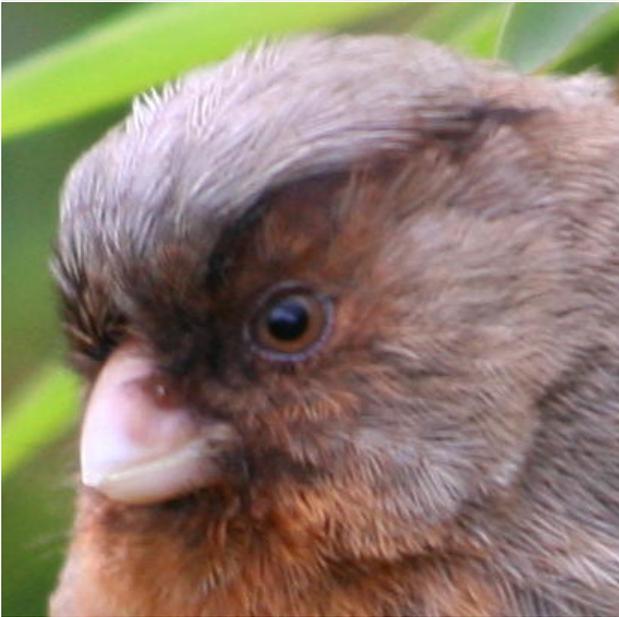
It was one of the infrequent real twitches that I have made in China! When on a Sumatra trip in early August, I got a sms from a Chinese birding friend that a Przewalski's Parrotbill had been photographed in Sichuan. This was my most wanted bird in China, so I immediately started to track down the record and quite successfully I soon was in contact with the photographer Dong Lei, who kindly provided all the necessary information including a photo of the actual bush the bird was perched in! The bird had been photographed in the evening of July 28th, but I had no opportunity to twitch it until late August. My friend Jocko Hammar was on a visit to China and had planned to do a trip to northern Sichuan. Instead of going to Rouergai and Gezangjiaze as planned, to look for e.g. the parrotbill, he quickly changed his plans. In the meantime I had found the necessary contacts at Tangjiahe Nature Reserve in order for Jocko to materialize his twitch. During the weekend he was there, I was biting my nails and had all my fingers crossed. In spite of this he unfortunately did not manage to relocate the bird. He spent altogether 48 hours at the very site, but sadly came down empty-handed. Immediately after his trip, he visited me in Beijing and provided all the remaining information there could possibly be for my twitch two weeks later. Naturally I was somewhat concerned that he had not managed to find the bird, but still this was the hottest trail there has ever been for this enigma since the sightings at Jiuzhaigou in 1985-1988. I just had go, and the sooner the better!

Highlights

What to say? Seeing Przewalski's Parrotbill had been a dream since I first heard about it. Finding a pair of them immediately upon my arrival at the site was like a dream itself. The birds performed for a long time at distances down to one meter, so I could not have wished for better views.

Przewalski's (or Rusty-throated) Parrotbill has been seen by very few birders. There are 3-4 records from the 19th century and after that the species was seen near Primeval Forest in Jiuzhaigou between 1985 and 1988, by the time the bamboo there was completely dead. Since then, many birders have looked for it both at Jiuzhaigou and elsewhere in northern Sichuan and southern Gansu. In 2006 I visited Baishuijiang in southernmost Gansu together with Jocko Hammar, Chris Campion and Stig-Uno Svensson and then we found seemingly excellent habitat along the ridges, although we were unfortunately prevented to access these. As it turns out, these ridges are the back-side of Tangjiahe! Presumably this bird may not be critically endangered in spite of the lack of sightings, as it seems to share the same habitat as Giant Panda for which there are several reserves in the area.

Przewalski's Parrotbill is named after General Nicholas Michailovitch Prjevalsky and is pronounced "She-val-ski". He was a Russian born explorer who made four major expeditions in China, Mongolia and Tibet between 1871 and 1885.



Itinerary

23/8

I left Chengdu in the late afternoon and arrived at the hotel at Tangjiahe at 22.00 in the evening. The drive was uneventful on mostly good roads. Night at the hotel at 1650 masl.

24/8

I woke up at 4.15 prepared for leaving the hotel at 4.30. The plan was to walk the first hour in the dark in order to be at the parrotbill site not too late in the morning. This plan was quickly changed as it was still raining and I was told there would be no way to cross the river to reach the trail up the mountain. There was nothing to do but wait and when the rain stopped around 8.00, I started birding along the road towards the river crossing. The nearby river was very noisy, but some of the more common birds of the area were noted. When we arrived at the river crossing, I was convinced that a foot crossing was possible, although a bit wet. Still I did not manage to convince the guides, so we birded our way back to the hotel where we had lunch. With no further rain during the morning, we did a new attempt at 13.00 and this time the water level had decreased somewhat so we managed to get across. Eventually on our way! From the river it was an arduous climb of 800 vertical meters to reach the parrotbill site. It took us 2.5 hours to get there with very few stops. During the last 200 meters before the site I regularly played the call of Przewalski's Parrotbill. When finally reaching the wooden hut, which was right at the site, I heard a parrotbill call. Knowing that Jocko had seen 100 Spectacled Parrotbills I was not overly excited. However, the call sounded very much like the tape... In fact it did not take long at all before I lay my eyes on a cute little Przewalski's!! After rain comes sunshine! I enjoyed a presumed pair of these stunners for about half an hour until they decided to vanish into the bamboo again. It was time to play "A Kind of Magic" by Queen and do a solitary dance! I went down to the wooden hut and dubbed it Camp Przewalski and told my guides that the mission was completed.



Shortly afterwards I went back to the place, but could not find anything so I continued a bit higher up. As I went back some minutes later, I saw some bamboo moving and tried the recording again. I could clearly see that the source of the movements came closer and within a minute I once again stared at a now familiar Przewalski. I followed three, possible even four, birds through the bamboo until they crossed the path and disappeared.

After this, about 17.30, I decided to bird along the trail below Camp Przewalski and did so for more than an hour before returning to the hut. The guides had cooked dinner and as the weather cleared I could see some Takins grazing the higher slopes.

By 20.00 it was time for an early night.

25/8

After a long night I woke early and listened to the rain. This made me somewhat worried about not being able to cross the river. At dawn the clouds were thick and it was still drizzling. Nevertheless I ventured out and birded around the hut and back down the trail. No parrotbills, but a few other birds like Sichuan Treecreepers.

After breakfast, we decided to walk back down already this day and we left Camp Przewalski at 10.00. The first 200 vertical meters I birded rather slowly, seeing e.g. a number of Blood Pheasants on the trail. When the rain intensified, we decided to walk quickly down to the river, where we arrived at 11.40. No problem crossing the river, so at least this was a positive thing. We walked the road back towards the hotel and just before arriving there, my driver appeared and picked us up.

I was by now quite concerned about the next river crossing, the one by car. We decided to get off straight away, only to find that it would not be possible to get across. As it was no longer raining, we went back for lunch at the hotel in order to wait the river out. Unfortunately upon our return to the river two hours later, the water level was only slightly lower than before. We waited and waited, but little happened. By 17.00 we drove back to the hotel and stayed there for the rest of the evening. The rain intensified and so was my worry getting across even on the Sunday...

26/8

I woke up at 5.00 and noticed to my relief that it had not been raining during the night, at least not in the valley. We left and could satisfyingly cross the river for a return journey to Chengdu. Near the reserve gate I challenged my luck by looking for Moustached Laughler until 7.30, but all I could manage was a Hwamei. By 12.30 we reached Chengdu airport and I managed to rebook my flight and was soon on my way home from a successful, albeit adventurous, twitch.

Weather

A lot can be said about the weather in this part of the world. Rain should always be expected and dry conditions must be regarded as a bonus. During the first night it rained quite a lot and it did not stop until mid morning. The remainder of that day was mostly dry, even with some sun coming through sometimes. The ridges above Camp Przewalski were mostly covered in clouds. The second night it also rained and this continued on and off like a drizzle for most of the day. This day was also much cloudier, with much reduced visibility at higher altitudes. All the rain made the water level in the rivers rise to sometimes impassable levels.

Site descriptions and logistics

To get to Tangjiahe Nature Reserve it is best to drive from Chengdu. Take the excellent highway northeast towards Mianyang, Guangyuan (and Xian). Turn off at KM 205 from Chengdu at exit 10 "Jinzishan" (sometimes spelled Jingzishan), which is approximately 2.5 hours drive. Shortly after the toll booth there is a junction with a brown sign showing Tangjiahe Nature Reserve down to the right. From then on the road follows the river. There are many villages and junctions along the road, but Tangjiahe is often (not always) signposted and people everywhere knows it. From the highway it takes about 2.5-3 hours on good paved roads to reach Tangjiahe. Immediately after the gate at the reserve there is a junction. To the right is a place (with 3 Chinese characters) 15 km away, which is near the hotel. This road soon becomes a gravel road that follows a river. After a while comes a river crossing that can be impassable in high water level conditions after rain. After slightly less than 15 km there is a large two-storey white building (the only building along this road). This is the place I call the hotel, as it contains these facilities. The building is apparently very new with good rooms. Food can be obtained here and it is here that I met the guides and stayed the first and third night. Altitude is about 1650 masl.



To get to Dacao Tang, one continues along the same gravel road for about 10 minutes by car to about 1850 masl. The river crossing is immediately after the only major river junction and about 50 meters from the very end of the road. The trail here is not very obvious and the guides should point out the best river crossing. On the opposite side of the river there is a small trail that zigzags up to the right on a grassy/bushy slope. Again, this trail is not very obvious until about 100 meters up. From then on it is just to continue on this trail as it leads steeply uphill a total of 800 vertical meters from the river crossing. It takes 2.5-3 hours walk with limited stops along the way. Coming down is obviously much quicker. The trail principally follows a ridge and the last bit may involve some climbing around crags and fallen trees. Camp Przewalski at 2650 masl is obvious and cannot be missed. It is situated right at the forest edge. The trail then continues to Dacao Tang (meaning Big grassland) at 3200 masl where e.g. Chinese Monal occurs.

There is mobile phone coverage at the hotel, but from the river crossing and onwards it does not work. However, if one climbs to the ridge high above Camp Przewalski, there is coverage again in case of emergency.

The trail leads through one of the most extensive areas of bamboo that I have encountered in China (only rivaled by Wawushan). Basically the entire under storey is a carpet of bamboo. This is especially true at altitudes from 2300 masl.

Guides are required to accompany all visitors and Mr Luo (mobile +86 158 0839 5067) can be highly recommended. To make reservations and arrange all the local logistics the best way is to contact Mr Shen Li Ming at the reserve office (+86 839 780 9950, mobile +86 135 1833 5523). Note that no one at the reserve speaks any English at all, so some knowledge in Mandarin is a good thing ;-). The guides will carry your bags and cook the food at Camp Przewalski. The conditions at there are very basic; it is a mere wooden hut that sleeps at least ten people and has a cooking "room" with an open fire. It would be advised to bring some bottled water and perhaps a bowl/chopsticks.

The first sighting of Przewalski's Parrotbill was by Dong Lei on July 28th at 20 meters before the turn-off to the hut. On the left side of the trail (walking up) there is a large spruce tree and it was sat in the small bush sticking up from the bamboo. This bird was in the company with 30-40 Spectacled Parrotbills. Jocko also saw large flocks of SPs during his visit, although strangely I recorded none. My two PP sightings were 40 meters beyond the turn-off to the hut, just by the first wooden steps. During the second sighting they moved downhill through the bamboo along the trail until they eventually crossed the trail towards the toilet. The main question in order to locate a larger population remains unanswered; if their favorite habitat is the treeless areas of bamboo or if they prefer the bamboo inside the coniferous forest, or perhaps it is actually the forest edge? The sightings in Jiuzhaigou would indicate that presence of forest is preferred.



The river crossing at 1850 masl at the start of the walking trail to Camp Przewalski and further on to Dacaoatang.



The two guides in the cooking department of the hut at Camp Przewalski. Mr Luo to the right is an ex-hunter and knows the area very well.



View of Camp Przewalski. The valley way down to the left is the road to the hotel. The sightings of the parrotbill were at the center of the photo. The trail down follows the ridge.



This photo is taken at the exact spot of my sightings. The hut is 40 meters down to the left.

Birds

Little Egret, *Egretta garzetta garzetta*

A few along the highway to Chengdu.

Chinese Pond-Heron, *Ardeola bacchus*

A few along the highway from Chengdu.

Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis coromandus*

A few along the highway from Chengdu.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter nisus ssp*

One female and one male near Camp Przewalski.

Blood Pheasant, *Ithaginis cruentus sinensis*

A total of eight males and three females seen on the trail near Camp Przewalski, where it was also heard at few times.

Blue Eared-Pheasant, *Crossoptilon auritum*

One heard near Camp Przewalski in the early morning.

Speckled Wood-Pigeon, *Columba hodgsonii*

One at 2000 masl.

Spotted Dove, *Streptopelia chinensis chinensis*

Several along the highway from Chengdu.

White-backed Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos leucotos tangi*

One pair 200 meters below Camp Przewalski.

Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos major stresemanni*

About five near Camp Przewalski.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica gutturalis*

50+ in the village of Qingxi.

Asian House-Martin, *Delichon dasypus cashmiriensis*

20-30 at 1800 masl.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba leucopsis*

Seven along the roads inside the reserve and common towards Chengdu.

Olive-backed Pipit, *Anthus hodgsoni hodgsoni*

Three at Camp Przewalski.

Collared Finchbill, *Spizixos semitorques semitorques*

About ten between 1700-1900 masl.

Brown-breasted Bulbul, *Pycnonotus xanthorrhous andersoni*

A few along the road from Tangjiahe.

Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus yunnanensis*

One near Camp Przewalski.

Winter Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes szetschuanus*

Three near Camp Przewalski.



Winter Wren

Rufous-breasted Accentor, *Prunella stropiata stropiata*

Two in the bamboo above Camp Przewalski.

Blue Whistling-Thrush, *Myophonus caeruleus caeruleus*

One at 1700 masl.

Chinese Blackbird, *Turdus mandarinus sowerbyi*

One along the highway from Chengdu.

Aberrant Bush-Warbler, *Cettia flavolivacea intricata*

A few heard in the bamboo around Camp Przewalski. Presumably several unidentified Bush-Warblers were this species or the next.

Yellowish-bellied Bush-Warbler, *Cettia acanthizoides*

One heard singing near Camp Przewalski and several presumed to be this species glimpsed in the bamboo below Camp Przewalski.

Spotted Bush-Warbler, *Bradypterus thoracicus thoracicus*

About five seen and one responded to a recording and started singing.



Spotted Bush-Warbler

Sichuan Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus forresti*

20+ at higher altitudes around Camp Przewalski.



Sichuan Leaf-Warbler

Hume's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus humei mandellii*

At least five at mid to high altitudes.

Greenish Warbler, *Phylloscopus trochiloides obscuratus*

A few at high altitudes near Camp Przewalski.

Large-billed Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus magnirostris*

One at the hotel at 1650 masl.

Claudia's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus claudiae*

About ten at 1700-1800 masl.

Bianchi's Warbler, *Seicercus valentini*

Two seen and heard near Camp Przewalski. A couple of unidentified *Seicercus* were also noted at lower altitudes.



Bianchi's Warbler

Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher, *Culicicapa ceylonensis calochrysea*

Common at lower altitudes.

Golden Bush-Robin, *Tarsiger chrysaeus chrysaeus*

Four at higher altitudes near Camp Przewalski.



Immature Golden Bush-Robin

Plumbeous Water-Redstart, *Rhyacornis fuliginosus fuliginosus*

Regular along the larger rivers.

White-throated Laughingthrush, *Garrulax albogularis eous*

A flock of about 20 at the hotel at 1650 masl.

Hwamei, *Garrulax conorus canorus*

One near the gate at Tangjiahe.

Elliot's Laughingthrush, *Garrulax elliotii elliotii*

Common at mid to high altitudes.

Black-faced Laughingthrush, *Garrulax affinis blythii*

5-8 at higher altitudes below Camp Przewalski.

Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler, *Pnoepyga albiventer albiventer*

One heard singing at 2400 masl.

Rufous-capped Babbler, *Stachyris ruficeps davidi*

One at 1800 masl.

Red-billed Leiothrix, *Leiothrix lutea* ssp

Several flocks at 1800 masl.

Streak-throated Fulvetta, *Alcippe cinereiceps* ssp

A total of 10-15 seen at higher altitudes below Camp Przewalski.

Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, *Alcippe morrisonia davidi*

One at 1800 masl.

White-collared Yuhina, *Yuhina diademata*

One at 1800 masl.

Vinous-throated Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis webbianus suffusus*

Two flocks of 15+ birds respectively at 1800 masl.

Przewalski's Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis przewalskii*

At least three birds at Camp Przewalski. How good can it get!! For details see above.



Przewalski's Parrotbill

Sooty Tit, *Aegithalos fuliginosus*

One near Camp Przewalski.



Sooty Tit

Coal Tit, *Periparus ater aemodius*
Ten near Camp Przewalski.



Coal Tit of the Chinese crested taxon

Yellow-bellied Tit, *Pardaliparus venustulus*
Ten at 1800 masl.

Grey-crested Tit, *Lophophanes dicrous dichroides*
Two near Camp Przewalski.

Green-backed Tit, *Parus monticolus yunnanensis*
10-15 at, mostly at lower altitudes.

Eurasian Nuthatch, *Sitta europea sinensis*
Two near Camp Przewalski.

Sichuan Treecreeper, *Certhia tianchuanensis*
Three heard singing below Camp Przewalski. Again it confirms that this recently described species is occurring at many sites all the way from southern Sichuan all the way to southern Shaanxi (where I have recorded it as far east as Taibaishan).

Chestnut-flanked Whiteeye, *Zosterops erythropleurus*
20+ at 1800 masl.

Red-billed Blue Magpie, *Urocissa erythrorhyncha* ssp
Three near the hotel at 1650 masl.

Eurasian Nutcracker, *Nucifraga caryocatactes macella*
10-15, mostly at lower altitudes.

Large-billed Crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos tibetosinensis*
Five near Camp Przewalski.

Vinaceous Rosefinch, *Carpodacus vinaceus vinaceus*
15-20 at higher altitudes below Camp Przewalski.

White-browed Rosefinch, *Carpodacus thura dubius*
Presumably this species heard twice near Camp Przewalski.

Mammals

Takin, *Budorcas taxicolor*
A total of about 20 above Camp Przewalski.

Chinese Giant Flying-Squirrel, *Petaurista xanthotis*
One stuck out its head from a hole in a tree 200 meters below Camp Przewalski. ID is tentative in lack of relevant literature.

Tree-Squirrel sp
Several small stripe-backed squirrels seen at higher altitudes below Camp Przewalski.