

**Baihualing, Gaoligongshan,
Western Yunnan,
China**

25-28 January 2007



Cachar Wedge-billed Babbler, first photo ever?

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General

This was my third visit to this excellent site in western Yunnan and the target was to find the extremely seldom-seen Cachar Wedge-billed Babbler. The species is most certainly different from the Sikkim Wedge-billed Babbler and there are very few sightings of it from anywhere. The song was unknown until one year ago and there had been a few sightings of it at Baihualing in recent years. Everything was set for a thrilling trip and as it turned out it was also a highly successful such in that we recorded three different individuals and managed to get both tape-recordings and photos.

In addition to The Babbler, we also saw a good selection of the other specialties of the Gaoligongshan, such as Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler, Grey-bellied Wren-Babbler, Black-headed Shrike-Babbler, Yellow-throated Fulvetta, Scaly Laughingthrush, Purple Cochoa and many more. Gaoligongshan is a magic place for anyone interested in babblers; 26 species, more than one quarter of the birds recorded on this trip were from this diverse family (although a revision of the Babbler systematic might be needed)! I had nice company by Beijing birder Marco della Seta, who was also fortunate enough to be able to stay an extra three days in the area, adding two Fire-tailed Myzornis and a smashing pair of Mrs Hume's Pheasant to his trip-list.

Itinerary

25/1

We left Kunming on the 20.00 plus 50 minutes flight and were picked up at Luxi airport (alias Dehong alias Mangshi). Then it was a 4h15m drive to Baihualing reserve incl 30 minutes stop to fix a puncture (which was amazingly arranged well after midnight). We went to bed around 02.00 and even the barking dogs soon faded away.

26/1

We left the hotel at 6.30 for the 30 minute drive up the mountain. On the spot we had a quick brecky in the dark, as sunrise is not until 7.45 in this part of the world. We walked up the main trail and birded back and forth the first km until mid afternoon, until we had successfully scored on my main target for the trip, the extremely localized Cachar Wedge-billed Babbler. After having feasted on fantastic views of this rarely seen bird, we continued uphill. The last couple of daylight hours until dusk at 19.00 we spent walking back down, where the car was waiting for us.

At midday I almost ran out of batteries for my loud-speaker, as all my spare ones were discovered to be empty. Panic set in as it was even before the Cachar was bagged. Fortunately there is such a thing as mobile phones and China is well covered with base stations. Through some emergency calls to a colleague in Beijing I had a message transmitted to our local guide, who sent a boy to the nearest town to procure a bagful of replacements. Consequently order was reinstalled some hours later.

27/1

This morning we delayed the start until 6.50 and we were in the forest at 7.20. At the crack of dawn we walked another trail compared to yesterday. The sun hit the hillside and it came alive with birds, so it took us quite a while to make the climb. Lots of bushes had flowers and this attracted sunbirds, Yuhinas and several other birds. At one place a pair of Cachar Wedge-billed Babbler responded and showed briefly. We continued walking along this trail for a couple of km before turning around. The rest of the day was spent either stalking out the gullies for babblers or the flowering trees for Myzornis. Half an hour before dusk we were back at the start of the trail.

28/1

This was my last day and I decided to give it half an hour at a clearing where there were lots of flowering trees around. Marco set off uphill on the main trail in order to reach higher altitudes at dawn. Five species of owls (strangely two individuals of each species!) were calling before dawn. It was only too soon when I had to leave for the airport and we slowly drove downhill looking out for birds along the way. We passed the hotel at 8.55 and continued to Mangshi. An expected (!?) traffic jam at the market town along the Salween river stole 15 minutes. This was actually a repeat performance from my last visit. When will they learn not to put all the veggies and goods on the road? Later we were held up again for 15 minutes due to a crashed minibus (not ours fortunately!). However, we reached the airport in due time at 12.55 and even had time for lunch before the flight to Kunming at 14.30. By that time I received a text message from Marco who had just seen two Myzornis well up the main trail...



Yuhina gallery; *Rufous-vented*, *Stripe-throated* and *Whiskered*

Weather

As usual during this time of the year the weather is very nice. It was somewhat colder than I have experienced from my November visits, but sunny and clear sky. Temperatures were just a bit too low for perfect birding (especially the first morning) and gloves would really have been needed in the morning, hadn't I forgot them. At higher elevations it was still ice on the water even in the afternoon. The first day was decidedly cooler than the others and it might have been a cold front passing through.

Birds

The subspecies are mostly assigned based on literature, rather than actual field characters.

- Great Cormorant, *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*
A flock of ten along the Salween.
- Crested Serpent-Eagle, *Spilornis cheela* ssp
One heard
- Crested Goshawk, *Accipiter trivirgatus indicus*
One seen a couple of times.
- Besra, *Accipiter virgatus affinis*
One seen in the second evening.
- Black Eagle, *Ictinaetus malayensis malayensis*
Most likely the two of a pair were seen several times.
- Mountain Hawk-Eagle, *Spizaetus nipalensis nipalensis*
One seen briefly when gliding down a small gully.
- Common Hill Partridge, *Arborophila torqueola batemani*
At least four duetting pairs were heard, as usual most frequently in the early morning and early evening. Once a small group was flushed and another pair was seen nicely in the open on the trail.
- White-breasted Waterhen, *Amaurornis phoenicurus phoenicurus*
One misplaced bird tried to cross the dirt road below Baihualing.
- Eurasian Woodcock, *Scolopax rusticola*
One seen pre-dawn on the main driving track up to the forest.
- Mountain Scops-Owl, *Otus spilocephalus latouchi*
Four heard pre-dawn. One day I will make an effort to actually see one!
- Collared Scops-Owl, *Otus lettia lettia*
One heard pre-dawn from the hotel and two heard pre-dawn in the forest.
- Brown-Wood-Owl, *Strix leptogrammica ticehursti*
One and a presumed pair heard pre-dawn.
- Collared Owlet, *Glaucidium brodiei brodiei*
Four heard pre-dawn.
- Asian Barred Owlet, *Glaucidium cuculoides* ssp
Three heard pre-dawn and another seen well.
- Grey Nightjar, *Caprimulgus indicus hazarae*
One seen in flight before dusk.
- Red-headed Trogon, *Harpactes erythrocephalus helenae*
One heard.
- Great Barbet, *Megalaima virens virens*
Several heard throughout the days.
- Golden-throated Barbet, *Megalaima franklinii franklinii*
Several heard and seen.
- Crimson-breasted Woodpecker, *Dendrocopos cathpharius tenebrosus*
One seen.
- Bay Woodpecker, *Blythipicus pyrrhotis pyrrhotis*
One heard.
- White Wagtail, *Motacilla alba alboides*
Two on the journey to Mangshi
- Grey-chinned Minivet, *Pericrocotus solaris montpellierii*
One pair seen.
- Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike, *Hemipus picatus capitalis*
Five scattered birds seen.
- Striated Bulbul, *Pycnonotus striatus striatus*
About five seen.
- Red-vented Bulbul, *Pycnonotus cafer stanfordi*
Common along the Salween river.
- Mountain Bulbul, *Ixos mccllellandii similis*
Several heard and seen.
- Black Bulbul, *Hypsipetes leucocephalus* ssp
About ten seen. Both black and white headed forms.
- Orange-bellied Leafbird, *Chloropsis hardwickei melliana*
Five seen.

Chestnut-bellied Rock-Thrush, *Monticola rufiventris*
One female and one male seen.

Long-tailed Thrush, *Zoothera dixonii*
Surprisingly few on the trails and only a total of ten seen.

Dusky Thrush, *Turdus naumanni eunomus*
Four seen together.

Chestnut-headed Tesia, *Tesia castaneocoronata ripleyi*
Two seen and one heard.

Buff-barred Warbler, *Phylloscopus pulcher pulcher*
Common.

Ashy-throated Warbler, *Phylloscopus maculipennis maculipennis*
Fairly common.

Sichuan Leaf-Warbler, *Phylloscopus forresti*
Less common than the two previous species.

[Bianchi's Warbler, *Seicercus valentini*
One silent bird could have been *valentini*, *tephrocephalus* or *omeiensis*, although *valentini* is the most likely candidate.]

Grey-cheeked Warbler, *Seicercus poliogenys*
A total of ten seen and heard.

Black-faced Warbler, *Abroscopus schisticeps ripponi*
A total of more than ten seen.

Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher, *Ficedula strophinata strophinata*
Three seen.

Large Niltava, *Niltava grandis grandis*
A total of almost ten seen and heard.

Orange-flanked Bush-Robin, *Tarsiger rufilatus*
15-20 heard and seen.

Oriental Magpie-Robin, *Copsychus saularis prosthopellus*
Two along the Salween river.

Blue-fronted Redstart, *Phoenicurus frontalis*
One female seen.

Daurian Redstart, *Phoenicurus aureus leucopterus*
One along the road below Baihualing.

White-bellied Redstart, *Hodgsonius phaenicuroides ssp*
One calling and briefly seen on both evenings.

Purple Cochoa, *Cochoa purpurea*
One was briefly seen in flight when it flew across above our heads. As I got Cochoa impression I played the tape and got an immediate response and it then called for another few minutes. Then the bird came in through the mid-storey and quickly changed positions before it decided to give up and get away.

White-throated Fantail, *Rhipidura albicollis*
Three seen.

Spotted Laughingthrush, *Garrulax ocellatus maculipectus*
Three birds provided splendid views as they sat right out in the open.

Scaly Laughingthrush, *Garrulax subunicolor griseatus*
Crippling views of a pair.

Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush, *Garrulax erythrocephalus woodi*
Pairs and a small groups seen at several occasions.

Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, *Pomatorhinus ruficollis similis*
About 20-30 seen.

Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler, *Xiphirhynchus superciliaris forresti*
Three of this charismatic bird was seen.



Slender-billed Scimitar-Babbler, a specialty of the area

Grey-bellied Wren-Babbler, *Spelaeornis reptatus*

One seen and another two heard, always in the well-vegetated gullies.



The recently split Grey-bellied Wren-Babbler (from Long-tailed) is a poorly named species. Grey-faced would be much more appropriate...

Cachar Wedge-billed Babbler, *Sphenocichla roberti*

Bird of the trip!! After playing the song at random, we got a strong response within a minute just near us. Then it did not take long until the bird circled us and gave absolutely stunning views. Mostly it was moving quickly through the under storey, but sometimes it climbed the branches up to a level of five meters and really showed off. On the second day, another bird responded to playing the song. This pair came in and spent only a few minutes near us before loosing interest and retreating uphill again.



Cachar Wedge-billed Babbler, the real prize!

Rufous-capped Babbler, *Stachyris ruficeps bhamoensis*
10-15 seen.

Golden Babbler, *Stachyris chrysaea chrysaea*

One seen.

Grey-throated Babbler, *Stachyris nigriceps coltarti*

One seen.

Black-headed Shrike-Babbler, *Pteruthius rufiventer rufiventer*

Two females and one male together. Another stunning specialty of Gaoligongshan.

White-browed Shrike-Babbler, *Pteruthius flaviscapis ricketti*

One female seen.

Rusty-fronted Barwing, *Actinodura egertoni ripponi*

An estimated total of 20-30 birds in many different bird flocks.

Blue-winged Minla, *Minla cyanouroptera ssp*

A total of seven birds seen.

Chestnut-tailed Minla, *Minla strigula yunnanensis*

40-50 seen.

Red-tailed Minla, *Minla ignotincta ignotincta*

10-15 seen.

Golden-breasted Fulvetta, *Alcippe chrysotis forresti*

Several flocks seen, the largest being of more than 20 birds.

Yellow-throated Fulvetta, *Alcippe cinerea*

Eventually I scored on this fast-moving fulvetta. A flock of 10-15 birds was seen three times and a few birds were also briefly seen at another site. About five were also seen at a third site.



Yellow-throated Fulvetta; a poor shot, but it was a lifer...

Rufous-winged Fulvetta, *Alcippe castaneiceps castaneiceps*

Several large flocks seen.

Manipur Fulvetta, *Alcippe manipurensis*

Two plus five seen.



Manipur Fulvetta, split from Streak-throated

Rusty-capped Fulvetta, *Alcippe dubia intermedia*

A total of three seen.

Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, *Alcippe morrisonia yunnanensis*
A common component in bird flocks.



Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, noisy and conspicuous

Beautiful Sibia, *Heterophasia pulchella*
Commonly seen.



Beautiful Sibia, must be seen in sunlight to deserve the name

Whiskered Yuhina, *Yuhina flavicollis rouxi*
About five flocks of 5-20 birds.
Stripe-throated Yuhina, *Yuhina gularis gularis*
Two seen.
Rufous-vented Yuhina, *Yuhina occipitalis obscurior*
Several small flocks.
Black-throated Tit, *Aegithalos concinnus talifuensis*
Five seen.
Green-backed Tit, *Parus monticolus yunnanensis*
Three seen.
Yellow-cheeked Tit, *Parus spilonotus spilonotus*
Three seen.
Yellow-browed Tit, *Sylviparus modestus modestus*
Half a dozen seen.
Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, *Sitta nagaensis nagaensis*
Two pairs seen.
White-tailed Nuthatch, *Sitta himalayensis*
Three together.

Gould's Sunbird, *Aethopyga gouldiae dabryi*
Several seen amongst flowering trees.



Mrs Gould's Sunbird, the abundance of flowers meant a galore in sunbirds

Green-tailed Sunbird, *Aethopyga nipalensis koelzi*
Several seen amongst flowering trees.

Fire-tailed Sunbird, *Aethopyga ignicauda ignicauda*
About five seen, all were alternate plumage males.

Yellow-bellied Flowerpecker, *Dicaeum melanoxanthum*
One male seen in a tree-top.

Chestnut-flanked White-eye, *Zosterops erythropleurus*
Two flocks of up to 20 birds.

Japanese White-eye, *Zosterops japonicus simplex*
A few small flocks.

Maroon Oriole, *Oriolus traillii traillii*
About five seen.

Long-tailed Shrike, *Lanius schach tricolor*
Two along the Salween river.

Ashy Drongo, *Dicrurus leucophaeus hopwoodi*
A total of six seen.

Grey Treepie, *Dendrocitta formosae himalayensis*
One seen.