

China



15th to 28th May, 2010



Saturday, 15 th	Temple of Heaven, Beijing
Sunday, 16 th	Hutongs, Forbidden City (Beijing)
Monday, 17 th	Great Wall, Jinshanling
Tuesday, 18 th	Summer Palace, Beihei Lake (Beijing)
Wednesday, 19 th	Terracotta Army, Xi'an
Thursday, 20 th	Moslem Quarter, City Wall (Xi'an)
Friday, 21 st	Reed Flute Cave, Guilin
Saturday, 22 nd	Li River, Yangshuo (Guilin area)
Sunday, 23 rd	Guilin
Monday, 24 th	Dragon's Terraces & Yao villages, Longji
Tuesday, 25 th	Seven Star Park, Guilin
Wednesday, 26 th	Bifengxia Panda sanctuary, Ya'an
Thursday, 27 th	Leshan
Friday, 28 th	Mount Qingcheng

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Introduction

The objective of this trip was to see the primary tourist sites of the country, using four different cities as bases – any birds would then be seen as a secondary consequence to this, with little or no time devoted to birding per se. I did prepare with a list of potential birds, but was also aware that some reports had indicated that less variation in species were encountered than would be expected for the land covered. This was certainly true in the city bases, although I would suggest that the numbers seen in suitable habitat were perhaps also on the low side (although this could also have been a function of the amount of time and focus which could have been attributed to the task).



The focal points visited were of no particular surprise, since they offered the wonderful mix of a new and fascinating country:

- Beijing – I suppose the must do, with most of the traditional cultural hotspots being within the built up city boundaries, although the Great Wall has a wonderfully open setting, as well as one or two speciality birds;
- Xi'an – for the Terracotta Army, which is set in gardens with one or two easy common birds;
- Guilin – the limestone Karst scenery humbles any birds which are found here. Our visit to the Tao villages in the hills also proffered one or two new hill species;
- Chengdu – for the pandas, which are disappointingly in open enclosures, but the site at Ya'an is set in woodland, and avian interest is fairly good when avoiding te hordes of people at the temples in the woodland at Quincheng Shan

Timing and weather

This is one of the difficult arts to master when planning a trip to a country as large and diverse as China. The problem is that any one time of year will offer varying climates from the different weather zones. We chose May mainly for the best balance in the North – Beijing and Xi'an are freezing in Winter and oppressively hot and humid in the Summer. It isn't actually the ideal time to visit Guilin, since the wet season is from April to June, although we only had one wet day there. Chengdu tends to be wet at any time of year, which is why the pandas are there in effect – they like wet and lush bamboo forest.

Travel

I have no doubt that many visitors to the country do so under their own steam, but China is one of those countries which makes it difficult for independent travel, due to language barriers, only recent opening up to the outside world, and a bar on hiring cars. The latter is a moot point, since the driving in China is chaotic, resulting in an every man for himself attitude. In addition, some English signs do exist, but possibly not enough to

guarantee arriving at the given destination. Various companies offer both packages and tailor made tours – we chose a smallish company called China Direct (www.chinadirect-travel.co.uk), who I can unreservedly recommend. As opposed to another company who we contacted, they offered a tailor made holiday for just the two of us in the true sense of the phrase (including our own driver and guide at all locations), for a very reasonable cost.

Flights outside of the London hubs can be very convenient. We flew from Newcastle, which hosts both Emirates and KLM. The latter was chosen since it offered flights from Chengdu as well as Beijing. Internal flights were also the norm within the country, due to the large distances between points of interest. There seem to very various Chinese airlines to choose from, all with a more than adequate service. The booking of these was left to the agent, as was the train from Beijing to Xi'an. The soft sleeper, arranged in four beds to a compartment, is fairly modern and a different way to cross the miles.

Tips

The currency in China is the Renminbi, of which the Yuan is the main denomination. We had been told that the \$US was widely accepted, and to take \$US travellers cheques. In reality, the Yuan rules – I took a small amount with me, and this was the standard currency, with no \$US seen in the two weeks we were there. We were told that not all hotels will change \$US travellers cheques, so I relied on withdrawing Yuan from cash machines – this worked, but only on ones owned by the Bank of China.

The food we encountered was excellent, and so much more varied than the Chinese food from back home. The Chinese have a very much more liberal view of what can be eaten than in the West, and this is often reflected in the menus encountered. We found the restaurants with English subtext (and even pictures) helped sieve out the choice.

Electricity is interesting, since there are often several types of socket in hotels. The standard is similar to the US style two flat pin, but the adapter must have these angled, and a flat pin earth must be included to access the socket. In some hotels, there was also a UK style 3 pin socket included.

Sites visited

Beijing

Almost four days were spent in the Beijing area, all bar one being within the city itself. The third day was spent on the Great Wall at Jinshanling, which is about two hours drive from our hotel. It offered the chance of some magnificent countryside, scenery, and smog free clean air. All that is said about Beijing in terms of the pollution haze that seems to envelope the city most of the time is indeed true. The roads choked with traffic and the sheer size of the place is indisputable. This also results in most of the city, and certainly the parts which we saw, being generally concrete and road.



Predictably, most of the time here was spent with our guide seeing the immense and imposing cultural sites such as The Summer Palace and Forbidden City, etc – all wonderful spectacles and profusely populated with copious tourists. Within the vicinity of our hotel, and only about 20 minutes walk away, was what appeared to be the hub of

leisurely Beijing life, set around the three lakes of Beihei, Houhai, and Qianhai. The usual suspects of Tree Sparrow and Black-billed Magpie were found here (as well as throughout the metropolis). Treats during lunch next to Qianhai Lake were a small group of perched and fishing Black-crowned Night Herons, and a sole male Mandarin Duck swimming by (interesting to see one that wasn't originally a cage bird – or main course!).



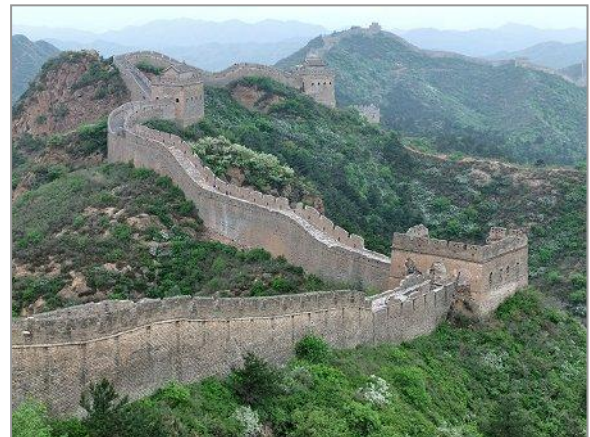
Qianhai Lake



The Summer Palace

The palaces were easily the best locations to spot Azure-winged Magpies, with marauding bands in both the Temple of Heaven and the Summer Palace, as well as obvious Large-billed Crows around the buildings. In my limited experience of these "lusher" parts of Beijing, this more or less wrapped up the variety that was seen.

The trip to Jinshanling was a different kettle of fish. The haze from Beijing seemed to last most of the journey, which was a little worrying, since we were hoping for clear skies for the wall itself. With these fears unfounded, we boarded the cable car to elevate us to the wall itself, which was impressive both for the feat of building and the magnificent surroundings. A variety of species were singing tantalisingly from the fairly dense low tree cover which carpeted the whole of the surrounding hills. As in the city, Black-billed Magpies were the most obvious resident, and it was perturbing to hear the familiar call of the Common Pheasant in its natural surroundings. While walking the wall, some of the vocalisations revealed small numbers of Daurian Redstarts, and a separate brace of Godlewski's Buntings. The washed out subspecies of grey Great Tits were almost ubiquitous, although one or two birds a little lower down towards the cable car entrance showed the yellow and green wash of the more northerly race. One treasure seen from the wall, and repeated on the cable car descent, was Red-billed Blue Magpie. Perhaps even more of a surprise was a Chinese Nuthatch perched at the top of one of the conifers at eye level from our carriage as we neared the station below. Among the copious Tree Sparrows around the restaurant in the village was a single Grey-capped Greenfinch, which added to the small groups seen from the wall. Final bird was a single singing Meadow Bunting next to the car park.



Xi'an

The two days in Xi'an were spent mostly within the city, the only break from this being the required excursion to see the terracotta army. The location of the hotel seemed to be some distance from any recognised parks (or in fact anything interesting!), leaving any birds seen titbits amongst the city bustle. As usual, Tree Sparrows were ubiquitous, but the odd Azure-winged Magpie was picked up. A visit to the Moslem Quarter was very interesting, due in part to the wonderful smells of cooking from the streetside vendors,

and the architecture within the mosque, where a couple of Common Blackbirds were present. A pair of Light-vented Bulbuls were perched on wires just outside of here. Small numbers of Swifts and Swallows were overhead, which included a single Red-rumped Swallow over the city wall. A second pair of Light-vented Bulbuls were also seen from the city wall, and a Hoopoe flew across one of the small areas of grass within the wall.



The mosque in the Moslem quarter

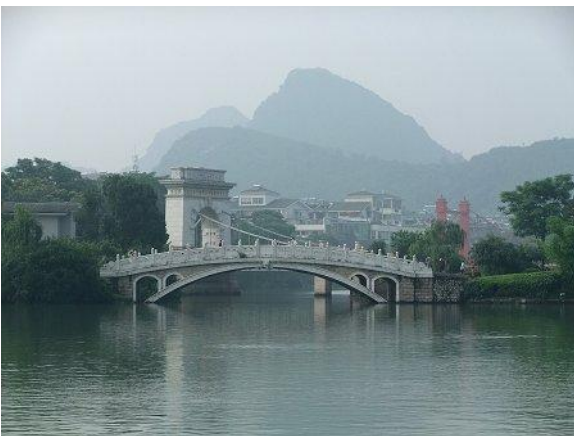


The outside of one of the terracotta pits

The excursion to the terracotta army did offer a little more variety, since from the time of the finding of the army in 1974, not only have the shops, houses and other tourist additions been developed, but also a small adjoining area of vegetation has been planted. It is possible that walking through most of this isn't allowed, but the short walk from the entrance to the pits unearthed a couple of local birds. While waiting for the electric transfer bus, a single White-cheeked Starling and a few Light-vented Bulbuls were seen, with a couple of Grey-capped Greenfinches singing from the treetop perches.

Guilin

With a population running into the hundreds of thousands rather than the millions, this city is very much smaller than the previous two city bases. This is very evident from the physically smaller area covered by the city, although it is still fairly large by UK standards. However, much of the area is still fairly well developed, while being softened by the surrounding limestone karst hills which even seep into the city boundaries. April to June is reputed to be the wet season for this semi tropical location, but we were fortunate in only being exposed to this for half a day (during the Li River cruise). Our hotel was situated next to one of Guilin's lakes, which was surrounded by a line of trees. Light-vented Bulbuls were the predominant bird throughout the city, with lesser numbers of Tree Sparrows, interspersed by the odd Oriental Magpie-robin and Oriental White-eye.



One of the Guilin lakes



Elephant Hill and Park from the Li River

Much better habitat was served during the cruise down the Li River, and subsequent time within and around the town of Yangshuo, which was where the boat docked, as well as the hills to the North-west of the city, which we visited to see some of the minority

people and dragon terraces. The former trip along the river was primarily to see the stunning karst scenery. Birds could occasionally be seen from the boat, but were generally difficult to make out. A trio of Black Kites overhead was easy, with a Eurasian Hobby a little harder. A Red-billed Blue Magpie looked soaked and forlorn while perched on wires next to the river. A Common Kingfisher flew into view and landed over the water as we passed its favoured fishing spot. We paid extra for a "golf buggy" trip through the farmland and villages a short ride from Yangshuo, where Crested Mynahs were occasional, and a single Plain Prinia called while walking the track next to the rice paddies.



Rice paddies near Yangshuo



Dragon Terraces from Yao village

The trip to the hills inhabited by the Yao people was as usual a tourist hotspot, but the ascent through the vendor stalls and traditional village does offer some open and impressive hilly vistas. Great Tits and Light-vented Bulbuls were as usual the most common offering, although both Barn & Red-rumped Swallows were in good numbers overhead. However, new birds were found here – a handful of Russet Sparrows replaced Tree Sparrows within the village, and a pair of Collared Finchbills were together in a tree at the apex of the uphill walk, with a brace of Grey-capped Greenfinches close by. The earlier journey had many shrikes perched on wires over the paddyfields, but one found here was to clinch the identity of the South-eastern race of Long-tailed Shrike (showing grey head and upper back, and no white on the wing). Another Yao village was visited, about 20 minutes from the Dragon Terraces, which included an inviting river running through it, and an even more inviting Plumbeous Water Redstart beneath the footbridge over it. Within the village, a female Pied Wheatear may have been on migration, since these should be more of a northern bird at this time of year.

Chengdu



Much as with the other cities which we were now familiar, Chengdu is very large and a mass of buildings, roads and people, offering what seems to be very little green birding areas within. The main reason for the stop here was to visit the Giant Panda research base, but the three outings from here proved to offer potential for avian interest also. One night was spent at the Moonstar Hotel in Ya'an. The reason given was to minimise journey times between Ya'an, Chengdu, and Leshan. This did offer the opportunity of a short amount of time for birding around the hotel grounds.

Following the large earthquake of 2008, the better known Panda base at Wolong was severely damaged, resulting in the remaining animals being shipped out to a new temporary home at Bifengxia base, near Ya'an. This may have been to our benefit, since the latter is a larger operation in terms of acreage, and may well be a lot quieter. In fact,

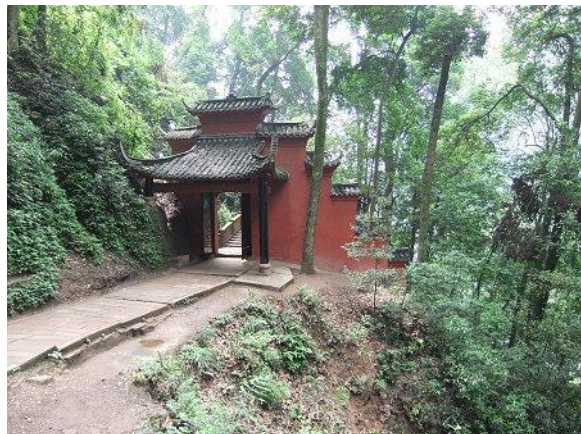
the first Panda enclosure was accompanied by a calling Common Cuckoo in a tree nearby, which stuck to its task during our entire visit. Predictably, many of the birds were staying within the dense (and soaken) foliage, but a handful could be seen. In addition to the common Light-vented Bulbuls and one or two Common Blackbirds, a small group of Masked Laughingthrushes were playing around in the canopy. One of the small manicured bushes next to some gift shops played host to a pair of Ashy-throated Parrotbills.

The only time devoted to pure birding was less than an hour amongst the few trees and allotments surrounding the Moonstar Hotel, which is situated on a hill overlooking Ya'an. Great Tits were as usual very common here, but a single Asian Brown Flycatcher was assumed to be on migration to its more northerly breeding grounds. Another group of Ashy-throated Parrotbills were busily working their way amongst the bushes of the allotments, where an Asian Barred Owlet flew from the ground to take up residence in another of the bushes. Above was a characteristically noisy Plain Flowerpecker. The most common bird at the location proved to be the white headed variant of Black Bulbul.

The following day was spent at the Giant Buddha of Leshan. A stop on the way to here at a tea plantation and shop, just on the outskirts of the city, actually proved more fruitful for birds than the Buddha site itself (which did turn up a Collared Finchbill on the descent to the waiting car). The bank above the tea shop, which held some tea terraces, was climbed, and it was here that a couple of White-browed Laughingthrushes were picked out, in addition to the local race of White Wagtail. An unknown woodpecker flew past and into the small copse, but it couldn't be relocated.



Tea stop near Leshan



Track up Mount Qingcheng

The last day was spent at Mount Qingcheng, which is a wooded location noted for its forest trails and Taoist temples. This was yet another popular location for the Chinese tourists. The cable car here was out of action, which was an undoubted benefit, since much more could then be seen on the climb up the many steps. The first of a handful of seen and calling Grey-headed Canary Flycatchers were located over the shops at the base of the climb, but a much better catch was a Drongo Cuckoo which landed fairly briefly next to the steps. A busy little group of Black-chinned Yuhinas was totally unaware of our presence as they mobbed a lone bush right next to the path. Singles of Collared Finchbill and white headed Black Bulbul, were in clearings at different elevations of the walk. Having become so used to washed out Great Tits throughout the trip, it was a pleasant surprise to see a Green-backed Tit with food for a nearby brood as we were nearing the end of the walk. Last good birds of the trip were a little unexpected. The restaurant we used after the Mountain walk was at the base of the climb, and the garden played host to a noisy group of Black-throated Bushtits.

SPECIES SEEN

Common Pheasant

Phasianus colchicus

Only present at the Great Wall at Jinshanling, where one was seen on the crest of a nearby hill, and at least one more was heard calling

Mandarin Duck

Aix galericulata

A single male swam by as we dined in a restaurant next to Quinhai Lake, one of the three developed lakes in the centre of Beijing



Mallard

Anas platyrhynchos

8 were on Beihei lake, the largest of the 3 lakes in the centre of Beijing

Little Grebe

Tachybaptus ruficollis

A single bird was on the lake to the front of our hotel in Guilin

Black-crowned Night Heron

Nycticorax nycticorax

5 birds landed on wood planks next to the restaurants on Quinhai Lake, generally relaxing, although one did catch a decent sized goldfish



Chinese Pond Heron

Ardeola bacchus

At least 6 were on the journey from Yangshuo to Guilin, at least 1 on the journey from Leshan to Chengdu, and 1 was in Xi'an

Little Egret

Egretta garzetta

Many more were likely than the dozen or so recorded on car journeys, since good numbers of white egrets were seen, but most were too brief or distant to be identified

Black Kite

Milvus migrans

3 were over the boat on the Li River

Amur Falcon

Falco amurensis

Separate male and female were positively identified on the return journey from Jinshanling to Beijing. One or two other small falcons were also likely to have been this species

Eurasian Hobby

Falco subbuteo

1 flew over the boat on the journey along the Li River

Eurasian Collared Dove

Streptopelia decaocto

Only 2 were seen on the journey from Jinshanling to Beijing

Spotted Dove

Spilopelia chinensis

A single bird was in the undergrowth at the base of one of the hills in Seven Star Park, Guilin

Square-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo

Surniculus lugubris

This bird is normally quite difficult to see, being a bit of a forest skulker. The one seen was fortunate, since it landed on a branch next to the steps up to the temples at Mount Qingcheng

Common Cuckoo

Cuculus canorus

A single bird was calling in a tree next to one of the Panda enclosures at Ya'an

Asian Barred Owlet

Glaucidium cuculoides

A single bird flew from open ground into a low bush in gardens below our hotel in Ya'an

Common Swift*Apus apus*

Quite common in some city areas – Beijing, Xi'an, Guilin (perhaps the largest flocks over Elephant Hill Park - ~40), and Chengdu

Common Kingfisher*Alcedo atthis*

A single bird landed on the banks of the Li River as we passed by on the cruise

Eurasian Hoopoe*Upupa epops*

1 was seen from the car on the journey to Jinshanling from Beijing, with a second seen from the city wall at Xi'an

Long-tailed Shrike*Lanius schach*

Best numbers were on the journey from Guilin to the Dragon Terraces, with ~20, and 1 perched near to the apex of the walk through the village. Smaller numbers were seen on subsequent days, with 4 the following day in Guilin, to 1 on the journey from Leshan to Chengdu, and 4 on the journey from Chengdu to Mount Qingcheng

Black Drongo*Dicrurus macrocercus*

2 were on the journey from Jinshanling to Beijing, 2 from the city wall at Xi'an, 1 on the journey to the Dragon Terraces, and 1 at Ya'an

Eurasian Jay*Garrulus glandarius*

2 were in the Panda sanctuary at Ya'an

Azure-winged Magpie*Cyanopica cyanus*

These were particularly common around the city of Beijing, with most of the birds being in groups around the tourist sites, such as the Summer Palace and the Temple of Heaven. Smaller numbers were at the Terracotta Army site at Xi'an (1), Moslem Quarter, Xi'an (2), and Ya'an (2)

**Red-billed Blue Magpie***Urocissa erythrorhyncha*

These are very large and stunning magpies, and tend to stand out from the greens and browns of the landscape – first was below the Great Wall at Jinshanling, second below the cable car on the descent. 2 were seen on the Li River trip at Guilin – one rain soaked and perched on a wire adjacent to the river, the other at the roadside on the return journey. Another was at Ya'an, and the sixth near Leshan

Eurasian Magpie*Pica pica*

These were quite common around Beijing, with 4 even being seen on arrival at the airport. Following this, only a further 2 were seen on the journey back from Yangshuo to Guilin

Large-billed Crow*Corvus macrorhynchos*

Only seen in the Beijing area – 6 within the Forbidden City; 2 at the Great Wall at Jinshanling; 1 at Beihei Lake

**Grey-headed Canary-Flycatcher***Culicicapra ceylonensis*

At least 4 were at the lower levels of the forest at Mount Qingcheng

Great Tit*Parus major*

Quite common in all the areas visited: 4 at Jinshanling; 2 at Seven Star Cave, Guilin; 2 at Yangshuo; 6 at the Dragon Terraces; ~6 at Seven Star Park, Guilin; ~10 at Ya'an; ~10 at Leshan

Green-backed Tit*Parus monticolus*

This species is likely to have been merely a subspecies of Great Tit until recent times, and looks more like the brightly coloured North European variety of Great Tit than the dowdy grey version seen above. It was only seen in the Chengdu area, with 2 birds at Mount Qingcheng, one carrying food for young

Collared Finchbill*Spizixos semitorques*

A pair were playing in a conifer at the top of the steps while visiting the Yao village in the hills from Guilin. 2 other birds were subsequently seen – 1 as we left the Giant Buddha site at Leshan, and the other briefly while ascending the steps at Mount Qingcheng

Light-vented Bulbul*Pycnonotus sinensis*

These were very common, being very vocal as well as obvious on sight, in Xi'an, Guilin and Chengdu. None were at Beijing, which is out of its more southerly distribution

**Black Bulbul***Hypsipetes leucocephalus*

The birds seen were all of the white headed variety, and only seen in the Chengdu area, with ~10 at Ya'an, and a single bird in the forests of Mount Qingcheng

Barn Swallow*Hirundo rustica*

Quite common throughout

Eurasian Crag Martin*Ptyonoprogne rupestris*

~4 birds were at Ya'an

Red-rumped Swallow*Cecropis daurica*

1 over the city wall at Xi'an; common at the Dragon Terraces

Black-throated Bushtit*Aegithalos concinnus*

A noisy and busy group of ~8 birds were in the trees next to the restaurant we spent lunchtime at near to the base of Mount Qingcheng

Plain Prinia*Prinia inornata*

1 on the track to the small village at Yangshuo

Common Tailorbird*Orthotomus sutorius*

~8 were very noticeable at Seven Star Park, Guilin

Masked Laughingthrush*Garrulax perspicillatus*

~6 wet birds were in one of the Giant Panda enclosures at Ya'an

White-browed Laughingthrush*Garrulax sannio*

3 were in the tea terraces at the tea stop just outside of Leshan, and 1 was at the Giant Buddha site within Leshan

Black-chinned Yuhina*Yuhina nigrimenta*

~8 were in a tight and noisy group in a couple of low bushes next to the steps up to the temples at Mount Qingcheng

**Ashy-throated Parrotbill***Sinosuthora alphonsiana*

2 small groups were at Ya'an – 2 together near to the nursery enclosure at the Panda sanctuary, and a group of 4 in the trees next to the hotel

Oriental White-eye*Zosterops palpebrosus*

4 birds seen in singles – Yangshuo; Guilin; Leshan; Mount Qingcheng



Chinese Nuthatch*Sitta villosa*

Bizarrely, a single bird was perched at the top of a tree next to the descending cable car from the Great Wall at Jinshanling

Crested Myna*Acridotheres cristatellus*

Most commonly seen in the Chengdu area, with ~10 on the journey from Leshan to Guilin and ~8 on the journey from Guilin to Mount Qingcheng. The first two were among the rice paddies of Yangshuo

**White-cheeked Starling***Spodiopsar cineraceus*

Only one seen – a bird perched near to the entrance to the Terracotta Army site, Xi'an

Common Blackbird*Turdus merula*

Xi'an (2); Seven Star Park, Guilin (~4); Ya'an (2)

Oriental Magpie-Robin*Copsychus saularis*

Li River/Yangshuo (~8); Guilin (1); Seven Star Park (~8); Mount Qingcheng (1)

Daurian Redstart*Phoenicurus aureoreus*

Only seen at the Great Wall, Jinshanling. They had a much lighter light grey crown than depicted in the books, looking almost as if they had a white cap

**Plumbeous Water Redstart***Rhyacornis fuliginosa*

One below the footbridge over the river at the Yao village, from Guilin

Pied Wheatear*Oenanthe pleschanka*

Rather unexpected, since the distribution in the books would indicate that this species should be much further North at this time of year, two females were seen in totally different localities. 1 was at the Yao village, from Guilin, the other next to the river on the opposite bank of the Giant Buddha, Leshan

**Asian Brown Flycatcher***Muscicapa dauurica*

This is another species which is supposed to be much further North at this time. A single bird was in the trees outside of the hotel at Ya'an

Plain Flowerpecker*Dicaeum minullum*

A very vocal bird was seen and heard in the canopy outside of the hotel at Ya'an, and a second was heard at the site of the Giant Buddha, Leshan

Eurasian Tree Sparrow*Passer montanus*

Seen throughout, these were abundant in Beijing. Fewer numbers were regularly seen at the other major centres visited



Russet Sparrow

Passer rutilans

Only seen at the Dragon Terraces, where 4 were within the Yao Village

Grey Wagtail

Motacilla cinerea

1 on wires at the Dragon Terraces; 2 Mount Qingcheng

White Wagtail

Motacilla alba

Terracotta Army, Xi'an (1); journey from Yanshuo to Guilin (1); Dragon Terraces (~4); Seven Star Park, Guilin (1); Leshan (2). Two distinct races were seen - *leucopsis* in the North, and *personata* in the West



leucopsis



personata

Grey-capped Greenfinch

Carduelis sinica

Great Wall, Jinshanling (4,3,1); Terracotta Army, Xi'an (1); Dragon Terraces (2 juveniles)

Godlewski's Bunting

Emberiza godlewskii

2 singing next to the Great Wall, Jinshanling



Meadow Bunting

Emberiza cioides

1 next to the car park at Jinshanling; 3 from the train approaching Xi'an

TOTAL SPECIES = 59

MAMMALS SEEN

Rhesus Macaque

Macaca mulatta

A small group, including both adults and young, were foraging at the top of one of the hills in Seven Star Park, Guilin. It is likely that they are quite easy to see here, since there are numerous signs warning of their presence at the base of other hills also



Perny's Ground Squirrel

Dremomys pernyi

One was next to the steps in the forest at Mount Qingcheng