



BIRD TOURISM REPORTS 8/2014

BALANG SHAN & EMEI SHAN, SICHUAN, CHINA, IN JULY 2014

Petri Hottola (phottola@gmail.com)



Fig. 1. A male **Grandala** at its scree breeding territory, Balang Shan Pass, Sichuan.

Between 1st and 7th July, 2014, I finally had a chance to visit Sichuan, albeit briefly, with a focus on two sites: Balang Shan (2.000-4.600 m) and Emei Shan (1.000-3.100m). The short duration of the stay was intentional. It was a part of a private RTW tour designed to cross the 7.000 species limit, and I needed to get as many new species as fast as possible during six selected stopovers across the globe: Japan, the Philippines, China, the Solomon Islands, the USA and Peru. Moreover, Sichuan is a vast region with high degree of diversity, a major destination for a birdwatching traveler. At the same time, the logistics of a visit remain somewhat complicated because of a shortage of reliable information in regard to services, and problems in communication. The first visit therefore was a reconnaissance one, a preliminary taste of conditions in the field in Sichuan. A second visit should follow, as soon as possible.

I flew in with Cathay Pacific from Manila to Hong Kong and Dragonair to Chengdu, arriving 8 minutes late. The immigration and customs procedures were well organized and did not involve much waiting. The departure was on Dragonair to Hong Kong and on Fiji Airways to Nadi and Honiara, with equally efficient formalities both in Chengdu and Hong Kong. The airports of China clearly are above the global average. As experienced flight travelers know, Cathay Pacific currently ranks among the top airlines in the world, with

excellent services. Dragonair, their regional subsidiary, is also well recommended, unlike Fiji Airways, which belongs to a completely different category of hit or miss services, to say the very least.

Balang Shan was selected as a birdwatching location because of a combination of excellent variety of high altitude bird species and peaceful environment, without the disturbance and complicated access characteristic of the other site, Emei Shan. Emei Shan, a Unesco World Heritage Site with its monasteries and the massive Buddhist Samantabhadra statue at the Golden Summit, is a very popular destination with domestic visitors. Emei Shan also has problem monkeys, entrance procedures and restrictions, not to mention relatively difficult access to forests on its steep slopes, which need to be explored by foot. Not as good for birds as it used to be, the tourist mountain nevertheless has a relatively extensive assortment of species not on a world list of a person who has never been to Sichuan. Additionally, the local services make it possible to do birding independently.



Fig. 2. The bodhisattva statue towers high over the forest at the Golden Summit, Emei Shan.

ACCOMMODATION, TRANSPORTATION & ACCESS

All in all, preparations for the visit were surprisingly complicated. Things keep on changing. Therefore, Internet information was discovered to be predominantly outdated, too general or leading to situations where one pays for services which do not really meet one's needs. As an example, it took me a while to understand that most of the accommodation in Wolong, between Chengdu and Balang Shan, had been destroyed by earthquakes and floods years ago. The Wolong Hotel may still exist in the Internet but in reality, it is a heap of rubble. On the other hand, the information on birds, provided by Björn Anderson for example, tended to remain valid.

Overall, reserving accommodation in Sichuan was a challenge. One cannot just arrive in China and start looking for hotels. In Finland, in order to apply for a Chinese visa, one needs to have a pre-booked room for each night. In other words, Internet reservations need to be made. In regard to Wolong, the one guesthouse still in existence had however no contact information in the Internet, not even a name. Instead, I tentatively reserved a room in Chengdu and continued searching for information. Later on, situations in the field dictated my choices, and Rilong replaced Wolong (hotel details under Balang Shan).

At Emei Shan, Baoguo, Teddy Bear Hotel had comprehensive Internet presence and promptly replied my emails in English, unlike the hotels on top of the mountain. I also tried to reserve one night at the Golden Summit with Ctrip, the Chinese reservation platform, but failed. Irritatingly, the hotel had plenty of vacant rooms but reservations could not be processed because the prices on the Ctrip system were outdated. Ctrip was informative about the problem and canceled the process. I still do not, however, understand why a difference of few yuans became such an obstacle.

In the end, I chose to stay all my three Emei nights at Teddy Bear (€22 per night), a convenient choice with comfortable rooms, efficient services and good food for right price, together with management fluent in English and capable of meeting one's individual needs. In Chengdu, I stayed one night at Chengdu Chuangang International Hotel (€32), close to the airport. It was a slightly worn out business hotel without English speakers ('International') but peaceful rooms and an airport shuttle. The shuttle took 10 minutes to the terminal. After Japan, the fact that the bus driver did not help with bags felt strange! The Internet reservations were made by Agoda, the Thai reservation platform perhaps best in its field in Asia.



Fig. 3. Our hotel in Rilong, Min Lang Shan Zhuang, with its ornamental Tibetan façade, and the Suzuki Jimny, ideal for two persons. The large door leads to the restaurant/reception.

Both Wolong and Balang Shan may be difficult to visit in July, because of the regularity of natural calamities (floods, earthquakes) and the consequently frequent closure of mountain roads (more below, under Balang Shan). Moreover, even if the roads were drivable, how should one organize transportation? A private car is required if one desires to see the various target species along the route. Earlier, before the major earthquakes, the Wolong Hotel could send a taxi to pick one up in Chengdu and local taxis were also available for visiting Balang Shan. Today, there is nobody to contact in Wolong. Chengdul travel agencies are not necessarily the answer either, considering the number of fraudulent operations, as reported by customers from Hong Kong (cf. the Internet). One needs to know who can be trusted. I had some contacts in Chengdu, and eventually a solution was discovered.

In regard to transportation, the first options contacted in April declined the idea of driving to Wolong. Everything started to clear up after contacting Sid Francis at BirdForum (see China Forum). He organized a 4x4 (Suzuki Jimny) and a driver for me. The driver was his brother-in-law Zeng Zhang, who also knew sites for several target species and had the stamina to carry on from sunrise to sunset, having been working in the field for some time. Moreover, Zhang spoke English, which allowed us to communicate in a language to some degree familiar to both of us. Sid also provided detailed information on the distribution of my 'shopping list' species. Personally, I prefer not have a professional bird guide with me. Discovering the birds by oneself is more rewarding. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the information Sid and Zhang had on the locations, and their knowledge on organizing the daily details of the journey. The arrangement was a necessary compromise in a situation where I could not rent a car and drive by myself.



Fig. 4. Rain in Baoguo. It is time to leave my temporary home there, Teddy Bear, and return to Chengdu.

With reference to food, some provisions were bought at a petrol station on the way to Balang Shan, and at the hotel in Rilong, in addition to dinners at the latter place and some snacks imported from Japan and Finland. Surprisingly, Zhang liked Finnish salted licorice (salmiak), the Black Drops I had with me! More snacks were bought at Teddy Bear, at shops in Baoguo and along the trails of Emei Shan, in addition to dinners at Teddy Bear. In both hotels, the tasty servings were so large that I ate the second half the next day, as a take away brunch. Cold banana pancakes taste great! I had brought a lunchbox with me and carefully washed it after each use. The Sichuan food has a reputation of being hot and spicy but a lover of Thai food may find the seasoning relatively mild. I regularly preferred to add some chili and other spices to create the desired effect. These were readily available at meals.

BALANG SHAN

All in all, the days at Balang Shan cost around RMB1.000 (€120) per day, including transportation, accommodations (2 persons), dinners (2 persons), road tolls and fuel. The share of transportation services was RMB700 per day, excluding the two last items on the list.

We had originally planned to drive to Wolong and visit Balang Shan, and possibly Wuyipeng, from there. Nevertheless, Zhang and Sid had bad news for me on arrival in Chengdu. Three days earlier, the Wolong floods had occurred once again, killing people and cutting the road for the time being. After a short negotiation, a 'back door route' was chosen, a seven-to-eight-hour drive via Ya'an and Lushan to Rilong (Rilongzhen) on the Tibetan side of Balang Shan, instead of the anticipated four-hour direct drive. We would stay in a hotel in Rilong, Min Lang Shan Zhuang (tel. 13990400525), a pleasant place to stay and have dinners. The location was as follows: Drive through Rilong town. Just before the bridge across a river, turn up left on Changpinggou Lvyou Road, towards a lama temple. After 200 m, veer left and up, arriving in front of the hotel. This is the Chang Pin Village section of Rilong. For RMB80 to 120 (around €13), depending on the season and bargaining skills, the hotel is a good deal for a comfortable double.



Fig. 5. Red swastikas, auspicious symbols also in the Nordic traditions, adorn the houses of Tibetan Buddhists in Rilong.

For Balang Shan, staying in Rilong was a better arrangement than Wolong would have been, with the exception of the very long drive between Chengdu and Rilong. In the morning, the pass could be reached in 30 minutes. Wuyipeng, on the other hand, had to be skipped. There was the driving there and back, and the long steep trail, all in all too time-consuming to be worth one's while. Well, I do not know if the site was even accessible in July 2014... What is more, most of the same species could be seen at the Bei Mu Ping section of Balang Shan, on the lower eastern slopes of the pass.

As a result of the extra driving time, I had only one and half days at this wonderful Eastern Himalaya site, and some time along the western access road via Jijindang. We started at 4.30 and 5.00, sunrise being at 5.30, and returned late in the afternoon on the first day, and early in the afternoon on the second. Fortunately, the weather remained fine during the visit. It had been raining for a week but the rain stopped the day we arrived and started again after our departure. In the beginning, water levels were still alarmingly rising in rivers along the route, but they began to sink soon afterwards. There was hardly any fog at the Balang Shan Pass. Because of the problems below Wolong, the road did not have much traffic. We were, however, not the only birdwatchers there. A couple from Beijing was photographing the birds.

The area was constituted by several distinctively different habitats with their respective birds, mammals and plants. The pass itself, at 4.600 meters, was relatively barren with rocky ground, but with numerous colorful flowers. On the eastern side, the grassy slopes remained open till 3.300 m (KM92) above the sea level, where coniferous forest existed. Lower down, at Bei Mu Ping and down to 2.000 m, the forests became more mixed, with increasingly thick beds of bamboo in the undergrowth. On the western side, the organization of the habitats was relatively similar, with drier environment and somewhat different bird species. Already on our way towards Rilong, some open high ground (around 3.500 m) needed to be passed, before and after Jijindang. In addition to hundreds and hundreds of yaks, some very nice birds were recorded at this section of the road.



Fig. 6. Balang Shan, after a week of rain. The Four Maidens (Mt. Siguniang) peak stands in the horizon. This is the prime habitat for **Snow Partridges**, **Tibetan Snowcocks** and **Grandalas**, among other high altitude bird species. The **Bharals** were seen on the left-hand ridge.

For Balang Shan, be sure to bring a warm cap and gloves also for a summer visit. At the high altitude, snow is not far away and mornings tend to be cold. Altitude sickness is a distinct possibility there, too. For some reason, I myself felt nothing despite the relatively rapid ascend from 500 (Chengdu) to 3.000 m (Rilong) to 4.600 meters (Balang Shan Pass). Everything was pretty normal, with neither fatigue nor headache. On the other hand, I kept on drinking fluids throughout the day. Otherwise, it would have been easy to develop dehydration in the high altitude. If altitude sickness is a problem for you, try to stay in Wolong (2.000 m).

The main problem during our visit was the existence of a road gang camp by a tunnel right above The Spot for Pheasants, the famous KM92 location which has had **Chinese Monals**, **White Eared-Pheasants** and **Verreaux's Monal Partridges**. Unfortunately, the men of the camp had been active in trapping 'bush meat' on the very slope favored by the pheasants and may even have killed some of them. In any case, they had scared the birds away. We saw them to carry a **Himalayan Marmot** to the camp, for a large cooking pot with vegetables. Overall, the situation made success with pheasants and partridges next to impossible.

A surprising variety of mammals were, however, seen at Balang Shan, considering the short duration of the visit. **Domestic Yaks** were plentiful on the way there. On the western slope, a female **Chinese Goral** with a calf was observed at a close distance. Around the pass, a live **Himalayan Marmot** and a female **Bharal (Himalayan Blue Sheep)** with a young one were spotted. An **Hog Badger** trotted across a high grassy slope at KM92, at an altitude of 4.000 m! The three squirrels around 3.500 m altitude, both slopes, were tentatively identified as **Pere David's Rock Squirrels**.



Fig. 7. Alpine flowers were in full bloom around Jiajindang, to the delight of a male **Kessler's Thrush**.

In regard to birds, the following species were observed:

Snow Partridge: One male was actively calling on a rock at the highest point (the pass). Great scope views!

Tibetan Snowcock: Dozens were heard at the pass and on the rocky slopes west of it, with great views of a courting couple and a party of three in flight.

Temminck's Tragopan: A male was calling at BMP (Bei Mu Ping), but even though interested in my recordings, it decided to stay in the bamboo, despite three attempts at the site.

Chinese Monal: Two individuals were heard calling just before sunrise at the Wood Snipe area. Extensive scanning of slopes around KM92 was not productive (cf. the disturbance).

White-eared Pheasant: On the second day, one was heard calling down in the valley, behind the conifers of Km92. It was a relief to know that not all of them had been killed.

Common Pheasant: One male crossed the road at Jiajindang, late in the afternoon.

Common Hoopoe: Two birds; an altitude of 3.500 m appeared surprisingly high for this species.

Common Cuckoo: Common throughout.

Large Hawk-Cuckoo: One calling bird.

Lesser Cuckoo: Single bird on top of a pole, lower W-slope.

Himalayan Swiftlet: A few birds were seen on the way down from Rilong.

Common Swift: A single bird, together with the following species.

Salim Ali's Swift: >20 recorded, especially W of Rilong.

Snow Pigeon: Pretty and conspicuous around KM92 (a total of 8 birds). Another dream Himalayan species...

Wood Snipe: Random stops on grassy slopes above KM92 readily produced two displaying birds right by the road. The snipes were very active at sunrise after a week of constant rain.

Himalayan Griffon: One adult was resident at KM92, and perhaps accustomed to eat the 'bush meat' offal. Another adult was seen further east along the road.

Himalayan Buzzard: Two were recorded, soaring low along the road, on the eastern slope.

Eurasian Sparrowhawk: One hunting adult on the eastern slope.

Tibetan Lark: One bird was unexpectedly seen standing on a roadside mound of earth, by a small bog at Jiajindang.

White Wagtail: Common, especially on the way to Rilong.

Grey Wagtail: One female close to Jiajindang.

Rosy Pipit: Very common on open slopes, especially in the west.

Olive-backed Pipit: A few individuals, not necessarily close in the forest.

Alpine Accentor: A total of eight birds were seen on both sides of the Balang Shan pass, above 4.400 m.

Chestnut Thrush: The most common thrush at Balang Shan (>40 recorded).

Kessler's Thrush: Surprisingly difficult to see; one far away male at KM92, another very close one higher up on the eastern slope, and a pair at Jiajindang. One of my main target species in Sichuan!

Himalayan Rubythroat: Two males were singing next to one another in the mid section of the western slope, in low scrub.

Firethroat: One male at a BMP roadside bamboo thicket, agitated by my mp3 recording.

White-capped Redstart: Common, especially along rivers and streams.

Blue-fronted Redstart: One of the most common passerines on the open sections of the western slope, with many young ones.

Black Redstart: One male at Jiajindang.

White-throated Redstart: We wasted a lot of time in search of this species in a wrong area, too high on the western slope. One male was finally seen much lower down, in a forested section close to Rilong, next to the Mt. Siguniang (Four Maidens) viewpoint. Another one was recorded at Jiajindang.

Daurian Redstart: One male was singing on a television antenna next to our hotel in Rilong.

Himalayan Bluetail: Two or three territories at the BMP section.

Eurasian Crag Martin: Two pairs at a craggy section of the road to Rilong.

Chinese Wren-Babbler: Three territories in roadside brush, lower eastern slope.

Claudia's Leaf Warbler: Common on the lower E slopes, including a number of young birds.

Greenish Warbler: Common in E-slope brush and forest edge.

Alpine Leaf Warbler: Three around Km92, in alpine willows.

Chinese Leaf Warbler: One singing male at upper BMP probably was a lucky find, even though the altitude and habitat were right for the species.

Grey-backed Shrike: Three were seen around 2.500-3.000 altitudinal zone.

Grey-sided Bush Warbler: Single bird in middle W-slope brush.

Elliot's Laughingthrush: The common laughingthrush of the lower eastern slope. Frequently seen.

Giant Laughingthrush: Two individuals were encountered at the BMP bamboo thickets.

Chinese Babax: One skulking bird was briefly observed by some farmhouses at BMP.

Great Parrotbill: Not seen but heard once, after playing a mp3 at 2.000+ m, on the lower eastern slope.

Grandala: Common (>40) breeder at the high pass, above 4.400 m. Another dream species...

Brown Dipper: Single bird was seen on the way up to Rilong.

Eurasian Wren: One male singing on top of a fir, close to Rilong.

Green-backed Tit: A few in lower altitude forests.

Sichuan Tit: One at the conifers of KM92. Check the current taxonomy of *weigoldicus*, not **Songar Tit** anymore.

Plain Mountain Finch: Very common (>100) around the pass, above 4.000 m.

Brand't Mountain Finch: Common around the pass, above 4.300 m.

Three-banded Rosefinch: One male was seen sitting in a fir, close to the Mt. Siguniang viewpoint, above Rilong. Quite a good luck to discover this and the following species in ten minutes!

Blanford's Rosefinch: One male on top of another conifer, at the same location as the previous species. The superficially similar *roseatus* **Common Rosefinch** also occurs in the area.

Chinese White-browed Rosefinch: One female was the only record of the species, at Jiajindang. Incredibly, not a single bird was seen at Balang Shan, despite much searching, possibly too high (?) on the upper western slope. No rosefinches were seen on the eastern slope.

Stresemann's (Pink-rumped) Rosefinch: A few on the W slope, lower down than the next species.

Red-faced Rosefinch: The common rosefinch of the Balang Shan pass, where only seen above 4.550 m.

Red-billed Chough: A party of four at the pass.

Alpine Chough: A single bird was flying high above a ridge at the Balang Shan pass.

Large-billed Crow: Common, but not numerous.



Fig. 8. Sometimes, bright red may become a camouflage: A **Red-faced Rosefinch** at the Balang Shan Pass.

As already pointed out, the visit was too short to locate all the available target species. The completely missed (not seen or heard) species included:

Blood Pheasant: Despite two searches at riverside western slope, we failed.

Golden Pheasant: The stakeout at BMP was not productive this time. One needs more time or trail access to the dense habitat.

White-browed Tit-Warbler: We did not have enough time for the conifers close to Rilong.

On the way between Rilong and Emei City, the following species were added to the trip list: **Eastern Cattle Egret, (Feral) Rock Pigeon, Spotted Dove, Barn Swallow, Long-tailed Shrike, Tiger Shrike, Tree Sparrow** and **Red-billed Blue Magpie**. The best bird was, however, a singing **Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler**, during a roadside stop some distance towards Lushan.



Fig. 9. Traffic was occasionally congested in small towns on the way to Ya'an. In most cases, the problems were caused by various construction projects, apparently to repair flood damage. Chinese cars dominated the scene, with interesting variety of brands and models for a car-spotter.



EMEI SHAN



Fig. 10. The endemic **Elliot's Laughingthrush**, common both in Balang Shan and Emei Shan, above 2.000 m.

On the Balang Shan return drive, Zhang took me to Emei City and Baoguo, to the Teddy Bear Hotel. For Emei Shan, I had two-and-half days, and an afternoon transit to Chengdu. The weather remained calm, sunny and dry for most of the stay, with a foggy (late) afternoon on the second day. Internet trip reports often complain about the Emei weather, but I had nothing to complain about. Thanks to the visit in Balang Shan, I was also sufficiently prepared for low temperatures on top of the mountain. Even in July, it could be only +8C on top of the Golden Summit, in comparison to +15C at Leidongping and +30C at Baoguo.

The Emei Shan days cost me around RMB800 – 1.000 (€96-120) per day – accommodation, transportation, cableway fees, entrance fees, meals and snacks included. As has been pointed out in earlier reports, food and drinks are readily available along the Emei Shan trails, to complement the snacks one has carried in. It is, however, advisable to hide everything well, because of marauding macaques (more will follow). The trick is to carry the food in pockets, in a number of small plastic bags for example, to avoid conspicuous bulges. The macaques have sharp eyes and plenty of experience in robbing the visitors.

In Baoguo, private lifts to Emei Shan were organized for each morning. Taxis are not allowed on the mountain and buses left too late. By bus, I would have arrived in Leidongping, the top station, around 10.30. With the special arrangement, I arrived before 7.00. Needless to say, the three and half hours made a huge

difference, even though 6.00 would have been ideal. Nevertheless, as already explained, it had not been possible to book a room in any of the mountain-top hotels. Hopefully, they will improve their communication with Ctrip in the future, to enable international reservations.

It was important to arrive at the ticket gates early, at least 30 minutes before they opened. In the early morning, it is better to have 10 rather than 100 cars before you. Walk to the ticket sales, to the right of the gate, and buy your ticket there, before returning to the vehicle. Tell them at once how many days you need on the ticket to avoid multiple visits at the ticket counter. On the positive side, the entrance fees had recently been lowered, after public complaints. One day was RMB90. The sales opened around 6.30 and it took almost half-an-hour to get there by a sedan, and another 15+ minutes to Leidongping (2.300 m), a large trailhead parking lot surrounded by guesthouses, restaurants and shops, and a temple.

In the afternoons, I took one of the very frequent buses back to Baoguo (RMB50=€6), in both cases around 16.00. The departures occurred as soon as every seat was occupied. The last departure of the day would have been at 18.00, at Leidongping. The bus took about 1 h 20 minutes downhill, or almost two hours on a weekend day, when there was more traffic and an accident. There was a short stop half way down the mountain, with a possibility to visit a toilet. Driving up, the transit would have taken more than two hours. In the end of the bus route, the Baoguo bus station was conveniently located next to Teddy Bear, less than 100 m uphill along the main street.

From Emei City to Chengdu, a taxi was organized for the 130 km ride, for RMB400 (€49), including road tolls. The recently finished new toll roads, in excellent condition and even faster than the older ones, helped in transitions, especially from Ya'an to Emei.



Fig. 11. Late visitors at the Jieyin Palace cableway ticket sales. The late afternoon fog is already setting in.

On top of the Emei Shan mountain, two areas were visited. On the first day, I took the trail towards Elephant Pool Monastery (Xixiangshi), spending a lot of time on the first two kilometers or so, and frequently playing mp3 recordings. I prefer to go slowly and focus on birds. Hiking long distances, the other option, does not necessarily leave enough time for observations. Much time was also spent giving way to the other people, especially during a mid-morning rush. The largest group encountered had more than 100 students! Unfortunately, 10% of them stopped to see what I was looking for and a few asked questions...

Before the EP Trail, a short walk on the Summit Trail had been aborted because of the crowd, too many people on the narrow track. In the frantic rush, I got pushed a few times. As a rule, the domestic visitors were nevertheless quite polite towards us foreigners. On the EP Trail, I walked from the Leidongping Temple (at the entrance of the parking area; large mixed party of birds behind the temple) to the first two stalls with a flowering tree (**Gould's Sunbirds**), to the next stalls by an open ridge (one-legged **Brown-flanked Bush Warbler**), the very long steps down to a good area of low bamboo with trees (at about 2.000 m altitude; **Chestnut-crowned Tesia**), and returned the same way. It was interesting to observe a number of porters to carry heavy loads of goods downhill to a monastery. Hard work, hard indeed.

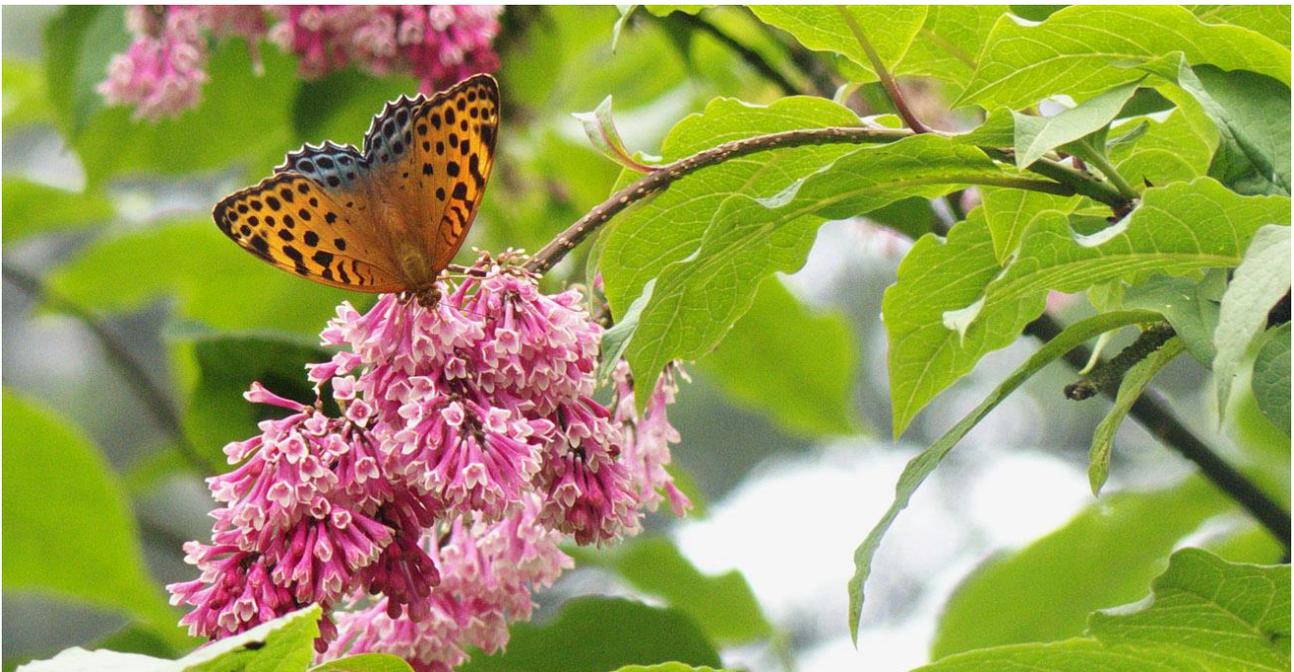


Fig. 12. A **Himalayan Fritillary**, at first food stalls of the Elephant Pool (Xixiangshi) Trail.

Walking the steep stairs was strenuous even without baggage. Going down, I met two guys who had already climbed two days from Baoguo to get there. Both of them readily admitted that they had underestimated the challenge. The maps are not on a scale and easily deceive an ambitious hiker. I myself had brought a pair of Ice Bug shoes with me and this proved to be a great advantage both at Balang Shan and on the Emei Mountain. With their spikes, the shoes helped in keeping balance on tarmac, rocks and wooden stairs, which occasionally had enough water on them to be slippery. Moreover, I had a trekking pole for additional security, to avoid a slip such as the one which hospitalized me in Hainan two years ago. Climbing slippery stairs on mountain slopes appears to be characteristic of Chinese nature reserves. The trails tend to be vertical, rather than level.

On the second visit, I walked the Summit Trail from Leidongping (about 2.300 m) to Jieyin Palace cableway station (2.450 m), again a lot of steps. The 5 minute ride in a cable car was RMB120 (€15) return. After arriving at the Golden Summit (Jinding) station (3.000 m) at 8.00, the main route was aborted at once, following a parallel narrow path on the right (not the major trail down to the right, to the hotels), through the backyards of a row of buildings. It was a short but productive walk, with long stops for observations. Not sure how to proceed at the end of the path, I first climbed up to the bodhisattva statue platform to ask about the monorail. After advice, I returned down, adding another 500 steps to my score.

At the bottom of the already deteriorating stairs, the closed monorail station was discovered together with the abandoned monorail itself. In order to go there, one had to walk around the station building, through some semiprivate areas occupied by construction workers, who however did not seem to mind. Even though it was potentially risky because of macaques, I followed the monorail path for about 200 meters, till the first large grassy opening on the left, in a curve, and observed the area, first from the top of a mound of gravel. On the way there, a man told me to 'go back home'. With his limited English, he was trying to warn me against taking the long hike to Wanfo Peak. I explained him that I am not going far and will soon return, and continued. Some monks walked on the rail itself, greeting me on their way to Jinding.

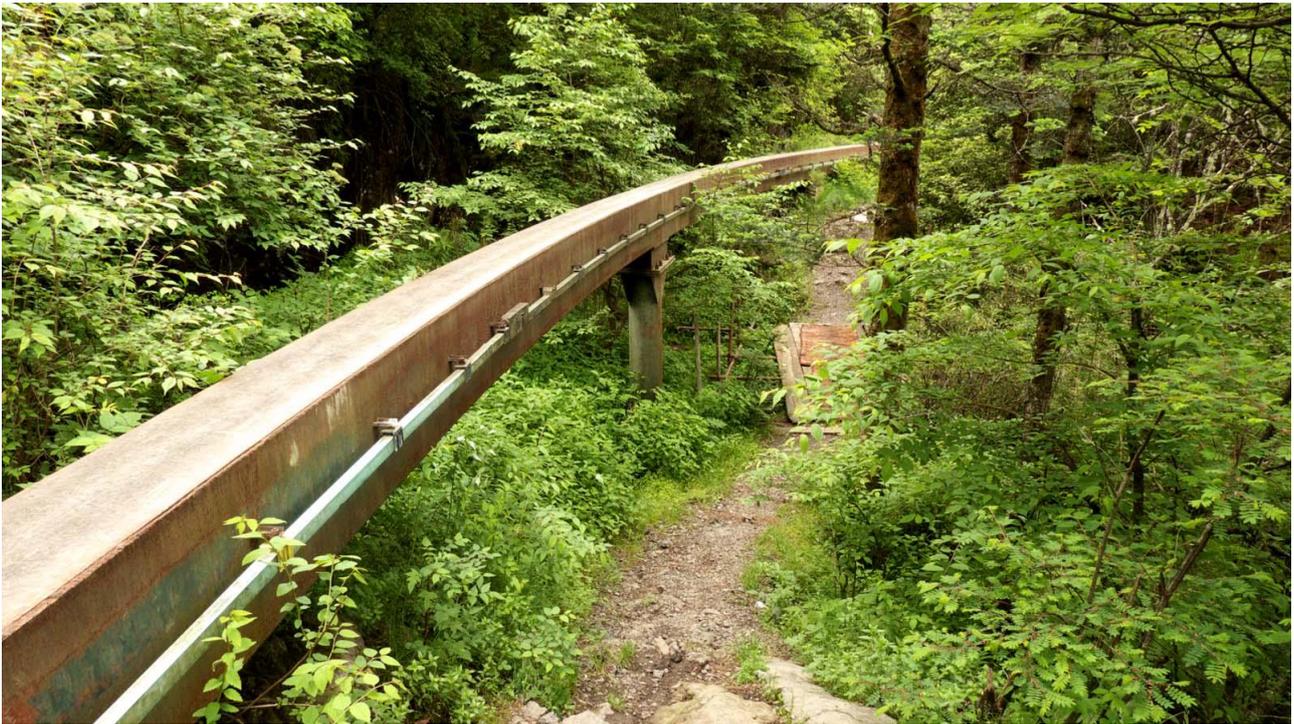


Fig. 13. The closed monorail and the path which followed it, a great access to undisturbed birding.

Afterwards, I walked back along the backyard path and beyond, taking other paths to the left just before the Jinding Peak cableway station, the entrance to the Golden Summit. These lead to some close-by buildings, behind which a few birds were observed, and to the Golden Summit rubbish dump, a hotel backyard site frequently mentioned in trip reports. Well, in the back of most buildings there had been a sort of continuous rubbish dump, mostly demolition and construction waste... As soon as afternoon fog started to hinder observations, I took the cableway down, thereafter walking down to Leidongping on the tarmac access road, gated and with privileged parking access for quite a few cars. There were not many people on the road, unlike on the hiking trail.



Fig. 14. A perky **Yellow-bellied Bush Warbler** at Monorail Meadow, Golden Summit, Emei Shan.

Lower down, on the third day, I visited the Jin Dynasty Wannian Temple area, between 1.000 and 1.500 m above the sea level (+26C). Initially, there was some delay at the Wannian cableway station, because they started only at 7.00, and it was unclear where to buy the tickets. The cableway station ticket counter was closed. The ticket sales, both for the cableway ride (RMB110 return, €13.50; going up is RMB65 and down RMB45) and the entrance, were in a separate small building in the start of a Wannian Temple hiking trail. The habitats along the steep trail looked good, but it was a too long and a too crowded walk for my already strained legs and nerves. I therefore preferred the cable car.



Fig. 15. The Wannian cableway, with its German six-seater cars.

Both here and at the Golden Summit, the female cableway officers were exceptionally nice and helpful. At the top cableway station, the temple fortunately was much closer (50 m) than the maps had indicated. Following its outer wall, I passed the temple, nervously looking for macaques which frequently ambush people there (signposted). Fortunately, none were around. After a short walk to some food & drinks stalls, guarded by dogs and therefore monkey-free, an increasingly steep climb followed, steep enough to discourage me after the first kilometer. In this section to Xixian and beyond, there is a one kilometer vertical climb without handrails. With tired feet one could easily break a leg, or a neck.

There were a few people around, mostly polite with the exception of some annoying youngsters with stereos, but also a number of good birds. Once again, I meticulously checked each section of the trail, waiting, listening and playing the mp3 recordings. I have no idea where the Wannian Pipeline Trail (cf. the Internet trip reports) was supposed to be but did not really mind, being busy enough with the birds seen along the main trail. Some observations were also made right below the temple but there were simply too many people there. After a short while, I took the cableway down. The Wannian bus station was located some 100 m down the road, below the cableway station. The return bus to Baoguo was RMB20 (€2.50).

Unlike at Balang Shan, there were not many mammals in Emei Shan, excluding the human beings. Only once I saw a squirrel, possibly another **Pére David's Rock Squirrel**, on the Summit Trail. The most notable exception were the **Tibetan Macaques** which, on the other hand, are a real problem for visitors, and especially for those who walk solo. Imagine a large, powerful dog with more than average intelligence, large jaws, a habit to move around in packs to stalk people, and an ability to jump from a tree... Some are really menacing and surprisingly large, up to 45 kg because of their rich diet. A few will attack, approaching behind one's back, grabbing a leg and threatening to bite unless one gives them food at once. Being alert for these fearful creatures, I managed to avoid them, except once.

At the very end/start of the Elephant Pool Trail (EP Trail), about 15 macaques were waiting for people in the first afternoon, and four of them came onto me. Each time, I managed to stop the monkey, by making a threatening grunt, pushing the sharp end of my trekking pole right onto its face and staring directly to its eyes, holding my ground until each of them had lost their face. Only then I advanced, never turning my back to the macaques after I had learned their stealthy habits.

Nevertheless, it was stressful to be constantly on guard. A monkey bite can be serious business and according to the locals, they have bitten numerous visitors. Afterwards, I started to carry some sizable rocks with me, in addition to the big stick. Between the Jinding Peak cableway station and Leidongping bus station, one way to try to minimize the risk is to walk on the above-mentioned tarmac road instead of the crowded forest trail. The former is also likely to be more peaceful for bird observations.

It would not be too difficult to teach the monkeys some manners, but for some reasons it is not done. Instead, some irresponsible visitors feed them. Personally, I would be ready to let them rob some super hot sandwiches from the visitors, loaded with the hottest variety of chili and perhaps also with some potent laxative, until the culture of robbery would cease. Pepper sprays and electric shock devices would also be a way to go, instead of the most obvious choice, stoning and beating with sticks, which may injure the animals. The macaques have every right to be there on the mountain, but they should respect the people more, for the benefit of both.



Fig. 16. An attempt to make rebrand a menace; one of the many signs with cute and friendly little monkeys. Emei Shan is well-known for its macaques.



Fig. 17. A more realistic sign at the Wannian cableway station, depicting the **Tibetan Macaques**. Would you like to walk this way, meeting the gang ready to jump on you?

What did I see in such a short time? Quite a lot, considering the conditions:



Fig. 18. A one-legged **Brown-flanked Bush Warbler**, well adapted to its handicap.

Chinese Bamboo-Partridge: One calling above the Wannian Temple.

Black Baza: A displaying pair close to the Wannian Temple.

Asian Barred Owlet: One perched bird was seen in the forest above the Wannian Temple.

Large Hawk-Cuckoo: One or two birds were heard on each day.

Crimson-breasted Woodpecker: One at the bottom of the EP Trail long & steep descent. Very close views.

Grey Wagtail: Three at Leidongping.

Chinese Thrush: One was singing in a pine between Jinding Palace and Leidongping, not far from the latter.

Golden Bush Robin: One territorial male was located on the EP Trail.

White-browed Bush Robin: One immature male at the Golden Summit, behind the buildings.

Daurian Redstart: One male was singing on top of a hotel at the Golden Summit.

Rufous-breasted Accentor: Six individuals at the Golden Summit, especially around the rubbish dump.

Fujian Niltava: One above the Wannian Temple.

Chinese Blue Flycatcher: One above the Wannian Temple.

Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler: One territorial male at the Monorail Meadow, Golden Summit.

Brown-flanked Bush Warbler: Common along the EP Trail and around the Golden Summit.

Yellow-bellied Bush Warbler: Three at the Summit Monorail Meadow.

Spotted Bush Warbler: Did not respond to my recording but nevertheless arrived to investigate it at the Summit Monorail Meadow.

Russet Bush Warbler: One actively singing male at the far end of the Summit Monorail Meadow.

Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler: Seen (1) at the Summit Monorail Meadow, the haven of bush warblers! I explored the site for almost two hours.

Chestnut-headed Tesia: One territorial male in bamboo at the bottom of the EP Trail.

Buff-barred Warbler: Fairly common along the upper EP Trail and very common at the Golden Summit (>50).

Claudia's Warbler: Common along the EP Trail, and relatively common also at the Golden Summit.

Sichuan Leaf Warbler: About 18 (singing) birds along the EP Trail, most of them close to Leidongping, and about 30 at the Golden Summit area.

Emei Leaf Warbler: One singing at the bottom of the long stairs at EP Trail, and another above the Wannian Temple, the only leaf warbler there! 1.500 – 2.000 m.

Kloss's Leaf Warbler: Single birds seen along the EP Trail and at the Golden Summit, simultaneously flicking their wings while foraging.

Buff-throated Warbler: Single bird at Summit Monorail Meadow.

Ashy-throated Warbler: One along the EP Trail.

Bianchi's Warbler: Common below Leidongping (EP Trail).

Omei Warbler: One singing male seen down the EP Trail. They apparently do not occur higher up. As soon as the species was located, I started to climb back to Leidongping.

Alström's Warbler: One singing bird above the Wannian Temple.

Gould's Sunbird: One pair at a flowering tree, by the first stalls of the EP Trail.

Hodgson's Treecreeper: A few in high altitude forests, around Leidongping.

Yellow-browed Tit: A party of eight at the bottom of the EP Trail.

Green-backed Tit: A few around Leidongping and the Golden Summit, and a single one above the Wannian Temple.

Rufous-vented Tit: Common and inquisitive at Golden Summit. The tits responded eagerly to recordings but my attempts for photography were each time disturbed by passing construction workers.

Coal Tit: At least five *aemodius* at the Golden Summit; easily overlooked among the previous species.

Yellow-bellied Tit: Common above the Wannian Temple, with many juveniles.

Black-throated Tit: A sizable party of 60 above the Wannian Temple, and another street-side party of 15 at Baoguo.

Black Bulbul: Single white-headed bird at the Wannian Temple.

Black-streaked Scimitar Babbler: One pair above the Wannian Temple.

Rufous-capped Babbler: One above the Wannian Temple.

Red-winged Laughingthrush: One skulking bird and another two heard along the EP Trail and above Leidongping.

Elliot's Laughingthrush: Very common between Golden Summit and Elephant Pool. Readily attracted to recordings. My xeno.canto mp3 recording was supposed to be *affinis*, but it proved to be *elliottii*!

Black-faced Laughingthrush: Two or three at the Golden Summit.

Chinese Hwamei: One close to Wannian Town.

Emei Liocichla: At least three individuals along the EP Trail and around Leidongping.

Red-billed Leiothrix: Common around Leidongping and above the Wannian Temple.

Eurasian Wren: One above the Wannian Temple.

Chinese Fulvetta: Rather common at the EP Trail, especially close to Leidongping.

Streak-throated Fulvetta: Common in the same area as the previous species.

Golden-fronted Fulvetta: This rare species was seen once. A single bird appeared in the presence of a large Fulvetta/Yuhina mixed party, which foraged low or were sunning themselves at the forest edge, below Leidongping, along the EP Trail. Slightly above the normal altitudinal range?

David's Fulvetta: About 12 above the Wannian Temple.

Dusky Fulvetta: Two *weigoldi* above the Wannian Temple.

White-collared Yuhina: Common between the Golden Summit and upper EP Trail; handsome and tame.

Stripe-throated Yuhina: Almost equally common as the preceding species along the EP Trail.

Black-chinned Yuhina: Relatively common around Leidongping (EP Trail) and above the Wannian Temple.

Striated Yuhina: Three birds above the Wannian Temple.

Grey-headed Bullfinch: One at Leidongping, start of the EP trail. Common at the Golden Summit.

Vinaceous Rosefinch: Two males and a female at the Golden Summit, behind and below the buildings.

Dark-rumped Rosefinch: One male at the same area as the preceding species.

Slaty Bunting: One female was seen at semi-open bamboo, right next to the EP trail, half-way down the long and steep steps.

White-winged Grosbeak: One fly-by over the stunted pine forest at the Summit Monorail Meadow.

Tree Sparrow: Two at Leidongping.

Crested Myna: Two in Baoguo.

Red-billed Blue Magpie: Common at lower altitudes, by the ticket gate and at the Wannian Temple in particular.

Large-billed Crow: Widespread, in small numbers.



Fig. 19. White-collared Yuhinas are curious birds, preferring vantage points such as this to observe their surroundings.



CONCLUSIONS

The short duration of the visit did no justice to either of the sites. Both of them would have required at least double the time I had for them. I was, however, lucky to have good weather throughout and therefore was able to produce a quite satisfactory trip list for a first time in Sichuan. I did largely fail with pheasants, which probably are easier earlier in the season, and with parrotbills, but was more successful with some other groups, such as leaf and bush warblers, and rosefinches. The missing species could be located at other sites, on my next visit there. Moreover, I doubt I would have been able to stand the crowds of Emei Shan for a full week. Being crowded in nature is a stressful situation.

Independent travel in China does not present too many on-site challenges. The preparations did, however, take some time. In retrospect, I should have prepared myself better for the trip. Much of the available time was, however, consumed by the difficulties in information gathering, in regard to access, accommodation and transportation. Based on my experiences, I would like to recommend the services of Sid and Zhang. It is probably best to contact them early, because certain seasons tend to be busy and one probably cannot always be accommodated in the schedule.

The floods aside, the first week of July was not a bad time to visit Balang Shan and Emei Shan. Late May or early June would probably be more productive for some species, but many birds were still territorial and active in July, too, and the numbers in the field had been augmented by juveniles. At the end of the day, you take what is available for you. Every season has its perks to be discovered.

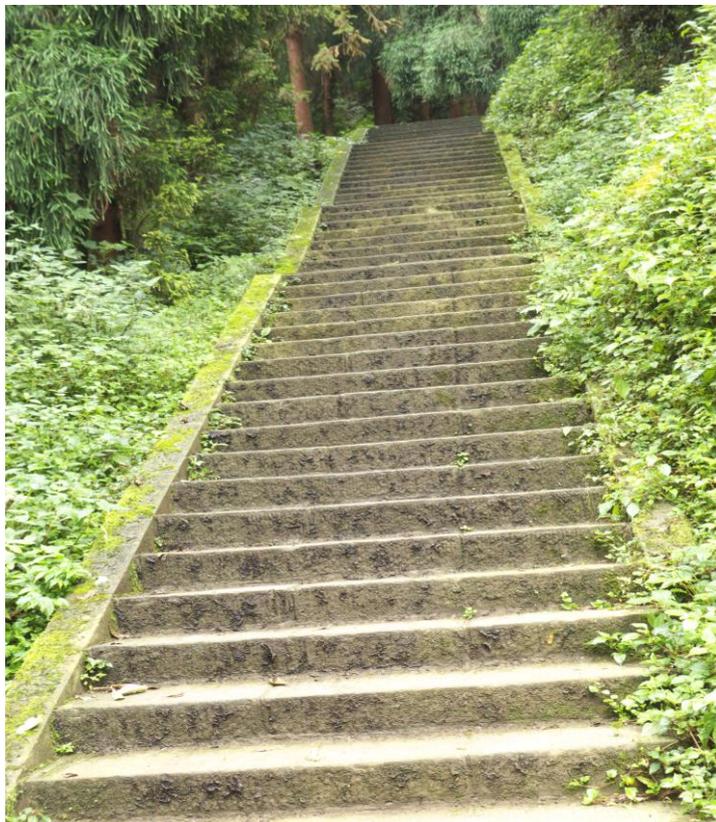


Fig. 20. A stairway to heaven? Endless stone steps lead the way up above the Wannian Temple.