

Baihuashan, Beijing - 7th June 2003

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Baihuashan is in the Mentougou district of Beijing Municipality, and lies approximately 110km west of central Beijing. The area, which borders Hebei Province, contains the 3rd highest peak in Beijing, Baicaopan at 2050m, as well as Baihuashan (literally 100 flowers mountain) at 1991m.

Unlike other mountainous areas in Beijing, even these highest peaks are accessible to non-mountaineers and can be reached with relative ease along ridge walks. The area is scenically attractive with a variety of habitat, including larch forests, alpine meadows, widespread deciduous cover, extensive areas of scrub and rocky slopes. There are more than 1100 plant and 170 animal species. Of particular interest to birders is that – according to the same literature at least - Brown-eared pheasant occurs in the area.

The area is not difficult to get to, but the journey does take much longer than a look at a map might suggest. Birders travelling to the area are strongly advised to leave early (to avoid heavy traffic on the 109 - a steep, winding single carriageway road). Or better still, why not stay the night. There is only one hotel there, not surprisingly called the Baihuashan Hotel (0)10 6085 6110. Baihuashan is a popular tourist destination, so book early to avoid disappointment.

We left at 5.30am from the 'east-central' Chaoyang district of Beijing. Our journey took three and a half hours, but this included an unscheduled detour of about 10km to Dragon's Gate Ravine (and back again). So please be aware that there is a 'Baihuashan' sign that needs to be ignored. If you want to go to Baihuashan directly do not take the right turn off the 109 that is also sign-posted to Dragon's Gate Ravine (Long Men Jian). There is a large landscape poster of the tourist area near this turning, which should be obvious (and which you should drive past!). Having said that, if you have time, Dragon's Gate Ravine may be worth a visit. If you have lots of time, why not continue along the minor 'loop road' to Lingshan, Little Dragon Gate, and finally to Baihuashan.

Also, if you are planning to spend a day getting there, there are many places along the 109 that would seem to be worth a stop. This main highway follows the Qingshui River for more than 50km. The long valley is flanked by steep mountains and is lined with woods, accessible scrub, attractive marshy areas; a lake or two; and even some patches of reeds. This area may be particularly good during migration. Even though it was late in the season, we saw 4 **Black-capped Kingfishers** perched on the same line of telegraph wires above the dry upper-reaches of the Qingshui River.

We arrived at the sign-posted turn-off to Baihuashan (the same sign that indicates 'Hebei-straight on') at after 8.30. Almost immediately, we were diverted onto a 'two-lane' dirt track to the left (which could in-fact be the stony-foundation of a new road that has been cut into the hillside, replacing the one-way paved road).

After a not-too-bumpy 20-minute ride, we reached the car park. The road continues up the mountain, but cars are not allowed to go further than the car park. There is a small shop near here selling basic provisions. Also, a restaurant attached to the hotel does excellent noodles if you can resist the temptation to dash up the mountain.

A few minutes uphill from here is the cable car station. The choice is straightforward. Spend 40 RMB (70 RMB for a return) for a leisurely ride up, gliding above the tops of the magnificent mature larch trees. Or walk uphill for, reportedly, two hours. We chose the former of course, so missed whatever birds there might have been between 1200m and 1800m. We had decided that the day was going to be an exploratory visit, so had a quite relaxed approach to things.

The rain, which had threatened to spoil the proceedings, stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The temperature was in the mid-teens, about 15 degrees cooler than Beijing. Although unpleasant in the wind, the weather should not have prejudiced our chances of seeing the sought after mountain species. It certainly didn't seem to have dented the enthusiasm of the many **Chinese Leaf Warblers**. In all, we noted 20 or more holding territory at various points above 1800m.

After alighting at the station at the top, we walked uphill along the track for about 30 minutes. The plateau of Baihuashan is covered in alpine meadows - supposedly ideal 'grazing' ground for brown eared-pheasant. Unfortunately we were there on a Sunday, so although quite early (in tourist terms) we were not early enough. So, even if the pheasant is up there - as it may well be - we had no chance of seeing it. Another area worth checking is the 'twin peaks' area.

The taller of the two peaks is Baicaoapan (2050m). The Chinese name suggests that this area also has alpine meadows. To get to Baicaoapan, turn right when you reach the open meadow, and head across the meadow to the Star Scrub Slope - see map (lots of bird activity here). Just beyond here there is a footpath that goes up a steep hillside. From here, continue up and up and up. The high-point, several kilometres along the ridge, can be reached via a not-too-steep path (shown above).

Unfortunately I didn't have time to explore it. **Northern Hawk Cuckoo** flew into and sat obligingly in bushes at the edge of the woods just before this point, as well at least

2 Blyth's Leaf Warblers. The best habitat, however, is on the left as you emerge onto the alpine meadow, towards Baihuashan itself (the peak with an aerial on top). Follow the rough track towards this point, skirting the larch forest that runs parallel to the meadows. An interesting excursion is to be found on the right hand slope of the mountain (marked as 'broadleaf forest walk' on the map). I only had time to 'run' down this trail for 30 minutes, so didn't see many birds. But the habitat is excellent.

This trail could perhaps be connected to the circular trail that returns to the base of the mountain, and could be well-worth exploring. Returned to the cable car, which stops running at 5pm (downwards; 4pm upwards). For early-birders, a walk up the mountain along the small path that keeps close to the cable car route (see map) may be the preferred option as the cable car doesn't start running until 8 am. The highlight of the all-to-brief birding session was **Lesser Cuckoo**; which was seen near the higher cable car station (+3 **Chinese Song Thrushes**).

According to the China Biodiversity.com website - one of the best English language sites on Chinese birds - the following species also occur at Baihuashan (I have only listed species of particular interest that, in my opinion, seem likely to occur in the breeding season): **Yellow-streaked Warbler; Collared Scops-Owl; Eagle-Owl; Bull-headed Shrike; Blue Whistling Thrush; Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker; Nutcracker; White-throated Needletail; Golden Eagle; Chukar; Rock Bunting; Alpine Accentor; Meadow Bunting; Eastern Crowned Warbler; Daurian Jackdaw; Pere David's Laughing Thrush; Elegant Bunting; Long-tailed Minivet; Chinese Nuthatch; Fea's Thrush; Hair-crested Drongo; Koklass Pheasant; Elisae Flycatcher; Chinese Hill Warbler; Hill Pigeon; Yellow-bellied Tit; Yellow-rumped Flycatcher;** and of course **Brown eared-Pheasant** (Baihuashan is close to its stronghold in the Beijing area, Dongling Shan). For the full Chinabiodiversity species list for Baihuashan go to <http://www.chinabiodiversity.com/search/english/locate.shtm> (and then Beijing/Baihuashan)

Birders visit Baihuashan very rarely. I would be surprised if more than a handful of foreign birders have actually visited the mountain. Which is a shame, because I have no doubt that a few days birding here, with early starts, would undoubtedly add to the knowledge of the birds of Beijing.