

Simao and Xishan, Yunnan, China

11-13 January 2008

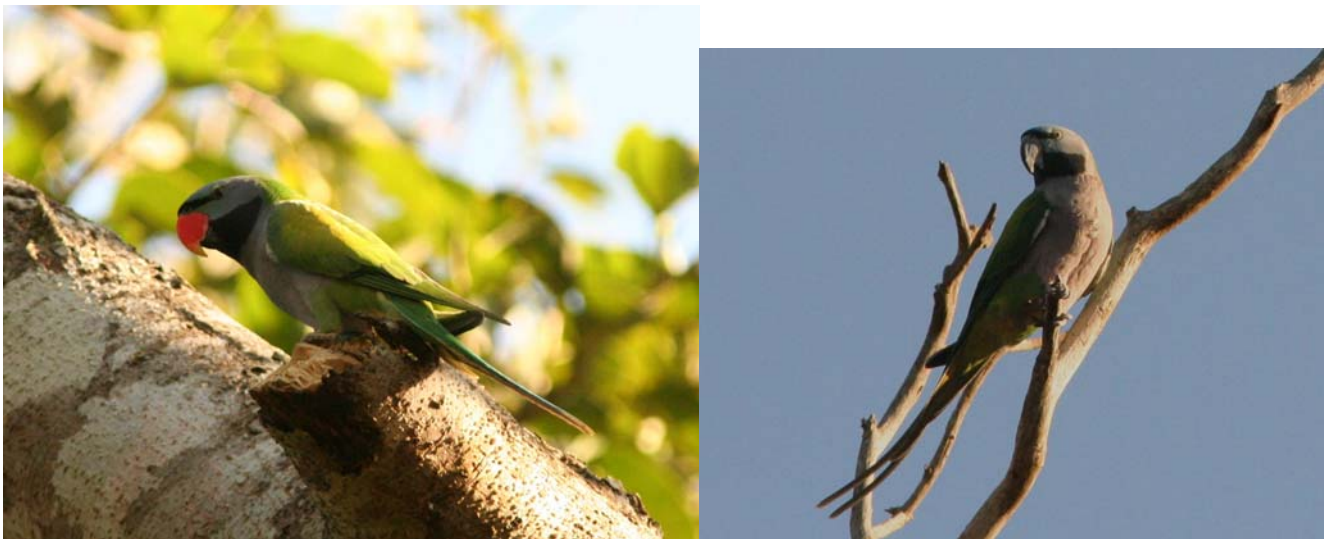


Male and female Lord Derby's Parakeets

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General

The sole reason for going on this weekend trip was that my friend professor He Fenqi invited me to join on a daytrip to Mangba to look for Lord Derby's Parakeet. This temptation was hard to resist and I was really grateful for this opportunity. After looking at travel schedules, it was even possible to fit in a day at Xishan near Kunming, providing yet another chance to look for my jinx Blanford's Rosefinch. The trip started in a not so good way, as our car broke down and the road to Mangba was in a worse than worse condition due to road-mending. It took us virtually the full Saturday to reach Mangba, although the rewards came thick and fast. When we were asking for directions in a tiny village, I chanced upon a splendid Jerdon's Baza, a bird that had escaped me for many years. Not five minutes later we arrived at Mangba and the shrieks of the parakeets were heard even before we came to a stop. For an hour we could admire these awesome birds at close range in nice late afternoon light. This compensated the long journey, although it was not until midnight when we arrived back in Simao, just a little late for the only possible flight to Kunming. The solution came in the form of a sleeper bus and I could save my Sunday at Xishan. This turned out very well, as I stumbled upon a party of five Blanford's Rosefinches, my third lifer of the weekend!



Male and female Lord Derby's Parakeets, a large and beautifully colored parakeet that is essentially endemic to China

Itinerary

11/1

The afternoon flight from Beijing to Kunming allowed me to connect with a late evening flight further on to Simao in the very south of Yunnan. Professor He met up at the airport and after a nice welcoming cup of tea, it was time to hit the hay.

12/1

We rose at 7.30 (light is switched on around 8.00 this far west in China) and we had a quick noodle breakfast. In a small microbus we travelled southwest in the direction of the Mekong river. The road was in a miserable state all along the way; bumpy, dusty, lots of road-menders and endless caravans of trucks and other weird vehicles. After 1h20min our microbus broke down (oil pump?). Fortunately it happened just at a small restaurant and Professor He miraculously summoned another car from somewhere in Simao. More than two hours later this Mitsubishi Pajero turned up and things looked good again. With lunch in our stomachs at 12.30 we hit the road, or whatever it could be called. The problem was that even with this faster car, we were continuously blocked by truck caravans. Not too much later the thought about missing my only flight connection to Kunming in the late evening was starting to nag. I did not need to worry too much about that, as it soon became very clear that the alternatives were either to push on and hopefully find the parakeets or to turn around and catch the flight. A birder has to do what a birder has to do, so in fact it was

not that much of options. In addition to the poor road, it also turned out to be much further than we were originally informed, in fact twice the distance! Eventually we arrived at the turn off, leaving the bad road behind. We started to climb some 500 altitudinal meters on a tiny dirt road/track that was almost as bad, but at least there were no one but us in sight. We had to ask our way at most of the junctions and for every person we talked to it seemed that Mangba was always much further on. At one point there was a small settlement at a junction and while the others went to find people to ask about directions, I scanned the surroundings. Much to my surprise I suddenly found a soaring Jerdon's Baza just over-head. It provided splendid views, but there was no time to unpack the camera, as we had still not found our target village or bird. However, Mangba turned out to be just a few hundred meters further on and we understood we were at the right spot, as we were welcomed by shrieking Lord Derby's Parakeets!!

We spent an hour, 17.00-18.00, in the village, us watching the parakeets and the villagers watching us. By 18.00 we really had to leave in order to get back to Simao and it took us six hours, including a dinner stop of almost 1.5 hours. Right at midnight we arrived at the bus station in Simao and to my surprise and luck there was a sleeper bus leaving for Kunming at 00.30. I quickly bought a ticket and said farewell to my travel companions.



Local villagers in Mangba, having the Parakeets at their door-steps

13/1

The bus ride was OK, although it may not be my most preferred means of transport. The "bed" was not quite my full length and it was just above freezing point. Nevertheless, I managed some decent sleep and by 9.00 we came to a halt at the central bus station in Kunming. I quickly grabbed a taxi and half an hour later I was at Xishan and could start my birding. The purpose of coming here was to search for Blanford's Rosefinch. Jesper Hornskov had found this species here a couple of times in the past and it seemed to be a good place to try to connect with this species, one of my last possible lifers in China. After about an hour I saw a few rosefinches in a pine tree, unfortunately they were towards the sun and rather quickly slipped away. I managed to get closer and could identify them as Dark-breasteds, excellent views, but not quite my target. Continuing along the trail I suddenly had this strange feeling that there was something down the slope in the forest. I slowly walked downhill and suddenly was face-to-face with three perched Blanford's! The birds were almost completely silent, but behaved very well in sitting out for long. They turned out to be five birds in total. After having photographed them I tried playing their song, something I have without result been doing for a few years in China by now. Strangely enough there was absolutely no reaction at all. Very happy with this success, I continued my birding along the hillside and enjoyed the birding in general. At one point I heard some rustle from the forest floor and saw the long tail of a male Lady Amherst's Pheasant slip away. Not really the view such a bird deserves.

By 14.00 I arrived at Huating temple where the same taxi driver as in the morning picked me up and swiftly in half an hour took me to the airport for my flight to Beijing.

Weather

Clear blue sky and day-time temperatures of around 20 Celsius made the birding very pleasant. During the nights, the temperature fell to probably only slightly above freezing point.

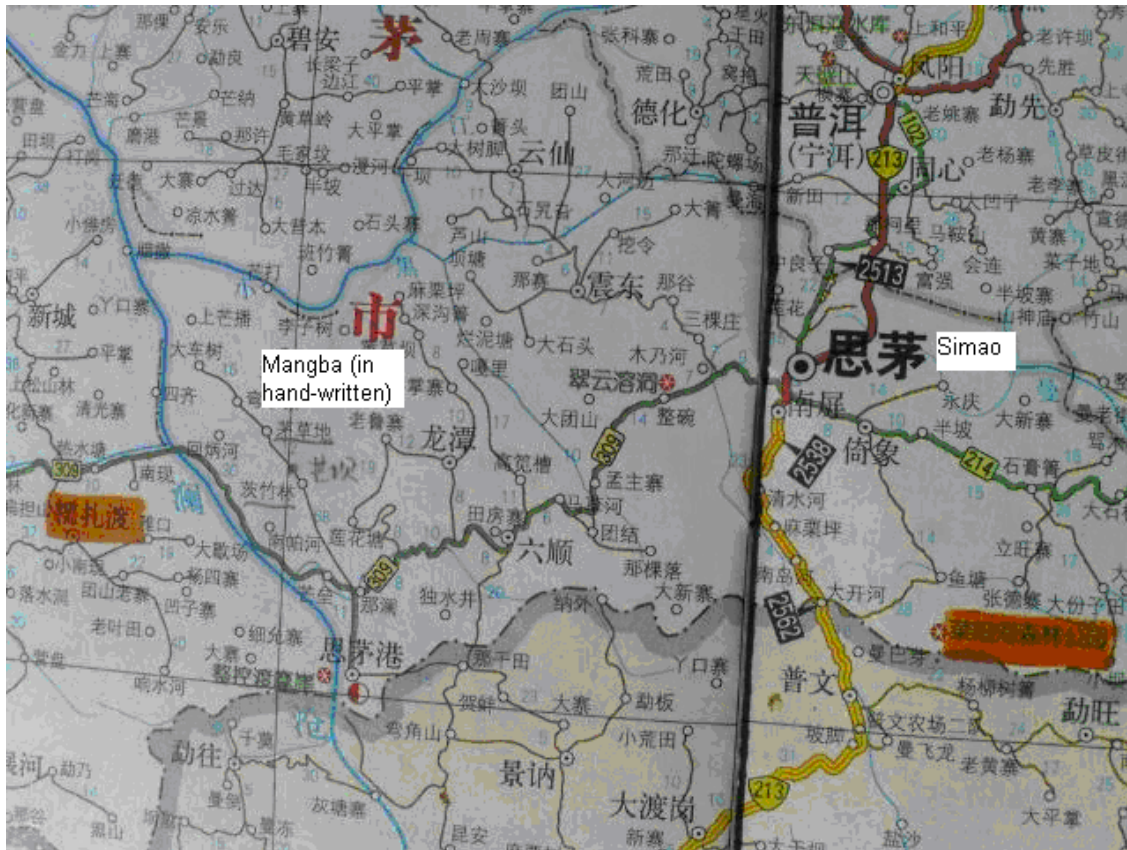
Site descriptions

Mangba, Simao

The village of Mangba would probably not be found on any regular map. It is a tiny settlement on a saddle point along a mountain ridge at 1500 masl in a very remote area of south Yunnan. I did not have any GPS, but some rough coordinates would probably be N22degr35, E100degr33, based on my estimates on Google Earth. From Simao, one takes the road WSW towards Liushun and continues past it almost all the way to the Mekong River. In what is probably the last larger town before the Mekong, one turns north on a small climbing mountain track for another 30 km. Along this track there are several small junctions and we had to ask the locals several times in order to eventually reach Mangba. The entire driving distance between Simao and Mangba is ca 112 km.

Simao has at least one, sometimes two, flights daily from Kunming. Hotels in Simao are seemingly widely available. There seems to be plenty of buses running between Simao and Kunming and indeed some of them continue beyond Simao towards the Mekong. The road between Simao and the Mekong was in a very bad state and according to Professor He, it was completely impassable just a couple of months before our visit. This part of Yunnan is thoroughly covered by the summer monsoon that can probably sweep away any kind of road, so a visit during the dry season is probably recommended. However, the entire road is being repaired and perhaps in a year's time it may be in a much better condition.

The Lord Derby's Parakeets in Mangba must belong to a relict population. According to the villagers they have been there for generations and as long as man can remember. The nearest known population would be in SW Sichuan and northernmost Yunnan. The reason for their survival is probably that a significant amount of really large trees has been spared from the deforestation that is otherwise so apparent all across Yunnan. According to reports, there are around 200 birds in the area. Taking into consideration that this species is a very restricted range species, occurring in very remote areas of China, it may well be that this is the most accessible site in the world. Although not necessarily rare within the range, one otherwise has to travel to southeast Tibet, southwestern Sichuan or northernmost Yunnan, neither which is really a weekend trip.



View of Mangba with a couple of the large remaining trees that attracts the Parakeets

Xishan

Xishan means western mountain and is situated just near Kunming, overlooking the large lake. The ridge is at around 2400 masl and provides an excellent view over Kunming and the lake. The mountain is covered with good forest, pine/oak at the higher elevations and more broadleaf/bamboo lower down. It is a touristic place, with lots of people visiting the temples and taking the chairlift to a viewpoint. There is however also a maze of trails where virtually no people walk, so the birding can be quite rewarding.

Birds

Chinese Pond-Heron, *Ardeola bacchus*

A few just near Simao.

Jerdon's Baza, *Aviceda jerdoni jerdoni*

One seen very well when soaring over the tiny village just before Mangba.

Lady Amherst's Pheasant, *Chrysolophus amherstiae*

One male, or rather the rear end of him, seen when sneaking away in the understorey half-way up on Xishan.

Lord Derby's Parakeet, *Psittacula derbiana*

About 30-40 seen exceptionally well at Mangba.



Lord Derby's Parakeets

House Swift, *Apus nipalensis nipalensis*

About 20 over the radio tower at Xishan.

Common Kingfisher, *Alcedo atthis benghalensis*

One west of Simao.

Great Barbet, *Megalaima virens virens*

One heard near Mangba.

Speckled Piculet, *Picumnus innominatus malayorum*

One at Xishan.



Speckled Piculet

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica ssp*

A few around Simao and Mangba.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba alboides*

A few between Simao and Mangba.

Olive-backed Pipit, *Anthus hodgsoni ssp*

A few near Mangba.

Grey-chinned Minivet, *Pericroptus solaris montpellierii*

About five at Xishan.

Red-whiskered Bulbul, *Pycnonotus jocosus monticola*

Two at Mangba.

Brown-breasted Bulbul, *Pycnonotus xanthorrhous xanthorrhous*

About ten at Xishan.

Red-vented Bulbul, *Pycnonotus cafer standfordi*

Two between Simao and Mangba.

Sooty-headed Bulbul, *Pycnonotus aurigaster latouchei*

A few between Simao and Mangba.

Chinese Song Thrush, *Turdus mupinensis*

One at Xishan.

Common Tailorbird, *Orthotomus sutorius inexpectatus*

Two between Simao and Mangba.

Buff-barred Warbler, *Phylloscopus pulcher pulcher*

One at Xishan.

Sichuan Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus forresti*

A few at Xishan.

Pallas's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus proregulus*

At least ten at Xishan.

Yellow-browed Warbler, *Phylloscopus inornatus*

Three between Simao and Mangba.

Orange-flanked Bush-Robin, *Tarsiger rufilatus*

Three at Xishan.

Blue-fronted Redstart, *Phoenicurus frontalis*

Two at Xishan.

Grey Bushchat, *Saxicola ferrea*

A few between Simao and Mangba.

White-browed Shrike-Babbler, *Pteruthius flaviscapis ricketti*

Two heard at Xishan.

Blue-winged Minla, *Minla cyanouroptera wingatei*

One at Xishan.

Spectacled Fulvetta, *Alcippe ruficapilla sordidor*

Common at Xishan, especially along the ridge.



Spectacled Fulvetta

Rufous-capped Fulvetta, *Alcippe dubia*

15-20 at Xishan, mostly along the ridge.

Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, *Alcippe morrisonia (yunnanensis?)*

About ten at Xishan.

White-collared Yuhina, *Yuhina diademata*

Three at Xishan.

Ashy-throated Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis alphonsianus yunnanensis*

Two at Xishan.

Black-throated Tit, *Aegithalos concinnus talifuensis*

Common at Xishan.

Green-backed Tit, *Parus monticolus yunnanensis*

One at Xishan.

Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, *Sitta nagaensis nagaensis*

Two at Xishan.

Flowerpecker sp, *Dicaeum* sp

One heard at Xishan was probably a Fire-breasted.

Japanese White-eye, *Zosterops japonicus simplex*

Two at Xishan.

Long-tailed Shrike, *Lanius schach tricolor*

Several between Simao and Mangba.

Ashy Drongo, *Dicrurus leucophaeus ssp*

Two near Mangba.

Bronzed Drongo, *Dicrurus aeneus aeneus*

One at Mangba.

Red-billed Blue Magpie, *Urocissa erythrorhyncha erythrorhyncha*

Heard between Simao and Mangba.

Blanford's Rosefinch, *Carpodacus rubescens*

Five together along the ridge at Xishan. Three adult males, one immature male and one female. Bird of the day and the reason for visiting Xishan. Having looked for this species all over west-central China, it was a welcome bird to get the arms around.



Blanford's Rosefinches

Dark-breasted Rosefinch, *Carpodacus nipalensis nipalensis*

One male and two females together along the ridge and one single male slightly lower at Xishan.



Dark-breasted Rosefinch