

**Beidaihe (and surrounding area),
Hebei province, China, 9th - 16th February, 2002**

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Saturday 9th February 2002. Train from Beijing to Beidaihe (Four and a half hours via Tianjin. Although there is one much faster train per day throughout the winter). Arrived at about 3 pm. Reservoir area at 4 pm. The reservoir was frozen, but the lagoon to the east was virtually frost free and held c30 Mallard + 1 male **Mandarin Duck** (the first of many species seen that are significantly outside the wintering area described by MacKinnon et al). Also, male Hen Harrier; 2 Green Sandpipers; c20 'birulai' Vega Gulls; and c50 Goldeneyes in the area.

All of 7 species on the day. But trip list at a whacking 9 species (including 2 species - a flock of c10 Bramblings and 1 Crossbill - seen the previous day at 'SunPark', Beijing)

Sunday 10th February 2002. Taxi at 8 am, south-west towards Qi Li Hai. The 'last' river before Qi Li Hai, which was mostly iced over, held about 200 Ruddy Shelducks. This number had increased to c380 (with a single Spotbill) by the time I returned home. c300 Goldeneyes on the sea off Qi Li Hai; also c300 Black-headed Gulls and c200 Vega Gulls there (again all birulai).

The taxi took me as far as the track went (over 2 miles from the 'entrance'), and I walked back the entire distance. The area of dunes, with scattered small trees, is supposedly ideal habitat for Jankowski's Bunting - a species that could theoretically winter in the area. But no sign, although a flushed bunting near the line of buildings where the taxi was waiting raised hopes momentarily. The bird was, however, a Meadow Bunting (first of 4 seen in this area - 2 x 2 pairs). Also, a single female Pallas's Rosefinch nearby enlivened the proceedings. Finally, 3 Eurasian Curlews on the large lagoon there.

Stopped off at another frozen river on the way back, where a flock of c20 Little Buntings was a pleasant surprise. Again, the literature does not suggest that they winter anywhere as far north as Beidaihe - MacKinnon puts their wintering range south of the Changjiang (Yangtze River).

Back to Lian Feng Shan (Lotus Hills), south entrance, at about 1.30 pm. Jesper Hornskov, the only resident Beidaihe-birder, had kindly informed me that during the previous week, there had been a **Red-throated Thrush** in the woodland by the small stream (only about 200 metres beyond the park entrance). Unfortunately, my arrival had coincided with a cold snap, which meant that the stream where 'thrushes and Hawfinches comes to drink" had frozen solid.

Consequently, the thrush numbers were way-down and I only managed 2 Naumann's (easily the most numerous wintering thrush in the Beidaihe area). Also, 1 Hawfinch; 8 Red-billed Blue Magpies; 1 Collared Dove; 1 Grey-headed Woodpecker; 2 Eurasian Sparrowhawks; 4 Long-tailed Tits (ssp vinaceus); c20 Marsh Tits; 10 Great Tits; and c8 Rufous Turtle Doves.

On to Lighthouse Point for the last hour of light. 3 Hoopoes had not realised that they, too, should be south of the Yangtze at this time (although it is not inconceivable that these were very early migrants). The single Chinese Bulbul, however, was almost certainly a resident.

Trip list at 35, including 29 species on the day.

Monday, 11th February, 2002. Another bitterly cold, sunny day. Met a friend at the south entrance of Lian Feng Shan. 4 Grey-capped (Oriental) Greenfinches; and in the 3 very pleasant hours before lunch we saw c6 Naumann's Thrushes; a single Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker; and 3 Crested Mynahs (a species that has only arrived in the Beidaihe area in recent years). My friend and his family's wonderful hospitality then brought a premature end to the day's birding. First we ticked off Beijing Duck (*ssp Pancakensis*) - on the limit of its described range. And then back to their place on news that there was a 'healthy' population of rare malt whiskeys. Unfortunately the '*Glemorangiensis*' - which was identified as a 10th winter - went from a 'rare malt' to one that was critically endangered, before becoming well and truly extinct. All in the space of a few hours.

There then followed some Danish and Chinese spirits that were more endangering than endangered. The 57% Baijiu (white alcohol) was not quite as smooth as what had gone before, but worryingly it did get better by the glass. The Danish 'Bitter Dram', however, had no redeeming features. But that didn't stop us from condemning it to the same fate as the others. So, an excellent evening, and a fitting way to celebrate the **Chinese New Year**.

At midnight, when the Year of the Horse arrived, Beidaihe was alight with a fireworks display to rank with the best of them. Or at least that's the way I remember it.

Tuesday, 12th February, 2002. Lighthouse Point at 8.30 am. My resilience was rewarded with a flock of c20 Naumann's Thrushes. But there was better to come. I was just pondering why Beidaihe only gets Naumann's in winter (and no Dusky), when I put my bins on, what is for me, one of *the best* thrushes. Nothing less than a glaringly bright Red-throated Thrush. Watched this for about 10 minutes, before it flew off with the pack of Naumann's.

Took my waiting taxi on to the park that is on the west side of the Sand Flats. Closed this time of year, so jumped over the wall, and squeezed through the fence on to The Flats.

The low, bright sun and the strong, bitterly cold south-east wind, made viewing quite difficult. Only managed to see c50 Vega Gulls, 120 Mallards (on the frozen shoreline), and c20 Goldeneyes on the sea.

Up to the small reedbed in the north-west corner of The Flats. I found that I could walk right through it on the ice (taking care not to trample the phragmites), so went up and down for about an hour to get a fullish count of the birds there. Pleased to amass a total of c8 Pallas's Reed Buntings; but even more pleased with the single Japanese Reed Bunting, which obligingly sat out for quite a while.

Then walked to a totally frozen-over Radar Marsh, which still manages to survive despite much-evidence of encroachment. Pallas's Reed Buntings were the most obvious bird there - 4 of them. Also, a Common Pheasant, a Eurasian Skylark and an Asian Short-toed Lark.

Walked to the south-west corner of the reservoir, cutting across the rough ground east of Radar Marsh. A flock of c20 Little Buntings here. Then onto the frozen reservoir and then to the north end, before turning east to bird an extensive area of rough ground (another 12 Little Buntings here, brought the day's total to an impressive 32 - not bad for a bird that's not supposed to winter anywhere near this region).

The lagoon that had hosted the Mandarin a few days before was all-but frozen over. Decided to try Lian Feng Shan again - hoping to find Siberian Accentor. Up again to the Crane watch-point, and then walked to the extreme west of the park, before skirting the perimeter all the way to the northern entrance. Very

few birds, although 2 **Yellow-throated Buntings** were a bright spot (a regular and "not uncommon" wintering bird at Lian Feng Shan).

25 species for the day. Trip list at 45 species - already up to my pre-trip expectations for the entire trip.

Wednesday, 13th February. In 1994, I first visited an unspoilt mountain area called Old Peak. Some birders reading this would have made the pilgrimage there in May for Chinese Leaf Warbler, and many other mountain species.

I've often wondered what the area is like in winter and, as they say, there is only one way to find out. Nowadays, the trip there is really easy. From Beidaihe town centre it took about 1 hour 20 minutes to cover the 70 or so kilometres. Thanks to 'proper' roads, and a long tunnel, this is about a third of the time that it took 8 years ago. The price to pay for this is that there are 3 quite large, modern hotels at the top (as well as the 'one and only' really-quite-quaint ramshackled 'guest house').

The park entrance has an electric retractable barrier. Problem was, there was no one in the ticket office to open it. I thought that it could have been opened manually, but I didn't bother to try - preferring instead to walk the 4 miles to the hotel area at the top (which is in turn about 2 miles to the top of the ridge). The mountain was stupendous - The sun shone in a perfectly glorious azure sky, and in my 6 hours walking only 1 car (and no one on foot) went by. The fast walking pace reduced the chill factor by several degrees, and I congratulated myself on the decision to make the effort to get there. The birds would be a bonus.

As it happened, they proved to be a handsome bonus. The mountainsides were brimming with Siberian Accentors - well, somewhat of an exaggeration, but they were the most numerous bird, and I did manage to see a total of about 40 them (3 large flocks - 9, 8, and 10 + odd ones and twos). One of the other target birds was quickly bagged near the start of the walk - the beautifully-marked Godlewski's Bunting. These, too, proved to be 'everywhere' - a total of about 25 birds (in ones and twos). The third and final target species, Chinese Nuthatch, was heard and then seen very well near the 'first' hotel. In fact, this species seems to prefer to be near human dwellings (the 20 or so that I saw were all in the old conifers near the hotels). Also, a murder of 10 Large-billed Crows, a flock of 30 Vinous-throated Parrotbills, and a 'crested' **Coal Tit** here.

For old times' sake I went to look at the old hotel, a little way down the hill from its modern counterparts. The habitat there is still just as I remembered it - lots of scrub either side of a mountain stream. A major surprise - something which I didn't see all those years ago - was a Pere David's Laughingthrush, which offered splendid views. Also, a flock of 10 Siberian Accentors here, moving slowly through the low bushes; and a lone Naumann's Thrush.

Walked up the mountain in the hope of finding Koklass Pheasant (which breeds here). Just to further prove that some things never change; just as in '94, '95, and '96, again failed to connect with this elusive bird.

At least managed to connect with my taxi, after walking all the way back to the entrance of the park. More impressively, 10 minutes before there, stumbled on to a bird that was perched on a concrete crash barrier. When I put my bins on it, was amazed to see a resplendent **Alpine Accentor**. Couldn't bear to tear myself away, and spent about 20 minutes (at minimum focussing distance) watching it watching me.

Slightly late back to the taxi, but still time to scramble up the hillside opposite to the park entrance, where I'd heard a Chinese Hill Warbler (White-browed Chinese Warbler). Eventually managed to get good views of 2 birds.

Then a record-breaking drive back to Beidaihe (within permitted speed limits of course), in time for my 5 pm appointment with Jesper and his family for a 'return match'.

Thursday, 14th February. Afternoon walk around Lian Feng Shan (north gate to south gate): 18 Oriental Greenfinches; and a Coal Tit. Taxi to Lighthouse Point. Only birds of note there was a flock of 14 Crested Mynahs. 20 species on the day. Trip list still at 54 species.

Friday, 15th February. Met Jesper at 9am for a walk around Lian Feng Shan's southern perimeter. Goldcrest was the bird of the morning (also was a trip tick). Taxi up to Lighthouse Point. Managed to find a 3rd (or perhaps 2nd) winter **Glaucous Gull** off the point. Also, Hoopoe some distance east of there.

Then to the Sand Flats for a sighting of historical importance (in Beidaihe birding terms). We had made our way on to the foreshore to look at the gulls. The final count there was 40 Vega Gulls (including 3/4 nominate Vegas); c300 Common Gulls (including 3 1st winter Kamchatkas); a lone first-winter Heuglin's Gull; and c100 Black-headed Gulls. The shoreline Mallards totalled c310; also 2 Shelducks and c40 Goldeneyes.

Then, at about 12.30 pm, we heard a bunting call above our heads. Jesper quickly got on to the bird, and I could tell from his expressive language that this was no ordinary bunting (at least in Beidaihe terms). This was, in fact, Beidaihe's second record of **Snow Bunting**. The first had occurred almost 89 years before (unless anyone has any later information), on February 17th 1913. Because my home is in Cley, Norfolk, the significance of a Snow Bunting is somewhat lost on me, but this is as 'gripping' to a China-resident birder, as say a Bluebird over the white cliffs of Dover would be to an English birder (well, not quite, but you get the picture).

Final bird of the day was a bit of an anti-climax - Pallas's Reed Bunting (2) in the Sand Flat's reedbed. Now that would cause quite a 'stir' at Cley - particularly in February.

Saturday, 16th February. The final day's birding, and the mercury was shooting through the thermometer housing... It was a balmy 10 degrees (give or take a couple), far warmer than it had been during the bulk of my stay. And there was water for the birds, and therefore more birds for the birders to enjoy.

Jesper and I again met at 9am (giving the birds plenty of time to wake up). This morning's Lian Feng Park southern-perimeter-walk was the best one of the trip. We set the scope on an ice-free pool of water and watched as Naumann's Thrushes (4) and Hawfinches (c10) came down to drink and bathe. Also, 2 Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpeckers; 2 male Chinese Grosbeaks; a Spotted Dove and 3 Yellow-throated Buntings (including a bright-plumaged singing male) in the immediate vicinity. A walk up a path to the garden area produced an in-flight Hoopoe.

Decided that, with a 'warm' wind from the west, it would be worth exploring a little further. So we set off for the place where I had seen c380 Ruddy Shelducks a few days before. Just beyond the Dai River, we were surprised to say the least to see 4 Common Cranes (all adults) winging their way to the north. Warm-weather induced early migrants, or winter visitors? Who knows, but what is for certain is that they were great to watch.

Da Pu He was excellent. Not quite as many Ruddy Shelducks as I had seen on the 10th, but still at least 100 birds. The star bird here, however, was Greater White-fronted Goose (29 birds). As far as I know, not previously recorded wintering in the area. Also, 4 'standing' Common Cranes (2 adults, 2 immatures); a single male Mandarin, 50 Mallards, 6 Spotbills and 2 Pintails.

Buoyed by these sightings, we decided to carry on to Qi Li Hai. A very-close, first-winter Black-tailed Gull was vindication enough for our decision to go further. Also 2 adult Heuglin's Gulls (of a total of 10 birds); 15 'birulai' Vega Gulls; and 2 adult 'mongolicus' Yellow-legged Gulls.

In for a penny.. With the good birds flowing thick and fast, we decided to go even further south-west - down to the salt lagoons of Lao Mi Gou (which is about two-thirds of the way to the Happy Island embarkation point). Just before here, a flock of 8 Common Cranes flew over our heads (northwards). A total of 16 for the day. To put this into context, I know of no published winter records of this species in the area.

The river at Lao Mi Gou held other surprises. A 1st winter **Glaucous Gull** (the 7th gull-species of the day), and 3 Smews (1 male). The lagoons, which were all totally frost free, held 100+ Goldeneyes, 30+ Goosanders, as well as 10+ Asian Short-toed Larks on the grassy fringes. The target bird here, Relict Gull, was unfortunately not seen.

Back to Qi Li Hai and even more surprises. A flock of 7 Whooper Swans on the lagoon (2 adults, 5 immatures); and a fly-pass of 18 honking Bean Geese rounded off a memorable winter day's birding on the Hebei coast.

47 species for the day, and a trip list which somehow had climbed to 70 species.

What will Beidaihe be like in May, I wonder?