

## **Finding Giant Pandas (and other mammals) in the Qinling Mountains – May 2006**

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### **Introduction**

After many years of waiting it is now possible to see Giant Pandas at Foping in the Qinling Mountains of central China. This report covers a trip from 6-19 May (9-17 May at Foping) specifically to look for pandas and other mammals. It should be read in conjunction with Jon Hall's excellent report from October 2005.

[www.mammalwatching.com/Palearctic/palearctchina.html](http://www.mammalwatching.com/Palearctic/palearctchina.html)

In hindsight despite assurances to the contrary May is not ideal for finding mammals in Foping as there is too much cover. However it is still a good month for pandas as they still occur at low altitudes. We eventually saw one on our 5<sup>th</sup> day in the reserve after narrowly missing two animals on our first day

The best guide to the mammals of China is [The Mammals of China](#) by Sheng Helin, Noriyuki Ohtaishi and Lu Houji published by China Forestry Publishing House and available from NHBS for £31 plus postage.

### **Logistics of visiting the Qinling Mountains.**

Two panda reserves can now be visited, Foping and Laoxiancheng. Foping is definitely the premier site and pandas are regularly encountered. At Laoxiancheng the accommodation is a day's walk from the best habitat so chances of seeing pandas are likely to be more limited.

A number of companies in Britain are now offering or planning to offer tours to look for panda, most appear to be charging upwards of £2250 for 2 weeks. Wildwings may run tours in the future. If they do details will appear on their website in due course [www.wildwings.co.uk](http://www.wildwings.co.uk).

I arranged the trip through Jean Wang, the Wildwings' ground agent in China. Jean arranged the internal flights to and from Xi'an, ground transportation and accommodation and we booked the international flights with BA ourselves. The total cost of £1460 per person was much lower than packages currently available in the UK. Jean can be contacted via Wildwings on 01179 658333.

Jean arranged the actual visit to the panda reserve through [www.wildgiantpanda.com](http://www.wildgiantpanda.com) the company that Jon Hall used. They provided a driver and English-speaking guide. Zoe Zuo joined us in Xi'an and for our visit to the Crested Ibis reserve near Yang County, and Jane (Zhu Pengjun) was the English-speaking guide at the panda reserve. Jane is very keen and knows some of the commoner birds as well as the key mammals. In the reserve we also had up to three local panda trackers working with us.

At present [www.wildgiantpanda.com](http://www.wildgiantpanda.com) run trips to the reserve from February-June, and August-November, i.e. the best times for seeing pandas. Other mammals are easier to see from late September to March (see details below), when there is less cover on the trees and many species move to lower altitudes to escape the harsher conditions at the higher levels. The forest itself is superb, one of the most pristine forests that I've visited anywhere in the world with almost no disturbance.

The accommodation at Sanguanmiao Protection Station, is basic as described in Jon's report, although they are trying to improve it with the installation of a solar-powered shower, new

mattresses on the beds, and the provision of a seat to make the toilet facilities more bearable. All meals are provided although I cooked food that I had taken with me. Phil Telfer who travelled with me ate the local meals with no obvious problems.

At present the government only allow two groups to visit the reserve each month although there did seem to be some latitude with this while we were there. However it is likely that Foping will become very popular and that you will need to make advance bookings several months in advance if you wish to visit the reserve.

### Useful websites

[http://www.fpnr.com/index\\_Eng.htm](http://www.fpnr.com/index_Eng.htm)

<http://www.wildgiantpanda.com/reserve/foping.htm>

### When to visit the reserve

- **Mammals** – I would suggest either late September/October or March. May was really not ideal for mammals because of the amount of cover although pandas are still at lower altitudes. It appears that October-November (late September for Asiatic Black Bear) and February-March are best for mammals. Mammals occur at lower altitudes in winter and there is less cover. Pandas have been known to enter villagers' houses in winter!

Pandas mate in March and up to 6 pandas have been seen together. We spoke to a Chinese photographer who claimed to have seen up to 12 pandas in a day in March although I have my doubts)

- **Birding / Pandas** - May is probably a good month as most of the summer migrants are in and singing and pandas are still at low altitudes. A visit to Foping can easily be combined with a trip to the Crested Ibis reserve at Yang County. We also saw Ibisbill on route. The birding is excellent although we were limited in the amount of birding that we did because of the time spent looking for pandas.
- **Birding**– Late May / June is probably best for birding as it is possible to access higher areas where there are good chances for Koklass and Blood Pheasants and Temminck's Tragopan.

### Field conditions

- The walk in to the reserve is an easy largely downhill 8 km walk on a good (largely concrete) track. The walk back is uphill and more strenuous especially the last 2 kms.
- Tracking mammals can be difficult as there are few trails and the terrain is in places very steep. As Jon describes you are often walking through thick bamboo or scrambling along creeks. The trackers all wear camouflaged clothing and can be almost invisible only a few metres away. There are plans to make similar clothing available to visitors. At the very least you should try to wear green/khaki clothing as pandas are very wary and easily spooked.
- As mentioned many of the slopes are steep and slippery. The locals wear flexible lightweight canvas shoes which seem to provide a good grip when scrambling up or down slopes and when crossing rivers. They are also more flexible and quieter than normal walking shoes/boots which is advantageous when tracking pandas. Although they are not waterproof they do dry quickly. It is likely that they will be available to purchase at the reserve in the future. I found that despite having good grips my walking shoes were not flexible enough on the steepest slopes.
- Gloves are useful when climbing rocks and for holding on to trees/bamboo when ascending and descending steep slopes.

- The weather was generally reasonably warm and sunny although we lost a full day to rain on our second day and actually saw our only panda during a thunderstorm on the 5<sup>th</sup> day.

### **Finding pandas**

Pandas occur at a high density in Foping, i.e. one panda per 1.4 km<sup>2</sup> and we saw plenty of evidence of pandas with fresh droppings and chewed bamboo shoots being found almost daily.

We worked with three trackers, Mr He being the senior tracker. The other trackers Mr Le and Mr Feung were also very good. The other senior tracker that Jon Hall worked with, Mr Zhang, was unavailable as unfortunately, for him and us, his house caught fire the day we arrived and was badly damaged. Consequently he spent the time we were there re-building his house.

Looking for pandas can be frustrating in that you sit in one spot while the trackers go looking for pandas. The only exception seems to be if you are travelling alone when you can follow the trackers. Once they find a panda, one tracker will stay with it, and the other will try to move you in to a position where it is likely to walk past you. Alternatively if it is asleep they will try to walk you up to it. Unfortunately both sleeping pandas that they found while we were there woke up and moved off well before we got anywhere near them.

The trackers found pandas on all four days that we looked for them. On the first day due to miscommunication between the trackers we ended up in the wrong place and missed them, on the second day the cover was too thick to get us anywhere near the panda and the tracker only saw it briefly. On the third day we went after another one in thick cover but had no chance as the bamboo was just too thick. Finally they found another in an area of open bamboo and we managed to see it well thanks to the heavy rain which disguised our approach. Once you have seen a panda well they concentrate on other species.

On some days you can sit around for several hours waiting for something to happen but after 2 days they gave me an extra radio so that I could wander off birding while we were waiting.

In hindsight we made a mistake on day 2 when it poured with rain all day. We learnt subsequently that the pandas move lower down in heavy rain and sure enough the following day there were day old droppings right by the main trail. Given that pandas are approached more easily in heavy rain because they have more difficulty hearing people approaching it is clearly advisable to go out looking for them in heavy rain.

Some groups are more fortunate. A Swedish group saw one in open bamboo on the walk in to Foping the week before our visit. While we were at Foping the director of the reserve and the chairman of WWF visited the reserve for a morning. Six trackers went looking for pandas at dawn, found one by 9 am and the director and chairman left having seen panda by midday.

However I believe that our experience and that of Jon Hall in October is more typical. Chris Cook failed to see panda at all in several days searching in December.

The guides only tend to track from 0830 to 1730 when in theory the pandas are less mobile. This means that you are not out in the field at the best times of day for other mammals although I tended to go out on my own at dawn (0530) and often stayed in the field after they returned to Sanguanmiao Protection Station (dusk was 2000). I also did one unproductive spotlighting session pre-dawn although the guides were very reluctant to let me go spotlighting as they were worried about attacks from takin (see below) and bears.

### **Evidence of other larger mammals during our visit**

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<b>Asiatic Black Bear</b> <i>Ursus thibetanus</i>	We failed to see bears ourselves but the trackers saw no fewer than four, including a female with a young one while looking for pandas. The trackers are reluctant to track bears in the spring but say that they are easier to see in September when they feed in fruiting trees. In spring bears feed on bamboo shoots and we found fresh bear droppings and evidence of where a bear had slept.
<b>Leopard Cat</b> <i>Felis bengalensis</i>	A Chinese photographer photographed two crossing the main track in the middle of the morning on the day we left the reserve.
<b>Jungle Cat</b> <i>Felis chaus</i>	Occurs and apparently hybridises with domestic cats. I saw one domestic cat showing some characteristics of Jungle Cat.
<b>Wild Boar</b> <i>Sus scrofa</i>	Heard one evening and lots of evidence found, i.e. rooting, slots etc
<b>Forest Musk Deer</b> <i>Moschus berezovskii</i>	Can be seen in the autumn/winter when they come down to lower levels although we did find fresh droppings on more than one occasion.
<b>Chinese Muntjac</b> <i>Muntiacus reevesi</i>	Heard one morning.
<b>Mainland Serow</b> <i>Capricornis sumatraensis</i>	Not seen by us although we found lots of evidence, i.e. droppings. Jon Hall saw one near the main river while spotlighting in 2005.
<b>Common Goral</b> <i>Nemorhaedus goral</i>	One seen by chance when we stopped to look at a Blue Rock Thrush along the road from Yangling City to Foping County. Another seen while we looked for Golden Takin from a ridge-top watchpoint. Lots of droppings found in the forest,
<b>Golden Takin</b> <i>Budorcas taxicolor</i>	Fantastic animals. 5+ seen at close range along a ridge about 2.5 hours walk from Sanguanmiao Protection Station. Another five watched from a traditional viewpoint at the top of the same ridge. They occur at lower levels in winter. Herds are generally wary and no danger to people but lone males can be very dangerous and the guides were reluctant to allow us to go spotlighting for fear of us being attacked by rogue takin. Several villagers have apparently been badly injured by takin!
<b>Red-bellied Squirrel</b> <i>Callosciurus erythraeus</i>	One possible on route to the 'takin ridge' but not seen well enough to be certain.
<b>Pere David's Rock Squirrel</b> <i>Sciurotamias davidianus</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ One along the river on route to Foping County. Single squirrels seen in Foping Reserve on 4 days were all thought to be this species although two may have been <b>Perny's Long-nosed Squirrels</b> <i>Dremomys pernyi</i></li> <li>▪ Also seen along Great Wall at Mutianyu.</li> </ul>
<b>Red &amp; White Flying Squirrel</b> <i>Petaurista alborufus</i>	Four seen about 45 minutes walk from Sanguanmiao Protection Station. Absolutely stunning animals. Two were looking out of holes when we reached the trees. The other two were persuaded to show themselves by the trackers. The trackers methods, i.e. throwing rocks at the trees should be discouraged. I showed them how to rub the tree to get them to show themselves with some success and other visitors should encourage them to use the same approach. We saw two gliding down a valley in broad daylight and they are really impressive.
<b>Cape Hare</b> <i>Lepus capensis</i>	Two seen at the Crested Ibis Reserve.

**Other larger mammals occurring in Foping**

<b>Chinese Snub-nosed (Golden) Monkey</b> <i>Pygathrix roxellanae</i>	Only likely to be encountered from October-March when they move to lower altitudes, consequently we dipped. They are easiest to find in October/November when they can be found around fruiting trees. There is another reserve nearer Yangling City where they are seen more easily but the reserve is difficult to visit because of a problem with the road.
<b>Raccoon-Dog</b> <i>Nyctereutes procyonoides</i>	Difficult to see but it can apparently be seen in the autumn when it often feeds on fallen fruit.
<b>Dhole</b> <i>Cuon alpinus</i>	Unlikely to be seen but it is according to the guides it is the biggest enemy of the Giant Panda in the reserve!
<b>Siberian Weasel</b> <i>Mustela sibirica</i>	Occurs commonly but rarely seen
<b>Yellow-throated Marten</b> <i>Martes flavigula</i>	Occurs but rarely seen
<b>Stone Marten</b> <i>Martes foina</i>	Occurs but rarely seen
<b>Asiatic Golden Cat</b> <i>Felis temmincki</i>	Occurs but rarely seen
<b>Clouded Leopard</b> <i>Neofelis nebulosa</i>	Occurs but the trackers that we worked with have never seen one.
<b>Swinhoe's Striped Squirrel</b> <i>Tamiops swinhoie</i>	None seen by us although Jon Hall scored in October.
<b>Siberian Chipmunk</b> <i>Tamias sibiricus</i>	In range but not encountered

**Small mammals**

I only set trip-traps on one night without success but Jon had some success with shrews in October 2005.

**Itinerary**

- 6<sup>th</sup> - Morning arrival Beijing, transfer to internal flight to Xi'an arriving mid-afternoon. Transfer to Yangling City for night, birding along Wei River on route.
- 7<sup>th</sup> - Long drive to Yang County via Foping County birding on route. Saw Chinese Goral at a roadside stop in the Qinling Mountains and Pere David's Rock Squirrel later in the morning, Visit to Foping County Information Centre to see video of pandas and then continued south to Yang County. Ibisbill was an unexpected bonus along the river south of Foping County. Evening visit to Crested Ibis Reserve near Yang County with 25 ibis coming in to roost. Night Yang County.
- 8<sup>th</sup> - Morning around Crested Ibis Reserve, afternoon return to Foping County birding the valley behind the information centre late afternoon. Night Foping County.
- 9<sup>th</sup> - Morning birding along the access road to Foping Reserve. Afternoon walking the trail to Sanguanmiao Protection Station.
- 10<sup>th</sup> - Foping Reserve all day tracking pandas 1-2 km back along the entrance track. Lots of panda and bear droppings were found and the trackers found two pandas during the day but both disappeared before we reached them. Started raining heavily at 1600 hours.
- 11<sup>th</sup> - Foping Reserve all day. Stayed at the Sanguanmiao Protection Station all day as it poured with rain all day.
- 12<sup>th</sup> - Foping Reserve all day, concentrating on area 3-4 km north of Sanguanmiao Protection Station. Panda seen briefly by Mr He in dense bamboo mid-afternoon.

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- 13<sup>th</sup> – Morning spent in area 3-4 km N of Sanguanmiao Protection Station. Panda found by Mr He but impossible to see in dense bamboo. Afternoon spent in new area just south of Protection Station. Fresh panda (and bear) tracks found.
- 14<sup>th</sup> – Spent day in area 2-3 km south of Sanguanmiao Protection Station. The trackers concentrated on the area east of river in morning switching to the forest west of river in the afternoon. A panda was eventually located by Mr He. After a frantic scramble up a steep creek in a thunderstorm we managed to approach a large male panda to within 15 metres and watched it for 3-4 minutes before it disappeared again. Elated we returned to the Protection Station in glorious sunshine.
- 15<sup>th</sup> – All day birding along the river to another Protection Station 8 km south of Sanguanmaio.
- 16<sup>th</sup> – Morning ascent for Golden Takin about 2.5 hours walk from the Protection Station. Excellent views of five takins at close range on the ridge followed by another five from the viewpoint at the top of the same ridge. A Chinese Goral seen while we ate lunch at the viewpoint was an added bonus.
- 17<sup>th</sup> – Sanguanmiao Protection Station during morning returning to Yangling City during afternoon.
- 18<sup>th</sup> – Early morning transfer to Xi'an and flight to Beijing. Afternoon along Great Wall at Mutianyu before returning to Beijing for night.
- 19<sup>th</sup> – Early morning departure from Beijing, arriving back in London early afternoon

**Birds**

This was not really a birding trip so the species list was quite low especially as it took several days to see panda. A full list of species seen follows.

F – Foping , X – Elsewhere, B - Both

Little Grebe	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	X
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	X
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	X
Chinese Pond-Heron	<i>Ardeola bacchus</i>	X
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	X
Black-crowned Night-Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	X
Crested Ibis	<i>Nipponia nippon</i>	X
Oriental Honey-buzzard	<i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>	F
Chinese Goshawk	<i>Accipiter soloensis</i>	F
Besra	<i>Accipiter virgatus</i>	F
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	F
Golden Eagle	<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>	B
Eurasian Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	X
Ring-necked Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	B
Golden Pheasant	<i>Chrysolophus pictus</i>	F
White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>	X
Common Moorhen	<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	X
Ibisbill	<i>Ibidorhyncha struthersii</i>	X
Grey-headed Lapwing	<i>Vanellus cinereus</i>	X
Long-billed Plover	<i>Charadrius placidus</i>	X
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	X
Snipe sp	<i>Gallinago sp</i>	X
Common Greenshank	<i>Tringa nebularia</i>	X
Green Sandpiper	<i>Tringa ochropus</i>	X
Wood Sandpiper	<i>Tringa glareola</i>	X
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	X
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	X
Hill Pigeon	<i>Columba rupestris</i>	X
Speckled Wood-Pigeon	<i>Columba hodgsonii</i>	F
Oriental Turtle-Dove	<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	X

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Spotted Dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>	X
Common Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus canorus</i>	X
Oriental Cuckoo	<i>Cuculus saturatus</i>	F
Asian Koel	<i>Eudynamys scolopacea</i>	F
Asian Barred Owlet	<i>Glaucidium cuculoides</i>	B
Grey Nightjar	<i>Caprimulgus indicus</i>	F
White-throated Needletail	<i>Hirundapus caudacutus</i>	F
Common Swift	<i>Apus apus</i>	X
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	X
Black-capped Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon pileata</i>	X
Crested Kingfisher	<i>Megaceryle lugubris</i>	X
Dollarbird	<i>Eurystomus orientalis</i>	X
Crimson-breasted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos cathpharius</i>	F
White-backed Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos leucotos</i>	F
Great Spotted Woodpecker	<i>Dendrocopos major</i>	F
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	X
Red-rumped Swallow	<i>Cecropis daurica</i>	X
Asian Martin	<i>Delichon dasypus</i>	X
White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	X
Grey Wagtail	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	B
Richard's Pipit	<i>Anthus richardi</i>	F
Long-tailed Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus ethologus</i>	B
Collared Finchbill	<i>Spizixos semitorques</i>	B
Brown-breasted Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus xanthorrhous</i>	B
Light-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus sinensis</i>	B
Brown Dipper	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>	B
Blue Rock-Thrush	<i>Monticola solitarius</i>	X
Blue Whistling-Thrush	<i>Myophonus caeruleus</i>	F
Blackbird	<i>Turdus merula</i>	B
Zitting Cisticola	<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	X
Yellowish-bellied Bush-Warbler	<i>Cettia acanthizoides</i>	B
Dusky Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus fuscatus</i>	F
Tickell's Leaf-Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus affinis</i>	F
Arctic Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus borealis</i>	X
Greenish Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i>	F
Large-billed Leaf-Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus magnirostris</i>	F
Eastern Crowned Leaf-Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus coronatus</i>	F
Golden-spectacled Warbler	<i>Seicercus burkii</i>	B
Chestnut-crowned Warbler	<i>Seicercus castaniceps</i>	F
Asian Brown Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa dauurica</i>	X
Ferruginous Flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa ferruginea</i>	F
Taiga Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula albicilla</i>	X
Blue-and-white Flycatcher	<i>Cyanoptila cyanomelana</i>	F
Rufous-bellied Niltava	<i>Niltava sundara</i>	F
Grey-headed Canary-flycatcher	<i>Culicicapa ceylonensis</i>	F
Firethroat	<i>Luscinia pectardens</i>	F
White-throated Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus schisticeps</i>	X
Daurian Redstart	<i>Phoenicurus aureus</i>	B
White-capped Redstart	<i>Chaimarrornis leucocephalus</i>	X
Plumbeous Redstart	<i>Rhyacornis fuliginosus</i>	B
White-crowned Forktail	<i>Enicurus leschenaulti</i>	B
Grey Bushchat	<i>Saxicola ferrea</i>	F
Asian Paradise-Flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>	X

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White-throated Laughingthrush	<i>Garrulax albogularis</i>	F
Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush	<i>Garrulax pectoralis</i>	F
Barred Laughingthrush	<i>Garrulax lunulatus</i>	F
Hwamei	<i>Garrulax canorus</i>	X
Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler	<i>Pomatorhinus erythrocnemis</i>	X
Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler	<i>Pomatorhinus ruficollis</i>	F
Pygmy Wren-Babbler	<i>Pnoepyga pusilla</i>	F
Chinese Babax	<i>Babax lanceolatus</i>	F
Red-billed Leiothrix	<i>Leiothrix lutea</i>	F
Golden-breasted Fulvetta	<i>Alcippe chrysotis</i>	F
White-collared Yuhina	<i>Yuhina diademata</i>	F
Vinous-throated Parrotbill	<i>Paradoxornis webbianus</i>	X
Black-throated Parrotbill	<i>Paradoxornis nipalensis</i>	F
Long-tailed Tit	<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>	B
Black-throated Tit	<i>Aegithalos concinnus</i>	X
Sooty Tit	<i>Aegithalos fuliginosus</i>	F
Marsh Tit	<i>Poecile palustris</i>	F
Yellow-bellied Tit	<i>Pardaliparus venustulus</i>	F
Great Tit	<i>Parus major</i>	B
Green-backed Tit	<i>Parus monticolus</i>	B
Eurasian Nuthatch	<i>Sitta europaea</i>	F
Gould's Sunbird	<i>Aethopyga gouldiae</i>	F
Fork-tailed Sunbird	<i>Aethopyga christinae</i>	F
Japanese White-eye	<i>Zosterops japonicus</i>	X
Black-naped Oriole	<i>Oriolus chinensis</i>	B
Brown Shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>	F
Long-tailed Shrike	<i>Lanius schach</i>	B
Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	B
Eurasian Jay	<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>	B
Azure-winged Magpie	<i>Cyanopica cyana</i>	X
Blue Magpie	<i>Urocissa erythrorhyncha</i>	B
Eurasian Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	B
Eurasian Nutcracker	<i>Nucifraga caryocatactes</i>	B
Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	B
Common Raven	<i>Corvus corax</i>	B
Red-billed Starling	<i>Sturnus sericeus</i>	X
White-cheeked Starling	<i>Sturnus cineraceus</i>	X
Slaty Bunting	<i>Latoucheornis siemsseni</i>	F
Meadow Bunting	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>	X
Red Crossbill	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>	F
Oriental Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis sinica</i>	X
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	<i>Passer montanus</i>	X