

Winter birding in eastern and south-western China (Shanghai, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan)

December 22nd 2001 - 7th January 2002



www.ChineseCurrents.com

Saturday 22nd December 2001. The first clear day in Shanghai for a couple of weeks. A high pressure area, centered on Shandong and Hebei, piped unusually cold, northerly air to the east coast. Shanghai was beautifully clear, crisp, and windless; and Hong Qiao was pulsating with hundreds of 'northern forest' thrushes and other exciting seasonal fare.

Bob, who had arrived from England only three hours earlier, and I were off to a great start on what was to be a superb 17-day birding trip.

In the 3 hours in Hong Qiao, we saw in excess of 300 Dusky Thrushes - 200 more than my previous 'best-day' total (also in the same area). There were many Naumann types among them - with one seemingly pure-blooded. But, sadly for the Dusky/Naumann splitting lobby, at least 25% of them looked like intergrades. 3 other thrush-species were seen: Pale Thrushes - a total of 3; 50+ Chinese Blackbirds, and a male Grey-backed Thrush (only seen by Bob).

The bird of the day, however, was a lone Japanese Waxwing. We had excellent close-range views of this superbly-marked bird, before it disappeared into the dense bushes that skirt the 'river' just to the south of the main lake.

Other birds of note at Hong Qiao: A flock of about 20 Vinous-throated Parrotbills, 2 Olive-backed Pipits, and single Red-flanked Bluetail and Masked Laughingthrush.

The supporting cast: Goldcrest, 20+ Chinese Bulbuls, 30+ Spotted Doves, 3 Herons, 2 Mallards, 100+ Teal, 30+ Spotbills, Tree Sparrow, 1 Long-tailed Tit, 10+ **Great Tits**, 6 Little Grebes.

Left Hong Qiao at 1330 and on to Fuxing Gongyuan, a small park in central Shanghai, where the flock of Chinese Grosbeaks, which I had seen during the previous few days, was still present. 2 Hwameis were a big surprise (I had not previously seen Hwamei in Fuxing Gongyuan, despite my office being inside the park!). Unfortunately one of the birds was in a cage. The other, which came within a yard of it, had presumably been attracted by the penned-bird's singing.

Day, and therefore trip list at 25 species.

Sunday 23rd December 2001. Another cold, sunny, windless day. At first light (0730), back to Hong Qiao, which had been blanketed by a sharp frost (an unusual sight in usually frost-free Shanghai).

The first bird of the day was a Common Buzzard*. Similar numbers of Dusky Thrushes as the day before, with several pure Naumann's; 3 Masked Laughingthrushes*; 12 Rufous Turtle Doves*; 3 Red-flanked Bluetails*, including 1 male; 5 Little Buntings*; 500+ White-cheeked Starlings* - near the north-eastern perimeter of the park (the biggest flock that I have ever seen); male and female Black-faced Bunting*; 1 Olive-backed Pipit; and c20 Chinese Grosbeaks.

Supporting cast: Chinese Blackbird (which, as I am sure people who have seen it will agree, is very different from its less muscular European cousin), Azure-winged Magpie, Long-tailed Tit*, Goldcrest*, Spotbill, Mallard, Teal, Heron, Chinese Bulbul, Little Grebe, **Tree Sparrow**, Spotted Dove, Feral Pigeon*, **White Wagtail**, and Great Tit.

Took the 1530 bus from Shanghai to Yancheng - which lies about 400 km NNW of Shanghai. Arrived there surprisingly quickly - the 5 hour scheduled trip beaten by about an hour. The Shanghai to Yancheng bus, followed by taxi to the reserve, is the best way to get to the famous Yancheng Nature Reserve (Tickets on the bus are bookable in advance, the coach is fast, clean and comfortable). Birders travelling from Beijing could fly to Nanjing - but the bus-time to Yancheng is about the same as from Shanghai. Night at the Yanfu Hotel in Yancheng.

Day List - 28 species. Trip List - 33 species

Monday 24th December 2001. Cold, very cold. Sunny all day. Windless in the morning. A penetrating wind after midday, which grew stronger and even more penetrating.

6.00 am taxi from the hotel to Yancheng Nature Reserve - the largest coastal nature reserve in China. Just after first light, we arrived at the first birdable area - a long strip of deciduous woodland running parallel with the dirt-track that leads to the reserve centre. Excellent views of a superb perched female Goshawk*. Also Grey-headed Woodpecker* (total of 6 during the day), Great Spotted Woodpecker* (3/4 during the day), and many Hoopoes* in the same narrow belt of trees.

Yancheng was designated a provincial nature reserve in or about 1983 and a national nature reserve in 1992. The reserve area occupies a staggering 2,800 square kilometres, and mostly comprises saline meadows (dominated by the 'Suaeda Salsa' plant), which stretch northwards from the Changjiang River all the way 'up' the Jiangsu coast, before meeting the rocky Shandong peninsular. But the inter-tidal mudflats; and freshwater lakes - surrounded by marshes - within the 10,000 hectare 'core' reserve area are of particular interest to visiting birders.

The awesomely majestic Red-crowned Crane* - over 600 of which winter at this reserve (according to the wardens) - soon made an appearance. Within 10 minutes of our arrival, 3 of them treated us to a fly-pass.

An area of phragmites and bushes skirting the small river opposite (and west of) the reserve centre sustained the promising start. In an excellent half-hour we clocked up 2 Little Buntings, 2 Meadow Buntings*; a few Rustic Buntings* and Black-faced Buntings* (total of about a dozen during the day); a single Pallas' Reed Bunting*, single Olive-backed Pipit, Daurian Redstart* (first of about a dozen for the day), and several Chinese Grosbeaks. This vantage point also yielded Eastern Marsh Harrier* and Common Pheasant*. But the big surprise, here, was the ease in which we saw one of the Yangcheng specialities - Reed Parrotbill* - half a dozen of these strikingly marked birds were seen within a dumpling's throw of the reserve's restaurant.

We then entered the reserve centre, seeing Kestrel*; Long-tailed Shrike*; another flock of about half a dozen Reed Parrotbills; 2 drake Pintails*; c30 Pochards*; 2 Common Snipes*; female/immature Hen Harrier*; c6 Great Crested Grebes*; 50+ Smews*: 8 Mandarins*; 20+ Goosanders*; 500+++ Teals; 5 Falcated Ducks*; 2+ Gadwalls*; and 10+ Shovelers*; Moorhen*; Coot*; a single Short-eared Owl*(only seen by me); Japanese Quail* and Cormorant* sp (too far away for specific ID). Returning to the track outside the reserve, we flushed a Woodcock*, and saw many more Spotted Doves (c100 in total), Chinese Blackbird, Magpie*, and 20+ White-cheeked Starlings.

At this point, I think I should point out to any would-be Yancheng-goers that you must be accompanied while in the reserve (and, please bear in mind, ALL the area is

supervised by the reserve - so if you want to go anywhere, you have to play the game). Also, the visit must be arranged beforehand with their head office. Another thing to note is that booking their hotel (Westerners can't stay anywhere else) is not the same as booking the visit to the reserve. We fell into the trap of thinking that we had booked both - when, in fact, the person that we had spoken to had not bothered to tell the head of the reserve that two 'big noses' (as Westerners are 'affectionately' referred to) were about to descend. The misunderstanding, however, was ironed out without too much waste of time and energy. They in fact rolled out the red carpet. Mr Lu, one of their top wardens, was assigned to look after us for the duration of the visit.

Our first 'trip out' was to an area which was several km south of the main reserve centre. We then walked a few km towards the sea (which was, we were told 10 km 'down the footpath'). We saw many more Red-crowned Cranes - all-in-all about 100 birds seen on the day, of which c70 were seen at this location in one sweep of the bins. Here, also, were 20 Common Cranes* (2 other smaller flocks of 4 and 5 brought the total to 29 for the day); 100+ Night Herons* in a single flock; a few more Bitterns* (total of 5 birds on the day); several Little Egrets* and c10 Great White Egrets*. Also, during the day, c 100 Bean Geese*; Vinous-throated Parrotbill; and Kingfisher*

Christmas Eve in the reserve hotel, which is in the small, but in no way quaint village of Xinyanggang, just north of the reserve centre. The bitterly cold day, was relatively pleasant, compared with the piercingly cold restaurant. Thankfully, we'd had the foresight to take along a rather nice bottle of Claret, which at least succeeded in warming our spirits on an otherwise less-than-festive Christmas Eve.

48 species seen on the day; 18 'new' (*) species for the trip; Trip List @ 71 species.

Tuesday 25th December 2001. Christmas Day broke bright and, as we had feared, excruciatingly cold. The sub-zero spell was now in its 5th day - a bit of a shock considering that even one day below freezing in this region of China is unusual. To makes things worse, a brisk north-easterly wind would spring up during the morning.

Our friendly warden and the reserve's small bus were waiting for us outside our hotel at first light. Mr Lu first took us to an area several miles north of the reserve centre. Here, we saw a fair sprinkling of waders feeding on the banks of various small channels: 2 Curlews*; 2 flocks of Spotted Redshanks*, totalling c50 birds; a female Goldeneye*; 2 Marsh Sandpipers*; single Green Sandpiper*; a Dunlin*; and 2 Kentish Plovers*. We were thwarted in our efforts to reach the sea, due to an impassable road, and decided to shelve it from the itinerary (as we had both seen the two shoreline-specialities - Saunders' and Relict Gulls in the Beidaihe area). We decided to concentrate on the core reserve area instead.

We were driven back to the freshwater lagoons which, yesterday, held thousands of 'small duck' that were too far away to identify. This time we were in a different position,

and much closer. And the good news was that the 'small ducks' were there in similar numbers. We were, of course, hoping that at least a few of them would prove to be Baikal Teal - surely not too optimistic given that 2 years before a birding tour group had reported a flock of 1,700 Baikals in or around the same area. With some degree of anticipation, we started to scope the flock. The first birds we saw were indeed teals (but Commons, not Baikals); then a few hundred Commons; then the count reached a thousand, then two thousand, and then we lost count. All (or at least the ones that were close enough to identify) were Commons. Also on the same lagoon, 100+ Pochards; 20+ Tufted Ducks*; 40+ Mallards; and 50+ Shovelers.

We were then taken to an area in the south of 'core reserve area', a few miles further than the furthest point we had reached the previous day (probably about 7 or 8 miles south of the reserve centre). On the way there (continuing down the same track that we had come in on the previous day) we stopped at one of the large lagoons that borders the strip of woodland running parallel with the road. Here, was the biggest flock of Smew I had ever seen - at least a thousand birds - the vast majority of which were males; as well as a seemingly odd-plumaged individual which, when the scope was wiped, turned out to be an Avocet. Incongruous-looking to say the least, swimming alongside the Smeews - obviously drawn to the nearest flock of pied birds it could find!.

A 'sweep' of the marshes, from a slightly elevated position, scored 110 Red-crowned Cranes - add this to the others we had seen elsewhere during the day, and we come to a conservative estimate of 230 birds. A more elevated vantage point would have undoubtedly enabled us to see many more - as they can be surprisingly difficult to see in the very long vegetation.

From here we continued down the track for a few more miles, before turning east and taking an even-bumpier track. Finding an Osprey sitting out on the mud flats was a pleasant surprise - a bird that is not supposed to winter as far north as Jiangsu (according to MacKinnon et al). This is the first and last time that I will mention "described range", because we saw literally dozens of species that were not supposed to be where we saw them - either in winter or, for a few of them, at any time! As anyone who has been birding in the farther flung regions of China will tell you, there are still many gaps in the literature. So, to misquote a Chinese proverb, "when birding in China, expect the unexpected".

A flock of Starlings (the vulgar ones) that we saw in a track-side bit of scrub further emphasises the point - they are 'supposed' to be an irruptive visitor to China - but Mr Lu assured us that they were quite common in Yancheng every winter.

One of the birds of the trip was seen on the way back to the reserve centre. We saw a large flock of egrets standing in a shallow channel, just up-stream of a penned area of water, where some locals were pulling out buckets full of fish - the egrets obviously waiting for the escapees. We then noticed a band of 8 spoonbills among the

egrets. Seven of them were Common Spoonbills*, and one, we were delighted to discover, was a Black-faced Spoonbill* - a globally threatened species that winters at Yancheng in small, and sometimes very small numbers (1997, 38 birds; 1998 2 birds - global wintering census count totalling c 600 birds - ref Dahmer & Felley).

Other birds seen during the day were as follows: 2 Grey-headed Woodpeckers; 5 Common Cranes; 20 Common Snipes; 100+ Vega Gulls*; several Heuglin's Gulls*; c50 Black-headed Gulls; 2 female/immature Hen Harriers; 1 Goshawk; 1 Common Buzzard; 200++ Little Grebes; c10 Great Crested Grebes; 100++ Little Egrets; 50+ Great White Egrets; 200+ Grey Herons; 1 Bittern; c10 Long-tailed Shrikes; c50 Magpies; c dozen Azure-winged Magpies; 3 Dusky Thrushes; Chinese Blackbird; 5+ Daurian Redstarts; 2 Great Tits; 50= Chinese Bulbuls; 20+ Buff-bellied Pipits; 4 Chinese Grosbeaks; and Olive-backed Pipit.

Back to the reserve hotel's restaurant (which is not actually in the hotel), where they had bumped us up to the only room with a heater (the finest Christmas present that we could have wished for); add that to the two other presents - Black-faced Spoonbill and a goodish bottle of Champagne I just happened to have with me - and Christmas Day 2001 is destined to live long in the memory.

56 species for Christmas Day; 18 'new' (*) species for the trip; Trip List @ 89 species.

Wednesday, 26th December 2001. Boxing Day, when any sane person would be recovering from all kinds of over-indulgence, was to be another hectic, travel day. The 4.45 am alarm call made me again question my sanity - even more so, because it had taken me until about 3.45 am to get warm. Left Xinyanggang at 5.15 am, our driver making very good time, and arriving at Yancheng in just over one hour. We had been told that there was a fast bus to Nanjing, leaving at 7 am. And, sure enough, that's exactly the time we left (further increasing our respect for the Chinese bus system).

The trip to Nanjing took about 4 hours and 15 minutes - slightly longer than the time it took us to travel from Shanghai to Yancheng. We were booked to fly to Nanchang (the capital of Jiangxi province) the following morning, and the plan was to spend half a day birding in the mountains around Nanjing - which for my money is one of the best cities in China - in that it is a cultural 'hotspot' (the city has been the capital of 10 different dynasties), AND it has extensive woodland and unspoilt mountains close to the city.

From the bus terminus, we told the taxi-driver to go to our hotel, to drop our bags. After 20 minutes of driving we arrived at the wrong hotel. The problem is that, in Chinese, "Sheraton" and "Hilton" are very similar, and we were taken to the wrong one. Problem was, our intended destination was right by the bus station. Having been to Nanjing a few times before, I realised that the hotel we had been taken to, the Hilton, was right on the edge, and on the 'right side' of town; only about 10 minutes drive from the start of the good birding area. With the clock ticking away, we decided to cancel

the reservation we had at the 'other' hotel (a great shame, because it is the only place in Nanjing that serves draught Guinness), and booked rooms at the one we were at instead.

We then had some difficulty in getting to the place on Purple Mountain that we thought offered the best chance of seeing the best birds. The taxi-driver again took us to the wrong location, despite him confirming that he knew exactly where to go (for some reason we persevered with the same taxi-driver that had messed-up earlier - blaming 'pronunciation', as opposed to blaming his hearing or motives). As luck would have it, however, we had landed up at the Observatory (the celestial type) - which has a rather nice 'woodland walk' all the way to the top of the mountain (take the footpath immediately left of the entrance gate - do NOT pay to enter the Observatory grounds).

Within seconds of starting the walk, we saw the first of 30++ Red-flanked Bluetails. Less than a minute after that, we saw a Red-billed Blue Magpie*, and almost at the same time found 2 Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpeckers*. Also, numerous Great Tits, a Great Spotted Woodpecker and a Rufous Turtle Dove.

It was quickly apparent that Shanghai was not the only place to be besieged by Dusky Thrushes. In all, that afternoon (left Purple Mountain at 4.20 pm), we saw over 600 birds. The ratio of Dusky to Naumann's here was very different to Shanghai. We estimated that each 'race/species/whatever' was present in about equal numbers. Interestingly, the vast majority of them were seemingly pure-blooded (again, quite different to Shanghai, where there were many more intergrades).

A late-flowering tree was a magnet for Japanese White-eyes* - the first of two flocks (combined total of c40). A really good 'find' was a very confiding flock of c15 Greater Necklaced Laughingthrushes*, that were rustling their way through the leaf litter. Also, the second of 2 flocks of Vinous-throated Parrotbills (each with 20 birds - therefore possibly the same flock).

Further up the track, a single Hwamei was difficult to see, but eventually gave itself up. A Spotted Piculet* - the first I've seen in eastern China - was much easier to get on to.

It was getting late, and we were a long way from anywhere that might have a taxi, so I decided to flag-down a passing Nissan Patrol. The driver seemed to be pleased to stop for us and, very obligingly, took us all the way back to the hotel. In the last half hour before dark, we walked up to the city wall, just opposite the hotel. This is an impressive piece of architecture - commissioned by the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, and started in 1366, the wall's circumference of more than 20 miles took 200,000 labourers 20 years to build. They did not toil in vain, because the surviving wall has some great habitat adjacent to it (construction near to this 'monument' is strictly controlled). This vantage point enabled us to look down on an

expanse of water (50+ Little Grebes); and a nice area of vegetation, which held a wintering Pallas' Warbler*

We made the most of the facilities at the hotel, because we knew that it would be a good few days before we could find similar comfort - so it had to be mixed grill and chips at the restaurant, washed down with several bottles of imported Heineken - the world's best lager - no probably about it.

20 species on the day; 6 'new' for the trip; Trip List @ 95 species.

Thursday, 27th December 2001. The 9.20 flight from Nanjing to Nancheng was on time; and within an hour we were collecting our bags and loading up yet another taxi. The arrangement that we had made, worked perfectly. Our guide was there to meet us at the airport, and in just over an hour we were at a small quay where our boat was waiting. Minutes later, at about midday, we were off 'up the river', and 40 minutes later we were alighting at a the nearest stopping point to the biggest lake in the Poyang reserve complex, Dahu.

Poyang Hu, the largest freshwater lake in China, was designated a Ramsar site in 1992. After the summer floods, Poyang reaches its maximum area of almost 3000 square km (170 km 'long' and 17 'wide'); in winter the water levels drop around about 11m compared to the summer high, and Poyang fragments into numerous lakes, separated by rough grassland. The reserve area comprises only 9 'winter' lakes, totalling some 22,000 hectares, or about 4% of the entire Poyang 'lake' area.

Dahu is seemingly fully protected, has no fishing nets, and no obvious disturbance from the many thousands of people that live in the immediate area. It also has its own very keen and dedicated full-time warden, Mr Zhou.

Mr Zhou was there to meet us off the boat; and was keen that we rushed to the southern part of the lake, where he had a few things to show us. The walk to view the lake took about half an hour, and in that time we found a two lifers: Black-collared Starling* (3 or 4 birds) near the houses at the start of the walk, and 2 Brown Crakes* feeding on the mud of one of the small channels opposite the houses. We also had a couple more additions to the trip list: Plain Prinia*, and 2 Black-winged Kites*.

The shallows of the lake were brimming with birds. The biggest delight was a flock of a couple of hundred Siberian Cranes* - amazing to think that near to 10% of the world's population were assembled in front of us. Estimates of the wintering population at Poyang differ widely, but Ramsar, in 1996, suggested that 98% of the then world population of c3000 wintered here (ie over an area of 3000 square kilometres, not necessarily within the relatively very small reserve area!).

The truth of the matter is that no one is quite sure of the numbers - the wardens didn't seem to know where the birds were, and the flock in front of us was the biggest that Mr

Zhou had seen on 'his' lake "this winter". Whatever, we were just happy to see them. Then, two people in bright helmets tried to cross a ditch, and got too close. Not happy with this, all of the cranes took to the air - and for perhaps 10 minutes circled the southern area of the lake. Without doubt, one of the most amazing sights I have ever seen - 220 Siberian Cranes gracing the air at the same time. I thought I had been lucky 20 years before, when I had seen a single bird at Bharatpur, in northern India. But the sight before us put things into perspective. Not a tick for me, but something far more satisfying.

Oriental White Stork*, however, **was** a tick. About 10 of them didn't seem disturbed by the interlopers and had stood their ground. This is a seriously endangered bird, the world population is estimated to be about 2,500; and a significant, but unknown (or undisclosed) number winter at Poyang.

Another endangered species is Swan Goose* - Poyang is reputedly the wintering area for most of the world's population - a good proportion of which were seen during the afternoon (an estimated 2,500+). A lone Dalmatian Pelican* was also much appreciated, as were the 150 Spoonbills.

We then skirted the south-western edge of the lake for over a mile, meeting our boat further upstream. During this walk we flushed a total of 6 Japanese Swamp Warblers* - another Poyang 'winter speciality'. Also saw c10 Long-tailed Shrikes; 100+ Lapwings*; 2 Common Pheasants; 3+ Blackbirds; 50+ Black-headed Gulls; Great Tit; c10 White-cheeked Starlings; 1 Kingfisher; c6 Chinese Bulbuls; 1 Daurian Redstart; 2 Japanese Quails; c100 White-fronted Geese*; c20 Oriental Skylarks; male Hen Harrier; 3 Greenshanks; Spotted Redshank; 1 Common Sandpiper; an incredible 2000 Avocets; 180+ Bewick's Swans*; Buff-bellied Pipit; c100 Spot-billed Ducks; a few hundred Pintails; 4 Curlews, c100 Common Teals; and c40 Bean Geese. Also, 2 Pied Kingfisher from the boat, as we approached the village of Wucheng - our home for the next 3 nights.

Settled in to the newly-built reserve hotel; and went for dinner. A good day by any standards, and cause enough to break open a celebratory bottle of Claret - sadly the last of my portable cellar (although I had saved a little something for New Year's Eve).

36 species for the day. 13 new for the trip. Trip list @ 108.

Friday, 28th December 2001. Another cold, bright morning. Mr Zhou, the Dahu specialist, had been signed-up to take us out for the day. His mission was quite straightforward - Find us some Hooded Cranes (the most difficult crane to catch-up with at Poyang); and a thousand or so White-naped. I could sense his nervousness. The fact that he was intent on taking us to an area of Dahu where he had seen 30 White-naped and three Hoodeds yesterday made it very clear that Cranes at Poyang - any cranes - require some amount of luck. Birders intending to visit should bear this is

mind; another 'warning' is that the area is very prone to fog (as we would find out on our last morning there - when we 'lost' an hour's worth of birding on the way out of the reserve). However, there is at least one report on the Net from a team of birders who were fogged in (or out?) for 3 days of a 4 day visit. So, be warned.

Our first objective was Zhong Hu - where apparently there had been a small flock of White-naped a few days before. To get to Zhong Hu, you have to walk about an hour out of Wucheng, and then catch the ferry for a 30 second trip across the river.

The walk to the ferry point was quite pleasant; Mr Zhou was as bouncy as ever, and even happier now that we had agreed to be interviewed by the local TV station, who had 'just happened' to be there filming a documentary about Poyang, which would be syndicated across China – including the China Central Television (CCTV) channels. I'm not a great believer in coincidences; but nevertheless I was more than happy to extol the virtues of this fabulous wetland to the obviously-delighted interviewer and film crew.



The fact that I could entertain their viewers with my limited Mandarin was an extra lucky bounce for them (although I imagined that they would later add subtitles to the film so that people would know what the hell I was babbling on about). The undoubted highlight of the piece, however, is bound to be the final shot of Bob's wave to the cameraman, who I noticed was intent on getting close-ups of his 'stylish' green wellies

and woolly hat. These items may indeed be the height of fashion for English birders on home turf (although, I doubt it), but in China they were a source of amusement wherever we went. Just to prove that some types of humour do travel - children and adults alike would fall about laughing, before rushing to drag out their friends and families so they too could share the experience. The cameraman obviously knew that the wellies and woolly hat 'trailer' would at least double the programme's audience ratings.

The film crew had had enough and left, and with their laughter melting away in the distance, we turned our attention to more serious matters..

In the next hour we saw Red-flanked Bluetail; c 30 Chinese Blackbirds; 6 Crested Mynahs*; 6 Chinese Grosbeaks; 4 Little Buntings; 2 White-cheeked Starlings; 1 Black-collared Starling; 3 Pied Kingfishers; 150+ Black-headed Gulls; Green Sandpiper; Buff-bellied Pipit; the first of the day's two White-breasted Kingfishers*; a Black-winged Kite; Water Pipit; Common Snipe; and a Greenshank.

Zhong Hu held no cranes; and the only birds of note was a flock of 2000 Avocets. Walked back to Wucheng, where a bus had been lined up to take us to Mr Zhou's recommended site for White-naped and Hooded Cranes. The bus went past the look-out point, and then on to the northern part of Dahu, where in winter a promontory links the Wucheng peninsular with the mainland. In summer, the Wucheng peninsular becomes Wucheng island.

No sign of any cranes - much to the dismay of Mr Zhou, who really does try his best for you. At this location, we saw Fan-tailed Warbler*; many Bean Geese flying over; Ruddy Shelduck*; 2 female Pied Kingfishers; and Spotted Redshank. Bob added some distant Shelduck* to the trip list.

Mr Zhou then suggested that we should try Sha Hu, which is opposite - ie due west of Dahu. We took the boat back to near where we had alighted for Dahu yesterday, instead crossing to the other bank of the river. Sha Hu was amazing.

It held an incredible concentration of Oriental White Storks - much larger than any that I have heard or read about. I was conscious that this might be the all-time biggest gathering ever witnessed, so I took the trouble to count them. 100, 200, 300, 400, right up to a total of 440 birds. Somewhere in the region of 20% of the world's population were before us. And they had a good chunk of the world's population of Swan Geese for company - about 5000 birds; as well as over a thousand Spoonbills for good measure.

The Siberian Crane gathering here was modest by comparison - 'only' 40 birds. Also 2 Smews; 20 Bean geese; 30+ White-fronted Geese; and 2 'different' Brown Crakes.

Walked back to the boat and crossed the river (same place as yesterday), continuing on to Dahu to see what 'new' birds had arrived there. From the same vantage as the previous afternoon, we saw one Dalmatian Pelican - presumably the same as yesterday; 100 Spoonbills; 5 Ruddy Shelducks; c50 White-fronted Geese; a few thousand Teals; male Smew; Pintail; a few hundred Swan Geese; White-throated Kingfisher; and at least one Japanese Swamp Warbler. 2 Brown Crakes again near the quay - presumably the same birds as yesterday.

About 40 species for the day; the 5 new ones took the trip list up to 113.

Saturday, 29th December 2001. Cold is bearable, fog isn't. We boarded our boat at 7 am, first light, and set off northwards to Bang Hu. The fog got worse. It's times like this - when boats, 100 times the size of the one you are on, are full-ahead 'south' - that you put your life in someone else's hands. I looked at our boatmen and, reassuringly, he didn't seem too concerned. After about an hour the fog started to clear, and we could at last see some birds. 30 or so Goosanders were dodging boats on the quite crowded river - again we checked for Scaly-sided Merganser, which allegedly winter in the area. Again, they were all Goosanders.

Many Pied Kingfishers (saw more than 30 during the day, including a flock of 7); 1 White-breasted Kingfisher; c4 Green Sandpipers; a few Common Sandpipers; c20 Spotted Redshanks; several Water Pipits; Buff-bellied Pipit; Kestrel; Eastern Marsh Harrier; a single Black-winged Kite.

We then arrived at Bang Hu. The previous evening, we had again tried to get some information about the whereabouts of White-naped and Hooded cranes. I asked about Banghu - no one thought that Bang Hu held any cranes (although Mr Zhou helpfully suggested that a lake - that didn't have a name - about an hour beyond Bang Hu may be good for White-naped). We still insisted on a stop at Bang Hu, however, because this lake features prominently in a number of trip reports that are available on the Net. For instance, one birding group, in 1999, reported over 1200 White-naped Cranes on this lake.

Within a few minutes of getting off the boat, and walking towards Bang Hu, 4 cranes took off some distance in front of us. Unfortunately, it was still quite foggy and the birds were quite a way ahead, flying low and directly away from us. There then followed a lively discussion as to what they were. One thing is for sure, when there is any doubt about whether you have seen Hooded or White-naped, then you haven't seen them well enough (and, the record books should show 'crane sp').

At least we had the lake to look forward to. Surely, there, the mystery would be solved. Bang Hu was a sad place. The lake, which stretched as far as the eye could see, also had fishing nets as far as the eye could see. Intensive fishing and cranes cannot co-exist. 2 years ago, things must have been very different. Later, we were to

find out from the Bang Hu warden that the biggest gathering of White-naped Cranes this winter, here, was no more than a 100 birds (which was the biggest flock that we'd heard about for the whole of the reserve this winter).

Every-so-slightly dispirited we continued to scan the marshes away from the netted-lake. Looking back the way we had come, over the top of where our boat was moored, we found a small group of cranes. The mist was still hampering the viewing, but it became increasingly obvious that we had found the most sought-after crane species in China (at least from my perspective). The very beautiful Hooded Crane (as you might have guessed, my favourite crane species - and a bird I had searched for before in China without success).

Spirits revived, we set off back to the boat, so we could cross the river and get much closer to them. Hiding behind a mound of sand, we watched the 3 Hoodeds (2 adults and a single offspring) for about 20 minutes, before they sensed that they were not alone, taking flight and disappearing into the mist.

We continued searching this area, turning up two more small groups of Hoodeds - a pair; and 2 adults with 2 juveniles. A total of 9 Hoodeds.

Continuing up stream, towards the 'lake with no name', we saw a very distant group of '4 large birds' (cranes, or whatever). We continued up the river, shielded by the bank, and after half a mile or so alighted at a point that we thought was within reasonable scoping distance of the birds. We cut the engine and climbed the bank. Bob immediately got his bins on to 4 White-naped Cranes* just in front of us. I was a few yards behind, and couldn't see over the bank; so only saw the birds as they took off. These majestic creatures flew low for a good few miles, before disappearing into the distant haze.

Surprisingly, the 4 very distant large birds were not the 4 White-naped Cranes we had just disturbed. From near the point we had flushed the cranes, we could again see the 4 birds - this time about a mile closer. They were in fact Black Storks*.

The 'lake with no name' held many people, but few birds (30+ Little Grebes, and a Bittern). But our trip '90 minutes beyond Bang Hu' had still be worthwhile - we had, at last, found White-naped Cranes (albeit not the several hundred we had hoped for).

We returned the way we had come, then took a tributary of the main shipping river to the point of land nearest the only large lake that we had not previously visited, Meixi Hu (Less than 2 hours from our furthest point out - much faster coming back because we were going downstream). We had just been told that Meixi Hu had had some White-naped Cranes "yesterday". We had received this 'hot news' from Mr Zhou, who had phoned us to report that the Meixi warden had reported this in the warden's meeting that he'd had to attend - hence him not being able to be with us today.

Just before we arrived at the Meixi landing point, we were lucky to see 2 Yangtze River Dolphins that seemed to be following the boat.

The walk to Meixi takes about 40 minutes from where you get off the boat. As it was getting late, we did it in 30 minutes, and arrived at a point where we could view the lake at about 4 pm. Meixi Hu has a very special feel to it - it is the most isolated of the lakes and is surrounded by miles and miles of rough grassland.

The late afternoon sun was behind us, and the viewing conditions were perfect (windless and clear). What's more, we could see a flock of cranes on the lake. 'Unfortunately' these were all Common Cranes - but wonderful to watch nevertheless.

As dusk approached, more and more Common Cranes and Oriental White Storks dropped in. In all there were 41 Common Cranes, c15 Oriental White Storks, and 3 Black Storks here. The most amazing sight, however, was a flock of about three and a half thousand (!) Spotted Redshanks.

Also, a fabulously marked male Eastern Marsh Harrier had me guessing for a while - the striking plumage was reminiscent of Pied Harrier (be 'ware of distant Harriers on passage at Beidaihe!).

It was getting dark when we got back to the boat, but at least it was a clear moonlit night. Back to the comfort of the reserve hotel, and another fine meal in their restaurant (Also, the local beer here is really quite nice).

26 species for the day, 3 of them 'new' for the trip. Trip list @ 116 species.

[At this point, it is worth mentioning that after we arrived back home in Shanghai, we phoned the head of Poyang reserve, Mr Liu, and voiced our concerns regarding Bang Hu. Mr Liu is acutely aware of the problems there. Bang Hu is not part of the core reserve area, and actually falls under the jurisdiction of a different county. Mr Liu and various ministry officials are trying to change this, and the long term plan is to give Bang Hu the same status - and degree of protection - as the other lakes. In the interim, they also plan to put additional staff into this area - and to make extra efforts to lessen the disturbance from the local population. Mr Liu and his team are extremely capable and, with the help of the local government, I have no doubt that they will overcome the difficulties. Increasingly in China, the cranes' best interests come first.]

We also spoke with our friend, Mr Zhou (the Dahu warden), and thanked him again for his efforts. Mr Zhou is indeed a really warm-hearted man - I could tell that he took absolutely no pleasure in telling us that a few days after we left, a flock of 600 White-naped Cranes dropped into his lake. Despite being well and truly 'gripped off', we still went ahead with the plan to post a little present to his baby daughter!

On 1st February, Mr Zhou called to tell me the wonderful news that "more than 3,000 Siberian Cranes and seven hundred White-naped Cranes" were on 'his' lake (Dahu).

Sunday 30th December 2001. Up before first light, so we could get an hour's birding at Dahu before leaving the reserve to catch our 11.25 am flight from Nanchang to Guiyang, the capital city of Guizhou province. A look out of the window, however, was enough to make me realise that the morning's prospects for crane-watching were on the poor side.

Visibility was down to about 30 metres, consequently we didn't see a single bird that morning. But, although disappointing, it was only the 'loss' of one hour - at a place that we had already been to. Therefore, we decided to go straight to the airport - our Nissan Patrol easily negotiating the bumpy road off the Wucheng peninsular. Arrived at the airport at about 10 am (90 minutes earlier than our departure time).

But as luck would have it the plane was delayed. Ironically, not because of fog (because the fog cleared as soon as we had left the Poyang area), but because of a technical problem that had prevented the plane leaving Nanjing. This was also a spanner in the works of our logistics - we were booked on the 5 pm train from Guiyang to Liupanshui. And had intended to get a couple of hours birding at Guiyang - not that we expected to see an awful lot there.

Worryingly, they announced that all the passengers on the flight were invited to take rooms at the airport hotel. If a Western airline had done this, you would be contemplating at least a day's delay. Hence, my increasing frustration. No sooner had we checked into the hotel, however, we were told that we would be leaving 'within the hour' (saw Common Buzzard; 2 Black-collared Starlings and a Great Tit near the hotel). Full marks, then, to Nanjing Airlines - 'only' a 5 hour delay, and yet they put everyone up in a hotel. I have been taking internal flights in China for over 5 years (sometimes several times a month), and in that time I have only experienced a couple of delays - and this was the first plane to be delayed more than an hour (so, like their buses, and train system, internal flights in China are actually very reliable).

We took off at 4.15 pm, arriving Guiyang at 6 pm. We went straight to the train station, and managed to buy the last 'hard seats' for the 7 pm train to Liupanshui. The trick in China is to buy 'hard seats' and upgrade to sleeper accommodation once you are on the train - because typically you can only buy sleeper tickets at the station the train starts its journey at. And a 'hard seat' ticket doesn't necessarily guarantee a seat - unless numbered, it just gets you on to the train. So we upgraded to a sleeper berth and managed to get a few hours sleep before arriving at Liupanshui at 0.45 am. Taxi to the hotel (Xinhua Dajiudian). Trip back on schedule, although only 3 species on the day (trip list still at 113 species).

Monday, 31st December 2001. Most birders probably think that Caohai - in westernmost Guizhou, on the Yunnan-Guizhou plateau, is a 'place too far'. The opening of a good road from Liupanshui to Weining, however, has made it a lot more accessible than before. The new road has cut 3 to 4 hours off the journey time. It is now possible to do the trip in about an hour and a half. So, with this in mind, we arranged a taxi for 7 am. We sped between clumps of vertical limestone mountains, climbing to the high plateau that spans all the way to northern Yunnan. A stop at a mountain stream enabled us to add 2 White-crowned Forktails*, 18 Little Buntings, and a few Olive-backed Pipits to the list.

Caohai is at 7,000 feet above sea level, but is surprisingly mild in winter (the first place we had been to on the trip that had no night frosts). The shallow lake, with areas of dense vegetation - Caohai literally translated means 'grass sea' - spans 96 square kilometres. The area is amazing in a number of respects - not least because it manages to balance the needs of its 100,000 bird population with the needs of the area's 20,000 farmers. This is a big eco-success story. Through education and a small grant-system, the farmers have embraced the objectives of the reserve. And have learnt to live alongside the waterbirds.

We arrived at the reserve's hotel at about 9 am. The head-warden of Caohai, Mr Lu, was there to meet us, and within a short time we set off in his 4 wheel drive car. We drove through the small town that skirts the lake, and down a track towards the southern edge of the lake, where there is a "crane look-out" (a superb vantage point, on the roof of an reserve-employee's house). We had already seen 2 Black-necked Cranes* in a field about a mile before this place, but resisted the temptation to stop and scope them (because Mr Lu assured us that there were 'lots more' ahead).

Sure enough, right in front of us, were many Black-necked Cranes. Amazingly, there were many farmers in the lakeside fields, perhaps within 30 or 40 metres of the birds - which seemed to be totally unconcerned by their presence.

The day was again very bright, and with the sun behind us we were able to fully enjoy the spectacle of Caohai, which stretched away to the horizon - a mass of water, short vegetation, and birds. We were told that about 400 Black-necked Cranes winter here, and so were delighted to be able to see 120 of them in front of us. A far cry from the situation here in the 70s, when the intensive-farming policy of the Cultural Revolution resulted in the drastic reduction of the lake's water-level (one report suggests that it was just-about drained). Not surprisingly, during this period, the numbers of Black-necked Cranes fell to an all-time low - reportedly only a couple of dozen birds.

The recovery started in the early 80s, when a reserve was established, and accelerated during the 90s, when policies were introduced aimed at winning the local population's support for the conservation effort. This 'team-work' has created a world-class sanctuary for these beautiful visitors from the Tibet-Qinghai Plateau.

As well as the graceful and confiding Black-necked, there were c40 Common Cranes (which were a lot flightier than their high-plateau counterparts). Also, from the same vantage point we saw a few hundred Ruddy Shelducks; 30+ Bar-headed Geese*; Black Drongo*; hundreds of Wigeon; Mallard; Spotbill; a flock of 50* Black-headed Greenfinches*; 2 Eastern Marsh Harriers; several Goosanders; 50+ Shovelers; 2 Ferruginous Ducks*; a single Green-backed Tit*; Eastern Stonechat*; Pochard; leucopsis White Wagtail; Kingfisher; several Great White Egrets; a single Intermediate Egret*; a few dozen Little Egrets; Great Spotted Woodpecker; and many Teal.

We also took a punt ride during the afternoon; which enabled us to get within a couple of dozen yards of a group of about 40 Black-necked Cranes (the picture below was taken with a 50mm lens!)



With the sixth crane species of the 'China six-cranes' trip under-the-belt; and on the occasion of New Year's Eve - we treated ourselves to a hot-pot supper and the last bottle of Champagne (for those of you who were wondering, yes we had taken the 'right' glasses with us). From here on in, my travel bags would be quite a bit lighter.

27 species on the day, 9 of which were 'new',; taking the trip list to a very reasonable 125 species (not bad for a winter-week in some pretty cold places).

Tuesday, 1st January 2002. New Year's Day broke clear and quite chilly. We were at the 'crane look-out' at about 8 am. I had made an effort not to look at any bird before we got there; and had the scope set-up so I could tick Black-necked Crane as the first bird for 2002 (surely, some kind of record?). In all, we only saw about 30 Black-necked Cranes during the day, significantly down on the numbers that we had seen yesterday.

Strange bird calls coming from the hill behind us, prompted a 40 minute pursuit finally ended when we managed to get some good views of a flock of about 10 Elliot's Laughingthrushes*. Also, 30+ Dusky Thrushes; a dozen Little Buntings; a single Black Redstart*; a flock of c100 Black-headed Greenfinches; 5 Daurian Redstarts; 2 Kestrels;

12 Olive-backed Pipits (including a group of 9 on a set of telephone wires); and the first of the day's total of c12 Long-tailed Shrikes.

We then boarded the punt, for a 5 hour trip, that would take us a couple of miles further north of Weining, and give us the best possible chance of seeing Baer's Pochard.

The numbers of waterfowl were quite staggering. In all, we saw several hundred Pintail; 500+ Ruddy Shelducks; several hundred Ferruginous Ducks; dozens of Goosander; c50 Tufted Ducks; hundreds of Pochards (but not a single Baer's - despite spending a couple of hours scoping the duck flocks from the punt); 30+ Bar-headed Geese; a few dozen Common Cranes; a few male Falcated Ducks (including an apparent Wigeon/Falcated hybrid); many Wigeon, Teal, Gadwall, Spotbill and Shoveler. Also, Black Drongo; Kingfisher; Eastern Stonechat; Little Egret; White Wagtail; 9+ Citrine Wagtails*; Eastern Marsh Harrier; a few Cattle Egrets*; 3 Great Crested Grebes; several Great Cormorants. As we were approaching Weining, we found a lone Wood Sandpiper*.

In the last two hours before dark we birded the rough ground and trees just to the north of the quay, here we saw Great Spotted Woodpecker, Green-backed Tit, a few Brown-breasted Bulbuls*, c40 Bramblings*, a single Chinese Thrush* and Chinese Blackbird.

The taxi picked us up at 5 pm at our hotel in Weining, and took us back to Liupanshui, where we had a very nice dinner before boarding the night train, which departed at 10.30 pm. Again, we bought hard seat tickets; this time upgrading to soft sleeper.

50 species for the day (and year!), and the 8 new for the trip took the list to 133 species.

Wednesday, 2nd January 2002. Night trains are a great way of exploring China. Fast (about 600 km per night), clean, good food, a good night's sleep, and of course cheap. It's also a way of maximising the birding time available. We arrived in Kunming, the capital of Yunnan province, at 6 am. We went straight to our hotel, had breakfast, and were still able to get to Xishan, the best birding area near Kunming, just after first light (which is at about 7.30 am here).

The best area that I have found during my half-dozen visits there is just after the first temple (on the right hand side, going up the mountain). About 100-200m further up there is a very large deciduous tree, standing alone (at this point the road turns about 80 degrees to the right). About 50 yards beyond this tree is a footpath to the left, which goes downhill to a small pavilion, and is criss-crossed by several other paths. Varied habitat includes bamboo groves, and dense vegetation, with a good

sprinkling of mature deciduous trees. We spent about 6 hours in this area and saw some excellent birds.

Our first bird of the day was Green-backed Tit, followed by a flock of c70 Black-throated Tits* (we later saw another flock of about 50 birds). Near to the pavilion, we had very close-views of a Giant Nuthatch*. In the same area we saw 4+ Rusty-capped Fulvettas* (first of a few small flocks); a very brightly coloured Red-flanked Bluetail showing characteristics of the race *rufilatus* had us guessing for a few seconds; a Chestnut-vented Nuthatch*; a small flock of Streak-breasted Scimitar Babblers*; a fleeting glimpse of a Red-billed Leiothrix*; the first of 4 or 5 Blue-winged Minlas*; and a Red-tailed Minla*.

Further down the track we had a busy 15 minutes when a bird wave hit. The flock of about a dozen birds contained 2 species of Bulbul - both of which were 'new' to both of us. Neither of them looked much like any Bulbul that we'd seen in the book, so during this time, they were referred to as 'number 1' and 'number 2'. Later, after checking with the indispensable *Birds of Southeast Asia* (Robson et al) it was obvious that 'number 1' was Mountain Bulbul*, and 'number 2' Chestnut Bulbul*. The flock contained about 6 of each. During this Bulbul melee, we also were diverted for a few seconds to look at a Spotted Piculet.

Another flock of birds then 'went through' - several White-collared Yuhinas*; and in the same tree - but much higher up - we saw a couple of flowerpeckers. Trouble was, both were females (and against the light). Thankfully, a few minutes later, a male appeared close-by; they were (or at least it was) Fire-breasted Flowerpeckers*. In all there were 6 of them, including two males.

Walked back to the road and up to near the car park at the top (about 30 minutes walk). Here there is another track down the mountain (I had seen a small flock of Maroon-backed Accentors at the start of this track, 11 months before). We searched long and hard, but no-sign of any Accentors. But Brown-breasted Bulbul, a beautiful Blue-fronted Redstart* a few male and female Long-tailed Minivets*; a Yellow-bellied Tit*, and a flock of Japanese White-eyes were some compensation.

The next target bird was Godlewski's Bunting. I had easily seen some on my last trip, on the rocks, near the top of the mountain. The easy way to get up there is the cable car (otherwise it's a couple of hours walk). With time pressing, we took this sensible option.

Unfortunately, this day was a national holiday, and it seemed that most of the tourists in China had decided to come to Xishan. We then worked out that the reason why we had not seen anyone earlier (on the lower slopes of the mountain), was because they were all on the top of the mountain. Thousands of them. Running, screaming, shouting, and generally having a good time.

So, sadly, despite extensive searching, no sign of any Godlewski's. The only birds of note here were Blue Whistling Thrush* and a Blue-fronted Redstart (from the cable car, on the way down). That evening, after so many days in the wilderness, the Western restaurant was a welcome change.

Only 22 species, but 16 of those new for the trip. Trip list now at 149 species.

Thursday, 3rd January 2002. Taxi back to Xishan in the morning: 30 Long-tailed Minivets; Spectacled Fulvetta; several Rusty-capped Fulvettas; female Red-flanked Bluetail; and Green-backed Tit during a very quiet two hours (Xishan can sometimes be quite birdless; other times it can be fantastic) . Back to the hotel and on to the airport for the Yunnan Airlines 11.30 am flight to Mangshi, in western Yunnan.

90 minutes, and some 800 km later, we were touching down. Emerging from the plane, we felt the welcome warmth of the afternoon sun. Although only just south of Kunming, the elevation here is over 1 km lower (The city of Kunming is at about 1,900m). After the cold we had endured for the past few weeks, the afternoon temperature of about 25C felt really good.

A few minutes later, we were in yet another taxi, on our way to the quite-smart border town of Ruili (the mountains of Burma are a few miles to the left - ie to the south - for the last 20 km). In fact, all the 100 km, 90 minutes drive is a pleasure. Beautiful scenery, and some very rich habitat - wooded mountainsides, paddy fields, and riverside vegetation (on the edge of which we saw a White-breasted Waterhen*).

For most of the way, the road runs parallel with the impressive Ruili River, which flows into Burma just south-west of the small town (becoming the Shweli), then merging with the mighty Ayeyarwady River, flowing past Mandalay, before emptying into the Sea of Bengal.

The taxi waited as we checked into the hotel, and then took us to probably the best birding area in the immediate vicinity, Gulan Huodian Shan, which is just a few km north-west of the town.

In about three hours here we saw many Ashy Drongo*; White-breasted Waterhen; Long-tailed Shrike of the black-capped form tricolor; hundreds of Swallows*, many Red-rumped Swallows*; a dozen or so Red-vented Bulbuls*; 2 Blue Whistling Thrushes; a small flock of Rufous-necked Laughingthrushes*; Bronzed Drongo*; Maroon Oriole*; a male Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush*; a female Magpie Robin; Red-throated Flycatcher*; Plumbeous Water Redstart*; a Common Tailorbird*; a Slaty-backed Forktail* and close views of a bird that had not been recorded in China before the early 90s, the very smart Black-backed Forktail*

Not only is the birding around Ruili excellent, the accommodation is very comfortable, and the food is first rate. Combine that with the superb winter climate, and it's easy to

see why Ruili is such a great place to visit (surprisingly, the place has only been visited by a small number of birders).

Friday, 4th January 2002. Back to the same area as yesterday. The morning was foggy - which we discovered is a feature of the area in winter. Spent a couple of hours around the river (near the point where it is bridged). Presumably the same Plumbeous Water Redstart as yesterday; Magpie Robin; White-capped Water Redstart*; same Black-backed Forktail as yesterday; same Slaty-backed Forktail as yesterday; Striated Prinia* singing near the bridge; Red-throated Flycatcher; a few Dusky Warblers*; many Olive-backed Pipits; a few White-browed Laughingthrushes* (not seen by Bob); a perched Lesser Coucal*; Bianchi's Warbler*; Little Bunting; and Yellow-browed Warbler*

Took the track north of 'shuili fadian' and walked up the hillside: Long-tailed Shrike; a few Grey Bushchats* singing from exposed perches. At about 11 am the fog at last began to clear; almost immediately the sky was full of Swallows and Red-rumped Swallows. The emerging sun seemed to be the cue for many birds to start singing. A really vocal Grey-breasted Prinia* was perhaps the loudest songster.

Crossed over to the other side of the river, and made our way to the path above the river, before climbing to the ridge (which is about 1,700m above sea-level). We then returned to the path, which we followed all the way to the small reservoir, before returning to the point we started at.

The birds came in waves. Male Rufous-bellied Niltava*; a Blyth's Leaf Warbler*; a noisy flock of c30 fabulously-colourful Long-tailed Broadbills*; 3 or 4 White-throated Fantails*; a Streaked Spiderhunter*; several Red-whiskered Bulbuls*; a Yellow-bellied Fantail* near the small waterfall; 3 really smart Velvet-fronted Nuthatches*; a flock of about a dozen White-bellied Yuhinas*; male and female Orange-bellied Leafbirds*; a White-tailed Nuthatch*; a few Grey-headed Canary Flycatchers*; Short-billed Minivet*; a Grey-headed Parrotbill*; a Lemon-rumped Warbler*; Pallas' Warbler ; Japanese White-eye; and a female Chestnut bellied Rock Thrush.

With darkness fast approaching it was a relief when we found the footpath leading down the mountain, and to our waiting taxi.

About 36 species for the day, of which 24 species were new (*) for the trip. The trip list now at 189 species - only 11 short of the notional 'target' of 200.

Saturday, 5th January 2002. Back to the 'shuili fadian' place, and a quick walk up the mountain to the small reservoir which we had found the previous evening. Grey Wagtail* was the first bird of the day, shortly followed by Slaty-backed Forktail (1 of 3 that day); and a very confiding Grey-backed Shrike*.

Three hours walking the path (all the way to the end) yielded 4 Grey Headed Canary Flycatchers; 20+ White Bellied Yuhinas; a male Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush; 2+ Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrikes*; 2++ Velvet-fronted Nuthatches; and several White-rumped Munias*. Bob caught up with White-browed Laughing Thrush (several on the path). Also, several Red-whiskered Bulbuls; a female Minivet (too high and fast to identify); a resplendent male Golden-fronted Leafbird*; a female Orange-bellied Leafbird; and 2 Scarlet Rosefinches* in the bushes right at the end of the footpath.

On the way back, we had prolonged views of Rufescent Prinia*. 2 Green Magpies* were surprisingly difficult to get on to; and another (?) large flock of Long-tailed Broadbills (c30). Back to our waiting taxi just after midday and to the reservoir, where we saw White Wagtail; Grey Bushchat; female Daurian Redstart; 3 Magpie Robins; a Little Cormorant* (perched and on the water) - apparently quite a rare bird in the Ruili area; 3 Chinese Pond Herons*, 15+ Scaly-breasted Munias*, one bizarre-looking Striated Grassbird* (which at times looked very crane-like!); Swallows; Little Grebes; a White-breasted Waterhen; many Red-vented Bulbuls; a Blue Whistling Thrush; a Plumbeous Water Redstart; 15 Olive-backed Pipits; and many Long-tailed Shrikes.

From the reservoir, we drove about 40 minutes north-east (in the direction of the airport), to Moli Yulin (the waterfall tourist attraction about 20 km NE of Ruili - which also has a hotel in the grounds should anyone be interested): In the couple of hours we had before dusk, we managed to see Grey Wagtail; Plumbeous Water Redstart; Daurian Redstart; Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher; 2 Grey-eyed Bulbuls* (sitting on the telegraph wires in the open area near the entrance to the park);

Walked up to the waterfall (about 40 minutes up the track that runs parallel with the fast-flowing stream): White-Capped Water Redstart; and a magnificent Spotted Forktail* near the very impressive waterfall (ie at the end of the track). On the way back, Slaty-backed Forktail; and c10 White-throated Bulbuls*. In the open area, a large flock of Little Swifts* and a feeding-frenzy of Black Drongos; and finally a male and two female Orange-bellied Leafbirds in the canopy of a fruiting tree. About 44 species for the day, of which 18 were new (*) for the trip.

Trip list smashes through the 200 barrier, all the way up to 207 species.

Sunday 6th January 2002. Back to Gulan Huodian Shan at first light (about 7.30 am). Again very misty early on. Grey Bushchat on the track up the mountain. Yet another large flock (20+) of Long-tailed Broadbills (or maybe the same flock that we had seen in different places).

Found another Black-backed Forktail (this time at the small reservoir at the start of the mountain path); also a couple of Slaty-backed Forktails further up. Grey Wagtail; White-throated Fantail; Rufous-bellied Niltava; Japanese White-eye; c20 Striated

Yuhinas* (even saw the striations!); Crested Honey Buzzard* circling the mountain; Red-whiskered Bulbul; Maroon Oriole; and c8 White-throated Bulbuls.

Near to the end of the track, Bob found one of The birds of the trip. A female Red-headed Trogon*, perched in full view (at least for Bob). Fortunately, I managed to get a second - this time prolonged - look at it a little further down the track.

A Streaked Spiderhunter flew overhead, carrying straight on; Rufescent Prinia; large aerial flock of Little Swifts; a few Bar Winged Flycatcher Shrikes; a Lemon-rumped Warbler; Green-backed Tit; White-bellied Yuhina; another couple of Velvet Fronted Nuthatches; another female Orange-bellied Leafbird and c6 Lesser Rufous-headed Parrotbills* near the start of the track.

Met up with taxi at about 1 pm, by which time the mist had, yet again, dispersed to reveal a crystal-clear azure blue sky. The temperature in the afternoon rose to the mid to high 20s. And with no wind, the conditions were more or less perfect for an afternoon stroll by the lake.

The lake I am referring to is just to the west of town (actually it was less like a lake and more like a marsh at the time we were there).

We birded here from about 2 pm to about 4 pm. Red-throated Flycatcher; c40 Cattle Egrets; Chinese Pond Heron; many Little Egrets; several Great White Egrets; a dozen Snipe; many Plain Martins*; Pied Kingfisher; 3 Pheasant-tailed Jacanas*; a superb Wryneck*; 10 Olive-backed Pipit on the same set of wires; and 3 Little Ringed Plovers*.

Took the old road to Zhangfeng, to Nanjunli Shan, about 10-12 km NW of Ruili, where there is still some good forest. Here we saw several Short-billed Minivets*; Grey-crowned Warbler*; White-throated Fantail; a close look at a female Small Niltava*; White-bellied Yuhina; many Long-tailed Shrikes; a small flock of Japanese White-eyes; several White-browed Laughingthrushes; a White-breasted Waterhen; c15 Grey Treepies*; Ashy Drongo; an Orange-bellied Leafbird; male and female Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrushes; and a couple more Velvet Fronted Nuthatches.

Because it was the 'last night of the trip', we decided to treat ourselves to an early dinner. So, for the first time during our 17-day odyssey, we left the birding area before sunset.

50 species for the day, 11 of which were new for the trip. Trip list at 218 species.

Monday, 7th January 2002. Our flight to Kunming was at about 11.30 am, and we had intended to spend a couple of hours at Moli Yulin (which is, give or take a few miles, on the way to the airport). However, I had to make some calls to my office in Hong

Kong which messed up the plan; so, with time running out, we decided to go straight to the airport instead.

Back to Kunming, where I continued alone to Shenzhen, then to Hong Kong, where I had an evening meeting (you can fly directly from Kunming to Hong Kong, but you have to spend 5 hours at the airport waiting for the connection - whereas the Shenzhen flight leaves within an hour of the Ruili flight's arrival). Bob, however, returned to Shanghai, where he had another day's birding to look forward to. Therefore, the only birding that day was from the car on the way to the airport. Consequently, only a handful of species were seen, none of them new for the trip.

Final trip list = 218 species.

But I am confident that sooner or later we will get to 220 - it is only a matter of time before some Yunnan-occurring 'subspecies' are found to warrant species status! But, at the end of the day, who cares if there's a subtle difference in DNA that makes a bird a Bianchi's Warbler as opposed to something else.

What is important, however, is the size of the wintering-population of cranes, geese, storks, and other waterbirds that depend on the Chinese bird reserves; and the numerous other birds populations in China that rely on undisturbed mountain forests. Because those numbers are the only numbers that matter.