



*9 days Western Sichuan Birding Trip
in October 2020*



In Search of Birds with Steven Bonta during China's National Day Holiday

Sept. 30 - Oct. 8, 2020



Summary

The year 2020 started with Corvid-19 which has changed the lives of people throughout the whole world. We were also no exception, as we lost all our reservations soon after the pandemic swept the world. We were so lucky that we got an inquiry from Steve right before the coming of the National Day holiday from Oct. 1st to 8th.

Steve is a language expert who speaks 8 languages. He lives in Shanghai and he is a very experienced, knowledgeable, and avid birder.

We knew that it would be a challenging birding trip due to the season and the 8-day long national holiday. We expected many tourists from other parts of China with the end of 9 months of lockdown and not be able to travel, and knew that this would make it harder to find good locations for birding. To avoid the crowds, we made some special arrangement. Despite all those unfavorable factors, we had a great birding time in western Sichuan. We counted 132 bird species and some mammals.



Lady Amherst's Pheasant

Steve had a wish list of specific birds that he wanted to see. We saw during the following on the trip: Lady Amherst's Pheasant, Blood Pheasant, Snow Partridge, Snow Pigeon, Lammergeier, Golden Eagle, Red-billed Chough, Alpine Chough, White-browed Tit-warbler, Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinch, Golden Pheasant, White-winged Grosbeak, Upland Buzzard, Chinese Babax, Rufous-tailed Babbler, White-browed Tit, Spot-breasted Parrotbill, Ibisbill, Plain Mountain Finch, Carrion Crow, Raven, Eurasian Nutcracker, Wood

Snipe, Rufous-vented Tit, Sichuan Tit, Spotted Laughingthrush, Chinese Fulvetta, White-throated



Redstart, White-throated Dipper, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Robin Accentor, Alpine Accentor, Rosy Pipit, Dark-breasted Rosefinch, and Golden Bush Robin.

The mammals we saw during the trip: Chinese Goral, Tufted Deer, Himalayan Marmot, Blue Sheep.



Trip Itinerary

Day 1 (Sept. 30): Arrive in Chengdu by late evening flight from Shanghai. Then drive 3 hours to Longcanggou. Overnight: Guesthouse in Longcanggou.

Day 2 (Oct. 1): Birding in Longcanggou and drive to Luding in the late afternoon. Overnight: Luding Yunshuiqiao Hotel.

Day 3 (Oct. 2): Whole day birding in Erlang Mountain. Overnight: Luding Yunshuiqiao Hotel

Day 4 (Oct. 3): Birding in Erdaoqiao of Kangding and looking for Ibisbill in Xinduqiao, then drive back to Chengdu in the late afternoon for a wedding ceremony that Steve has to participate in the following day. Overnight: Chengdu.

Day 5 (Oct. 4): Drive to Wolong in the evening, birding on the way. Overnight: Wolong Hotel.

Day 6-8 (Oct. 5-7): Birding in Balang Mountain and Wolong. Overnight: Wolong Hotel.

Day 9 (Oct. 8): Birding in Balang Mountain in the morning. Drive back to Chengdu to catch the evening flight back to Shanghai.



Trip Itinerary

Sept. 30: Chengdu to Longcanggou, foggy and raining.

The plane arrived on time surprisingly. Normally this flight from Shanghai to Chengdu has lots of delays. After meeting Steve, we drove immediately toward our destination—Longcanggou which has become a very popular birding destination in Sichuan. It was foggy and there were lots of cars driving on the road. The 8-day long holiday has not started yet but some experienced travelers wanted to leave early to avoid the huge crowds. Obviously, Steve got very excited about this trip. He asked me lots of questions about his trip while we were on our way to our destination at a much slower speed than usual due to heavy fog and traffic. After we left the highway, we drove

up along the winding road to the higher part of Longcanggou. Suddenly, we saw a Tawny Owl on the road and we were able to see how beautiful the bird was before it flew away. We arrived at the hotel at about 4 AM. The hotel manager has already given us directions on how to get to our room. With some effort, we got into our room and set the departure time at 7:00 in the morning. Then we went to bed to get our lost sleep.

Oct. 1: Longcanggou to Erlang Mountain, sunny.

I awoke to the loud calls of a Chinese Bamboo Partridge at 6:30. I got up and made preparations for the day. After Steve got up, we walked out of our hotel to look for birds. Because of road construction, the traditional bird path has been closed and we had to go to another so-called scenic spot to look for birds. On our way to the parking lot, we saw an Eastern Buzzard soaring low, and a flock of Red-billed Leiothrix chirping actively in a cluster of the roadside bush. We got



Red-billed Leiothrix

to the parking lot and I got the entrance tickets. When I walked out of the ticket office, I saw Steve looking for birds on one side of the parking lot. At the creek by the side of the parking lot, we saw a Plumbeous Water Redstart. At a pond near the creek, we spotted several Mandarin Duck and one Chinese Pond Heron. Boarding a park golf cart, we headed toward the higher part of the park. It's about 6 kilometers. From the top, we walked down toward the bottom, the scenery was great



Little Forktail

but we did not see many birds, We saw Long-tailed Shrike, Eurasian Jay, Grey Treepie, Green-backed Tit, Brown-breasted Bulbul, Common Kestrel, Black-throated Tit, White-browed Laughingthrush, Blue Whistling Thrush, Japanese White Eye, and Little Forktail. Though it is the first day of the holiday, there were still quite many tourists who had no interest in birds. After walking half of the valley, we decided to walk to the road to take a golf cart to the bottom and move to our next birding site. We drove to our hotel and had lunch before we headed for Luding. On the way to Luding, we stopped at a couple of places to look for birds.

But it was very foggy on the eastern side of Erlang Mountain. By the time we drove to the western

side of Erlang Mountain, it was already getting dark. We had some light birding there before we drove to our hotel.



Rufous-breasted Accentor

Oct. 2: Erlang Mountain, cloudy.

We left our hotel at 5:30 AM and drove to the higher part of Erlang Mountain. Now the old deserted birding road became busy again. We saw piles of iron bars left by the roadside for the construction of gigantic pylons for high voltage electricity transmission. It was obvious that the impact on pheasants from this project was pretty big. We failed to find any Lady Amherst's Pheasants as we had done in our past birding trips. After some serious search for Lady Amherst's Pheasant, we decided to focus on other birds. Suddenly

I heard the call of Spotted Nutcracker, and I called Steve and walked quickly toward the direction where the call was from. I saw a Spotted Nutcracker perched on the top of a pine tree. After some great views of the bird, we moved on to search for other birds. We saw a Rufous-breasted Accentor, an Elliot's Laughingthrush, a flock of Long-tailed Minivet, an Ashy Drongo, a Large-billed Crow, Japanese Tit, Brown-breasted Bulbul, Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler. We drove toward the mountain top aiming to find some rosefinches. Suddenly by the roadside, we saw a flock of Blood Pheasant in the light fog. They ran into the bushes once they saw us. So, we drove



Blood Pheasant

to the top and found it was pointless to try the other side of the mountain because of the heavy fog. We turned around and started back down. While we were driving close to the place where we saw blood pheasants, to our surprise, we found them coming out from the bush. We stopped and enjoyed another great view of those beautiful pheasants. After that, we drove down to a trail entrance, we parked our car and walked into the forest along the trail. It turned out to be the most fruitful walk of the day. We enjoyed not having passing vehicles, shouting travelers and noise of machine from the construction site. It was

so quiet, we only heard the chirping of birds. Along the trail, we found Fire-breasted Flower Pecker, White-browed Fulvetta, Rusty-capped Fulvetta, Pygmy Wren Babbler, Gold-breasted Fulvetta, Hodgson's Redstart, Chinese White-browed Rosefinch, Twite, Little Bunting, and Dark-breasted Rosefinch. When we returned to the deserted driving road, we saw more hikers and more cars. So, we moved to the lower part of the mountain to search for Rufous-tailed Babbler. We heard the call of the birds and used a playback call, but unfortunately, we got little response from playback. So, in the late afternoon, we drove back to our hotel at Luding county town and enjoyed a wonderful dinner at a local popular restaurant.



Chinese White-browed Rosefinch

Oct. 4: Luding to Chengdu via Kangding, cloudy.

We left our hotel at 5:30 AM for Kangding to avoid traffic and get to our birding site early enough. With the opening of a new highway, between Ya'an and Kangding, it becomes very convenient now to get to Kangding. At 6:00 we were already in Kangding. We headed directly to Erdaoqiao where we can search for some special birds such as Lady Amherst's Pheasant, Rufous-tailed Babbler, Chinese Babax. It was still dark when we got to our birding site so we decided to have an early breakfast. We drove to along a dirt road after breakfast, searching for birds feeding on the road. Suddenly, I saw a female pheasant, I hinted to Steve and he saw the bird. It was Lady



Lady Amherst's Pheasant

Amherst's Pheasant. We continued our search for a beautiful male. When we came to a small parking lot, we parked our car and walked around to search for the pheasants. It was pretty quiet so we decided to drive to a higher place to try our luck. While we were driving along the dirt road toward the higher part of the mountain, I saw a male Lady Amherst's Pheasant feeding on the roadside, I stopped our car and pointed out to Steve the direction of the bird ahead of us on the road. He saw the bird. He was marveled at the

beauty of the bird. After the great view of the bird, we drove on to the higher part of the mountain where we got our first bird wave. We saw Rufous-tailed Babbler, Elliot's Laughingthrush and Chinese Babax. After that, we decided to move to our next birding site to search for Steve's dream bird, the Ibisbill. The main road was already jammed with cars. Most of them headed to a popular attraction about 10 km away. We just followed the long line of cars, slowly moving forward. Luckily, policemen were working on the road, maintaining order. It took us about 40 minutes to drive through the line. We climbed along the winding road. The newly-paved road made our driving very comfortable. Steve was constantly amazed by the beautiful scenery. If we were not heading for birding and having a tight schedule of driving back to Chengdu in the late afternoon for his friend's wedding on the next day, he would have requested multiple stops to take pictures like dozens of drivers who parked their car on the road to take pictures. After climbing over Zeduo Mountain, we stopped our car and walked into the scrubby slope to look for birds. Here we encountered another bird wave and we saw White-browed Tit, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Robin Accentor, Oriental Magpie, Alpine Leaf Warbler, Greenish Warbler, Himalayan Griffon, Daurian Jackdaw, Red-billed Chough, and Raven. After this exciting bird viewing, we drove on to Xingduqiao to search our target bird of the day, the Ibisbill. We got to the site and I parked the car in a safe place, we walked to the riverside. Without much difficulty, we saw an Ibisbill feeding in the stream. We got an excellent look at the bird and took hundreds of photos of this lovely bird. Then we decided to head back to Chengdu. By now the winding road on both sides of Zeduo Mountain was already packed with cars of holiday travelers. With the hard work of police, the cars were moving in an orderly way, though at a much slower speed. We were able to get to Kangding in the late afternoon. Worrying about the traffic, we decided to head back to Chengdu right away. At Ya'an, we had late dinner. Then we drove back to Chengdu and set a time to pick up Steve after his participation in his friend's wedding ceremony.



Ibisbill

Oct 4: Chengdu to Wolong, cloudy.

I picked up Steve at 3 PM near his hotel, then we drove toward Wolong. We made some stops when we got to the mountains at the edge of Chengdu Plain, but we did not see many birds, just some common ones like White-browed Laughingthrush, Light-vented Bulbul, Long-tailed Shrike,

Oriental Magpie Robin, and Grey Wagtail. We had dinner on our way to our hotel and checked in.



Balang Mountain

Oct 5: Balang Mountain area, cloudy and drizzling.

We left our hotel at 5:00 AM. Our first target is the Chinese Monal. We drove to the site by the side of a tunnel and had breakfast there. It was foggy. We only heard the calls of Koklass Pheasant, and we could barely see anything. We waited for a while, hoping the fog would move away. In the mountainous area, the weather is always variable and hard to predict. Sometimes the fog comes and leaves quickly. However, luck was not with us this morning. After waiting for about one hour, there was still no sign that the fog would disappear. We headed to the top of the mountain. Just when we were leaving, we saw a Common Kestrel sitting on a wire in the fog. Possibly because of the fog, the bird showed little interest toward us and stayed on a wire when we drove away. The heavy fog accompanied us all the way to the tunnel entrance. I told Steve there was no point for us to try the top, based on my experience we could try the other side of Balang Mountain. He happily took my advice, we drove through the 8-kilometer-long tunnel, and there was no fog on the other side and, the cloud stayed very high. We took the old deserted road from other side. There were already quite a number of cars driving on the road as people were taking pictures of the scenery. While we were driving toward the higher part of the mountain, we searched the roadside meadows for Gandala and rosefinches. This is the difficult season for birding, as the migrant birds have been gone for quite a while. Now lots of resident birds like Gandala and finches, flock together and move around this gigantic area. That means we may see a big flock or we simply could not see them at all. It was very quiet. The most frequent calls we heard were from travelers who climbed to the ridge of the mountain and shouted. I did not know where this tradition came from. We hiked to a quiet slope where we often find Tibetan Snowcock, Snow Partridge, Red-fronted Rosefinches. It was also quite there. I did not know where those lovely birds have

gone. Suddenly I saw a Snow Pigeon. From distance, I could hear the calls of Snow Partridge, and we searched the slope very closely but could not spot them. While we were climbing down the slope, we saw two Himalayan Marmot with straw and tree twigs in their mouth; they were making their nest for the upcoming cold winter. Then we saw a lammergeyer and five Himalayan Griffon soaring over the mountain ridge. When we got back to our car, we saw the other side of the mountain pass was still shrouded with heavy fog. We drove there and scanned some mountain ridge above the fog. I saw several Blue Sheep climbing over the mountain ridge. It was still heavy fog below. So, we decided to drive down from the same side we came up. In the scrubby area, we found White-browed Titwarbler. After some search in the lower woods, we headed back to Wolong Village where we planned to try to find Golden Pheasant. We drove to the higher part of the village and parked our car in a safe place, and we walked along a dirt trail. We heard a Chinese Babax calling. We searched the farmlands closely. It was a little bit late now. After some careful searching, we turned back and walked toward our car. Suddenly we saw a male golden pheasant quickly crossed the road ahead of us. Steve was amazed at the beauty of the bird and kept saying that this is the most beautiful birds he has ever seen and this bird should be picked as the most beautiful birds in the world. After this encounter, we got back to our car and drove down to our hotel.



Golden Pheasant

Oct. 6: Balang Mountain area, cloudy.

We started at 5:00 in the early morning. The weather looked better. It was cloudy but the clouds were high and it was not drizzling. When we got to the higher part of the Balang Mountain, there was still heavy fog. After we got through this heavy fog, we saw a beautiful sea of clouds. The sun was going to rise. Hundreds of travelers were waiting with their cameras. I saw that some people

had already climbed to the mountain ridge waiting for the golden moment. Seeing this, I knew it will be another tough day for birding. At the mountain pass, we heard calls of Snow Partridge and Tibetan Snowcock coming from a distance. We searched closely but they hid so well that we could not find their exact location. The two sides of the mountain pass are totally different worlds. One side was filled with fog, and the golden morning ray has dyed the white fog into golden color with snow-capped mountain peaks standing in distance. What a beautiful morning! The other side of the pass was totally clear. We spent the whole morning birding on the clear side of the mountain, and we saw Rosy Pipit. To our surprise, we even saw an Olive-backed Pipit. They were not common at this elevation. The other birds we saw were largely a repetition of what we saw here in the previous day such as Himalayan Griffon, Alpine Chough, and Red-billed Chough. After lunch, we decided to go back to Wolong and try to find more birds there. We drove to Lama Monastery in Wolong. This is the place we often find the Golden Pheasant. We got there and we started our search in the nice forest around the monastery. As soon as we walked into the forest, I heard the call of Golden Pheasant. We got close to the bushes where the call came from, then we saw three Golden Pheasants! When we climbed up to the higher part of the mountain slope, we heard the active calls of Spot-breasted Parrotbill, our first parrotbill for this trip. In the bushes, we also saw Collared Finchbill, Red-billed Blue Magpie, White-browed Laughingthrush, and Red-billed Liothrix. After our birding here, Steve decided to leave to donate to the monastery to support their efforts to conserve this nice habitat for birds.



Spot-breasted Parrotbill

Oct. 7: Balang Mountain area, sunny.

We left our hotel at 5:00 AM. Finally, we got a sunny day. We drove to the deserted road outside a tunnel. It was still dark when we got there, so we had our breakfast. The first bird we saw was a Chinese Fulvetta. I heard the call of White-winged Grosbeak, in a tree over the little cliff above the deserted road, we saw three White-winged Grosbeaks. The loud calls of Giant Laughingthrush could be heard now and then. We searched the cliff, and meadow patches closely, trying to see any traces of a Chinese Monal or a White Eared Pheasant. After walking the deserted road, a couple of times, Steve and I heard the calls of White Eared Pheasant almost at the same time, and we searched the mountain slope closely. Luckily, a flock of 16 White Eared Pheasants walked



White Eared Pheasant

out of bushes and came to the open meadow. They walked in a formation with a male taking the rear. The male bird looked around vigilantly, guarding against any possible danger, while the birds marched into the meadow near the edge of bushes. After the excellent view of the birds, we continued our search for birds along this deserted road, and we found Golden Bush Robin, Giant Laughingthrush, Elliot's Laughingthrush, Dark-breasted Rosefinch, White-throated Redstart, Himalayan Bluetail. Suddenly Steve saw a mammal moving in the bushes, we looked closely. It was a Chinese Goral. Then we drove up toward the mountain pass, trying to find birds on the slopes. We saw Plain Mountain Finch, Rosy Pipit, Alpine Accentor but we failed to find Grandala and rosefinches. After crossing the mountain pass, we decided to drive to the lower part of the mountain to try some low elevation viewing. Now it was close to the end of the holiday, so there were not so many cars on road as the previous days. We drove to a viewing point where travelers see the beautiful Four Girls Mountain. We parked our car in the parking lot and walked into the woods to search for birds. It was quiet there. We spent about 40 minutes birding there, then we drove down to the petrol station to fill the gasoline and turned back for our hotel.



Snow Partridge

Oct. 8: Balangshan to Chengdu and departure, cloudy.

This was our final day of birding. We needed to drive back to Chengdu and Steve needed to fly to Shanghai that evening. We left our hotel at 5:00 as usual. It was foggy so we directly drove to the top of Balang Mountain. As soon as we got out of the heavy fog, we saw a sea of clouds below us and the sun started to rise. It was another beautiful morning. When we got close to the top, we heard the calls of Snow Partridge, we stopped immediately and scanned the places above us. We saw three Snow Partridges. Finally,

we saw this bird after searching for them for 3 days. Then I heard the call of Red-fronted Rosefinch, I scanned the slope and found the bird. I showed Steve the location of the bird. He was very happy to see it. Now the sun rises, we saw a golden sea of clouds. We took some photos of this beautiful morning and decided to head back and try some birding in Wolong to minimize our chances of being caught by returning traffic because this was also the last day of the 8-day long holiday. We had a brief stop at the foot of Balang Mountain to look for Wallcreeper and Black-capped Kingfisher. We did not see these two birds but we found Green-backed Tit, Brown Bush Warbler, White-capped Redstart, and Slaty-backed Flycatcher. After that, we drove to Lama Monastery again. As soon as we parked our car in the parking lot, we heard the calls from a mixed flock of birds. We headed immediately toward the bushes. There we encountered the best bird wave in the Wolong area so far. In the bushes, we saw Stripe-throated Yuhina, White-collared Yuhina, David's Yuhina, Red-billed Liothrix, Chinese Babax, Elliot's Laughingthrush, Grey-hooded Fulvetta, and a very nice view of three golden pheasants. This brought our 8-day birding trip to a happy ending. We drove back to Chengdu and Steve spent some time in his apartment in Chengdu to repack. Then I took Steve to Chengdu Airport and said goodbye to him.



Chinese Babax



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