

Wuling Shan, Hebei province – 14th-15th June 2003

www.ChineseCurrents.com

There are many wonderful mountains within easy reach of Beijing, but very few, if any, that are blessed with the stature, beauty, ecosystem and accessibility of Wuling Shan. The foot of the mountain is about a two and a half hour drive from the centre of Beijing. The summit (c180km north-east of central Beijing) is reached via a 40 minute ascent along a winding, but generously wide paved road; followed by a 5 minute gentle walk. Waitao peak, at 2118 metres, is the highest point of Hebei and Beijing's majestic Yan Shan range (literally, 'swallow mountains').

The area boasts over 1800 plant species including its 'very own' species of bellflower (Campanulaceae), *Adenophora wulingshanica*. Although not quite a Wuling Shan endemic - it's also found across the border in Beijing's Miyun county - the 'wulingshanica' tribute serves to illustrate the importance of this state-level nature reserve.

Covering more than 180 square kilometres, the reserve is accessible from 3 directions - north, west, and south (the main entrance). Access via the South Gate is particularly appealing because it is here that you will find the very well maintained paved road that connects to the hotel and to the summit. Whereas the other 2 gates only link to mid-level car parks, that are a hike and another car journey away from the main birding areas.

To get there from Beijing, basically drive north-east down the road that runs parallel to the airport expressway, and continue to Miyun. Shortly after Miyun take a right turn, signposted to Xinglong. The road on the Beijing side is quite narrow in places, but improves after you cross the border into Hebei. At Xinglong, either continue to the mountain, or if you prefer drop the car at the park office (opposite the railway station at the 'far end' of the town) and take the park bus.

Please bear in mind that if you go by taxi, then you will have to pay for the driver and the car. At 71 RMB per person and 45 RMB for the car it's not cheap; but this is, from a birder's selfish perspective, probably a blessing as it undoubtedly deters many local tourists from visiting the reserve. In the 6 hour walk down the mountain on the Sunday we only saw a handful of cars (although the ongoing restrictions imposed because of SARS would also have contributed to the paucity of vehicles).

Beijing was in the mid-30s on the day we travelled, so it was a relief to feel the cool mountain air. In fact, when we arrived at our hotel - the Lianhua Chi (literally 'Lotus Flower Pond'), which is at 1800m - it was decidedly cold. Thankfully, the hotel had worked out that most Beijingers would arrive there ill equipped, and were only too pleased to hire out traditional mountain coats for the duration of the visit.

We donned our jackets and drove the short distance to the peak. The first bird of note there was a very vocal **Rosy Pipit** (the first of c6 seen at or near the top of the mountain). Wuling Shan (literally Fog-spirit Mountain) lived up to its name. Visibility was down to 50 or 60 metres for the first hour at the top. Then, as if someone had turned on the lights, the fog drifted to the north, and the mountain appeared in front of us in all its grandeur.

Godlewski's Buntings appeared from nowhere as did the first of many **Chinese Leaf Warblers**. Strolling down the road towards the hotel, we had a fly-by **Fea's Thrush**; and a quite-remarkable 'flurry' of minivets. A flock of 4 'yellow' birds flew in noisily and left again a few minutes later. Good to see that the species is still alive and well in Hebei - close to the northern limit of its known range. Also, **Wren**, 2 **Hobbies**, 2 **Blyth's Leaf Warblers** and a total of 10 **Godlewski's**. Reached the hotel at about 4 p.m. On arrival, delighted to hear the loud, distinctive song of a species that had eluded me on my travels in other parts of China. **White-bellied Redstart** has a remnant population in Hebei, which has somehow been cut-off from the main population that extends across much of central and western China.

The bird was calling near a rocky outcrop just beyond the wooden huts adjacent to the hotel restaurant. Hearing the bird it easy, but seeing this ultra-skulker is quite a different proposition. Waited until about dark and only managed the briefest glimpse. 2 **Large-Hawk Cuckoos** were somewhat easier to see as they sat out on exposed perches to shout their maddening call at each other. The scope views of this surprisingly difficult to see species were appreciated. Also, **Chinese Song Thrush** calling near here, but unfortunately couldn't hear the far-less-melodic Fea's. An excellent dinner at the hotel restaurant rounded off a thoroughly enjoyable day. 0415 alarm call, and quickly back again to the same rocky outcrop. The White-bellied Redstarts were in full-voice - at least three birds within a very short distance of each other. But, again, no show.

Walked up the track to the north of the hotel where 2 more of them were giving it large. One, frustratingly, was very close. Decided to go in to the pine wood and walk the bird towards the corner (next to where two tracks crossed). This paid big dividends, as the bird ran into the open where we were able to enjoy prolonged views down to just a few

feet. Even managed a 10 minute scope view of this very vocal bird, as it perched in the low branches of a pine tree, where it displayed an exotic combination of midnight-blue upperparts, whitish belly, and constantly flicked and fanned orangey-red 'start'. Then on to a nest of little wooden cottages, just behind the hotel. Here we found a very confiding pair of **Fea's Thrushes**, which kept returning to the same area to gather beak-fuls of caterpillars, before flying into the wood opposite to presumably feed their hungry young. The species has a very restricted breeding distribution - and is only known from a few sites in Hebei, Shanxi and Beijing. (in winter it has been recorded in West Bengal, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland and Manipur, north-east India, Burma, north-west Thailand and Laos - per Birdlife International.) I had not seen the species for 9 years (Happy Island, May 1994), so was very appreciative of the birds' early-morning show.

Following breakfast we set off down the mountain. We could easily have decided to head along the west-road towards the waterfall and cable car (about 6 km from the hotel), but decided instead to try to find the footpath just around the corner from the hotel. We scrambled over an area of rocks (opposite a staircase leading to the hotel) and indeed found a good footpath that cuts through excellent habitat. However, instead of winding to the bottom the path only cut off a corner of the road. Still, it was good while it lasted - we saw many singing 'phylloscs' of 3 species: **Chinese Blyth's**, and **Hume's Leaf**; a male **Long-tailed Minivet** made a fleeting appearance; as did a fem/1st-year-male **Elisae Flycatcher**.

We emerged onto the road at about the 24 km marker and then followed the virtually deserted road downhill for about 6 km. The very varied habitat - mixed forests, cliffs, and luxuriant vegetation - held a variety of mountain species, including 2 **Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpeckers**; an odd pair of **Nuthatches** - **Chinese** and **Eurasian** in the same tree; **Songar Tit**; a crimson-breasted **Long-tailed Tit**; and last but by no means least, a **White-throated Rock Thrush** (which I failed to connect with).

We were picked up at the 18 km point at about 2pm and were back to the heat of Beijing by 5pm for a well-deserved cool beer.