

**Nonggang Nature Reserve,
Guangxi, China**
(twitching the recently discovered Nonggang Babbler)

25-27 July 2008



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General

In June 2008 it was finally published; the news that yet another new species had been discovered in China. Nonggang Babbler *Stachyris nonggangensis* was first seen in late 2005 by Jiang Aiwu. Since then he and his colleagues have been gathering information in order to eventually describe it as a species new to science. I had been waiting for several months to set foot in Nonggang, but entry permits to the Nature Reserve were only possible to get after the publication. It was with eager anticipation that I, Jocko Hammar and Chris Campion steered towards Nonggang. July is of course not the best time to go birding in South China, due to the rainy monsoon season. However the attraction of seeing Nonggang Babbler was hard to resist much longer and it coincided very well with Jocko being in China.

By the Sunday we all agreed that it had been a very successful weekend; with nice views of Nonggang Babbler, as well as a couple of wonderfully clear days in an almost unbelievably beautiful landscape. We owe our sincere thanks to Jiang Aiwu, who first saw and described the Babbler and also took the time to show us the birds.



Chris, Jocko and Bjorn with Jiang Aiwu after having seen the Babbler. This most likely became the last joint twitch in China, as one participant of this intrepid trio has now run out of target birds ;-)

Itinerary

25/7

Jocko, Chris and I all came in to Nanning with different flights (Shenzhen, HK and Beijing respectively) in the early to mid evening. While waiting for Chris to arrive, me and Jocko had dinner in the airport restaurant, only to discover that Jiang Aiwu was dining just a couple of tables away from us. Once Chris arrived at 20.00, we quickly entered the micro-van and headed off in the direction of Viet Nam. Not quite all the way there we turned off to Longzhou and eventually came to a halt at the Nonggang Nature Reserve Headquarters at 23.00. The name of this site is Lenglei.



Just before dawn at 06.00 we were up and started to walk along a jeep-track just behind the building. The sight of the mist from a humid night amongst the back-drop of stunning limestone mountains was truly awesome. First we tried to find Nonggang Babbler along the jeep-track behind the building. We even walked past the very spot where Jiang Aiwu first saw the Babbler and it is difficult to have a more exact precision of a 'sight' type locality. Jiang heard the Babbler, although it was difficult to get any real access to the forest at this site. Instead we turned around and walked along another jeep-track through the sugarcane fields. Eventually this track dead-ended and we pursued the sugarcane in an Indiana Jones fashion in order to reach a tiny trail. This trail snaked up through a forested valley between majestic limestone cliffs and after about half an hours walk we reach an area with limestone in mature forest. This was supposed to be a good place for Nonggang Babbler, but in spite of spending 4-5 hours patrolling the site, we came up empty-handed. By mid-afternoon our hopes were about to fade and we decided to return to the site of the morning. While walking back out of the forested valley Jiang suddenly told us to hang around some cliffs for half an hour. Just as he said that, Jocko saw two birds sp, flying off the ground. We all got our bins on one bird and could see a distinct crescent around the ear-coverts! This is one of the unique features of Nonggang Babbler and Jiang's 'Yes-yes-yes' was echoing. The view was however extremely brief and none of us had seen any pale iris, which is another key feature. I managed to get a brief recording of the calls of the 4-5 birds before they moved off. Fortunately they decided to come back and even gave bursts of song. Then it took quite a while to get decent views, but after having spent more than an hour in the area, we all get satisfactory views, although no photography was possible. Elated with this success we drifted out of the forest with the amazing feeling of being part of the ten or so people that have ever seen this unique bird. When walking back through the sugarcane, we unknowingly took a slight detour, but finally reach the jeep-track. After a long hot day, it was nice to have a cold shower and adequate dinner at the accommodation. Jiang even surprised us with pulling out a few cold beers from the next-door village.



Jocko and Chris skulking in the sugarcanes in Bittern-like style

27/7

With the pressure off after seeing the Babbler the day before, we returned to the site with the purpose of obtaining some photographs. The weather was clear and on the way to the forest, a party of stiff-winged White-winged Magpies decided to glide overhead, much to the joy for the one in desperate need of this lifer. Bird of the day so far. At one place we also briefly heard another Nonggang Babbler.

We again worked our way through the wet sugarcane and up the forested valley to where we had connected with the Babblers yesterday. In spite of playing both calls and song, there was not the slightest sniff of any birds today. Instead we turned our attention to a Buff-breasted Babbler pointed out by Jiang. This gave us a bit of a surprise as it was slightly different from the birds in Viet Nam as well as producing a bit of a different call. I made some recordings and got poor shots until the bird decided to give up on his unseen rival.

By late morning we decided to return back for the mid-day departure and as we found no reason to flog a dead horse, we even had lunch before taking off at 11.30.

The return drive was initially spectacular with the limestone karst landscape, before reaching the Nanning-Hanoi express-way. Exactly three hours later we arrived at the airport for our respective flight to Beijing respectively Hong Kong.

Weather

Hot and humid! During daytime the temperature surely soared around 35. The sun was out for most of the time, although during the night there were some drops of rain. In hindsight, we were probably quite lucky not to have any rain during the daytime.

Logistics

Through my friend Professor He Fen-qi and my assistant I got in contact with Professor Zhou Fang, who kindly connected me with Jiang Aiwu. Jiang then arranged for all the necessary permits and logistics, and guaranteed a completely hassle-free weekend.

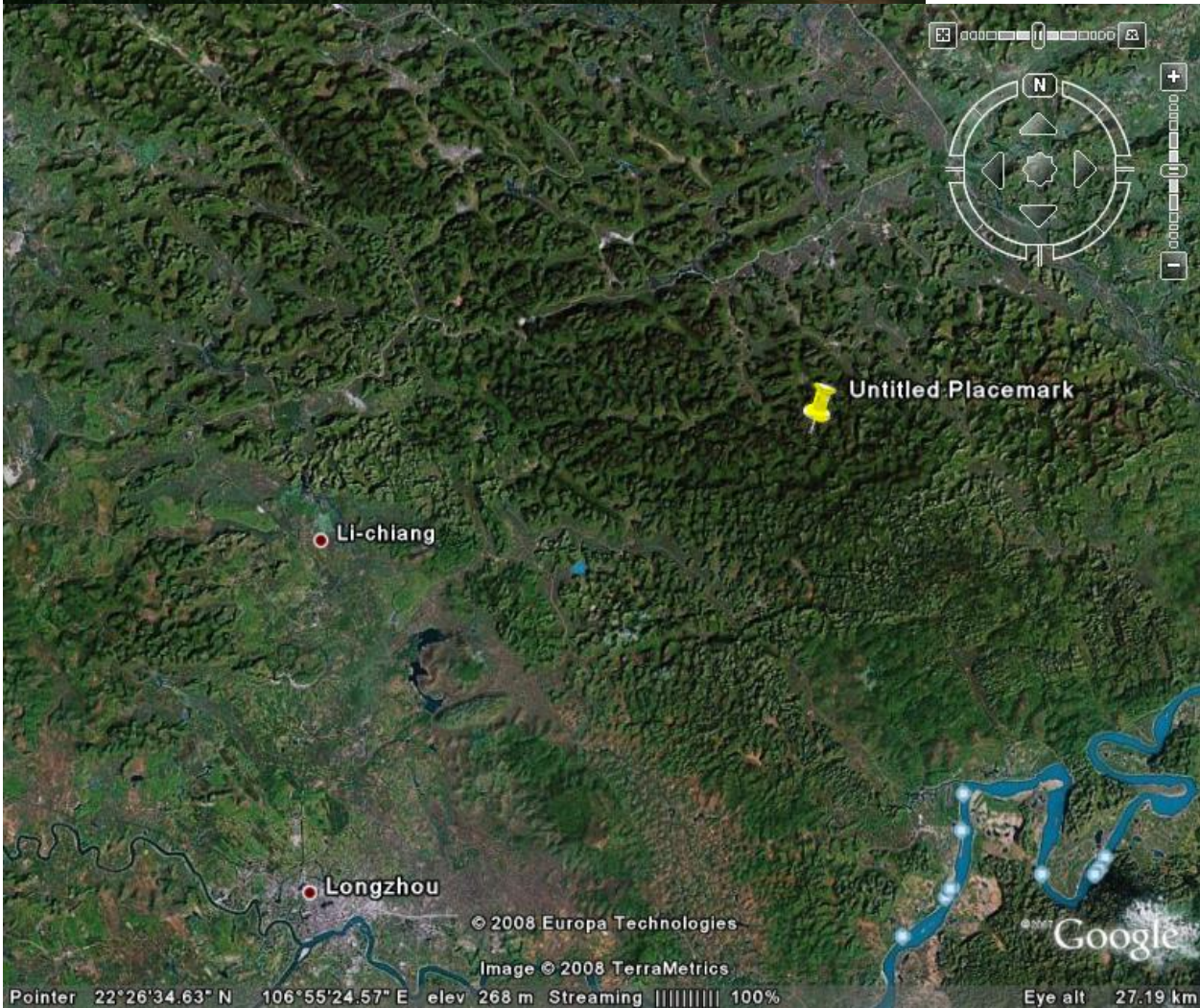


Lenglei, Nonggang HQ



Jiang Aiwu pointing at an old nest of Nonggang Babbler.

Site descriptions



Nonggang Nature Reserve is in the southwest of Guangxi, very close to the border with Viet Nam. The entire area is covered with dramatic karst limestone landscape. On these steep mountain-sides there is, within the reserve, still mature forest. This is the habitat of the Nonggang Babbler and so far there have been no records of it outside the reserve, in spite of several searches. From a satellite photo the extent of the more mature forest can be clearly seen.

Birds

Bar-backed Partridge, *Arborophila brunneopectus brunneopectus*

One pair heard duetting in the morning between Lenglei and the 'Babbler' trail.

Red Junglefowl, *Gallus gallus jabouillei*

One heard at Lenglei station was presumably a wild bird.

Red-headed Trogon, *Harpactes erythrocephalus (intermedius?)*

One heard along the 'Babbler' trail and another heard by Jocko near Lenglei station.

White-throated Kingfisher, *Halcyon smyrnensis fokiensis*

One seen from the road when leaving Nonggang NR.

Great Barbet, *Megalaima virens virens*

One heard near Lenglei station on both mornings.

Black-browed Barbet, *Megalaima oorti sini*

One heard along the jeep-track.

[Great Spotted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos major cabanisi*

One near Lenglei station by Jocko was a rare record at Nonggang.]

Rufous Woodpecker, *Celeus brachyurus fokiensis*

One heard at Lenglei station, three along the jeep-track and one heard along the 'Babbler' trail.

Bay Woodpecker, *Blythipicus pyrrhotis sinensis*

One heard along the jeep-track.

Black-crested Bulbul, *Pycnonotus melanicterus flaviventris*

About five between Lenglei station and along the 'Babbler' trail.

Red-whiskered Bulbul, *Pycnonotus jocosus jocosus*

30+ near Lenglei station.

Puff-throated Bulbul, *Alophoixus pallidus henrici*

Five along the 'Babbler' trail.

Rufescent Prinia, *Prinia rufescent rufescent*

A few at the edge of sugarcane fields.



Rufescent Prinia

Yellow-bellied Prinia, *Prinia flaviventris sonitans*

A few heard in the sugarcane fields.

[Common Tailorbird, *Orthotorius sutorius longicauda*

One seen by Jocko.]

[Goodson's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus goodsoni (goodsoni?)*

One along the jeep-track. The exact identification of this bird cannot be confirmed. Most likely a nominate *goodsoni* based on information from literature and comments from other birders.]

Yellow-bellied Warbler, *Abroscopus superciliaris superciliaris*

About ten seen and heard.

Hainan Blue-Flycatcher, *Cyornis hainanus*

One along the 'Babbler' trail.



Hainan Blue-Flycatcher

Black-naped Monarch, *Hypothymis azurea styani*

A few seen.

Buff-breasted Babbler, *Pellorneum tickelli* (fulvum?)

About five heard along the 'Babbler' trail and along the jeep-track (all pointed out by Jiang Aiwu) and one seen along the 'Babbler' trail the last morning. Interestingly none was heard delivering the calls I have heard from it in Viet Nam, nor did Jiang Aiwu recognize some of the calls I have recordings from elsewhere in SE Asia. Additionally, the only bird that we saw (which also delivered a song besides the calls, indicating it being a territorial adult), had a strange mottled breast that I have not seen on the few birds I have seen in Viet Nam. The legs were not as bright pink either. According to Jiang Aiwu, Nonggang is the only place in Guangxi where Buff-breasted Babbler occurs. As it seems to be connected to limestone forest, the same habitat as Nonggang Babbler, it would clearly be of interest to study this taxon in depth.



Buff-breasted Babbler

- Large Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus hypoleucos tickelli*
One heard along the 'Babbler' trail and one heard near Lenglei station.
- Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus ruficollis intermedius*
10-15, mostly heard, all over the place.
- Streaked Wren-Babbler, *Napothera brevicaudata stevensi*
15-20 heard and a few seen along the 'Babbler' trail.
- Rufous-capped Babbler, *Stachyris ruficeps davidi*
Fairly commonly heard and a few seen.
- Nonggang Babbler, *Stachyris nonggangensis*
4-5 heard and seen well along the 'Babbler' trail and one more heard the last morning halfway between Lenglei station and along the 'Babbler' trail. The bird is quite distinctive with key features being: blackish-brown overall with dark brown wings, pale blue iris, obvious pale crescent just behind the (lower) ear-coverts, black-and-white checkered throat. It is strictly connected to the limestone areas inside mature forest. The calls are a typical babbler twittering style. The song is a slurred slightly deflected and drawn-out prryyyhh, immediately followed by a higher pitched shorter variant of the first note. Sometimes the second note was omitted, but this may have been after repeated playback.
- Spot-necked Babbler, *Stachyris striolata tonkinensis*
One along the 'Babbler' trail the last morning.
- Pin-striped Tit-Babbler, *Macronous gularis lutescens*
Fairly commonly seen and heard.
- Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, *Alcippe morrisonia schaefferi*
Fairly commonly seen and heard.
- Chestnut-collared Yuhina, *Yuhina torqueola*
Several flocks along the jeep-track.
- White-bellied Yuhina, *Erpornis zantholeuca griseiloris*
Several along the jeep-track.
- Sultan Tit, *Melanochlora sultanea seorsa*
About five along the jeep-track and three between Lenglei station and the 'Babbler' trail.
- Fork-tailed Sunbird, *Aethopyga christinae latouchii*
Two seen along the jeep-track.
- Crow-billed Drongo, *Dicrurus annectans*
One along the jeep-track and four along the 'Babbler' trail.
- White-winged Magpie, *Urocissa whiteheadi xanthomelana*
Heard three times along the 'Babbler' trail and 11 seen in a loose flock when flying across the valley between two limestone mountains.