

'EASY SICHUAN' TOUR (7 – 26 May 2008)

By Doreen

Flight Itinerary

- 07/5 Spore – Chengdu, Sichuan – Dufu Cottage, Wawu Shan & Emei Shan
- 15/5 Chengdu – Shanghai (5-1/2 hrs wait in the plane)
- 16/5 Shanghai – Nanchang, Jiangxi – Wuyuan county & Wuyi Shan
- 20/5 Nanchang – Xi'an, Shaanxi – Taibai Shan & Yang Xian countryside
- 25/5 Xi'an – Chengdu
- 26/5 Chengdu – Spore

Group: Hannu (Tour Leader), Mike – the perfect gentleman (America), Peter & Gudrun (Germany), Brady (Canada), John (Australia), Geoff, Mike and Ron (U.K.) and Doreen (Singapore). Half of them had seen more than 5,000 bird species in their life; not me of course.

Our 'Easy Sichuan' Tour by Birdquest turned topsy-turvy when a major earthquake devastated Sichuan.

As a result of the earthquake, our original itinerary (Wolong – Balang Shan – Maerkang – Jiuzhaigou) got thrown out of the window and with it, my target birds like the Grandala, Tibetan Snowcock, Blood Pheasant, Chinese Monal, Snow Partridge, White & Blue Eared Pheasants, Black-necked Crane, Wood Snipe and Alpine Accentors, to name a few. Sigh!!!

It happened at about 1427h on 12 May 2008. We were still high up along the slopes of Wawu Shan when the ground we stood on shook for approx 105 seconds. We heard rocks crashing in the distance. The birds stopped singing. We remained calm (at first). Soon, local lines went dead, we couldn't call the local office and we don't know if any

one knew our vehicle was trapped between 2 landslides. Luckily international lines were intermittent and I managed to call home (just in case .. 'The last conversation') and even asked my husband to alert Jia Min (the China agent) on our behalf.



Wawu Shan

Rather than wait for help to come, the majority of us agreed it was safer to try and get out of the mountain as soon as possible in case of further tremors. Each of us took a bottle of mineral water and our backpacks and climbed slowly across one of the muddy landslides.



Landslide at Wawu Shan

We walked slowly down the mountain road in scattered groups. Loose earth and small rocks were strewn along sections of the road. 2 lucky Brits ahead of the entire group saw a female Temminck's Tragopan in the middle of the road! Hours later, at 1710h, a mini van came to our rescue! I knelt on the ground to thank God. We quickly packed in like sardines and the driver sped all the way down. It took him 25 minutes to reach the base of the mountain where we checked into the luxurious Wawushan Hotel. I awoke with a start at 2345h and felt the ground shook slightly. No one panicked, so I went back to sleep in a birding outfit.

There were other trying and frightening times, but one recount is enough.

It was easy birding on this tour. 90% was all on roads and we were driven right up to the top wherever possible. It rained heavily for just a day throughout our entire trip. I noticed the occasional taxi ferrying locals on the mountain. So if you speak Mandarin, you should be alright on your own. There is no shortage of hotels or chalets at the mountains we visited. Sichuan food is deliciously spicy but be prepared for generally very oily food.

Wawu Shan – Sichuan Prov - Alfred has written a good brief about Wawu Shan, so I won't repeat except to add that our group went wild when I spotted a Red Panda.

Emei Shan – Sichuan

A UNESCO World Heritage Site.

While waiting for any flights out of Chengdu, we drove to Mt Emei. We stayed at Emeishan Grand Hotel situated beside the Main Entrance and birded around Luofeng Nunnery, Fuhu and Baoguo Temples (all within walking distance at base of mountain). Emei Shan is a famous Buddhist mountain in

China. Her highest Wanfo Peak stands at 3,099m asl.

Birds seen: Chinese Partridge, Asian Himalayan Warbler, Hwamei, Fork-tailed Sunbird, Bamboo Barred Owllet, Rufous-faced Wagtail,

Wuyuan County – Jiangxi Prov

Saw Poyang Lake as we drove along the highway.

Birds seen: Chinese Spot-billed Duck, Common Pheasant, 12 – 15 Yellow-throated Laughingthrush (soon to be split "courtoisi"), 5-6 Masked Laughingthrush, Red-billed Starling, Crested Myna

Wuyi Shan – Jiangxi/Fujian Border

A UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Marketplace near Wuyi Shan

Birds seen: Cabot's Tragopan, Asian House Martin - nesting, Collared Finchbill, Brown Bush Warbler, Sulphur-breasted Warbler, Golden Parrotbill, Black-chinned Yuhina, Chestnut Bulbul, Striated Yuhina, Brown Bullfinch. Our Biggest Frustration: One White-necklaced Partridge which responded to Ipod playback. Was very, very close but for 30 minutes it refused to show itself! Aarrghhh ...

Taibai Shan – Shaanxi Prov
(www.taibaishan.com)



Basic Accommodation at Taibai Shan



Common Toilet

Highest we could go was 2,250m asl. A bit of snow showed further up the mountain. A pity the ski cable car station was unmanned; otherwise, we would go to the summit for the Koklass Pheasant which was heard only.

Birds seen: *Temminck's Tragopan*, *Golden Pheasant*, *Brown Dipper*, *Rufous-breasted Accentor*, *Winter Wren*, *Himalayan Red-flanked Bluetail*, *Spotted Bush Warbler*, *Goldcrest*, *Sooty Tit*, *Yellow-bellied Tit*, *Eurasian Nuthatch*, *Spotted Nutcracker*. My Big Dip: *Spectacled Parrotbill*!

My total (not the group's) is 233 bird species. Have not sorted out recent splits, etc but at the moment it looks about 116 lifers out of which 38-39 are Chinese Endemics and Near-Endemics.

Meanwhile, here are my top 5 birds on this trip:-

1. **Temminck's Tragopan** – seen male (at Taibai Shan) and female (at Wawu Shan). One gorgeous, stunning male came barely 15 metres from us. We looked in disbelief as it responded to ipod playback. We lost sight of it once but the bird came down the slope and walked nearer and nearer towards us. At one point, it flapped its wing as if in display. Exclamations from the group included, "Jesus Christ!", "Oh my God!". All enjoyed a good 2.5 - 3mins look. It made up for the very basic accommodation with no bathing facilities!



Temminck's Tragopan - photos courtesy of Ron Knight



2. **Cabot's Tragopan** – seen male and female along same stretch of road at Wuyi Shan. Males were seen on both days, once briefly. Another was perched on a rock by the roadside whilst a female was seen busy preening herself before feeding on leaves. (She plucks and swallows up leaves very quickly.)



Female Cabot's Tragopan – photo courtesy of Ron Knight

3. **Lady Amherst's Pheasant** – seen male and female at Wasu Shan. A colourful male stood proudly on a mound showing off his beautiful long barred tail.

4. **Crested Ibis** – globally critical. Seen 10-15 - mostly white, 2 in summer plumage at staked out roosting site in Yang Xian countryside in Shaanxi.



Crested Ibis – photo courtesy of Ron Knight

5. **Chinese Bamboo Partridge** – seen very well on two occasions – 2 birds feeding by the roadside (15 minutes) at Wuyi Shan and 1 bird calling in the middle of a vegetable plot at Yang Xian.



Chinese Bamboo Partridge – photo courtesy of Ron Knight

I enjoyed my adventure in China - abundant birds, good food, great company and beautiful people. Maybe I should take up Mandarin lessons after all 😊