

BUCKBIRD JOURNEYS

In cooperation with China Wild Tours, Fuzhou

CHINA

XINJIANG EXTENSION`

The search for the world's most remote Ground Jay

Friday 31 May – Monday 3 June 2013

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Up until relatively recently the 4 forms of Podoces Ground Jays (and another, now considered unrelated, one) of the remote deserts of Asia were probably the world's most difficult set of birds, both geographically and politically, to see. From Pleske's (now Iranian) in Iran, through Panders (now Turkestan) in s-central "Russia", Henderson's (now Mongolian) in west China and Outer Mongolia, Hume's (Hume's Groundpecker) in Tibet and on to Biddulph's (now Xinjiang) in far north west China all were not only difficult of access but for the most part, until the 1980 / 1990's almost totally off limits to foreigners. Even now birders balk at the complexity of finding some of them

Most remote and seldom seen of them all is Xinjiang, confined to the wastes of the Takla Makan desert in far west China, close to the sites of her now defunct nuclear programme and for many year's totally off limits. In 1996 I had a chance whilst on a Birdquest tour of Tibet but mechanical troubles got in the way, now, whilst planning the Buckbird tour of south and east China, why not a small extension to the other end of this vast country to seek out this bird and any others we could find in this seldom visited region? For me there was an added incentive – not only would it complete the set of Ground Jays, under current taxonomy it would be my last Jay of all

Surprisingly two others elected to join in (or perhaps not so surprising as they were the same two who had taken the Scaly-sided Merganser extension to Jiangxi whilst on a trip to Thailand and Burma in 2012!) so off we went. In the end we succeeded admirably although the circumstances were not quite what we expected, but three days in a completely new faunal area to the rest of the tour were never going to allow us more than to scratch the surface of the many birds and mammals to be found even in these inhospitable lands. It was Menxiu's second visit to this area

Friday 31 May

The S and E China group disperses at Shanghai Airport leaving the remaining four to catch the afternoon China Southern Airlines 5 hour flight to Urumqui. No longer a one horse desert town, Urumqui is now a typically booming Chinese city and our 2200 arrival translates into an arrival at our hotel after midnight

Saturday 1 June

We all squeeze into our Nissan Pajero at 0900 and our admirable driver commences the long drive westwards. Out of Urumqui we soon start to ascend the flank of the eastern end of the mighty Tien Shan mountains and pass through a lot of good looking forest on our ascent of the 4280m Hoie Xia Pass, doubtless missing a lot of good birds on the way. As we ascend into grassy river plateaus the scenery is awesome with great stony ridges topped by snow capped peaks. The birds we do see are often curiously “European” including a huge Cinereous Vulture, a couple of Golden Eagles, House Martins, Blackbirds, Black Redstart, Snow Finches and both Red and Yellow-billed Choughs. There are however some of a more eastern nature – Himalayan Griffon, Upland Buzzard, a couple of pristine White-winged Redstarts, Rufous-tailed Shrike and a male Common Rosefinch. Several Long-tailed Marmots and the smaller Long-tailed Ground-Squirrel add to the eastern flavour

Over the divide it becomes progressively more arid as we reach the city of Korla and head onwards into the Takla Makan itself. At first it is a disappointment with large areas under cultivation and under plantations of desert poplar. Even when we reach relatively unspoilt desert where Ground Jays can be seen the hand of man remains everywhere, not least in the busy straight highway leading north. There is little to be seen and an intense and prolonged dust storm cuts the little to almost zero. We eventually limp into the more traditional surrounds of Luntai (itself now at the start of an oil boom) and our simple hotel. A meal of fiery lamb casserole and noodles restores some of the flagging spirits

Sunday 2 June

I coerce an initially reluctant driver and Menxiu to a predawn start and we are soon on the desert road south into an alien landscape of sandy dunes and stunted trees – prime habitat for our quarry. There are birds including both Common (Japanese) and Long-legged Buzzards, Eurasian Stock Doves, Desert Finches and Saxual Sparrows but it is not until around 0830 that we connect with our quarry. The Jays are feeding on the roadside verges and seem little concerned by the now continual and speeding traffic, only moving a few metres into the sand at any time. We count nine in a short stretch, a pair with 3 well grown young and another two pairs all within one mile. We absorb them, photograph them and they will be our last, despite much further searching both this morning and in the afternoon

Back in Luntai breakfast is much appreciated and we while away the morning in the Desert Poplar fringes of the Tarim River where our first endemic Yarkand Hares, a light Booted Eagle, Azure Tits feeding young and Desert Whitethroats (including one feeding a Cuckoo chick) are all enjoyed. It is hot when we reach the Luntai Forest Park where we track down a White-winged Woodpecker as well as another Booted Eagle and a Long-legged Buzzard. The long road back to Korla, although sandstorm free, produces little although a fine Upland Buzzard being mobbed by Crows raises the pulse a little. Our hotel in modern Korla is good, as is dinner

Monday 3 June

We are again up before dawn and on to our destination at the north western end of Bosten Hu, largest body of fresh water in this region. Huge reedbeds lead down to the lakeshore and are alive with birds – Cormorants, Herons, Gulls and Terns overhead and closer to hand Citrine Wagtails, Eurasian Reed, Great Reed and Paddyfield Warblers, Eurasian Reed Buntings and many Bearded Reedlings. They have to compensate for an almost 100% dearth of birds on our long journey, via modern highways and barren country, back to Urumqui and a last hotel and dinner. Our major objective has been spectacularly achieved but there is no doubt we have left a lot behind

Systematic Lists

Tien Shan (TN), Luntai, Takla Makan (L), Bosten Hu (B)

Birds

1. Great Cormorant (*Phalacrocorax carbo*)
B several hundred 3/6
2. Grey Heron (*Ardea cinerea*)
L 1 2/6, B several 3/6
3. Eastern Great Egret (*Ardea modestus*)
B several 3/6
4. Little Bittern (*Ixobrychus minutus*)
B 2 in flight 3/6
5. Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*)
B several 3/6
6. Northern Shoveler (*Anas clypeata*)
B 1 3/6
7. Red-crested Pochard (*Rhodonessa rufina*)
B a single female 3/6
8. Ferruginous Pochard (*Aythya nyroca*)
B 2 3/6
9. Himalayan Griffon (*Gyps himalayensis*)
TN several 1/6
10. Cinereous Vulture (*Aegyptius monachus*)
TN a single 1/6
11. Black Kite (*Milvus nigrans*)
L, B
12. Black-eared Kite (*Milvus lineatus*)
L 3 2/6
13. Japanese Buzzard (*Buteo japonicus*)
L 2 2/6. A loose split from Common (*B. buteo*) not widely accepted
14. Long-legged Buzzard (*Buteo rufinus*)
L 3 2/6
15. Upland Buzzard (*Buteo hemilasius*)
TN 1 1/6, E 1 near Korla 2/6
16. Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)
TN two young birds together 2/6. Ssp *daphanea*

16. Booted Eagle (*Hiraaetus pennata*)
L 2, both pale phase, 2/6
17. Common Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*)
TN, L. Nominate ssp
18. Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*)
B up to 10 3/6
19. Black-winged Stilt (*Himatopus himantopus*)
B several 3/6
20. Northern Lapwing (*Vanellus vanellus*)
B 1 3/6
21. Yellow-legged Gull (*Larus cachinnans*)
B several 3/6. Nominate "Caspian" Gull
22. Black-headed Gull (*Larus ribidundus*)
B several hundred 3/6
23. Common Tern (*Sterna hirundo*)
B several 3/6. Nominate, white bellied, ssp
24. Whiskered Tern (*Chlidonias hybridus*)
B several 3/6
25. Stock Pigeon (*Columba oenas*)
L several 1/6 and 2/6. Ssp *yarkandensis*
26. Oriental Turtle Dove (*Streptopelia orientalis*)
Several around Urumqui 1/6. Ssp *meena*
27. Eurasian Collared Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)
A few around Bosten town 3/6. Ssp *stoliczkae*
28. Eurasian Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*)
TN 1 1/6. Nominate ssp
29. Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*)
Several including one chick being fed by a Desert Lesser Whitethroat at L. Ssp *subtelephonus*
30. Common Swift (*Apus apus*)
Common. Ssp *pekinensis*
31. White-winged Woodpecker (*Dendrocopus leucopterus*)
L 1 2/6. An uncommon desert Woodpecker found from Afghanistan to here
32. Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*)
Common. Nominate ssp
33. Northern House Martin (*Delichon urbica*)
TN 1/6, B 3/6, nesting under bridges. Nominate ssp
34. White Wagtail (*Motacilla alba*)
Several. Ssp *personata*
35. Citrine Wagtail (*Motacilla citreola*)
B several 3/6. Ssp *weerae*
36. Grey Wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*)
TN 2 1/6. Ssp *robusta*
37. Richard's Pipit (*Anthus richardi*)
B 1 3/6. Ssp *centralasie*
38. Alpine Accentor (*Prunella collaris*)
TN one probable 1/6. Not seen well
39. Eurasian Blackbird (*Turdus merula*)
TN 1 in flight 1/6. Ssp *intermedia*

40. Black Redstart (*Phoenicurus phoenicurus*)
TN several 1/6. Nominate ssp
41. White-winged Redstart (*Phoenicurus erythrogaster*)
TN 2 males 1/6
42. Northern Wheatear (*Oenanthe oenanthe*)
TN, L several
43. Desert Wheatear (*Oenanthe deserti*)
L 2 2/6. Ssp *oreophila*
44. Cetti's Warbler (*Cettia cetti*)
L heard 2/6. (h)
45. Paddyfield Warbler (*Acrocephalus agricola*)
B several 3/6. Ssp *capistrata*
46. Eurasian Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*)
B common 3/6. Ssp *fuscus*, a possible future split
47. Great Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus arundinaceus*)
B common by voice, a couple seen 3/6. Ssp *zarudnyi*
48. Desert Lesser Whitethroat (*Sylvia minula*)
L several by the Tarim River. Nominate ssp
49. Bearded Reedling (*Panurus biarmicus*)
B several 3/6
50. Azure Tit (*Parus cyanus*)
L at least 6 by the Tarim River 2/6. Ssp *tianschanicus*
51. Rufous-tailed Shrike (*Lanius isabellinus*)
L, B several 2/6 and 3/6. Nominate ssp
52. Black-billed Magpie (*Pica pica*)
TN 1 1/6. Ssp *bactriana*
53. Xinjiang (**Biddulph's**) Ground Jay (*Podoces biddulphi*)
L 9 2/6. The target bird of the trip and a NW China endemic
54. Red-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax*)
TN at least 20 1/6. Ssp *brachypus*
55. Yellow-billed Chough (*Pyrrhocorax gaculus*)
TN at least 6 1/6. Ssp *digitatus*
56. Large-billed Crow (*Corvus macrorhynchus*)
Several. According to the books they should have been Carrion (*C. corone*)
but they all looked like Large-billed to us
57. Northern Raven (*Corvus corax*)
TN 2 3/6. Probably ssp *tibetanus*
58. Common Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*)
L, B several flocks. Ssp *porphyronotus*
59. Eurasian Tree Sparrow (*Passer montanus*)
Common as ever even in the driest of habitats. Ssp *dilutus*
60. Saxual Sparrow (*Passer ammondendri*)
L common 2/6. Ssp *stoliczkae*
61. White-winged Snowfinch (*Montifringilla nivalis*)
TN 4 1/6. Ssp *alpicola*
62. Desert Finch (*Rhodospiza obsoleta*)
L several small flocks 2/6
63. Common Rosefinch (*Carpodacus erythrinus*)
TN a male in song 1/6. Ssp *roseatus*

Mammals

1. Yarkand Hare (*Lepus yarkandensis*)
L 3 2/6, B 2 3/6. This somewhat variable creature is endemic to the Tarim River Basin of Xinjiang
2. Long-tailed Marmot (*Marmota caudata*)
TN several of these large floppy creatures at high altitude 1/6
3. Long-tailed Ground Squirrel (*Spermophilus undulatus*)
Several alongside 2

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