

Muli, Sichuan, China

30 April – 5 May 2008



*Biet's or White-speckled Laughingthrush was described by Oustalet in 1897.
It is named in honour of the French catholic missionary Felix Biet (1838-1901).*

Björn Anderson

General

Biet's Laughingthrush was a bird that seriously attracted my attention when I moved to China five years ago. Virtually nothing is known about this species and since the historical specimens were collected in the old days, it has been reliably recorded only once. It was when Ben King observed it in Muli County in April 1989. Since then most of the forests in the area have been logged and it has been a bit unclear what the current situation is. In 2005 I was part of a few birders that funded an exploratory visit to find out if any suitable habitat would still be left. It was found that indeed some patches of seemingly good habitat still remained, although the bird was not found. In December 2006, John and Jemi Holmes went to the area with roughly the same conclusions and result.

I was keen on making a try for myself and started the planning. Nick Dymond, who was going to be in China at a suitable time, decided to join forces, and John and Jemi were also keen to return. During the planning stages I got in contact with Roland Zeidler from Chengdu. He had been trekking in the area six years ago and has a lot of experience of travelling in western Sichuan. In early April we met up in Chengdu for the final planning and discussing which areas to explore. I had also been discussing this species with Ben King and although most of the forests would most likely be gone, Ben gave me some good advice and encouragement as well as providing me with a recording of its song. I am therefore extremely grateful to Ben for all the support he has given.

During the last few days before the trip, we had the bad news that the area could be affected by travel restrictions to Tibetan areas. This was a severe threat and extremely annoying. However, after some investigations on the situation, we came to the conclusions to give it a go anyway.

Muli is in a very remote area of China and has the reputation of being run by warlords not long ago. In the old times it even had its own king. Very few westerners have set foot in the area and I have several times been advised not to go there for safety reasons. However, the temptation of rediscovering Biet's Laughingthrush became too much...

We were very lucky to actually find several Biet's Laughingthrushes already during our first morning in the field! It is difficult to accurately describe the feeling of seeing this enigmatic species. They were found in a stunningly beautiful unlogged valley and we were able to photograph it and record its song. We spent 1.5 days in this valley and another half day and a morning at slightly higher elevations.



The happy team having just seen Biet's Laughingthrush. From left Sid, Roland, Bjorn, John, Jemi and Nick

Apart from the Laughingthrush, we also recorded some other interesting birds such as: Szecheny's Monal-Partridge, Lady Amherst's Pheasant, Great, Brown and Fulvous Parrotbills as well as a good number of warblers and flycatchers. It is noteworthy that we did not find any Lord Derby's Parakeets, a species that Ben King saw daily in 1989. This species is probably heading towards extinction, judging by the number of birds found in cages in southwest China.

Itinerary

30/4

I left Beijing on the last flight of the day to Chengdu and directly went to the Aviation Hotel near the airport. Nick Dymond, who was going to accompany me on the trip, had already checked in and over a beer we started to build castles in the air about the forthcoming events.

1/5

Xichang is not one of the airport hubs of the world and thus we were down to the only morning flight at 8.00. The hop across from Chengdu to Xichang was less than an hour, which was considerably less than the 12 hours it took for Roland and Sid to drive the car the same distance. They met us at the airport in Xichang and we were soon on our way towards Muli, or at least that was what we thought. We soon discovered that we were actually heading a route that was most likely going to be blocked. We therefore chose to take another recommended route and by that we essentially left Xichang around 10.30. First we crossed a high mountain range over to Yalong River where we had a quick lunch in a village. Then we climbed yet another mountain range before entering a larger flat upland plain.



The road to Muli crosses numerous mountains and it is easy to understand that the area has been very remote and isolated

The town of Yanyuan was the place where we turned north for Muli, which we eventually reached by 18.30. With some more daylight left, we decided to immediately pass Muli and continue up the mountain. By dusk we reached a house with some forest plantation people and we chose to stay there for the night. This turned out to be a lucky strike as the locals told us about the status of the forests. As we were keen on finding bamboo inside the forest, we were recommended one specific trail leading up a valley. This would be our plan for the first morning in the field. During the evening we enjoyed the company of the locals and were provided with Tibetan butter tea, something that honestly could be given a miss in my opinion. We slept on the floor of their meeting room and dreamed about the upcoming birding.



Tibetan butter tea preparation for us

2/5

We woke up by 5.15 and by the crack of dawn we started off on the recommended trail. We soon entered some magnificent forest with patches of bamboo thickets. The trees were covered in moss and lichen and had obviously not been logged. The only damage to the area was from cattle grazing. With this habitat available, the hopes for finding the target bird increased and it did not take us long until we got a distant response from a calling bird. Only I heard it once, but fortunately another bird called soon after, just behind us. This one called a few times, but was not responsive. At least we knew that they were still live and kicking!

After a while we heard a third bird and soon after two birds came in quietly. One was initially seen very briefly by me low in the bamboo, and later Nick got equally brief views of another that hopped up and flew a short distance. Seemingly these birds were going to give us a run around. We carried on along the trail and continued to play the recording. Suddenly I saw a Laughingthrush hopping on the ground and had unobscured, albeit brief, views of a Biet's Laughingthrush!! The others had still not got satisfactory views of any and as the bird did not really respond so strongly, we carried on along the trail up to a clearing at about 3300 masl. There was a lot of bird activity in the sun-lit trees, but we felt we had to get onto the real stuff so we walked slowly back down the trail. We soon stumbled upon John and Jemi that had asked the local people where we would be. They had heard the Biet's Laughingthrush, but not yet seen it. While talking to them one was calling nearby and we moved closer and soon got a response when a male hopped up on a sun-lit branch, right out in the open. John's camera was clicking, mine was suddenly out of battery and Nick could not get on to the bird. The bird remained in view for a minute before flying closer. Sid quickly offered me a camera battery (million of thanks for that Sid!!). The bird started to circle us and eventually we all got good close up views of two birds hopping around in the rather open bamboo. After having spent numerous megabytes on photos and a few recordings, we gathered and took a victory group photo.

We continued the general birding in the valley until 13.00, when we returned to the accommodation for a noodle lunch.

In the afternoon, Nick and I went back to the valley and basically did the same walk as in the morning. Bird of the afternoon was a stunning male Lady Amherst's Pheasant that walked right out in the open at the edge of a clearing. No Biet's were heard although we coincidentally saw a new pair up a slope. We called them in and had yet more stunning views of them at close range.

By dusk we were back at the accommodation and had an improvised simple dinner.

3/5

We started this day in the same way as yesterday as we wanted to get more observations of the Laughingthrushes as well as surveying the valley for other species. No Biet's were spontaneously singing during the entire morning, which may indicate that they were well into the breeding season. One of the same pairs as yesterday responded to playback and showed well. We added a number of new birds compared to the day before and it was yet another very enjoyable birding experience. John and Jemi caught up with us at the farthest clearing and we hung out there for quite a while. By 11.00 we were back down at the road and we drove up the road towards Kangwu Liangsi. Around midday we arrived at the lake where we tramped a marsh in the search of interesting snipes, although the only outcome was a couple of Common such. We had a nice lunch at a gathering of houses where they also offered us to stay overnight, which seemed like a good idea.



The lake at Kangwu Liangsi behind the prayer flags



The afternoon was spent along the road towards Kangwu Liangsi lamasery. We did not make it all the way, but could see the old monastery in the distance. This was merely a ruin since the destructions during the Cultural Revolution. A new monastery is being built and could possibly offer accommodation. By dusk we were back near the lake and were invited to have dinner at the senior officer's room where his wife cooked dinner for us.



Sid and Nick are looking forward to the dinner



Yours truly in front of Biet's Valley

4/5

Sometime during the night it started to rain and right above my head the water was dripping on the inner ceiling, creating a serious noise that varied with the intensity of the rain. The rain did not stop at dawn and I put on some rain gear and walked along the road towards the lamasery again. A female Blood Pheasant was feeding on the road and a close Szecheny's Monal-Partridge was calling, but did not give himself up. As the rain increased in intensity we decided to leave earlier than planned, as we did not want to get stuck on the muddy roads. By 11.00 we passed Muli and continued back towards Xichang, where we arrived by 17.30 after a long travel day.

In Xichang we checked in at a hotel and went for a celebration dinner.

5/5

The flight to Chengdu was at 9.50 and Roland and Sid kindly drove us to the airport and waved us off. They then had a long journey back to Chengdu, while we soon got on the plane instead. In Chengdu, Nick and I split up. He went to Jiangxi and I flew back to Beijing.

Weather

The first two days in the field were beautiful with dry and sunny weather, except for late the second afternoon when there were some drops of rain. The third and last morning started with a light rain that continued for the entire return journey. Temperatures were generally very pleasant with a fleece jacket only needed in the early morning and late afternoon.



In the distance we could watch the three holy peaks of Sichuan's Shangri-La

Logistics

Roland Zeidler at Western Sichuan Tours smoothly arranged the logistics. Roland has been arranging field trips to western Sichuan for several years, speaks and reads Mandarin fluently and is also very interested in birds. He can be contacted at www.wstourix.com or at cailantao@yahoo.com.cn and is happy to arrange trips to the area. Sid, another westerner living in Chengdu and interested in birds as well as possessing a minibus, excellently did the driving.



Nick, Roland and Bjorn having lunch at the 'Muli café'

Site descriptions

The birding was performed in Muli County at altitudes between 3000 and 3600 masl. Due to the so far unknown population of Biet's Laughingthrush, no precise details will be published in this report in order to avoid trapping. Relevant information and survey recommendation will be sent to BirdLife.

The habitat in Biet's Valley consisted of mature mixed forest with both tall coniferous and mid-size old broad-leaf trees as well as lots of deciduous trees. Most of the older trees were covered with moss and hanging lichen. The undergrowth was extensively covered with 3-4 meter tall bamboo of 1-2 cm thickness. This bamboo was mostly not extremely dense. A few cattle were grazing the area and had made damage in certain places. A few clearings along the trail in the valley bottom were most likely created by grazing or selective logging. All the sightings of Biet's Laughingthrush were made in direct connection with bamboo. Altitudes where they were recorded are according to Google Earth 3150-3300 masl. The entire valley that we covered was approximately 400 x 1000 meters.



Habitat in Biet's Valley

Birds

Cattle Egret, *Bubulcus ibis coromandus*

Ten near Xichang.

Ruddy Shelduck, *Tadorna ferruginea*

One pair at the lake at Kangwu Liangsi.

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos*

One pair at Kangwu Liangsi.

Oriental Honey-Buzzard, *Pernis ptilorhynchus ssp*

One adult male at Kangwu Liangsi.

Himalayan Griffon, *Gyps himalayensis*

One immature at Kangwu Liangsi.



Himalayan Griffon

Sparrowhawk sp, *Accipiter sp*

One at Kangwu Liangsi.

Mountain Hawk-Eagle, *Spizaetus nipalensis nipalensis*

One without tail at Biet's Valley.

Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus interstinctus*

One between Yanyuan and Muli and one between Yanyuan and Xichang.

Szecheny's Monal-Partridge, *Tetraophasis szechenyii*

One heard at very close range in the rainy morning at Kangwu Liangsi.

Blood Pheasant, *Ithaginis cruentus geoffroyi*

One female feeding on the road in the rainy morning at Kangwu Liangsi.

Ring-necked Pheasant, *Phasianus colchicus elegans*

One seen and two heard at Kangwu Liangsi.



Ring-necked Pheasant, without the ringed neck...

Lady Amherst's Pheasant, *Chrysolophus amherstiae*

Two heard at Biet's Valley where also a cracking male was seen right out in the open. Two heard at Kangwu Liangsi.

Common Snipe, *Galinago gallinago gallinago*

Two flushed from the marsh south of the lake at Kangwu Liangsi must have been late migrants.

Oriental Turtle-Dove, *Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*

One at Kangwu Liangsi,

Large Hawk-Cuckoo, *Cuculus sparverioides sparverioides*

Two heard at Biet's Valley.

Common or Oriental Cuckoo, *Cuculus canorus/orientalis*

One between Muli and Yanyuan.

Collared Owlet, *Glaucidium brodiei brodiei*

One heard at Biet's Valley.

Grey Nightjar, *Caprimulgus indicus hazarae*

Two heard at Biet's Valley.

Himalayan Swiftlet, *Aerodramus brevirostris innominatus*

Three at Biet's Valley.

White-throated Needletail, *Hirundapus caudacutus nudipes*

Two at Biet's Valley.

Eurasian Hoopoe, *Upupa epops saturata*

One between Xichang and Muli.

Woodpecker sp,

Three heard at Biet's Valley.

Oriental Skylark, *Alauda gulgula ssp*

Two near the lake at Kangwu Liangsi.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica rustica*

Locally common between Xichang and Muli.

Red-rumped Swallow, *Cecropis daurica ssp*

Locally common between Xichang and Muli.

Asian House-Martin, *Delichon dasypus cashmiriensis*

50 near Muli.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba alboides*

A few around Muli and Biet's Valley.

Grey Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea ssp*

One between Muli and Biet's Valley.

Olive-backed Pipit, *Anthus hodgsoni hodgsoni*

Two at Kangwu Liangsi.



Olive-backed Pipit

Rosy Pipit, *Anthus roseatus*

One at Kangwu Liangsi.

Long-tailed Minivet, *Pericrocotus ethologus ethologus*
A few at Biet's Valley.

Collared Finchbill, *Spizixos semitorques semitorques*
One between Xichang and Yanyuan.

Brown-breasted Bulbul, *Pycnonotus xanthorrhous* ssp
Two between Xichang and Yanyuan, and five at Biet's Valley.

Black Bulbul, *Hypsipetes leucocephalus* ssp
Five at Biet's Valley. White-headed form.

Brown Dipper, *Cinclus pallasii pallasii*
Two between Muli and Biet's Valley.

Winter Wren, *Troglodytes troglodytes* ssp
Four at Kangwu Liangsi.

Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush, *Monticola rufiventris*
One or two between Yanyuan and Muli.

Blue Rock-Thrush, *Monticola solitarius pandoo*
A few between Xichang and Muli.

Blue Whistling-Thrush, *Myophonus caeruleus* ssp
One near Biet's Valley.

Chestnut Thrush, *Turdus rubrocanus gouldi*
One heard at Biet's Valley and ten at Kangwu Liangsi.

Chestnut-headed Tesia, *Tesia castaneocoronata ripleyi*
Two at Biet's Valley.

Yellowish-bellied Bush-Warbler, *Cettia acanthizoides*
Two heard at Biet's Valley.

Yellow-streaked Warbler, *Phylloscopus armandii perplexus*
One heard at Kangwu Liangsi.

Buff-barred Warbler, *Phylloscopus pulcher pulcher*
A few at Biet's Valley and ten at Kangwu Liangsi.

Ashy-throated Warbler, *Phylloscopus maculipennis maculipennis*
Three at Biet's Valley.

Sichuan Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus forresti*
Common at Biet's Valley and Kangwu Liangsi.

Blyth's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus reguloides assamensis*
Two between Yanyuan and Muli, and common at Biet's Valley and Kangwu Liangsi. Thought to be taxon *assamensis* based on literature, but unclear how it differs from *claudiae*.

Bianchi's Warbler, *Seicercus valentini*
Common at Biet's Valley and a few at Kangwu Liangsi.

Seicercus omeiensis/tephrocephalus
Three seen and heard at Biet's Valley. Unusually high for these taxa?

Slaty-backed Flycatcher, *Ficedula hodgsonii*
Two heard between Biet's Valley and Kangwu Liangsi.

Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, *Ficedula strophinata strophinata*
Five at Biet's Valley.

Slaty-blue Flycatcher, *Ficedula tricolor diversa*
One pair at Biet's Valley and one female at Kangwu Liangsi. Slightly buffish throat on the male.

Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher, *Culicicapa ceylonensis calochrysea*
One heard at Biet's Valley.

Indian Blue Robin, *Luscinia brunnea brunnea*
Two seen and three heard at Biet's Valley.

Orange-flanked Bush-Robin, *Tarsiger rufilatus*
Two at Biet's Valley and two at Kangwu Liangsi.

Golden Bush-Robin, *Tarsiger chrysaeus chrysaeus*

One female at Biet's Valley.

White-throated Redstart, *Phoenicurus schisticeps*

One male at Kangwu Liangsi.



White-throated Redstart

White-capped Water-Redstart, *Chaimarrornis leucocephalus*

One between Muli and Biet's Valley, and one at Kangwu Liangsi.

Plumbeous Water-Redstart, *Rhyacornis fuliginosus fuliginosus*

Common along the rivers around Muli and Biet's Valley.

[White-crowned Forktail, *Enicurus leschenaulti sinensis*

One at Biet's Valley seen by the others.]

Siberian Stonechat, *Saxicola maurus ssp*

One near Xichang.

Grey Bushchat, *Saxicola ferrea*

Two between Muli and Biet's Valley.

Yellow-bellied Fantail, *Rhipidura hypoxantha*

Two pairs at Biet's Valley.

Biet's Laughingthrush, *Garrulax bieti*

A total of six territories at Biet's Valley. Two pairs and one single seen, the rest were heard only.

One of the pairs was seen both days



Biet's Laughingthrush

Giant Laughingthrush, *Garrulax maximus*

Two heard at Biet's Valley and several heard (and seen by the others) at Kangwu Liangsi.

White-browed Laughingthrush, *Garrulax sannio oblectans*

Three at Chengdu airport when leaving for Xichang was a good *Garrulax* omen.

Elliot's Laughingthrush, *Garrulax elliotii elliotii*

One heard between Muli and Biet's Valley, and three heard near Biet's Valley.

Black-faced Laughingthrush, *Garrulax affinis muliensis*

One at Biet's Valley within the same territory as a pair of Biet's.

Black-streaked Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus gravivox dedekensi* or *decarlei*

One heard at Biet's Valley.

Pygmy Wren-Babbler, *Pnoepyga pusilla pusilla*

Three heard at Biet's Valley.

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

One heard at Biet's Valley.

Chestnut-tailed Minla, *Minla strigula yunnanensis*

Three at Biet's Valley and three at Kangwu Liangsi.

Golden-breasted Fulvetta, *Alcippe chrysotis* ssp

Ten at Biet's Valley.

White-browed Fulvetta, *Alcippe vinipectus bieti*

10-15 at Biet's Valley and 10-15 at Kangwu Liangsi.



White-browed Fulvetta

Black-headed Sibia, *Heterophasia desgodinsi*

Five at Biet's Valley.

Stripe-throated Yuhina, *Yuhina gularis omeiensis*

Three at Biet's Valley.

White-collared Yuhina, *Yuhina diademata*

30+ at Biet's Valley and 20+ at Kangwu Liangsi.

Rufous-vented Yuhina, *Yuhina occipitalis obscurior*

Two at Biet's Valley and two at Kangwu Liangsi.

Great Parrotbill, *Conostoma oemodium*

One pair at Biet's Valley.

Brown Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis unicolor*

One pair at Biet's Valley.

Fulvous Parrotbill, *Paradoxornis fulvifrons albifacies*

Three together at Biet's Valley.

Black-browed Tit, *Aegithalos iouschistos bonvaloti*
Common at Biet's Valley and Kangwu Liangsi.



Black-browed Tit

Coal Tit, *Periparus ater aemodius*
One at Biet's Valley and several at Kangwu Liangsi.



Coal Tit

Rufous-vented Tit, *Periparus rubiventris beavani*
Ten at Kangwu Liangsi.



Rufous-vented Tit

Grey-crested Tit, *Lophophanes dichrous wellsi*
Three at Biet's Valley and ten at Kangwu Liangsi.



Grey-crested Tit

Green-backed Tit, *Parus monticolus yunnanensis*
Two at Biet's Valley.

Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, *Sitta nagaensis nagaensis*
One heard at Kangwu Liangsi.

Gould's Sunbird, *Arthopyga goulidae dabryii*
Ten at Biet's Valley.

Brown Shrike, *Lanius cristatus ssp*
One near Xichang.

Long-tailed Shrike, *Lanius schach ssp*
A few near Xichang.

Grey-backed Shrike, *Lanius tephronotus tephronotus*
A few between Xichang and Muli, and two at Kangwu Liangsi.

Black Drongo, *Dicrurus macrocerus cathoecus*
Many between Xichang and Muli.

Eurasian Jay, *Garrulus glandarius sinensis*
Two at Biet's Valley.

Red-billed Blue-Magpie, *Urocissa erythrochyncha erythrorhyncha*
Four at Biet's Valley and one at Kangwu Liangsi.

Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica sericea*
A few between Yanyuan and Muli.

Eurasian Nutcracker, *Nucifraga caryocatactes macella*
One heard at Biet's Valley and one heard at Kangwu Liangsi.

Red-billed Chough, *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax himalayanus*
One pair nesting at the lake at Kangwu Liangsi.

Large-billed Crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos tibetosinensis*
Many between Yanyuan and Muli.

Russet Sparrow, *Passer rutilans intensior*
Several between Xichang and Muli, and several at Biet's Valley.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus obscuratus*
Seen in villages.

White-browed Rosefinch, *Carpodacus thura femininus*
One at Kangwu Liangsi.

Greenfinch sp
One heard near Biet's Valley.

Tibetan Serin, *Serinus thibetanus*
Five plus 50 at Biet's Valley.

Collared Grosbeak, *Mycerobas affinis*
One female at Kangwu Liangsi.
Godlewski's Bunting, *Emberiza godlewski yunnanensis*
A few between Yanyuan and Muli.



A pair of Biet's Laughingthrushes



Bishop Felix Biet to the left in the front. Photo taken in 1890 in Tatsienlu.