

Koko Nor (Qinghai Hu), Qinghai, China

18-20 July 2008



Great Black-headed Gull in the dawn light with Qinghai Nanshan in the background

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General

With one day notice I had a weekend to spend and quickly decided to go to Koko Nor in Qinghai on the northeastern part of the Tibetan Plateau. As I had been to the area before, it required no advance planning and would guarantee good birding in a fantastic landscape. I did not really have any target bird in mind, although I was keen to see an adult male Ala Shan Redstart (which I did not). I spend 1.5 days in different habitats ranging from the grassy and scrubby hillsides at Rubber Mountains, the desert near Caka and at the meadows and wetlands along Koko Nor.



Sunrise over Koko Nor

Highlights

Favorite birds included Henderson's Ground-Jay, Przewalski's Rosefinch (aka Pink-tailed Bunting), Great Black-headed Gull, Blanford's, Pere David's, Rufous-necked and White-rumped Snowfinches, White-browed Tit and Black-necked Crane. The icing of the cake and the only lifer was however the cute Pallas's Cat that I stumbled upon when it was hunting Pikas.

Itinerary

18/7

I took the evening flight from Beijing to Xining and arrived around 21.00. The pre-booked driver met at the airport and we quickly drove the 27 km/<30 min to Xining town. I stayed at Qingken Holiday Hotel, which was perfectly ok.

19/7

We set off from the hotel at 04.00 and by 05.15 we passed the southeast corner of Koko Nor. As it was still dark I quickly decided to continue to Rubber Mountain shortly beyond Heimahe, at the southwest corner of the lake. Dawn was at 6.00 and just before we arrived at Heimahe, we briefly stopped to admire a large flock of Great Black-headed Gulls. By 06.30 we had reached one of the valleys I wanted to explore and I started to walk along the grassy and scrubby slopes. There were lots of interesting birds and flowering plants and an absolutely stunning view of the mountains and Koko Nor. I spent until 12.30 in this area and covered two major valleys on the northwest side of the road.



Back at the waiting car, we continued up over the pass (3817 masl) and down on the dry Caka side, where we had a noodle lunch in a small village. In the early afternoon, I looked for birds in one of the small patches of planted trees without finding anything in particular. Later in the afternoon I walked the desert further west towards Caka in search of Henderson's Ground-Jay and Blanford's Snowfinch. I also spent some time looking for Pallas's Sandgrouse, although I decided to leave the area at 17.00 before they normally start flying about. Instead I went back to Rubber Mountain and covered a third valley southeast of the road. Much the same birds as in the morning, but to my surprise I stumbled upon a Pallas's Cat at very close range. At sunset I wandered back to the road and we drove to Heimahe, where we found a decent hotel opposite to the major gas station.



The entire mountain range is heavily grazed by Yaks and sheep



Heimahe in the background and Great Black-headed Gulls in the foreground

This day I woke up at the crack of dawn 06.00 and walked to the shore-line of Koko Nor, which is probably about 2 km away from the village. The grassy meadows held lots of larks and the shore-line was full of waterbirds. I spent a great deal of time photographing the Great Black-headed Gulls, thinking that it must be just a matter of time until one turns up in my home country Sweden. [Sure enough, just a few hours later the first for Sweden was actually seen!]. At around 09.00 I was back by the road and the driver picked me up and drove east along the lake to the southeastern corner. Here is a marshy area that I birded for an hour or so, until it was time to return to Xining for the flight back to Beijing.

Weather

Saturday was warm, clear and sunny, but Sunday became overcast with a significantly lower temperature (still a shirt was enough). As I forgot to bring sun blocker, my nose and hands quickly turned cerise-coloured.

Logistics

I flew to Xining and had a pre-arranged regular car to pick me up and take me to all the birding areas. The driver Mr Wang (+8613897230568) did a terrific driving job. Everything worked out very smoothly and travel in the area is pretty straight-forward.

Site descriptions

I visited essentially four different areas. First it was the Rubber Mountains just southwest of Heimahe. This is part of the Qinghai Nanshan mountain range along the south end of Koko Nor. The mountain and hills are not very steep and covered with grazed grassland and scrubby hill-sides. Next I birded the desert area north of Lake Caka, which is a flat dry area next to a salt lake. The second day I spent along the shore of Koko Nor, firstly just outside Heimahe and secondly in a marshy area at the southeastern end of Koko Nor.



Typical habitat in the Rubber Mountains (Qinghai Nanshan)



The desert near Caka on the south side of the mountain range is clearly much drier and habitat for Henderson's Ground-Jay, Blanford's Snowfinch and Pallas's Sandgrouse

Birds

Little Grebe, *Tachybaptus ruficollis poggei*

One at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Great Crested Grebe, *Podiceps cristatus cristatus*

50 at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Black-necked Grebe, *Podiceps nigricollis nigricollis*

50 at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*

500+ near Heimahe and smaller numbers at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Grey Heron, *Ardea cinerea jouyi*

Two at the wetlands outside Heimahe and three at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Bar-headed Goose, *Anser indicus*

500+ at the wetlands outside Heimahe and 20+ at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Ruddy Shelduck, *Tadorna ferruginea*

100+ at the wetlands outside Heimahe and a few at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Gadwall, *Anas strepera strepera*

Three at the wetlands outside Heimahe.

Eurasian Teal, *Anas crecca crecca*

Five at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Mallard, *Anas platyrhynchos platyrhynchos*

One at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Northern Pintail, *Anas clypeata*

One at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Red-crested Pochard, *Netta rufina*

50+ at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Common Pochard, *Aythya ferina*

50+ at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Tufted Duck, *Aythya fuligula*

One at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Lammergeier, *Gypaetus barbatus barbatus*

One immature at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.



Giants of the air-space, adult Himalayan Griffon and immature Lammergeier

Himalayan Griffon, *Gyps himalayensis*

About five at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.



Immature and adult Himalayan Griffon

Upland Buzzard, *Buteo hemilasius*

Three east of Heimahe and one at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.

Saker, *Falco cherrug milvipes*

One adult at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain looked strange with pale under-wing coverts and was overall very pale, but had the brown back and narrow moustaches typical of the species.

Tibetan Partridge, *Perdix hodgsoniae sifanica*

One plus two seen and a few heard at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.



Tibetan Partridge

Black-necked Crane, *Grus nigricollis*

One pair at the wetlands outside Heimahe and one pair at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Eurasian Coot, *Fulica atra atra*

100+ at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Black-winged Stilt, *Himantopus himantopus himantopus*

Two at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Little Ringed Plover, *Charadrius dubius curonicus*

Two at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Kentish Plover, *Charadrius alexandrinus alexandrinus*

Ten near the wetlands outside Heimahe.

Lesser Sand-Plover, *Charadrius mongolus atrifrons*

One at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Black-tailed Godwit, *Limosa limosa ssp*

800-1000 at the wetlands outside Heimahe and a few at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor. Presumably these were the western taxon.

Spotted Redshank, *Tringa erythropus*

Two at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Common Redshank, *Tringa totanus eurhinus*

50+ at the wetlands outside Heimahe and 20 at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor

Green Sandpiper, *Tringa ochropus*

One at the wetlands outside Heimahe and one at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Wood Sandpiper, *Tringa glareola*

Ten at the wetlands outside Heimahe and three at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Common Sandpiper, *Actitis hypoleucos*

One at the wetlands outside Heimahe and one at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Great Black-headed Gull, *Larus ichthyæus*

100 in one flock just east of Heimahe and a few more flying over the lake just at sunrise the first morning. The second morning there was probably more than 1000 birds along the coast at the wetlands outside Heimahe. Only one juvenile and less than ten 2yr and 3yr were seen.



Great Black-headed Gulls

Brown-headed Gull, *Larus brunnicephalus*

200-300 at the wetlands outside Heimahe.



Brown-headed Gull

Common Tern, *Sterna hirundo tibetana*

Ten at the wetlands outside Heimahe and ten at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.



Common Tern

Hill Pigeon, *Columba rupestris rupestris*

One plus three east of Heimahe and one near Caka.

Common Swift, *Apus apus pekinensis*

Many near Caka and 20 at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.



Common Swift road-killed at Caka

Fork-tailed Swift, *Apus pacificus pacificus*

Three at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain and one at the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain.



Fork-tailed Swifts

Eurasian Hoopoe, *Upupa epops saturata*

One at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain and two at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Tibetan Lark, *Melanocorypha maxima holdereri*

10-15 at the wetlands outside Heimahe, mostly closer to the water than the village.



The huge Tibetan Lark

Hume's Short-toed Lark, *Calandrella acutirostris tibetana*

Five near the wetlands outside Heimahe.



Hume's Short-toed Lark

Oriental Skylark, *Alauda gulgula inopinata*

Common in all areas.



Oriental Skylark

Horned Lark, *Eremophila alpestris brandtii*

Fairly common in all areas, esp near Caka.



Horned Lark

Pale Martin, *Riparia diluta tibetana*

Frequently seen at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain and the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain and along the southern end of Koko Nor.

Asian House Martin, *Delichon dasypus cashmiriensis*

A few at the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba leucopsis*

Two near Caka.

Citrine Wagtail, *Motacilla citreola calcarata*

Two juveniles near the wetlands outside Heimahe and several juveniles and adults at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.

Rosy Pipit, *Anthus roseatus*

One at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain and one at the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain.

Robin Accentor, *Prunella rubeculoides fusca*

10-15 at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain and one at the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain.



Robin Accentor

Rufous-breasted Accentor, *Prunella strophhiata strophhiata*

Five at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.

Brown Accentor, *Prunella fulvescens dresseri*

Ten at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain and three at the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain.

White-browed Tit-Warbler, *Leptopoeile sophiae obscura*
Five at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.



White-browed (aka Stolitzka's aka Severtsov's) Tit-Warbler

Dusky Warbler, *Phylloscopus fuscatus robustus*
One at the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain.

Tickell's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus affinis*
Common at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain and the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain.

Black Redstart, *Phoenicurus ochruros rufiventris*
Fairly common at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain, the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain and a few near Caka.



Black Redstart

Blue-fronted Redstart, *Phoenicurus frontalis*
Fairly common at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain and the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain.



Juvenile Blue-fronted Redstart

Siberian Stonechat, *Saxicola maurus przewalskii*
20 at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.



Siberian Stonechat

Isabelline Wheatear, *Oenanthe isabellina*
One east of Heimahe and fairly common near Caka.

White-browed Tit, *Poecile superciliosa*
Two at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.

Hume's Ground-Tit, *Pseudopodoces humilis*
Common in Rubber Mountains and all along the southern end of Koko Nor.



Hume's Ground-Tit aka Groundpecker

Grey-backed Shrike, *Lanius tephronotus tephronotus*
One at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain and one pair with young near Caka.

Henderson's Ground-Jay, *Podoces hendersoni*
One plus a pair near Caka.



Henderson's Ground-Jays



Red-billed Chough, *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax brachypus*

Five at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus tibetanus*

Common in villages.

Rock Petronia, *Petronia petronia brevirostris*

One in the small wood near Caka.

White-rumped Snowfinch, *Montifringilla taczanowskii*

Ten at the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain and two at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.



White-rumped Snowfinch

Pere David's Snowfinch, *Montifringilla davidiana davidiana*

Five at the wetlands at the southeast corner of Koko Nor.



Pere David's Snowfinch

Rufous-necked Snowfinch, *Montifringilla ruficollis ruficollis*

Locally common at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain and the second visited valley in Rubber Mountain.



Rufous-necked Snowfinch

Blanford's Snowfinch, *Montifringilla blanfordi barbata*
About ten near Caka.



Blanford's Snowfinch, note the forked black eyebrow compared to Rufous-necked

Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch, *Carpodacus davidianus argyrophrys*
One female at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.

Streaked Rosefinch, *Carpodacus rubicilloides rubicilloides*
One plus one at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.

Twite, *Carduelis flavirostris miniakensis*
Common at RM.



Twite

Przewalski's Rosefinch (Pink-tailed Bunting), *Urocynchramus pylzowi*

One female at nest with chicks and a further five including two males at the first visited valley in Rubber Mountain.





Przewalski's Rosefinches

Mammals

In addition to various Pikas, the following mammals were encountered.
Himalayan Marmot, *Marmota himalayana*
Many seen at Rubber Mountain.



Himalayan Marmot

Woolly Hare, *Lepus oiostolus*
Presumably one at Rubber Mountain.



Woolly Hare?

Pallas's Cat, *Felis mungul*

One was seen at close range when it was hunting Pikas very near some nomads in Rubber Mountain.
This was a real surprise and the first record I have heard of from Qinghai Nanshan.



Pallas's Cat