

SOUTH CHINA IN WINTER

'I thought that it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to improve on the birds that we saw on last winter's South China tour but I was wrong. Many people view our *South China in Winter* tour as a water bird special and in many ways it is – the spectacle of tens of thousands of swans, geese and ducks at Poyang Hu in particular must be one of Asia's premier avian attractions. But the tour's much, much more than just a water bird special.

So what will our longest lasting memories of the tour be? Will it be an individual species such as Scaly-sided Merganser, one of the five species of crane, perhaps Siberian or Red-crowned, or would it be something totally different, perhaps Pied Falconet or even a passerine such as Reed Parrotbill or Yellow-throated Bunting. Or could our fondest memory be the sheer spectacle of tens of thousands of birds – thousands of swans, geese and ducks not to mention the spoonbills, storks and cranes on Shahu, Poyang Hu's single most bird thronged lake. Among my avian memories our first Tristram's Buntings in the Botanical Gardens at Hangzhou, our first Bull-headed Shrike on the edge of the attractive, traditional village at Xiaoqi, the Yellow-browed Buntings we saw the following day near 'Moon Bay' and the Grey-chinned Minivets also near Wuyuan the day after that all feature highly. And I'm only up to about the fourth day of the tour.

The tour started well with an introductory walk in the waste ground close Pudong International Airport in Shanghai. Here, only metres from busy roads, one of Asia's busiest international airports and the world's fastest passenger train we watched our first Chinese birds – among them several parties of hyperactive Vinous-throated Parrotbills, umpteen Olive-backed Pipits and our first four species of bunting. We visited the attractive Hangzhou Botanical Gardens in neighbouring Zhejiang Province that same afternoon and Xiaoqi on the edge of Wuyuan town the following day. Qingyu hadn't even set up our lunch when our principal quarry at the latter site flew in – a fine Pied Falconet landed in the very tree that our local guide had told us just a matter of minutes earlier, was its favourite. We'd added Brown Dipper, Mandarin Duck and White-crowned Forktail to our burgeoning lists even before sitting down for our first noodles.

We had excellent studies of a vocal Hwamei and then four Long-billed Plovers the following morning, Christmas Day, and sure enough Scaly-sided Mergansers flew in right on cue. They performed well, but not nearly as well as the ones we'd find a few kilometres further up stream within the hour. Add to these a couple of Crested Kingfishers, impressive numbers of Red-billed Starlings, half-a-dozen Yellow-browed Buntings, eight Masked Laughingthrushes, a handful of recalcitrant Siberian Rubythroats and some gorgeous rural scenery. We'd had a good time at Wuyuan, a really good time and, while we weren't the only people in town celebrating Christmas we were probably the only ones wearing party hats and doing a bird list!

Poyang Hu lived up to, and even surpassed, some of our expectations. It's notoriously difficult to estimate numbers in large flocks of birds but we certainly had plenty of practice and, in this respect, Shahu, hosting tens of thousands of birds, was particularly outstanding. Here among the almost 5000 Tundra Swans, thousands of geese including up to 1500 Swan Geese, tens of thousands of ducks with Falcated Duck, Eurasian Wigeon, Northern Pintail and Common Teal all being particularly well represented, up to 4000 Eurasian Spoonbills, and of course the 1350 Oriental Storks (45% of the world population at this one site alone!) we managed to find a few rarities. Chief among the latter were the 100 Baikal Teal, a dozen or so Smew and a single Dalmatian Pelican - the later being one of perhaps just 50 birds on the entire East Asian flyway! Needless to say Poyang Hu's cranes were our chief quarry and we found the expected four species with Siberian, White-naped and eventually Hooded all being well represented and each performing superbly. Add to these the parties of Lesser White-fronted Geese, the huge numbers of Spotted Redshank and Pied Avocet, the larks and pipits and the time we spent floundering on the river's sand banks dissolves away.

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It was significantly colder in coastal Jiangsu but the birds didn't seem to mind. The hoped for Red-crowned Cranes, only recently designated China's 'National Bird', performed better than we had dare hope as, eventually, did our other main target at Yancheng NNR – the exquisite Reed Parrotbill. It also took us a while to find our first Chinese Grey Shrike but we eventually stumbled across two, the first one being our last new bird of 2007. We also struggled to see Saunders's Gull, the world's rarest *larid*. Not definitively seen at our semi-regular site north of Yancheng we found three birds on our unscheduled excursion south to the Pere David's Deer Reserve in Dafeng county. Most of us also caught up with Pale Thrush that day, others having to wait until we visited a park on the edge of Shanghai the following morning. This park, surprisingly devoid of human but not avian visitors, also held four Yellow-bellied Tits, impressive numbers of Grey-backed and White's Thrushes and our last new bird of the tour - an exquisite male Japanese Thrush.

We explored a tiny fraction of Shanghai city later that afternoon, rode on the high speed Maglev train, had a short walk along and then travelled under the world famous Bund and even found time to go souvenir and festive shopping.

How many of us knew, in advance of our trip, quite what to expect in modern day China and how many of us went home with altered opinions as to where the Middle Kingdom's heading? Now more than ever China's a land of incredible contrasts and accelerating social change, a land of considerable personal wealth juxtaposed with near grinding poverty, a land of thriving elitism, rampant ambition and a populace with an enviable work ethic. Right now's the time to visit China and we were privileged indeed to see some of the more impressive parts of it.' – Paul Holt.

Bird List:

The order, English and scientific names mostly follow those used in the recommended field guide for this tour - MacKinnon, John and Karen Phillipps. 2000. *A Field Guide to the Birds of China*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Key to the status codes:

Column 1 = total number of days that the species was recorded

Column 2 = maximum daily count for that particular species

H = denotes a species that was heard but was not seen

(H) = denotes a species that was heard more often than it was seen

Codes against the bird names indicate globally threatened species as defined by BirdLife International (2004) *Threatened birds of the world* 2004 CD-Rom Cambridge, U.K. BirdLife International as follows:

CR = Critically Endangered

EN = Endangered

VU = Vulnerable

NT = Near-threatened

Chinese Bamboo Partridge	1	2	H	<i>Bambusicola thoracica</i>
Japanese Quail	1	6		<i>Coturnix japonica</i>
Common Pheasant	7	15		<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
Tundra Swan	3	4830		<i>Cygnus columbianus</i>
Swan Goose EN	3	1500		<i>Anser cygnoides</i>
'Tundra' Bean Goose	6	800		<i>Anser fabalis serrirostris</i>
Greater White-fronted Goose	4	500		<i>Anser albifrons</i>
Lesser White-fronted Goose VU	2	30		<i>Anser erythropus</i>

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Ruddy Shelduck	3	30		<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
Common Shelduck	3	20		<i>Tadorna tadorna</i>
Mandarin Duck	3	10		<i>Aix galericulata</i>
Gadwall	4	100		<i>Anas strepera</i>
Falcatad Teal	5	1500		<i>Anas falcata</i>
Eurasian Wigeon	5	2500		<i>Anas penelope</i>
Mallard	6	300		<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
Chinese Spot-billed Duck	8	400		<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>
Northern Shoveler	4	150		<i>Anas clypeata</i>
Northern Pintail	3	2000		<i>Anas acuta</i>
Garganey	1	1		<i>Anas querquedula</i>
Baikal Teal VU	3	100		<i>Anas formosa</i>
Common Teal	7	12000		<i>Anas crecca</i>
Common Pochard	5	635		<i>Aythya ferina</i>
Tufted Duck	2	6		<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
Smew	5	85		<i>Mergellus albellus</i>
Red-breasted Merganser	1	1		<i>Mergus serrator</i>
Scaly-sided Merganser EN	1	14		<i>Mergus squamatus</i>
Common Merganser	6	320		<i>Mergus merganser</i>
Grey-capped Pygmy Woodpecker	4	3		<i>Dendrocopos canicapillus</i>
Great Spotted Woodpecker	5	6		<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
Grey-headed Woodpecker	3	2		<i>Picus canus</i>
Great Barbet	1	2	H	<i>Megalaima virens</i>
Eurasian Hoopoe	6	30		<i>Upupa epops</i>
Common Kingfisher	8	3		<i>Alcedo meninting</i>
White-throated Kingfisher	5	2		<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>
Crested Kingfisher	3	2		<i>Megaceryle lugubris</i>
Pied Kingfisher	4	10		<i>Ceryle rudis</i>
Asian Barred Owlet	1	1		<i>Glaucidium cuculoides</i>
Rock Pigeon	8	50		<i>Columba livia</i>
Oriental Turtle Dove	9	50		<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>
Spotted Dove	11	40		<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>
Siberian Crane CR	3	150		<i>Grus leucogeranus</i>
White-naped Crane VU	3	130		<i>Grus vipio</i>
Common Crane	4	210		<i>Grus grus</i>
Hooded Crane VU	2	14		<i>Grus monacha</i>
Red-crowned Crane EN	3	30		<i>Grus japonensis</i>
Water Rail	1	1	H	<i>Rallus aquaticus</i>
Brown Crake	2	1		<i>Amaurornis akool</i>
Common Moorhen	5	20		<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>
Eurasian Coot	7	300		<i>Fulica atra</i>
Common Snipe	7	30		<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
Black-tailed Godwit	2	250		<i>Limosa limosa</i>
Eurasian Curlew	3	100		<i>Numenius arquata</i>
Spotted Redshank	6	2400		<i>Tringa erythropus</i>
Common Greenshank	8	30		<i>Tringa nebularia</i>
Green Sandpiper	8	5		<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
Common Sandpiper	4	3		<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
Sanderling	1	4		<i>Calidris alba</i>

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Dunlin	6	400	<i>Calidris alpina</i>
Pied Avocet	4	3000	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Grey Plover	2	15	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>
Long-billed Plover	1	6	<i>Charadrius placidus</i>
Kentish Plover	2	170	<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
Northern Lapwing	5	150	<i>Vanellus vanellus</i>
Black-tailed Gull	1	2	<i>Larus crassirostris</i>
Mew Gull	2	15	<i>Larus canus</i>
Vega Gull	5	300	<i>Larus vegae</i>
Yellow-legged Gull	4	65	<i>Larus cachinnans mongolicus</i>
Black-headed Gull	6	110	<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
Saunders's Gull VU	1	3	<i>Larus saundersi</i>
Whiskered Tern	1	85	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>
Black Kite	1	1	<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>
Hen Harrier	5	7	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>
Crested Goshawk	2	1	<i>Accipiter trivirgatus</i>
Eurasian Sparrowhawk	3	2	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
Common Buzzard	5	2	<i>Buteo buteo</i>
Black Eagle	1	1	<i>Ictinaetus malayensis</i>
Pied Falconet	1	1	<i>Microhierax melanoleucos</i>
Common Kestrel	7	2	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
Merlin	2	1	<i>Falco columbarius</i>
Peregrine Falcon	4	3	<i>Falco peregrinus</i>
Little Grebe	9	100	<i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>
Great Crested Grebe	4	85	<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
Great Cormorant	5	40	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
Little Egret	7	100	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>
Grey Heron	7	200	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
Great Egret	3	250	<i>Casmerodius albus</i>
Chinese Pond Heron	4	2	<i>Ardeola bacchus</i>
Black-crowned Night Heron	5	950	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>
Great Bittern	3	5	<i>Botaurus stellaris</i>
Eurasian Spoonbill	4	4000	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>
Dalmatian Pelican CR	3	1	<i>Pelecanus crispus</i>
Black Stork	1	8	<i>Ciconia nigra</i>
Oriental Stork EN	3	1335	<i>Ciconia boyciana</i>
Orange-bellied Leafbird	3	4	<i>Chloropsis hardwickii</i>
Bull-headed Shrike	2	1	<i>Lanius bucephalus</i>
Long-tailed Shrike	12	30	<i>Lanius schach</i>
Chinese Grey Shrike	2	1	<i>Lanius sphenocercus</i>
Red-billed Blue Magpie	4	20	<i>Urocissa erythrorhyncha</i>
Azure-winged Magpie	5	60	<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>
Grey Treepie	1	3	<i>Dendrocitta formosae</i>
Black-billed Magpie	6	500	<i>Pica pica</i>
Grey-chinned Minivet	1	60	<i>Pericrocotus solaris</i>
Brown Dipper	1	3	<i>Cinclus pallasii</i>
Japanese Thrush	1	1	<i>Turdus cardis</i>
Grey-backed Thrush	2	20	<i>Turdus hortulorum</i>
Chinese Blackbird	11	200	<i>Turdus (merula) mandarinus</i>

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Pale Thrush	3	12		<i>Turdus pallidus</i>
Rufous-tailed Thrush	6	12		<i>Turdus naumanni</i>
'Naumann's Thrush'	2	2		<i>Turdus n. naumanni</i>
'Dusky Thrush'	4	2		<i>Turdus n. eunomus</i>
White's Thrush	1	4		<i>Zoothera dauma</i>
Siberian Rubythroat	1	4	H	<i>Luscinia calliope</i>
Bluethroat	1	1		<i>Luscinia svecica</i>
Northern Orange-flanked Bush Robin	6	6		<i>Tarsiger cyanurus</i>
Oriental Magpie Robin	5	6		<i>Copsychus saularis</i>
Daurian Redstart	9	10		<i>Phoenicurus aureoreus</i>
Plumbeous Water Redstart	3	8		<i>Rhyacornis fuliginosus</i>
White-crowned Forktail	2	3		<i>Enicurus leschenaulti</i>
Red-billed Starling	6	300		<i>Sturnus sericeus</i>
White-cheeked Starling	6	500		<i>Sturnus cineraceus</i>
Black-collared Starling	5	40		<i>Sturnus nigricollis</i>
Crested Myna	11	200		<i>Acridotheres cristatellus</i>
Chinese Penduline Tit	2	6		<i>Remiz consobrinus</i>
Yellow-bellied Tit	1	4		<i>Parus venustulus</i>
Great Tit	11	12		<i>Parus major</i>
Long-tailed Tit	1	7		<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
Black-throated Tit	4	50		<i>Aegithalos concinnus</i>
Collared Finchbill	3	50		<i>Spizixos semitorques</i>
Brown-breasted Bulbul	1	50		<i>Spizixos semitorques</i>
Light-vented Bulbul	10	100		<i>Pycnonotus sinensis</i>
Chestnut Bulbul	2	20		<i>Hemixos castanonotus</i>
Mountain Bulbul	1	10		<i>Hypsipetes mccllellandii</i>
Black Bulbul	1	6		<i>Hypsipetes leucocephalus</i>
Goldcrest	3	3		<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Zitting Cisticola	3	2		<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>
Plain Prinia	2	4		<i>Prinia inornata</i>
Brownish-flanked Bush Warbler	2	5		<i>Cettia fortipes</i>
Dusky Warbler	5	3	(H)	<i>Phylloscopus fuscatus</i>
Pallas's Warbler	4	3		<i>Phylloscopus proregulus</i>
Yellow-browed Warbler	7	4	(H)	<i>Phylloscopus inornatus</i>
Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush	1	4		<i>Garrulax pectoralis</i>
Masked Laughingthrush	1	8		<i>Garrulax perspicillatus</i>
Hwamei	1	2		<i>Garrulax canorus</i>
Spot-breasted Scimitar Babbler	1	6		<i>Pomatorhinus erythrocnemis</i>
Streak-breasted Scimitar Babbler	2	4		<i>Pomatorhinus ruficollis</i>
Rufous-capped Babbler	1	2		<i>Stachyris ruficeps</i>
Dusky Fulvetta	1	5		<i>Alcippe brunnea</i>
Grey-cheeked Fulvetta	1	60		<i>Alcippe morrisonia</i>
Striated Yuhina	1	30		<i>Yuhina castaniceps</i>
Vinous-throated Parrotbill	8	40		<i>Paradoxornis webbianus</i>
Reed Parrotbill NT	3	12		<i>Paradoxornis heudei</i>
Eurasian Skylark	6	80		<i>Alauda arvensis</i>
Oriental Skylark	3	15		<i>Alauda gulgula</i>
Fork-tailed Sunbird	1	1		<i>Aethopyga christinae</i>
Eurasian Tree Sparrow	12	200		<i>Passer montanus</i>

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White Wagtail	12	20	<i>Motacilla alba</i>
" "	3	10	<i>Motacilla alba leucopsis</i>
" "	1	3	<i>Motacilla alba ocularis</i>
Yellow Wagtail	2	1	<i>Motacilla tschutschensis</i>
Grey Wagtail	2	1	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
Richard's Pipit	3	5	<i>Anthus richardi</i>
Olive-backed Pipit	11	30	<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>
Red-throated Pipit	2	1	<i>Anthus cervinus</i>
Water Pipit	4	6	<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
Buff-bellied Pipit	8	120	<i>Anthus rubescens japonicus</i>
White-rumped Munia	4	40	<i>Lonchura striata</i>
Scaly-breasted Munia	2	10	<i>Lonchura punctulata</i>
Brambling	3	40	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>
Grey-capped Greenfinch	5	15	<i>Carduelis sinica</i>
Eurasian Siskin	1	1	H <i>Carduelis spinus</i>
Yellow-billed Grosbeak	7	20	<i>Eophona migratoria</i>
Meadow Bunting	2	2	<i>Emberiza cioides</i>
Tristram's Bunting	2	4	<i>Emberiza tristrami</i>
Little Bunting	8	20	<i>Emberiza pusilla</i>
Yellow-browed Bunting	1	6	<i>Emberiza chrysophrys</i>
Rustic Bunting	3	3	<i>Emberiza rustica</i>
Yellow-throated Bunting	3	4	<i>Emberiza elegans</i>
Black-faced Bunting	9	20	<i>Emberiza spodocephala</i>
" " "	3	6	<i>Emberiza spodocephala sordida</i>
Pallas's Bunting	2	6	<i>Emberiza pallasi</i>
Reed Bunting	2	3	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>
Lapland Bunting	1	30	<i>Emberiza lapponicus</i>