

BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 4/2013:

HAINAN, CHINA



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Fig. 1. Welcome to the wet tropical forests of Hainan!

In summer 2012, I visited the tropical island of Hainan, China, between 24th July and 2nd August, but only three days were spent in full time birding. The idea was to try to see as many regional endemics as possible in one location, Jianfengling National Park, west of Sanya on the southern mountains of Hainan. The visit was largely based on the information of Paul Holt's excellent report on a visit in January 2012, available at www.club300.se (Reserapporter). With the help of his information and contacts, visiting the island without any skills in Chinese language appeared feasible.

This proved to be true, even though I had to abort Jianfengling two days earlier than planned. Even though extremely careful on the park's Ming Feng nature trail, I managed to slip on its wet wooden stairs, injuring my left leg. Despite disinfection measures, hospital quality bandages and an immediately taken dose of correct antibiotics, the leg soon became too painful to walk and an

evacuation to Sanya became necessary, by a local taxi. As could be expected, all the following days were sunny, without rain...

Two visits in the Sanya Nongken Hospital's emergency unit followed, with two nights in the Orient Bay-View Hotel, on the expense of my insurance company. Another night was spent in Haikou, at the celebrated Eadry Royal Gardens, with another hospital visit to change the bandages, before being evacuated to Finland by China Southern and Finnair first class, via Guangzhou and Hong Kong. On the way to Finland, I got erysipelas in the leg and this further complicated the situation.

In these and other minor logistical problems, not to mention reserving my accommodation, an invaluable help was Wang Qingyuan, of Chinabirdtour.com (wangqingyuan@yahoo.com.cn; tel. 00 86 10 89505149; address: 2601 Building E, No. 16, Ba Li Qia South Street, Tongzhou, Beijing, China 101100). Wang had been recommended by Paul in his report and she proved to be more than worth the recommendation, going the extra mile with professional support.

There unfortunately are no bird photos in this report, as a consequence of rain, fog and humidity which made the conditions beyond the capacity of my mediocre Lumix pocket camera. Oftentimes, the birds were quite close and I made an attempt to photograph them but managed only to get some blurred shots, useless for publication. There will, however, be other photos which provide some information on the sites discussed in the text.



Fig. 2. Downtown Sanya, as seen from the Orient Bay-View Hotel. The sky was full of House Swifts.

LOGISTICS

My flights were on Finnair from Helsinki to Beijing, and on Hainan Airlines to Haikou. On hindsight, I should probably have invested on the Helsinki – Hong Kong – Sanya connection, if available. Nevertheless, at Haikou Airport a rushed transfer was successfully made to the Sanya Bullet Train (max 120 km/h on this route with several stops), which had frequent departures in the same building, downstairs through a 200 meter tunnel. The tickets were bought for first class (large windows & good views) with a kind help of an English-speaking Chinese engineer looking for a seat in the same class. I had printed a few useful sentences in Chinese (translated by Google Translate) and they also helped in this and some other situations. The air-conditioned first class was but one carriage in the train, air-conditioned and a bit more comfortable than the other ones, for a slightly higher price of Y95 from the Haikou International Airport to Sanya.

The fast train made the long trip short and arrived at Sanya railway station, well after sunset. In there, I got a taxi to Jianfengling for Y700 (the same rate Paul Holt got in January), after some negotiation with the help of Wang (on phone). It is a lot but other options are few and complicated. The return in a local taxi was less, Y500. I had bought a Chinese SIM-card with ample phone time on arrival in Beijing, before transiting between international and domestic terminals there. First, we had a stop in a local grocery to buy some fresh fruit, biscuits, candy and drinks for the park. I had brought few kilos of food with me from Finland but did not have anything fresh. Preparing oneself food-wise proved to be a sound decision.



Fig. 3. First class cabin of the bullet train to Sanya. Make sure to get a seat with a view.

We then zoomed on the coastal highway, eventually turning right to the mountains. My instructions to find our destination, Tianchi Resort, were quite accurate and informative in Chinese, but the driver unfortunately never seemed to have enough patience to read them properly. At the park's entrance gate, my national park entrance fee (¥40) was paid. Afterwards, he repeatedly got lost. Again, I turned to Wang, even though the mobile network was weak on the mountains, until we finally found the place (2 h drive), without a soul in the reception. After some waiting (one hour), blowing horn and searching with the barking guard dog, I was finally able to check in my apartment for the next few days, and to drag my suitcases up some one hundred stone stairs. The accommodation was ok, after I closed a hole in one window, through which a Pacific Rat managed to get in at first night and have a taste of bananas. A clean bed and a hot shower cost ¥240 per night. Hot water was available for 24 hours per day.

The food in the restaurant, on the other hand, was a bit monotonous and lacking in protein. A stew of chicken feet, skin and bones with rice but without any meat, for example, was not really my idea of ideal nourishment, even though it provided an interesting insight to what was eaten there. Omelets with tomato, onions or local mushrooms were fine for lunches, to be complemented by my personal reserves of spices, canned meat and fish, dark bread and fruits. It is a simple rural restaurant with a simple menu, unlike the variety available in city hotels. In the room, I could make my own tea and use the kettle also for boiling drinking water. Bring a thermos, like I did, and you may have hot tea on the trail, too. The climate is not hot at all high in the humid mountains, but quite comfortable, even cold at times. At night, I needed my sleeping bag.



Fig. 4. One of the accommodation blocks of Tianchi Resort. My room was on the far left.

MING FENG TRAIL

Tianchi Resort has an excellent location for Hainan endemics because it is right on the Ming Feng trail, the main access to the forest. The trail is about two-and-half kilometers long, mostly made of wooden stairs (5.000?) with platforms and shelters here and there, and runs up and down making a full circle on a steep mountain slope. By doing the circle, one visits altitudinal zones between 900 and 1.100 meters above sea level, with their characteristic fauna and flora. All the three endemic species of Hainan may be seen there, even though one may need several visits and a focused effort. Magnificent Night-Heron (*Gorsachius magnificus*), Blyth's Kingfisher (*Alcedo Hercules*) and Pale-capped Pigeon (*Columba punicea*) are also theoretically possible, making the visit potentially even more exciting. I did see a flying heron at Tianchi Resort at dusk, but to me it looked and sounded like a Black Bittern (*Ixobrychus flavicollis*).

Mp3 recordings are quite useful in this forest to attract shy species such as Hainan Peacock-Pheasant, even though one should not overdo them. At the moment, so few birders visit the site that this really is not a problem. There is a comprehensive archive available at Xeno Canto and I had recordings of all the potential species with me, as a reference sound collection.

There are plenty of leeches and centipedes in the forest and many of them lurk on the wooden handrails of the boardwalk. It pays to use insect repellent and to check one's hands and feet on a frequent basis. Birding from the boardwalk is nevertheless very comfortable, a luxury, if compared to the other option, climbing the mountain through the forest! There are several rest stations and many signs indicating the various tree species. These help in putting the records on the map. Some of the names are amusing (e.g. 'Treelike Fleshseed Tree'). In the middle of day, there may be a number of Chinese tourists on the boardwalk, too, if the weather is good. Most of them were very nice and welcoming, even though sometimes a bit loud, and even helped in locating the unseen leech on one's neck.

What I did see in the forest did much more than compensate the few leeches, to say the very least, even though I managed to bird only for three full days before the accident. My favorite spot was the Sky Garden platform which had huge trees to give shelter in case of rain showers and had a great view to a valley and close by canopies, along which various mixed groups of birds moved. There I did spend most of my time, patiently waiting birds in a spot where they would be seen well, rather than making several rounds a day on the trail.

One slow round was quite enough for me, with mornings focused on skulkers on the forest floor and late evenings to birds around the Tianchi Resort entrance. The Ancestral Cave was another productive platform area. In the bird species section, the trail is discussed counter-clockwise; I went up from the accommodations to Ancestral Cave and came down to Sky Garden and to the entrance of the resort. Sunrise was around 6 AM and the walk was best started just before it.



Fig. 5. An information table with the stations and rest areas mentioned in the text.



Fig. 6. Ancestral Cave, the top station of the Ming Feng trail.



Fig. 7. The Sky Garden platform; one of the main rest areas along the route.



Fig. 8.and part of the view from the platform. Good for canopy mixed bird parties!

THE BIRDS

There are birds in the forest but the trick is to see them well, partly because of the dense foliage and partly because of the constantly variable weather conditions, including showers of rain and periods of fog or sunshine. Lenses get foggy at times. One hears a lot of songs and calls, and frequently sees obscured movements in the bushes, without being able to find out the identity of their source. For example, I do not have any idea how Silver-breasted Broadbills (*Serilophus lunatus*), also present in the forest, sing. I have seen the species in other locations, but never consciously heard them.

The main target birds

Hainan Hill Partridge (*Arborophila ardens*): At least seven territories/pairs were recorded along the trail, based on calling birds, some of them quite close to the resort. Best chance for good views was at Wind Fallen Trees, signposted along the first ascend of the boardwalk. No signs of hunting activities were noted during the short visit (cf. traps found by Paul Holt).

Hainan Peacock-Pheasant (*Polyplectron katsumatae*): The star species of the Ming Feng Trail. On the first morning (26th July), one male was flushed and later heard close to the rest shelter below the Sky Garden, in an area where Paul Holt also recorded the species in January, between Buttress Wonder and One Tree Makes a Forest.

On the third morning (28th July), I was playing a male call recording at Charles Oatchestnut sign, just before Wind Fallen Trees, crouching low and motionless on the boardwalk, when a female suddenly arrived from behind, scurrying around in the low vegetation and running away to a direction from where it could later be heard calling. Superb! The many people who have failed in seeing the species in Hainan may probably best appreciate the potential the Ming Feng trail has. Thank you Paul for publishing the information!

Chinese Barbet (*Megalaima faber*): Common in the forest and often seen at a close range at Tianchi Resort, at fruiting trees and bushes. About 20 individuals were recorded on each day.

Fairy Pitta (*Pitta nympha*): The species was actively calling during a period of rain, above Sky Garden, on the 27th of July. They should not be breeding in Hainan, but what was this bird doing at Ming Feng trail in summer? I guess some individuals do not migrate, for whatever reason, and may show territorial behavior in certain conditions. Or do they breed, after all?

Rufous-cheeked Laughing-Thrush (*Garrulax castanotis*): Common species along the trail. My best views were repeatedly had during the Sky Garden observation periods, when the passing groups visited the platform to have a close look of the strange visitor in his black rain poncho. It was, however, hopeless to photograph such dark birds against dark foliage, with my pocket camera.

Grey-cheeked Babbler (*Alcippe hueti*): A common bird of forest edges and openings, and bushy streambanks. Lively parties of up to 15 birds were encountered on a daily basis, daily totals being between 10 and 30 individuals.



Fig. 9. Just after this sign, uphill, one enters a Hainan Peacock-Pheasant territory.

Spot-necked Babbler (*Stachyris striolata*): A common species along the Ming Feng trail, but mysteriously absent on one day and everywhere to see on another.

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler (*Pomatorhinus ruficollis*): Heard on several occasions but relatively difficult to see. Nevertheless, superb close views were available at Ancestral Caves where three birds came to inspect me during another period of rain.

Hainan Blue Flycatcher (*Cyornis hainanus*): Five recorded individuals. It took me some time to learn the song and start finding these pretty flycatchers, which apparently are not uncommon in the forest.

Hainan Leaf-Warbler (*Phylloscopus hainanus*): Common on the upper slopes of the forest, in high canopy mixed small bird parties. Daily totals of up to 40 birds. Close views could be had of birds attracted by a recording. A beautiful species.

Yellow-billed Nuthatch (*Sitta solangiae*): Seven recorded individuals. Best found in mixed canopy small bird parties at the Sky Garden valley. Another beautiful bird.

Chestnut Bulbul (*Hemixos castanonotus*): These bulbuls had apparently moved somewhere else (to breed?) during my visit. Instead of the many reported by Paul Holt, only one individual was seen at lower Ming Feng Trail, on the 28th of July. None were present at Tianchi Resort.

Grey-headed Parrotbill (*Paradoxornix gularis*): A lively party of at least 20 individuals spent some time at the Sky Garden platform on the 28th. A lone individual was seen in another location along the trail on the same day. Apparently heard already before these observations.

Indochinese Green Magpie (*Cissa hypoleuca*): One individual was seen well in a forested ravine below Sky Garden on the 27th July, before Buttress Wonder. Also heard at Ancestral Cave on the 28th.

Ratchet-tailed Treepie (*Temnurus temnurus*): Heard once on the 27th and seen well on a top of a tree at Sky Garden, on the 28th of July.

Fork-tailed Sunbird (*Aethopyga christinae*): Present at Sky Garden or Tianchi Resort on each day but a male was seen really well only once, at the former location.

Other bird species

A pair of Crested Goshawks (*Accipiter trivirgatus*) had a territory below the Sky Garden and were once joined by a Crested Serpent-Eagle (*Spilornis cheela*). Mountain and Green Imperial Pigeons (*Ducula badia* and *aenea*) and Bar-tailed Cuckoo-Doves (*Macropygia unchall*) were observed only once or twice. Dozens of Asian Palm Swifts (*Cypsiurus balasiensis*) and House Swifts (*Apus nipalensis*), and up to hundreds of Barn Swallows (*Hirundo rustica*) patrolled the skies during periods of good weather, together with Chinese Shenyang J-11 fighters.

Red-headed Trogons (*Harpactes erythrocephalus*) were seen and heard on a regular basis. A Blue-bearded Bee-eater (*Nyctornis athertoni*) frequented the resort parking lot in the evenings. Lesser and Greater Yellownapes (*Picus choloreolophus* and *Chrysocolaptes flavinucha*) were particularly common around the accommodation buildings, with two Grey-capped Woodpeckers (*Dendrocopos canicapillus*) joining them on one occasion. Also drongos were well present, with a single Ashy Drongo (*Dicrurus leucophaeus*), Bronzed Drongos (*D. aeneus*) and several very vocal Greater Racquet-tailed Drongos (*D. paradiseus*) along the trail.

The common bulbul species were the Mountain (*Pycnonotus mclellandii*) and Puff-throated Bulbuls (*Criniger pallidus*). Several pairs of Orange-bellied Leafbirds (*Chloropsis hardwickei*) also had territories along the upper parts of the Ming Feng trail. In the small bird mixed parties, Hainan Leaf Warbler, White-bellied Erpornis (*Erpornis zantholeuca*) and Sultan Tit (*Melanochlora sultanea*) were the three dominant species, the last species being particularly active and attractive. Grey-chinned and Orange Minivets (*Pericrocotus solaris* and *flammea*) had also formed colorful flocks of 20 to 30 birds in each.

The scarcer passerines (one to two records of each) included Rufous-faced Warbler (*Abroscopus albogularis*), White-throated Fantail (*Rhipidura albicollis*), Rufous-capped Warbler (*Stachyris ruficeps*), Japanese White-eye (*Zosterops japonicus*), Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum cruentatum*), Dusky Fulvetta (*Alcippe brunnea*) and Large Woodshrike (*Tephrodornis virgatus*). White-crowned Forktails inhabited the stream by the resort. At night, I did not spend much time for owling and possibly therefore had more modest results than Paul Holt did in January. There were, however, actively calling Collared and Mountain Scops Owls (*Otus lettia* and *spilocephalus*), and Asian Barred and Collared Pygmy Owlets (*Glaucidium cuculoides* and *brodiei*) around the accommodation.

Additionally, hospital visits in Sanya and Haikou, and the transits to these cities, produced a number of Chinese Pond-Herons (*Ardeola bacchus*), Eastern Cattle Egrets (*Bubulcus coromandus*), Black-winged Kites (*Elanus caeruleus*), Rock Doves (*Columba livia*), Spotted and Eastern Turtle Doves (*Streptopelia chinensis* and *orientalis*), Ashy Wood-Swallows (*Artamus fuscus*), Long-tailed Shrikes (*Lanius schach*), Tree Sparrows (*Passer montanus*), a White-rumped Munia (*Lonchura striata*), Chinese Bulbuls (*Pycnonotus sinensis*), Common and Crested Mynahs (*Acridotheres tristis* and *crisatellus*) and Red-billed Starlings (*Sturnus sericeus*). The last species was seen from the train between Haikou and Sanya (roosting party of 40), from the taxi from Tianchi Resort to Sanya (a single bird) and again from the Sanya – Haikou train (a single bird).

My main two misses, excluding the mega-rarities, were White-winged Magpie (*Urocissa whiteheadi*) and Collared Crow (*Corvus torquatus*). One crow was seen from the bullet train in the first evening, flying over rice fields, but it was already too dark to identify it. The magpie could be seen in Vietnam, which I have not visited yet, and the crow in mainland China. Birdwise, it was a successful visit, seeing the Hainan Peacock-Pheasant alone being worth the effort.

...AND MAMMALS

The area has a relatively good variety of mammals. In the three days, I recorded the following species: Pacific Rat (the one in my bed and eating my bananas), Lesser Marmoset-Rat (one in low streamside bamboo at night, in bright car lights), Rhesus Macaque (5), Pallas's Squirrel (a few), Red-hipped Squirrel (a few) and Maritime Striped Squirrel (common). Some unidentified bats were also present at Tianchi Resort.

AT THE END OF THE DAY

Thanks to Paul Holt and Wang Qinguy, visiting this key site in Hainan has become feasible for globetrotting birders. I hope my report will further encourage and prepare others for doing the same, without injuring themselves the way I did. At the moment in January 2013, my leg is almost as good as it used to be, after six months of recovery and a recent birding trip to three islands in the Caribbean.



Fig. 10. My injured leg, already with some bacterial infection. Beware the slippery steps!



Fig. 11. Ornamental cars at Eadry Royal Gardens, only for the show. D6666 = 'damn good luck'?!