

'EASY' SICHUAN

The Heart of China

Thursday 12th May – Monday 30th May 2011 (19 days)

Leader: Hannu Jännes

Group Size Limit: 8

Tour Category: Easy at times, but mostly Moderate



White Eared Pheasant (Nik Borrow)

This is a special version of our classic Sichuan tour, which visits by far the best part of this huge country for speciality birds, designed to allow those who are not exceptionally fit, or who have a few more years under their belt, the chance to see over 90% of the specialities that would typically be seen on the standard, more physically demanding, Sichuan tour.

China is a vast and enigmatic land that has long fascinated outsiders. For naturalists it has been China's wealth of endemic birds and mammals, epitomized by the Giant Panda and the rare pheasants and other birds that inhabit the mountains along the eastern rim of the Tibetan Plateau, which have exerted an almost irresistible attraction. As with so many other remote areas, the difficulties associated with getting there, whether natural hazards or man-made obstacles, merely added to the fascination. Even now, with access possible at long last, only relatively few

western birdwatchers have had the opportunity to see for themselves the marvellous endemic birds of China.

The diversity of birdlife is somewhat limited in parts of the heavily populated east (although even here there are some superb areas for birding) but, in complete contrast, vast tracts of the north, west and centre of China are sparsely populated and this enormous region offers some of the finest birding in Asia. For those with a particular interest in Asian birds, or indeed for anyone who loves to travel far from the beaten track, a visit to interior China offers something uniquely rewarding.

During this exciting tour we shall visit Sichuan, a region in the very heart of China that best reflects the astonishing avian diversity of this huge country (which has an avifauna of over 1300 species). Sichuan lies at the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau and this superb province has the richest concentration of Chinese

specialities, holding around two-thirds of the country's endemic birds! Not only does Sichuan offer the best opportunities for seeing China's prime specialities, but due to the great diversity of its habitats, ranging from the subtropical lowlands of the Red Basin and rich evergreen foothill forests to cool temperate zone forests, alpine meadows, dramatic snow-capped mountain peaks and vast grasslands at the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau, the province has a remarkable wealth of birds in general. Without a doubt Sichuan is the very best of China!

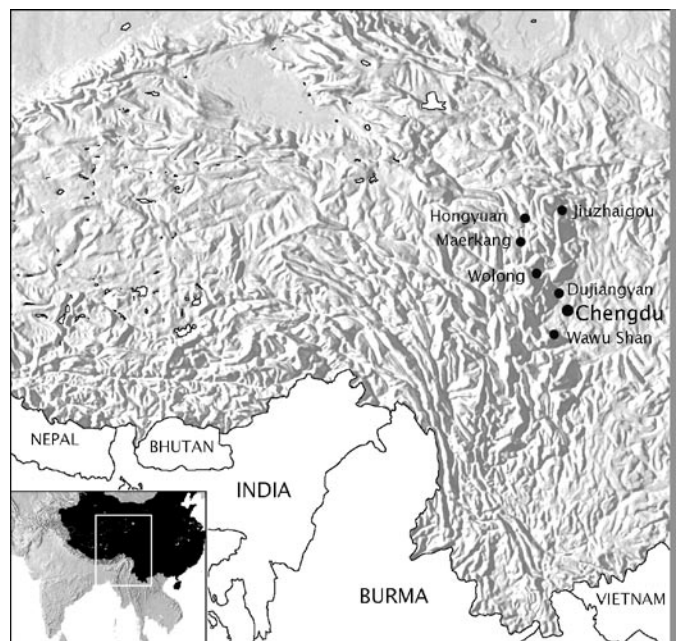
This easier version of our 'Ultimate Chinese Endemics' tour is a fabulous adventure, with incredible scenery as well as wonderful, rarely observed birds. Dramatic improvements in the standard of accommodation and in the condition of the roads in Sichuan in recent years (they are now often good or even very good), combined with the discovery of new areas with easier access for birding, mean that this is no longer such a tough tour as it once was. A bonus is some of the best food we encounter on any Birdquest tour!

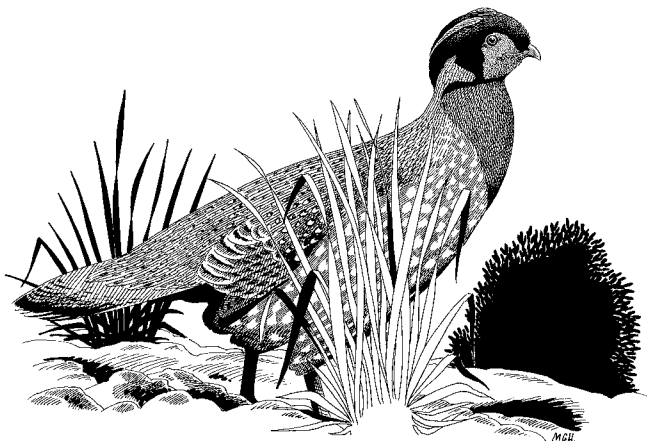
We start our journey in Chengdu, the provincial capital, and from here we

shall travel southwards to Wawu Shan (or Rooftile Mountain) in central Sichuan, a peak of over 3000m situated not far from famous Emei Shan. Here we can see Emei's special birds, including Emei Shan Liocichla and Grey-hooded Parrotbill, as well as somewhat more widespread species such as Lady Amherst's Pheasant, Emei Spectacled Warbler, Claudia's Leaf Warbler, Emei Shan Leaf Warbler, Klossi's Leaf Warbler, Sichuan Leaf Warbler and Red-winged Laughingthrush, while staying in comfort and exerting far less physical effort!

Next, already sated with China's avian riches, we head deep into the mountains to the famous reserve at Wolong, site of the World Wildlife Fund's Giant Panda research project, where we shall search for some of China's most exciting specialities (including some superb pheasants, such as White Eared Pheasant and Chinese Monal, and the stunning Firethroat) amidst dramatic mountain scenery.

After a thorough exploration of Wolong we shall continue our journey, climbing over high, spruce-clad passes, haunted by Verreaux's Monal Partridges, Przevalski's Nuthatches and Sichuan Jays, until we come





Temminck's Tragopan (Michael Hodgson)

to the high grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau where the rare Black-necked Crane breeds in the remote marshes and where swarthy Tibetan herders tend yaks and ponies.

Eventually we drop down from a high pass at the head of the turbulent Min River to Jiuzhaigou, another of China's Giant Panda reserves that is situated close to the meeting point of Sichuan, Qinghai and Gansu provinces. The incomparable alpine valleys of the area with their rich forests, turquoise lakes and waterfalls, inhabited by ethnic Tibetans, have an extremely rich avifauna (including such species as Blue Eared Pheasant, Rufous-headed Robin and Sukatshev's Laughingthrush which are amongst the least known in Asia) and is undoubtedly one of the most scenically spectacular places we have ever visited.

On our way back to Chengdu we will pause to explore Qingcheng Shan in the foothills at the edge of the Red Basin. Qingcheng Shan has been partly protected from deforestation by religious sentiment, for the mountain has been a centre of Buddhism and Taoism for almost 2000 years, and is a good spot for a number of lower altitude species including the endemic Northern Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, the breeding-

endemic Swinhoe's Minivet and the arboreal Forest Wagtail. At the end of our visit to this ornithological Mecca we shall reluctantly head for home, taking back memories of many marvellous birds and an endless panoply of scenic splendour.

Birdquest pioneered birding tours to Sichuan as far back as 1984.

Itinerary

Day 1 The tour begins at midday in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, where we will stay overnight. In the late afternoon there will be a chance to visit a small area of parkland where we should find such species as Spotted Dove, Red-rumped Swallow, Himalayan Wagtail, Chinese Bulbul, Oriental Magpie-Robin, the breeding-endemic Chinese (or Mandarin) Blackbird, the delightful little Rufous-faced Warbler with its high-pitched, teetering song, Rufous-capped Babbler, the near-endemic Vinous-throated Parrotbill, White-browed Laughingthrush, the near-endemic Hwamei, Black-throated Tit, Eurasian Tree Sparrow and the impressive Yellow-billed Grosbeak.

Day 2 Chengdu is situated

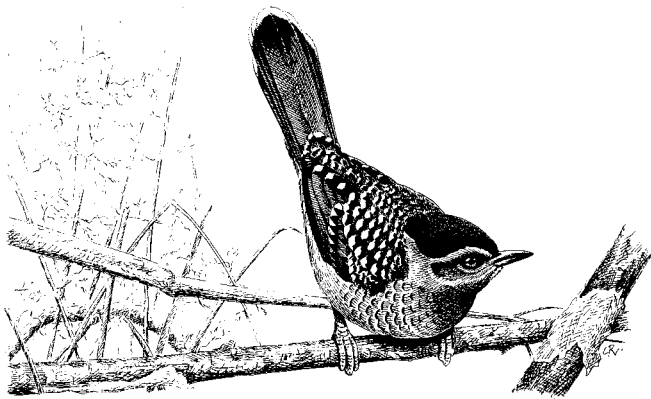
near the western margin of the fertile plains of the Red Basin, not far from the high mountains that form the outer ramparts of the Tibetan Plateau. This morning, after another chance to look for birds in Chengdu if need be, we will drive southwards to Wawu Shan for a four nights stay. (We will spend three nights close to the summit and one night at the base of the mountain.) Our route takes us across the flat countryside of the Red Basin and through a very Chinese landscape of intensively cultivated patchwork of small fields, little villages of old-style cottages and tall clumps of bamboo. Some things seem little changed, whether it is the Chinese peasants planting the new rice crop, the ubiquitous bicycles that epitomize lowland China, or the villagers buying and selling from tiny market stalls, but as we pass through the rapidly modernizing towns and cities of Sichuan, complete with high-rise buildings and an incredible amount of on-going construction, we will have an inkling of just how much China's economic boom is now spreading from the coast deep inland. Even the roads are a surprise to newcomers, with long stretches of expressway! Along the way we should see a few open country species such as Little Egret, Barn Swallow and Long-tailed

Shrike. In the late afternoon we will begin our exploration of Wawu Shan.

Days 3-5 Wawu Shan, or Roof Tile Mountain, is a peak of over 3000m situated to the west of the more famous Emei Shan and possessing a virtually identical and extremely rich avifauna. The great advantage of birding at Wawu Shan is that the terrain is so much easier of access than at Emei, so the sheer physical effort required to see the specialities is hugely reduced! At lower levels, areas of evergreen broadleaf woodland are interspersed with cultivation, but higher up this gives way to deciduous woodland and ultimately large open, grassy or bamboo-covered areas and stands of mixed coniferous-rhododendron forest (some of the latter will still be in flower at this season). As at Emei, jagged limestone crags with their gnarled conifers loom out of the clouds at Wawu and as we walk here amongst the gnarled, moss-encrusted trees we may enjoy some superb vistas across a seemingly endless series of mountain ridges to the great snow-capped peaks of western Sichuan beyond. There are some superb birds to be found here and in particular we shall be looking for three extremely localized endemics: Grey-hooded Parrotbill,



Firethroat (Craig Robson)



Giant Laughingthrush (Craig Robson)

Emei Shan Liocichla and the recently described Sichuan Treecreeper. Parrotbills are one of the glories of Sichuan and in addition to Grey-hooded we should also see Great, Brown, Ashy-throated, Fulvous, Golden and quite possibly the impressive Grey-headed! Another group occurring here in remarkable numbers is *Phylloscopus* warblers. This part of Sichuan probably holds the world record for diversity, for no fewer than 17 species have occurred in the area! During our time here we should encounter Claudia's Leaf (split from Blyth's Leaf), Emei Leaf, Klossi's Leaf (split from White-tailed), Large-billed Leaf, Ashy-throated, Buff-barred, Sichuan Leaf (split from Lemon-rumped) and Buff-throated Warblers, and perhaps also migrant Pallas's Leaf and Yellow-browed Warblers heading for Siberia. Wawu is clearly also 'bush warbler heaven' and we could well encounter Brownish-flanked, Chestnut-crowned, Aberrant, Yellowish-bellied, Grey-sided, Brown and Russet Bush Warblers during our stay! Furthermore, no fewer than four species of 'golden-spectacled' warblers occur on the mountain, with the endemic Plain-tailed Warbler at the base and the near-endemic Bianchi's Warbler at the summit, while Grey-crowned Warbler *Seicercus tephrocephalus*

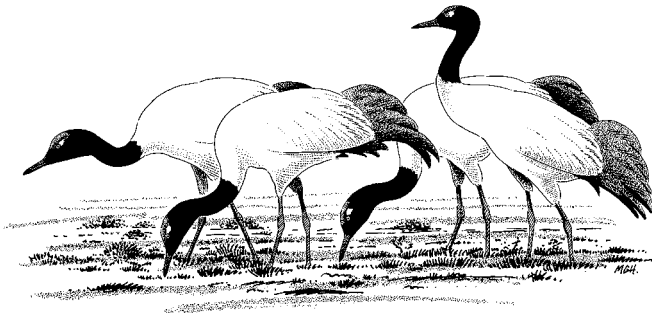
and Emei Spectacled Warbler *S. omeiensis*, the latter endemic to the region, occur at intermediate altitudes. We have a good chance of encountering the superb near-endemic Lady Amherst's Pheasant, one of the most beautiful but most secretive of China's pheasants, and with a little luck the gorgeous, near-endemic Temminck's Tragopan. Wawu Shan is surely one of the best places for seeing the former species. We should hear the endemic Chinese Bamboo Partridge, but seeing one is much less certain. Additional endemics and near-endemics we should find while at Wawu include the pretty Chinese Blue Flycatcher (a wonderful songster, split from Blue-throated), the big Black-streaked Scimitar Babbler (now treated as distinct, following a reorganization of the Spot-breasted Scimitar Babbler complex), Elliott's Laughingthrush, the lovely Red-winged Laughingthrush, the very confiding Grey-hooded Fulvetta (now a Chinese endemic following taxonomic reorganization, having been renamed from Streak-throated Fulvetta), Brown-capped (or Dusky) Fulvetta and White-collared Yuhina. More widespread birds we may well encounter are Crested (or Oriental) Honey Buzzard, Large Hawk-Cuckoo, Whistling Hawk-Cuckoo (split from

Hodgson's, and, together with the previous species, much easier to hear than to see), Oriental and Lesser Cuckoos, Asian Koel, Collared Owllet (more easily heard than seen), Oriental Scops Owl, Himalayan Swiftlet, Fork-tailed (or Pacific) Swift, Darjeeling and Bay Woodpeckers, Grey Wagtail, Himalayan Black Bulbul (of the striking white-headed form), Long-tailed Minivet, Brown Dipper, Rufous-breasted Accentor, White-browed Shortwing, the superb Golden Bush Robin, the smart White-tailed Robin, the secretive White-bellied Redstart, Grey Bushchat, Blue Whistling Thrush, Slaty-backed Forktail, Verditer, Ferruginous, Slaty-blue, Rufous-gorgeted and Grey-headed Flycatchers, Vivid Niltava, Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler, Pygmy Wren-Babbler, Black-faced Laughingthrush, Red-billed Leiothrix, White-browed Shrike-Babbler, the dazzling Golden-breasted Fulvetta, Stripe-throated and Black-chinned Yuhinas, Rufous-vented, Coal and Green-backed Tits, the near-endemic Yellow-bellied Tit, the dazzling Gould's Sunbird, Japanese White-eye, Hair-crested Drongo, Blue Magpie, Large-billed Crow, Russet Sparrow, Dark-breasted and Dark-rumped Rosefinches, and the near-endemic Grey-headed Bullfinch. We should also encounter several of the more uncommon birds of the area such as Chinese Goshawk, the attractive Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon (which has a most unpigeon-like, rather eerie call), the secretive White-tailed Robin, the smart Grey-winged Blackbird, the noisy White-throated Laughingthrush, the lovely Spotted Laughingthrush or the endemic Rusty Laughingthrush. If we are really lucky, we will even come across the little-known and seldom-seen Gold-fronted Fulvetta.

Day 6 After some early morning birding at Wawu we head northwestwards to Wolong for a five nights

stay (divided between two locations). After passing through Chengdu we enter the mountains and leave the crowded lowlands behind, winding our way through the deep valleys and gorges carved by the turbulent Min River and its tributaries. As we approach Wolong the valley narrows until cloud-wreathed forest loom high above us, recalling scenes from old Chinese paintings.

Days 7-10 The Wolong Giant Panda reserve is famous as the headquarters of the World Wildlife Fund's research and conservation efforts to save the species from extinction. The pioneering work on pandas by George Schaller was carried out in this beautiful region of forested mountains, bamboo thickets, alpine meadows and jagged, snow-covered peaks. During our stay here we will divide our time between two guesthouses, with three nights being spent at moderate altitude and the last night much higher up. As a result we will be able to explore areas from about 1500m right up to the high alpine zone above 4000m. We shall be birding amidst some breathtaking mountain scenery, with the surrounding peaks rising to over 5500m and the even higher peak of Siguniang visible in the distance. By using a road that climbs over the Balang Shan range by way of a high pass at over 4500m we can drive right up to the habitat of Tibetan Snowcock, Snow Partridge and the amazingly beautiful but endangered endemic Chinese Monal. At the highest altitudes, where patches of snow-free rocks project above the snow, we may well find gorgeous, indigo-coloured Grandalas, Alpine Accentors, Red-breasted Rosefinches and restless flocks of Plain and Brandt's Mountain Finches feeding on insects in this seemingly inhospitable environment. Lower down, where the azalea scrub begins, the rare



Black-necked Cranes (Michael Hodgson)

and little-known Wood Snipe displays overhead in the half-light before dawn, although sometimes they are not visible from the road (being instead a long way away down steep slopes). Here also we will look for the incomparable endemic White Eared Pheasant, for we may find these magnificent creatures feeding out in the open early in the morning. In the thickets the strikingly-plumaged endemic Firethroat can often be lured into view by judicious use of a tape-recording of its song. At dawn the loud, barking calls of Koklass Pheasants ring out across the forest. Amongst the many other species we may encounter in this wonderful reserve are Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffon Vulture, Eurasian Sparrowhawk, Himalayan Buzzard (split from Common), Golden Eagle, Common Kestrel, Common (or Ring-necked) Pheasant (here in its natural home), the handsome Snow Pigeon, Common Cuckoo, Asian House Martin, Rosy Pipit, White-throated Dipper, the stunning White-tailed Rubythroat, Indian Blue Robin, Blue-fronted, Daurian and Plumbeous Redstarts, River Chat (or White-capped Redstart), the endemic Kessler's and Chestnut Thrushes, Tickell's Leaf Warbler, the endemic Spectacled Parrotbill, White-browed Fulvetta, Spotted Nutcracker, Red-billed and Alpine Choughs, and Chinese Beautiful (split

from Himalayan Beautiful) and Streaked Rosefinches. If we are really in luck we will come across the impressive endemic Barred Laughingthrush or the near-endemic Black-browed Tit. We shall also have a second opportunity to catch up on a number of species we may have missed at Wawu Shan.

Day 11 After some final birding at the Balang Shan pass we will travel through spectacular mountain scenery to Maerkang for a two nights stay. We leave the well-watered alpine zone of Sichuan behind as we cross into the dry valleys, clothed with great pine and spruce forests, that are typical of the eastern approaches to the Tibetan plateau. As we travel further into the mountains the Han Chinese influences of the lowlands give way to Tibetan ones. Here one can see villages of stone-built houses with high-pitched roofs (reminiscent of old-fashioned Swiss chalets), clusters of prayer flags rippling in the breeze, Buddhist chortens and swarthy Tibetans with high cheekbones and cheerful smiles. As well as enjoying the unfolding scenic marvels we shall make several stops to look for such birds as Hill Pigeon, Eurasian Crag Martin, Hodgson's Redstart, Blue Rock Thrush and the superb Wallcreeper during the journey.

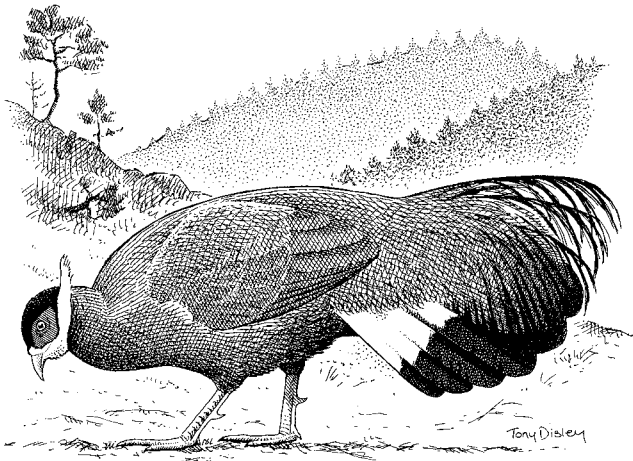
Day 12 In the early morning

we will climb up high into the mountains by road to an area of coniferous forest where we will have our first chances to look for the endemic Crested Tit-Warbler, which unobtrusively feeds high in the spruces, and the retiring endemic Sichuan Jay. This is also a good area for the endemic Verreaux's Monal Partridge, although it only occasionally comes to the roadside to put on a great show for visiting birders. The secretive endemic Severtzov's Grouse also inhabits the uncut sections of these primeval forests, although we would be very lucky to see one from the road. Other species likely to be encountered in this splendid area include the beautiful Blood Pheasant, the huge Black Woodpecker, Winter Wren, Himalayan Red-flanked Bluetail (split from Northern), the smart White-throated Redstart, Greenish, Hume's Leaf and Yellow-streaked Warblers, Goldcrest, the near-endemic Chinese Babax, the endemic Giant Laughingthrush (which lives up to its name), the endemic Chinese Fulvetta, Hodgson's (or Himalayan) Treecreeper (split from Eurasian), Oriental Crow (split from Carrion), the attractive endemic Pink-rumped (or Stresemann's) Rosefinch, Chinese White-browed Rosefinch (split from Himalayan White-browed) and both White-winged Grosbeak and the even more impressive Collared Grosbeak. If we are in luck we will come across the unobtrusive Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker,

Day 13 In the morning we will search areas of coniferous forest where we should be able to find the localized Przevalski's Nuthatch (split from White-cheeked). Eventually, after crossing some low passes, we leave the forest behind and enter the wide open grasslands of the Tibetan plateau, crossed by meandering rivers. In this habitat, either today or tomorrow, we should see such

species as Ruddy Shelduck, Black-eared Kite (split from Black), Upland Buzzard, Common Redshank, Common Tern, Eurasian Hoopoe, the huge endemic Tibetan Lark, Horned Lark, Oriental Skylark, Blyth's Pipit, the lovely Citrine Wagtail, Black Redstart, Siberian Stonechat, Dusky Warbler, the endemic Père David's Laughingthrush, Songar Tit (split from Willow, and in this instance of the Tibetan form *affinis* which may represent a distinct species), Japanese Tit (split from Great), Grey-backed Shrike, the impressive near-endemic Chinese Grey Shrike, Eurasian and Azure-winged Magpies, the huge Tibetan race of the Common Raven, Twite (of the interesting interior Asian form, which may represent a distinct species), Common Rosefinch and Godlewski's Bunting. Eventually we will reach the remote town of Hongyuan where we will stay overnight.

Day 14 If we awake to a crisp early morning on the eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau the mist that hangs low over the wide grasslands will gradually clear to reveal the deep blue sky that is typical of remote, high-altitude regions. The star attraction of this fine area is the rare and endangered near-endemic Black-necked Crane, which still breeds in some of the wetlands, while other birds of the area include Black Stork, Greylag Goose, Gadwall, Eurasian Teal, Ferruginous Duck and Goosander (or Common Merganser). We shall also search a valley clothed in high altitude scrub for the lilac-tinged Severtzov's Tit-Warbler and the endemic White-browed Tit, while the dry steppe holds the bounding Hume's Ground Jay (perhaps not closely related to the corvids after all, so perhaps better called Hume's Groundpecker). Eventually we pass from the Tibetan Plateau grasslands back into the moister, partly-forested, mountainous country typical of northern Sichuan before



Blue Eared Pheasant (Tony Disley)

finally dropping down through more extensive forests until we reach Jiuzhaigou for a four nights stay.

Days 15-17 Jiuzhaigou is a scenically magnificent area of high, snow-covered peaks, dense coniferous and mixed forests, hillsides covered in flowering rhododendrons and azaleas, bamboo thickets and a host of alpine flowers. The valley sides are frequently wreathed in cloud and the almost ethereal beauty of the area is further enhanced by the many intensely blue or turquoise lakes connected by waterfalls and rushing streams. The prime speciality is the lovely Rufous-headed Robin. This little-known species was only known (as a breeding species) from the

neighbouring province of Shaanxi before we discovered it at Jiuzhaigou in 1984. Other endemics or near-endemics we will be concentrating on include Chinese Thrush, the relatively recently described Chinese Leaf Warbler, the highly localized Sukatschev's Laughingthrush, Sooty Tit, the attractive Père David's Tit, Chinese Nuthatch, Tibetan Siskin and the impressive Three-banded Rosefinch. Once the endemic Three-toed Parrotbill was common here, but following the mass bamboo die-off in the late 80s it has become rare. If we are really in luck we will come across Père David's Owl (split from Ural). As we explore this watery, sylvan world we should also encounter such species as

Great Spotted Woodpecker, the unobtrusive Maroon-backed Accentor, Long-tailed Thrush, Grey-crested Tit, Eurasian Nuthatch, Bar-tailed Treecreeper and quite possibly Vinaceous Rosefinch. We will also visit some areas where there is less disturbance than in the much-visited national park. As we walk along the forest trails in the early morning the barking calls of endemic Blue Eared Pheasants echo across the valleys and, provided we are persistent and have a bit of luck on our side, we should enjoy good views of these splendid birds.

Day 18 After some early morning birding at Jiuzhaigou we will drive to Qingcheng Shan near Dujiangyan for an overnight stay, enjoying the spectacular scenery of the Min River gorge en route. We will stop along the way in an area which holds an isolated population of the beautiful Siberian Rubythroat, which we should be able to watch in full song while the ruby droplet on its throat veritably pulsates.

Day 19 Early this morning we will explore the foothills at Qingcheng Shan. Here amongst a mosaic of woodland patches, bamboo, cultivation and small hamlets we may well encounter Chinese Pond Heron, the arboreal Forest Wagtail,

the endemic Swinhoe's Minivet, the near-endemic Collared Finchbill, White-crowned Forktail, the endemic Northern Grey-cheeked Fulvetta (a recent split), the smart Tiger Shrike and Eurasian Jay. Later we will continue to Chengdu where the tour ends in the afternoon.

Accommodation & Road

Transport: The hotels are mostly of normal Birdquest standard. The hotels or guesthouses at the upper level of Wawu Shan, at Maerkang and at Hongyuan are fairly simple, but all rooms have private bathrooms. Road transport is by small coach or minibus and roads are mostly good.

Walking: The walking effort ranges from easy to moderate on this version of our tour, but one must contend with the effect of altitudes up to 4500m (although the walking is almost all on roads above 3100m).

Climate: Rather variable. At lower altitudes it is generally warm or hot (and often rather humid), whilst at higher altitudes temperatures range from cool to decidedly cold. At this season sunny periods alternate with rainy, overcast weather (and it may even snow at high altitudes).

Bird Photography:

Opportunities are worthwhile.