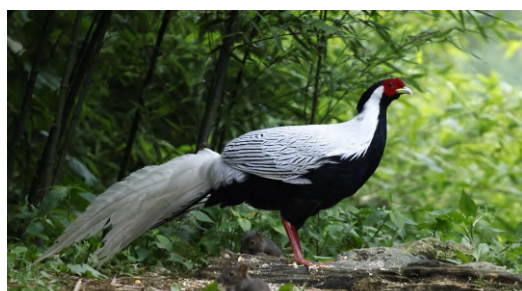


China's Sichuan Basin & Tibetan Plateau

June 11 – 26, 2026 | Trip Report by Peg Abbott



With guide Bella Zhang, Naturalist Journeys host Peg Abbott, and ten participants: Kim, Ken, Lorna, John, Daryl, Andrew, John, Cathy, Rob and Valerie



Thurs., June 11 Arrivals in Chengdu

Most of our group had come in early, and thoroughly enjoyed their time exploring. Some went to the Chengdu Panda Center, others walked Huanhuaxi Park almost next door to the hotel, and several raved about the museum adjacent to the hotel. Kim and Ken said they could have spent a full day there! Our hotel was located in the Qingyang District, on the Huanhua River, so a great base for all coming in early. Both Peg and Lorna had



some delays getting in due to flight issues, but they caught up eventually, Lorna this evening late, and Peg the following day.

Bella met everyone in the lobby for some afternoon birding and it was fun to see so many species right next to the hotel. Andrew and Mark both described Huanhuaxi Park as a mini Central Park with no traffic. It was delightful to be in, with lovely sculptures and incredibly clean, easy to navigate around and a good introduction. A young woman was exercising with her swords, elegant in motion. We found Little Grebes building a nest, and about 200 Black-crowned Night-Heron and 80 Gray Heron on a rookery. Songbirds included a Black-throated Tit with fledged young. Chinese Blackbirds, a furtive Fork-tailed Sunbird, Rufous-faced Warbler, Yellow-billed Grosbeak, and Red-billed Starling.

We passed through a local market walking to dinner. There were rows of gorgeous fruits, meat butchers, a big tub of eels. Dinner was fun and we all learned traditions on how the rotating table center worked (counter clockwise please!), practiced using chopsticks and tasted some delicious food. Ten or more dishes soon appeared with loads of vegetables and various meats. They started us off bland (day one) but we asked to tone it up in subsequent days. Chinese beer was cold and tasty!

Fri., June 12 Huanhuaxi Park | Muchuan

This morning our group headed back to Huanhuaxi Park, where lush trees attracted a good number of species. We walked easy paths and found a few new species today. Since our hotel was in the city, and we'd be heading out to the country side, we visit Kuanzhai Alley, a historic area with both modern and traditional Chinese culture. We had an excellent lunch at a local restaurant before heading south to Muchuan, about a three hour drive on good, paved highways. The staff wanted to take photographs with us, and with smiles we convinced them to up the spice level which was good! Our driving route took us past massive apartment complexes, nests of buildings all built on a plan. Along the way we stopped at Xinglong Lake, where we found a host of water associated species. We saw the Cotton Goose and both Yellow and Cinnamon Bitterns. A Black-winged Cuckoo-shrike was another highlight. Some local photographers shared their photos with us, they seemed to be regulars.

After lunch we drove towards Pingshan, and went birding up by the monastery. The route was scenic, with deeply incised river gorges, lush stands of bamboo, and mixed broadleaf-conifer forests. The road system was impressive, wide multi-lanes, and relatively little traffic. Bridges are gorgeous, overall the infrastructure blew us away.



Peg was there to greet us as we returned, and this night at dinner we took time for introductions as our group was now complete. We had several in the group that had been to China in years past, but not for birding. Rob and Lorna knew some of the language which was a great help as we ventured deeper into the region. A few of our group were new to Asia completely, always fun as so many birds are new. We shared various dishes, taking what we wanted from a selection of at least ten dishes, a style of eating that works so well with birding, as you sit down and voila, here comes a host of delicious fare. There is no ordering or waiting, just dig in and enjoy. We caught up on our species checklists which had arrived with Peg and headed off to bed.

Sat., June 13 Muchuan | Bird Hide | Local Birding

We woke before dawn, Peg just arriving jumped right in and started the bird day hearing a Collared Scops Owl from the hotel room. Today turned out to be one of those legendary off the charts birding days, one in which supported the local community by visiting a series of bird blinds (hides) from which we could view some of the most sought after species in China including Sichuan Partridge. We drove to a point where the bus could no longer go and transferred to local vehicles to drive up the mountain. At the very first hint of light, we navigated a trail down to the first hide, thankfully, with bamboo along the sides for good grasping. It was steep, but they had put gravel on a good part of it, and we helped each other down and got settled quietly before the theater performance of nature would be begin.

The first performers were a gang of Buffy Laughingthrush, bold and chattering and bouncing around the water feature. Two Red-billed Leiothrix in vibrant color came in that seemed to gleam in that early light. And then it in a male Silver Pheasant, and we were all gob smacked. It moved around impressively, then when challenged by a Pallas' Squirrel did a twist and fan of the tail that was most impressive. We were fully in awe of this Bird when an even rarer bird came in, a pair of Sichuan Partridge. Two Chinese birders next to Peg exclaimed how lucky we were to see these (within a few minutes of arrival) when they had booked a second day after sitting in this hide the full day yesterday and never seeing them. The partridge pair stayed for several minutes, feeding, always close together. Below these two, on a rock in the middle of the water feature was a rather homely Lady Amherst Pheasant male in molt, working on coming into breeding plumage.

We did not feel rushed, but at some point, Bella indicated it would be good for us to move on, her intimate knowledge of the timing of all this worked well as we got to the next blind in time to see Temminck's Tragopan, both male and female Lady Amherst Pheasant in full breeding plumage. They were exquisite. We enjoyed extended time to watch them, which was really wonderful. We even saw them work their way up through the forest of thick bamboo.

We came back up to our cars and walked along the level road, looking for some of the smaller birds of the area. We then dropped down back towards one of the hides, and went off to the side where a songbird water feature brought in all kinds of beautiful species. It was super busy with different species dropping in, all of them wanting to take a bath. There were Red billed Leiothrix, several species of bulbuls, Rufous-capped Babbler, and a real thrill to see as they are usually shy, the



brilliant Emai Shan Liocella.

Time past so quickly! We had done so well, it was time to celebrate with lunch in town. Andrew said at this point, we hit our lick with excellent spicing in all the dishes and everyone was most satiated. Time for a nice break post lunch, enough for a nap or shower for time to download photos and then back we went in the afternoon.

A few of us were still jetlagged and others had spent their energy going up and down the steep bamboo trails to the hides so we were looking for a relaxing afternoon and went up on the mountain where a temple sits above the hotel and the habitat is just high enough. We get the different species. Most prominent were Black-streaked Scimitar-Babbler, Daurian Redstart, Ashy-throated Parrotbill and Collared Finchbill.

We have several choices of trails to bird and as the group had been there on their first afternoon before Peg joined them, some wanted to try to see the giant Buddha, a bit of a tourist attraction, but with some lovely forest so we made time and several took a steep walk downhill to see this 11 story carving in sandstone good to get those steps in! Others lingered near the top for more birding, watching Red-billed Blue Magpies, Oriental Greenfinch, and White-browed Laughingthrushes.

Dinner was back at the hotel, our lightly chef kept bringing out dish after dish after dish, some that were repeat like Kung pow Chicken, and some that were new, including a scrumptious eggplant dish that was so well cooked and delicate that even Mark, who professed not to like it, tried some and took seconds. There were loads of vegetables, and sesame pork, two chicken dishes, and of course, rice. We then caught up on our bird list - off to bed!

Sun., June 14 Wawushan | Scenic Drive Into the Mountains

We met at 7 AM for breakfast, warm noodles or fried eggs from the hotel, and from Sun and Ava (our driver and assistant local guide) a host of nice foods from the grocery to supplement; several of us appreciated yoghurt, hard-boiled eggs, and peanut butter for bread as familiar foods from home. There were also fun snacks for us to pocket to enjoy on the road or trail.

We then walked along the river in front of our hotel. With some searching we had success spotting a pair of Brown Dipper that flew through and landed on some prominent rocks. Rob had his scope always out and ready, and he followed a distant bird in flight to discover it was an Oriental Magpie, which landed on a branch with a resulting great trio - Black Bulbul, and Red-billed Blue Magpie -sweet!

Time to load up. We had a four-hour drive to Wawu Mountain, one of the most famous birdwatching spots in



China, also beloved by the Chinese people for the significance of its setting. A few roadside stops to break up our trip allowed us good looks at Great Barbet, Oriental Magpie, Plumbeous Redstart, and White Wagtail.

Wawu Mountain is a flat, table top mountain we stayed on the shoulder of and would access by cable car for our birding. Once atop the tram we walked in total comfort along a wooden raised boardwalk that stretched for miles. It was damp and misting this afternoon but we were so glad we opted to come up and take a peek. Not one but two Red Panda were right off the boardwalk trail, busy preening and fairly oblivious to all of our oohs and aahs of admiration. We had a lot of good birds, with views of Coal Tit (the crested Himalayan form), Rufous-vented Tit, Bianchi's Warbler, Aberrant Bush Warbler, Gray-hooded Fulvetta, both Great and Fulvous Parrotbills Hodgson's Treecreeper and several Laughingthrushes. Rob got his scope on a Chestnut Thrush – nice!

Our hotel has the feel of a ski resort, though it was not particularly busy, after a very full day we were grateful for what had become the custom everywhere for dinner, hot dishes ready and waiting for us as we sat down, with a wonderful mix of vegetables, meats and always a few new dishes to try. Beer was common but wine no so, later on we'd figure out there were private wine stores we could access. Tea was always hot and plentiful too.

Mon., June 15 Cable Car to Wawu Mountain | Boardwalk Trail

We had a full day to bird in Wawu National Park, and we could see how it earned its reputation as one of the most well-known birding sites in China. We found the national parks to be well-maintained and spotless, no trash anywhere. There were two areas we wanted to cover, one on the level of the hotel along an old road, and one an extraordinary raised boardwalk walkway around the summit where we could walk for several miles and beautiful pristine forest on a wide path where we didn't have to think about our footing, we could just stroll and scan and take all the time we wanted to. We walked about 4 1/2 miles for the course of the day at a birders pace.

The first walk was at six, and optional early morning walk out of level old road with great use of birds often below us. We found great birds and high activity including Golden Parrotbill, Golden-breasted Fulvetta, several species of tits, Gray-crowned and Chestnut Crowned Warblers, several leaf warblers (nice to compare), both Blue-winged and Red-tailed Minlas and more. We returned to the hotel to enjoy a hot breakfast and were able to sample some dumplings and other local foods that were fun. We still rated our own stash of peanut butter which we were pretty fond of too.



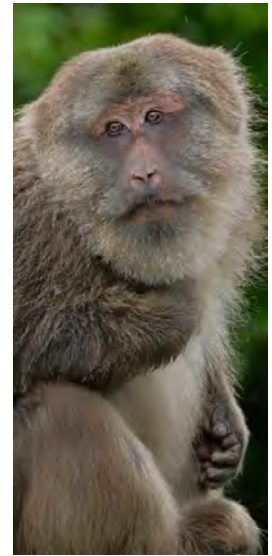
We then caught the tram of the mountain, and would spend much of the day up there. There is another simpler tented hotel serve us lunch. The weather turned more challenging as they progress so it was nice to go and have a hot lunch. Would have been foggy in the morning turned pretty consistently rain in the afternoon so by four we've decided to give up and head home. Despite that we did remarkably well the species, many were below us feeding low in the bamboo under story and we got good looks at Long-tailed Minivet, Buff-barred and Buff-throated Warblers, three species of bush warblers, four species of parrotbill including Three-toed, another of the large members of that clan. Elliot's Laughingthrush were common, as were Rufous-gorgeted Flycatcher and we spotted a nest.

Dinner was back at the hotel and we had a very nice eggplant dish, again we had about 10 different dishes to choose from and ample proportions, we could sample what we liked, and the dishes varied from vegetarian to pork and chicken. There was a nice tofu and a bit spicy sauce that was new and very fresh cooked greens. We caught up on our bird list and headed off to bed.

Tues., June 16 Giant Panda Research Center | Labahe Nature Reserve

As our weather had been pretty wet the day before, we opted to go back up the tram for another round on the boardwalk. It was very worthwhile and we added a number of species, notably and with some work, Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker. Persistent (and talented) guide Bella was not going to let this one get away! Along the boardwalk we got buzzed by a White-throated Needletail, and charmed by a Golden Bush-Robin, such a beautiful species. Gray-hooded Bullfinch were new, and the turquoise-blue color of Verditer Flycatcher was, as always, stunning. We found a brilliant male Short-billed Minivet, with gleaming red plumage set off by the dark green of a wall of conifers. Not too far down the trail (after we took the shuttle to the lake) we had clear views of two Great Parrotbills which we had only heard the day before in the mist. Impossibly cute Fulvous Parrotbills worked the bamboo, then picked up Brown Parrotbills feeding. Two Gray-headed Bullfinch came close, crossing our path. The morning was wonderful, with primary forest draped in mosses, even a few rhododendrons still in bloom.

We descended (after helping to extricate a few Blue Whistling Thrushes that were caught in the tram station) and headed on, with taking our lunch in town at base of the mountain. Peg described this area as the "Jackson Hole of China" for its stores and restaurants. We had specialty coffees, beans cooked like popcorn, veggies and meat dishes and .sweet buns filled with red bean paste for dessert, yum!



Soon we were on our way 4 hours to Labahe, our next birding hotspot to visit. On the way we visited a Panda Reserve near Tianquan, a quiet and very well run center in a natural landscape. It was a delightful visit, cool weather with a nice breeze, and the pandas were actively feeding. We saw several Giant Panda youngsters with their moms, cuddling and playing and two which had climbed high up in the trees for a nap. They have various enclosures they called gardens and they move the pandas around for variety. Some are public and others private to give them a break from admiring visitors. Pandas spend most of the day eating, pooping (from their high fiber diet), and sleeping and we were so happy to see them up close. The company we use in China also does panda trekking seasonally, and while possible, Giant Pandas are very difficult to see in the wild. This center has quite a few pandas that were born in other countries in return to China, including from Washington DC and from San Diego. We had to take a moment to pick up some panda souvenirs and then on we went, navigating winding mountain roads at times four lane and other times too, but all smooth traffic moving freely. We passed a lot of beautiful scenery and big flowing rivers. Everywhere the landscape was green.

Wed., June 17 Labahe Nature Reserve | Kangding: Gateway to Tibet

We had an early breakfast and headed out to meet the park shuttle early. It was great to be the first out and have it all to ourselves. We had a full day to explore the Labahe area of Great Panda National Park, a fairly new National Park created by combining several other parks to create a much larger conservation area that includes bamboo forest so critical to pandas, but also wildland areas valuable to so many other species. Once again, we were impressed by the trail system and its shuttle bus system.

Our first walk was on the main road walking downhill we've driven up to the point. We intercepted a mixed flock and added several new species, including Southern Nutcracker, Stripe-throated Yuhina, Ferruginous Flycatcher, Mrs. Gould's Sunbird (gorgeous!) and Chestnut-flanked White-eye. We were able to see both Red Deer and Sambar Deer in the forest. And to our joy, thanks to John's keen spotting, more good looks at Red Panda.

We then walked on an elevated boardwalk through primary forest to trees over 200 years in age that were festooned with masses and lichens including hanging clusters of Spanish Moss or Old Man's Beard. Another Ferruginous Flycatcher posed nicely for us, and we were thrilled to catch up to a couple of woodpeckers, Great-spotted, and Darjeeling. There was interesting signage along the way, and several of the large trees were labeled, Himalayan Hemlock, Emei Shan Fir (endemic), Sargent's Spruce and three kinds of native cherry trees. There were many birch and maple and we could see how beautiful it must be in the fall when colors turn. We got to watch the wing flicking behavior of Claudia's Leaf-Warbler and three species of tits blew through in a mixed flock, Gray-crested, Yellow-browed, and the crested Himalayan form of Coal Tit. We all enjoyed another



look at the beauty of the Golden-breasted Fulvetta.

With these two walks in the morning time passed quickly and we were hungry for lunch, so we ducked into the little mountain café at the cable car station where we had a choice of dumpling or noodle soups or a chicken burger served on a bun, a fun change of pace in our dining. We also enjoyed coffees from the upstairs Hug Cafe.

We then headed down the mountain, making stops at a scenic viewpoint and at a bridge over the river, where we could scan for birds associated with fast moving streams. We found a Brown Dipper, a Plumbeous Redstart a White-capped Redstart, but alas, no forktails yet, expected in the rushing stream habitat. A Marten's Warbler gave us a run for our money, singing and singing just out of you. John and Andrew waded into the brush and got a glimpse, and we all learned from Bella more about the complexity of comparing its song with other closely-related species.

We returned to the hotel for some down time, as we all needed to catch up on showers and have some personal time. Our plan was to meet back at 6:30 PM for dinner and then head out for an optional night drive and short night walk to look for mammals. Rain kept a few at home but it was a super productive night drive not far from the hotel. We found Leopard Cat, a sleeping Temminck's Tragopan, and using Bella's heat sensor, a pair of Tawny Fish Owl, really impressive birds.

Thurs., June 18 Kangding | Views of Mount Gongga | Erdaoqiao

We decided not to return up to the forest in the magical boardwalk, even though we enjoyed it thoroughly it looked like clouds were going to be thick again this morning, so we opted for a walk along the river. What a good decision, it turned out to be absolutely delightful, mostly because of beauty. The color of the water was cerulean, there were many flowering trees, and we walked leisurely, enjoying views of outrageous Red-billed Blue Magpies, various small songbird species, and a Brown Dipper flying upstream. We had clear sightings a brilliant male Mrs. Gould's Sunbird feeding in red flowers, and a Blue Whistling Thrush feeding on an open hillside.

We continued to enjoy this river energy, even after packing up and leaving the hotel, as our route on to the next location paralleled it for quite some time until we were out of Giant Panda National Park. We made several stops to scan for various species, and were quite taken with the scenery, watching jade and pale green waters roar by under massive mountain cliffs – stunning!

We had lunch along the way, at a restaurant in an elegant building, that had colonial, British style furniture, some local art and books in big, heavy wooden shelves, creating a cozy atmosphere. Again, the food kept



coming, long after we filled our plates. There were always more dishes to sample. With full bellies after this lunch, there was a little bit of napping on the bus though we hated to miss a thing!

We were able to check into our homestay, indeed a small boutique hotel, and this creative, comfortable modern place turned out one favorite of the trip. Our rooms were spacious, sunlit, with furnishings of clean design, giving a peaceful atmosphere. There were big deep bathtubs for those that wanted to soak, and nice showers as well. Definitely a place you wanted to tuck in for more than a few hours, so thankfully we had a bit of downtime until 3:30, when we met back in the lobby to head up into some scrub land about the town, and search of interesting species – Bella had endemics on her mind.

It was still pretty hot, strange to be in light clothing at such a high elevation, we were almost at 10,000 feet. Right away, we found one of our target birds, the Rufus tailed Babbler, which urged on with a bit of playback came right up into a shrub and singing it's a little hard out, giving us a wonderful view. Later, we would return to this area and get wonderful looks at Chinese Babax, a thrasher-like species erupting in loud vocalizations, we saw a noisy family group of three.

In-between our two visits to this mountain side trail, we drove up to the top of the road where there was an active cement making facility, but we parked near to that and chose a quiet road to walk, with mountain views into a picturesque glacial carved curve of high valleys rimmed by green. Peg spied a couple of herds of yak way up at the tree line, and we got them in the scope. We saw Himalayan Griffin's circling in the sky, along with Red-billed Choughs. But the real prize of the day was a species often difficult to find. With patience and Bella's incredible tracking skills, we finally all got views of a male Firethroat. This singing beauty had teased us a previous day, but with time and skill we were able to see it in an open Siberian larch tree. We also saw Southern Nutcrackers flying, around us, calls like surround sound stereo. We could see the cones of Armand Pine that they feed in here. There were so many lovely wildflowers in bloom, those of us interested kept falling back behind the group taking photos and trying to figure out what they were using the Seek app.

Somehow, it got to be almost 7 PM, time to be back to the hotel, but it was worth lingering to find these special birds and explore a different habitat. Dinner was ready and waiting for us, delicious with a lot of varied dishes. As a special treat dessert, Ava had gone shopping and brought us back the freshest (juiciest!) watermelon you could imagine, Daryl commented it was the best she'd ever had.

Kangding is the largest town around and known for its nightlife, including an area where people of all ages join nightly in dance so our group wanted to go in and Bella was happy to take them, the bright lights were beautiful, dazzling indeed!



It was fun! Picture a lively downtown scene, with bright lights, restaurants, and shops. A central dance area in the town square held traditional dancing, with little kids to grandmas. Great community spirit, a loosely orchestrated circle - everyone knew the dance moves - and Bella explained that each move has a significance in Tibetan life. You can see this online, query the Kangding Live Song Square. It goes on every night until 11 when the lights are turned off and people head for home. The Zheduo and Yala River s run and meet up right through the middle of the city, so this night life with all its neon and color gave us an unexpected small version of New York's Times Square. Locals enjoyed taking photos of our group, especially of Valerie who joined in the dance circle with a big smile. Andrew described the great energy, simple and bright and open to all.

Fri., June 19 Yajiang | Eastern Tibetan Plateau

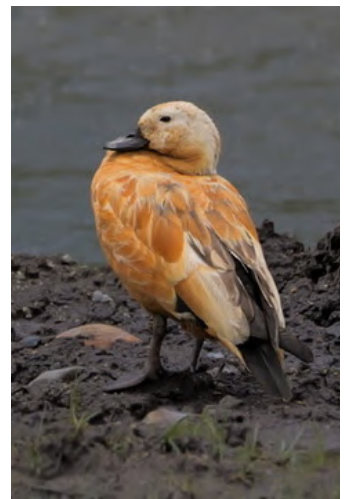
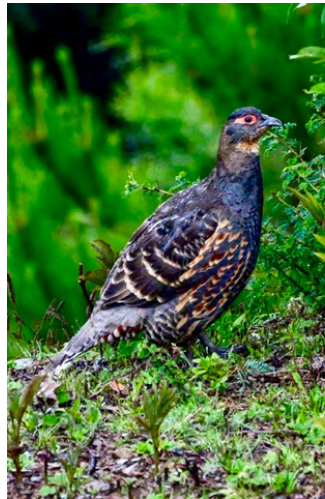
We had a leisurely morning as our "homestay" boutique hotel prepared us a beautiful Chinese cooked breakfast, a tray for each of us with hot noodles, rice congee, fresh melon, some pickled vegetables and a special treat, little pyramid shaped Zongzi, sticky rice with a spicy pork center wrapped in a bamboo leaf - a traditional food for the annual Dragon Boat festival held today.

We took off at 8 AM and headed into the mountains, passing through conifer forest and then to areas higher than trees. We made several stops and found some high elevation birds including both Snow and Hill Pigeons, Brown Accentor, Streaked Rosefinch, and Tickell's Leaf Warbler, the more yellowish alpine form. Most of these were scope views, additionally three Himalayan Griffons put on a good aerial show, circling above us.

The next stop was the top of the world at a high pass, clouds precluded a clear view of almost 25,000 ' Mount Gagga, but peeks through revealed its glaciers. We birded around the parking lot and had fun watching locals in an oversized swing set placed here for all, fun to see locals posing for pictures, visiting a prayer site, and purchasing local fruits. The fruit man wanted to give us free samples and it worked as several of us purchased fruit - all so delicious!

In the parking lot was a mobile coffee truck, perfect for all of us who love to stop for this kind of break. Our enthusiasm was getting contagious within the group. A lovely woman that called herself Icy fixed us Americanos, Hot Chocolates and Lattes. We also got our dog fix by petting her absolutely adorable, blue eyed pup named Glacier. She let us take pictures of her home in a van and it was a fun exchange. We really had admired her entrepreneurial spirit, parked here on top of the world meeting people from around the world.

We went to explore a bit more, winding our way through the mountains, and eventually following a rushing



stream where was some effort we were able to find Ibisbill, one of the iconic species of the Himalayas that extends into China and its associated mountains.

We had lunch in a town that with its brick buildings could've been one of several cities of Europe. It was charming, and we had fun peeking into the stores that sold traditional Tibetan hat, variety of clothing, prayer mats, and blankets. Our timing was perfect, as just as we entered the restaurant we saw huge lightning bolt and a clap of thunder was loud enough to split open the sky. The rain was heavy and it lasted pretty much for the full hour or so we were in the restaurant, then cleared as we needed to go. We feasted (again!), tasting some wonderful dumplings, a salty rice and cracker dish, several chicken, pork, beef, and vegetable dishes. There was a very creative greens with garlic dish and another eggplant dish that was quite different from anything we've had.

For the rest of the afternoon we were on the road again, the sun came back out as we dropped down an incredibly engineered highway that literally circled around itself to lose elevation. Our route went up and down the mountains. We were beginning to understand the layers of vegetation, and how they stacked by elevation, we dropped once again from rock scree into the realm of conifers. We admire the typical Tibetan homes, some of them in the countryside and more intricate ones in the towns. They were yaks grazing everywhere, and small sturdy horses. This part of rural China looks like a story book.

Sat., June 20 Yajiang | Local Monastery Visit

We left super early, piling groggily into the bus at 4:30 AM. Shy pheasants and partridges were on our wish list, and that required being up there at first light. We drove up an incurably steep road which was actually paved. It started out clear but as we increased elevation, we drove into mist and thick fog.

On arrival, Sun and Ava had French-press coffee ready for us in no time. In raingear and with umbrellas, we waited for daylight to come. Soon the ear piercing call of Buff-breasted Monal Partridge urged us to walk over to a viewpoint between rock buildings of the monastery village. Score! A pair was there, the male calling and we got great views. We walked over to a residential part of the complex, and on a couple of broken down roofs spotted a glorious all White Eared pheasant. The species we hoped to see turned out to be fairly easy at this remote location. Our first Himalayan Beautiful Rose Finch was one huddled under the corner of a building on a wire staying out of the rain. Thankfully soon it would break and we'd have sun.

At first we could barely see into the impressive lawn and water pool that is line by stupas is part of the monastery complex. We made out the shapes of some large pheasants as the fog cleared. We found them to be



incredibly tolerant, just poking around feeding on scraps of the lawn. And timely would count 18 White Eared Pheasants together – wow!

We spent much of the morning really happy as the clouds were lifting, and we could see the magnificent views of both sides of this high perched site of the monastery. Clouds framed the dark forms of conifers, a couple of small villages across the expanse of the valley began to show, and there was music starting to emanate from a group of tents on another plateau area. We learned that was a summer gathering of local people who were dancing and singing and having fun. Most of the 30 or so monks still living at this facility were over at the party so we had the whole place to ourselves. We walked a couple of roads, and we're happy to find Blood Pheasant, White-bellied Redstart, Common Cuckoo, Maroon-backed Accentor, both White-browed and Chinese Fulvettas and a new bird for us with a bold pattern and big personality, the Giant Laughingthrush.

We walked a different road on the other side of the monastery that was mainly oak trees, and we were festooned with what they locally called Methuselah's Beard, similar to Spanish Moss hanging in our country. Andrew spotted an Asian Black Bear, and a few of the group got a glimpse before it went into the trees. We learned that this area is important to the economy of rural local people as mushrooms grow here in July and August that are much prized by the Japanese. The monks and local people harvest them and actually use drones to help get them down the mountain to be shipped out as fresh as possible.

We discovered many wildflowers in bloom, inspiring us to take pictures and use our Seek app to try to figure out what they were. And we kept finding birds, including Red Crossbill and Derbyan Parakeets. These gorgeous parakeets were totally unexpected, and we had incredible view of them. Two different pairs perched in easy scope view, males with a smoky-blue head and bright orange beak. There was more weather drama as we when were birding as a big thunderstorm was welling up, and we started to see lightning in the distance in here big booms of thunder. Eventually, it started to rain and we decided to hop back into the vehicle but the spectacle was glorious.

We enjoyed the views driving back down. In town, Bella stopped for water, and we spied a few bottles of wine for sale in the window (a rare find in China), so we ran in after her and grabbed a few as we'd seen none at the restaurants all throughout our trip. It was fun at dinner to share that and some fruit we had gotten along the way along with another incredible meal a varied dishes. Tonight they had a grilled theme to the menu, some interesting vegetables and some sesame leaves with garlic fried up like potato chips.

Off to bed, a long but very rewarding day.



Sun., June 21 Yajiang | Huiyuan Monastery | Danba Tibetan Village

Today was largely a travel day, through spectacular and varied scenery. We did find some new birds at highway and rest stops including White-capped Redstart and Bearded Vulture. We got good looks at Sichuan Tit and Streaked Rosefinch as well. We were learning some of the calls and recognized those of Chestnut Thrush and Giant Laughingthrush.

We drove through a lot of rural countryside, watching yaks cross rivers, at times yaks blocked the road. We saw many sturdy small horses, there were tourist facilities with picnic grounds and horses saddled to ride. Many of the Tibetan-style homes were beautiful, heavy stone and timber with bold lines, interesting doors and windows.

We had a cultural stop at two very different monasteries. The first was Lhagang Monastery in the town of Tagong. Our timing was perfect as the monks were inside chanting. The rich colors, sounds of bells and deep-tone voices, faces of the devote worshippers, and sense of history (this monastery dates back about 1375 years) were both memorable and moving. We picked up a few little treasures in the shop, made a donation, and headed on. A decorated motorcycle was parked under an intricate religious painting.

The second was the 7-year home of the 7th Dali Lama, constructed to keep him out of harm's way, 300+ years ago. We entered into a wide central lawn, surrounded by monk's quarters. Yellow walls of traditional Tibetan architecture here blend with Han Chinese dragon sweeping eaves, a golden roof crowned with protective bird images, the International Flag of Buddhism flapping in a breeze, a dark sky promising rain, spring green leaves on trees beyond the compound, and distant views of snow-capped peaks all left their impression on us. We left with a few more treasures, candles, beads, and cloth, and continued our journey.

We stopped for a view of Yala Snow Mountain, at 19,300 feet holding impressive glaciers. Several food booths sold sausages, corn pancakes, and other foods we had not seen. Several of us just had to try Chinese soft serve ice-cream. The next part of the journey we dropped about 4000 feet in elevation, through a dramatic river gorge. The river roared and slopes were steep. Absolutely remarkable.

In the late afternoon we started the ascent to the Danba Villages, and were happy with the skill we had seen throughout our journey in Sun's driving. What an incredible feeling to find these beautiful villages, with small agricultural fields and fruit trees, scattered on either side of an immense river gorge. The Chinese government has encouraged small scale tourism development here and it was lovely to be a part of it. Our small hotel stood under two high towers, ancient structures. We were warmly greeted, and fed well.



Mon., June 22 Danba Villages | Forest Birding | Jiarong Tibetan Culture

We had a day free of driving any distance, just walking around the village and birding in the forest above one of the villages. We found Asian Koel, Gray-headed Woodpecker, numerous Black-rumped Magpies, our first Common Ravens perched on high towers, cute family groups of Black-browed Tit, and Chestnut-vented Nuthatch.

One building was more beautiful than the next. We had gone out early to bird, then back for a hearty breakfast, and then went out again to see a homestead being made into a tourism site, where we could actually go inside and climb the 100+ feet of one of the historic defensive towers that in their time, were family homes. They had opened up one of the windows and put a modern ladder up, putting the historic type of ladder next to it so we could compare. John was the first to head up and soon was waving his arms at us from high above. Several others followed, and got to sense firsthand, but it was like to live here inside of protective tower in case of marauding neighbors. Best of all we looked out into the most sublime scenery. Southern Nutcrackers posed for us, Red-billed Choughs showed off their acrobatic flight, and Daurian Redstarts sang away.

We had a leisurely afternoon, with time to see the local museum, which was quite well done and showed off the accoutrements of daily life. The area has fertile soil, and we watched some villagers preparing the field, at a small table vendor we were able to buy local mushrooms, packaged, and dried. We stopped at the local coffee shop, something quite new for China, and it doubled his reading room with a big screen TV. They probably showed movies from time to time. It had Florida ceiling windows and a wonderful ambience. We enjoyed sipping coffee and petting the local dog. Behind us was a former home that had been taken over as a small museum, and they didn't do an excellent job, showing the tools and clothing and accessories of daily life centuries ago. Syria had been impoverished, but rather than leave for the city they wanted to make it come back alive, so the government was supporting tourism efforts. We learned a lot and fully enjoyed the experience. We saw Sichuan Pepper growing on bushes lining the road.

We tried Yak butter tea before our late afternoon outing, the highlight of which was seeing a Speckled Piculet and inviting some local women to view through the scope. Asian Tit, two Golden Eagles and over a half-dozen Himalayan Griffons soaring overhead were a treat.



We had a celebration with cake tonight for Ken's birthday – what a special place to have it, and we enjoyed getting photos of Ken and Kim with big smiles. We all helped them eat it, as well as the sweets our host had encouraged us to help prepare – steamed buns, filled with walnuts and brown sugar - our monthly dose of sugar for sure!

Tues., June 23 Birding the Mountain Road to Jiajin | Balang Mountain

There are times in travels with Naturalist Journeys tours that we feel like we've stepped into a fantasy, a place so special you want to hold onto it, but you know your time is brief. We took in all we could at the Jiayi Danba Village on this fertile edge of the Tibetan Plateau. Our homestay accommodations had surprised us totally! The rooms were spacious and beautifully artistic, with simplicity an element of design and the whole atmosphere so peaceful. Walking around the villages, each of the homes made a frame for the other homes, all immersed in a magnificent wilderness area of steep proportions. Atop the peaks were prayer flags. Seven or eight small villages are perched 1000 ft. above the main town of Danba along the river. People plant corn, turnips, chiles and potatoes, and harvest mushrooms and fruit. We could see numerous standing towers, the signature of this region, some of them dating back close to 1500 years. We hated to leave!

We took loads of pictures, some of them panoramic, mesmerized by the beauty of the Tibetan architecture, the native stone, the painted and curved doors, metal work on the gates, it was just a pleasure to take it all in. Our hostess was delightful at the hotel, and she waved us off as we continued on towards our next stop.

Our route was picturesque, with livestock, broad valleys, eventually we reached a high pass. In the lower reaches we saw a tower with many Salim Ali's Swifts alongside Eurasian Crag Martins. Colorful Ruddy Shelducks lined the streams and in a wet meadow area, we saw marmots. At another stop we found Pink-rumped Rosefinch and lovely White-throated Redstarts. At the forest edge we were lucky to have a Eurasian Goshawk circle above, and we found Przevalski's Nuthatch, Dark-sided Flycatcher, Tibetan Serins, and Gray-crested Tits. Late afternoon we would add Rufous-bellied and Great-spotted Woodpeckers, a couple of Yellow-bellied Flowerpeckers, and Spot-winged Grosbeaks putting on a good show on a fruiting tree.

Our lodgings were at the Red Army Camp, small cabins around a small pond under a large conference center. The art and history of the place was the first messaging we had observed with this much gusto. In the night we heard Himalayan Owl. The meals were delicious here, we were still getting some new dishes in the mix, quite something after our many nights of travel.



Wed., June 24

Jiajing Pass | Forest Bird Explosions!

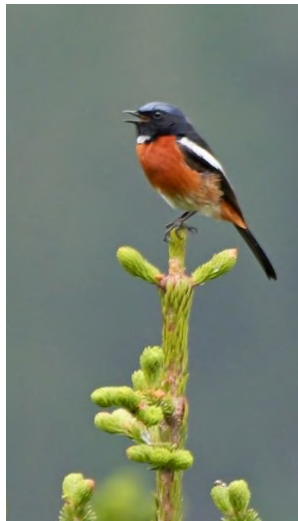
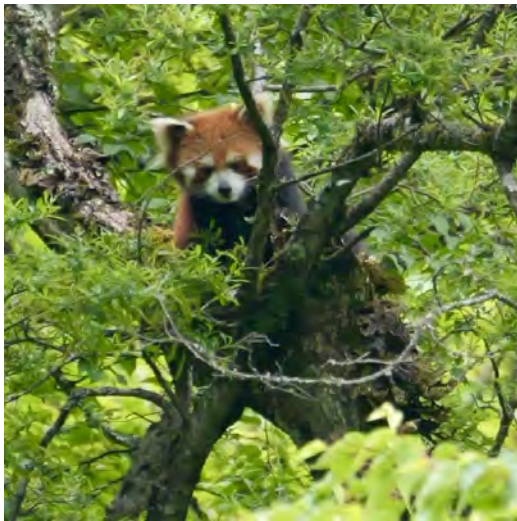
We wanted to get an early start, so it was dark as we headed toward the bus, we were lured on with promise of French pressed coffee, and a nice breakfast in the field.

The Himalayan Owl was still making its distinctive call in trees right behind our little cottages as we met this morning in the dark. It had rained in the night in the Boardwalk was slippery so we clutched the rail as we gathered around. Bella had her handy heat sensing camera, and we could all follow the vocalizations of this magnificent bird as it made its way from tree to tree. Finally in it came; we trained the light on it and there it was, about the size of a Barred Owl back home. We got wonderful views, and in the end it launched itself across the valley opening, so we saw it in flight and watched it land in the big old growth tree on the slope behind. What a way to start the day!

We wanted to go up high to a pass, try our luck at some really special birds and then work our way back down so we proceeded fairly directly to the top of the pass at about 13,500 feet. But sadly, we were totally lost in the mist, we couldn't see very far ahead at all, and after spying an Alpine Accentor, and some Plain Mountain Finches feeding their young, we decided to go over the pass and drop down into the trees of the forest to bird there until it would clear. This strategy worked well as we walked into what could only be described as a bird explosion, there was so much activity in this patch of forest we didn't know what to look at first. There was Hodgson's Treecreeper, various leaf warblers, and then a real beauty flew in, the Crimson browed Finch, one of the rosefinch family. We had hoped to see. Rob described it as the most like our Pine Grosbeak back home, the large size and the large conifer feeding bill. We worked hard to sort out a Himalayan Beautiful versus Pink rumped Rose finch, and we got a good show by a Chestnut-crowned Bush Warbler which sang its little heart out.

The scenery was remarkable, with a deep canyon below us, completely filled with dark conifer trees, down to the squiggle of the road that made dramatic turns so classic in the style of road building here in China. We found Przevalski's Nuthatch, and stopped at a view point as a big procession of Chinese motorcycles went by. Several birds perched up in plain view, which made the day for our photographers. Blue-fronted and White-throated Redstarts posed.

Time pass quickly, and we decided to head down to the town for lunch, where we vote to keep it simple and



have dumplings, which were just delicious. Several of us were not finding the food very spicy or hot, and ask them for some of the wonderful Szechuan pepper sauce to add to our bowls. After lunch, we headed back up the mountain, trying for a few additional species, and then passing back over the high alpine zone, which was still fogged in with mist.

On the way down, we did a few stops, each time finding one or two species of interest. But the thrill of the day happened almost to the bottom, the sun pulled over so Bella could check out some raptor nests on a cliff for activity. And not only were they active, we were able in the scope to get in view one of the rare raptor of the world the world, the Bearded Vulture or Lammergeier. There was a chick in the nest, bigger than its parent, and we took turn s in the scope, though some couldn't quite differentiate the head from the body, the image clicked when we saw it raise its head to show off the massive bill. WOW.

After a good day, with intermittent rain, but also periods of sun, we headed into the hotel. We did our bird checklist, and enjoyed dinner in the style we've gotten so used to, dish after dish coming in to go on the Lazy Susan, which we circled around counterclockwise, on this evening, they added some baked potatoes with a nice crushed pepper dipping mixture, some little bread rolls, which we hardly had any of for the whole trip, a green bean and chili dish that was quite spicy, and various meat dishes, including sesame chicken. Ana cut up some fruit that Peg bought at the market and that was the perfect dessert.

The Himalayan owl was hooting behind our cabins as we went to sleep...

Thurs., June 25 Balang Shan Pass | High Mountain Birding with Local Guides | Chengdu

We had one more birding area that was important for us to visit, in search of the day-glow colored Chinese Monna and other species of high elevation. We would drive up to a Balang Shan Pass at 14,763 feet. The road would not allow our comfortable 19 cedar coat us to go up so we would meet locals who would transport us to the top. The locals turned out to be experts at birding and finding the species we wanted to see. While they did not speak English, they participated at each stop looking for what we hope to find, a wonder example of community-based ecotourism.



As we'd had several foggy mountain to experiences, we did not set our hopes too high. Our first couple of stops were low enough that we could see into the green vegetation, and look off the slope s full of grazing yaks. They had lots of calves, and we laughed as one of the frisky youngsters got what we called the zoomies and was racing around the herd. Equally distracting as the yaks with the beautiful blanket of wildflowers. We got down on our hands and knees and photographed various specimens, and then some of them were like flame torches standing high within the shrubby vegetation, particularly orange and yellow poppies. The native dwarf rhododendron with a purple bloom, covered the slope, like one might see gorse in England.

Keen-eyed Bella spotted some wild Blue Sheep up on the ridge top and we trained the scopes on them, there was at least one ram with big horns and several younger ones and females. We heard a Chinese Monal, then Chestnut-throated Monal Partridge, and in time we're able to find one that we got into the scope, a fairly non-descriptive female, but a good representative of the species we were grateful to find. There were Blue fronted Redstarts, and at the second stop at higher elevation, we saw a flock of Snow Pigeon that curved around on the wind, showing off all the beautiful patterning of their back and tail. We shared the road with horses, donkeys, and cows. There was a little traffic so we could stop and put the scope on various species. We found Tibetan Snowcock and watched them navigate the rocky slopes. Chinese Rubythroat sang loudly from tall willow shrubs.

We wanted to get up to the top early, and while there was some missed that came in when it was remarkably clear the level we needed to see, which was that of the immediate terrain. This was rocky with interspersed shrubs. We got out of the cars and walked to the top of the past, not moving very quickly at this high elevation. But Bella crying out "Snow Partridge" got us going and indeed we had excellent looks at this high elevation species. We saw Alpine Accentor, Red-fronted Rosefinch, and then to our complete delight, a pair of Grandala came down. The male was absolutely electric blue. He was so gorgeous in that open alpine landscape, we watched it for some time and then as we were sorting out other species, it returned within about 10 feet of us along the Roadside. Another big wow!

On the way back down, we stopped again in shrubby, terrain, and search of White browed Tit Warbler, a colorful and energetic member of the bushtit family. We were quickly distracted by as many as five singing male Chinese Rubythroats, a few quite close range. Bella was going through the bushes up a drainage with a few behind her. Peg went the other direction, and to her delight, found a family of four tit-warblers in a tall shrub. The views were good and she immediately called out to those around the cars to come quickly. Here was the bird we wanted, yeah! This is not a species one can normally can get a scope on as they move so fast so Bella had her



doubts, but we were able to watch them for 10 to 15 minutes, with everyone getting scope views as the parents were attending their young. They may have just fledged and this was probably was a nest site. We were thrilled. The local guides were happy we were occupied and were off finding medicinal plants that was in bloom to harvest, showing us their finds.

It seemed like we'd has numerous highlights of the day and we should not pick another accomplishment for our grand finale, but we stopped again, lower down the slopes to try again for the Chinese Monal that we had heard, which we had only heard and not seen. Peg loaned her binoculars to one of the local guides, thinking he would probably find it quicker than she would, and within a few minutes he got very excited and ran to Bella and grabbed the scope. About mid slope on the mountain, near a scree slope, was a bright, turquoise bird, that shine like fancy jewelry. It was a male and we were able to get it in the scope and everyone got their fill of looking at this gorgeous creature.

Again, we thought this has to be a grand finale, the Bella stop near rushing stream and then doing a scan. We found another new species for the trip, the White throated Dipper. Smiles all around.

At this point, we have the need to get back to the city as many were flying out that night or the next day, so we pulled out, traveling back through a series of tunnels that cut through the mountains, some of them well over a mile long. We passed a Hydroelectric project and just as if turning a switch, we were out of the mountains and into the flats of the eastern part of the province and heading to Chengdu.

We had lunch in a small town, and the woman was delighted to have us, and went around, taking our photo of us, eating her very delicious dumplings and a lovely broth with fresh scallions. We got to the hotel late afternoon and after several weeks and such wonderful memories had said goodbye to our luggage driver in the morning, and son, our expert driver Sun, and assistant guide Ava, in the afternoon as they left us when we checked into the hotel. Our flock was breaking up!

We celebrated our trip with stories of species and moments special to each of us as we feasted on some really delicious food at a local restaurant we walked to from our hotel. We thanked Bella, our incredible guide, for her knowledge, patience, and the fact that she was never out of sight – so much energy she put to showing us the beautiful birds of Sichuan. We had a most compatible group and were sad to see this adventure end.



Fri., June 26 Departures

Some of our group had left just after midnight, the rest of us had a leisurely and rather incredible breakfast at this plush hotel's buffet, and then headed to the airport, just across a walkway. China had surpassed our every expectation, at every turn! We'll be back.

Photos: Group (Peg Abbott - PA), Giant Panda (Valerie Gebert - VG), Silver Pheasant (PA), Koi Fish (VG), Light-vented Bulbul (VG), Sichuan Countryside (VG), Sichuan Partridge (VG), Silver Pheasant (PA), Temminck's Tragopan (VG), Lady' Amherst's Pheasant (VG), Red-billed Leothrix (PA), Early morning view (VG), Red Panda (VG), Wawu Shan statues in the mist (VG), Short-billed Minivet (VG), Fulvous Parrotbill (VG), Spotted Bush Warbler (VG), Giant Panda (Mark Cavallo - MC), Alpine Birding Guide Bella Zhang and Panda specialist Gerry (VG), Tibetan Macaque (VG), Golden-breasted Fulvetta (MC), Long-tailed Magpie (MC), Ice Blue water rushing by (VG), Bridge (MC), Typical Lazy Susan meal (VG), Lake Honghaizi (MC), Prayer Flags (PA), Ruddy Shelduck (VG), Chestnut-throated Monal-Partridge (VG), White Eared-Pheasant (MC), Blood Pheasant (VG), Derbyan Parakeet (MC), Architecture (PA), Black-rumped Magpie (VG), Group birding (VG), Panoramic view of switchbacks (VG), White-throated Redstart (VG), Wallcreeper (VG), Snow Partridge (MC), Alpine Horses (VG), Grandala (VG), John (MC), Plain Mountainfinch (VG)