

## SOUTH-EAST CHINA

December 26, 2024-January 14, 2025

### **Participants:**

Nigel Adlam  
Greg Anderson  
Richard Carden  
Clive Garland  
Richard Noske

Guide: Steven An of China Birding Tours (<https://chinabirdingtours.com>)

This was a successful and very enjoyable trip. We had good views of nearly all our target species, learned much about China, munched on some terrific food and realised that anything is possible in the Land of the Dragon if you're willing to pay for it. Steven, who owns China Birding Tours, is the best guide in the country. He speaks better English than most Aussies and is a world-class birder. He makes huge efforts to ensure his guests have the best chance of seeing the birds, and is flexible enough to change the itinerary if necessary at the last minute. And he's a good bloke.



We left Australia, from Darwin and Brisbane, on Boxing Day and met up in Wuhan late on December 27. Steven had arranged for us to stay in the very good airport hotel. We flew north-east to Linfen early the next morning and then drove into the mountains for two hours. This was a two-day self-guided pre-extension to our main tour, but Steven made all the arrangements, such as hotel, vehicle and driver. We saw a Brown-eared Pheasant immediately after arriving at the hotel and saw many more close up over the next 24 hours.

Overall, the hills were very quiet birdwise but we picked up a few species, such as Chinese Nuthatch and Naumann's Thrush. Apparently, Golden Pheasant is possible lower down the mountain. It was bitterly cold; even the mountain creek and small waterfalls had frozen.



We flew back to Wuhan the next day, stayed at the airport hotel again and then the next morning drove for 90 minutes to the Dongzhai area for a two-night stay. In this area there are several hides for Reeve's Pheasant, considered by many to be the most beautiful galliforme. We saw two females at dusk from the hide, but the light was fading fast and the birds were wary. Fortunately, we gained marvellous views of a male while we walked in the forest the next morning. It's a gorgeous bird. In this region we also saw specialities such as Crested Ibis and Collared Crow, and a number of buntings, including Yellow-browed, Yellow-throated, Little and Black faced.



That afternoon, we drove south past Wuhan – where the wet market at the epicentre of the covid-19 pandemic has been demolished and enclosed in a large concrete wall – to Jiujiang where we were treated to a magnificent sight of at least 120 Baer's Pochards. Not bad for one of the world's rarest ducks.



The next day we we first returned to the Baer's Pochard site, and enjoyed better views of the birds in the morning light, before heading to Poyang Lake where we picked up four species of crane – Siberian (by far the most numerous), Common, Hooded and White-naped – plus Oriental Stork and Brown Crake. It was heartening to see so many Chinese, particularly young people, on a day out to watch the birds from well-made platforms and walkways. The conservation movement seems to be growing in China as more people learn that their country has some of the finest wildlife on earth – something that should make all Chinese proud.



The following morning was also spent in the Poyang Lake area, seeing many of the same birds we saw on the previous day. In the afternoon we made a longish drive to the attractive town of Wuyuan where we spent the night.

The next day we drove to what was once a remote village, climbed up onto a bloke's rooftop and got fantastic views of Pied Falconets coming out of their overnight roosting hole and then perching in full view. A photographer's delight. The village was accessible only by a dirt track until a road was built 30 years ago. The village is now clearly prosperous – nice homes, well-kept fields, lots of new cars – because they can get their produce to market. The villagers are also benefiting financially from birders visiting to see the falconets. Hopefully, this will ensure that the trees used by this beautiful little raptor are preserved.



After enjoying the falconets in the morning, we drove to a river not too far away and we all got great views of several Scaly-sided Mergansers. Business-savvy locals have built a hide, although we saw the ducks from a riverbank. In this area we eventually all had good views of Grey-sided Scimitar-Babbler, and flushed a small covey of Chinese Bamboo Partridges. Another of our targets here was Short-tailed Parrotbill, but despite several hours of searching spread over two days, we were out of luck. However, a nice, but noisy, flock of Grey-headed Parrotbills was some compensation.



Our next major site was forest-covered Emeifeng mountain. Steven was concerned that the minibus we had been travelling in, although very comfortable, would be a hindrance on the narrow, winding road up Emeifeng, so an alternative plan was hatched. Our driver took us to the station and we enjoyed a brief, but fast, bullet train ride to Shangrao, where we picked up a 4WD vehicle and drove on to Taining, near Emeifang, where we spent the night.



Birding was slow and cold the next day. Despite a relatively early start, we failed to see Elliot's Pheasant on the lower slopes of the mountain or Cabot's Tragopan at higher elevations. A party of Buffy Laughingthrushes briefly had us excited, but they were moving quickly through the forest and we were not able to get satisfying views. Steven insisted that the population of the tragopan was quite high, so we spent much of the day walking up and down the same stretch of road, but none of the birds was obliging. Later in the afternoon we came across a nice party of at least seven Silver Pheasants, including two adult males. As light was fading and we were heading back down the mountain, we were finally rewarded by a male Elliot's Pheasant crossing the road. Not everyone obtained ideal views, but that was rectified the next morning when a couple of others were seen. On our second morning we also returned to walking the road at higher elevations, and before too long a male Cabot's Tragopan crossed the road and gave us excellent views.



By this time, we had done so well that we were almost a day ahead of our proposed schedule. Steven was quick to suggest a change of itinerary, and soon we were on the road and heading towards Fuzhou. Along the way, we stopped at a site that had previously proved reliable for Blyth's Kingfisher. Eventually Clive spotted one sitting on a rock along the stream, and we all saw it well. Little, White-crowned and Slaty-backed Forktails, White-capped and Plumbeous Redstarts, and a family of Chinese Bamboo Partridges also made sure we had plenty to watch. We spent the next morning in Fuzhou looking for White-necked Partridge in a park near the town and although we heard them a couple of times, none was seen. Nevertheless, the park yielded many other birds, including Tristram's Bunting, Indochinese Yuhina, and Grey-backed, White's, Pale and Japanese Thrushes. A drive to the nearby coast to search for Chinese Crested Tern was not successful, but we did see a nice selection of shorebirds, as well as a small flock of White-shouldered Starlings.



We then flew from Fuzhou to Nanning and drove for a couple of hours to Nonggang, where we were joined by the owners and some of the guides from Tropical Birding. They were good company, despite their terrible jokes. Birding has had a dramatic and beneficial effect on what must have been a poor backwater until the Nonggang Babbler was first described in 2008. Entrepreneurial villagers have set up lodges, hides and a taxi service to cater to the influx of birders, mainly wealthy Chinese photographers from Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing. The hides were well-made and well-positioned. We got perfect views of the babbler, plus Spot-necked Babbler, Large Scimitar Babbler, Bar-backed Partridge, Blue-rumped Pitta, White-winged Magpie, Black-throated Laughingthrush and Indochinese Green Magpie.



The controversial highlight of Nonggang was an evening sortie to a lake where some of our now quite large group ticked the extremely rare White-eared Heron. The controversy was

whether anyone should tick a bird that was seen distantly and in very poor light.



The final leg of our trip was three nights in Hainan, where we waited patiently in good hides to be rewarded with thrilling close-up views of Hainan Peacock-Pheasant and Hainan Partridge. There was serious debate about which was better looking – the peacock-pheasant or the partridge. Other birds of note on Hainan were the startlingly yellow Hainan Leaf Warbler, the skulking Rufous-tailed Robin, Rufous-cheeked Laughingthrush, Hainan Laughingthrush and Chinese Barbet.



Overall, it was an enriching trip. We cannot recommend Steven highly enough. His knowledge of China's rich birdlife is amazing. His guiding business deserves to do well.

Zai jian.  
Nigel Adlam