



## N SICHUAN (E TIBET), JUNE 2015

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**Fig. 1.** A male (**Tibetan**) **Citrine Wagtail** guards its territory at 'Valley 2', along Hongyuan Road.

In June 2015, 15th to 20th, I started a seven week private birding RTW (OneWorld Global Explorer) in China (PRC), by visiting the northern tip of Sichuan (administratively) or Eastern Tibet (culturally and historically), the Ruergai (Zoige) region, which is dominated by vast high altitude grasslands, yaks and yurts, but also has some unique coniferous forest. Some sites within the neighboring Hongyuan and Songpan regions were explored, too.

On my target species list were the following 27 bird species: **Blue Eared Pheasant**, **Blood Pheasant**, **Tibetan Partridge**, **Chinese Grouse**, **Sichuan Wood Owl**, **Black-necked Crane**, **Ibisbill**, **Hodgson's Redstart**, **Robin Accentor**, **Maroon-backed Accentor**, **Plain Laughingthrush**, **Snowy-cheeked Laughingthrush**, **Tibetan Grey Shrike**, **Ground Tit**, **White-browed Tit**, **Przevalski's Nuthatch**, **Crested Tit-Warbler**, **White-browed Tit-Warbler**, **Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch**, **Streaked Rosefinch**, **Pinktailed Bunting**, **White-rumped Snowfinch**, **Rufous-necked Snowfinch**, **Tibetan Snowfinch**, **Tibetan Serin**, **Godlewski's Bunting** and **Sichuan Jay**.

For locating these species, I had searched the Internet and, importantly, was also backed up by information from Sid Francis (more below), including a GPS device with selected 'hot spots'. To return the favor, I could inform him about three discoveries on the way: **Sichuan Wood Owl** and **Maroon-backed Accentor** territories in Baxi, and breeding **Tibetan Grey Shrikes** in Waqixiang.

At the end of the trip, 23 target species out of the 27 had been recorded. The species I missed were **Tibetan Partridge**, **Ibisbill**, **Crested Tit-Warbler** and **Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch**. In the

limited time, and after some disturbing rain in Baxi, I was quite happy with the result. Some already familiar scarce birds had, after all, also been observed, such as **Three-banded Rosefinches**, not to mention the new mammals. All the birds observed en route will be mentioned in the following trip report, with some commentary on the missed ones, too.

## GETTING THERE

On the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, I arrived in Hong Kong at 7.25, according to the schedule, on a Finnair night flight from Helsinki across Soviet... Russia and China. Unfortunately, Air China had canceled my next leg (a Dragonair codeshare), an 11.15 flight to Chengdu, reserving me another seat on a 19.45 flight. Very bad customer service indeed, for somebody who had paid a full rate for the flights between Hong Kong and Chengdu, as there were other code share flights available, half full. Nevertheless, Air China expected me to wait 12.5 hours at the Hong Kong airport, after a 9 hour flight from Europe, and a sleepless night. That would leave me five hours to sleep before birding would start the next morning, with an initial 10 hour drive up north to Baxi.

To avoid this, I needed to be transferred to another plane. For HKD 600, €66, I got a seat on a 10.15 Dragonair flight to Chengdu. Cursing silently, because neither Air China nor Dragonair took responsibility for the matter, but blamed one another, I managed to get on board in time. Just when we were about to leave, a sensor problem surfaced, and the repairs took two hours. Ohh...the joys of international air traffic! Fortunately, I had good company on board, a man from Chengdu who worked in Hong Kong and was about to meet his family the first time in 2015. He had only seven days of vacation in a year, but claimed that it was not a big problem for the family.



**Fig. 2.** In Hong Kong, there were many zombies, who were visually attached to their guiding units.

In Chengdu, another problem surfaced after the easygoing customs and immigration. At tourist information, they helped me to call my hotel, for a shuttle. The number, even though correct, did however not respond. I had to look for a taxi. Before that, I visited a convenient grocery store at the arrivals. One of the young ladies there carried a shopping basket for me, when I searched for snacks and drinks. Exceptional service and very reasonable prices, too!

The first taxis in the line did not know the Chengdu Xiang Yu Hotel or its address, even though both were printed also in Chinese. Only the third driver was ready to explore the Shuangliu area, where the correct building was eventually located, after we had had a minor accident with another car. We were stopped at green lights, when a white sedan reversed on us. It had been parked along the street. The driver had apparently not checked his mirror, or bothered to look back. Fortunately, he hit an already damaged spot in the taxi. The ride was CNY16 (€2.20). I gave the man CNY20 (€2.80), but did resist telling him to use the extra €0.60 for the repair of his vehicle.

On the return drive to Chengdu, after the Ruoergai trip, my driver Zeng Zhang (more below) knew the way to the airport, and I knew the way from there to the hotel. The next day, I took the hotel shuttle to the airport and flew to Hong Kong. In Chengdu, Dragonair did compensate my earlier problems by an upgrade to business class, and also gave me boarding passes all the way to Denpasar, Bali, despite the fact that the Cathay Pacific Bali flight would depart twenty hours later. Actually, a bit more than that, because also that plane had a technical problem at its gate, a problem which delayed us by an additional hour.

## **ROAD TRANSPORTATION AND ROUTE**

Just like for my first visit in Sichuan, in July 2014, I had contacted Sid Francis in Chengdu, via BirdForum (see China Forum), and asked if he could organize my transportation there. His brother-in-law Zeng Zhang agreed to do the job, with his Suzuki Jimny 4x4. He knew the roads, sites and accommodations in Ruoergai (Zoige, the Chinese name), and could be trusted to keep on doing his part without delays or problems in motivation, a common risk with hired drivers. There are certain advantages in driving around in a private car, with a familiar driver who speaks both English and Chinese, and understands the local culture and society.

We would meet early on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, in front of my Chengdu accommodation. ZZ arrived at 6.00, as agreed, and we drove straight to Baxi, some 7 to 10 hours north, depending on traffic and road works. Being lucky in that sense, and with the weather, we did the drive in 7.5 hours, despite a few stops on the NR213 road between Chuanzhushizhen and the grassland plateau, at Lianghekoucun Heights, a high altitude area where the target species started to become available.

The first stop was made immediately after some large bridges, where a gravel track ran right and down to the valley. The next stops were made by the highway and along another side road to the right (east). A search for **Streaked Rosefinch** did, however, initially fail because I did not really know where to look for them. At Baxi, we could stay between 14.30 and 18.00, in a sunny afternoon with clear blue sky, the best weather of the visit.

The next day, the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, we started at Baxi at 5.45, fifteen minutes before sunrise, and stayed there till noon, when the weather deteriorated. It was time to move west, towards Ruorgai Grasslands plains around the Flower Lake (Hua Hu), about 50 km west of Ruorgai on NR213. After a successful visit there, between 13.20 and 14.30, we returned to Baxi for the late afternoon hours (16.00 – 18.30). The driving time between Ruorgai and Baxi was about 30 minutes. My first **Little Owl** was seen along this stretch. The drive Ruorgai – Flower Lake took about one hour.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, the whole day was spent on the road to Hongyuan and back, with exploration of some side roads, and an early 5.00 departure and a late return at 19.00, both in darkness. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, we started the drive back to Chengdu at Baxi (5.40 – 10.30), and stopped again at the Lianghekoucun Heights. Later on, a lot of time was spent on the road because of a traffic jam in Songpan (road works) and a more serious one on the Chengdu outer bypass. Five lanes, including one informal one, were not enough to handle the cars of a growing city with 8 million inhabitants. Today, Chengdu is larger than Hong Kong and growing fast.

In and around the Chengdu region, an **Oriental Magpie-Robin**, a **Red-rumped** and **Barn Swallows**, **Grey-throated Martins**, a **Long-tailed Shrike**, **Chinese Bulbuls**, **Common** and **Crested Mynas**, **Japanese White-eyes**, and **House** and **Tree Sparrows** were recorded.

In addition to the car rental, I paid the gasoline and road tolls. The cost of the gasoline was CNY585 (€81) in total, and the tolls a mere CNY50 (€7). For the price of the transportation, please contact Sid and discuss with him, if you also prefer to do an independent tour, without guide services. Be prepared for quotes exceeding €100 per day, a day meaning a lot of hours in this case.



**Fig. 3.** The valleys are crowded and easily clogged when road repairs are needed (Songpan).

## ACCOMMODATIONS

I stayed two nights at the Chengdu Xiang Yu Hotel (1080 Logistics Ave, Shuangliu), in a double room (Deluxe Twin) for €29 and €30, including breakfast. There was a CNY100 key deposit, the current standard. The reservations were made at Agoda.com. There were four young ladies at the reception and one of them spoke a little English. Because of that, I was able to order a take away breakfast for the next morning. The packed version is, however, not a substantial breakfast. It may therefore be a good idea to buy food and drinks to complement it. In the last morning, I had my breakfast on board the Dragonair flight.

The double room was large and nice, clean with a comfortable bed and crispy linen, and with a good quality flat screen television. On the downside, there was a smell of cigarettes (a non-smoking room with an ashtray!) and no sugar for tea. The worst feature was the bathroom light: a sensor closed it every 40 seconds and each time I had to reactivate it with my hand, for example during the showers! Lots of calisthenics, a bit too much, I would say.

In Ruoergai, we rented two rooms at the Hotel Flower Lake. Its soap bars were labeled Hotel Hua Hu, the Chinese name of the lake, even though in Latin letters. Two double rooms cost CNY150 (€21) each per night, a total of CNY900 (€126) for three nights, and a CNY100 key deposit. The rooms were rather cold at night, because the windows had been left open for the day and there was no heating. Sound sleep, nevertheless, thanks to my extra travel blanket and pillow.



**Fig. 4.** Look for this sign and the bird emblem, when searching for the Chengdu Xiang Yu Hotel. My Swarovski scope and bags may be seen indoors, ready for an early morning departure to Baxi. Other customers, who requested a breakfast at this hour, before the restaurant was open, were declined. It is important to order the take away breakfast the day before.



**Fig. 5.** The non-smoking room was comfortable, but there was a snag. Let's have a closer look on the small table by the curtained window...



**Fig. 6.** In Chengdu, there are no non-smoking rooms in business hotels; it is non-smoking in bed!

In a Ruergai restaurant, 150 meters from the hotel, dinners for two cost around CNY50 (€7). If I also ordered four hard-boiled eggs for the next day, the cost was CNY75 (€10.50). In other words, eggs are relatively expensive on the high plains, but at least they were not artificial, as they may be in some other parts of China! They also washed my lunch box, with boiling water, when this was requested. It was, after all, not just a dinner we had, but a lunch as well. The servings were so large that I always put half of my share in a box, for the next day. The food was tasty and filling, with a variety of vegetables, noodles, rice and meats such as chicken and beef (yak). Snacks and drinks could be bought at a nearby grocery store, run by some young and happy Tibetan women, who seemed to greatly enjoy a foreign customer in their shop.

The only birds worth mention in Ruoergai were two **Common Terns**, seen flying past us at a gas station, and a **Brown-headed Gull**, later on.

## **BIRDS AND SITES**

### **Lianghekoucun Heights**

Lianghekoucun Heights is a high area of mountains (road went up to 3,400 meters) around the village of Lianghekoucun, along NR213. The landscape is dominated by sparse vegetation, grass and brush. For directions, see the route description (above).

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, several stops were made en route, beyond the valley with large bridges towering across it. The first stop, right after the last bridge, on the right, was a welcome respite. There is a track there, which leads to the old road at the bottom of the valley. The dry hillside brush soon produced a handsome breeding pair of **White-browed Tits**, a singing **Godlewski's Bunting** and a skulking pair of **White-browed Tit-Warblers**. Soon afterwards, I located my first **Hodgson's Redstart**. Along a gravel side track to the east (right), in a river valley 17 km beyond Lianghekoucun village, several birds were added to the trip list, including a pair of **Golden Eagles**, a **Saker Falcon**, **Horned Larks**, *przewalskii* **Siberian Stonechats**, and an unexpected *canturians* **Japanese Bush Warbler** (formerly, **Manchurian Bush Warbler**), in a moist area of valley-side bush.



**Fig. 7.** The valley with large bridges, and good scrub habitat right below them.

In the general area, **Ruddy Shelducks**, **Himalayan Griffons**, a **Hill Pigeon**, *bakeri* **Common Cuckoos**, an **Oriental Skylark**, two *confusus* **Brown Shrikes**, **Grey-backed Shrikes**, ten *himalayanus* **Red-billed Choughs**, **Large-billed Crows**, a male *pandoo* **Blue Rock Thrush**, **Eurasian Crag Martins**,

**Asian House Martins** (at bridges), **Black** and **White-capped Redstarts**, and **Grey** and **White Wagtails** were observed. I also heard a **Plain Laughingthrush**, but did not stop to look for it, being sure to score at Baxi. That was, however, not as easy as anticipated!



**Fig. 8.** The first stop immediately produced the first **Godlewski's Bunting** of the trip.



**Fig. 9.** Tibetan yurt settlements, with cars, motorbikes and yaks, at the side road to the east.

Returning to Songpan and Chengdu on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, another attempt was made. Right after the Waqie road junction, driving south on NR213 towards Chuanzhushizhen, there was space to park on the right, where remnants of the old road still existed. ZZ suggested that it could be a place suitable for **Streaked Rosefinches**. He was right. In few minutes, I had located one male and three females/juveniles. Additionally, I got my best views of a **White-browed Tit-Warbler**, despite the grey sky and light rain. Other birds at the site included a **Chinese White-browed Rosefinch**.



## **Baxi Area (Baxi Forest)**

The site consists of a rough gravel road, starting next to a closed check-point on the highway NR213, 17 km east of Ruergai. The road initially crosses a stretch of grassy plain, climbs up to a coniferous ridge, and ends in Baxi Village. We never went that far. Birding is normally done in the first half of the road, on the roadsides and by viewing the grassy slopes for **Blue Eared Pheasants**, first at km 4.5, on the right, and then at km 9.5, on the left, opposite to the start of a trail to a site known as the Baxi Forest. I wish the weather had not been so cloudy there. Some great photos failed because of a shortage of light, inside the forest in particular.



**Fig. 10.** The eared-pheasant meadow site nr. 2, as seen from the Baxi Forest trailhead.

In regard to the eared pheasants, the visit was a rerun of the 2014 nightmare at Balang Shan, where I did my best and spent too many hours in trying to see a **White Eared Pheasant**, but only heard some calls. Also in Baxi, the birding was crippled by the fact that the **Blue Eared Pheasants** did not appear at their usual stakeouts, despite six hours of scanning, but preferred places behind them. One bird was heard at both pheasant pastures, but I only saw *suehschanensis* **Ring-necked Pheasants** there, with a maximum simultaneous total of twelve males and two females. What a setback! Also **Blood Pheasants** could only be heard calling, a total of four birds at bushy streamsides between the forested hills. I guess I am better with accentors than with pheasants...

The valley in general, and open roadsides, were good for **Stresemann's Rosefinches** and **Godlewski's Buntings**. The former species may easily be confused with **Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch**, their calls being the main separating feature in the field. The latter species is very rare in Sichuan and should therefore be identified with great care. Other birds observed in these situations included **Himalayan Griffons**, **Black Kites**, **Himalayan Buzzards**, a **Spotted Dove**, *bakeri* **Common Cuckoos**, **Himalayan Swiftlets**, and **Oriental and Large-billed Crows**.

The Baxi Forest yak trail went first up some meadows with bushes, on somewhat damp ground, before entering the forest proper, with firs and pines. In there, the best idea probably is to follow a level path to the left, a short distance to the edge of the forest, by another opening, from where

a valley with many treetops may be observed by a scope. Alternatively, one could do the very steep climb up the hill, which I did on the first visit, regretting it, because not much was seen up there. As far as I am able to judge, it is better to stay down and wait for the birds to appear, stalking them.

I checked the forest twice, between 7.00 and 10.45 on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June (light rain started at 9.30), and between 6.30 – 9.30 (light rain after 7.00 and heavy rain after 9.30), on the 19<sup>th</sup>. On the first attempt, I immediately saw a pair of **Chinese Grouse** walking on ground at the place where the somewhat obscure trail entered the forest. I went in slowly and silently, and took care to not step on dead branches, and therefore did not scare the birds off. They just walked away, the male staring at me at times. **Hazel Grouse** is common in Finland and the two species clearly share some habits. When the grouses had left, I sat down on a tree trunk and played a Xeno.Canto **Snowy-cheeked Laughingthrush** recording. A pair immediately appeared there, for close views. Two highly restricted range endemics in five minutes!



**Fig. 11.** Entrance to the forest; **Chinese Grouses** and **Snowy-cheeked Laughingthrushes** were seen right here. The level yak path to the left starts immediately beyond the bushes.

Going up the hill, I played a recording of **Sichuan Jay** calls, and whistled the call, because **Siberian Jays** (another Finnish bird) readily arrive to meet one when this is done, but there was just a short response and no jays to be seen. Instead, a group of **Giant Laughingthrushes** attacked me, scolding the intruder and filling the air with their noisy chatter. The species is easily agitated by **Sichuan Jay** calls. Later on, I played the jay call again on two visits to the forest edge observation point (left hand level trail), in both cases immediately attracting a **Maroon-backed Accentor**, probably the most beautiful bird of the trip, when seen so closely. At first I thought that it was attracted to the jay calls too, before I realized that the recording also had the thin song of the accentor in the background. The accentor had its territory right below the observation point and could later be heard singing there. What a neat, voluminous plumage!



**Fig. 12.** The most productive viewpoint at Baxi Forest; a **Maroon-Backed Robin** was in the bushes.

The **Sichuan Jays** were finally seen in the last morning, from the above-mentioned observation point, two yellow-billed birds silently foraging in firs, across the narrow valley. During the two visits, the same firs also produced a pair of **Three-banded Rosefinches** with a juvenile, a **Przevalski's Nuthatch**, an apparent **Crested Tit-Warbler** (left unidentified, too short observation time) and about 30 **Tibetan Serins**, in addition to more than 100 **Common Crossbills** (*tianschanica* or *himalayaensis*?). Bring your scope and sit down on the narrow edge of the path.



**Fig. 13.** There is always time to stop to admire flowers!

Other birds in the forest and around its edges, in the coniferous zone, included: **Speckled Wood Pigeons**, a *khamensis* **Black Woodpecker**, **Sichuan Tits**, **Goldcrests**, a **Hodgson's Treecreeper**, a **Dark-sided Flycatcher**, **Chinese, Sichuan and Greenish Leaf Warblers**, **Eurasian Wrens**, a **Long-tailed Minivet**, **Giant Laughingthrushes**, **Red-headed Bullfinches** and a **White-winged Grosbeak**. I also heard two birds singing like a **Siberian Chiffchaff** but do not know what they were; the species should not occur in Sichuan. Some other species probably has a similar style song?



**Fig. 14.** Kessler's Thrush was the most common thrush in Baxi area.

It is not a long walk, about 250 meters from the place where one's car may be parked, to the above-mentioned observation site. Close to the car, there is good semi-open habitat and great views to the grassy slopes on the opposite side of the road, mist permitting. If it starts to rain, or mist raises, the views may deteriorate fast. At the roadside meadows and rows of low bushes, the following birds were observed: **Chestnut and Kessler's Thrushes** (the most numerous thrush), **Chinese Blackbirds**, **White-throated Redstarts** (very common), **Grey-backed Shrikes**, a **Brown-flanked Bush Warbler**, **Plain, Elliot's and Black-faced Laughingthrushes**, a *leucogenis* **Ashy Drongo**, *tibetanus* **Japanese Tits**, **Common Rosefinches** and two *sordida* **Black-faced Buntings**.



**Fig. 15.** A female **White-throated Redstart** at Baxi, where the species was common.

In the first morning, just before sunrise, I got lucky playing a **Sichuan Wood Owl** tape, close to the first pheasant pasture. There was a territory there, and a male defended it, immediately responding to the 'rival bird'. A great start for the first full day in the Ruoergai region! The shared features with **Ural Owl** (another common bird in Finland) are there, but have apparently been exaggerated earlier and I do not have any doubts on the validity of the species. Along the grassland start of the Baxi road, the best records were an adult **Eurasian Hobby** and three **Daurian Jackdaws**.



**Fig. 16.** One of the three **Daurian Jackdaws**; bold and inquisitive. See the metal shine on wings.

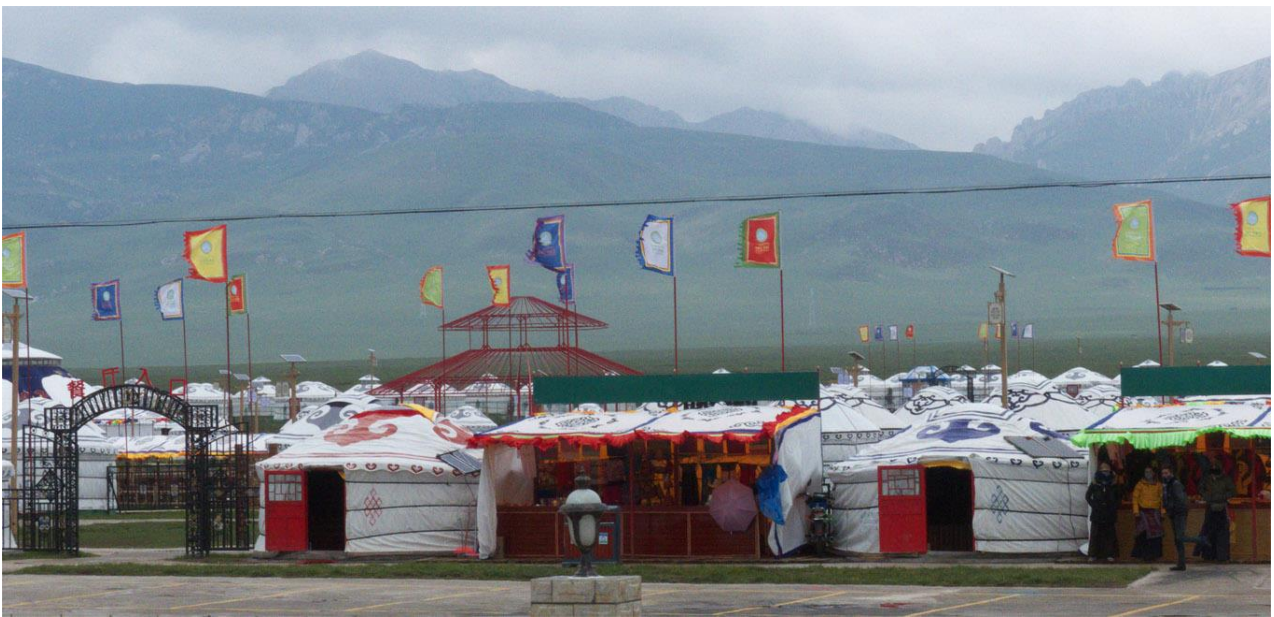
There are some houses, small villages and a Buddhist temple or two on the way. On the 17<sup>th</sup>, some major Tibetan ceremonies occurred there, with white smoke rising high from one of the temples. In the Songpan region, on the other hand, there were many Muslims (Hui) and mosques. Overall, the area is quite peaceful and the locals do not bother the visitors at all, as long as the visitors respect them, too. Some interesting mammals were recorded in Baxi area, as well: a few thousand domesticated **Yaks** in the beginning of the road, six **Himalayan Marmots**, a **Wild Boar**, a **Sika Deer** and three **Takins**.

### **Ruoergai Grasslands**

As already described, the Ruoergai Grasslands are located around 50 km west of the town. Actually, there are grasslands all the way, but the best area for birds lies in the flat, damp plains close to the Flower Lake. For reasons not immediately apparent to an uninformed observer, the birds and **Pikas** concentrate at certain areas of the vast grassland, even though the habitat does not seem to alter that much. The best birds at Ruoergai Grasslands were my first 14 **Black-necked Cranes**, photographed and videotaped when foraging and calling by the road, the last crane species I had missed in the world! Almost equally interesting were the **White-rumped** and **Rufous-necked Snowfinches**, both common, and my first eight **Ground Tits** (a Tibetan endemic).

Other birds seen during the short visit were **Himalayan Griffons**, a second calendar year **Eastern Imperial Eagle**, **Black Kites**, an **Upland Buzzard**, 12 **Brown-headed Gulls**, a **Common Tern**, a **Little Owl**, a **Salim Ali's Swift**, **Oriental Crows**, **Horned Larks**, **Asian Short-toed Larks**, **Black Redstarts** and five *miniakensis* **Twites**. The grassland birdlife was very different from Baxi.

The Flower Lake itself, on the other hand, is a lost case in terms of birdwatching tourism, to say the very least. It is today a tourist trap and can only be visited in a tour bus, which commute there at regular intervals, stopping for photography and returning back to the highway. Needless to say, the buses are loaded with visitors with no special interest in nature and there is not enough time for observations. Moreover, one needs to buy an entrance ticket and wait for the next round.



**Fig. 17.** A small section of the tourism development close to Flower Lake, devoid of tourists...



**Fig. 18.** My last missing crane species, the endangered **Black-necked Crane**. See the band?

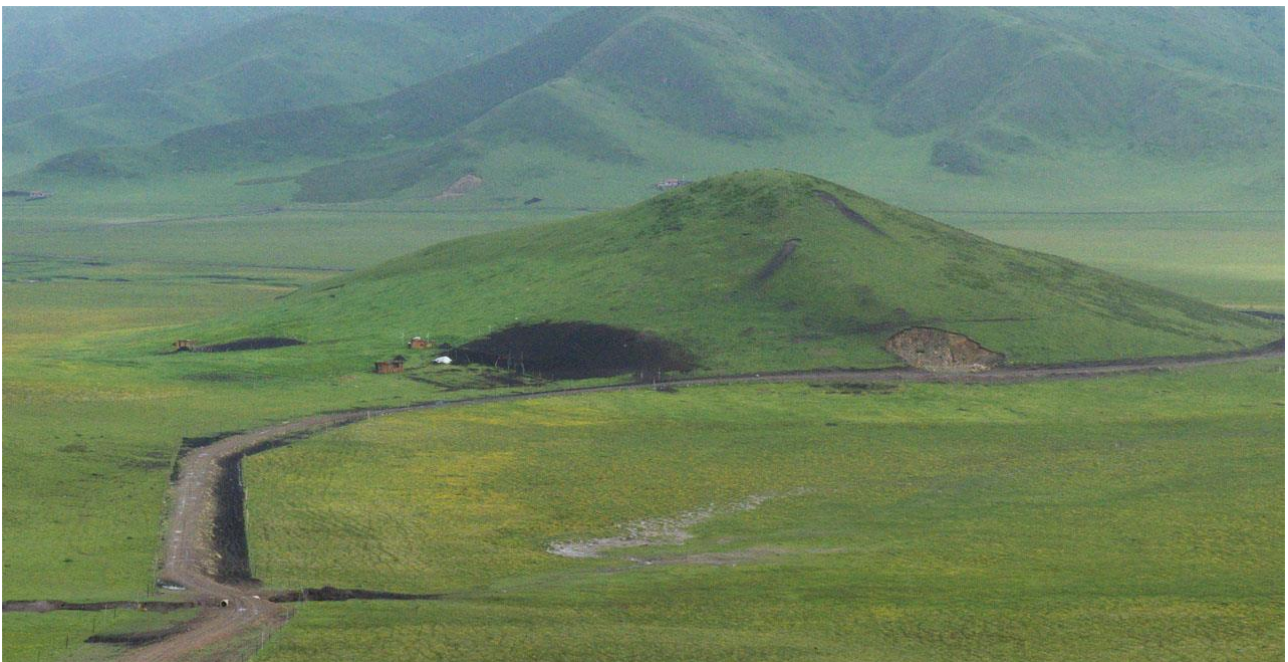
On the way back to Ruorgai, I made it sure to check every meter of telephone lines as a pair of **Tibetan Grey Shrikes** has traditionally nested in that area, even though there had been no records for 2015. As expected, no shrikes were seen.

The grasslands had some mammals, too: more than 10.000 **Yaks**, several **Himalayan Marmots** and more than 200 **Plateau (Black-lipped) Pikas**. The pikas are as cute as anything can be and live together with snowfinches. Look for the pikas if you want to find the snowfinches, and vice versa!

### **Road to Hongyuan**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, the whole day was spent on the Provincial Road S209, between Ruorgai and Hongyuan (274 km, return). We left an hour before sunrise, in order to reach a certain site soon after the first light, a hill and a ravine with bushes, by a large grassy valley about 44 km southwest of Ruorgai. I will call the valley Sheng Dao Valley in this report.

The day started at the above-mentioned spot, in which I climbed a steep hill up and down, to the amusement of some resident **Yaks**, before scoring with a **Pink-tailed Bunting**, hearing the song further up. Later that morning, I actually saw one female along the highway, few kilometers further south. We also visited another old territory, which proved to be unoccupied. At the first site, the second target species was **Robin Accentor**, a skulking bird, two of which were nevertheless seen zooming around in the bushes, without too much effort. Other birds observed at the site included a party of 12 **Himalayan Griffons**, four **Common Redshanks** (in the valley), a **Russet Sparrow** and three **Rosy Pipits**, in addition to the more widespread species.



**Fig. 19.** The 'Valley 2'; impressive grassland scenery with a small quarry.

Afterwards, we crossed the Sheng Dao Valley to the west on a gravel track, over a steep ridge, and into another even more stereotypically Tibetan valley ('Valley 2') with grass, yaks and yurts. The track soon arrived at a small quarry, a haven for some pikas and birds: two dozen *intermedia* **Rock**

**Sparrows**, and a **Rufous-necked Snowfinch**. Soon afterwards, a pair of *xerophila* **Tibetan Snowfinches**, the target species for the area, was also located running on ground at edge of the quarry, possibly breeding there. I initially misidentified them as **Plain Mountain-Finches**, as a result of poor guidebook illustrations. In the field, the snowfinch is a rather plain greyish bird and the white areas do not necessarily show well on closed wings. See the Internet for photos.

Later on, a new (not visible in Google Maps) and rough section of the track took us across the valley, through a wetland, before a u-turn at the other side. In there, two pairs of **Black-necked Cranes**, several **Little Owls**, a pair of **Tibetan Larks**, and the first male *calcarata* (**Tibetan**) **Citrine Wagtail** were observed.



**Fig. 20.** A **Rufous-necked Snow Finch** at the quarry, with yaks in the background, of course!

Returning towards Ruergai in the late afternoon, I decided to try another side road, to northeast at the northern end of the Sheng Dao Valley. The gravel road was initially fine and took us to a large wetland area, where the road had been cut by floods and was under repair. Even a cursory glance at the site revealed its potential as a replacement for the lost Flower Lake. There were a pair of **Greylag Geese**, a **Ferruginous Duck**, a **Brown-cheeked Water Rail**, two pairs of **Black-necked Cranes**, about 10 **Common Redshanks**, 15 **Common Terns** and (**Tibetan**) **Citrine Wagtails**. The place was also a haven for **Tibetan Larks**, eight birds were seen from a single observation spot.

Going south towards Hongyuan in the morning, I kept on scanning the wires along the road. Suddenly, a very large grey shrike was spotted, about 14 km before Waqixiang (according to signs, 'Waqie township'). A **Tibetan Grey Shrike**, a giant among shrikes, was discovered, against all odds! We soon located another bird, a confirmation of a breeding pair. The first bird was photographed and videoed. The last part of the drive to Hongyuan, on the other hand, was not productive at all, a *milvipes* **Saker Falcon** being the best sight. Overall, the sites mentioned in old reports had deteriorated. The same had happened, unfortunately, to a more recent **Eurasian Eagle Owl** nest, too, which had been damaged by road construction. The S209 was being upgraded and the project will probably continue for a couple of years.





**Fig. 21.** There were **Tibetan Larks** at the new wetland site.



**Fig. 22.** One of the definite highlights of the trip; a **Tibetan Grey Shrike** has been discovered!

There was a known **Ibisbill** territory further south of Hongyuan, but it was too far away for us. The drive would have taken two extra hours, which we did not have. I kept looking for the species at suitable river habitats, but failed to locate any. **Ibisbill** is a scarce breeding species in the region. The old Hongyuan site for **Tibetan Partridge**, 9 to 10 km north of the town, at a small rocky hill on the left (west), by a river, just before the last larger hill on the right (east), was occupied by a tourism development. I explored similar habitat at a close by quarry, but only saw three *kansuensis* **Azure-winged Magpies**, a **White-browed Tit-Warbler**, three **Hodgson's Redstarts** and a surprise *chinensis* **Eurasian Wryneck** there.

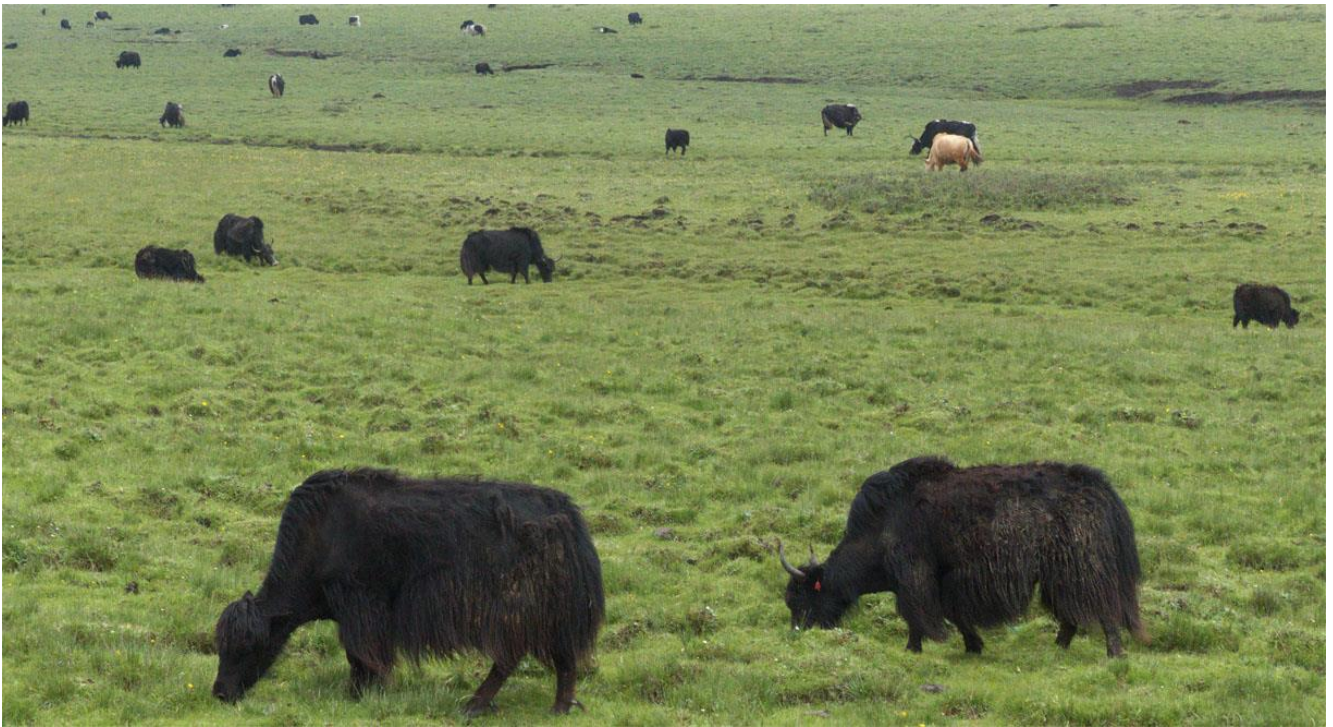
On the way back, before entering the high ground of Sheng Dao Valley, there was some good habitat at Chabudong, on the east side of the road. The side road was rather bad, uneven and with many potholes, which had been caused by heavy trucks, but we nevertheless went in for a kilometer. The birds there included a **Ferruginous Duck**, a pair of **Common Redshanks**, a pair of **Whiskered Terns**, **Large-billed Crows**, a pair of **Russet Sparrows**, **Rock Sparrows**, **(Tibetan) Citrine Wagtails** and a fine **Blyth's Pipit**, with great scope study of the bird standing on the track. Also the next road to the right was checked, but we soon turned around, as time was running out and there was a road construction depot by the road, with disturbing heavy traffic.



**Fig. 23.** A roadside *milvipes* **Saker Falcon**, always a handsome falcon to watch. I have seen the species in Finland, too, the first confirmed record there, a second calendar year bird.

In the general area, along our route, about 30 adult and four duckling **Ruddy Shelducks** were seen, in addition to three **Ferruginous Ducks**, a **Ring-necked Pheasant**, an adult **Golden Eagle**, **Black Kites**, three **Upland Buzzards**, a pair of **Black-necked Cranes**, about 10 **Brown-headed Gulls**, a **Spotted Dove**, **Eurasian Cuckoos**, **Little Owls**, **Grey-backed Shrikes**, a **Eurasian Magpie**, about 30 **Ground Tits** (with variable coloring, apparently depending on soil), numerous **Oriental Skylarks**, one *magna* **Crested Lark**, about 35 **Horned Larks**, two *tibetana* **Hume's Short-toed Larks**, one **Asian Short-toed Lark**, three **Kessler's Thrushes**, one **Chestnut Thrush**, about 25 **Black Redstarts**, **Siberian Stonechats**, **White** and **(Tibetan) Citrine Wagtails** and about 10 **Twites**.

Along the Hongyuan road, roughly 15.000 **Yaks** were seen, together with about 100 Himalayan **Marmots**, about 100 **Plateau (Black-lipped) Pikas** and a group of 10 **Chinese Red Pikas** on a rocky outcrop north of Chabudong, towards the construction depot. The best record and one of the highlights of the whole trip was, however, a pair of **Grey Wolves** minding their business and observing some **Yaks** at Chabudong Plain. We saw them, but they did not notice us. It is a rare thing to be able to observe a shy carnivore unnoticed, when the animals are completely relaxed. I have previously observed the wolves only in Kazakhstan (Karaganda), the USA (Arizona!) and Finland (North Karelia).



**Fig. 24.** Domesticated **Yaks** were everywhere in the grasslands, variable in color but always docile.

## CONCLUSIONS

Once again, I spent some very intensive and interesting days in Sichuan. A total of 116 bird species were observed. The arrangements of field operations went without complications and it was possible to focus on birds and mammals. Only weather caused problems, in the form of rain, and especially in Baxi area. In drier weather, the results would have been even better. It is, however, important to remember that the situation could have been far worse, too, like it was in 2014, when floods necessitated a time-consuming alternative route to Balang Shan. Sichuan regularly has natural calamities, including earthquakes. What is more, the Chinese administration is known to surprise visitors with access restrictions, as a result of infrastructure developments. Some of the key sites in the region have been out of bounds for years. Considering this, the trip was a resounding success.

I was particularly happy with the discoveries of the **Sichuan Wood Owl**, the **Tibetan Grey Shrikes** and the **Maroon-backed Accentor**. Any visit in the region, individual or tour-based, involves a chance for new discoveries if one keeps one's eyes and ears open, and keeps on searching, even though the available information might suggest otherwise. For Northern European birders, there is certain magic in the northern East Asian birdlife, at the other end of the Eurasian continent. It is a mixture of familiarity and unknown. I might well visit Sichuan again in the near future. It is a large and an extremely diverse area, in terms of habitats and wildlife.

A visit is therefore warmly recommended for others, too. I hope obtaining a Chinese tourist visa is easier for you than it is for us Finns. Up here, one is supposed to visit the embassy in person, twice. In my case that would be 2.400 km of travel. The other option is to hire a travel agent in Helsinki to do it, for a service fee. If it was less complicated, I would certainly travel to China more frequently.