

Baihe Nature Reserve, Sichuan, China

1-4 June 2007



View to the west, with the more famous Jiuzhaigou beyond the ridges



Chris pointing at the Blackthroat territory

Björn Anderson

General

This was the third trip we made with the purpose of finding Blackthroat, one of the three “lost” birds of central China. Together with Chris Campion and Jocko Hammar we visited Taibaishan (Shaanxi) in 2005 and Baishuijiang (Gansu) in 2006 with a rather negative result. In addition I have tried several times at various places in northern Sichuan. This time we opted for Baihe Nature Reserve in northern Sichuan. The reserve is next door to Jiuzhaigou and it was here that Ben King saw and heard one in May 1985 (pers comm). Furthermore Thomas Brooks (pers comm) saw a most likely immature male here in August 2002. It therefore felt like an interesting area to explore.

Unfortunately Jocko had to bail out in the last minute due to business commitments, but Chris and I decided to give it a go. Our thanks must first of all go to Ben King who provided me with tantalizing stories about Blackthroat and Chinese birding, as well as providing me with a recording of the 1985 bird. Ben was encouraging and convinced that one day we would succeed. My assistant Michelle helped us with setting up all the logistics and this was made astonishingly well, as there were none of the usual hassles on this trip.

Highlights

Highlight? Well, not a difficult choice as we actually found the bird, but apart from the Blackthroat we also recorded a nice selection of north Sichuan specialties like Sukatshev’s Laughingthrush, Blue Eared-Pheasant, Verreaux’s Monal-Partridge and Pere David’s Owl.

[Note: Since this report was first drafted, Przewalski’s Parrotbill has been rediscovered at nearby Tangjiahe in Sichuan in July 2007. In early May 2008 birders revisited Baihe to look for the Blackthroat without success.]

Itinerary

1/6

Chris started the day early and took a morning flight to Jiuzhaigou in order to pick up a couple of needed birds: Blue Eared-Pheasant and Sukatshev’s Laugher. He was lucky enough to see BIEP already near Gonggangling pass on the way from the airport and the Laugher appeared dutifully near Long Lake. I took the last flight of the day from Chengdu and was picked up by the pre-arranged car, which 1.5 hours later arrived at Jiuzhaigou village. There I picked up a happy Chris Campion and we continued for another half hour to Baihe. We checked in at a decent hotel and had a quick beer and a Gongbaojiding before hitting the hay.

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After a short night sleep, we left the hotel at 04.00 for the short drive back towards Jiuzhaigou and soon turning south on a small dirt road. This road took us 6-7 km up the Baihe valley to a point where we had to continue on foot. This was at an altitude of 1800 masl and our aim was to get to 2700 masl, so we had quite a walk ahead of us. It was still dark when we set off, but soon the dawn chorus took off with Indian Blue Robins as key vocalists. The dirt road soon became a trail and gently climbed to Shapingdi (not quite sure about the pinyin spelling, but this is what it sounded like) at 2200 masl. This is a clearing with a forest station where it is possible to stay overnight. Our intention was however to continue climbing and after a very steep climb we reached the first planned campsite. We made this Basecamp our home for the first night and birded a few hundred meters above and below during the rest of the day. At 2500-2700 masl we found a decent carpet of bamboo, but after searching for Przewalski’s Parrotbills for several hours, we felt that there were none around for the time being. In the evening it started to rain lightly for a while at about the time we pitched the tents. The evening was spent enjoying a bonfire with some not-so-delicious noodles and suddenly The Courtyard restaurant in Beijing felt like such a different world (probably correctly so!).

3/6

After an eventful night with all sorts of sounds and movements around the tents, we rose at the crack of dawn. A Verreaux's Monal-Partridge was calling nearby, but never came into view and both Pere David's and Chinese Tawny Owls called briefly during the night. In the morning we again worked the bamboo just below Basecamp, but failed to turn up any big excitements. Back at the tent, we packed up in order to get to higher altitudes while the birds were still active. Our plan for the day was to walk up to the ridge and then follow a contour trail to another large patch of bamboo for the second night. We stopped every 100 meters and played the song of Blackthroat. At one stop, suddenly Chris saw a small black robin-like bird make an immediate response to me playing the song and fly diagonally towards me and disappear. The bird had made an obvious response and based on what Chris had seen, we made the decision to stay in the area for quite a while. In spite of playing the song another few times, we did not get any visible or audible response, so we decided to just wait it out. After about an hour I found a robin-like cold brown bird with a rufous tail. The bird soon flew out of view, but what I had seen of it, it fitted a female Blackthroat very well. This definitely made us stay in the area until we could get conclusive evidence. However it took until 14.30 in the afternoon when we both saw a bird coming to the area again. This time Chris was onto it quick enough to in his bins see a male Blackthroat fly to a low scrub before hopping down onto a fallen log. There it took tree bouncing hops and we saw it flying into some dense vegetation out of view. The rest of the afternoon was naturally spent in the same area, but unfortunately nothing more happened.

At dusk we pitched our tents nearby to the territory and again made a bonfire for yet another noodle dinner.

4/6

I got up long before dawn to check if the Blackthroat was going to sing in the dark, but the only interesting birds we could hear were a Pere David's Owl, a couple of Temminck's Tragopans and a handful of Verreaux's Monal-Partridges. We also saw a few Blue Eared-Pheasants, a Golden Bush-Robin, two Tibetan Serins and a silent non-responsive Sukatshev's Laughingthrush. The morning continued without any further Blackthroat sightings and by 9.00 we had to descend the mountain. The low song-activity was also emphasized by the resident pair of Orange-flanked Bush-Robins that never sang and only showed twice. We choose another route down in order check a second area of bamboo, but still no signs of any parrotbills. By 14.00 we were down at 1800 masl where the car was supposed to pick us up, but due to some miscommunication it turned out that the car was waiting around the next corner, which we later found out. Anyway, we had plenty of time to get back for the late evening flight to Chengdu, so we stopped at Jiuzhaigou and recharged our batteries at the Sheraton Hotel where we found some well-deserved beers.



View from Blackthroat Camp

Weather

We were treated with absolutely brilliant weather the first and third day, but the second day started with light rain that gradually faded away with a clear evening. That day the temperature fell to 7 Celsius, so decent clothing is required, as is good sleeping gear in case of camping.



Chris is looking for migrating Halsueti's (or is it Hallucination?) Wren-Babblers

Logistics

We contacted the staff of the nature reserve to arrange for all logistics, including car transport to/from airport, guide, porters and hotel in Baihe. In principle a permit is required for foreigners to visit the reserve and this should be applied through the Forestry Bureau of Sichuan. None of the people we met spoke any English, so my basic Mandarin helped a lot in the communication.

In order to be at high altitude at the crack of dawn, we decided to camp both nights and this saved us a lot of extra climbing up and down. There are not many places that are flat enough to pitch a tent, but both our camps were quite ok.



Chris and Tiang Yu Lin to the left

We and the porters brought all the food and water up the mountain. The porters also took water from the streams and we used this after boiling it. Note however that the porters one day also consumed our purified water and left stream water for us. Not really our intention! Apart from the snacks that we brought, we mostly cooked noodles of two kinds: imported edible by us and local non-edible by the porters. It wasn't quite a gourmet trip, but enough to keep us going for the three days.



A kettle of boiling water from the nearest stream for the noodles, what more can you wish for?

Site descriptions

Baihe Nature Reserve is just east of the more well-known Jiuzhaigou National Park. Jiuzhaigou is the only place from where there are modern records of Przewalski's Parrotbill and also two records of Blackthroat. The problem with JZG is however that it is extremely crowded and logistics inside the park are quite complicated. Furthermore, lots of birders have been looking for both these birds during the last almost 20 years, without any positive result.

We regularly played the call of Przewalski's Parrotbill, but unfortunately no response was given. There are at least three good areas with bamboo at altitudes of 2500-2700 masl, of which we covered only two. We also kept playing the song of Bar-winged Wren-Babbler, but this did not elicit any sign of the enigmatic halsueti form of BWWB. We found lots of seemingly good habitat, so perhaps this seldom (*any* sightings known?) seen taxon lurks in these forests.



Lush forest along the Baihe river at 1900 masl.



Snow covered peaks of 4000+ meters ensured a stunning view.

Birds

Sparrowhawk sp, *Accipiter* sp

Two seen at 2800 masl.

Verreaux's Monal-Partridge, *Tetraophasis obscurus*

One heard at Basecamp (2700 masl) and five heard at Blackthroat camp (2800 masl). They were only heard during the first hour of daylight.

Temminck's Tragopan, *Tragopan temminckii*

Two heard shortly after dawn at Blackthroat camp (2800 masl).

Blue Eared-Pheasant, *Crossoptilon auritum*

One was heard calling in early morning from immediately above Blackthroat camp (2800 masl) and then it was seen flying down the slope. One hour later another was heard calling 50 meters further up and we then flushed two more birds that flew past us down the same slope. A further 1-2 birds were heard calling from higher up above Blackthroat camp (2800 masl) later in the morning. Chris also saw three birds at Gonggangling, about 500 meters towards the airport from the highest pass.

Speckled Wood-Pigeon, *Columba hodgsonii*

One seen well near Basecamp (2700 masl) and one heard at Blackthroat camp (2800 masl).

Large Hawk-Cuckoo, *Cuculus sparverioides sparverioides*

Around ten heard, frequently disturbing our sleep during the night.

Himalayan Cuckoo, *Cuculus saturatus saturatus*

At least five heard.

Lesser Cuckoo, *Cuculus poliocephalus*

5-10 heard.

Chinese Tawny Owl, *Strix nivicola nivicola*

One heard from Basecamp (2700 masl).

Pere David's Owl, *Strix davidi*

One heard twice from Basecamp (2700 masl) and one heard once from Blackthroat camp (2800 masl).

Grey-headed Woodpecker, *Picus canus kogo*

One heard at Basecamp (2700 masl) and one seen at Blackthroat camp (2800 masl).

Eurasian Crag-Martin, *Hirundo rupestris rupestris*

One at 1800 masl.

Asian House-Martin, *Delichon dasypus cashmiriensis*

Flocks of at least 20 birds were seen occasionally at 2700-2800 masl.

Grey Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea robusta*

One at 1800 masl.

Olive-backed Pipit, *Anthus hodgsoni hodgsoni*

One seen in song-flight at 2850 masl.

Long-tailed Minivet, *Pericrocotus ethologus ethologus*

Small parties with a total of at least 20, mostly at higher altitudes.

Collared Finchbill, *Spizixos semitorques semitorques*

One at 1800 masl.

Goldcrest, *Regulus regulus yunnanensis*

Seen twice near Basecamp (2700 masl).

Winter Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes szetschuanus*

One heard at 2850 masl.

Chestnut Thrush, *Turdus rubrocanus gouldi*

At least ten, mostly at higher altitudes.

Kessler's Thrush, *Turdus kessleri*

About five between JZG airport and Gonggangling.

Chestnut-headed Tesia, *Tesia castaneocoronata castaneocoronata*
At least ten, mostly heard and mostly above 2600 masl.

Aberant Bush-Warbler, *Cettia flavolivacea ssp*
Three heard in bamboo at 2700 masl.

Yellowish-bellied Bush-Warbler, *Cettia acanthizoides acanthizoides*
Three heard in bamboo at 2700 masl.

Pere David's Bush-Warbler, *Bradypterus davidi davidi*
Four heard between 2500-2800 masl.

Sichuan Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus forresti*
Common at higher altitudes and heard throughout the day.

Chinese Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus yunnanensis*
Common at higher altitudes and heard throughout the day.

Hume's Warbler, *Phylloscopus humei mandellii*
Common around 2800 masl and heard throughout the day.

Greenish Warbler, *Phylloscopus trochiloides obscuratus*
Smaller numbers at higher altitudes.

Large-billed Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus magnirostris*
At least ten at between 2000-2800 masl.

Claudia's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus claudiae*
Smaller numbers, mostly at lower altitudes.

Grey-crowned/Emei Warbler, *Seicercus tephrocephalus/omeiensis*
About five heard at 2000-2100 masl.

Bianchi's Warbler, *Seicercus valentini*
Common above 2200 masl.

Slaty-backed Flycatcher, *Ficedula hodgsonii*
Common at most altitudes.

Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, *Ficedula strophinata strophinata*
One at 2500 masl.

Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher, *Culicicapa ceylonensis calochrysea*
At least ten, mostly at lower altitudes.

Blackthroat, *Luscinia obscura*
One male and seemingly one female at Blackthroat camp (2800 masl).

Indian Blue Robin, *Luscinia brunnea brunnea*
At least 25 between 1800 to 2550 masl.

Orange-flanked Bush-Robin, *Tarsiger rufilatus*
Two heard around 2600 masl and a pair at Blackthroat camp (2800 masl).

Golden Bush-Robin, *Tarsiger chrysaeus chrysaeus*
One female above Blackthroat camp (2800 masl).

Blue-fronted Redstart, *Phoenicurus frontalis*
One pair above Blackthroat camp (2800 masl).

White-capped Water-Redstart, *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus*
One at 1800 masl.

Plumbeous Water-Redstart, *Rhyacornis fuliginosus fuliginosus*
Three at 1800 masl.

White-bellied Redstart, *Hodgsonius phaenicuroides ichangensis*
At least ten heard and one female seen, mostly at higher altitudes.

Sukatschew's Laughingthrush, *Garrulax sukatschewi*
One seen, but not responsive, just above Blackthroat camp (2800 masl). During our 24 hours at the site, it was never heard.

Elliot's Laughingthrush, *Garrulax elliotii elliotii*
Fairly common, mostly heard.

Scimitar-Babbler sp, *Pomatorhinus* sp
One heard at Blackthroat camp (2800 masl).

Pygmy Wren-Babbler, *Pnoepyga pusilla pusilla*
One heard at 2000 masl.

White-collared Yuhina, *Yuhina diademata*
One pair in bamboo at 2700 masl.

Sooty Tit, *Aegithalus fuliginosus*
One food-carrying pair in bamboo at 2700 masl.

Pere David's Tit, *Poecile davidi*
A total of four between 2500-2800 masl

Coal Tit, *Parus ater aemodius*
One seen by Chris.

Grey-crested Tit, *Lophophanes dichrous dichroides*
At least ten, mostly at higher altitudes.

Yellow-bellied Tit, *Pardaliparus venustulus*
About ten between 2100-2800 masl.

Green-backed Tit, *Parus monticolus yunnanensis*
Four between 2200 and 2400 masl.

Hodgson's Treecreeper, *Certhia hodgsoni khamensis*
One at 2500 masl.

Bar-tailed Treecreeper, *Certhia himalayana yunnanensis*
One food-carrying pair at Basecamp (2700 masl).

Grey-backed Shrike, *Lanius tephronotus tephronotus*
A few between JZH airport and Gonggangling.

Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius sinensis*
Two at mid-altitudes.

Red-billed Blue Magpie, *Urocissa erythrorhyncha brevivexilla*
One heard at 2100 masl.

Eurasian Nutcracker, *Nucifraga caryocatactes macella*
A total of five between 2500 and 2800 masl.

Common Rosefinch, *Carpodacus erythrinus roseatus*
One heard at 1800 masl.

Vinaceous Rosefinch, *Carpodacus vinaceus vinaceus*
One female at mid-altitude.

Tibetan Serin, *Serinus thibetanus*
Two just above Blackthroat camp (2800 masl).

Grey-headed Bullfinch, *Pyrrhula erythaca erythaca*
At least five, mostly at higher altitudes.

Slaty Bunting, *Latoucheornis siemsseni*
5-7 between 2100 and 2600 masl.