

China

Beidaihe

8–23 May 2014

Participants

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Siberian Blue Robin

Leaders Bill Blake and Vaughan Ashby

Day 1 Most of the group met up at London Heathrow for a short, early morning Swissair flight to Zurich where we met up with Tony and Joanne who had flown from Manchester. From the airport lounge numerous Red Kites and a distant White Stork kept us amused before our onward flight to Beijing departed on time.

Day 2 Arriving at Beijing's impressive new International Airport (built for the 2008 Olympics) early morning we were met by the lovely June, our interpreter for the tour and Kevin, our ground agent. Our coach took us to the Beijing International Hotel for a two-night stay where we met up with Vaughan Ashby, my co-leader for the tour. After freshening up we met for breakfast in the hotel restaurant before boarding our coach again for a day's birding and sightseeing in the city. First our coach took us to Yuyuantan Park, one of many green oases in this bustling city. A leisurely walk introduced us to some of the commoner Chinese birds: Grey-capped (Pygmy) Woodpeckers, a beautifully marked Eastern Crowned Warbler and at least 10 handsome Yellow-billed (Chinese) Grosbeaks were the pick of the birds all giving good views. The supporting cast included Spotted Doves, Common Swifts of the race *pekinensis*, Grey-headed Woodpecker, Olive-backed Pipits, White (Amur) Wagtails, Arctic, Pallas's, Yellow-browed and Two-barred Warblers, Taiga Flycatchers, Azure-winged Magpies, White-cheeked Starlings, Crested Mynas, Black-faced and Chestnut Buntings plus the ever-present Eurasian Magpies and Eurasian Tree Sparrows. On the mammal front a few Siberian Chipmunks were seen. We were also joined by our final group member, Bahar, who had flown in from Turkey, Kevin having stayed on at the airport to meet and greet her. Close to our next destination is the district of Beijing where a famous dish supposedly originated and we had lunch at

one of these restaurants specializing in 'Peking Duck'. We started our late afternoons sightseeing tour at Tian'anmen Square, the largest public square in the world and a modern creation that is the geographical centre of Beijing; events witnessed here have shaped the history of the People's Republic from its very beginnings. June showed us the Great Hall of the People and Chairman Mao's Memorial Hall where his body lies. Next we entered the magnificence of the Imperial Palace or Forbidden City by the Wumen (Meridian Gate), once reserved for the sole use of the emperor. Although much restoration has taken place this is the best preserved and most complete example of Imperial architecture in China and was the centre of Chinese life for six centuries through the reigns of 24 emperors of the Ming and Qing dynasties; then ordinary Chinese were forbidden from even approaching the city walls. June continued her role as guide as we toured the various bridges, courts and halls before we left via the Imperial Garden and thence by the North Gate and walked a short distance to our coach. As well as the ubiquitous Eurasian Magpies and Eurasian Tree Sparrows we saw flyover Black-crowned Night-herons, a flyover Amur Falcon, more White-cheeked Starlings, Barn and Red-rumped Swallows and Large-billed Crows. Sightseeing over, our coach took us back to our hotel where we had time to freshen up before dinner at a nearby western style restaurant and welcoming sleep after a long day.

Day 3 After an early breakfast in the hotel we left to drive out of the city to Bai He (White River Valley) in Huairou District. New sections of motorway sped us into the mountains north of Beijing where we could see sections of the Great Wall. These included some fine old watchtowers perched loftily on the precipitous slopes. We spent the day along the river valley having taken a picnic lunch with us. Leaving the coach, we walked along the river, the birding was good and new birds came thick and fast. A singing Radde's Warbler caused some initial confusion but gave good telescope views. Our walk gave us a good selection of water birds, warblers and buntings. The 'stars' here were a Crested Kingfisher, which, thanks to Ken, everyone got 'scope views of, and three Beijing Babblers, one of which showed exceptionally well to all. The latter is a scarce, Chinese near-endemic that normally skulks in the hillside undergrowth. Other birds seen included Little Grebes, a brief Yellow Bittern, Grey Heron, three Mandarin Ducks, a Peregrine Falcon, Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers, Common Kingfisher, Grey Wagtail, handsome Daurian Redstarts, Siberian Stonechat, Dusky Warblers, Vinous-throated Parrotbills, Silver-throated Tit (another Chinese endemic recently split from Long-tailed Tit), Coal, Willow (Songar) and Japanese Tits (the latter a recent split from Great Tit), garrulous Red-billed Blue-magpies, Carrion Crows, a male Russet Sparrow for some, Oriental Greenfinches plus Black-faced, Godlewski's, Meadow, Yellow-throated and Little Buntings. Despite a thorough search however we could not find any Ibisbills this year. After our picnic lunch we tried further up river checking likely looking spots for Ibisbill and Long-billed Plover as we went but we drew a blank. Ibisbills need slow-flowing water but here the pebble and small boulder islands have been removed and the river flow increased for recreational purposes (canoeing); sadly this is to the detriment of breeding Ibisbills! We saw more of the same plus more Hill Pigeons, including a flock of eight birds, and more Oriental Honey-buzzards that included a kettle of over 30 birds migrating north over the hills. We stopped for a photo opportunity at the Great Wall 'watchtowers' but otherwise it was an uneventful drive back into Beijing where we had dinner at the same restaurant as last night and called the bird log in the hotel bar. Mr Lee, our usual driver, arrived with his coach and would be our driver for the rest of the tour.

Day 4 We woke to persistent rain this morning but fortunately it was a travel day. Whilst we were at breakfast Mr Lee loaded up the coach and we were soon heading east out of the city for the G1 Jingha Expressway to Beidaihe, a summer seaside 'resort' some four to five hours east of Beijing on the Gulf of Bohai. It was still raining when we arrived at the Jin Shan Hotel in Beidaihe but thanks to June our check-in was swift and our rooms soon allocated. We met up in the hotel restaurant and after a tasty lunch we decided that, as it was still raining quite heavily, we would use the shelter of the covered walkways to bird the hotel gardens as there seemed to be a good number of birds present: some of the birds seen were a Scaly Thrush, a Siberian Blue Robin, Radde's Warblers plus some much-photographed Black-faced and Little Buntings. Eventually the rain eased and we walked to the Friendship Hotel; here the extensive wooded grounds offer food and shelter for a mix of tired migrants and a leisurely walk around the grounds revealed a typical selection of migrants. On the way Tony spotted a Grey-streaked Flycatcher in the garden of Suzie Wong's and we had close views of a Hume's Leaf-warbler in a roadside hedge. At the Friendship amongst the resident Eurasian Hoopoes, Great Spotted Woodpeckers and Chinese Blackbirds we found Rufous-

tailed and Siberian Blue Robins, a fine Dusky Thrush, up to four Mugimaki Flycatchers and several Korean Flycatchers that included at least two stunning males resplendent in bright yellow, black and white plumage. We also found flocks of Chestnut-flanked White-eyes that chattered nervously as they flitted amongst the tree tops. After a couple of hours the rain got heavier again so we made our way back to the hotel for a warm shower before dinner and the bird log. June had a surprise in store for Nick and after dinner she produced a big birthday cake for him, complete with musical 'happy birthday' candles.

Day 5 This morning was an early start for a pre-breakfast walk to Lighthouse Point, a 5–10 minute stroll along the beach from the Jin Shan. From the point, Great Crested Grebes were seen on the sea as well as several Eurasian Hobbies 'hunting' out at sea: small birds were still coming in off the sea and the Hobby's technique is to force late arriving migrants down into the sea where they can pick them off the surface. A splendid male (Rufous-bellied) Blue Rock-thrush flitted about the beach whilst the trees and scrub held a female Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, Olive-backed Pipits, Siberian Stonechat, various *Phylloscopus* warblers including a few Dusky Warblers, a Brown Shrike and three Masked Laughingthrushes, the latter are probably the result of accidental introduction or escapes as their natural range is well to the south. Returning to our hotel for breakfast we chased a large group of gulls further up the beach but closer inspection revealed only Black-headed, Black-tailed and Herring (Vega) Gulls. After breakfast our coach took us to the Dong Shan Hotel; here the extensive grounds have more cover than the Friendship and we found, amongst others, Oriental Turtle-doves, a male Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, Rufous-tailed and Siberian Blue Robins, more Dusky Warblers, a male White-throated Rock-thrush, Eyebrowed Thrushes, Asian Brown Flycatchers, Brown Shrikes and at least two Pale-legged Leaf-warblers that were calling frequently whilst dipping their tails downward. After lunch a Scaly Thrush was located in the hotel grounds by the tennis court and eventually everyone got to see this spectacular thrush before our coach took us to an area called the Sand Flats where the tide was just about right for us to check through the waders present, many of which were in smart summer dress. Black-winged Stilts, Little Ringed and Kentish Plovers, a couple of Lesser Sand-plovers, Pacific Golden-plovers, Grey Plovers, eight Red Knots, two Red-necked Stints, four Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, 25 Bar-tailed Godwits, Whimbrels, Eurasian Curlew, 30 Spotted Redshanks (many in their summer 'black velvet' dress), Common Redshanks, eight Marsh Sandpipers, Common Greenshanks and Wood and Terek Sandpipers were all seen. Other birds included Great and Little Egrets plus four Black-tailed Gulls and eight Vega Gulls in various plumages amongst the many Black-headed Gulls. In the marshy margins we also saw several Eastern Yellow Wagtails and a stunning male Citrine Wagtail, whilst some saw a Red-throated Pipit. Our next port of call was to the Wetlands Park and Heng He Reservoir a short distance from the Sand Flats. Here we found a couple of Intermediate Egrets amongst the commoner egrets, Chinese Pond-herons, a pair of Swan Geese with at least five small goslings, Eastern Spot-billed Ducks, a nesting pair of Amur Falcons and a Grey-headed Lapwing. Passerines were represented by various *Phylloscopus* warblers, parrotbills, buntings and a small group of Chinese Penduline-tits that showed well in the treetops; a Muskrat was seen swimming across a patch of open water. Before returning to our hotel we briefly rechecked the Sand Flats but found nothing new. We had a very tasty dinner in the hotel restaurant, washed down with a cold beer or a glass of wine for some before calling the bird log in reception.

Day 6 This morning our pre-breakfast walk was to the Friendship Hotel where a Grey-sided Thrush was a good find, which, with another Scaly Thrush, were the pick of the birds seen; an unidentified cuckoo species flew through and we heard a Black-naped Oriole but it remained unseen. After breakfast our coach was to take us to a couple of sites north of Beidaihe. June was in a playful mood this morning and had hidden a 'musical candle' under Mr Lee's seat. Whilst waiting for the group to board he searched high and low for the source of our amusement before June relented and removed the offending article. Our first stop was a visit to the Great Wall at Jiao Shan, north of the large port city of Qinhuangdao. Our target species here was Pere David's Laughingthrush, a Chinese endemic; a group of Taiwanese bird photographers had found a nest and staked out the area. We soon had good views of one of the adults and it became apparent to all why the bird's alternative name is Plain Laughingthrush. Most of the group took the opportunity to walk along part of the Great Wall and take photographs; this is the wall's first high peak rising out of the coastal plain and the watchtowers are a telling vantage point over the narrow tongue of land below, which was the one-time invasion route for armies from the north. A few members of the group made it all the way up to the first watchtower, no mean feat as it is quite a climb; had the air been less hazy the views would have

been spectacular. A Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, a male White-throated Rock-thrush and singing Meadow Buntings were the pick of the rest plus small flocks of Chestnut-flanked White-eyes feeding frantically in the treetops before the urge to continue northward proved too strong and they moved on, their rather melancholy calls drifting over the trees as they went. Lunch was taken in a KFC in the city of Qinhuangdao and we spent the afternoon at Shi He (Stone River). This stony-bedded estuary and its small islands attract good numbers of feeding and roosting shorebirds whilst the various pools, rough ground and sheep-grazed grassland dotted with small plantations of pine and poplar trees can attract a good variety of migrants. The area was once a huge quarrying operation that is now slowly being reclaimed by nature. We found a couple of smart Grey-tailed Tattlers and some Sharp-tailed Sandpipers on the small islands, a total of five Long-toed Stints on the pools plus another Grey-headed Lapwing and Pacific Golden-plover on the grassland. We continued along the south side of the river towards the sea wall and flushed a Japanese Quail that landed behind a sandy hillock but then proceeded to walk around in the open and pose for photographs. Nearby the trees held good numbers of migrants: Taiga Flycatcher was the most numerous of five species of flycatcher present and seven species of *Phylloscopus* warblers included three well-marked Eastern Crowned Warblers whilst the hard 'tet' call of Dusky Warblers seemed to be everywhere. A Forest Wagtail was seen strutting about under the stunted pines but promptly disappeared before everyone could see it. Whilst trying to relocate it the group flushed a Grey Nightjar towards me but only Dave A and I saw it. The wagtail was eventually refound and showed well to all, at one time next to a male Brambling! Brown Shrikes were also numerous and at the edge of one of the many pools a (Red-spotted) Bluethroat and a Chestnut-eared Bunting, both stunning males, gave good telescope views. It was hard to tear ourselves away but we needed to negotiate the Qinhuangdao traffic to get back to Beidaihe in time to check the Sand Flats again. Here a brief stop produced a scarce Chinese Egret, five Pied Avocets and a couple of Gull-billed Terns, all new for the trip list, before we returned to the Jin Shan for dinner and the day's bird log.

Day 7 Our pre-breakfast walk to Lighthouse Point was late starting this morning as I had found a singing Lanceolated Warbler in the hotel grounds. Having gathered the group around Vaughan and I tried to coax the bird from its bush and into view but the views for most were brief and unsatisfactory as it crept mouse-like through the grass before diving back into its favoured bush. Also in the gardens were a Japanese Quail, a Siberian Rubythroat and an Oriental Reed Warbler plus a very unfortunate Siberian Blue Robin that was carried off in the bill of a marauding Eurasian Magpie. Arriving at Lighthouse Point we discovered that the small marshy area at the side of the track had been bulldozed in preparation for a new road into the little harbour. A drake Common Goldeneye swam close inshore and a flock of 30+ Common Sandpipers on a sandbank was notable; passerines in the woods included Siberian Blue Robin, Bluethroat, Eastern Crowned Warbler and Pale-legged Leaf-warbler and a Black-naped Oriole; best of all was a Northern Boobook that showed disappointingly for most as it tried to evade both us and the ever-watchful Eurasian Magpies. After breakfast we visited the Sand Flats area again but this time we took the boardwalk around the southern edge, which gives access to this excellent area where the trees and reed beds around the edge offer tired migrants a chance to rest and refuel before moving on and can be easily viewed from the boardwalk. A calling Indian Cuckoo remained unseen but we did see Ring-necked Pheasants, Pacific Swifts, Black-browed Reed Warblers, Black Drongos and a Tristram's Bunting as well as more Siberian Blue Robins and Siberian Rubythroats, another Bluethroat, White-throated Rock-thrush and Eyebrowed Thrushes and more warblers and flycatchers. A group of Common Shelducks and a drake Falcated Duck were feeding at the tide's edge and the waders present included nine Red-necked Stints, three Long-toed Stints and three Sharp-tailed Sandpipers. A leisurely lunch was followed by another visit to the Friendship where the highlight for me was finding a male Schrenck's Bittern in 'long' grass on the sports field; I radioed Vaughan, and, with the group assembled, we tried to walk the bird gently towards the group. Amazingly the bird seemed to have disappeared in the 12-inch high grass, however we did relocate the bird a little further away still hiding in the grass; this is a declining species and the bird looked extremely weak so we left it in peace. Also of note were a couple of late Red-flanked Bluetails, a Chinese Thrush, Black-naped Orioles, Common Rosefinches and we heard an Oriental Scops-owl that unfortunately stopped calling before we could locate it; the saddest find however, was a dead Northern Boobook being eaten by Eurasian Magpies. Whether the owl was killed by the magpies or not it was a reminder of the heavy toll taken by these birds on the northbound migrants. The restaurant was busy for dinner tonight before we called the bird-log in reception as usual.

Day 8 A small flock of Common Rosefinches was seen in the Jin Shan gardens before our pre-breakfast walk to the Friendship Hotel started; thrushes in the shaded leaf litter close to the entrance this morning included a fine male Siberian Thrush together with a Grey-sided and several Eyebrowed Thrushes plus more Rufous-tailed and Siberian Blue Robins and a showy Pale-legged Leaf-warbler. Today, we were travelling south to the Happy Island area for a 3-night stay in Laoting so Mr Lee loaded the coach whilst we were at breakfast. We were soon under way and made good time despite the traffic; the 'road sweeper' vehicles proved popular with the photographers, Chinese ingenuity at its best! Arriving in Laoting we picked up our local guide, Snow, before visiting Big Wood (confusingly the Chinese name means Little Wood). An initial walk close to the entrance revealed a few species but it was not heaving with birds so we had a picnic lunch before a more concerted search of the area. We saw a good cross section of thrushes, warblers and flycatchers; Vaughan came up trumps when he spotted a Black-winged Cuckooshrike. Initially it was flighty and uncooperative but it eventually settled down and showed well to all. We drove back in to Laoting, checked in to our apartment rooms and freshened up before visiting an area called Qian Shui Wan or Shallow Water Bay. The habitat was rough grassland with shallow pools, tidal inlets and beaches, waders were abundant and included a Greater Sand-plover, Grey Plovers, three Great Knots, Sharp-tailed, Terek and Curlew Sandpipers, Far Eastern Curlews and Spotted Redshanks. Other birds seen in the area included Common Kestrel, Little, Gull-billed and Common Terns, the latter of the black-billed race *longipennis*, Siberian Stonechats were numerous and Asian Short-toed Larks and Zitting Cisticolas were seen song-fighting; a Pallas's Grasshopper-warbler showed briefly on a shingle track before flying into the grass. We had dinner at a restaurant a short drive from our apartments before calling the bird log in the comfort of an apartment room.

Day 9 We had a lie-in this morning as there was no pre-breakfast walk. After breakfast we headed to Happy Island (Bu Ti Dao), which, for the last couple of years, has been connected to the mainland by a causeway to allow easy access for the heavy plant and materials needed for the various building works on the island. We had permission to drive across the causeway this morning, negating the need for a boat and allowing us quick and easy access to the island. Once across, electric buggies took us to a small plantation in the centre of the island behind the Buddhist temple and known as Temple Wood. Using the raised boardwalk we spent the morning birding the wood and the surrounding grassland, reeds and ditches. Several (Eastern) Cattle Egrets in full summer dress were seen flying to and from the islands heronry. Initially the wood seemed rather quiet but with patience we were rewarded with some good birds. Two Ashy Minivets and a Narcissus Flycatcher were new for the trip plus more Siberian Blue Robins, Siberian Rubythroats, Eyebrowed Thrushes, Zitting Cisticola, Pale-legged Leaf-warblers, Eastern Crowned, Arctic, Pallas's, Two-barred, Yellow-browed, Radde's and Dusky Warblers, Grey-streaked, Asian Brown, Taiga and Korean Flycatchers, Chinese Penduline-tits, Chestnut-flanked White-eyes plus Tristram's and Chestnut Buntings. Common and Oriental Cuckoos were heard calling and Pacific Swifts passed overhead. Vaughan found a stunning Tiger Shrike that unfortunately disappeared before anyone could see it and despite much searching could not be refound before lunch. A tasty lunch and refreshments were served in the island's new restaurant before returning to the field. First we checked the mudflats in front of the restaurant where a Red-breasted Merganser and a Eurasian Oystercatcher were trip ticks along with more Pied Avocets, another Greater Sand-plover and two more Red-necked Stints. Next we made our way across to the other side of the island to look for more waders on the incoming tide but by the time we got there the tide had beaten us. However, we did see a couple of superb Saunders's Gulls (one of which was in full summer plumage), Richard's Pipits and a Bluethroat whilst a brief raptor passage saw three Pied Harriers (including a stonking adult male), a couple of Oriental Honey-buzzards and four Chinese Sparrowhawks move through northwards. Paul found a Yellow-breasted Bunting amongst some planted conifers but it would not cooperate for the rest of the group. We headed back to Temple Wood for another hour or so; Bahar relocated the Tiger Shrike but again it vanished before anyone else could see it and just as we were about to leave Nick found four magnificent Japanese Grosbeaks that gave good scope views as they perched inconspicuously in the treetops before electric buggies took us back to our coach. Back on the mainland we drove the short distance to the legendary Magic Wood for the late afternoon. Virtually the first thing I saw was a flash of yellow, I realised it was a Black-naped Oriole, but why was it upside down? The penny dropped, the bird was caught in some mist nets along with several other smaller birds. Thanks to some ringers in the group, Ken and Tony, we released alive the two orioles, two Brown Shrikes, a Taiga Flycatcher and a Tristram's Bunting. Sadly three Brown Shrikes, a Taiga Flycatcher, a Radde's Warbler and

seven Dusky Warblers were all dead; thankfully the wood was not heaving with migrants otherwise the carnage would have been much greater. Having untangled the birds we pulled down and destroyed the nets and broke up the poles. We did see plenty of healthy birds however; Dusky Warblers were particularly numerous plus our first Striated Heron and Thick-billed Warbler of the tour and another Japanese Grosbeak. We visited last night's restaurant again for another interesting dinner.

Day 10 Another early breakfast this morning so that we could get out to Big Wood early but it was rather quiet with a flock of nine Grey-headed Lapwings overhead, a Common Cuckoo seen calling, a Japanese Grosbeak and a Chestnut Bunting being the best of the bunch. We made our way across to Happy Island by the causeway again; on arrival Paul found a couple of obliging Lanceolated Warblers that showed well on the sea wall and posed for photographs. As with yesterday we spent time in and around Temple Wood first, had a restaurant lunch, checked for waders on the incoming tide and returned to the Temple Wood area for some late afternoon birding. In the wood area we heard Indian, Common and Oriental Cuckoos calling and saw two Eastern Marsh-harriers, an Ashy Minivet, Rufous-tailed Robins, Daurian Redstart, 13 species of warbler including Zitting Cisticola, Black-browed Reed Warblers, Large-billed and Pale-legged Leaf-warblers and Arctic Warblers, five species of flycatcher, Black-naped Orioles and Tristram's, Chestnut and Yellow-breasted Buntings. Bird of the morning was a Needle-tailed Swift, first seen by Vaughan, that sped over the island, at times coming quite low and was later joined by at least one other; the diagnostic white 'U' on the rear underparts showing particularly well. From the sea wall we saw up to six Saunders's Gulls and amongst the many waders present we found another Great Knot, many Far Eastern Curlews and best of all we had good views of seven Asiatic Dowitchers feeding on the incoming tide. Back in Temple Wood many of the morning's birds were still present but probably the rarest bird on the island was an Azure-winged Magpie, a species not normally seen away from Beijing! Several Tolai Hares were seen about the island and we also saw a couple of Amur Hedgehogs rummaging around on the woodland floor, a much paler species compared to our European Hedgehog. Dinner was at our breakfast restaurant, western style sizzling steak or chicken, before the bird log again in rooms at our apartments with June and Snow as our hosts.

Day 11 After an early breakfast we found ourselves back in Big Wood finding some top-quality birds amongst the commoner migrants present. Pick of the bunch here was a Grey Nightjar resting on a horizontal branch, a brief Black-capped Kingfisher for some, another handsome Tiger Shrike that showed to all and a couple of female Blue-and-white Flycatchers, one of six species of flycatcher present. Next we called in at Magic Wood where another male Schrenck's Bittern, albeit only in flight, was especially pleasing for Tony as he had missed the bird in the Friendship. We also saw a brief Oriental Scops-owl that would not cooperate for us plus more Siberian Blue Robins and Black Drongos. After freshening up at our apartments we loaded the coach and left to travel back to Beidaihe stopping at the Luan He estuary for a picnic lunch. The tide was just about right and we spent a very enjoyable couple of hours watching the many waders present, most of which were in immaculate summer dress. Birds seen here included nine Common Shelduck, an Eastern Marsh-harrier, two Eurasian Oystercatchers, seven Pied Avocets, many Kentish and Grey Plovers, six Lesser Sand-plovers, 20 Red-necked Stint, three Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, over 50 Dunlin of the red-backed race *sakhalina*, three striking Broad-billed Sandpipers, 10 Asiatic Dowitchers with the numerous Bar-tailed Godwits, a Far Eastern Curlew, Common Redshanks, Wood, Marsh and four teetering Terek Sandpipers plus two Herring (Mongolian) Gulls, Little, Gull-billed, Common and Caspian Terns and more Zitting Cisticolas. After an uneventful journey back to Beidaihe we booked back in to the Jin Shan for a three night stay. A brief search of the gardens revealed it to be fairly quiet but a couple of Brown Shrikes and a Japanese Grosbeak were noteworthy. After dinner the lovely June offered everyone a shoulder massage, which proved very popular before we called the log.

Day 12 The day dawned cool with a threatening sky and a forecast of rain; a Japanese Quail flushed from the Jin Shan gardens as we made our way to the Friendship Hotel for a very eventful walk. Rufous-tailed Robins, Siberian Blue Robins, Siberian Rubythroats, a Red-flanked Bluetail, Black-naped Orioles and many Dusky Warblers were all seen plus a couple of Lanceolated Warblers. The first new bird of the day proved to be an elegant Japanese Waxwing that posed at the top of a tree. Rounding up the group stragglers Paul arrived with news of an odd cuckoo he had found in another part of the gardens. His description sounded

intriguing so, having seen the waxwing, he took us to where he had seen the bird; arriving en masse the bird flew from a small bush in a secluded garden to a larger area of trees. The bird proved to be very wary and mobile but the rather short-winged and long, graduated tail jizz identified it as a coucal species; the seemingly small size and chestnut underwing-coverts clinched the ID as a Lesser Coucal. This is normally a sedentary species that occurs well to the south of Beidaihe but has been recorded as far north as Korea and Japan; it would appear to be the first record for the Beidaihe area so congratulations go to Paul for a great find. Earlier on the walk some of us had seen what was almost certainly an Asian Stubtail but it disappeared never to be seen again. After breakfast we revisited the Stone River; arriving at the estuary rain clouds loomed but after checking the waders we continued walking out towards the sea wall. A smart summer-plumaged Rosy Pipit showed well on the pools and a couple of Common Snipes flew over calling and showing broad white edges to the secondaries before a 15-minute shower sent people for cover. Most waited it out back on the coach; once the rain stopped we reconvened in the field. A fenced off area of rough grass and bushes held at least three Siberian Rubythroats, Siberian Blue Robins and Dusky Warblers. I walked out to the stunted trees and soon found a Pale Thrush feeding with an Eyebrowed Thrush under the pines. I radioed Vaughan to bring the group over. Dave A was the first to arrive and saw the bird well but the bird flew as the rest arrived; fortunately it only flew a short distance and everyone eventually had good views. We decided to call it a morning and head into Qinhuangdao for lunch. Just as we were leaving Dave A alerted me to some movement, lifting my bins I saw a small, pale-yellow eye and a bright yellow bill, then the rest of the bird materialised as it moved slightly; it was a female Yellow-legged Buttonquail. Back came the group and it showed well for everyone, even posing for photos as it scuttled across the ground and even flew a short distance. Lunch was taken at a special barbecue restaurant in the city after which we returned to the estuary. We saw more Black-browed and Oriental Reed Warblers and Thick-billed Warblers, Richard's Pipits and Black Drongos; Paul's good day continued when he found a Baillon's Crake on one of the small reedy pools but it disappeared before anyone else arrived and despite much searching did not re-appear. Arriving back at Beidaihe we stopped at the Sand Flats where the morning's murk had lifted; a drake Falcated Duck and some Pied Avocets were the pick of the birds present. It was a happy coach that returned for another excellent dinner and the bird log.

Day 13 The Friendship was fairly quiet first thing but we still managed to dig out some good birds including Siberian Blue Robin, Bluethroat, Chinese Thrush, Black-browed Reed Warblers, Lanceolated Warblers and a Pallas's Grasshopper-warbler that did its best to hide deep inside a bush but we managed to get scope views of the bird. After breakfast, we returned to the Reservoir and Wetlands Park where we spent the rest of the morning on the boardwalks and shaded paths. We saw at least three Yellow Bitterns, one of which showed particularly well both in flight and as it clambered around in the reeds. Other birds included a single Striated Heron, two Intermediate Egrets, two Purple Herons, a Black-capped Kingfisher, another Pallas's Grasshopper-warbler and a trio of Lanceolated Warblers, Black-browed and Oriental Reed Warblers and Thick-billed Warblers, Vinous-throated Parrotbills, Chinese Penduline-tits, Chestnut-flanked White-eyes and many more Black-naped Orioles whilst an Indian Cuckoo called from the trees unseen. Lunch was taken at the hotel allowing the heat of the day to subside before we visited the Sand Flats again where we checked out the channels and especially the extensive reed beds. Our target here was Pallas's Bunting and after a few false alarms we eventually had reasonable views of one bird. We flushed a Japanese Quail from the muddy margins and another Pallas's Grasshopper-warbler from the reeds whilst Eastern Yellow Wagtails flitted about the mud and a drake Falcated Duck was still on the sea. Returning to the Jin Shan late afternoon people had the option do their own thing so those that wished could either pack ready for tomorrow or do some birding around the hotel. Some of us chose a short walk to Lighthouse Point, our first visit in six days, where we were surprised to see that the road into the 'harbour' was well on the way to being completed; not surprisingly it was rather quiet bird-wise but there were a few migrants present, notably Bluethroat, Arctic Warbler, Pale-legged Leaf-warbler and Brown Shrikes. We enjoyed our final dinner in the Jin Shan restaurant before calling the bird log in reception and packing for tomorrow's journey to the mountains.

Day 14 This morning we were able to gain access to an area of rough overgrown grassland and bushes known as the Jin Shan Field for our early walk. It is a prime building plot but thankfully it has been saved by virtue of the fact that it contains some well-preserved parts of the old city walls from the Qing dynasty thus

creating a haven for tired migrants. Yet another Schrenck's Bittern was flushed from the field, a Chinese Sparrowhawk and two Pacific Swifts flew over and at least three Siberian Blue Robins, a Siberian Rubythroat, a Pallas's Grasshopper-warbler two Thick-billed and four Lanceolated Warblers plus Black-faced and Chestnut-eared Buntings were seen. After breakfast, with the coach already loaded, we left the Jin Shan for the last time, negotiated the Qinhuangdao traffic and headed north into the Yan Mountains to Zu Shan Forest Park (Old Peak). In the later part of the journey we followed the boulder strewn Shi He valley and acting on information received we pulled in off the narrow road at Yang Jiang Shan where we had a good view over the rock-strewn riverbed; as we got off the coach two colourful Dollarbirds flew over. Vaughan went to check some small rocky islands and soon found our target bird here, Long-billed Plover; we had good views of a pair with two small chicks. Also seen here were a Daurian Redstart, two (Rufous-bellied) Blue Rock-thrushes and Godlewski's Buntings all in song and the cliffs above the river held two Hill Pigeons and Eurasian Crag-martins were nesting under a rock overhang. Soon afterwards, we reached the foot of the Zu Shan Mountain and our coach took us up to the North Gate entrance where we were to investigate the area below the entrance. We had brief views of a Manchurian Bush Warbler and better views of a Blunt-winged Warbler, both of which responded to play back; the latter was carrying nesting material and started to sing too. A pair of Hair-crested Drongos that flew over showing off a blue iridescence to their upperparts in the bright sunshine as well as the 'hair crests' were also new for the tour whilst Daurian Redstarts and Godlewski's and Meadow Buntings sang from the overhead wires. Whilst we had been birding our luggage had been transferred to a minibus and we boarded another minibus to continue up the mountain and checked into our small but clean and comfortable hotel for an overnight stay. After freshening up we had lunch in a small friendly restaurant opposite our hotel. It was a tasty but simple lunch of local produce which will be remembered mostly for the chips. The staff remembered us from last year and knew we liked chips sprinkled with white stuff and plenty of red stuff so we got chips with sugar and strawberry jam – very interesting! We spent an hour or so in the area close to the hotel hearing a Northern Hawk-cuckoo and seeing a pair of vocal Snowy-browed Nuthatches plus more Daurian Redstarts, Yellow-bellied Tits and Oriental Greenfinches. Next, the minibuses took us to the highest driveable point on the mountain; scenically this is the best part of the holiday and on clear days there are spectacular views of wooded hills and valleys and ancient watchtowers can be seen as the Great Wall snakes across distant hills. Straight away we heard a Chinese Leaf-warbler which responded to play back and showed extremely well; it was joined by a very showy Claudia's Leaf-warbler, rather comical with its wing flicking display, and a little later by a Hume's Leaf-warbler, which also showed well. It was fairly warm on top with only a light breeze so we made the most of it and spent the rest of the afternoon on the forested peak. We tried to lure White-bellied Redstart into view where we had seen them before but this ace skulker failed to respond. We saw more Daurian Redstarts, Claudia's, Chinese and Hume's Leaf-warblers, Dark-sided, Grey-streaked and Asian Brown Flycatchers, Yellow-bellied and Silver-throated Tits and a Yellow-throated Bunting. Lesser and Oriental Cuckoos were both seen; the latter is a brood parasite of *Phylloscopus* warblers and a female was seen either laying or attempting to lay an egg in the nest of a pair of Claudia's Leaf-warblers, the warblers eventually chasing the cuckoo off. A search for Yellow-streaked Warbler was eventually rewarded when a single bird responded to playback and eventually showed itself to the group. Whilst most of the group had made the short climb up to a pagoda to look for the Yellow-streaked Warbler, Mary, Lilian and Joanne chose to relax on some seats where they watched a shrike for some time before it flew off; after checking the field guide later the blackish tail identified it as a Bull-headed Shrike. Minibuses took us back down the mountain to our hotel for a nice warm shower. Walking across to the restaurant the high pitched, frenetic calls of a Northern Hawk-cuckoo could be heard on the mountain; we enjoyed another dinner in the restaurant where we also called the bird log, much to the amusement of the giggling staff.

Day 15 Our last full day started early with minibuses back up the mountain for a rather chilly pre-breakfast walk. Our driver drove slowly so we could stop easily if we saw anything on the road ahead, pheasants in particular, but we had no such luck. It was a still morning so we tried again for White-bellied Redstart but we drew another blank. I saw what was presumably the same Bull-headed Shrike in the same area as the bird seen yesterday evening but it flew before most of the group arrived. We finally saw Northern Hawk-cuckoo getting great views of two birds in flight and saw more Oriental Cuckoos calling. We started to walk back down towards our hotel seeing many of the mountain's breeding birds on the way. These included three Siberian Blue Robins, Daurian Redstarts, a couple of Grey-sided Thrushes, many Claudia's Leaf-warblers,

at least five Chinese Leaf-warblers, three Hume's Warblers, Korean Flycatchers, a smart pair of Narcissus Flycatchers, Yellow-bellied Tits, four Snowy-browed Nuthatches, a pair of Eurasian Jays and a male Yellow-throated Bunting but the superb male Siberian Thrush first spotted by Keith was probably a migrant. Having descended a fair way on foot we called up the minibuses to take us the rest of the way down, just as they arrived a couple of Grey-faced Buzzards floated over the road and these birds proved to be our last trip tick of the tour. Today was June's birthday (one of them?) and David T had turned a coloured sketch of a Red-billed Blue-magpie into a card and we all signed it; after breakfast David presented the card to June bringing a hint of a tear to her eyes. All too soon it was time to leave the mountain. We bussed it down to the North Gate where we stretched our legs again whilst our luggage was transferred to our coach. We made an effort to get better views of Manchurian Bush Warbler but the bird refused to cooperate and showed only briefly; two Blunt-winged Warblers were in song and (the same) two Hair-crested Drongos flew over whilst a couple of Pallas's Ground Squirrels frolicked amongst the rocks. The buses took us to the village at the foot of the mountain where we boarded our coach to begin the journey back to Beijing. Just after we left the North Gate the front minibus slammed on the brakes as a large green snake slithered across the road; everyone got to see a sizeable Chinese Beauty Snake. Our return to Beijing was via the same route as last year, part of which was through the Qinglong River valley, a classic shingle-bed river valley with slow-flowing water and ideal for Ibisbills. Last year we saw what could only have been an Ibisbill from the coach but sadly we could not stop. This year we had allowed time to stop and properly investigate the area but when we arrived we found the river had been turned into a huge extraction site with the underlying sand being removed for the construction industry so the biodiversity of the valley had been irrevocably changed; sadly there was no point in stopping. Heading on to Beijing we made good time and Mr Lee took us on a little sightseeing tour of the 2008 Olympic Park area, in particular the Birds Nest Stadium and the Cube. Arriving back at the Exhibition Hotel in Beijing we had plenty of time to freshen up and pack for the journey home. Dinner was at the western style restaurant across the road again; Kevin bought the beers and the shy and retiring June made a little speech thanking the group for making her job easy and being so much fun to be with. Some, aided by June, took the opportunity to do some souvenir and gift shopping in the department store before retiring after a long day.

Day 16 Our flight to Zurich was at 06.45 so Mr Lee had little traffic to negotiate on route to the airport; at the airport Vaughan gave a short speech as we presented June and Mr Lee with the collections we had made for each of them. We said our farewells to them and to Kevin; they had all done a great job for us on the tour helping it run smoothly and added a lot of fun too. As usual it was a tearful June that waved us all goodbye. Check in was quick and painless, the flight uneventful and, despite the seemingly short transfer time at Zurich, we all connected with our onward flights to Heathrow or Manchester.

The group total for the tour was 218 species; we saw 36 species of wader, 6 species of cuckoo, 17 species of chat/thrush, 22 species of warbler, 8 species of flycatcher and 11 species of bunting.

My thanks go to Vaughan for his excellent organisational skills and his ceaseless sense of humour and to 'the Birdfinders China team' of June, Kevin and Mr Lee for helping the tour run smoothly. As always, the group deserve my special thanks for their patience, camaraderie, sense of humour and birding skills; a shared interest and passion for birds made it an excellent tour to lead.

Bill Blake on behalf of Birdfinders