

China

Beidaihe

9–24 May 2016

Participants

Nicholas Aebischer
Frank Baillie
Ian Blackmoor
Shirley Bruce
Alex and Liz Cruikshanks
Martin and Elaine Dear
Glen Giles
Daphne Hayward
Dave Hicklin
John Hunt
Robert Lovell
Paul Shilling
John Sirrett
Roy Williams



Fujian Niltava

Leaders Bill Blake and Nigel Warren

Day 1 The group, minus one, met up with Nigel and I at Terminal 5, London Heathrow for our late afternoon direct British Airways flight to Beijing. The flight was uneventful but some of us managed to get some sleep in preparation for a long day tomorrow.

Day 2 We arrived at Beijing's impressive International Airport (built for the 2008 Olympics) on time at 09.30; once through immigration and security we were met by Sisi, our interpreter for the tour and Kevin our ground agent. Our coach took us to the Beijing International Hotel, our accommodation for the next two nights; we also met up with our final group member, Robert, who had been in China for a couple of weeks on a cultural tour. We had time to change, freshen up and relax before we met up again in a nearby restaurant for lunch and to discuss the plans for the day. A feast was put before us which we could not really do justice to; having eaten we boarded our coach for some sightseeing and birding in the city. The sightseeing started at Tian'anmen Square, the largest public square in the world. Kevin acted as guide pointing out various points of interest including The Great Hall of the People and Chairman Mao's Memorial Hall and Mausoleum, before we entered the lavish surroundings of the Imperial Palace or Forbidden City by the Women (Meridian Gate), once reserved for the sole use of the emperor. Despite various restoration projects this is still the best preserved and most complete example of Imperial architecture in China. Thankfully it was fairly quiet crowd wise and many photographs were taken of the various bridges, courts and halls before we left via the Imperial Garden and the North Gate. As well as the ubiquitous Eurasian Magpies (the form here mooted as a possible future split) and Eurasian Tree Sparrows we saw flyover Black-crowned Night-herons, Eurasian Kestrel, Common Swifts of the race '*pekinensis*', Barn and Red-rumped Swallows and Large-billed Crows. With the cultural tour over we had a short walk back to our coach to move on to one of the city's many parks for some birding. Our coach took us to Yuyuantan Park, one of many green oases in the city, where a leisurely walk introduced us to some of the

commoner Chinese birds. A lone Japanese Waxwing was a good find here; Mandarin Ducks, a migrant Grey-faced Buzzard, Chinese Blackbird, and a small group of Yellow-billed (Chinese) Grosbeaks were the pick of the bunch all giving good views. Chinese Blackbird is a recent split from Eurasian Blackbird and, as such, is a Chinese endemic. The supporting cast included Black-crowned Night-herons, Mallard, Eurasian Hobby, Spotted Doves, Great-spotted Woodpecker, more Red-rumped Swallows, garrulous Light-vented (Chinese) Bulbuls, a Radde's Warbler, a single Vinous-throated Parrotbill, Azure-winged Magpies, White-cheeked Starlings and Crested Mynas plus the ever-present Eurasian Magpies and Eurasian Tree Sparrows. We had an excellent dinner in a private room at our lunch time restaurant before I called the log. Returning to the hotel after a very long day sleep was the priority for most people.

Day 3 A pre-breakfast walk in the small park opposite our hotel produced 4 Mandarin Ducks on the boating lake plus our first Pallas's Leaf and Yellow-browed Warblers and Little Buntings. A Grey-capped Woodpecker showed to some but the undoubted star of the morning was a gorgeous adult male Korean Flycatcher, its bright lemon-yellow underparts glowing in the early morning sunshine; a fiery orange-red wash on the throat showed it to be an older male. The planned itinerary for today was to visit a remarkable site that we visited last year for the first time, a huge reservoir known as Miyun Lake, which supplies most of Beijing's drinking water. Sadly the powers that be have decided that this lake would be a soft target for a terrorist attack and, as such, just a couple of weeks before we arrived this year, access was now prohibited to everyone, not just birders. After breakfast in the hotel restaurant we left to drive to the Beijing Botanical Gardens close to the Fragrant Hills; the gardens are popular with the locals and as we entered by the South Gate it was initially very busy but once further in away from the crowds we found some good habitat and some good birds. A Collared Finchbill perched on top of a conifer gave good scope views and an Oriental Turtle-dove posed for photos in an open grassy area; we tracked down calling Grey-capped Woodpecker and Snowy-browed Nuthatch eventually getting good views of both birds and 3 more Japanese Waxwings were well seen. More Pallas's Leaf and Yellow-browed Warblers were seen plus a brief singing Hume's Warbler. Other new birds were Brown Shrike, Marsh Tit, Taiga Flycatcher, Oriental Greenfinch and our only Brambling of the trip whilst another Grey-faced Buzzard drifted overhead. We had organised a picnic lunch but Kevin owned up that he had left the food in the fridge in his room – oops! Poor old Kevin never lived it down and was ribbed about it for the rest of the day and for a few days afterwards. It simply meant we had lunch in a McDonald's on our way to our next destination. We spent the afternoon at the Sad River (Sha He); we never found out why it had such a name but it certainly was not sad for us as the river teemed with birdlife. Little and Great Egrets and Grey Herons were very numerous whilst Great Crested and Little Grebes, Common Moorhen, Black-winged Stilt, Little Ringed Plovers, Common Snipe, Marsh, Green, Wood and Common Sandpipers and a couple of Whiskered Terns were all present plus Common Kingfisher. Black-crowned Night-herons were particularly numerous perching out in the open on every available pole or lookout perch belying their name and their normally crepuscular and nocturnal behaviour. A stunning male Citrine Wagtail glowed intense yellow amongst a small group of '*macronyx*' Eastern Yellow Wagtails (that included a superb male of the Green-headed '*taivana*' subspecies). Nicholas picked up a Grey-headed Lapwing flying towards us, which proved to be our only one of the tour. In the surrounding vegetation we found a couple of Richard's Pipits and a pair of White Wagtails of the '*ocularis*' race, sometimes known as East Siberian Wagtail. Oriental Reed-warblers 'churred' loudly from the reeds and a Radde's Warbler skulked below us betraying its presence by its sharp 'tek' call. A Taiga Flycatcher complete with red throat, a Brown Shrike, Little Buntings and a Black-faced Bunting were some of the other birds found. Back at our hotel we had time for a shower before dinner at our usual restaurant with traditional Peking Duck being served followed by the log call. It had been an excellent if somewhat tiring day despite our enforced change of itinerary.

Day 4 It had been a stormy night with thunder and lightning and we woke to persistent heavy rain; fortunately it was a moving day so after a hotel breakfast our driver for the rest of the trip, Mr Zhou, loaded up the coach and we were soon on our way. We headed east out of the city for the G1 Jingha Expressway to Beidaihe, a summer seaside 'resort' some five hours east of Beijing on the Gulf of Bohai, an inlet of the Yellow Sea. The journey was broken up by a comfort stop but very few birds were seen from the coach. Arriving in Beidaihe once again we had a change to our planned itinerary; on previous tours we have always stayed at the Jin Shan Hotel but this year it was closed until late May to allow re-decorating and plumbing

work to be done. This enforced change actually worked out quite well for us as we would now be staying at the Friendship Hotel. This hotel has much larger grounds than the Jin Shan and is a place we often visit during our stay in Beidaihe as the extensive grounds attract good numbers of migrants; so this year we were staying amongst the birds and were saved a 10 minute uphill walk for our pre-breakfast walk. Sisi oversaw our check-in and our rooms were soon allocated. We had time to unpack and freshen up before we met for a tasty lunch in the hotel restaurant. Our coach took us to the Sand Flats on the edge of town where we could scope the area from a boardwalk; the mixture of muddy pools, sandbars, sea shore, estuary, reedbeds and rank vegetation attract a good mix of shore birds and migrating passerines. A couple of scarce Chinese Egrets fed in the river amongst the commoner Great and Little Egrets and Grey Herons whilst Chinese Pond-herons skulked in the vegetation. Waders were numerous and we saw Black-winged Stilts, Little Ringed, Kentish and Grey Plovers, 4 Lesser Sand-plovers, Red Knot, at least 50 Red-necked Stints, a single Temminck's Stint, 8 Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, single Eurasian Curlew and Broad-billed Sandpipers, a single (Eastern) Black-tailed Godwit, Bar-tailed Godwits, Whimbrel, 2 Eurasian Curlews, 4 Marsh Sandpipers, 100+ Common Greenshanks, a single Terek Sandpiper plus 10+ Common Sandpipers and a Ruddy Turnstone. Amongst the numerous Black-headed and Black-tailed Gulls we found 4 beautiful adult Saunders Gulls, resplendent in full summer plumage and a single adult Mongolian Gull whilst Little and Gull-billed Terns fed on the tide line. Sand Martins, a Grey Wagtail, Siberian Stonechat were also seen whilst a Chinese Penduline-tit showed well in some nearby reeds and a male Amur Falcon zapped past overhead; Common Pheasant was also seen rather than just heard. We returned to the Friendship Hotel to bird amongst the wooded areas, manicured hedges, rough grassy patches and dark forgotten corners of the grounds. Amongst the resident Eurasian Hoopoes, Grey-headed and Great-spotted Woodpeckers and Chinese Blackbirds we found Eurasian Collared-doves, Olive-backed Pipits, a rather uncooperative Siberian Rubythroat, a fine Chinese Thrush, numerous nervous Dusky Warblers, Asian Brown Flycatchers, Japanese Tits, Red-billed Blue-magpies and more Chinese Grosbeaks plus a smart adult male Chestnut Bunting. Dinner in the hotel restaurant was followed by the log call.

Day 5 For those that wanted we had an early start for a pre-breakfast walk in the hotel grounds but migrants proved to be thin on the ground; Black-naped Oriole and Pacific Swifts were new whilst a Chinese Thrush, a female Korean Flycatcher and a few Yellow-browed Warblers were the best of the rest. The nervous 'tak-tak-tak' calls of Dusky Warblers, so familiar yesterday afternoon, were conspicuous by their absence this morning; some of the group saw a female Green-backed (Chinese) Flycatcher. A small group of Ashy Minivets flew over calling but only some of our group saw them. We spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon further east along the coast, close to the city of Qinhuangdao, at the Stone River (Shi He). The small stony islands here can attract good numbers of roosting shorebirds and it is consistently a good site for Wandering Tattler; we eventually found four Tattlers once we had disembarked from our coach. Alongside the estuary heading towards the beach are various pools, rough ground and sheep grazed grassland dotted with small plantations of pine and poplar trees which can attract a good variety of migrants. The other Birdfinders group, led by Vaughan and Sveta Ashby, were also here today; thanks to shared information via 'walkie-talkies' Vaughan put us on to a Common Crane that they flushed in our direction; closer inspection of the bird showed it was colour ringed and fitted with a satellite transmitter. Working the rough ground and reedy pools close to the entrance a Japanese Quail was flushed, we had good views of Pallas's Buntings and, for some, brief views of a Chestnut-eared Bunting. A calling Pechora Pipit was seen in flight a couple of times but refused to co-operate with views on the ground. Chinese Penduline-tits called and Oriental Reed-warblers sang from the small reedy pools whilst Zitting Cisticolas sang as they danced their aerial display flights and at least one Black Drongo was flycatching along the edge of a small plantation. The plantations themselves proved to be fairly quiet but we did find a Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, a female White-throated Rock-thrush, Olive-backed Pipits, Yellow-browed, Pallas's Leaf and Radde's Warblers, Dark-sided, Asian Brown and Taiga Flycatchers, Chinese Penduline-tit, Brown Shrikes and Oriental Greenfinches. Whilst we were birding Sisi was driven into the city to pick up our packed lunches from a KFC which we ate in the shade of a small poplar plantation.

Having eaten we checked the pools closer to the sea seeing a couple of Purple Herons, a single Eastern Spot-billed Duck and various wader species that included Black-winged Stilts, Little Ringed Plovers, Common Redshank and elegant Marsh Sandpipers. Moving on to the beach a scan of the shore line and sandbanks

revealed a couple of Greater Sand-plovers with 8 Lesser Sand-plovers, 3 Pacific Golden-plovers, 2 Grey Plovers, 2 Sanderling, 2 Broad-billed Sandpipers, a Bar-tailed Godwit and 2 Terek Sandpipers and a mixed group of Mongolian and Black-tailed Gulls. As we walked back to our coach Vaughan called me on the radio to say they had found two Mongolian Larks further along the beach; a quick walk back to the beach and along the dunes and we were soon watching these chunky, large billed larks. Initially they were a bit flighty but they eventually settled down and gave excellent views to everyone showing off their white 'spectacles', broad black patches on neck-sides forming a half collar, rusty-brown wing coverts, crown and nape and clean white secondaries and inner primaries contrasting with blackish outer primaries; normally a scarce winter visitor to the area they were a very welcome surprise and much photographed. Whilst most people were enjoying the larks John S took some shots of the group of gulls on a sand bar. When he got back home to England and had the chance to look at his shots on a larger screen he noticed that amongst the Black-tailed and Mongolian Gulls was a slightly larger and darker gull that appeared to be a '*taimyrensis*' Heuglin's Gull, split by some authorities as Taimyr Gull. Returning to Beidaihe we stopped off at the Sand Flats; scanning from the bridge I picked out two more exquisite Saunders' Gulls in full summer plumage amongst the many Black-headed Gulls present. Also present was a single Caspian Tern which proved to be the only one of the trip. After dinner and the log some of the group heard an Oriental Scops-owl calling in the hotel gardens. Friday the 13th it may have been but we had seen some quality birds today.

Day 6 This morning our pre-breakfast walk was to Lighthouse Point, a ten-minute walk from our hotel; sadly many changes have taken place here over the last year or two and much of the habitat has been removed to make way for a road into the small harbour and an information centre about the life and poems of Chairman Mao Zedong who regularly visited Beidaihe as a summer retreat and was inspired to write many poems here. Bird wise it was rather quiet but we did find a Great Cormorant looking out of place perched on a communications tower. We walked south along the beach but saw very little; a single Eurasian Oystercatcher was a new bird for the list. After breakfast a female Siberian Rubythroat was found in one of the dark corners of the hotel gardens and an Eye-browed Thrush was seen by the sports field. Our coach took us to the reservoir north of Beidaihe where we were allowed access once Sisi had shown our permits. A Yellow Bittern was seen on the reservoir plus some Green Sandpipers but the surrounding trees and pools held few migrants; we found a very skulking Rufous-tailed Robin lurking in the undergrowth and in a tree above it a male Common Rosefinch put in a brief appearance. Black-naped Oriole, Asian Brown and Taiga Flycatchers, Black Drongo, Vinous-throated Parrotbill and Little Bunting were some of the supporting cast. The Swan Goose family present on one of the pools stayed hidden on a vegetated island and thus eluded us this time. Before returning to our hotel for lunch we stopped at the Sand Flats again. Most of the waders, gulls and terns present on the previous few days had moved on but a group of 12 Common Shelduck mulling about on the tide line were new birds for the trip. After lunch we planned to visit the Dong Shan Hotel which has even more extensive grounds than the Friendship. Just before we were due to leave a Siberian Thrush was found close to the sports field; initially uncooperative it eventually gave itself up to most of the group. A light rain had started to fall by the time our bus took us to the Dong Shan but it grew heavier as we walked the gardens and conditions soon got worse making it hard to find any birds. John S found a Bluethroat, another trip tick, but that was best of the bunch on what became a very wet afternoon. We returned to the Friendship to dry off and warm up before dinner and the day's bird log.

Day 7 Our pre-breakfast walk around the hotel grounds proved to be very quiet; Alex found a female Red-flanked Bluetail feeding in the open close to our building and what was presumably the same Siberian Thrush was seen again by the sports field. 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. Unfortunately today was a Sunday and what started as a trickle of people using the boardwalk turned into a river of people; it soon became apparent that our planned walk was a non-starter as the boardwalk was part of a route for a charity/fun walk and thousands of people were taking part. Before the deluge of people we managed to find a Eurasian Wryneck, Black-browed Reed-warbler, Dusky Warbler and Brown Shrikes amongst commoner species. Back at the Friendship we lucked in to a dark-eyed Indian Cuckoo that had been rescued from the ever-menacing Magpies and placed in a bush to recover from its ordeal; sadly the many Eurasian Magpies and Red-billed Blue-magpies take a heavy toll on the migrants

passing through the area. Alex and Liz did well to find a Yellow-throated Bunting but unfortunately it did not perform for the whole group. A leisurely lunch was followed by another visit to the Dong Shan where once again it was hard work looking for migrants; trip ticks were a couple of Grey Nightjars and Arctic Warbler amongst various other warblers and flycatchers already seen. Back at the Friendship the Siberian Thrush and Chinese Thrush showed reasonably well again in the shaded leaf litter favoured by them and a Grey-sided Thrush was seen in the same area. A flighty White's Thrush was heard singing in various parts of the grounds but proved to be hard to pin down and consequently eluded some people. It is a moving day tomorrow so most people were keen to pack and sleep after dinner and the log call.

Day 8 The Grey-sided and Siberian Thrushes were still present below the sports field along with Eyebrowed Thrushes and a brief White's Thrush whilst Dusky and Radde's Warblers and Taiga, Asian Brown and Dark-sided Flycatchers made up the numbers; new in was a singing Thick-billed Warbler found by Alex in the top of a conifer that mostly remained well hidden close to the top. At breakfast we mapped out the plan for today and, with the coach loaded, were soon heading south to the Happy Island area for a three-night stay; this time Kevin had remembered the packed lunches! The plan was to make birding stops at various estuaries on the way thus maximizing our chances of finding the most species. Our first stop was at the Da Pu He estuary but it proved to be a rather brief visit as the estuary was rather quiet apart from the usual egrets and waders. A half hour further on our next stop was at Chi Li Hai or Seven Mile Lagoon; the tide was in our favour and we had plenty of wading birds to keep us occupied. Grey Plover, Red Knot, Bartailed Godwit, Whimbrel, Common Greenshank and Marsh Sandpipers made up the bulk of the waders present with smaller numbers of Pacific Golden-plovers, Lesser Sand-plovers and Terek Sandpipers plus our first Dunlin, here of the red-backed 'sakhalina' race. Amongst the many Great and Little Egrets a couple of close Chinese Egrets gave excellent views and our first, and only, Osprey caused some panic amongst the waders as it flew over. As we were leaving a Chinese Goshawk flew over but unfortunately most of the group had already boarded the coach. On our way out to the Luang He estuary we started to see our first (Eastern) Cattle Egrets in the fields and flooded paddies and a few White-winged Terns in full summer plumage hawking for insects. A Pied Harrier flew past us but sadly we were on a busy road and could not stop. Arriving at the estuary we visited the busy fish quay where some of the many Junks present were unloading their smelly catch. Most of the group took advantage of the opportunity for some shots of this timeless scene. We checked through the waders present on the sand flats beyond the boats and picked out a single summer plumaged Great Knot feeding in the mid distance. Turning back inland we drove alongside the estuary and chose a spot for our packed lunch where we could scan for waders and raptors. Our only new birds here were a distant Spotted Redshank and an Eastern Marsh-harrier that gave reasonable views as it flew over an island in the estuary. Zitting Cisticolas sang their monotonous song from rank vegetation and a pair of White (Amur) Wagtails was seen but Lesser (Asian) Short-toed Lark remained unheard and unseen. Lunch over we drove back towards the main road and finally found a couple of larks plus a Red-billed Starling perched on a roadside wire and more Black Drongos and Brown Shrikes. Continuing south we picked up our local guide, Shao Sheer in Laoting, before driving on to Lao Yu Jian, a once small fishing village that has grown considerably in recent years. The sea wall here offers good views out across the estuary towards Happy Island. The Chinese army had installed a temporary communications post close to the best point on the sea wall but, despite our considerable optics and cameras, they were friendly enough and even smiled at us. Kevin was anxious that no one took any photos of them but he needn't have been as we were far more interested in birding. Unfortunately the tide was well out and most of the many birds present were a way off in the distance. We retraced our steps and visited Big Wood (confusingly the Chinese name means Little Wood). The old entrance into the wood has been fenced over since last year but we found another way in around the back of the wood; missing the footpath we stomped across an area of dried grass and reed interspersed with a few acacia and poplar trees. Nigel and I walked slowly through the waist high vegetation with the rest of the group a few paces behind; a Rufous-tailed Robin was the first bird to pop up, perching in the dried reeds a few metres ahead of us but not easy for everyone to see. After a few more steps a Forest Wagtail flitted up into the lower branches of a tree followed shortly afterwards by another bird off to the left which again perched in a tree. A couple of Yellow-billed Grosbeaks, Little Buntings and Brown Shrikes were also seen before we eventually reached a wide track which made the birding much easier. Paul flushed yet another Forest Wagtail from a ditch that ran parallel with the track as we made our way into the heart of the wood. Three Yellow-breasted Buntings feeding on the main track were a good find; once a

common migrant with flocks that numbered in their hundreds, they are now a rare bird. The metallic call of a Pale-legged Leaf-warbler was heard but the bird remained unseen. We also found our first Grey-streaked Flycatchers, Chestnut-flanked White-eyes and a single Tristram's Bunting amongst the commoner Dark-sided, Asian Brown, Taiga and Korean Flycatchers, Black-naped Orioles, Siberian Blue Robin, Arctic, Pallas's, Radde's and Dusky Warblers and a female White-throated Rock-thrush. Other birds seen in the area included various herons and egrets that nest in the woods heronry plus numerous Siberian Stonechats and song-fighting Zitting Cisticolas on the rough ground on the edge of the wood. We checked into the You Hau Hotel, newly built and very clean, light and airy; a delicious dinner was washed down with some cold beer at our hotel restaurant before calling the bird log.

Day 9 We had an early start this morning to get to Big Wood for a pre-breakfast walk; although the wood was not heaving with migrants and we saw no new birds, we did see a good selection of warblers and flycatchers that included Black-browed Reed-warbler and Arctic Warbler and some handsome male Korean Flycatchers plus a singing Common Rosefinch. After breakfast at our usual restaurant in town 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 we checked the area close to the car park where we had great looks at a Grey Nightjar perched low down in the open posing for photographs; we also found Siberian Blue Robin, Black Drongo plus Black-faced and Chestnut Buntings and a Richard's Pipit flew off calling. At the same time Vaughan's group had walked along the sea-wall to look for Asian Dowitchers. Vaughan radioed me to say they had found 3 birds on the incoming tide; unfortunately by the time we had walked out there the birds had flown due to the fast flooding tide but a single Pied Avocet was a trip tick. Disappointed we took electric buggies 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 in the wood and the surrounding grassland, reeds and ditches. Initially the wood seemed rather quiet but with patience we were rewarded with some good birds. After a tasty lunch and refreshments in the island's restaurant we returned to the boardwalks of Temple Wood. The many birds seen included a migrant Claudia's Leaf Warbler characteristically slowly flicking its wings alternately, a Pale-legged Leaf Warbler with its almost translucent legs, Eastern Crowned Leaf, Pallas's Leaf and Two-barred, Radde's and Dusky Warblers, a pair of Green-backed (Chinese) Flycatchers, the stunning male complete with bright yellow supercillium and rump and wholly yellow underparts, Hair Crested Drongo and a vocal Japanese Grosbeak. We also saw more Rufous-tailed Robins, Siberian Blue Robins, Siberian Rubythroats, Eye-browed Thrushes plus another Grey-sided Thrush, Dark-sided, Grey-streaked, Asian Brown, Taiga and Korean Flycatchers, Chinese Penduline-tits, Chestnut-flanked White-eyes plus Tristram's and Chestnut Buntings. Common, Oriental and Indian Cuckoos were heard calling and various egrets and herons in full summer dress were seen flying to and from the island's heronry. John H saw a Black-capped Kingfisher on Temple Lake. In the afternoon we found the bird of the day rarity wise when we finally got good views of an elusive Fujian Niltava, a female that finally perched front-on to show the white 'semi-necklace' below the throat and the small blue patch on the neck sides. Crossing back to the mainland we returned to our hotel for a shower and dinner in the hotel followed by the bird log.

Day 10 Another early breakfast this morning so that we could get out to Big Wood early but it was rather quiet with much the same birds as we had seen yesterday so we returned to town for an earlier breakfast before we crossed to Happy Island by the causeway again. On arrival our first target was the sea wall to check the waders on the incoming tide, looking especially for the dowitchers we had missed yesterday. A Richard's Pipit was on the 'golf course' close to the sea wall as we walked to the best wader area; we arrived in plenty of time this morning and had an excellent selection of waders that included a flock of 70+ Lesser (Mongolian) Sand-plovers, mostly in full summer dress, a summer plumaged Great Knot and Terek Sandpipers amongst the commoner waders plus 2 Chinese Egrets. We also got to grips with Far Eastern Curlew seeing 8 birds in all; a much warmer brown bird than Eurasian Curlew with a dark rump, well-marked underwing coverts and a ridiculously long curved bill. With the tide now racing in Nigel picked out three Asian Dowitchers with a small group of Bar-tailed Godwits; slightly smaller than the godwits the all black, straight bill with a slightly bulbous tip and the distinctive rocking feeding action were the best ID

features to distinguish from the bar-wits. Walking back to the car park a couple of Pechora Pipits were flushed from a damp ditch; noting where they landed we tried to get views on the ground but only succeeded in flushing them back to the ditch. Whilst searching for the pipits Kevin saw and photographed a stunning male Yellow-breasted Bunting but sadly it disappeared before all could see it. Electric buggies took us out to Temple Wood again; as with yesterday we spent time in and around the wood, had a restaurant lunch, and returned to the Temple Wood area for some late afternoon birding. In the wood area we saw Rufous-bellied Woodpecker, Olive-backed Pipits, Siberian Blue and Rufous-tailed Robins, Siberian Stonechat, Eye-browed Thrushes, 11 species of warbler including Arctic Warblers, Eastern Crowned and Pale-legged Leaf Warblers, 7 species of flycatcher that included a male Green-backed and a female Mugimaki Flycatcher (which, rather surprisingly, proved to be the only one of the tour), Chestnut-flanked White-eyes, Yellow-billed and Japanese Grosbeaks, Black-naped Orioles and Black-faced Buntings; several Tolai Hares were seen about the island. On leaving the island we made our way to Magic Wood and walked the track from the sea to the back end of the wood; a good number of birds were present in the trees, bushes and ditches on either side of the track. The best of the bunch were Siberian Blue Robin and Rubythroat, another Grey-sided Thrush with the Eye-broweds, Black-browed and Oriental Reed-warblers, a skulking Thick-billed Warbler, Radde's and Dusky Warblers and Brown Shrikes plus Gull-billed and White-winged Terns on the nearby pools. John S also saw a small skulking warbler that he later identified as an Asian Stubtail. We returned to our hotel for a shower before going out to dinner at our breakfast restaurant for western style sizzling beef or chicken steak; back at our hotel Nigel called the bird log tonight as I was losing my voice.

Day 11 This morning we revisited the Magic Wood track before breakfast; it was quieter than last evening but we found Siberian Rubythroat and Lanceolated Warbler amongst the more common migrants present and John S heard a Pallas's Grasshopper-warbler briefly in song. As we were heading back to our coach a smart adult male (Red-bellied) Blue Rock-thrush was found close to the start of the track. After breakfast with the coach loaded we left to travel back to Beidaihe, stopping first at Magic Wood proper. The Wood itself proved to be fairly quiet but some had brief views of a perched Dollarbird before it flew; a nice male Siberian Rubythroat, Eastern Crowned Leaf Warbler, Dark-sided, Grey-streaked and Korean Flycatchers, a Hair-crested Drongo, Common Rosefinch and a flyover Hawfinch were noteworthy. After an uneventful journey back to Beidaihe we booked back in to the Friendship Hotel for a three-night stay; after freshening up we reconvened in the restaurant for lunch. Our coach took us to the Reservoir where we spent the afternoon but it too was relatively quiet; we had more views of Yellow Bittern but the Swan Goose family evaded us once again. A brief search of the Friendship gardens revealed it to be somewhat quiet too. After dinner and the log most people retired to their beds; an Oriental Scops-owl was heard in the gardens again.

Day 12 On our pre-breakfast walk this morning it soon became apparent that more birds had arrived overnight and the birding was more exciting because of it; bird of the morning was a Baikal Bush-warbler, an ultra-skulker, found by some Belgian birders also staying at the hotel. It was found in an area of manicured bushes and the bird stayed true to this area feeding on the bare earth beneath the bushes; when disturbed it either froze or hopped a few inches up into the lower branches of a bush. Some of the assembled group adopted some very strange and rather uncomfortable looking positions in order to view the bird; some laid on their stomachs and poked their heads into the bush to get a view and some comical photos were taken, with patience however everybody saw the bird, some very well and some not so well; considering the bird was often less than 10 feet away it was remarkably hard to see at times. A tiny dark brown warbler with a small bill, short wings and a graduated tail the buffy supercillium, greyish ear-coverts, a necklace of fine black streaking below a pale throat and pale crescentic tips to dark under tail coverts were the main ID features. It was not particularly wary, just naturally skulking but amazingly some people managed to get some pics of it. Pacific Swifts, Siberian Blue Robin, Siberian Rubythroat, Siberian and Chinese Thrushes, many Dusky Warblers and Red-billed Starling were some of the supporting cast seen. The bush-warbler made us late for breakfast but we did not care; having eaten we revisited the Stone River. We found 2 Grey-tailed Tattlers with some Whimbrel on the stony islands where we left the coach and a Common Crane (presumably the same bird we saw on Day 5) flew over the pools giving good scope views when it landed before an impressive Saker Falcon flashed across in front of us. We walked out to the rough ground and flooded hollows getting great views of a Pallas's Bunting that perched high for all to see as Black-browed and Oriental Reed-warblers sang from the damp hollows. My radio spluttered into life and Vaughan

announced that their group had found a Tiger Shrike just a few hundred metres from where we were; we quickly made our way across to a small plantation and had excellent views of this beautiful shrike that is becoming increasingly scarce. On his way to the shrike whilst under the pines Alex had brief views of a dark thrush with pale underparts that he thought may have been a Japanese Thrush; sadly the bird was not seen again. We spread out to cover more ground; Dusky Warblers and Taiga Flycatchers were numerous in the stunted pines and a Shrenck's Bittern was flushed from a small reed fringed pool. Lunch was taken in the shade of a small plantation once Sisi and Kevin returned from Qinhuangdao with a KFC take-out. A summer plumaged Spotted Redshank and 11 (Eastern) Black-tailed Godwits were the pick of the waders whilst a Baillon's Crake played hard to get on one of the small reedy pools; we saw more Eastern Yellow Wagtails, Black-browed and Oriental Reed-warblers and had great views of Lanceolated Warblers with one in particular playing 'hide and seek' in the short grass and two more Pechora Pipits tantalized us with now you see me, now you don't views. Leaving Stone River in the early afternoon we headed back into Qinhuangdao before heading north to the Great Wall at Jiao Shan. Our target species here was Pere David's Laughingthrush, a Chinese endemic; to start with they led us a bit of a dance showing briefly to some members of the group before disappearing back into the undergrowth. Patience paid off however and everyone managed some kind of view; not the most colourful of Chinese birds it soon 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; huge congratulations to Frank who made it carrying an injury to his legs. A couple of Dollarbirds showed well from the wall; also seen here was a Daurian Redstart and a 'gronking' Common Raven. After the climb, whilst we relaxed with refreshing ice-creams, a couple of laughingthrushes appeared in the vegetation behind and everyone had first class views. We were rather late leaving but just before we left we found a singing Meadow Bunting perched on a fence close to the entrance; back at our hotel we had another excellent dinner before the bird log.

Day 13 The Friendship was fairly busy first thing and some of the birds seen were Japanese Quail, Siberian Blue Robin, Siberian Rubythroat, Siberian Thrush, Chinese Thrush, Lanceolated and Thick-billed Warblers and a Pallas's Grasshopper-warbler that did its best to hide. Bird of the morning however was another Tiger Shrike, found by Glen on the edge of the sports field; initially it did a disappearing act but when relocated it gave good views. 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 had our best views of at least 3 Yellow Bitterns, both perched and in flight and we finally caught up with the Swan Goose family on one of the islands on the first lake. Other birds included a Common Cuckoo (seen calling), Pacific Swift, Lanceolated and Thick-billed Warblers, Eastern Crowned Leaf Warbler, a singing Arctic Warbler, Vinous-throated Parrotbills, Chinese Penduline-tits, Chestnut-flanked White-eyes, Black-naped Orioles and White-cheeked Starling. Lunch was taken at the hotel after which we allowed the heat of the day to subside before we visited the Sand Flats again but the muddy channels and sandbanks proved to be quiet with Lesser Sand-plovers, Red-necked Stints and a couple of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers being the best of the waders; Amur Falcon, Eurasian Hobby, Eastern Yellow Wagtails, Siberian Stonechats and Brown Shrikes were also seen. We enjoyed our final dinner in the Friendship restaurant before calling the bird log and packing for tomorrow's journey north to the mountains.

Day 14 This morning we had an early breakfast and, with the coach already loaded, we left the Friendship for the last time, negotiated the Qinhuangdao traffic and headed north into the Yan Mountains to Zu Shan Forest Park (Old Peak). We made good time and soon we were wending our way into the mountains along the Qinlong River valley to a bridge where Vaughan's group had seen three Ibisbills yesterday morning. Sadly, despite searching upstream and downstream from the bridge we could find no Ibisbills; new birds for the trip were Striated Heron, Japanese Sparrowhawk, Peregrine and Crested Kingfisher. Black-capped Kingfisher was new for everyone except John H who saw one on Happy Island; a Grey-capped Woodpecker and a pair of White (Amur) Wagtails showed well by the bridge. We moved on to another spot further up river where we found a single Long-billed Plover with a couple of Little Ringed Plovers close by giving a chance to compare the two species; Black Drongo and Meadow Bunting were also seen here. Moving on

again I decided to try the spot where we had seen Ibisbills last year; en route Mr Zhou took a wrong turn which turned out to be rather fortuitous as we saw another Long-billed Plover from the bus, quite close to the road. Other birds seen thanks to the wrong turn were Common Sandpiper, Eurasian Crag-martin, Blue Rock-thrush and Daurian Redstart. The limestone cliffs running alongside the river here overhang the road and in places this overhang is very low which meant the bus could not continue; we even went through a limestone arch. Amazingly Mr Zhou managed to find a place to turn the coach around and we moved on to the next spot. Scenically this site is one of the best on the tour and we ate our packed lunch here overlooking the fast flowing, shallow river dotted with shingle islands. We saw singles of Black Stork and Hill Pigeon plus three Red-billed Choughs, all of which were new for the tour, plus more Striated Herons, Amur Falcons, Eurasian Hobbys and Meadow Buntings and a single Common Greenshank; however, in what appeared to be perfect breeding habitat, we could not find Ibisbill. Somewhat deflated we left the river to move higher into the mountains. On reaching the village at the foot of Zu Shan Mountain our coach continued up the steep incline to the North Gate entrance to the Forest Park where we had a brief search of the area. Siberian Stonechat and Daurian Redstart were seen 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. As the minibus was unloaded by the hotel entrance we found a White-bellied Redstart in the hotel garden; normally one of the most skulking birds on the mountain this superb slaty-blue male gave truly remarkable views as it whistled its rather melancholic song. It posed for the cameras often flaring its long graduated tail, flashing rufous-orange tail sides (reminiscent of a Bluethroat) and flicking the tail from side to side rather than shivering the tail like a 'normal' redstart. The white belly contrasted strongly with the dark slaty-blue flanks and breast and the bird even showed off the two white spots on the dark alula. Although it did skulk on the ground under bushes it also perched right out in the open often cocking its tail over its back (like a Dartford Warbler) showing off the thin dark tips to the white undertail coverts. It was hard to tear ourselves away from this unbelievably showy bird but after freshening up we were out to do some late afternoon birding in the area around the hotel. We saw Snowy-browed Nuthatches, colourful Daurian Redstarts, noisy Yellow-bellied Tits, a Songar Tit, charismatic Claudia's Leaf Warblers, Oriental Greenfinches and a Godlewski's Bunting; some were fortunate to see a pair of Yellow-throated Buntings. It was quite a bit cooler on the mountain and it was nice to have a hot shower before going to dinner in a small and friendly restaurant across the road from our hotel. The staff remembered us from previous years and served up a tasty dinner of local produce washed down with some cold beers; Kevin had brought along some Chinese spirit for us which slipped down well for those that tried it. As usual the staff were fascinated by our daily log call and smiled and giggled as we called the birds seen today. Walking the 100 metres or so back to the hotel we heard a Chinese Tawny Owl calling that seemed fairly close; in many visits over many years to this mountain this is the first time I have heard this species. Unfortunately we did not have this bird on any iPod so John S tried Tawny Owl playback but there was no reply and we never heard the bird again. Kevin booked our transport for the morning.

Day 15 Our last full day started early with great views of the White-bellied Redstart again in the hotel garden and this time it had a female for company, a rather dull, dark brown bird but with the same long, graduated tail; Daurian Redstart was also nesting in the hotel garden. A minibus was waiting to take us to the highest driveable point on the mountain for a chilly pre-breakfast walk. Our driver drove slowly so we could stop easily if we saw anything on the road ahead, in particular we were hoping for Koklass Pheasant, but we had no such luck. It is often windy up here but this morning it was fairly still; this meant the panorama from the viewpoint was a little misty but we still had spectacular views of wooded hills and valleys stretching north to the horizon and, despite the mist we could still see ancient watchtowers on the distant Great Wall as it snaked across distant hills. We soon heard Chinese Leaf Warblers singing their repetitive scratchy song and one soon responded to play back and showed extremely well singing from the top of a conifer. We also saw a very showy Claudia's Leaf Warbler with its rather comical wing flicking display and nuthatch-like behaviour. Hume's Warbler also showed well, its strange downward slurred buzzing song more like an insect than a bird. Northern Hawk-cuckoos were calling close by but it was a while before we finally saw one and in the end we had great views of two birds in flight; Common and Oriental Cuckoo calls echoed round the valley. Our next target was Yellow-streaked Warbler and we soon had one respond to playback in a favoured area which showed reasonably well to all. We saw Common

Pheasants, more Daurian Redstarts and Yellow-bellied Tits but we only had fleeting glimpses of Grey-sided Thrush. Our minibus took us back down the mountain to our hotel for breakfast; it had been a good mornings birding and we were ready for coffee and food. Refreshed after coffee and breakfast we took another minibus back up the mountain so that we could walk down slowly birding as we went. There was plenty of birdsong and we amassed a good selection of birds on our easy downhill walk. A pair of Eurasian Jays, Eurasian Wren, Goldcrest and some Long-tailed Tit look-alikes now split as the endemic Silver-throated Tit reminded us of home but Grey-headed Woodpecker, Chinese Thrush, Snowy-browed Nuthatch, Dark-sided and Asian Brown Flycatchers plus the aforementioned leaf warblers emphasized the oriental theme. A showy Pale-legged Leaf Warbler sang from the treetops and an Asian Stubtail showed itself to those at the front of the group. All too soon we were close to our hotel seeing more Daurian Redstarts, Yellow-bellied Tits, Oriental Greenfinches and a Godlewski's Bunting. We tried to tempt a Manchurian Bush-warbler in to view with the aid of playback but it was a no show. We had lunch in the restaurant before loading up the minibuses that would take us down to the North Gate where our coach was waiting; the male White-bellied Redstart put in a final appearance to bid us farewell. At the North Gate we stretched our legs whilst our luggage was transferred to our coach. Vaughan's group had seen Manchurian Bush-warbler and heard Blunt-winged Warbler here so we tried playback for both species but there was now a strong wind blowing and it had started to rain and we drew a blank. We boarded our coach and Mr Zhou began our return journey to Beijing; it was an uneventful journey with our only stops being for a comfort break and for Mr Zhou to obtain a permit to take his coach into the capital. Arriving back at the Exhibition Hotel in Beijing we had time to freshen before we had our last dinner together in a private room at the restaurant across the road again. Kevin insisted on buying the beers but we had a surprise for him. By accident Alex had obtained two field guides for China and he was going to give one to Kevin so I suggested we all sign it and present it to Kevin with a little speech which we did; a slightly embarrassed Kevin smiled a big thank you. After calling the log we retired to our hotel to pack for the journey home and sleep after a long day.

Day 16 After a lie-in this morning we had breakfast at the hotel aiming to leave for the airport by 07.30. The traffic was already quite busy but Mr Zhou safely negotiated us through to the airport. I gave a short speech as we presented Sisi and Mr Zhou 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. Check-in proved to be a bit slow and security was even worse but we eventually got through to our departure gate and were soon seated for our British Airways flight to London Heathrow. The flight proved to be uneventful and we arrived at Heathrow on time.

The group total for the tour was 214 species of which 4 were heard only, Oriental Scops-owl and Chinese Tawny Owls, Eurasian Wren and Goldcrest. We saw 37 species of wader, 16 species of chat/thrush, 20 species of warbler, 7 species of flycatcher and 10 species of bunting. It was a rather odd spring compared with previous years with birds trickling through in small numbers rather than any big falls but presumably this was down to the predominately fine and settled weather.

My thanks to Kevin and Sisi for all their hard work organising, translating and generally cutting through the red tape so that the tour could run smoothly and to Mr Zhou for his excellent and safe driving; also a big thank you to Nigel for all his help and keeping us entertained with his wry sense of humour. As always the group deserve my special thanks for their patience, camaraderie, sense of humour and birding skills. It is always good to meet people with a shared interest and passion for birds and that made it an excellent tour to lead.

Bill Blake
Birdfinders