

Western Yunnan

(Gaoligongshan and the Burma border)

13th – 20th February, 2010

Shi Jin

Saturday, 13th February

Gaoligongshan, Yunnan

The Gaoligongshan is one of my favourite places in China (when it's not raining that is... don't go in April as I did three years ago).

It's the place to see many amazing species that are on the edge of their ranges (and don't occur elsewhere in China).

The focus of this trip was one of my dream birds - Ward's Trogon. A friend had found a female less than two weeks before and so, with the exact coordinates in hand, how could I resist?

The area it had been seen was, alas, quite cool, dark and birdless, and so after one hour of seeing very little (and knowing that I had three more days here), I headed down to lower altitudes and wave after wave of birds.

Some of which I actually managed to get photos of ;-)

Franklin's Barbet (nom. *ssp franklinii*), sev
Rusty-fronted Barwing (*ssp ripponi*), c40
Grey-cheeked Fulvetta (*ssp yunnanensis*), c100
Black Bulbul (*ssp ??*), c150
Stripe-throated Yuhina (*ssp gularis*), 2
Nepal Sunbird (*ssp koelzi*), 2
Black-faced Laughingthrush (*ssp oustaleti*), few
Spotted Forktail (*ssp guttatus*), 1
White-throated Laughingthrush (*ssp eous*), c60
Oriental White-eye (mon. *ssp palpebrosus*), c20

Rufous-vented Yuhina (ssp obscurior), c50
Buff-barred Warbler (nom. ssp pulcher), sev
Mrs Gould's Sunbird (ssp dabryii), 2
Maroon-backed Accentor (monotypic), 3

btw I'm reverting to the "old" name of Nepal Sunbird, because the name that's now in vogue, "Green-tailed" makes no sense whatsoever. Either that, or I'm colour blind. And I prefer Franklin's to Golden-throated (Barbet).

Other birds seen:

Hill Partridge, 6
Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker, 1
Red-billed Blue Magpie, 2
Grey-chinned Minivet, 2 fem
Bronzed Drongo, few
Ashy Drongo, few
Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush, 1 fem
Beautiful Sibia, c20
White-collared Yuhina, 1

Whiskered Yuhina, sev
White-bellied Yuhina, c20
Black-throated Parrotbill, c10
Grey-hooded Parrotbill, c40
White Wagtail, 1
Rufous-capped Babbler, 1
Large Cuckooshrike, 1
Grey Bushchat, few
Daurian Redstart, 1
Blue-fronted Redstart, few
Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, 1
White-tailed Nuthatch, 1
Rusty-flanked Treecreeper, 1
"Great" Tit (ssp subtibetanus),
c10
Yellow-cheeked Tit, c10
Mountain Bulbul, 3
Brown-breasted Bulbul, c10
Ashy-throated Warbler, few
Black-faced Warbler, 2
"Golden Spectacled" Warbler sp,
1
Red-tailed Laughingthrush, sev
Red-faced Liocichla, few
Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler,













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Sunday, 14th February

Gaoligongshan, Yunnan

In a bid to get the Year of the Tiger off to a flying start, I made a determined effort to see Ward's Trogon. I started the serious climb up the mountain before first light and, after one hour of continuous slog I arrived at the bird's preferred altitude (or at least it was when my friend saw a female there two weeks before). Again, there was very little bird activity at this height and, after two hours of walking slowly backwards and forwards along the forest trail, I gave up and headed back down the mountain.

After 30 minutes or so I hit on a rich seam of birds that kept me occupied for an hour or so. A flock of 18 Speckled Wood Pigeons graced this area, as did a dozen or so Beautiful Sibias, which can look less than beautiful unless they are seen in good light. A flock of Grey-cheeked Fulvetta cruised through and, following on close behind, was a bird I had only seen once before... A Walden's Barwing, which obligingly sat out for a few seconds, soaking up the bright sunlight that had just begun to break through. As you will see from the photograph, the generally accepted name of Streak-throated Barwing is just plain daft (at least for this race), not least because it's more streaked than Streaked Barwing, and so I have taken the liberty to re-christen it.

Really, the people responsible for putting the modern names to birds in this part of the world need to get out more. My "favourite" name change is Indian to Grey Nightjar. How many nightjars are not grey I wonder. And while I'm on this particular soap box, whose idea was it to change the wonderful name of Pere David's Laughingthrush to Plain Laughingthrush??

Which brings me on to the subject of the bird I saw a few yards from the Walden's Barwing: I had never seen one before, although I had seen reports of several being seen in the area over the years. As soon as I put my binoculars on it, I had one of those moments that makes birding so sweet – seeing something incredible, not just incredible in the sense that you have not seen something before, but in the sense that you have never seen anything like it before. I am referring to the binocular-filling view of Hume's Wren Babbler (*Sphenocichla humei*). In this part of the world, the sub-species is *roberti* which is, I understand, even more impressive than the nominate *humei* which occurs from Sikkim to northern Assam (north of the Brahmaputra, according to Clements).

So, it's not hard to work out what I would call it the event of a split. Anyhow, after so many boring brown jobs named after him (not forgetting that Mrs Hume got an amazing pheasant), Mr Hume deserves something a bit special. And Hume's Wren Babbler is that and a lot more. So special, in fact, I actually forgot to put my binoculars down and pick up my camera! But no regrets ;-)

Yellow-cheeked Tit (nom. *ssp spilonotus*), few

Speckled Wood Pigeon (monotypic), 18

Beautiful Sibia (monotypic), c60

Walden's Barwing (ssp saturator), 1
Naga Nuthatch (nom. ssp nagaensis), 1
Yellow-bellied Fantail (monotypic), few
Rufous-throated Partridge (ssp intermedia), sev
Black-headed Sibia (monotypic), 1
Brown-throated Treecreeper (ssp shanensis), 1
Rusty-capped Fulvetta (ssp ?), 8

And also a Black Giant Squirrel!

Other birds seen:

Crimson-breasted Woodpecker, 1
Franklin's Barbet, 4
Black Eagle, 1
Long-tailed Shrike, 1
Red-billed Blue Magpie, 2
Grey-chinned Minivet, 2
Ashy Drongo, sev
White-throated Fantail, 1
Long-tailed Thrush, 3
Bluetail sp., 1
Blue-fronted Redstart, 1
Rusty-flanked Treecreeper, 1
Green-backed Tit, 1
Oriental White-eye, sev
Brown-breasted Bulbul, 2
Striated Bulbul, 2
Mountain Bulbul, few
Black Bulbul, c200
Buff-barred Warbler, sev
Ashy-throated Warbler, few
Robert's Wren Babbler, 1 (now split as per note below)
Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler, few
Rusty-fronted Barwing, c20
Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, c50
Stripe-throated Yuhina, few
Rufous-vented Yuhina, c200
Nepal Sunbird, 1
Mrs Gould's Sunbird, 4





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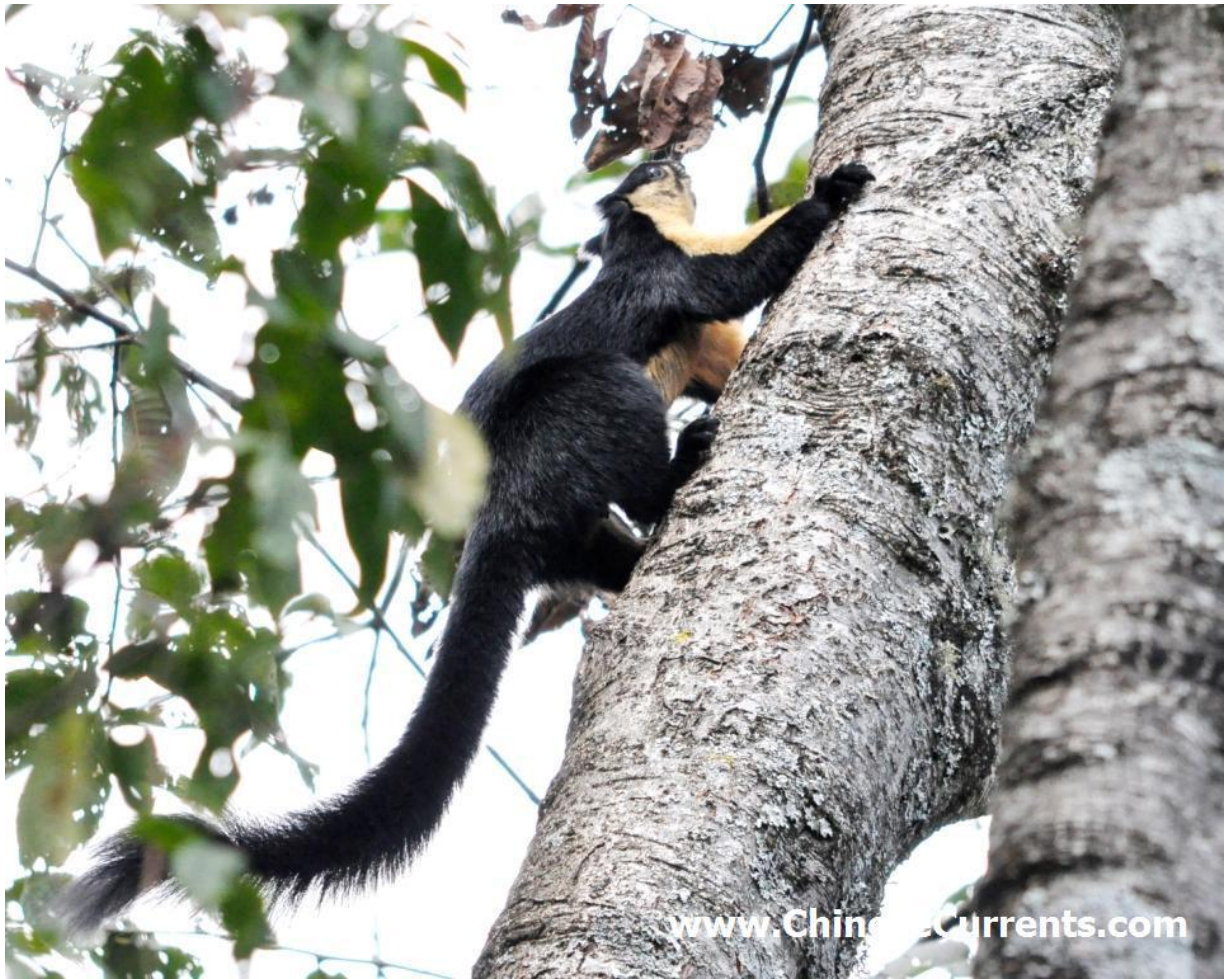


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15th February

Gaoligongshan, Yunnan

What's the best present you could possibly give your wife or girlfriend? If you think that an LV bag, a bottle of Chanel, or maybe even a diamond ring are impressive, then think again...

In 1881, Allan Octavion Hume presented his wife, Mary Ann Grindall, with... a pheasant. The circumstances have not been recorded, but it's unlikely it was wrapped and he almost certainly didn't say, "Cook this f'me dinner luv".

This particular pheasant would last a bit longer than that.

As well as having a wonderful name, Mrs Hume's Pheasant is one of China's most impressive birds. I was lucky enough to find a male three years ago in the Gaoligongshan, but failed to get any kind of photograph of it.

So, with that in mind, I was a bit tense to say the least when, this morning, I heard a rustle of dead leaves only 20 yards or so from me at exactly the point I had seen Mrs Hume's in 2007. Glimpses of its white tail did nothing to relax me.

The good news was that the bird was on a very steep slope and I gauged that it couldn't go up or across without me getting a full view of it. Of its options, the easiest would have been to come down the slope and on to the path in front of me. I pre-set the focus on the point where I thought it might emerge, and waited.

The rustling stopped.

The silence was deafening until, that is, the bird burst from the undergrowth with an almighty explosion. It flew over my head, somehow managing to find a gap in the trees, and flew down the slope faster than a downhill skier.

Well, I did get a great view at least - after all the bird was only 15 yards away at its nearest point to me. But, I was far too stunned to even think about picking up my camera (not that I would have had any chance of getting a shot had I have done so).

Crimson-breasted Woodpecker (ssp tenebrosus), 1
Red-tailed laughingthrush (ssp sharpei), few
Black Eagle (nom. ssp malayensis), 1
Yellow-throated Fulvetta (monotypic), sev
Plain-backed Thrush (nom ssp mollissima), 1
Fire-tailed Sunbird (nom ssp ignicauda), 2
Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler (nom. ssp albiventor), 1
Brown-breasted Bulbul (nom. ssp xanthorrhous), sev

Other birds seen:

Mrs Hume's Pheasant, 1 male
Silver Pheasant, female
Swallow, few
Kestrel, 1
Long-tailed Shrike, 1
Grey-chinned Minivet, 2
Ashy Drongo, 2
White-throated Fantail, 1
Long-tailed Thrush, 3
Large Niltava, 1 male
Himalayan Bluetail, 1
Naga Nuthatch
"Great" Tit, few
Grey Bushchat, few
Black-throated Tit, c20
Yellow-cheeked Tit, sev

Black Bulbul, c100
Mountain Bulbul, few
Buff-barred Warbler, few
Ashy-throated Warbler, few
Greater-necklaced Laughingthrush, sev
Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush, sev
Scaly Laughingthrush, 1
Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler, 1
Rusty-fronted Barwing, sev
Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, c40
Beautiful Sibia, c20
White-bellied Yuhina, sev
Rufous-vented Yuhina, c40
Grey-headed Parrotbill, c60
Mrs Gould's Sunbird, few
Tibetan Siskin, c30











16th February

Gaoligongshan to the border with Burma

The plan for today was to hike over the Gaoligongshan range to Tengchong. The 10 to 12 hour hard slog, which follows the mountain trail known as the Southern Silk Road, goes from 1500 metres above sea level to 3,600 and down again to 1,800.

Unfortunately, the weather yesterday up top was poor. Looking up from about 2,400 metres I had seen that thick cloud was enveloping the mountain tops and fresh snow had fallen. Not ideal conditions to look for one of the gems of this area, Sclater's Monal, to put it mildly.

And so, at the last minute, I changed the plan and hastily arranged for a truck to take me to Tengchong. We left at 5am for the four hour drive, which meant that we would travel in darkness for most of the trip. A Brown Fish Owl, slowly flapping across the road and into the full beam of the truck's headlights, was a pleasant surprise; as were the group of mountain chickens crossing the road (Mountain Bamboo Partridges to be precise). The stop to photograph the latter delayed us by 10 minutes or so, and I called the driver I had arranged to meet in Tengchong to tell him that I would be a few minutes late.

At 9.05am we arrived at the rendezvous point on the outskirts of the city. I said goodbye to my Gaoligongshan driver and hello to Mr Zhou, who would drive me to the border region. Or so I had thought until, that is, I noticed that Mr Zhou has his moped with him. "Where's the car?" I asked.

"Mashang lai!" he said with a serious look.

Nothing annoys me more than being told that something is coming on a horse. That's the literal meaning of mashang. It's meant to be reassuring and to conjure up an image of someone galloping towards you at breakneck speed, who would arrive in moments.

I enquired about the horse's progress. It transpired that Mr Zhou's wife had the car (to squeeze in an extra customer before picking me up). After 20 minutes, my patience was wearing a bit thin. I called Mrs Zhou, who told me that she was still speeding towards me on their horse and that she would be with me in, guess what, no more than another 20 minutes.

I'm afraid this was the last straw. I had got up at 4.30am to be here for 9am and, what's more, if they had told me earlier about the delay I would have stopped in the mountains for an hour or so.

I told Mrs Zhou what I thought about her and her husband's shoddy service, and told her to take her time as I would not be using their lame horse. Although this made me feel better, it probably wasn't a sensible thing to do, as I had to make my own arrangements for what was a less than straightforward journey. But I didn't care, the principle was worth suffering for.

I marched across to the other side of road and waited for a taxi. After five minutes, I hadn't seen a single one. Then I saw an empty taxi driven by a 60 something year old woman. Elder Sister Wang looked surprised to see me, but stopped nevertheless. "Where are you going?" she asked. I told her.

"That's crazy," she laughed, "No ones goes that far west!" In fact, it's impossible to go any further west as my destination abuts the border with Burma, one of the most dysfunctional countries on the planet. After two minutes of discussion, I had persuaded her to take me half way; and after realising she was a remarkably good driver – in fact one of the best I've seen in China – I renegotiated for her to take me all the way (and to pick me up in five days' time). The package also included a two hour birding stop en route for both trips.

Happy with the deal, Elder Sister Wang dropped down to third gear, breezed past a convoy of bread vans that were struggling to negotiate the pot holes on the dirt track, and raced towards one of the few areas in China that has superb lowland evergreen forest.

This forest holds no fewer than three species of hornbill (and a host of other birds that only just get in to Chinese territory). This would be my third trip to the area. On the second trip I had seen Wreathed and Oriental Pied. Great Hornbill had eluded me. Would this be a case of third time lucky I wondered?

Mountain Bamboo Partridge (ssp ?), sev
Sooty-headed Bulbul (ssp ?), c50
Siberian Stonechat (ssp ?), few
Eastern Cattle Egret (monotypic), c50
Great Cormorant (ssp sinensis), c30
Small Pratincole (monotypic), c50
River Tern (monotypic), c10
Grey-throated Sand Martin (Riparia chinensis), c20
River Lapwing (monotypic), 2
Blue Rock Thrush (ssp ?), 1
Eugene's Whistling Thrush (Myophonus eugenei), 1
Crested Treeswift (monotypic), c40
Chestnut-tailed Starling (monotypic), sev

Other birds seen:

Ruddy Shelduck, 1
Blue-throated Barbet, 3
Hoopoe, 2
Pied Kingfisher, 2
White-breasted Kingfisher, 2
Kestrel, 1
Greater Coucal, 1
Brown Fish Owl, 1

Spotted Dove, 1
White-breasted Waterhen, 1
Moorhen, 1
Common Sandpiper, 1
Greenshank, 2
Little Ringed Plover, c10
Little Egret, c20
Crested Serpent Eagle, 1
Long-tailed Shrike, c20
Grey-winged Blackbird, 1
Siberian Rubythroat, 1
White-capped Water Redstart, 1
Pied Bushchat, sev
Black-collared Starling, c30
Swallow, sev
Red-rumped Swallow, c20
Striated Swallow, few
Striated Grassbird, 1
Citrine Wagtail, 2
Grey Wagtail, 1
White Wagtail, few









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17th February

Yunnan, Burma border

I saw a hornbill in China 20 years after I first came birding here. I'm not saying it became an obsession to see one, but I had spent weeks exploring the China-side of various border regions (Vietnam, Laos, Burma). But I drew blank after blank.

Then, last year, I found a male Wreathed Hornbill soaring over the forest about 3 miles from the border with Burma. The following day I found an Oriental Pied, less than a mile from the border.

But still no sign of the biggest, and arguably the most majestic of them all, Great Hornbill.

So, with that species firmly on my mind, I started climbing the mountain track.

After an hour I heard the distinctive call of an Oriental Pied, very close by. In fact it was so close, I didn't have time to lift up my camera when it swooped over my head, quickly disappearing into the valley below.

Just as I was regathering my composure following this close-encounter, I saw IT.

I knew immediately it was a Great Hornbill. It was flying from left to right, just over the tops of the trees of the hillside to the east.

Problem was, I also knew that I would only be able to see it for three or maybe four seconds before its flight-path would take it out of view.

I picked up my binoculars of course, and was able, at last, to watch my most-wanted bird in the world. Next time I'll pick up the camera.

Great and Oriental Pied in the space of two minutes is hard to beat. Or so I thought...

Two hours up the same track I stopped to take a photo of a flock of Nepal Fulvettas (an impossible task, as always) when out of the corner of my eye I saw something coming towards me. I turned and immediately let out an expletive or two...

Wreathed Hornbill! Very close. Flying slowly towards me. Not one, not two, not three, not four, but a FLOCK of FIVE MALES!

Without doubt, the most amazing sight I've ever seen in my birding life.

Not to mention, three hornbill species in two hours of China birding.

What more is there to say...

Wreathed Hornbill (monotypic)
Atherton's Bee-eater (nom ssp. Athertoni)
Pin-tailed Green Pigeon (nom ssp apicauda)
Black-winged Cuckooshrike (ssp ?)
Ashy Bulbul (nom. ssp flavala)
Hair-crested Drongo (ssp brevirostris)
White-hooded Babbler (nom. ssp rufulus)
Hardwick's Leafbird nom ssp hardwickii)
Brown Dipper (ssp dorjei)

Other birds seen:

Lesser Yellownape, 2

Blue-throated Barbet, sev

Leschenault's Bee-eater, 5 (nom. ssp leschenaulti) ["Chestnut-headed" or should that be "Chestnut Head & Shoulders" ?]

Himalayan Swiftlet, c30

Mountain Imperial Pigeon, 1

Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon, few

Emerald Dove, 3

Long-tailed Shrike, few

Maroon Oriole, 4

Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike, 1
Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, 1
Rufous-bellied Niltava, 1
Hill Blue Flycatcher, 2
Nepal House Martin, c20
Flavescent Bulbul, c30
Black Bulbul, c35
Striated Grassbird, 1
Grey-bellied Tesia, 3
Red-billed Scimitar Babbler, few
Rufous-capped Babbler, sev
Silver-eared Mesia, c30
Streaked Spiderhunter, c10
Olive-backed Pipit, 3
Common Tailorbird, few
Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, few













18th February

Yunnan, Burma border

I endured a bone-shaking 45 minute motorised rickshaw ride to get up to Rong Shu Wang at first light. The "one-tree forest" is certainly an amazing sight. But it's the birds of this area that are worth getting up early for. Last year I had seen Collared Treepie and Banded Bay Cuckoo here. Others have seen even more exotic birds, such as Grey Peacock Pheasant and Hodgson's Frogmouth.

A close up view of the blue-bearded Atherton's Bee-eater was a nice opener, as were the Long-tailed Sibilias and perched Mountain Imperial Pigeon, but I didn't find very much else here this morning.

I met some Chinese birdwatchers (there were more than a dozen birding the area) who kindly gave me a lift further up the mountain. It was there, near the highest point of the road, that I ran in to a flock of about 30 Grey Sibia, which entertained for more than 30 minutes.

It was only this evening, as I was going through today's photographs on my computer that I discovered another sibia species I actually hadn't seen - or at least hadn't noticed in the field - a Rufous-backed Sibia! The Grey Sibia I was trying to photograph had just flown and I got a picture of a tree trunk instead... but near the top of the frame was a Rufous-backed

Sibia dropping onto a branch. The comedy of errors continued as one of the later shots of a sibia in flight was not what I thought it was. It was another, or perhaps the same Rufous-backed. Here, then, is the downside of taking photos of birds in a dimly-lit forest, sometimes you don't actually know what you are photographing!

What's all the fuss you may be wondering. Well, the dilemma is that I have not actually seen Rufous-backed Sibia in China or anywhere for that matter. And yet I have two photographs of one (the flight shot of which I'm attaching). How funny (not to mention incompetent).

The hit (and mostly miss) photo day continued until the early evening when I saw a flock of 4 parakeets zipping around a fruiting tree that was on a ridge, a long way off. Frustratingly, I failed to get them in my viewfinder, so their identity remains a mystery. I then convinced myself that they had actually flown into the fruiting tree. I couldn't get any closer to the tree, and I was struggling to pick anything up with my bins, but nevertheless I waited.

Then, 20 minutes later, out came a parakeet flying slightly towards me and the bright, low sun that was behind me. Strangely, it looked bigger than the four I had seen earlier with the naked eye. I thought I'd better get a photo of it.

I'm pleased I did, because it was an Alexandrine Parakeet.. a bird that breeds in Burma and Assam, but has only been seen a few times in China. Talking of Burma, the Alexandrine just kept on going, all the way to and across the river that marks the border with that country.

19 species photographed today, 15 species (in bold) new for 2010:

Mountain Imperial Pigeon (ssp griseicapilla), 1

Long-tailed Sibia (nom. ssp picaoides), 5

Greater Racket-tailed Drongo (ssp grandis), 2

White-throated Bulbul (ssp burmanicus), few

Long-tailed Thrush (monotypic)

"Himalayan" Bluetail (ssp ??)

Atherton's Bee-eater (nom. ssp athertoni), 1

Nepal Fulvetta (tentative ID) If this, then ssp commoda, sev

Crested Serpent Eagle, (ssp burmanicus), 1

Striated Bulbul (ssp?), c20

Grey Sibia (monotypic), c30

Short-billed Minivet, sev

Scarlet Minivet (ssp elegans), sev

Streaked Spiderhunter (nom. ssp magna)

Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher (ssp. calochrysea), 1

"Blue-throated" Barbet (? ssp ?? the prominent black malar stripe on this bird is not described in available literature)

Alexandrine Parakeet (ssp avensis...), 1, the third or fourth record for China as far as I know

Bronzed Drongo (nom. ssp aeneus), c20

Rufous-backed Sibia (nom. ssp annectens), 1

Other birds seen:

Lesser Yellownape, 1
Grey-headed Pygmy Woodpecker, 1
Blue-throated Barbet (nom ssp asiatica ie without black malar), c20
Drongo Cuckoo, 1
Harwick's Leafbird, 1
Grey Treepie, 1
Ashy Drongo, few
Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike, few
White-throated Fantail, 1
Yellow-bellied Fantail, few
Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush, 1
Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, few
Siberian Rubythroat, 1
White-capped Water Redstart, 1
Plumbeous Redstart, few
Siberian Stonechat, sev
Pied Bushchat, 1
Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, 1
Grey-throated Sand Martin, 1
White-eye sp, c20
Flavescent Bulbul, c doz.
Sooty-headed Bulbul (few)
Black Bulbul, c20
Mountain Bulbul, few
Hume's Leaf Warbler, 1
Puff-throated Babbler, 1
Red-billed Shrike Babbler, 1
White-browed Shrike Babbler, 1 fem
Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, few
Beautiful Sibia, 1
Silver-eared Mesia, c15
White-bellied Yuhina, c doz.
Black-throated Sunbird, 3
White Wagtail, few
Olive-backed Pipit, few













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Friday, 19th February

Yunnan, Burma border

I headed back up the border trail at first light, hoping to get a better view of Great Hornbill as well as some photos of a few of the 200 or more species that I could theoretically bump into here.

The sun had not risen when I saw my first bird of the day perched on some bamboo, next to the track. I was puzzled at first, I then noticed its "racquet-tail" and realised it was of course a Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo. [Kindly note that The BBBC is considering a name change from racket to racquet, for the two drongo species that have this feature... it will be resolved as soon as we can get our hands on a copy of the OED, but we suspect that "racquet" is still the preferred English spelling].

Either way, there was something quite arty about the tail and the bamboo (when there's no light and you are shooting at a ridiculously high ISO, then "art" is always a useful smoke-screen... at least for me). With poor light today, "art" is a feature of today's photo collection.

It was still not quite light when I spotted a very small owl perched very high up. It had its back to me, which was quite handy as I could see the diagnostic nape markings of Collared Owlet. The first time I had actually seen the species! But I had to wait for 10 minutes or so for it to twist its neck round for the shot that appears below.

A pair of Leschenault's Bee-eaters, or chestnut "head & shoulders" bee-eaters if you prefer, was the next photo-treat. I've noticed that this bird seems to prefer butterflies to bees.. at least in these parts. Just as I was watching one dismember a butterfly, a female Greater Flameback flew past, which I somehow managed to get a flight shot of.

Much further up the track (about three and a half hours walk up, or perhaps 14 or so km) I sat down to eat some lemon cake. Very nice it was too. I was just washing it down with some cold, red tea, when I saw something that made me splutter. A female Wreathed Hornbill was flying languidly towards me, above the hillside, at almost eye-level. I swapped the bottle of tea for my camera, and fired off several shots. The Wreathed Hornbill then landed in a tree. It looked around for a few minutes, squawked a few times, and then set off. I had my camera poised just as it did so, and was able to get some shots of the bird looking more like a jet-fighter than a hornbill.

Just as I was thinking that birding doesn't get any better than this, the sky darkened... (..actually I am exaggerating somewhat, but they are big birds). The male and female Wreathed Hornbill slowly glided past in the direction of the lone female I had seen just a few minutes before. The sequence of photos that appear below capture the events as they unfolded.

Assuming that this male was not one of the party of 5 bachelors I had seen two days before, then there are at least EIGHT Wreathed Hornbills in this area.

I came down the mountain a little early in an effort to see some parakeets down by the river. No luck, but in the half-light of the evening (hence the "arty" photos), I did find and photograph three species I had not seen before on this trip – within 100 yards of each other (all, thankfully, on the China-side of the border):

Little Green Bee-eater, Red-wattled Lapwing (2), and a Wire-tailed Swallow! The latter was

well-appreciated because there have not been many China records. In fact, the one I found very near here three years ago was perhaps only the second or third country-record.

I noticed that there was a Chinese bird-watcher just down the track, who had a big lens. I shouted him over excitedly. Problem was, there were now three or four hundred swallows without wire-tails swirling around. I tried to explain the significance of what I'd just seen, somehow remembering the Chinese name for the bird, which I blurted out. At that point, the photographer lost interest in the hunt.

"Wire-tailed Swallow?" he questioned.

"I photographed one of those a few days ago at Ruili" [5 hours drive south of here].

Just as I had re-found the bird and was re-defining the word futility by trying to take some flight photos of it in the murky half-light, he decided to pull the trigger:

"Look!... I've got some really nice shots of it!"

And very nice they were too, but who wants crisp, in-yer-face frame-fillers when you can have grainy-minimalism ;-)

Twenty photos today, of 14 species, all except Wreathed Hornbill are new for 2010.

Lesser Racket-tailed Drongo (ssp tectirostris)
Puff-throated Babbler (ssp ?)
Collared Owlet (nom. ssp brodiei)
Leschenault's Bee-eater (nom. ssp leschenaulti)
Greater Flameback (ssp guttacristatus)
Wreathed Hornbill
Maroon Oriole (nom. ssp traillii)
Grey-backed Shrike (nom. ssp tephronotus)
Large Woodshrike (ssp pelvicus)
Pied Bushchat (ssp burmanicus)
Scaly-breasted Munia (ssp yunnanensis)
Wire-tailed Swallow (ssp filifera)
Red-wattled Lapwing (ssp atronuchalis)
Little Green Bee-eater (ssp ferrugeiceps)

Other birds seen:

Goosander, 1 male
Grey-headed Woodpecker, 1
Giant Barbet, few
Blue-throated Barbet, few
Hoopoe, 1
Asian Palm Swift, c20
Mountain Imperial Pigeon, 1
Spotted Dove, c10
Emerald Dove, few
White-breasted Waterhen, few
Cormorant sp, 1
Little Egret, sev
Hardwick's Leafbird, sev
Long-tailed Shrike, few
Bar-winged Flycatcher Shrike, 1
Yellow-bellied Fantail, few
White-throated Fantail, 1
Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, few
Himalayan Bluetail, 1
Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, 2
Siberian Stonechat, sev
Velvet-fronted Nuthatch, 1
Grey-throated sand Martin, c50
Swallow, c300
Striated Swallow, few
Flavescent Bulbul, c20
Black Bulbul, c50
Mountain Bulbul, 1
White-throated Bulbul, sev
Rufous-capped Babbler, 2
Blyth's Leaf Warbler, 1
White-crested laughingthrush, sev
Blue-winged Minla, 1
Silver-eared Mesia, c10
Long-tailed Sibia, few

Black-throated Sunbird, 4
Streaked Spiderhunter, sev
Little Bunting, c60













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Saturday, 20th February, 8am to 4pm

Yunnan, Burma border

My last day of the trip, I was determined to get some shots of a few of the signature birds of the area that had thus far eluded me

I took the same motorbike rickshaw I had taken earlier in the week; arriving at the high-point of the road just after first light.

A female Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush was my first photo opportunity of the day, albeit a distant one. But not nearly as distant as the small woodpecker I photographed next. So distant, I really didn't know what it was. I couldn't see any obvious breast-stripping and it somehow reminded me of pictures I had seen of Fulvous-breasted, which I understand has never been seen in Yunnan. Then again, I had never seen Stripe-breasted, but had fully expected even the female of that species to have what it says on the can... ie prominent breast-stripes.

[The bird - photo below - is in fact a female Stripe-breasted as its shoulders are black, not white-speckled and its black malar stripe is generously proportioned - not that I was able to work this out for myself!]

I spent the next three hours in a clearing, where there was an abundance of seeding bushes that attracted many different species. A Coral-billed Scimitar Babbler was an exciting find, although the light was not good enough to do it justice.

Then came a flock of several Red-faced Liocichla, which were annoyingly difficult to get photos of. But perseverance paid off in the end (well, sort of). The next in the queue was a small group of Whiskered Yuhina; followed by several Grey Sibia. As soon as I saw this species, I was on alert for the much-rarer Rufous-backed Sibia (a bird I had photographed a few days before, without realising it at the time). I didn't have to wait long, before this gloriously-patterned sibia appeared from nowhere, and I was able to watch it for a few minutes and get a "not that bad" shot of it - my 5th Sibia species of the trip.

By now, the sun was shining brightly and I was able to enjoy the excellent conditions for photography. Seeing a Flavescent Bulbul is always a pleasure, but in this wonderful light it's easy to see why this area's subspecies *vividus* was so named.

And, finally, after getting poor shots of the species every day for the past few days I was able to get a reasonable photo of the delightful Silver-eared Mesia. Even a Blue-winged Minla paused long enough for a photo.

But I still had not seen (or so I had thought) Stripe-breasted Woodpecker. This is one of the two woodpecker "specialities" of this area that had eluded me despite spending some 18 days in the field here, over three trips.

With time slipping away, I walked down the mountain road with woodpeckers firmly in mind. A soft tapping coming from the direction of a dead tree attracted my attention. Third time lucky! There it was, a male Stripe-breasted, in good light, at a reasonable distance. I enjoyed the bird through my bins for a while. Just as well, because as soon as I touched my camera, the bird decided that he would rather be elsewhere.

Mrs Wang (one of the best drivers in China you will remember) arrived at the meeting point on time, and took me back to my hotel where I collected my rucksack.

On the way back, we had to pass the place where I had managed to get a poor photo of the Coral-billed Scimitar Babbler in the morning. I thought it would be worth stopping for a while on the off chance that it was still in the area.

As luck would have it, the Coral-billed appeared just before I was about to leave and I was able to get a photo of this beautiful bird in glorious sunlight. Maybe I'm biased, but I really think that this species is far classier than its "Red-billed" cousin. This is my favourite babbler (although Robert's Wren-Babbler is hot on its heels ;-).

This was the last photo of the trip and it's a fitting end to a very enjoyable time in what is one of my favourite birding areas in China, or anywhere for that matter.

15 species photographed today (10 species "new" for 2010 are highlighted).

Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush (monotypic)

Mountain Bulbul (ssp similis)

Stripe-breasted Woodpecker (monotypic)

Whiskered Yuhina (ssp rouxi)

Red-faced Liocichla (ssp bakeri)

Rufous-backed Sibia (nom ssp annectens)

Flavescent Bulbul (ssp vividus)

Common Tailorbird (ssp inexpectatus)

Rusty-capped Fulvetta

Blue-throated Barbet

Ashy-throated Warbler (nom. Ssp maculipennis)

Chestnut-tailed Starling

Blue-winged Minla (ssp wingatei)

Silver-eared Mesia (ssp vernayi)

Coral-billed Scimitar Babbler (ssp stanfordi?)

Other birds seen:

Great Barbet, few

Atherton's Bee-eater, 1

Asian Palm Swift, c30

Emerald Dove, 1

Accipiter sp, 1 male

Little Egret, c200

Cattle Egret, c30

Maroon Oriole, 2

Black-winged Cuckooshrike, 1

Bronzed Drongo, c20

Yellow-bellied Fantail, few

Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher, few

Large Woodshrike, 1

Eugene's Whistling Thrush, 1

Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch, 1

Naga Nuthatch, 1

Grey Sibia, c20

Striated Yuhina, c10

Red-billed Leiothrix, 1

Streaked Spiderhunter, 1

Purple Sunbird, 1 male

















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