

CLASSIC CHINA BEIJING & SICHUAN (INCLUDING BLACK-NECKED CRANES)

MAY 10 – JUNE 2, 2010

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*The days grow long, the mountains
Beautiful. The south winds blows
Over blossoming meadows
Newly arrived swallows dart
Over the steaming marshes
Ducks in pairs drowse on the warm sand
South Wind
-Du Fu*

China is vast almost beyond comprehension. Clearly no single tour can attempt to visit all the sites and see all of China's natural wonders. This tour explores four of the most important bird sites in the province of Sichuan, home to most of China's endemic birds and location of some of the most ancient surviving Asian plants and animals. The tour will primarily focus in Sichuan on the Wolong Panda Reserve, (Mt) Emei Shan, the fabulous Wawu Shan National Forest Reserve, and World Heritage Jiuzhaigou Reserve. We will also enjoy several of China's most famous sites in the Beijing area including a visit to the Great Wall of China, Tiananmen Square, Summer Palace and Forbidden City.

Our visit to the Middle Kingdom is carefully timed to coincide with the first few weeks of spring. In Wolong and Emei Shan, the worst of the winter chills will be over and many resident birds will be singing, while spectacular species such as Temminck's Tragopan; Blood, White Eared and Golden pheasants; and Tibetan Snowcock are somewhat easier to see. Also at this time, large numbers of passage migrants are moving north to their breeding grounds and almost anything can turn up. Plants and trees will be bursting into life, and for the botanists among us, there will be the added delight of seeing very different species in flower—some even representatives of quite familiar families. Mammals, in hibernation throughout the cold winter months, will be emerging from their dens. If we are lucky, we may be treated to something special such as an exquisite Red Panda or a view of the little known Golden Snubnose Monkey, though the chances of our seeing a Giant Panda in the wild are very slim.

VENT'S China tours, while primarily birding and natural history trips, are designed to include a balance of some of its finest natural wonders in addition to enjoying cultural and historical sites. Generally, we find the two interests are not mutually exclusive. Since VENT first operated tours to China, the changes and improvements to the infrastructure of just about everywhere we travel in China are nothing short of astonishing. Good, paved roads now provide access to just about all of the sites we visit, and the quality of accommodations has improved incredibly. Some of our hotels

will be rated at five-star. The food continues to be good to very good, the Sichuan cuisine particularly tasty and served banquet style. The birding has also improved with better protection of forests and a total removal of firearms from the community, with the result that several species we could not have dreamed of seeing before are now possible from the roadside. Add to this a total ban on logging of native forests and the impact of stricter laws, and, as we shall see on this tour, the effect is one of more birds and mammals that are much less shy than they were in the 1990s.

May 10-12, Days 1-3: Fly USA to Beijing. These days there are more choices than ever of flights from the United States to Beijing. With that being said, you should plan your flights to arrive Beijing, China (airport code PEK) on the morning of May 12 where upon clearing customs and immigration, you will be met by our ground agents and escorted to your hotel. We will meet for lunch in the hotel restaurant at 12:30 P.M. followed by a pre-arranged tour to visit Tiananmen Square, Forbidden City and the Summer Palace. We should also be able to find a few birds in the Summer Palace area with chances for Azure-winged Magpie, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Yellow Bittern, Oriental Reed-Warbler, Ruddy-breasted Crake or perhaps a late departing Smew.

NIGHT (May 12): Beijing Qianmen Jianguo Hotel, Beijing

May 13, Day 4: Beijing-Great Wall of China. A full day of activities is planned today in Beijing. An early morning start will take us to the Great Wall of China. The Badaling section of this monumental structure is undoubtedly China's most famous land mark. Sneaking off into remoter sections of woodland we should be able to find some entertaining birds with chances for Yellow-rumped Flycatcher, Forest Wagtail, Chinese Hill Warbler, and with migration in full swing we may well turn up a surprise. If possible we will make a visit to Wild Duck Lake. This manmade reservoir is home to good numbers of waterfowl and we have the chance to see some great birds with Swan Goose, Baikal Teal, White-naped Crane and Great Bustard all possible. Returning to Beijing we will make a visit to the extensive Ming Tombs where more birding is possible in this fascinating location.

NIGHT: Beijing Qianmen Jianguo Hotel, Beijing

May 14, Day 5: Fly Beijing to Chengdu; Afternoon Birding at Panda Breeding Centre. Today we will take our Air China flight from Beijing to Chengdu, the 2,500 year-old capital of China's most populous and wealthiest province, Sichuan. This increasingly modern, vibrant city still has, tucked away in its hidden-most recesses, wonderful warrens of cramped little houses, and associated crowded alleyways and impromptu markets. And there is one more relic of a now-vanished Chinese epoch to edify its inhabitants—one of the very few giant outdoor statues of Mao Tze-tung left in China.

Approximately the size of France, Sichuan is located almost in the center of the enormous country of China. The great Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau bound the northern and western borders of Sichuan, while the eastern two thirds comprise the flat lowlands of the Red Basin, the "bread-basket" of China. Sichuan has a bird list of at least 600 species, including 34 of mainland China's 46 endemics, in addition to some of the most spectacular birds on our planet. A large number of these have been recorded on the sacred mountain of Emei Shan and within the Wolong Panda Reserve.

From our very comfortable hotel, we will venture out to the Riverview Bamboo Park. This attractive park displays more than 100 species of bamboo. Popular with locals to enjoy a spring afternoon, play mah-jong and sip green tea, the park offers convenient birding. It is a good site for the diminutive Rufous-faced Warbler, Vinous-throated Parrotbill, and beautiful Black-throated Tit. Scattered sunflower seeds often bring the Yellow-billed Grosbeak. The river attracts fishing Little Egrets, Red-rumped Swallow and the occasional Hoopoe or Red-billed Starling.

NIGHT: Jinjiang Hotel, Chengdu

May 15, Day 6: Drive to Emei Shan. This morning we will drive south to the town of Hongzhushan, located at the base of Mt. Emei Shan. Our drive takes us on a surprisingly comfortable road across vast, flat lands of intensive agriculture. We should see characteristic species of the open country such as Black Drongo, White Wagtail, the beautiful Red-rumped Swallow, and Long-tailed Shrike amongst the patchwork quilt of rice, beans and wheat. It is a thoroughly typical Chinese rural scene. Peasants throng the roads carrying pigs on the back of bicycles to market, or putter along on strange contraptions that pass for tractors. Thatched cottages and groves of bamboo provide brief relief from the monotony of the agriculture, while expansive straw hats bob as people work.

We will spend time exploring the fabulous Leshan Buddha, a 72 meter high statue carved into the mountainside. The monumental statue took 90 years to complete, from 713 to 803 A.D. Although a popular tourist site, it has some good birds, and in previous years I have encountered Tiger Shrike, Fire-breasted Flowerpecker, Hair-crested Drongo, Eurasian Jay, Yellow-rumped Flycatcher and Striated Yuhina, to mention a few.

Once we have settled into our accommodations, we will set off to explore the nearby foothill zone. A mosaic of farmlands, scrub, broad tumbling streams, and patches of tall secondary woodland support a good assortment of birds. Some of the species we may encounter include Black Baza; the attractive Collared Finchbill; Brown-breasted Bulbul; Plumbeous Water and White-capped Water redstarts; the strikingly attractive Slaty-backed Forktail—so evocative of montane Asian creeks and forest-lined streams; Spot-breasted Scimitar-Babbler, Hwamei (one of those elusive laughingthrushes!); Ashy-throated Parrotbill; the endemic Yellow-bellied Tit; and the spectacular Red-billed Blue Magpie.

NIGHT: Hongzhushan Guesthouse

May 16-17, Days 7-8: Mount Emei Shan. Emei Shan rises to an impressive 10,165 feet (3,099 meters), dramatically dominating the vast, flat Red Basin. Revered for its striking limestone crag scenery, resplendent with gnarled conifers that punctuate billowing clouds, Emei Shan is the quintessential “Chinese water-painting.” As a result of its sacred status, Emei Shan still encompasses superb old growth forests from mixed broadleaved evergreen forests at lower elevations, to deciduous woodland and extensive bamboo groves, and finally to mixed conifer and rhododendron forest at the upper elevations. We will explore the mountain’s various elevations and habitats by utilizing an extensive network of paths, long flights of steps, a paved road and a cable car.

Located at the interface of the Oriental and Palearctic avifaunas, Emei Shan hosts a rich and fascinating selection of birds, including three species—Emei Shan Liocichla, Gray-hooded Parrotbill and Emei Leaf-Warbler—that are virtually endemic to the mountain. In addition, Emei Shan is well represented by several families of birds with which we will become very familiar during the course of the next few days. Preeminent, of course, are those wonderful babblers! And some of the species we hope to encounter include Streak-breasted Scimitar-Babbler; Pygmy Wren-Babbler and very similar looking but vocally distinct Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler; Moustached, Spotted, Elliot’s Black-faced, and the rare but oh-so-lovely Red-winged laughingthrushes; Red-billed Leiothrix; Dusky, Streak-throated, Golden-breasted, and Gray-cheeked fulvettas; Black-headed Sibia; and White-collared, Stripe-throated, and Black-chinned yuhinas. In addition there is that most charismatic and sought-after group, the Parrotbills (sometimes placed in their own family); a total of eight species are possible on Emei Shan, including Great, Spot-breasted, Gray-hooded, Gray-headed, Brown, Ashy-throated, Fulvous and Golden.

We will inevitably encounter many species of old world warblers, largely in two genera. An amazing variety of *Phylloscopus* warblers occur here and it is possible that we will find over a dozen species during our stay in Sichuan. Species here should include Blyth’s Leaf, Lemon-rumped, Buff-barred, Ashy-throated, Large-billed Leaf, and Buff-throated warblers. We will also search for the little known Emei Shan Leaf-Warbler, which has been described only in recent years.

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Golden-spectacled Warbler has recently been split into a number of different species, three of which occur on Emei Shan. Near the summit we should find Bianchi's Warbler, while Gray-crowned Warbler occurs at middle elevations, with Plain-tailed Warbler occurring near the foot of the mountain. Flycatchers are well represented on Emei Shan too, and some of the species we may encounter include Brown-breasted, Ferruginous, Rufous-gorgeted, Chinese, Slaty-blue, Verditer, and Gray-headed Canary flycatchers; and Fujian and Vivid niltavas.

Some of the other species we may encounter include Chinese Bamboo-Partridge—heard more often than seen; Chinese Goshawk; Gray-faced Buzzard; Black Eagle; Oriental Honey-buzzard—occasionally seen migrating over in small flocks; Speckled Wood-Pigeon; Wedge-tailed Green-Pigeon—uncommon; Speckled Piculet; Gray-headed, Crimson-breasted and Bay woodpeckers; Oriental, Lesser and Drongo cuckoos; Red-headed Trogon; Collared Owlet—occasionally seen and frequently heard during the day; Asian House Martin; Black-winged Cuckoo-shrike; Long-tailed and the scarce Swinhoe's minivet; Mountain Bulbul; Rufous-breasted Accentor; the rarely seen Purple Cochoa; White-browed Shortwing—a wonderful songster but often tough to see; Golden Bush-Robin—this gem actually glows!; White-bellied Redstart—relatively common at higher elevations; White-tailed Robin; Spotted Forktail; Brown-flanked, Chestnut-crowned, Aberrant, Yellowish-bellied, and Brown bush-warblers—all rather elusive; Chestnut-crowned Warbler; the diminutive, elusive, but at times very vocal Chestnut-headed Tesia; Mrs. Gould's Sunbird; Russet Sparrow; Gray-headed Bullfinch; Blanford's, Vinaceous, Common, Spot-winged and Dark-rumped rosefinches; White-winged Grosbeak; and Yellow-throated Bunting. And then there are those species we all dream about. Perhaps this year it will be our karma to see the incomparable Lady Amherst's Pheasant—this is probably THE place to search for this incredibly ornate but very difficult species. If circumstances permit we will go out at night in search of nocturnal birds and mammals (and for that matter lizards and frogs). Species we might encounter include Oriental Scops-Owl and Brown Hawk-Owl.

Please note: The rapid rise in Chinese domestic tourism has brought pressures on the more popular sites such as Emei Shan. So many people now come to the mountain every year that the authorities have banned the use of private vehicles, and it is now necessary to travel up the mountain road on the park's "green buses." This is a bit tedious at times, but clearly better than endless traffic jams. Thus, for this journey, we will have to share the bus with others and will not be able to stop at will. Nevertheless, we feel that this situation is quite acceptable and workable.

NIGHTS: Hongzhushan Guesthouse

May 18-20, Days 9-11: Wawu Shan. The great discovery of our tour five years ago was this fabulous national forest reserve, which boasts exceptionally good forest and better populations than Emei Shan of many of Sichuan's rarest birds and animals. Wawu Shan is three hours of scenic driving from Emei Shan. To make it even more comfortable, there is a great cable car to the summit, which protects some old growth fir forest that has never been logged and has a superb bamboo understory. On the summit we will look for the recently discovered Sichuan Treecreeper, with its distinctive song and upperparts beautifully camouflaged like lichen-blotched trees. We have a good chance to find not only the beautiful Fulvous Parrotbill but also the endemic Gray-hooded Parrotbill, both very difficult birds to find normally. Other great birds we saw on the summit last year were Brown, Aberrant and Yellowish-bellied bush-warblers (the last a real crowd pleaser as it sang with gusto a few yards from the group); clouds of Himalayan Swiftlets; the rarely seen Great Parrotbill; Besra; Black Eagle; Stripe-throated Yuhina; and Lesser Cuckoo.

The lower forest reaches are also exceptionally rich in birds and provide our best chance to see such skulkers as the endemic Emei Shan Liocichla, the beautiful but supremely skulking Red-winged Laughingthrush, Moustached Laughingthrush, and the elusive Rusty Laughingthrush. There is always the chance of an encounter with the rare Purple Cochoa or Streaked Barwing and I believe our chances of seeing these birds is much greater here than at Emei Shan. Two years ago we encountered Lady Amherst's and Silver Pheasant amongst an outstanding variety of Sichuan specialty birds.

NIGHTS: Gong Tong Mountain Villa

May 21, Day 12: Drive to Chengdu; Afternoon Chengdu Giant Panda Breeding Centre; Evening Sichuan Opera. We have a final morning birding at Wawu Shan before we take to the road and head to Chengdu. In the afternoon we will visit the Giant Panda Breeding Centre that has been notably successful at breeding this most enigmatic of endangered mammals. There will be an opportunity to photograph these wonderful animals, in addition to seeking out several rather good birds. Some of the species we have encountered include Chinese Pond-Heron, Cinnamon Bittern, with luck the Chinese Bamboo-Partridge, Large Hawk-Cuckoo, Common Kingfisher, the glamorous Asian Paradise-Flycatcher, Forest Wagtail, Chinese (Light-vented) Bulbul, Oriental Magpie-Robin, Black-throated Tit, the distinctive *mandarinus* subspecies of Eurasian Blackbird, White-browed Laughingthrush, Tiger Shrike, Oriental Greenfinch and White-rumped Munia.

In the evening we will attend the Sichuan Opera that has been a big hit with our tour in recent years. It is a series of acts ranging from arpu (violin) concerto, shadow puppetry, opera singing and the dramatic depiction of ancient stories from the general's wives to the butterfly lovers with comedy and gymnastics included. It is quite a show and we are seated comfortably outside with tea always on offer or perhaps an optional foot massage!

NIGHT: Jinjiang Hotel, Chengdu

May 22-24, Days 13-15: Wolong Panda Reserve. We depart Chengdu on a good road through rich agricultural areas. Soon after reaching the town of Guanxian, we abruptly leave the plains and enter another world—one of towering rock-faces, spectacular crags, and beautiful, cloud-wreathed temperate woodlands. After about an hour's drive along the Pitiao River, we should begin to see some of the characteristic birds of this habitat. Typically, along the streams and rivers we should encounter the lovely White-capped Water Redstart alongside the smaller Plumbeous Water Redstart and much shyer Blue Whistling-Thrush; higher up we should find Brown Dippers ouzeling in midstream. Woodlands clinging to the near-vertical rock faces occasionally support such species as Brown-breasted and Black bulbuls, Collared Finchbill, Blue Rock-Thrush, and Long-tailed Minivet. After four hours, we will arrive at Wolong.

Wolong is one of those places that, at sometime in your life, you just must visit; it is truly special. If nothing else, the drive from our accommodations up to Balan Shan Pass at 15,000 feet, surrounded by immense, towering, snow-dusted crags and satin blue skies is "worth the price of admission." Encompassing an area of about 770 square miles, Wolong is home to the largest remaining population of Giant Pandas in the world. While we have little chance of seeing the Giant Panda in the wild, we will seize the opportunity to see some rare and some truly spectacular birds. From our base at 6,000 feet, we will explore Wolong's wonderland of moss- and lichen-draped fir woods, lit by flowering rhododendrons, and shrubby and spring-colored mixed deciduous woodlands, which resound with the barking calls of Golden Pheasants just behind our accommodations. Gradually acclimating ourselves to the altitude, we will visit higher spots only after we have spent a few days birding at lower and mid-level elevations. A good road bisects the entire reserve, enabling us to drive right up to the highest pass at 15,000 feet. Most of the birding will be conducted along this road, in addition to forays along adjacent trails.

At the highest altitudes, amidst some breathtaking mountain scenery, we will search among a mosaic of snow patches and scree slopes for the cryptic Snow Partridge, Tibetan Snowcock, Red-billed and Yellow-billed choughs, Snow Pigeon, Grandala (the male is the most spectacular blue of any known bird, seeming to glow like a Chinese lantern against the snow), charming Alpine Accentor, Plain and Brandt's mountain-finches, and the totally cosmic Red-faced Rosefinch. With luck we may also find the extraordinarily beautiful but sadly endangered Chinese Monal as it forages among dwarf willows, hopefully within sight of the road. This area is also known as a breeding location for the rare Wood Snipe, although we are more likely to hear it than actually see it! All things being equal, we should see several species of vulture, including the charismatic Lammergeier, Himalayan Griffon and, with luck, Cinereous Vulture.

At lower elevations, amongst distinctive azalea scrub, we'll listen for the characteristic calls of the White-eared Pheasant or the mournful cry of the indescribably handsome male Temminck's Tragopan, in the hope that the

sounds will lead us to these visions of incredible beauty. The extremely shy Koklass Pheasant also inhabits this area, but we are unlikely to encounter more than its distinctive barking call—a characteristic sound of dawn in these mountains. Slowly meandering down the road, surrounded by mountains that rise to over 19,000 feet and some of the most awe-inspiring panoramas on our planet, one sometimes marvels that this place is real. Amongst the numerous other interesting species that inhabit this fabulous reserve we may see Verreaux's Monal-Partridge; Blood Pheasant; Crimson-breasted, Darjeeling and White-backed woodpeckers; Large Hawk; Lesser and Oriental cuckoos; White-throated Needle-tail; Fork-tailed Swift; Long-tailed Minivet; Black-winged Cuckoo-shrike; Citrine—sensational in breeding plumage; Gray and White wagtails; Olive-backed and Rosy pipits—superb in breeding plumage; Gray-backed Shrike; Spotted Nutcracker; White-tailed Rubythroat; Firethroat—a gorgeous skulker at lower elevations; Indian Blue Robin; Blue-fronted, White-throated and Daurian redstarts; Orange-flanked Bush-Robin; Kessler's, Chestnut, Scaly, Chinese Song and Plain-backed thrushes; the diminutive Pygmy and Scaly-breasted wren-babblers; Great, Three-toed and Spectacled parrotbills; Chinese Babax; Elliot's, Barred and Giant laughingthrushes; Chinese, Streak-throated and White-browed fulvettas; Green Shrike-Babbler; White-collared and Stripe-throated yuhinas; Chestnut-headed Tesia; Spotted, Yellowish-bellied and Gray-sided bush-warblers; possibly the poorly known Chestnut-crowned Bush-Warbler; Buff-throated, Yellow-streaked, Buff-barred, Lemon-rumped, Large-billed, Blyth's, and the recently described Chinese leaf-warblers—most of these *Phylloscopus* warblers will be in fresh breeding plumage and at their songful best, an exciting prospect compared to their drab appearance on their wintering grounds; the charming Severtzov's Tit-Warbler; Rufous-gorgeted, Snowy-browed, Slaty-backed and Slaty-blue flycatchers; Rufous-vented, Gray-crested, Sooty and Green-backed tits; Gould's Sunbird; Dark-breasted, White-browed, Beautiful and Dark-rumped rosefinches; Gray-headed Bullfinch; Tibetan Serin; and Slaty Bunting. Mammals are not conspicuous here; however, increased protection in recent years has produced more frequent sightings of the peculiar Golden Takin, in addition to Chinese Goral, Tufted Deer, Blue Sheep, the very handsome Yellow-throated Marten, Chinese Ferret Badger, Red Panda, and the bizarre Golden Snub-nosed Monkey.

Please note that if it is possible, we will spend one night at the Wuyipeng Giant Panda Research Centre. This research centre involves a three kilometer hike up onto a plateau, a gradual but fairly steep uphill climb that everyone two years ago completed without problem (sorry, no cable car here). The bamboo forests here are sensational and will provide our best chance to see Temminck's Tragopan, Fire-capped Tit, the very rare Three-toed Parrotbill, Barred Laughingthrush, Golden-breasted Fulvetta, Firethroat and Green Shrike-babbler.

It was during a stay up here in 2000 that I saw my only Red Panda, but, sadly, chances of seeing the Giant Panda even here are very remote. For a good book to read on this location, try George Schaller's *Last Panda*. This area was his study site for this most enigmatic of carnivores. Please also realize the research centre has been completely rebuilt and has its own cook. It is much more comfortable than my stay in 2000. Whether we get to stay at Wuyipeng depends on panda researchers, who, of course, have the priority here, but we will attempt to get permission to stay.

NIGHTS: Wuyipeng Panda Research Station (May 23)

*Wooden Rooms, Wolong (May 22, 24)

May 25, Day 16: Drive Wolong to Mengbi Shan. With an early departure up and over the Balang Shan Pass, we will travel to Mengbi Shan. This drive through gorge country and old growth coniferous forest is spectacular and we will be constantly seeing interesting birds. On previous visits we have seen Long-tailed Rosefinch, Hill Pigeon, nesting Wallcreeper, Lammergeier, and Giant Laughingthrush. We will also have further opportunities to search for scarcer birds like White-browed Tit-Warbler, White-tailed Rubythroat, pheasants, and partridges that we will be keen to have under our birding belts.

* Due to the 2008 earthquake, many of the structures in Wolong have been declared unsafe. We will be staying in temporary "Wooden Rooms" while in this area. Please note the rooms will be basic and do not have private facilities. Should conditions improve, we will move to a facility with private bathrooms.

Eventually we will make it through to Mengbi Shan, which provides a very good chance to see the scarce endemic Sichuan Jay plus our best chances for both White-Eared and Koklass pheasant.

NIGHT: Maerkang Hotel, Mengbi Shan

May 26, Day 17: Eastern Tibetan Plateau. We will take advantage of an early morning visit to Mengbi Shan before we continue on our drive to the town of Hong Yuan on the eastern edge of the Tibetan plateau. The landscape and the birds will change as we follow the Mingjiang River toward its source via the Zhegu Pass. Forests give way to rolling grasslands and marshes, while the beautiful houses take on a distinctly Tibetan architecture. We will begin to encounter yak herders moving their herds to summer pastures—real Tibetan cowboys. We will also be on the lookout for some very special birds, perhaps none so revered as the Black-necked Crane. Last year we found a total of 50 and watched an exchange on the nest accompanied by wild trumpeting—a song befitting our vast landscape.

NIGHT: Hong Mao Hotel, Hong Yuan

May 27, Day 18: Eastern Tibetan Plateau. We will spend the day exploring the Tibetan grasslands and freshwater lakes. We should see Ruddy Shelduck, Black-eared Kite, Common Pheasant, Common Redshank, Common Cuckoo, Horned Lark, Oriental Skylark, the aberrant Hume's Groundpecker, Black Redstart, Père David's Laughingthrush, Kessler's Thrush, Twite, Citrine Wagtail, and Tibetan Lark. With a full day exploring the grasslands to the north, including the seventh bend of the Yellow River near the outpost town of Tangke, we will be on the lookout for such Tibetan specialties as Upland Buzzard, Saker Falcon, Ferruginous Duck, Brown-headed Gull, Whiskered and Common terns, Red Collared-Dove, Pale Martin, Rufous-tailed Shrike, Hodgson's Redstart, Rock Sparrow, and perhaps White-rumped or Black-winged snowfinch.

NIGHT: Dazang Yangquang Hotel, Ruo Er Gai

May 28, Day 19: Drive Rouergai to Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve. A new road provides us with a great opportunity to visit Daba Lake. This fascinating wetland always provides something of interest. Two years ago we had excellent views of Steppe Eagle, Saker Falcon, Red-crested Pochard, Mongolian Plover, breeding plumaged White-winged Black Terns, Spotted Redshank and nesting White-rumped Snowfinch. From here we will then track towards Jiuzhaigou. Extending our stay to include a visit to Jiuzhaigou will permit us not only to bird in one of the most spectacular world heritage sites in China, but also provide an opportunity to see some of Sichuan's other endemic species we have not had the chance to see. Today will mostly be spent traveling to Sichuan's northern region. We will descend the Tibetan plateau and bird in some national forests. This will give us an opportunity to search for the scarce endemic White-browed Tit, as well as the beautiful Crested Tit-Warbler and the very sparse and elusive Sichuan Jay. We will arrive at Jiuzhaigou and spend the evening in our comfortable hotel.

NIGHT: Jiuzhaigou Paradise Hotel, Jiuzhaigou

May 29-30, Days 20-21: Jiuzhaigou Nature Reserve. Two full days will be dedicated to exploring such wonderful sites as the Primeval Forest, Mirror Lake, Swan Lake, Pearl Shoal Waterfall and Panda Lake. Birds are exceptional here, but typically at low density in the boreal conditions. High on our seek and focus list are Godlewski's Bunting, Rufous-bellied Niltava, Chinese Nuthatch, White-cheeked Nuthatch, Indian Blue Robin, Chinese and Long-tailed thrushes, Sooty Tit, Crimson-browed Finch, Severtsov's Grouse, Blue-eared Pheasant, the sensational Three-banded Rosefinch, Sukatshev's Laughingthrush, the giant Père David's Owl, the mythical Rusty-throated Parrotbill, the scarce Spectacled Parrotbill, Crested Tit-Warbler, the globally threatened Rufous-headed Robin, Three-toed and the giant Black woodpeckers, White-winged Grosbeak, and much more. The snow capped peaks, which surround the glacial lakes with mixed fir, juniper, and aspen forests and beautiful waterfalls, make this a great scenic background to search for these sought-after birds.

Please note: Jiuzhaigou, like Emei Shan, has grown to be one of the most popular tourist sites in China. It is stunningly beautiful. In an effort to control the impact of tourism, we will again be using the internal bus service within the park.

NIGHTS: Jiuzhaigou Paradise Hotel, Jiuzhaigou

May 31, Day 22: Drive to Guanxian Hill Resort (Green Mountain Reserve). We will stop overnight right at the very edge of the Sichuan Himalayas, in the small town of Guanxian. During the afternoon we will explore an attractive area of tall secondary woodland unusually set aside at low elevation. Here we should encounter several species we are unlikely to find elsewhere, in addition to more widespread species: Gray-headed Woodpecker, Asian Barred Owlet, Oriental Turtle-Dove, Collared Finchbill, Brown-breasted Bulbul, Black-naped Oriole, and Hair-crested Drongo. On previous visits we have also encountered the delightful Rufous-faced Warbler and there is a chance for the rare Swinhoe's Minivet.

NIGHT: Howard Johnson Hotel, Dujiangyan

June 1, Day 23: Morning Birding Green Mountain Reserve; Afternoon Drive to Chengdu. After some final birding at the Green Mountain Reserve, we'll drive to Chengdu to connect with our return flight to Beijing. The return drive is approximately 2-3 hours. We will have our farewell dinner tonight, reflecting on the superb birding, incredibly spectacular scenery, and natural beauty hidden in the vast country that is China.

NIGHT: Sino-Swiss Hotel, Beijing

June 2, Day 24: International Flights for Home. Participants may schedule their flights home at any time today. Check-out time from the hotel is noon.

EXTRA ARRANGEMENTS: Should you wish to make arrangements to arrive early or extend your stay, please contact the VENT office at least two months prior to your departure date. We can very easily make hotel arrangements and often at our group rate, if we receive your request with enough advance time.

TOUR SIZE: This tour will be limited to 8 participants.

TOUR LEADER: Dion Hobcroft

Dion Hobcroft has been working for VENT since 2001. He has led tours to Australia, New Guinea, New Zealand, Bhutan, India, Southwest Pacific, Cambodia, Thailand, China, Japan, Russia, Alaska, and the Antarctic. Dion has traveled to Sichuan on more than seven occasions, spending more than seven months birding in the field here. In 2007 alone Dion showed more than 2,000 species of birds to VENT clients. His informative, relaxed, and educational nature, combined with sharp eyes and ears, has established Dion as a favorite of many tour participants. His fieldwork for over 30 years on birds and other terrestrial vertebrates has allowed him to amass an extraordinary knowledge of the biodiversity in the Asia-Pacific region. Born in Tasmania and based in Sydney, Dion has traveled widely throughout Australia listing over 760 species, placing him in the top echelons of Australian birders. He is very tuned-in to the songs of bird species in the Asia-Pacific region, and specializes in rare and elusive species. He is delighted to show these skulking rarities to his travel companions. Dion has published several papers on field ornithology, served on national and state rare bird committees, managed *Birdline NSW*, run introduction to ornithology courses for Sydney University, and, before he traveled so continuously, was a popular speaker with various natural history societies. Dion has worked for many research and government agencies ranging from the Antarctic Division, Department of Environment NSW, Agriculture Protection WA, Taronga Zoo, Australian Museum, and the Queensland Department of Primary Industry. Dion lives in Sydney with his wife Lise, and two young children, Grace (age 8), and Daniel (age 4).

FINANCIAL ARRANGEMENTS: The fee for the tour is **\$8155** per person in double occupancy from Beijing, China. This includes all meals from Lunch on Day 3 to Dinner on Day 23, accommodations as stated in the itinerary, ground transportation, internal air transportation during the tour (Beijing to Chengdu and return in economy class), gratuities, and guide services provided by the tour leaders. It does not include airfare from your home to Beijing and return, airport departure taxes, visa fees, alcoholic beverages, special gratuities, phone calls, laundry, or items of a personal nature. Rates are based upon group tariffs; if the tour does not have sufficient registration, a small-party supplement may have to be charged.

The single supplement for this tour is **\$1125**. You will be charged a single supplement if you desire single accommodations, or if you prefer to share but have no roommate and we cannot provide one for you.

EXCHANGE RATE SURCHARGES: In the erratic global financial markets of today, it is difficult to predict foreign currency exchange rates over the long term or at the time of operation of a tour or cruise departure. Tour prices are based upon the rate of exchange at the time of itinerary publication. If exchange rates change drastically, it may be necessary to implement a surcharge. If a surcharge is necessary, every effort will be made to minimize the amount. In many cases, these additional foreign exchange rate surcharges are passed to VENT by its vendors and suppliers.

FUEL AND FUEL SURCHARGES: In the uncertain, often volatile oil market of late, it is difficult – if not impossible – to predict fuel costs over the long term, and more specifically, at the time of operation of this departure. Our prices are based upon the prevailing fuel rates at the time of itinerary publication. While we will do everything possible to maintain our prices, if the fuel rates increase significantly, it may be necessary to institute a fuel surcharge.

TOUR REGISTRATION: To register for this tour, please contact the VENT office. The deposit for this tour is **\$500** per person. If you prefer to pay your deposit by check, your tour space will be held for 10 days to allow time for the VENT office to receive your deposit and completed registration form. If you prefer to pay your deposit using a credit card, your deposit must be made with MasterCard or Visa at the time of registration. The VENT registration form should then be completed, signed, and returned to the VENT office. Full payment of the tour fee is due 120 days prior to the tour departure date.

CANCELLATION POLICY: Cancellation penalties and refunds are based on the following schedule: if cancellation is made 120 days or more before the tour departure date, a cancellation fee of **\$250** per person will be charged unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be **\$100** per person. If cancellation is made fewer than 120 days before departure date, no refund is available. This policy and fee schedule also applies to pre-trip and post-trip extensions. *We strongly recommend the purchase of trip cancellation insurance for your protection.*

<u>If you cancel:</u>	<u>Your refund will be:</u>
120 days or more before departure date	Your deposit minus \$250*
Fewer than 120 days before departure date	No refund available

*Unless the deposit is transferred to a new registration for another VENT tour that will operate within the next 12 months, in which case the cancellation fee will be \$100 per person.

TRIP INSURANCE: A brochure and application form for optional coverage for baggage, illness, and trip cancellation can be obtained through the VENT office. **We strongly recommend that you purchase trip cancellation insurance as soon as possible to protect yourself against losses due to accidents or illness.** VENT recommends *Travel Insured International* as our preferred insurance provider. Check with your insurance agent regarding coverage you may presently have via other insurance policies that may cover illness during your trip. **Waiver for pre-existing conditions is available; however, stipulations apply, usually requiring the purchase of the insurance soon after registering.** Optional expanded insurance coverage is

available and includes items such as work-related cancellation, medical upgrade, and a “Cancel for Any Reason” clause among others. Contact *Travel Insured International* prior to registration for details. Not all insurance providers provide the same levels of coverage. If you purchase insurance through a company other than *Travel Insured International*, please be advised that rules and stipulations may be different.

Medical insurance which covers you for emergency evacuation/repatriation during the trip is also recommended for this tour. This coverage is included in the Worldwide Trip Protector plan offered by *Travel Insured International*. A good website for information and acquisition of emergency evacuation/repatriation insurance is: www.insuremytrip.com.

Victor Emanuel Nature Tours is not a participant in the California Travel Consumer Restitution Fund. California law requires certain sellers of travel to have a trust account or bond. This business has a bond issued by Travelers in the amount of \$50,000. CST #2014998-50.

AIR INFORMATION: Victor Emanuel Travel is a full-service travel agency and wholly owned subsidiary of Victor Emanuel Nature Tours (VENT). Victor Emanuel Travel will be happy to make any domestic or international air travel arrangements from your home and return. Please feel free to call the VENT office to confirm your air arrangements.

ALTITUDE: We will be ascending to elevations above 10,000 and as high as 15,000 feet (driving over passes). However, we will acclimate ourselves by ascending in small increments daily. Most ascents will be by vehicle, and we will then work a given area by walking downhill; however, there will be times when there is no option but to walk uphill. At high altitudes, we will almost always be walking along a road and at a very slow pace, so this should not be a matter of concern for anyone in moderate to reasonable condition. Those with heart or respiratory concerns should contact their doctor prior to departure.

BAGGAGE: Participants are encouraged to take whatever they think they will reasonably need for this tour, including telescope and tripod, camera and video equipment. With regard to clothing, participants should bring sufficient items with them so that they can survive several days without laundry being done. Please check with your international airline carrier for allowances and restrictions. Air China, your internal China airline, allows two checked bags with combined weight of no more than 50 pounds/23kg (per person) and your carry-on baggage no more than 11 pounds/5kg. This is generally sufficient for most needs on this tour.

CLIMATE: At the time of our visit (May), and because of the wide range of altitudes (400 to 15,000 feet) that our tour covers, we will encounter a wide range of temperatures, including cold and damp, snow, and almost certainly some rain. There may be occasionally hot conditions with very bright sunshine, which typically in the mountains (because of the increased radiation) causes sunburn more readily than one supposes. Beijing and Chengdu are typically warming and becoming increasingly hot and humid at this time of year. At the high passes it can be bitterly cold if windy conditions prevail. Gloves and warm clothes are essential here.

CLOTHING: Casual is the order of the day. Hard wearing, easy to wash and dry field clothes are ideal. Sturdy hiking boots with a solid lug sole are essential; sneakers or sports type shoes are not appropriate, as the ground will be wet and possibly slippery a lot of the time. Laundry service will NOT be available in Wolong. Participants are therefore advised to bring more, rather than less clothes with them. Participants should bring layers rather than one or two large items. Sturdy, rainproof jackets and pants are strongly recommended (shower proof plastic jackets are not sufficient), in addition to at least one warm sweater, and a down or synthetic jacket or vest. Other items that are recommended include a warm head covering such as a beret or balaclava, in addition to a regular birding hat, gloves and scarf or neck gaiter. Many of our participants found silk or synthetic thermal long underwear very handy for the cool nights and early mornings. Sunglasses are very useful (occasionally essential) at higher elevations, especially if there is a lot of snow about. Thick socks that absorb perspiration and cushion one's feet

from hard surfaces are important. It is also useful if the socks are long enough so that the bottom of one's pants can be tucked inside.

SPECIAL NOTE: Please - absolutely no bright colors. China's birds and other wildlife are quite shy, and we will be trying to see a number of very elusive species. Muted colors are essential to enhance our chances. Please do not wear white or brightly colored clothes, hats, gloves, bags, or other paraphernalia. Furthermore, if you can avoid crackling nylon/plastic jackets and pants, this will greatly enhance everyone's enjoyment of the trip and enable the leader to hear those critical, but so easily overlooked, subtle call notes of the birds you want to see.

CURRENCY: Participants are advised to carry sufficient funds in low denomination American Express U.S. dollar traveler's checks and/or U.S. dollar cash. The latter can be very useful in an emergency. I normally change US Dollars into Yuan at the Beijing Airport or at our hotel in Chengdu. You will only need a nominal amount to cover laundry, souvenirs and other items of a personal nature.

DOCUMENTS: A passport valid for at least six months beyond your planned departure from China is required for United States citizens to enter the country. An entry visa is required for United States citizens to enter China and **should be obtained prior to arrival.** For further information, you may wish to contact the Chinese consulate nearest you or *Pinnacle Travel Document Systems* (www.traveldocs.com on the web or 888-838-4867 by phone), a company which handles visa procurement. Non United States citizens should check with their consulate/embassy for instructions.

EQUIPMENT: You should have a quality pair of binoculars in good repair (please check before departure!). Your tour leader will be carrying a Questar spotting scope; however, you are urged to bring your own spotting scope if you so wish, as this will greatly enhance your enjoyment of this tour.

You should bring all the camera equipment, spare batteries, and film or digital supplies that you will need. Film will be almost impossible to obtain once we depart Beijing. **Nearly everyone brings too little film or digital storage which causes some distress; PLEASE bring plenty.** UV and polarizing filters are recommended, especially at higher elevations where glare can be a problem. Plastic bags are very useful to protect equipment from rain and dust. A really good flashlight or headlamp is essential, so please ensure that yours is in good working order and that you have spare bulbs and batteries. A spare flashlight or headlamp is ideal. Couples should bring one flashlight or headlamp each.

A small daypack (either waterproofed or with a strong plastic bag inside) is essential for carrying excess clothing, camera equipment, toiletries, food, and water. However, in many of the areas where we will be birding, we will have regular access to our transport, which will be attended by a driver and his mate. Water bottles are important if you like to carry a regular supply of water.

Other useful items include:

- **Snacks:** It is advisable to bring granola-type bars, dried fruit or other snacks, as western-style snacks will not be available in China, and Chinese food may not include the roughage we have grown accustomed to in our Western diets.
- **Flashlights or Headlamps:** We will be out at night on a few occasions; a small flashlight or headlamp is essential to find your way around the panda research center at night.
- **Handywipes:** These are very important and paper tissues are especially useful. All participants should carry sufficient for their personal needs for the entire tour.
- Spare glasses or contact lenses.
- **Sunscreen:** Strongly recommended especially for higher elevations where the UV is much greater; lip balm is also essential.
- **Umbrella:** The collapsible type is easy to carry and useful both against rain and sun.

MEALS / TRANSPORTATION: In China we will travel in comfortable, well appointed, modern, heated, Japanese buses with large, airy windows that are ideal for birdwatching and photography. An additional vehicle will follow us with all our baggage and a third vehicle will carry all picnic food supplies including soft drinks, and bottled water. Dinners are taken at the various lodges and guesthouses. Drinks and snacks will be available at all times in the vehicle. Sichuan cuisine consists of many varied vegetable-rice and meat dishes all prepared hot and tasty. We try to provide a mixture of spiced and not spiced food as our restaurants dictate. The food is a major highlight. If you cannot operate chopsticks, you should bring your own cutlery as this is generally difficult or impossible to find in Sichuan.

MISC:

Electricity – China is 220 volts; Two-pin and three-pin sockets are in use. Do not rely on an electric razor, or having electricity available for charging your video batteries (although all participants have managed well enough on previous trips).

Language – Mandarin Chinese is the most widely spoken; English is spoken at most tourist areas.

Time – 12 hours plus 1 day ahead of Eastern Daylight Savings Time

HEALTH: If you are taking prescription medication or over-the-counter medicine, be sure to bring an ample supply that will allow you to get through the tour safely. Please consult your physician as necessary. Remember to pack all medication in your carry-on baggage, preferably in original containers or packaging. As airline baggage restrictions can change without warning, please check with your airline for procedures for packing medication. As standard travel precautions, you should always be up to date with tetanus shots, and strongly consider inoculations against Hepatitis types A and B. No vaccinations are required; however, cholera and yellow fever inoculations are required only if you arrive within five days from an infected area. We recommend participants contact their doctor for advice prior to departure.

In addition to your physician, a good source of general health information for travelers is the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta. The CDC operates a 24-hour recorded Travelers' Information Line 877-FYI-TRIP (394-8747) or you can check their website at www.cdc.gov/travel. Canadian citizens should check the website of the Public Health Agency of Canada: www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/new_e.html (click on travel health).

Participants are advised NOT to drink tap water or unboiled water placed at the table unless advised by your tour leader. Bottled drinks (including uncarbonated bottled mineral water) will be available at all times. You should not eat uncooked foods such as meat or vegetables, or food that has cooled and/or been sitting in the open, permitting flies to settle. Unpeeled fruit is fine, provided you wash the exterior first in clean water.

PLEASE NOTE: While in remote areas of Sichuan, participants will be at a day or more from Western type medical facilities in case of emergency. Please be aware of this before joining the tour. All participants should bring a good quantity of all their medical/pharmaceutical supplies, as these will be very difficult to obtain anywhere on the tour.

SUGGESTED READING: Our website, www.ventbird.com offers an affiliated online store that carries a wide variety of items for birding and nature lovers, including over 6,000 books. A portion of the sales from this store benefits the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. You may also visit such other online stores such as www.amazon.com, and for those out-of-print or hard-to-find titles, www.abebooks.com or www.buteobooks.com which specializes in ornithology books. We also recommend Andrew Isles bookstore for the Asia-Pacific region at <http://www.andrewisles.com/AndrewIsles/>. Andrew can also often obtain difficult to find and out of print books. If you have difficulty obtaining any titles, you can contact the *Natural History Book Service* located in the U.K. which has one of the most comprehensive collections of books on natural history: <http://www.nhbs.com>.

- Helin, S., Ohtaishi, N., and L. Houji. *The Mammalian of China*. Beijing. China Forestry Publishing House. 1999.
- Insight Guides. 1990. *China*. Apa Publications. – A superbly illustrated guide to China packed with lots of useful and interesting information. A must before you depart.
- McKinnon, J. and K. Phillipps. *A Field Guide to the Birds of China*. Oxford. O.U.P. 2000. **This is THE field guide to have with you on tour.** Admittedly it is not ideal, but it is the only one there is. You might consider supplementing this Craig Robson's outstanding FG to the birds of SE Asia.
- McNeely, Jeffrey A. and Paul Spencer Wachtel. *Soul of the Tiger: Searching for Natural Answers in Southeast Asia*. New York: Doubleday, 1988. One of the most intriguing and beautifully written books on the complex relationships between man, his myriad beliefs and nature, and the implications for conservation.
- Polunin, O. and A. Stainton. *Flowers of the Himalaya*. Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1984. A very helpful guide; while not quite encompassing China, it will provide a useful insight into the flora of the region.
- Robson, C. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Southeast Asia*. UK. New Holland Publishers. 2000.
- Rowell, G. 1985. *Nomads of China's West*. National Geographic: Vol 161 no 2 pp 244 - 263.
- Snow, E. 1972. *Red Star over China*. Pelican. – The classic on the Chinese revolution.
- Snow, E. 1981. *China*. Orbis – A compilation of Snow's earlier works on China under the communist regime.
- Smith A. T. and Xie Y. (eds) 2008 *A Guide to the Mammals of China* Princeton University Press
- Zhao, J., Zheng, G., Wang, H. & J. Xu. 1990. *The Natural History of China*. Collins. London. – A beautifully illustrated book with lots of very useful information on geography, vegetation communities, plants and animals. A separate section provides additional details of some China's more important reserves, including Wolong.

TIPPING: Tipping (restaurants, porters, drivers, local guides) is included on VENT tours. However, if you feel one or both of your VENT leaders or any local guides have given you exceptional service, it is entirely appropriate to tip. We emphasize that such tips are not expected and are entirely optional.

RESPONSIBILITY: Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, Inc. (VENT) and/or its Agents act only as agents for the passenger in regard to travel, whether by railroad, motorcar, motorcoach, boat, or airplane and assume no liability for injury, damage, loss, accident, delay, or irregularity which may be occasioned either by reason of defect in any vehicle or for any reason whatsoever, or through the acts or default of any company or person engaged in conveying the passenger or in carrying out the arrangements of the tour. VENT and its agents can accept no responsibility for losses or additional expenses due to delay or changes in air or other services, sickness, weather, strike, war, quarantine, or other causes. All such losses or expenses will have to be borne by the passenger, as tour rates provide for arrangements only for the time stated. The right is reserved to substitute hotels of similar category for those indicated and to make any changes in the itinerary where deemed necessary or caused by changes in air schedules. The right is reserved to cancel any tour prior to departure, in which case full refund will constitute full settlement to the passenger. The right is reserved to substitute leaders on any tour. Where this is necessary, notification will be given to tour members. No refund will be made for any unused portion of the tour unless arrangements are made in sufficient time to avoid penalties. The prices of the tours are based on tariffs and exchange rates in effect July 10, 2009 and are subject to adjustment in the event of any change therein. The right is reserved to decline to accept or to retain any person as a member of any tour. Baggage is at owner's risk entirely. The airlines concerned and their agents and affiliates are not to be held responsible for any act, omission, or event during the time passengers are not on board their aircraft. The passenger ticket in use by said airlines, when issued, shall constitute the sole contract between the airlines and the purchaser of these tickets and/or passenger. The services of any I.A.T.A.N. carrier may be used for these tours, and transportation within the United States may be provided by any member carrier of the Airline Reporting Corporation.