



Trip Report

China - Giant Panda Expedition

6th to 16th November 2010 (11 days)

Trip Report compiled by tour leader Simon Bellingham



Tour Summary

Giant Pandas are without doubt one of the most iconic mammals on the planet, and if it's your dream to see this piebald beauty in the wild then this trip report is definitely worth going through! I have travelled to the Giant Panda stronghold in the Qinling Mountains three times and on each occasion I have found it equally tough. To understand this statement I need to put you in the picture. The Qinling Mountains run on an east-west axis through central China, dividing the country both geographically as well as climatologically. These mountains are renowned for harbouring the most biologically-rich temperate forests in the world – but don't let this statement fool you: the animals that call these tall, picturesque mountains home are, for the most part, very shy. China also has a population of over 1.3 billion people, and here is the question that needs to be asked: how is it that the animals we seek on this tour have survived in a country with such a high population who regard almost all living things as potential food? Obviously, there are many reasons, but I believe one of the main reasons is that trekking in these steep, bamboo-clad mountains is only for the very physically fit. Yet having said all this, if you are up for the adventure and wish to see the likes of Snow Leopards, Mountain Gorillas or Giant Pandas, then you have little choice other than to sign up and get fit! Our small group was certainly up for the challenge and their perseverance in the field paid off with all the target mammal species being seen on our tour, along with a host of other interesting wildlife and some brilliant memories!



Report

Our ultimate destinations for this tour were two reserves in the Qinling Mountains in Shaanxi Province. However, before heading to the mountains we first visited the Terracotta Warriors and Horses museum located on the outskirts of Xi'an, the arrival and departure city for this adventure. Built by the



first Emperor of all China, Qin Shi Huang who ruled from 246 BC, the thousands of life sized pottery soldiers, horses, war chariots and weapons were buried to aid the Emperor in ruling in his afterlife. Unfortunately, the Emperor's army was decimated after his death and the necropolis was raided and set alight. Forgotten for thousands of years, this monumental work of art was only rediscovered in 1974 when a group of peasants were digging to create a well and happened upon the remnant shards of archaic pottery. Today this site is well preserved and presented and we had a fascinating afternoon gazing over the staggeringly lifelike terracotta figures placed in precise military formation according to rank and duty. The Terracotta Warriors and Horses Museum is now officially a World Cultural Heritage Site and a poignant icon of China's distant past.

Being a wildlife tour we could not resist the urge to embark on a little birding on the museum grounds as well as at a site along the banks of the Ba River on the way back to our hotel in Xi'an. A number of new birds were seen by all members of our group but the highlight for most was certainly a sighting of three Long-billed Plovers on the river. This uncommon shorebird was the last

shorebird in the world to be ticked off on one of our member's world bird list! After an early breakfast the following day our group left the comforts of our hotel in Xi'an for the long drive into the heart of the Qinling Mountains. Our journey along the motorway took us through more tunnels than I had ever experienced on any road anywhere in the world and was therefore not too eventful from a wildlife or scenery point of view. It was only once we turned off the motorway onto a picturesque country road, which would lead us to Huayang Village and the adjacent Changqing Nature Reserve, that we were able to view any wildlife. On this quiet road we saw several new birds and our first mammal for the tour, a Pere David's Rock Squirrel. Pere David, after whom this squirrel is named, was the 19th century missionary/naturalist who described many new species of mammals, birds and plants to science and is perhaps most famous for first describing the Giant Panda to the western world. Unfortunately, we did not see a Giant Panda along this road, nor did we expect to do so; we did however chance upon the totally unexpected: seven Crested Ibis's were spotted feeding in the rice paddies alongside the road.



This attractive bird with its pink and white plumage and regal crest is one of the rarest birds in the world! From a world population of less than thirty birds, their numbers have now gradually climbed due to effective conservation measures implemented by the Chinese. We were hoping to catch up with this species in Huayang Village where there is a well known roosting spot, but we were delighted to find it upon the roadside

instead. This bird had extra significance to our group as it turned out to be one of the last ibis species to be seen by one of our group's members (a different man to the one who ticked off is last shorebird); furthermore, it was seen on his birthday – a most memorable moment indeed!

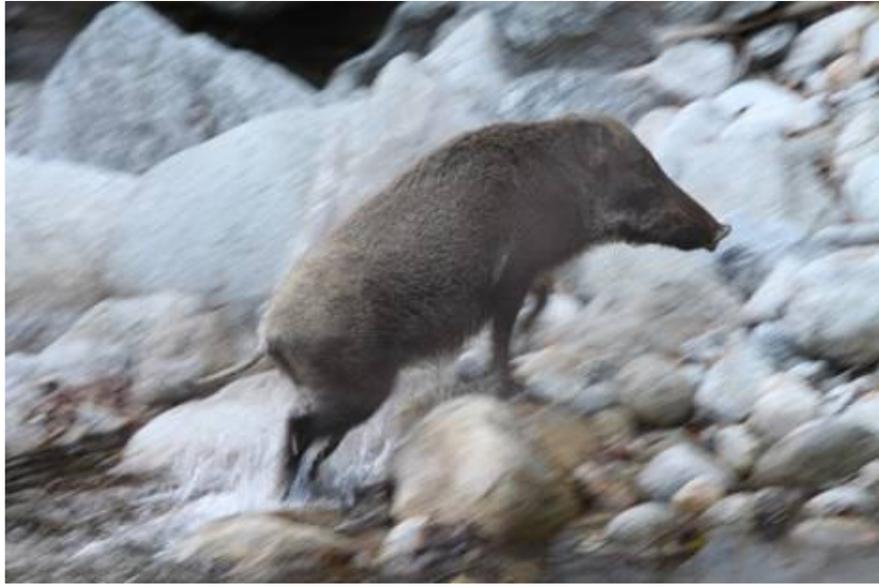


There is no accommodation in Changqing Nature Reserve; however, Huayang Village is conveniently positioned adjacent the reserve and served as our humble base for the next three nights. As this accommodation is very basic we spent the dying hours of the day exploring the village and surrounding farmland, where again the Crested Ibis stole the show when a flock of twenty-seven birds flew overhead to a roost in the village.

Changqing Nature Reserve is home to approximately one hundred Giant Pandas and it was as a result of this iconic species that the area was recognized for its conservation importance and converted from a timber concession to a nature reserve in 1995. For Indri this reserve offers the possibility of a Giant Panda sighting as well as an opportunity to access high altitudes via the old timber concession road network. At these higher elevations we hoped to encounter various species, but most importantly the magnificent Golden Takin. These are best described as a large stocky goat; bulls have been known to weigh as much as 350 kg (770 lb), but the most famous aspect of this animal must be its fur coat that takes on a golden colour in this part of the world. We were lucky enough to find two of these creatures during our exploration of Changqing Nature Reserve, including an excellent sighting of a relaxed bull close to the road moments after entering the reserve on our very first day. We watched the bull for over an hour until the first rays of the morning sun struck the animal, thereby allowing the photographers in our group to capture him at his best. We were also able to catch two brief glimpses of Common Goral, two sightings of Eurasian Wild Boar and numerous sightings of Pere David's Rock Squirrel.



The high altitudes of this park offer numerous positions from which one can spend long periods of time quietly scoping for wildlife on the distant slopes and in the valleys below; we had evidence of Mainland Serow and Leopard in the region and it would have been fabulous to have seen these animals on this



tour. Unfortunately, however, we did not sit and scan for wildlife the following day, choosing instead to search for Giant Pandas in the lower lying valleys.

The Giant Panda's principal food source consists of two species of bamboo, Farges Cane (*Bashania fargesii*) and Umbrella Bamboo (*Fargesia spathacea*). On this low calorie diet they are unable to build up sufficient fat stores to allow them to hibernate over the winter; instead they migrate to food sources in the warmer lower lying valleys. Our search for Pandas in Changqing entailed a lengthy walk with local trackers on a trail through perfect Panda habitat. While no Pandas were seen, we did find numerous areas where they had recently fed and several fresh Panda droppings were also found, both good indications that the bears had moved to lower elevations for the winter.

Having spent two full days exploring Changqing Nature Reserve it was time to move on to the world's most famous wild panda reserve, Foping. After a hurried breakfast we packed up and headed west through the steep but fantastically scenic Qinling Mountains. Once again short stops to scout for wildlife along the way helped to add new species to our list and also allowed people to stretch their legs (the vehicles in China are certainly designed for the Chinese!). The mammal highlight of the journey was a Muntjac Deer that was seen crossing an open area from one patch of cover to another. As usual, some good birds were also spotted on the journey, and those that evoked the most excitement included outstanding views of Golden Pheasant (as well as one showy male that was flushed from the roadside), excellent views of a Wallcreeper flashing its crimson wings while feeding on cliffs along the roadside, and two Collared Crows perched on the outskirts of a village.

Created to protect the Giant Panda and its favored habitat, Foping Nature Reserve lies in the transitive area between the subtropics and temperate zones, covering roughly 35,000 hectares. To enter this ecological paradise we had to load our gear onto pack mules and hike eight kilometers along a well constructed path towards our base for the next five nights – the Sanguanmiao Research Station. The forest ablaze with the changing leaves of autumn, we walked with a tangible excitement in our step knowing that we were within the realm of the Giant Panda, a nearly mythical animal to behold in the wild and certainly one of the most charismatic mammals on Earth.



The Qinling Mountains were much warmer than expected this year, which contributed to substantially more birds than anticipated as a result of several migrant species remaining in the mountains for longer than usual. Unfortunately, the warm spell was a threat to our mammal sightings; as previously mentioned it is the cold weather at high altitudes that forces certain species, and Giant Pandas in particular, into the lower lying valleys during the winter months. Nonetheless, despite the warm weather we soon found fresh evidence of Giant Pandas in the stands of Farges Cane that line the steep valleys close to Sanguanmiao and our group was optimistic on our first morning in Foping Nature Reserve.

The best way to see Pandas in Foping is to let the local trackers work at finding them while the group waits for any positive news. This waiting period is usually spent birding or building up one's strength for what is invariably a tough hike to the place where a bear has been located. Fortunately, the bamboo thickets in Foping are an excellent place to feast one's eyes on bird species seldom

encountered elsewhere and our group wasted no time in searching for some of this avian eye candy. Before long everyone was glued to their binoculars and enjoying views of the beautifully patterned Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler; the vociferous Hwamei, Barred, Mustached and White-browed Laughingthrushes, and confiding flocks of beautiful Golden-breasted Fulvettas, to name but a few. Star birds for the day, however, had to be the flocks of Spectacled Parrotbill and Sooty Tit, both of which are Chinese endemics. Before long the day had drawn to a closure and despite the excellent birding in beautiful surroundings the group was becoming anxious as not a single bear was located by the trackers!

On the following day the group was nowhere near as confident about finding a bear, and despite more good birds being located while waiting for the trackers we were notably anxious about finding the main target for our tour. To our great relief the trackers finally called us in the late afternoon with excellent news; they had located a bear feeding in a stand of thick bamboo at the base of a valley not far from an easy walking trail! When we finally met up with the trackers the bear could be heard feeding in the bamboo and the bamboo could be seen moving as the bear fed – but try as we might it was impossible to view the bear itself as the bamboo was just too thick! The only way to view it was for smaller numbers of the group to each take turns sneaking into a viewing position and in that way to try and secure everyone a sighting. Unfortunately, however, before we were able to implement this plan one of the trackers spooked the bear, which moved up and away on an impossibly steep bamboo-clad slope. A small number of the group then tried the impossible: to climb the slope in the hope of getting a glimpse of the bear. As it turned out, hope is a powerful tool and two members managed to achieve just that – a mere glimpse! Two days had passed and only two of us out of a group of eight had managed to see a Panda! Moral was visibly low and our Chinese hosts tried to lift our spirits by putting together a hearty meal in a local trackers house with beer and wine to boot. Yip, Pandas are not easy animals to see – but the following day our luck was about to change....

With only two full days in hand for the group to realize their dreams of seeing a Panda the pressure was mounting. The trackers set out at a brisk pace to a new area in the reserve and we had not waited too long before they called us with the good news of a Panda having been sighted. On this occasion all but one of our party were able acquire excellent views of a big male Panda, though not without working for it first! The bear had been located by the trackers on a ridge just above the bamboo line; to reach it we had to silently snake our way up a slippery creek and through a dense stand of bamboo to where the bear was resting. It was nearly impossible to get everyone silently over the obstacle course laid before them and by the time we had reached the spot from where we would have been able to view it, it had ambled off into the valley below. Undeterred, the trackers set off again to relocate the bear, which was subsequently found on the opposite ridge across the valley. The trackers then encouraged us to follow them quickly and silently. The obstacle course between the ridge that we were sitting on and the one we needed to reach (quickly and silently) consisted of a steep, densely covered bamboo slope; only

the possibility of a Giant Panda sighting could have motivated the exhausted group to undertake another arduous trek. All but one person decided to attempt to see the bear for a second time. On reaching the opposite ridge the bear had again moved and the group was exhausted; however this time the trackers were ahead of the bear in the valley below. On hearing the trackers in front, the bear turned back to the ridge from where it had just come and where we were now silently sat waiting. The bear slowly made its way back up the slope until it was about five meters away from a wide-eyed party of spectators!! While the perfect animal sighting is one where the animal is unaware or unconcerned by its observers, unfortunately our group was positioned both in and behind trees at the very point where the bear came out on the ridge, and on seeing us it took fright and ran off into the bamboo; an incredible encounter all the same!

With most of the group having seen our target a decision was made to split into two groups on the last day in Foping; most of us went to look for Red and White Giant Flying Squirrels at a well known stake-out, while the trackers and the one member of our group still short of a Panda sighting went out once again in search of a Giant Panda. The Panda expedition was unfortunately unsuccessful in locating another bear, but the Giant Flying Squirrel outing was a great success. Red and White Giant Flying Squirrels are about the size of a small cat, but when they stretch the webbing between their front and rear legs to glide they transform into a wonderful red and white flying carpet larger than a doormat! A climb up a steep Oak filled valley led us to huge holes inhabited by these squirrels; watching this magical animal glide down the valley was definitely one of the mammalian highlights of the trip. The afternoon was then spent at leisure allowing people the chance to rest after the past few days of strenuous hiking. Some of our party decided to walk along the trail that leads out of the reserve in an attempt to get to high altitudes and see new bird species that may be lurking there. As luck would have it, one of these people chanced upon a Giant Panda drinking at a stream, while the others had an excellent view of a Golden Takin.

On our last morning at Foping our group woke up before first light and headed out to where the bear had been seen drinking the previous afternoon. Giant Pandas do not generally move about at night and we hoped that we would find the animal where it was left the previous day. Despite a concerted effort, however, we did not manage to find it.

As we did not encounter any Golden Monkeys while in Changqing or Foping Nature Reserve, in order to catch up with this outrageous looking primate we decided to visit a place called Da Ping Yu where the local Chinese feed a troop of wild monkeys. While the Golden Monkeys lived up to their reputation of being one of the star animals of the region, the experience was unfortunately marred by the fact that the troop was harassed out of the trees towards the food by the local Chinese in their eagerness to impress their western spectators. Ecotourism is a new concept for the Chinese and despite their best intentions to do the right thing, acts of ecotourism at times amount to the equivalent of ecoterrorism! I reflected on this idea as we slowly wound our way

out of the Qinling Mountains and my overall conclusion was that from an environmental perspective things do indeed appear to be improving in China; each time I visit this country there are more local people interested in the outdoors and working with the environment, there are more conservation initiatives and there is more money being allocated to the environment. Indri's Giant Panda tour is by far our toughest tour, yet our groups of enthusiast fuel this ecotourism revolution and give value to the animals that we cherish.



We eventually drove out of the mountains along the base of a steep valley much like those in Foping Nature Reserve, with a clear fast flowing river escorting us for most of the way. We watched as Crested Kingfisher, White-crowned Forktail, White-capped and Plumbeous Redstart and the buoyant Brown Dipper went about their daily duties along the watercourse, while along the roadside the brilliantly colored Red-

billed Blue Magpie and Daurian Redstart stole the show amongst the plethora of avian contenders. However, it was not the fantastic scenery or fleeting glimpses of wildlife that my mind was focused on, nor was it the amazing sightings that we had had over the past several days; instead, it was the prospect of a large western meal and a warm and comfortable bed!



Mammals (11 Species)

Squirrels Scluridae

Red and White Giant Flying Squirrel *Petaurista alborufus*

A magnificent sighting of this animal was had gliding through an oak lined valley above the Sanguanmiao Research Station in Foping Nature Reserve.

Pere David's Rock Squirrel *Sciurotamias davidianus*

These squirrels are common in the Qinling Mountains and we had sightings everyday.

Perny's Long-nosed Squirrel *Dremomys pernyi*

Only two sightings of this animal were had whilst in Foping Nature Reserve. On previous tours to the reserve, at earlier times in the year, this animal had been common and I assume that the lack of sightings was due to them having gone into hibernation.

Bears Ursidae

Giant Panda *Ailuropoda melanoleuca*

Our tracking team found a Giant Pandas on three occasions whilst we were in Foping Nature Reserve and members of our group were able to see two of these animals, including the magnificent male that nearly walked into our group; the third animal was found deep in the mountains late in the afternoon and no attempt was made to trek to the location.

A further Giant Panda was seen by one of our group during the afternoon on the last day at Foping; no activities were planned during this time and people either chose to rest or search of wildlife on the trail that leads in and out of Sanguanmiao Research Station. Imagine the excitement of discovering a Giant Panda on your own in the forest; this lucky individual was able to snap off some good photographs and watched the bear for over an hour; a memorable wildlife moment indeed!

Giant Panda droppings as well as evidence of them feeding in the bamboo were found on all the days that were spent looking for these animals.

Mustelids Mustelidae

Yellow-throated Martin *Martes flavigula*

Tracks and droppings of what could well have been a Yellow-throated Martin were seen while hiking on a trail high in the mountains in Changqing Nature Reserve.

Old World Monkeys Cercopithecidae

Chinese Snub-nosed Golden Monkey *Rhinopithecus roxellanae*

A habituated troop of these stunning monkeys was seen on our last day in the Qinling Mountains at a sight called Da Ping Yu, close to the Foping Nature Reserve turn off from the main road. The sighting of these rare and fascinating primates was marred by the fact that they were baited and harassed to the viewing point by local Chinese who were far too eager to impress their western visitors. Our group did let the "monkey chasers" know that we were not impressed by their monkey chasing antics.

Pigs Suidae

Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*

Two Wild Boar were seen from the vehicle while driving through Changqing Nature Reserve. Signs of this animal were abundant in both Foping and Changqing Nature

Reserve in the form of tracks, droppings and disturbed earth where they had rooted for tasty morsels below the surface of the ground.

Deer Cervidae

Chinese Muntjac Deer

Muntiacus reevesi

A single animal was seen by most of our group on the drive between Changqing and Foping Nature Reserves. The animal crossed an open clearing on a distant slope and we eagerly stopped the vehicle in the hope that we would be able to acquire scope views but unfortunately the animal moved into dense cover and was not seen again. A Muntjac deer was heard calling on most days in the fields below the Sanguanmiao Research Station in Foping Nature Reserve.

Antelope, Cattle, Sheep and Goats Bovidae

Golden Takin

Budorcas taxicolor

Our entire group was able to see a relaxed bull on both days spent in Changqing Nature Reserve. On both days we spent a considerable amount of time watching and photographing the animal without disturbing it. Another Takin was seen with the aid of a scope resting on a distant slope from a high altitude vantage point in Changqing. In Foping Nature Reserve good sightings were had of a Takin bull on the last two days in the reserve. Takin tracks and droppings were seen on most outings into the mountains in Changqing and Foping Nature Reserve.

Mainland Serow

Capricornis sumatraensis

Serow tracks and droppings were seen on a brief walk done at high altitude in Changqing Nature Reserve.

Common Goral

Nemorhaedus goral

Brief glimpses of Goral were seen on three occasions at high altitude in Changqing Nature Reserve. While walking along a trail high in the mountains in Changqing a single animal stood up in a stand of bamboo, the animal froze for long enough for a few of us to see it before disappearing into the undergrowth; the other two Goral sightings were brief glimpses of fleeing animals seen while driving through the reserve. Goral droppings were seen whenever we climbed onto the mountain ridges.

Birds (117 species)

Pheasants, Fowl & Allies Phasianidae

Koklass Pheasant

Pucrasia macrolopha

Three birds were seen on the walk to find Red and White Giant Flying Squirrel. A further two birds were seen by some of the group on the walk out of Foping Nature Reserve. This bird appears to prefer foraging in the open understory of Oak forest.

Reeves's Pheasant

Syrnaticus reevesii

A single bird was seen by a member of our group while walking the trail that leads to the Sanguanmiao Research Station in Foping Nature Reserve.

Common Pheasant

Phasianus colchicus

Several birds were seen in the fields around our accommodation in both Huayang Village and the Sanguanmiao Research Station in Foping Nature Reserve.

Golden Pheasant

Chrysolophus pictus

By far the most common pheasant of the tour; this bird was seen wherever there were good stands of bamboo. A male Golden Pheasant must be one of the most beautiful birds in the world, yet despite a concerted effort, no one was able to sneak up close enough to take good photographs of a male; females are more confiding.

Ducks, Geese & Swans Anatidae

Eastern Spot-billed Duck

Anas zonorhyncha

We enjoyed good scope views of at least forty birds on the Ba River on the outskirts of Xi'an.

Grebes Podicipedidae

Little Grebe

Tachybaptus ruficollis

We found two birds while birding on the Ba River on the outskirts of Xi'an; several birds were also seen on two large dams that we passed in the Qinling Mountains.

Ibises & Spoonbills Threskiornithidae

Chinese Crested Ibis

Nipponia nippon

We were delighted to find seven of these endangered birds feeding in rice paddies alongside the provincial road that leads to Huayang Village and Changqing Nature Reserve. A further thirty birds were seen later in the day as they gathered to roost in Huayang Village; sightings of these birds became a daily event in Huayang Village.

Herons, Egrets & Bitterns Ardeidae

Grey Heron

Ardea cinerea

Seen in small numbers on most of the rivers that we passed.

Eastern Great Egret

Ardea modesta

Three birds were seen on tour; two on rivers on the outskirts of Xi'an and one whilst driving alongside a watercourse in the Qingling Mountains.

Little Egret

Egretta garzetta

A numbers of these birds were seen alongside open rivers and ponds during the tour.

Cormorants Phalacrocoracidae

Great Cormorant

Phalacrocorax carbo

Several birds were seen at a large dam as we drove out of the Qinling Mountains.

Falcons & Kestrels Falconidae

Common Kestrel

Falco tinnunculus

One bird was seen when driving to the Terracotta Warriors museum outside Xi'an and at least one other bird was seen whilst driving through the Qinling Mountains.

Peregrine Falcon

Falco peregrinus

A single bird was seen whilst driving from Huayang Village to Foping Nature Reserve.

Hawks, Eagles & Kites/Accipitridae

Chinese Sparrowhawk

Accipiter soloensis

Three birds were observed on tour; one was seen briefly at a birding stop on the roadside whilst traveling to Huayang Village and Changqing Nature Reserve while good sightings were had on two occasions whilst exploring Changqing Nature Reserve.

Northern Goshawk

Accipiter gentilis

In Changqing Nature Reserve we had good views of this bird in flight on two occasions.

Common Buzzard

Buteo buteo

A single late migrant was seen whilst traveling to Huayang Village and Changqing Nature Reserve.

Long-legged Buzzard

Buteo rufinus

A lone bird was seen from the vehicle on the top of an electrical pole just before exiting the Qinling Mountains.

Mountain Hawk-Eagle

Spizaetus nipalensis

This bird was seen on several occasions in the Qinling Mountains and while most sightings were of birds in flight we did have good scope views of a bird perched in trees near the Sanguanmiao Research Station in Foping Nature Reserve.

Plovers & Lapwings Charadriidae

Grey-headed Lapwing

Vanellus cinereus

A single bird was seen in an open piece of agricultural land outside Xi'an.

Long-billed Plover

Charadrius placidus

Three of these scarce waders were found on the Ba River on the outskirts of Xi'an. This was the last wader on one of our group member's world bird list!

Sandpipers Scolopacidae

Common Greenshank

Tringa nebularia

One bird was seen on the Ba River on the outskirts of Xi'an after our visit to the Terracotta Horses and Warriors museum.

Green Sandpiper

Tringa ochropus

A single bird was seen on the Ba River.

Pigeons & Doves Columbidae

Common Pigeon

Columba livia

Seen in small numbers around Xi'an.

Oriental Turtle Dove

Streptopelia orientalis

A common bird that was seen on most days.

Spotted Dove

Streptopelia chinensis

A single bird was seen in the grounds of the Terracotta Horses and Warriors museum.

Typical Owls Strigidae

Collared Owlet

Glaucidium brodiei

We heard this bird several times at Foping Nature Reserve but were not able to get a sighting of the bird.

Asian Barred Owlet

Glaucidium cuculoides

We had outstanding views of this beautiful little owl as it sat on a telephone line alongside the road; this confiding little animal posed for many photographs adding great pleasure to our drive into Huayang Village and Changqing Nature Reserve.

Kingfishers Alcedinidae

Common Kingfisher

Alcedo atthis

This beautiful little bird was seen in the reeds alongside the Ba River during our walk along its banks on our first day.

Crested Kingfisher

Megaceryle lugubris

We enjoyed several sightings of this oversized kingfisher along the larger rivers in the Qinling Mountains.

Hoopoes Upupidae

Eurasian Hoopoe

Upupa epops

A single bird was seen in the grounds of the Terracotta Horses and Warriors museum.

Woodpeckers Picidae

Speckled Piculet

Picumnus innominatus

This tiny bird was seen and photographed on two occasions whilst birding in the fields around our accommodation in Huayang Village.

Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker

Dendrocopos canicapillus

Two birds were seen in the gardens at the Terracotta Warriors and Horses Museum and were fairly frequently encountered in Foping Nature Reserve.

Crimson-breasted Woodpecker

Dendrocopos cathpharius

These fine looking woodpeckers were seen feeding in mixed flocks on most days in Foping Nature Reserve.

Great Spotted Woodpecker

Dendrocopos major

This woodpecker was seen outside the Terracotta Warriors and Horses Museum, in Huayang Village and in Changqing and Foping Nature Reserves, making it the most frequently encountered woodpecker on tour.

Grey-headed (-faced) Woodpecker

Picus canus

One bird was seen feeding on a tree in the grounds of the Terracotta Warriors and Horses Museum and several sightings were had during early morning birding excursions in the fields around our accommodation in Huayang Village.

Shrikes Laniidae

Brown Shrike

Lanius cristatus

This bird was seen on two occasions during our tour, on both occasions the bird perched on an overhead wire looking for insects in the grass below.

Long-tailed Shrike

Lanius schach

This attractive bird was seen during one of the stops between Huayang Village and Foping Nature Reserves. Our group was trying to relocate a Chinese Muntjac Deer that had been seen from the vehicle when this bird and several others species showed up.

Grey-backed Shrike

Lanius tephronotus

One bird was seen hawking insects from a fence pole whilst driving out of the Qinling Mountains.

Crows, Jays & Magpies Corvidae

Eurasian Jay

Garrulus glandarius

Living up to its Latin name this vociferous bird was heard and seen on most days in the Qinling Mountains.

Red-billed Blue Magpie

Urocissa erythrorhyncha

Very attractive and equally conspicuous, we enjoyed excellent daily encounters with this lovely Asian species in the Qinling Mountains.

Eurasian Magpie

Pica pica

This bird was frequently seen along the roadside as we passed through the Qinling Mountains and in the cultivated fields around Xi'an.

Spotted Nutcracker

Nucifraga caryocatactes

We enjoyed daily views of this attractive species often perched at the top of a conifer.

Collared Crow

Corvus pectoralis

This attractive crow is difficult to find outside China and was therefore high on everyone's wish list; we had spectacular views of two birds on the fringe of Foping Village along with distant views of single birds on the drive in and out of the Qinling Mountains.

Large-billed Crow

Corvus macrorhynchos

Not as common as on previous tours to the region however a small number of individual birds were seen on the travel days in and out of the Qinling Mountains.

Tits & Chickadees Paridae

Marsh Tit

Poecile palustris

Small numbers of birds were seen each day in Changqing Nature Reserve.

Willow Tit

Poecile montanus

Three birds were seen on tour in two in Changqing Nature Reserve and one in Foping Nature Reserve.

Coal Tit

Periparus ater

A single bird was seen in the fields around our accommodation in Huayang Village outside Changqing Nature Reserve.

Yellow-bellied Tit

Periparus venustulus

One bird was seen on the drive in to Huayang Village.

Grey-crested Tit

Lophophanes dichrous

This beautiful bird was seen in Changqing and Foping Nature reserve whenever we were in coniferous forest at high altitude.

Great Tit

Parus major

Seen on several occasions in the Qinling Mountains.

Green-backed Tit

Parus monticolus

This beautiful little bird was abundant in Foping Nature Reserve with several birds seen daily.

Bushtits Aegithalidae

Black-throated Bushtit

Aegithalos concinnus

Small active flocks were encountered on several occasions in the Qinling Mountains.

Sooty Bushtit (E)

Aegithalos fuliginosus

This Chinese endemic was enjoyed almost daily in the Qinling Mountains.

Bulbuls Pycnonotidae

Collared Finchbill

Spizixos semitorques

This bird was seen on the grounds of the Terracotta Warriors and Horses Museum as well as several times in the Qinling Mountains. The bird was particularly common on the edge of cultivated land.

Brown-breasted Bulbul *Pycnonotus xanthorrhous*

This bird was seen frequently in the on tour.

Light-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus sinensis*

This beautiful bulbul was commonly encountered throughout our tour.

Mountain Bulbul *Ixos mccllellandii*

This bird was seen in Changqing and Foping Nature Reserve where they tend to favor stands of bamboo.

Old World Warblers Sylviidae

Sorting through mixed flocks of Phylloscopus warblers in the Qinling Mountains, during the summer months, can be very tricky as a result of the large number of birds and species. These small birds are some of the first to migrate in winter months making birding easier but the post birding debate less interesting! Very few Phylloscopus warblers were seen on this tour due to the advancing winter.

Yellow-streaked Warbler *Phylloscopus armandii*

One bird was seen in both Changqing and Foping Nature Reserve.

Chinese Leaf-Warbler *Phylloscopus yunnanensis*

Two birds were seen in mixed flocks in Foping Nature Reserve.

Two-barred Warbler *Phylloscopus plumbeitarsus*

We had good views of one bird in Foping Nature Reserve.

Rufous-faced Warbler *Abroscopus albogularis*

Five of these beautiful little birds were seen whilst birding on the scenic road into Huayang Village and Changqing Nature reserve.

Babblers & Parrotbills Timaliidae

Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus erythrocnemis*

A small number of these shy birds were seen on two days in Foping Nature Reserve in stands of thick bamboo.

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus ruficollis*

These attractive birds were seen almost daily in the bamboo in Changqing and Foping Nature Reserve.

Rufous-capped Babbler *Stachyris ruficeps*

A number of these birds were seen in mixed flocks in Changqing Nature Reserve.

Chinese Babax *Babax lanceolatus*

Our group had excellent views of five birds in Foping Nature close to the Sanguanmiao Research Station on the morning that we set out to look for Giant Flying Squirrel; up until this point we had only had fleeting views of one or two birds.

White-throated Laughingthrush *Garrulax albogularis*

Large noisy flocks of between twenty and thirty birds were encountered in Changqing and Foping Nature Reserve.

Moustached (Ashy) Laughingthrush *Garrulax cineraceus*

We found this bird either singly or in pairs on two occasions during our stay in Foping Nature Reserve often in the cover of dense stands of bamboo.

Barred Laughingthrush (E) *Garrulax lunulatus*

This bird was very responsive to "pishing" and good views of this Chinese endemic were obtained by all of those who ventured into the thick bamboo stands in response to its call.

Hwamei (Melodious Laughingthrush) *Garrulax canorus*

This bird has a beautiful call and was seen and heard regularly in both Changqing and Foping Nature Reserves.

White-browed Laughingthrush *Garrulax sannio*

Great views were had of this species on our first birding outing into the cultivated fields around our accommodation in Huayang Village; the bird was seen again in both Changqing and Foping Nature Reserves.

Elliot's Laughingthrush *Garrulax elliotii*

We had outstanding views of this bird moving amongst a flock of White-browed Laughingthrush during our first birding outing into the cultivated fields around our accommodation in Huayang Village.

Red-billed Leiothrix *Leiothrix lutea*

Three of these beautiful birds were seen in Changqing Nature Reserve.

Green Shrike-Babbler *Pteruthius xanthochlorus*

This bird was seen on a number of occasions in mixed flocks in the broadleaf deciduous forests lining the valleys of Foping Nature reserve.

Golden-breasted Fulvetta *Alcippe chrysotis*

Flocks of this beautiful bird were seen on several occasions within the Farges Cane stands in Foping Nature Reserve. This stunning little creature is easy to see as it responds well to "pishing" with a call that reminds me of the crackle of static electricity.

Chinese Fulvetta (E) *Alcippe straticollis*

There are two principal types of bamboo found in Changqing and Foping Nature Reserves – dense stands of Farges Cane found in the lower lying valleys and smaller clumps of Umbrella Bamboo found at higher altitudes. This bird initially proved to be tricky as it is seldom encountered in the thick stands of Farges Cane where we spent most of our time searching for Giant Pandas; once we realized that its preferred habitat was the Umbrella Bamboo, sightings became more common. None of these birds were seen in Changqing Nature Reserve however they were seen on at least three days in Foping Nature Reserve.

Spectacled Fulvetta *Alcippe ruficapilla*

These birds are fairly common in dense bamboo and were encountered almost daily on our hikes in Foping Nature Reserve.

Grey-cheeked Fulvetta *Alcippe morrisonia*

Gray-cheeked Fulvetta is now a group of four different species (Zou et al. 2007, Song et al. 2009). The one we saw is *A. davidi*; the nominate race, *morrisonia*, is now restricted to Taiwan. *A. davidi* may be called **David's Fulvetta**; Clements did not split it this year but surely will next year. We frequently encountered this Fulvetta in the Fages Cane thickets of both Changqing and Foping Nature Reserves.

Streak-throated Fulvetta *Alcippe cinereiceps*

Interestingly, this bird has also recently been split by Clements as follows: 1) **Gray-hooded Fulvetta** *Alcippe cinereiceps*, occurring mostly in central and southern China; 2) Streak-throated *Fulvetta Alcippe manipurensis*, occurring mostly in Indochina (e.g., Thailand, Vietnam, Laos etc.); and 3) Taiwan Fulvetta *Alcippe formosana*, endemic to Taiwan.

Great Parrotbill *Conostoma oemodium*

A pair of Great Parrotbills were seen once in both of the reserves we visited. This bird is quite confiding and responds well to both "pishing" and calls; the lack of sightings must therefore indicate relatively low numbers.

Spectacled Parrotbill *Paradoxornis conspicillatus*

We encountered several flocks of these birds feeding in stands of Farges Cane in the lower lying valleys of Changqing and Foping Nature Reserves.

Vinous-throated Parrotbill

Paradoxornis webbiana

Whilst birding along Ba River on the outskirts of Xi'an we encountered a flock of over a hundred of these beautiful little birds; we continued to have sightings of large flocks of these birds throughout our tour.

Wrens Troglodytidae

Winter Wren

Troglodytes troglodytes

One or two birds were seen on each outing around our accommodation in Huayang Village on the outskirts of Changqing Nature Reserve; a bird was also seen in Foping Nature Reserve.

Nuthatches Sittidae

Eurasian Nuthatch

Sitta europaea sinensis

Common and confiding we found this beautiful little bird in varying habitat types throughout our tour.

Treecreepers Certhiidae

Eurasian Treecreeper

Certhia familiaris

We had good sightings of this bird in Changqing and Foping Nature Reserve: most often they were seen foraging within mixed flocks.

Bar-tailed Treecreeper

Certhia himalayana

Whilst looking for Red and White Giant Flying Squirrels in an Oak filled valley, with open understorey, in Foping Nature Reserve, we chanced upon a pair; our only sighting of this species on our tour.

Starlings Sturnidae

White-cheeked Starling

Sturnus cineraceus

We encountered flocks of these birds in most urban areas that we passed through during our tour.

Thrushes Turdidae

Chinese Blackbird

Turdus merula

A few birds were encountered on each outing around our accommodation in Huayang Village on the outskirts of Changqing Nature Reserve.

Chestnut Thrush

Turdus rubrocanus

Large mixed flocks of Chestnut, Dusky and Naumann's Thrush were found resting in trees behind our accommodation in Huayang village; flocks were also seen flying south, no doubt on their way to their over-winter feeding grounds. This attractive bird was also seen in both Changqing Nature Reserve and Foping Nature Reserve.

Naumann's Thrush

Turdus naumanni

A few birds were found amongst the mixed flocks of thrushes behind our accommodation in Huayang village.

Dusky Thrush

Turdus eunomus

These birds were first seen amongst the mixed flocks of Chestnut, Dusky and Naumann's Thrush in the trees behind our accommodation in Huayang Village as well as within Changqing and Foping Nature Reserves.

Old World Flycatchers Muscicapidae

Red-flanked Bluetail

Tarsiga cyanurus

This beautiful Robin was frequently seen everyday in the Quinling Mountains.

Hodgson's Redstart

Phoenicurus hodgsoni

Only one bird was seen during tour; the bird was found close to a river on the drive between Changqing and Foping Nature Reserves.

Daurian Redstart

Phoenicurus aureus

This attractive bird popped up fairly frequently throughout our tour usually in open clearings or on cultivated land.

Blue-fronted Redstart

Phoenicurus aureus

Unfortunately we only saw this attractive redstart on a few occasions during the tour, twice in the cultivated field behind our accommodation in Huayang Village and once on the drive between Changqing and Foping Nature Reserves.

Plumbeous Water Redstart

Rhyacornis fuliginosa

These birds were encountered on all the large open fast flowing rivers we came across in the Qinling Mountains.

White-capped Redstart

Chaimarrornis leucocephalus

These birds breed in the headwaters of fast flowing rivers in the summer, up to 400 meters above sea level, and move down stream during the winter. Only three sightings were had of this bird, twice alongside the river that ran past Huayang Village and once alongside the Heihe Reservoir on the drive out of the Qinling Mountains.

Little Forktail

Enicurus scouleri

This beautiful little bird was seen twice on the river that ran past Huayang Village and once close to the Research Station in Foping Nature Reserve.

White-crowned Forktail

Enicurus leschenaulti

I missed this striking bird on my last visit to the Qinling Mountains on this visit we saw it almost everyday in the Qinling Mountains.

Dippers Cinclidae

Brown Dipper

Cinclus pallasii

We enjoyed multiple views of this charismatic species feeding in all the mountain rivers that we encountered.

Old World Sparrows Passeridae

Russet Sparrow

Passer rutilans

Three birds were seen one morning in the cultivated behind our accommodation in Huayang Village.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow

Passer montanus

Good numbers were seen in the urban areas we visited on tour.

Waxbills, Munias and Allies Estrildidae

White-rumped Munia

Lonchura striata

These birds were seen in a small flock on two occasions in the Qinling Mountains, both times in thick entangled scrub alongside rivers.

Accentors Prunellidae

Rufous-breasted Accentor

Prunella stropiata

First seen on a rooftop in Huayang Village and then on two other occasions in Foping Nature Reserve.

Robin Accentor

Prunella rubeculoides

Two birds were seen high in the mountains in Da Ping Yu not far from where we viewed the habituated Chinese Golden Snub-nosed Monkey troop.

Wagtails & Pipits Motacillidae

White Wagtail

Motacilla alba

First encountered in the grounds of the Terracotta Warriors and Horses Museum and along the Ba River on the outskirts of Xi'an; we also saw several birds during early morning excursions into the fields around our accommodation in Huayang Village.

Rosy Pipit

Anthus roseatus

A number of birds were seen in the open low-lying cultivated fields in the Qinling Mountains.

Finches Fringillidae

Brambling

Fringilla montifringilla

Common in the cultivated fields around Huayang Village; three birds were also seen in the orchards around the Foping Research Station on the second last day in the reserve.

Grey-capped Greenfinch

Carduelis sinica

Seen in small numbers in the cultivated fields on the outskirts of Xi'an and around Huayang Village.

Three-banded Rosefinch

Carpodacus vinaceus

Only one of these splendid birds was seen on tour. This bird was seen by the four tour members who walked to the highest lookout point above the car park at Foping Nature Reserve on our last day in the mountains (above 2000 meters above sea level). The bird was feeding on pine nuts in a conifer forest.

Grey-headed Bullfinch

Pyrrhula erythaca

Excellent views of a small flock of these beautiful bright birds was had by all tour members high in the mountains of Changqing Nature reserve; this bird was seen again in both Changqing and Foping Nature Reserve.

Buntings & Allies Emberizidae

Godlewski's Bunting

Emberiza godlewskii

One bird was seen in the fields around our accommodation in Huayang Village during a pre-breakfast birding excursion.

Meadow Bunting

Emberiza cioides

A single bird was seen on two occasions during our pre-breakfast birding outings in Huayang Village.

Little Bunting

Emberiza pusilla

Several of these birds were seen in the fields around our accommodation in Huayang Village.

Yellow-throated Bunting

Emberiza elegans

This attractive little bird was seen in small numbers in the fields around our accommodation in Huayang Village and in the orchards around the Foping Research Station.

Black-faced Bunting

Emberiza spodocephala

A single bird was seen in the fields around our accommodation in Huayang Village.

Reptiles and Amphibians (1 species)

Viperidae

Strauch's Pitviper

Gloydius strauchi

On our drive out of the Qinling Mountains our group came upon an unusual sighting of this species – more than twenty snakes were found basking in the sun together. We stopped, studied and took photographs of a number of individual snakes ranging from young to old (older snakes are apparently darker) and male to female – a fascinating sighting indeed!

Photo credits: Giant Panda by Gerald Broddez; Landscape by Jonathan Rossouw; Crested Ibis in flight by Jonathan Rossouw; Wild boar by Jonathan Rossouw; Giant Panda by Peter Ferrera; Golden Takin by Jonathan Rossouw; Golden Snub-nosed Monkey by Peter Ferrera; Golden Snub-nosed Monkey by Jonathan Rossouw.

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