

Helanshan, Inner Mongolia, China

8-10 July 2005



Blue Eared-Pheasant

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General

The purpose of this trip was to see Blue Eared-Pheasant. Having previously dipped twice at Jiuzhaigou, I felt it was time to clean up on this genus. Helanshan apparently has a healthy isolated population of this species. My gen for the trip was virtually nothing, other than some brief reports from Chinese friends. Nevertheless, I was eager to find out for myself and to do some birding in a seldom-visited place. Not only had I crippling views of some Pheasants, but also found a White-bellied Green-Pigeon, a species that is very rare on the mainland, as well as a Crested Tit-Warbler.

Itinerary

8/7

I left Beijing with the 20.00 flight to Yinchuan in Ningxia. A slight delay, but I was promptly picked up at arrival by the reserve staff in a police car. Interestingly the guy put on the red/blue flashing lights in order to mark the importance of the transport! Even though it was very late evening, the drive naturally had to stop for food, which delayed us another 20 minutes. Nevertheless, we arrived the hotel in Bayan Hot slightly after midnight. As I had very little idea about the location of the nature reserve and had no clue at all about logistics and accommodation, I had to use the GPS to find out that we actually were in Bayan Hot. Neither of the people I met spoke any English at all, so I had to rely on my embarrassingly poor Mandarin.

9/7

The driver wanted to start at 7.00, which was not really my cup of tea. After some negotiations in the evening, we agreed on 6.00. Keen to get going I was at the doorstep well before 6, but had to wait until 7 before they showed up. So much for that! In addition, they insisted on breakfast before leaving. After more than two years in China I still have difficulties with rural Chinese breakfast, so it was another wait until we hit the road. At the HQ in the outskirts of the town there was another wait for the jeep to arrive and it was something like past 8 before we crossed the desert towards the mountain. The dawn mega-chorus of the wanted Eared-Pheasant was definitely long gone when we arrived at the right habitat. At the elevation of 2500 m we stopped and started to walk up a side valley to the left (north) through the spruce forest. It did not take us long until we stumbled upon a pair of Eared-Pheasants and had good scope views at close distance before they fled/walked away. It was a huge relief to have bagged the target bird so soon. We continued up the side valley to 2800 m where we turned around and descended. I then spent many hours walking all the way back down the main valley until the entrance of the gorge. Nice birding although many birds had stopped singing as it was in the middle of the day.

The rest of the day was spent walking around in the town and having dinner.

10/7

This day the car arrived promptly at 6 and we were soon driving south out of Bayan Hot towards the South Temple (Nan Si). About a handful of km south of town, we took a left turn at the first major junction and the road aimed for the mountains. The South Temple was a large temple complex with lots of surrounding houses. Just southeast of the major temple, there was a concrete track leading in through a large gorge starting at almost 2000 m. I did not walk long when to my surprise I saw a White-bellied Green-Pigeon sitting in a tree right in front of me. It behaved well and stayed in the area in order to be properly documented. Soon after this I heard some pheasants in the undergrowth and a party of three Blue Eared-Pheasants crossed the path and climbed the slope in full view. I then birded the trail until I finally reached a large meadow at 2600 m. Most of the birds were the same as yesterday, but it was a very pleasant day and it was not until 12 when I was back by the car. After lunch we started the return journey to Yinchuan and the airport, which we arrived at 14.30. The flight to Beijing left bang on time and it was only a 1.5 hours flight until being back home.

Weather

Day one was perfect with slightly overcast, pleasant temperature of about 20-25 C. The entire area seemed to be very dry, although some of the clouds seemed to actually hold some rain and there was a stream in the main valley that patchily held some water. The second day was brilliantly sunny with very good visibility.



View from 2300 meter at the South Temple

Logistics

I started the preparations with just a phone number to the headmaster of the reserve. As it turned out he did not speak English, so I quickly put my secretary on the job. After just one phone call everything was arranged with permits, accommodation, transport including pickup at the airport. Altogether I ended up paying 700 RMB, which I think was very reasonable and significantly lower than the asked for 2000 RMB.

Phone numbers to Mr Ma, the headmaster of the nature reserve, is 04838332859 (office), 13804739080 (mobile).

Site descriptions

Helanshan (or Ala Shan) is situated west of Huang He (Yellow River) on the border between Ningxia and Inner Mongolia. There are two Nature Reserves in the area, one in each province, although reports say that the Inner Mongolia one is better in terms of birds. The main valley that I visited the first day is reached from the desert town of Bayan Hot, which is situated west of the mountain range. The drive from Yinchuan airport to Bayan Hot took slightly more than two hours on good roads. In the northeastern part of Bayan Hot is the reserve HQ in a large official building so typical of China. From the HQ there is a very poor gravel road that leads due east through the desert. About halfway to the mountain there is a gate with a small house. In this house we got the key to another locked gate closer to the mountain. From the HQ to the entrance of the gorge is less than 30 minutes, but the road is extremely poor. Note however that it deteriorates even further when you drive through the gorge and up the main valley. 4WD is necessary to negotiate the large boulders that create the surface of the track.



The "road" up the main valley.

Bayan Hot (or Alxa Zuoqi) seems to be a changing town with many fashion shops popping up. There are at least a few larger hotels, so should be no problem finding accommodation. The reserve people booked one for me.

The South Temple (Nan Si) is situated a bit further south than the main valley. Access is by driving south along the main road south of Bayan Hot. After a few (5?) km there is a major junction, with a road that leads towards the mountain. This road ends at the South Temple and from there it is possible to walk along a concrete trail up through the gorge. Eventually this trail comes to a large meadow at 2600 m, after having climbed through the spruce forest. Note that the first lower part is a drier ravine with some deciduous trees and it was here that I found the White-bellied Green-Pigeon as well as the party of Blue Eared-Pheasants.



At 2600 meter at the South Temple

Birds

Ruddy Shelduck, *Tadorna ferruginea*

Two in a pond near the South Temple.

Northern Sparrowhawk, *Accipiter nisus nisosimilis*

One at 2600 m at the South Temple.

Eurasian Kestrel, *Falco tinnunculus interstinctus*

One female in the main valley and three at the South Temple.

Chukar, *Alectoris chukar pubescens*

Four coveys with adults plus a few singles in the main valley.

Blue Eared-Pheasant, *Crossoptilon auritum*

One pair seen nicely in a small clearing in the spruce forest at 2600 m in a side valley to the main valley. Three together seen when crossing the path at 2100 m at the South Temple and then showing brilliantly on the slope for about ten minutes.



Blue Eared-Pheasant. Why on earth was it created like this?!

Whiskered Tern, *Chlidonias hybridus swinhoei*

30-50 near Huang He crossing on the way to the airport.

Eurasian Collared-Dove, *Streptopelia decaocto decaocto*

Fairly common in Bayan Hot.

White-bellied Green-Pigeon, *Treron sieboldii (fopingensis ?)*

One female in the dry part of the gorge at 2100 m at the South Temple. This was most unexpected and certainly the first record for Inner Mongolia. The species is very rare in China and this is about 600 km north of its northernmost range in the Qinling mountains where the subspecies *fopingensis* is endemic.



Female White-bellied Green-Pigeon

Common Swift, *Apus apus pekinensis*

Common around Yinchuan.

Fork-tailed Swift, *Apus pacificus pacificus*

Small number seen a few times in the main valley.

Eurasian Hoopoe, *Upupa epops saturata*

One at the reserve HQ in Bayan Hot and a two more in Bayan Hot.

Crested Lark, *Galerida cristata magna*

Two between Bayan Hot and the main valley.

Horned Lark, *Eremophila alpestris brandti*

Common between Bayan Hot and the main valley.

Sand/Pale Martin, *Riparia riparia/diluta*

A large flock near the Huang He crossing on the way to the airport.

Eurasian Crag-Martin, *Hirundo rupestris*

About 10 in the main valley and 20 at the South Temple.

Barn Swallow, *Hirundo rustica gutturalis*

Fairly common in Bayan Hot.

White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba leucopsis*

Two in Bayan Hot.

Grey Wagtail, *Motacilla cinerea robusta*

Three in the gorge in the main valley.

Brown Accentor, *Prunella fulvescens nanshanica*

About 20 in forest and scrub in the main valley and one at 2600 m at the South Temple.

Chinese Hill Warbler, *Rhopophilus pekinensis pekinensis*

One carrying food in the gorge in the main valley.

Crested Tit-Warbler, *Leptopoecile elegans*

One male seen very nicely at 2500 m at the South Temple. The English name and most pictures are not very good, as the crest does not really exist, but seems merely to be a backward-pointed white cap. Anyway, always a nice bird to see and in an area not normally shown on distribution maps.

Yellow-streaked Warbler, *Phylloscopus armandii armandii*

Common in the entire main valley and at the South Temple.



Yellow-streaked Warbler

[Gansu Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus kansuensis*

One probable seen at 2500 m at the South Temple. None heard singing in spite of the other *Phylloscopus* being very active.]

Hume's Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus humei mandellii*

Common in the spruce forest above 2500 m both in the main valley and at the South Temple.

Black Redstart, *Phoenicurus ochruros phoenicuroides*

About ten in the gorge in the main valley and 20 at the South Temple.

Daurian Redstart, *Phoenicurus aureus leucopterus*

About ten in the main valley and about ten at the South Temple.

Blue-fronted Redstart, *Phoenicurus frontalis*

Two in the upper main valley.

Pied Wheatear, *Oenanthe pleschanka*

About five at the gorge entrance to the main valley.

Desert Wheatear, *Oenanthe deserti oreophila*

About ten between Bayan Hot and the main valley and one south of Bayan Hot.

Pere David's Laughingthrush, *Garrulax davidi davidi*

Five in the lower main valley and twice heard at the South Temple.



Pere David's Laughingthrush, preferring to use this name instead of calling the poor bird: Plain...

Songar Tit, *Poecile songara affinis*

Fairly common in the main valley and at the South Temple.

Coal Tit, *Periparus ater (pekinensis ?)*

About ten above 2400 m at the South Temple. Intermediate length of the crest between northern and southern forms.

Snowy-browed Nuthatch, *Sitta villosa villosa*

About ten in the spruce forest in the upper main valley and fairly common above 2400 m at the South Temple.

Wallcreeper, *Tichodroma muraria nepalensis*

One at 2700 m up the side valley from the main valley.

Isabelline Shrike, *Lanius isabellinus isabellinus*

About ten between Bayan Hot and the main valley.

Brown Shrike, *Lanius cristatus cristatus*

Two at the hotel in Bayan Hot.

Grey-backed Shrike, *Lanius tephrocephalus*
Four in the lower part of the main valley.



Grey-backed Shrike

Eurasian Magpie, *Pica pica sericea*

Three south of Bayan Hot. Many nests seen.

Red-billed Chough, *Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax brachypus*

Common in the main valley and at the South Temple, e.g. a flock of 100+.

Eastern Carrion Crow, *Corvus [cornix] orientalis*

One in main valley and 10+ at the South Temple.

Eurasian Tree Sparrow, *Passer montanus dilutus*

Common around Bayan Hot and Yinchuan.

Common Rosefinch, *Carpodacus erythrinus roseatus*

Common in the main valley and at the South Temple.

Beautiful Rosefinch, *Carpodacus pulcherrimus davidianus*

10-20 in the main valley and 20+ at the South Temple.

Red Crossbill, *Loxia curvirostra japonica*

Singles and small flocks seen and heard several times in the spruce forest in the main valley and at the South Temple.

Oriental Greenfinch, *Carduelis sinica sinica*

About ten in Bayan Hot.

Godlewski's Bunting, *Emberiza godlewski godlewski*

Fairly common in the main valley and at the South Temple.

Mammals

Blue Sheep

One at a ridge at the side valley at the main valley.

Small deer

One bounced away in the spruce forest at the South Temple.