For those who like truly wild places, very localised speciality birds and a smattering of rare mammals, our tour southwards across the Tibetan plateau culminating in the fabled Tibet, where the fabulous Potala Palace rivals any of the natural wonders seen during the tour, is perhaps the most iconic tour in Asia. Added to that is the cultural contrast of Xinjiang, ’the western frontier’ and the formidable Taklamakan Desert. Many of the birds encountered have exotic names which pay homage to the early explorers of these remote lands; Roborovski’s Rosefinch, Kozlov’s Bunting and Babax, Szechneyi’s Monal Partridge, Biddulph’s and Henderson’s Ground-jays, Güldenstädt’s Redstart, Severtzov’s Tit-warbler and Przewalski with a partridge, redstart and most significantly for many, a beautifully pink passerine which is now in its own bird family – Prezwalski’s Pinktail. In addition, there were close encounters with Tibetan Sandgrouse, Pale Rosefinch, Gansu Leaf Warbler, Crested Tit Warbler, Pallas’s Sandgrouse and the regal Black-necked Crane. The main tour finished in Tibet, with memorable encounters of Tibetan Eared Pheasant, Giant Babax, Prince Henri’s Laughingthrush and Lord Derby’s Parakeets. Most of us though continued on to Xinjiang where after several ground-jays we also encountered Tarim Babbler, Azure Tit, Saxual Sparrow, White-winged Woodpecker,
Blue-capped and Eversmann’s Redstarts, Savi’s Warbler, Black-throated Accentor and even a surprise Moustached Warbler – possibly the second record for China. Mention should also be made of the mammals which this year included Wolf, Tibetan and Red Fox, Blue Sheep, Grey Marmot, Przewalski’s, Goitered and Tibetan Gazelle, Kiang and the rare Tibetan Antelope.

Our first day began with a visit to the pine woodlands north of Xining, the provincial capital of Qinghai. Greeted on arrival by Oriental Greenfinches, we headed over to the conifers for breakfast, picking up our first of many Gansu Leaf Warblers, a range-restricted breeder of northern Qinghai and Gansu, then Chinese White-browed Rosefinch, Rufous-breasted Accentor, Chestnut Thrush and a stunning Siberian Rubythroat sat out singing (which was still there on our walk back!). A Chinese Thrush was heard singing distantly and soon found perched miles away, before flying overhead not to be seen again, not ideal. As the weather warmed up and it turned into a beautiful morning, several feeding flocks and bursts of activity soon produced all of our targets – Crested Tit-warblers, Przewalski’s and Chinese Nuthatches, Chinese Leaf Warbler, ‘Gansu Bluetail’ – a vocally distinct form from Siberian and surely worthy of further investigation, along with a supporting cast including Greenish, Yellow-streaked and Hume’s Leaf Warblers, Grey-headed Bullfinch, White-throated Redstart, Willow Tit and Great Spotted Woodpecker.

The afternoon was spent on the dry slopes next to Xining where despite a full afternoon of trying, we failed to find Pale Rosefinch as the reforestation of the area continues to leave little habitat remaining for this dry slope specialist – not many places in the world that’s become a problem! We did pick up a pair of Pied Wheatear, Pere David’s Laughingthrush, several Godlewski’s and a single Meadow Bunting, a stationary Little Owl that didn’t move an inch for hours and a large number of Hill Pigeon, as Common Swifts and Eurasian Crag Martin’s swooshed around us. We ended the day with our first of many fine Chinese dinners.

As we were all keen to see the rosefinch, we decided to try a different area this morning. It was certainly more promising, with large numbers of Pied Wheatears, including fledged youngsters knocking about. The birding was reasonably productive, and we also saw Daurian Redstart, several singing Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush and even an Alashan Ground Squirrel, though excitement came right at the very point we were to turn around when we suddenly found a male Pale Rosefinch flying away, perching next to another male. For the next 15 minutes we enjoyed them, and another pair at close range with the male seemingly offering a piece of grass to the female. To finish off the morning a pair of Przewalski’s Partridge were scoped, with the male running rings round the female in an apparent courtship display.

Now the excitement really began as we drove west on to the plateau, more than 3000m above sea-level, and truly on to the ‘Roof of the world’. Koko Nur, a huge saline lake was our starting point, and at breakfast we were treated to views of tibetana Common Tern flying back-and-forth between lake and marsh, Pale Martins buzzing around us, while Hume’s Short-toed Larks sang overhead and fed close-by. A stroll around the marsh we were buzzing with excitement as our first Ground-tits bound into view, small flocks of chicks endlessly chasing adults and Plateau Pika were continually running around and lifting their heads above the parapet while Oriental Skylarks were a constant background voice. On the water itself Black-necked Grebes were out in force, with plenty of chicks either hitching a ride on mum, or attempting to! Great Crested Grebe, Eurasian Coot, Bar-headed Goose, Ruddy Shelduck, Red-crested and Common Pochard, Ferruginous Duck, Wood and Green Sandpipers and Common Redshank were duly noted, as were two distant pairs of Black-necked Crane, a plateau breeding endemic. A familiar call to most of us soon revealed
19 juvenile Bearded Reedlings, which were soon as close as they could possibly get without leaving the comforts of the reeds for the shoreline! The shoreline has changed quite a bit this year, with temporary tents and shops littering the grass where we usually found Pere David’s Snowfinch, though fortunately after a short search we found a male bringing food to its nest inside an old pika borrow.

As time had run ahead of us, the only ‘birding’ of the afternoon was spent while enjoying copious amounts of fresh yak yogurt at our favourite little farm, then it was the drive west to the salt-town of Chaka for three nights.

Thin air greeted us the next morning as we headed out of town to a small mountain valley tucked between several towering peaks. At breakfast a group of Goitered Gazelle grazed in the distance on their usual patch. As we made our way from plain to ravine the continual drizzle just started to part as a singing Pine Bunting came into view, twittering a familiar A little bit of bread and no cheeeees! Continuing up, both Black and White-throated Redstarts got the pulses racing before the gulley opened up into a wide grassy glade dotted with junipers. Steep slopes of juniper surrounded us on all sides making for a majestic scene. It was here we tried for our next target and soon enough a Przewalski’s (or Ala Shan) Redstart perched up on the closest juniper at the edge of the glade. For the next half hour, it moved from tree to tree giving us superb views as it fed. Several Eurasian Magpies passed-by of the bottanensis subspecies while White-winged Grosbeak appeared, including a group of over 30 singing from neighboring pines as a female foraged on the grassy slope next to us. Then, all the marmots started going berserk, making loads of noise without us managing to see a single one. Mary was quick to find the reason why – Wolf! The lone wolf then proceeded to slowly make its way across the slope in front of us, sniffing and inspecting marmot holes as it ambled across and up the hillside, occasionally looking back at us over his shoulder. On the walk back, we found a pair of Daurian Partridge in the taller grass, completing a lovely morning.

In the afternoon we scoured a different sector of the plains. Beforehand, some tall grass looked inviting for Mongolian Lark, and sure enough there was one waiting for us on a wall on arrival before taking flight and performing a display flight overhead while an invader tried to take its territory. Asian Short-toed Larks were conspicuous before a pair of Henderson’s Ground-jays suddenly flew in, perching on the wall, alternating between hopping and flying towards us allowing exceptional views as they went about their business. With these out the way so quickly, it meant we could concentrate on finding Blanford’s Snowfinch and Pallas’s Sandgrouse. Unfortunately, the rest of the afternoon wasn’t quite clockwork as we only had two poor views of the sandgrouse and drew a blank with the snowfinch, in what turned out to be a bit of a chore under the blazing sun.

Dawn, and breakfast at Chaka Saltworks – one of the ‘50 must-see sites in China’ apparently, and who knows why as it’s about the only site lacking any scenery through the entire tour! Oddly, no sandgrouse once again, they were obviously feeding elsewhere this time round but we did add to our lark-list with good, close views of Tibetan Larks sunning themselves as sunrise broke. We then headed to the scrub-covered hills close to Koko Nur with the cloudless skies making for a perfect morning. We helped ourselves to fresh yak yogurt (again!) before a short walk upslope to the scrub. There was a single reason for our visit here, the much sought-after Przewalski’s Pinktail, a very cool bird with a cool name that we coined due to its status as a monotypic family species. Luck was on our side as our first stop revealed a male randomly sat close-by, where a back view was met with “it’s not as pink as I’d imagined”, then a female flew-in carrying food straight to…. a nest! Words were soon eaten as the male, defending its territory from another nearby male performed to perfection, possibly our closest views yet on a tour as it sat, displayed and sang...
for over half an hour just in front of us on numerous perches while the female carried on with her duties, returning every few minutes with a mouth full of insects. Eventually we tore ourselves away as we had other birds to find though nothing was going to top this. Robin Accentor appeared on three occasions, Severtzov’s Tit-warbler twice, White-browed Tit twice, Alpine Leaf Warblers, Smoky Warbler, Blue-fronted Redstart, Siberian Stonechats, while overhead (and below!) Himalayan Griffons found the thermals to carry them up, with an adult Lammergeier mixed in at one point – it was non-stop action. Looking around, perfect weather, rolling hillsides and a bagful of birds it had been a perfect morning, especially as we ended it with a double dosage of yak yogurt.

After lunch we ventured to another secluded valley gorge. Oriental Skylarks were abundant and vocal along the way and once we reached a boulder strewn plateau a pair of Przewalski’s Partridge were spotted slowly creeping up the hillside next to us, giving great scope views as they called raucously. Our attentions then turned to a Wallcreeper flying high overhead, which eventually led us to its nest, half way up the opposite rocky hillside. We watched for as long as we wanted as the pair would come and go with food or searching through tiny crevasses to find grubs – surely one of the world’s most unique and stunning birds, particularly pleasing for Denis to finally see a childhood dream bird. On the walk out a Tibetan Grey Shrike appeared ahead of us, flying up-and-over us and doing what they do best, just continuing on, and on, and on, perching occasionally until it was just a speck, even in the Swarovski scope.

A final morning in the Chaka area, overlooking a cold, flat expansive plain that at first seemed barren but a short scan revealed a small group of eight Critically Endangered Przewalski’s Gazelle – one of the world’s rarest gazelle’s with less than 1500 remaining - which we watched as they dashed across the distant plain. Walking out after breakfast it wasn't long before we tracked down a couple of displaying Blanford’s Snowfinches in song-flight, at times landing metres from us. Still longing for better sandgrouse views we chose a different area to previously, and now we found out why there was a lack of elsewhere as they were all here! In our hours walk we picked up no less than 14, mostly flying overhead.

Our next stop was the large town of Gonghe where we enjoyed some fantastic dumplings (again!) which filled us with energy for the afternoons walk up-and-down through wadi’s. It was hot when we arrived as the sun was quite apparent after the chill of the higher altitudes. Birding was typically slow going here, picking up much of the same; Black Redstarts being particularly abundant (is there any habitat not suitable for the species on the plateau?!) a Short-toed Snake Eagle, Crested Lark, Grey-backed Shrike, Pine Bunting, more Mongolian Finches and Rock Sparrow before, eventually, we finally tracked down a pair of the sought-after margalanica Desert Whitethroat – perhaps now better known as Margelan Whitethroat as the species is vocally distinct from nominate minula.

*Szechenyi’s Monal Partridge and Kozlov’s Bunting*

A big day followed - winding south and up to the famous (to birders at least!) Er La, found us in a new environment, at 4,500m! The cool, bracing air that met us off the bus told us we were high up indeed, but the rain and mist was not what was ordered. Time passed by far quicker than expected as we fed each other stories, Denis even giving us a short burst of song while a charming Taiwanese birder kept us company for a while. By late morning the weather still hadn't cleared, in fact, a layer of snow now lay on the ground, so off we all went. Henri’s Snowfinch and Güldenstädt’s Redstart appeared before we reached the usual area where Robovoski’s Rosefinch inhabits. Sure enough, despite the dreadful conditions we found a female and three males, chasing each other and feeding just feet away at times, luckily they fed so close as only then was the crimson-red of the males head visible! The thick mist did not make walking any further enticing in the slightest so, satisfied with the rosefinch, headed back down to the
warmth and comfort of the bus and sped away to Maduo for the night. En-route our first Tibetan Gazelle and Kiang appeared, as the weather lifted lower down. Sleeping at 4,200m wasn't ideal but we coped better than expected.

The next day really was a driving day with a few stops along the way especially for looks at more Black-necked Crane, several Tibetan Fox, Kiang, Tibetan Gazelle, 53 Upland Buzzards, a family of Saker and plenty of Rufous-necked Snowfinch before we reached Yushu for lunch. Post lunch, next to a roadside monastery we stopped to scan the cliffs adjoining fields and a fast flowing river. The first bird sighted was a stunning male Great Rosefinch feeding in the nearby meadow. On the river an Ibisbill was already waiting for us next to the bridge, while at the cliffs a cute Glover's Pika was busy feeding and darting up-and-down the rocky face as families of Ground-tit were busy feeding, some of which, like the Tree Sparrows were almost red colour, presumably due to some bathing in red soil or, who knows what.

The scenery, as we headed down to Nangquan was absolutely stunning, deep, rocky gorges plunging down into the Mekong – some of the best of the whole trip, though birding stops ground to a halt as it had been a long day.
The following day we visited Beizha Forest Reserve and the wonderful forests here. However, major road construction was underway curtailing any efforts to get to the end of the road, while a primary school is built by the entrance (!). A stop at the river was very productive and while we enjoyed our breakfast we were joined by a few Daurian Jackdaws, Eurasian Magpies, Carrion and Large-billed Crows, all of which failed the bread test. A Himalayan Marmot appeared mesmerized by the sunrise and Pink-rumped Rosefinches were abundant throughout the day. Up a deep valley the cries of Szechenyi’s Monal Partridge made us take a left. Expecting reasonable scope views somewhere way above us, we were proven correct, as it typically screeched from a tree stump, however this bird was different to usual as it allowed us to walk to within 20 metres of it which is when the reason became clear – it was guarding both mate and three well-grown chicks. Venturing deeper into the reserve produced our only Chinese Fulvetta and Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinch amongst the plentiful Pink-rumped and Chinese White-browed Rosefinches. A particularly impressive show was three immature Lammergeier that floated just overhead, even dropping a bone, while being harried by the ever-present Large-billed Crows. A mini-flock contained Sichuan Leaf Warbler, both Grey-crested and Rufous-vented Tits and a brief Himalayan Bluetail.

At lunch, in an idyllic buttercup meadow (but next to the public toilets!) Eurasian Buzzard circled while Black Woodpecker was scoped, along with some impossibly stationary Blue Sheep on a seemingly vertical cliff above us as our hardy Tibetan bread remains were fed to the Daurian Jackdaws and crows. The afternoon was a slow going affair with us being restricted to the main road, fortunately in times like this on the plateau we always had John G to pick out a flower of interest (well, to some of us!) to study. Slaty-backed Flycatcher was particularly plentiful and our only Buff-barred Warbler of the tour was found. On our way back we stopped at some rhododendron scrub with the usual associated birds before calling it a day under another bright, sunny evening.

Continuing along the Tibetan plateau we had to head north-west to head south with several stops during the day, each one seemed to produce something. Breakfast was greeted by a Henri’s Snowfinch and, finally, a singing Chinese Rubythroat chasing a female (with another female chasing the male, go figure!). Second stop produced several roadside Red-fronted Rosefinch then the third stop several birds – Ibisbill, nesting Black-winged Snowfinch and eye-level Salim Ali’s Swifts. After lunch, we headed onto the high plateau, above 4,000m. A marsh held hundreds of Bar-headed Geese and some 26 Black-necked Cranes. Rufous-necked Snowfinch, Plateau Pika and Upland Buzzard were abundant, with a circling Saker at one, final stop before an early night to make the most of the following day, and boy would it be worth it.

Just when we thought the scenery couldn’t be topped, today we drove from Qumalai to Golmud, which burnt our retinas with the constant sweeping changes in landscapes. First up, we spent breakfast in the rolling hills of the plateau we had come accustomed to over the previous 10 days, with four Saker sat nearby, along with Upland Buzzards and Plateau Pika around us. The hills then gave way to the vast plain of the Hor Xii National Nature Reserve, with a backdrop of the snowcapped Qiajajima massif, dominated by Yuzhu Feng, at 6186m, while grazing on the plains were 180 Kiang, 250+ Tibetan Gazelle and, most importantly, 36 Tibetan Antelope, together with 136 Upland Buzzard and 31 Saker over the course of the day. From the pastures we moved to the arid, stony plain. The moment we all got out the bus, goose-like honking revealed a Tibetan Sandgrouse flying overhead, not only that it then landed just 200m away, joining five others already feeding amongst the fine purple flowers and stony terrain! We spent the next 45 minutes gradually getting closer to them, within 30 metres, though every time we shuffled forward, so did...
they! The occasional other bird flew by, while a pair of Tibetan Plover (a sure-fire split from Lesser Sandplover) were obviously breeding nearby. This enigmatic sandgrouse has become considerably easier since this site was found, rendering the long hike above Er La unnecessary, much to our relief!
After lunch in a truckers town we headed north to Golmud, when the scenery suddenly turned even more arid, with huge, steep, barren mountains dominating either side of us. A stop, venturing off-road led us to some Great Rosefinches but little else before we reached the town of Golmud for dinner and our evening train.

The overnight train south, into Tibet proper (or, to be politically correct, Xizang) was a pleasant and comfortable experience in soft-sleeper, and some of us probably got our longest, and best nights sleep for some time! During the morning, the plateau continued either side of us until we hit Lhasa in the late morning. During the afternoon we paid a visit to the magnificent Potala Palace, immersing ourselves in a tour around the famous building built in the 7th century (though reconstructed continually due to the battles and wars lasting until the 17th century) to see for ourselves the colourful history and magnificent architecture as we strolled, clockwise around the palace. We also visited Jokhang Temple, witnessing the numerous pilgrims prostrating themselves outside, and enjoying a stroll inside the temple and the numerous buddhas on show. The streets were lined with colourful faces and scenes, revealing a side to Tibet beyond the birds which makes this such a special tour. Obviously we couldn’t let our guard completely down in the afternoon and we enjoyed several Tibetan Blackbird around the palace, along with an escaped Pere David’s Laughingthrush, while Salim Ali’s Swift swooped overhead.

We drove into the hills the next morning where we took a winding road that led up to a monastery. A premature stop and scan to find our usual Eurasian Eagle Owl roosting was successful before a later stop for breakfast. The place was crawling with birds and in a short time we’d picked up great views of several Giant Babax and Prince Henri’s Laughingthrushes. In addition, Tibetan Eared Pheasants called from the surrounding hillsides before we eventually spotted a couple above the road, which made us peer down the road to see a whole gaggle of them already crossing the road, including numerous youngsters of various ages. A quick throw of seed (and bread!) had 30 of them at super-close range, which was an absolute delight and highlight enjoying these beautiful birds at such close range, before they continued to feed down slope.

Wandering around the nunnery, further up the hill, we had repeated views of babax and laughingthrushes, while Streaked Rosefinch were numerous and we had magical looks at a couple of male Severtzov’s Tit-warblers at arms reach while Pink-rumped Rosefinch were abundant once more. With the loud noise and work for the upgrading of the nunnery, snowcocks were unfortunately conspicuous by their absence so we spent some time birding the lower slopes, finding the flock of pheasants once more, including one male amusingly calling from the edge of a plank of wood, wobbling either way with each call. After this beautiful morning it was time for another long drive, 300km east, dropping into the deep, pine-glad gorges of East Tibet with little to report but some heavy construction work and for many of us, our first taste of hitting 5000m.
We had a couple of days in East Tibet, our first stop relaxed us as, after some tantalizing fly-overs, we had scope views of a pair of Lord Derby’s Parakeet, our sole reason for visiting this remote area. The scenery was once again stunning, and different to the previous couple of weeks with the deep, warm gorges thick in foliage due to the monsoon winds penetrating northwards from the Bay of Bengal. White-collared Blackbird, Blyth’s Leaf Warbler and Common Rosefinch were common at our first stop, as was Rusty-fronted Bushtit. In the afternoon a couple of stops and a walk along a raging, noisy torrent produced a few birds – these East Tibet forests we’ve always found bizarrely quiet with few birds to show for our efforts, perhaps summer migrants stop short of passing over the Himalaya and stick to the southern slopes, in Arunachal Pradesh? Large-billed Leaf Warbler, Whistler’s Warbler, Chestnut-flanked White-eye, Severtzov’s Tit-warbler and Chinese White-browed Rosefinch were the main birds to be seen before we called it a day.

Breakfast was well chosen on our second day here as no sooner had we arrived, five Lord Derby’s Parakeet flew in, perching directly overhead! During the morning we would see a total of 26, most of which were perched and flying above us giving great scope views including a male crunching through a pine cone. We added a handful of additions to the list, including a bonus pair of Brown Bullfinch. Red-billed Leiothrix, Whistler’s Warbler and Daurian Redstart were also noted. A steamboat lunch was particularly tasteless and amusing, delving into various parts of a chicken, including head adding to our continued ‘cultural experience’!

Birding higher up after lunch produced an excellent Maroon-backed Accentor (I’m sure there are parts of its song only dogs can hear), also Collared Grosbeak and a White-bellied Robin (what was a redstart) for John C, before dipping back into the valley and eventually finding a singing Black-headed Greenfinch. Surprisingly, last years tour found singing Firethroats, so off we went in search of these, only to find a newly constructed, and very robust and impenetrable green fence in our way! After an hour or so walking around it there was absolutely no way through, so we had to give up. However, Prince Henri’s Laughingthrush, Giant Babax and plenty of Black-headed Greenfinch were about, in a very pleasant surrounding, while four Tibetan Eared Pheasant appeared briefly on the distant slope, to conclude our Tibetan experience.

Three flights on our big travel day took us into Xinjiang, and the edge of the Taklimakan Desert, checking-in just shy of midnight at our hotel thanks to a delayed flight and new, much higher-levels of security in the province since our last visit. We had a full day along the northern fringes of the Taklimakan, steering clear of venturing deeper into the desert, after all, Taklimakan literally translates as ‘Place of no return’! In the early morning the vegetation became increasingly sparse, highlighted by a singing Steppe Grey Shrike at breakfast. Overnight rain had meant several small puddles dotted on the road, with Asian Short-toed Larks and Mongolian Finches flitting away as we bumped our way down the road. Predictably, one puddle had attracted a pair of Biddulph’s Ground-jay, more-or-less the reason for us visiting the province, and is endemic to the Taklimakan. This beautifully marked jay returned to the puddle after we stopped and piled out, and was actually a group of four birds which kept returning to pick through the roadside gravel in search of food. With success under the belt, we could continue and enjoy the more vegetated areas around settlements and, in particular the Tarim River. The odd stop before lunch produced another ground-jay, Desert Whitethroat (*minula* is actually restricted to breeding in Xinjiang, and not found elsewhere), several Paddyfield Warbler, a returning flock of 15 Temminck’s Stint, several Stock Dove, Long-legged Buzzard, Booted Eagle, and for the mammal-lovers the much sought-after Tarim Basin Hare.

Lunch was a feast, picking out a Uighur restaurant gave us a wonderful local flavor, and lamb Cornish Pasties! We were able to watch from start to finish as they rolled and baked this treat, along with some wonderfully spiced lamb kebabs. A Black Stork circling overhead reminded us we were here not just for the food!
Our usual afternoon birding spot was well and truly flooded as the banks of the river had flooded over. This meant it would take some plugging away to get our four targets, which we eventually did during the afternoon. Tarim Babbler, usually such a ground skulker became a tree skulker as they duetted continually for over half an hour and another pair further on did likewise. Next, a single Azure Tit finally responded to perch overhead while more babblers showed, as did several Desert Whitethroat, a common bird here.

The flooding had obviously dispersed White-winged Woodpecker and Saxual Sparrow but trying other, drier areas soon led us to a cooperative woodpecker and a flock of over 50 sparrows, mostly comprised of recently fledged youngsters. Unfortunately, our drive back took much longer than expected for two reasons – one, being held up at a Police checkpoint for an hour as they checked and rechecked our documentation and secondly the ridiculously slow speed limit that we made sure we never crossed! The slow drive meant our ground-jay tally for the day hit double figures, which was more appreciated than the check-in at the hotel which once again required a prolonged security check (as it’s a different district to our previous night!).

As we’d mopped up in the desert we drove back towards Korla airport, with a mid-morning to lunch time stop at the huge Bosten Lake. We covered the tiniest of fractions of the vast reedbed (which covers some 100kmsq), but it was absolutely full of birds, despite the stench of toxins that must leak into the water from the various factories and power stations that litter the edges. A real Eurasian feel here, reminding most of the Brits of Norfolk, just on a much, much bigger scale, while our sole non-European representative had what can only be described as a tick-fest! Great Reed, Eurasian Reed and Paddyfield Warblers were all abundant, while a Moustached Warbler was a complete surprise, but showed excellently being just the second record for China (the first was just the previous year). Bearded Reedling were in large gatherings of buff-and-black juveniles and must have numbered hundreds. Little Bittern was conspicuous with one pair in particular returning to their nest every few minutes. A pink from a trackside tamarisk, revealed two Savi’s Warblers skulking. Western Great Egret, Northern House Martin, Black-headed Gulls, Whiskered Tern, hirundo Common Tern, Common Kingfisher and Reed Bunting were noted while a Little Crake laughing from the reedbed tantalized us.

The surrounding bushes and scrub held a surprise male Saxual Sparrow among the large flock of Tree Sparrow and Eurasian Blackbird appeared though the abundance of little trackside nectar flowers were noted for their almost complete absence of pollinators, and the whiff of head-heavy toxins presumably playing an unfortunate part in this. A European Roller on a roadside wire was also much appreciated before it was time for our afternoon flight to Urumqi. Unfortunately, the flight ended up being four hours delayed (with a switch of aircraft) for reasons not immediately apparent, but it meant a very late finish once again!

Our final day of birding switched to the conifer-cloaked mountains of the Tian Shan. Before reaching the mountains, a breakfast stop in the foothill meadows produced several breeding Red-headed Bunting, Pine Bunting, Tawny and Richard’s Pipits, Eurasian Skylark, Turkestan Shrikes, Isabelline Wheatear, Common Whitethroat, the only frustration was the calling Common Quail that managed to cross the track just round the bend, out of sight! The Tian Shan, or ‘Celestial Mountains’ work their way west from Xinjiang well into Kazakhstan and home to several breeding specialties. As we walked up towards the conifer-lined valley a distant rolling trill sounded all too familiar to the European birders – surely it had to be a ‘Gropper’, sure enough a quick bins-scan revealed a Eurasian Grasshopper Warbler churring away on top of a fence post! A nice China tick for James to boot. However, we decided not to dwell too long with this bird and headed for the forest. Grey Marmot, an East Tian Shan and Altai mountains endemics
were sat by their burrows on the edge of the flower-filled meadow, appearing huge and fat compared to their Himalayan counterparts from the Tibetan leg of the tour. Not long after entering the forest we found our first Black-throated Accentor of the day, swiftly followed by a stunning, though agitated male Blue-capped Redstart, and hardly venturing a step further, a Three-toed Woodpecker, a soar miss from Qinghai, more than made up for that here with an imperious, eye-level view on a tree stump. Having cleaned up here it was time for lunch – more kebabs, ‘rock cheese’ (I’m not sure on the real name, but it had both the appearance, and texture of a rock) and butter tea. On the walk down we bumped into a pair of stunning Fire-fronted Serin, another male redstart, Eurasian Blackbird and juvenile Black-throated Accentors, and back at the meadow the ‘Gropper’ put in a fine, prolonged performance at close range. In addition, in-and-around the open areas meena Oriental Turtle Dove, Mistle Thrush, Linnet, Greenish and Hume’s Leaf Warblers, Eurasian Treecreeper, Red Crossbill, Spotted Nutcrackers aplenty and an abundance of scarlet-red Common Rosefinches and Black Kites. Changing habitat in the afternoon was required for our final main target here – Eversmann’s Redstart. Always a tricky bird, we tracked down a territorial female, though seemingly lacking a mate, with a juvenile appearing later in the afternoon. Returning to Urumqi, we had one final bird up our sleeve, visiting a lake on the outskirts of the city. Though the lake itself appeared in great condition, and even fenced to preserve it, the surroundings were completely dominated by cranes, high-rise buildings, factories and soon-to-be factories and high-rise. Fortunately, the lake can still lay claim to be the only breeding locality for White-headed Duck in China, with a handful clinging on here, in which we found an actively feeding male feeding off the near shoreline, along with large numbers of Black-necked Grebe. However, the final new bird of the tour wasn’t to be the duck, but House Sparrow, on the walk back to the vehicle. House Sparrow and housing construction work is not what we envisaged to be the last impressions of the Tibetan Plateau and Xinjiang but after 19 previous days of absolutely stunning scenery, birds, mammals and food we had been spoilt.

For information regarding our tours to the Tibetan Plateau and Xinjiang, or other Chinese destinations, please click here. Alternatively please contact us via email or telephone us +441332 516254 regarding organising a custom tour.

**Bird-of-the-tour**

1. Przewalski’s Pinktail  
2. Tibetan Sandgrouse  
3. Szechenyi’s Monal Partridge  
4. Przewalski’s Redstart  
5= Kozlov’s Bunting  
5= Severtzov’s Tit-warbler

**Xinjiang extension**

1. Biddulph’s Ground-jay  
2= Three-toed Woodpecker  
2= Blue-capped Redstart  
4= Red-headed Bunting  
4= Eurasian Grasshopper Warbler

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*Gansu Leaf Warbler and Chinese Leaf Warbler*
Crested Tit-warbler and Siberian Rubythroat

‘Gansu Bluetail’ and Chinese White-browed Rosefinch

Hume’s Short-toed Lark and White-winged Grosbeak
Alpine Leaf Warbler and Smoky Warbler

Kiang and Blue Sheep

Pink-rumped Rosefinch (male and female)
Tibetan Plover and Blood Pheasant

Woolly Hare and Tibetan Gazelle

Black-winged Snowfinch (juv) and Ibisbill
Pale Rosefinch and Blanford’s Snowfinch © John Clark

Severtzov’s Tit-warbler and Ground Tit

Prince Henri’s Laughingthrush and Tibetan Blackbird
Giant Babax and Streaked Rosefinch

Black-headed Greenfinch and sign on train!

Azure Tit and Maroon-backed Accentor
Brown Bullfinch and Chinese White-browed Rosefinch

Tarim Babbler and Eversmann’s Redstart

Linnet and Eurasian Blackbird
Kanda Shan (Qinghai), Tibetan Eared Pheasants (Tibet) and Tian Shan (Xinjiang)
### Systematic List

#### ANSERIFORMES: Anatidae
- **Greylag Goose** (*Anser anser*)
- **Bar-headed Goose** (*Anser indicus*)
- **Ruddy Shelduck** (*Tadorna ferruginea*)
- **Common Shelduck** (*Tadorna tadorna*)
- **Gadwall** (*Anas strepera*)
- **Mallard** (*Anas platyrhynchos*)
- **Red-crested Pochard** (*Netta rufina*)
- **Common Pochard** (*Aythya ferina*)
- **Ferruginous Pochard** (*Aythya nyroca*)
- **Goosander** (*Mergus merganser*)
- **White-headed Duck** (*Oxyura leucocephala*)

#### GALLIFORMES: Phasianidae
- **Szechenyi's Monal Partridge** (*Tetraophasis szechenyii*)
- **Tibetan Snowcock** (*Tetraogallus tibetanus*)
- **Common Quail** (*Coturnix coturnix*)
- **Przevalski's Partridge** (*Alectoris magna*)
- **Daurian Partridge** (*Perdix daurica*)
- **Tibetan Partridge** (*Perdix hodgsoniae*)
- **Blood Pheasant** (*Ithaginis cruentus geoffroyi*)
- **White Eared Pheasant** (*Crossoptilon crossoptilon*)
- **Tibetan Eared Pheasant** (*Crossoptilon harmani*)
- **Common Pheasant** (*Phasianus colchicus suehschanensis*)

#### PODICIPEDIFORMES: Podicipedidae
- **Great Crested Grebe** (*Podiceps cristatus*)
- **Black-necked Grebe** (*Podiceps nigricollis*)

#### COLUMBIFORMES: Columbidae
- **Hill Pigeon** (*Columba rupestris*)
- **Snow Pigeon** (*Columba leuconota*)
- **Speckled Wood Pigeon** (*Columba hodgsonii*)
- **Stock Dove** (*Columba oenas yarkandensis*)
- **Eurasian Collared Dove** (*Streptopelia decaocto*)
- **Oriental Turtle Dove** (*Streptopelia orientalis orientalis*)
- **Streptopelia orientalis meena**

#### CUCULIFORMES: Cuculidae
- **Common Cuckoo** (*Cuculus canorus*)

#### APODIFORMES: Apodidae
- **Common Swift** (*Apus apus pekinensis*)
- **Salim Ali's Swift** (*Apus salimali*)
- **Blyth's Swift** (*Apus leuconyx*)

#### GRUIFORMES: Gruidae
- **Black-necked Crane** (*Grus nigricollis*)
GRUIFORMES: Rallidae
Little Crake  Porzana parva  heard only
Common Moorhen Gallinula chloropus
Eurasian Coot Fulica atra

CHARADRIIFORMES: Ibidorhynchidae
Ibisbill Ibidorhyncha struthersii

CHARADRIIFORMES: Recurvirostridae
Black-winged Stilt Himantopus himantopus

CHARADRIIFORMES: Charadriidae
Lesser Sandplover (Tibetan Plover) Charadrius [mongolus] atrifrons

CHARADRIIFORMES: Scolopacidae
Common Redshank Tringa totanus
Common Greenshank Tringa nebularia heard only
Green Sandpiper Tringa ochropus
Wood Sandpiper Tringa glareola
Common Sandpiper Actitis hypoleucus
* Temminck's Stint Calidris temminckii

CHARADRIIFORMES: Laridae
* Black-headed Gull Larus ridibundus
Brown-headed Gull Larus brunnicephalus
Common Tern Sterna hirundo tibetana
* Sterna hirundo hirundo
* Whiskered Tern Chlidonias hybridus

PTEROCLIDIFORMES: Pteroclidae
Tibetan Sandgrouse Syrrhaptes tibetanus
Pallas's Sandgrouse Syrrhaptes paradoxus

Pelecaniformes: Phalacrocoracidae
Great Cormorant Phalacrocorax carbo

PELECANIFORMES: Ciconiidae
* Black Stork Ciconia nigra

CICONIIFORMES: Ardeidae
Grey Heron Ardea cinerea
* Western Great Egret Ardea alba alba
Cattle Egret Ardea ibis coromandus
* Little Bittern Ixobrychus minutus

ACCIPITRIFORMES: Accipitridae
Black Kite Milvus milgrans lineatus
Lammergeier Gypaetus barbatus
Himalayan Griffon Gyps himalayensis
Eurasian Sparrowhawk Accipiter nisus
Eurasian Buzzard Buteo [buteo] burmanicus
Upland Buzzard * Buteo hemilasius
Long-legged Buzzard * Buteo rufinus
Golden Eagle Aquila chrysaetos
Booted Eagle Aquila pennata
Short-toed Snake Eagle Circaetus gallicus

**STRIGIFORMES: Strigidae**
Little Owl Athene noctua inpasta
Eurasian Eagle Owl Bubo bubo tibetanus

**CORACIIFORMES: Coraciidae**
* European Roller Coracias garrulus

**CORACIIFORMES: Alcedinidae**
* Common Kingfisher Alcedo atthis atthis

**CORACIIFORMES: Upupidae**
Eurasian Hoopoe Upupa epops

**PICIFORMES: Picidae**
Great Spotted Woodpecker Dendrocopos major stresemanni
* White-winged Woodpecker Dendrocopos leucopterus
* Eurasian Three-toed Woodpecker Picoides tridactylus tianschanicus
Black Woodpecker Dryocopus martius

**FALCONIFORMES: Falconidae**
Eurasian Kestrel Falco tinnunculus
Eurasian Hobby Falco subbuteo
Saker Falcon Falco cherrug milvipes

**PSITTACIFORMES: Psittacidae**
Lord Derby's Parakeet Psittacula derbiana

**PASSERIFORMES: Campephagidae**
Long-tailed Minivet Pericrocotus ethologus

**PASSERIFORMES: Laniidae**
Isabelline / Daurian Shrike Lanius isabellinus tsaidamenis
* Lanius isabellinus arenarius
* Turkestan Shrike Lanius [isabellinus] phoenicuroides
Grey-backed Shrike Lanius tephronotus
Tibetan Grey Shrike Lanius [sphenocercus] giganteus
* Steppe Grey Shrike Lanius pallidirostris

**PASSERIFORMES: Corvidae**
Eurasian Jay Garrulus glandarius kansuensis heard only
Azure-winged Magpie Cyanopica cyanus kansuensis
Eurasian Magpie Pica pica bottanensis
Pica pica sericea
* Pica pica bactriana
* Biddulph's Ground Jay Podoces biddulphi
Henderson's Ground Jay
Podoces hendersoni

Spotted Nutcracker
Nucifraga caryocatactes macella

* Nucifraga caryocatactes rothschildi

Red-billed Chough
Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax himalayanus

Yellow-billed Chough
Actinodura cyanouroptera

Daurian Jackdaw
Corvus dauricus insolens

Carrion Crow
Corvus [corone] orientalis

Large-billed Crow
Corvus japonensis tibetosinensis

Common Raven
Corvus corax tibetanus

**PASSERIFORMES: Paridae**

Willow Tit
Poecile montanus affinis

Sichuan Tit
Poecile [songar] weigoldei

White-browed Tit
Poecile superciliosa

Rufous-vented Tit
Periparus rubidiventris

* Azure Tit
Cyanistes cyanus

* Coal Tit
Parus ater rufipectus

Grey-crested Tit
Lophophanes dichrous

Japanese Tit
Parus minor minor

* Great Tit
Parus major kapustini

Ground Tit
Pseudopodoces humilis

**PASSERIFORMES: Panuridae**

Bearded Reedling
Panurus biarmicus russicus

**PASSERIFORMES: Alaudidae**

Tibetan Lark
Melanocorypha maxima

Mongolian Lark
Melanocorypha mongolica

Hume's Short-toed Lark
Calandrella acutirostris tibetana

Asian Short-toed Lark
Calandrella cheleensis kukunorensis

* Calandrella cheleensis seebohmi

Crested Lark
Galerida cristata

Oriental Skylark
Alauda gulgula

* Eurasian Skylark
Alauda arvensis dulcivox

Horned Lark
Eremophila alpestris khamensis

**PASSERIFORMES: Hirundinidae**

Pale Martin
Riparia diluta tibetana

* Riparia diluta gavrilovi

Eurasian Crag Martin
Ptyonoprogne rupestris

Barn Swallow
Hirundo rustica

Red-rumped Swallow
Cecropis daurica daurica

Asian House Martin
Delichon dasypus cashmeriense

* Northern House Martin
Delichon urbicum urbicum

**PASSERIFORMES: Pycnonotidae**

Himalayan Black Bulbul
Hypsipetes leucocephalus leucothorax

**PASSERIFORMES: Leiothrichidae**

Elliot's Laughingthrush
Garrulax elliotii
Prince Henri’s Laughingthrush  
White-browed Laughingthrush  
Kozlov’s Babax  
Giant Babax  
Giant Laughingthrush  
Pere David’s Laughingthrush  
Red-billed Leiothrix

**Garrulax henrici**  
**Garrulax sannio**  
**Ianthocincla koslowi**  
**Ianthocincla waddelli**  
**Ianthocincla maximus**  
**Pterorhinus davidii**  
**Leiothrix lutea**

**PASSERIFORMES: Sylviidae**

Chinese Fulvetta  
‘Margelan’ Lesser Whitethroat  
* Desert Whitethroat  
* Common Whitethroat  
* Tarim Babbler

**Fulvetta striaticollis**  
**Sylvia minula margelanica**  
**Sylvia minula**  
**Sylvia communis rubicola**  
**Rhophophilus [pekinensis] albosupercilius**

**PASSERIFORMES: Zosteropidae**

Chestnut-flanked White-eye

**Zosterops erythropleurus**

**PASSERIFORMES: Regulidae**

Goldcrest

**Regulus regulus yunnanensis**

**PASSERIFORMES: Troglydidae**

Eurasian Wren

**Troglydotes troglodytes szetschuanus**

**PASSERIFORMES: Phylloscopidae**

Smoky Warbler  
Alpine Leaf Warbler  
Yellow-streaked Warbler  
Buff-barred Warbler  
Gansu Leaf Warbler  
Sichuan Leaf Warbler  
Chinese Leaf Warbler  
Hume’s Leaf Warbler  
* Greenish Warbler  
* Large-billed Leaf Warbler  
Blyth’s Leaf Warbler  
Whistler’s Warbler

**Phylloscopus fulgiventer weigoldi**  
**Phylloscopus occisinensis**  
**Phylloscopus armandii armandii**  
**Phylloscopus pulcher pulcher**  
**Phylloscopus kansuensis**  
**Phylloscopus [chloronotus] forresti**  
**Phylloscopus yunnanensis**  
**Phylloscopus humei mandelli**  
**Phylloscopus humei humei**  
**Phylloscopus trochiloides trochiloides**  
**Phylloscopus trochiloides obscuratus**  
**Phylloscopus trochiloides viridianus**  
**Phylloscopus magnirostris**  
**Phylloscopus reguloides**  
**Seicercus whistleri**

**PASSERIFORMES: Aegithalidae**

Rusty-fronted Bushtit  
Severtzov’s Tit Warbler  
Crested Tit Warbler

**Aegithalos iouschistos**  
**Leptopoecile sophiae obscura**  
**Leptopoecile elegans**

**PASSERIFORMES: Acrocephalidae**

* Great Reed Warbler  
* Eurasian Reed Warbler  
* Paddyfield Warbler

**Acrocephalus arundinaceus**  
**Acrocephalus scirpaceus fuscus**  
**Acrocephalus agricola**
* Moustached Warbler  
  * Acrocephalus melanopogon

**PASSERIFORMES: Locustellidae**

* Savi's Warbler  
  * Locustella luscinioides

* Common Grasshopper Warbler  
  * Locustella naevia

**PASSERIFORMES: Sittidae**

* Eurasian Nuthatch  
  * Sitta europaea seorsa

* Chinese Nuthatch  
  * Sitta villosa bangsi

* Przevalski's Nuthatch  
  * Sitta przewalskii

**PASSERIFORMES: Tichodromidae**

Wallcreeper  
  * Tichodroma muraria

**PASSERIFORMES: Certhiidae**

* Eurasian Treecreeper  
  * Certhia familiaris tianschanica

**PASSERIFORMES: Sturnidae**

* Eurasian Starling  
  * Sturnus vulgaris

**PASSERIFORMES: Turdidae**

White-collared Blackbird  
  * Turdus albocinctus

Tibetan Blackbird  
  * Turdus maximus

Chestnut Thrush  
  * Turdus rubrocanus gouldi

Kessler's Thrush  
  * Turdus kessleri

Chinese Thrush  
  * Turdus mupinensis

* Eurasian Blackbird  
  * Turdus merula intermedius

* Mistle Thrush  
  * Turdus viscivorus

**PASSERIFORMES: Muscicapidae**

Slaty-backed Flycatcher  
  * Ficedula hodgsonii

Slaty-blue Flycatcher  
  * Ficedula tricolor minuta

Siberian Rubythroat  
  * Calliope calliope

Chinese Rubythroat  
  * Calliope pectoralis tschebaewi

White-bellied Robin  
  * Luscinia phaenicuroides

'Gansu' Siberian Bluetail  
  * Tarsiger cyanurus albocoeeruleus

Himalayan Bluetail  
  * Tarsiger rufilatus rufilatus

Przevalski's Redstart  
  * Phoenicurus alaschanicus

Black Redstart  
  * Phoenicurus ochrurus rufiventris

Hodgson's Redstart  
  * Phoenicurus hodgsoni

White-throated Redstart  
  * Phoenicurus schisticeps

Daurian Redstart  
  * Phoenicurus auroreus

Güldenstädt's Redstart  
  * Phoenicurus erythrogaster

Blue-fronted Redstart  
  * Phoenicurus frontalis

White-capped Redstart  
  * Phoenicurus leucocephalus

Plumbeous Redstart  
  * Phoenicurus fuliginosus

* Blue-capped Redstart  
  * Phoenicurus caeruleocephala

* Eversmann's Redstart  
  * Phoenicurus erythronotus

Siberian Stonechat  
  * Saxicola maura przewalskii

Isabelline Wheatear  
  * Oenanthe isabellina

Pied Wheatear  
  * Oenanthe pleschanka
Desert Wheatear  
Northern Wheatear  
Rufous-tailed Rock-thrush  
Blue Whistling-thrush

**PASSERIFORMES: Cinclidae**
White-throated Dipper  

**PASSERIFORMES: Nectariniidae**
Mrs Gould's Sunbird  

**PASSERIFORMES: Passeridae**
Russet Sparrow  
Eurasian Tree Sparrow  
House Sparrow  
* Saxual Sparrow  
Rock Sparrow  
Henri’s Snowfinch  
Black-winged Snowfinch  
Blanford’s Snowfinch  
White-rumped Snowfinch  
Père David’s Snowfinch  
Rufous-necked Snowfinch

**PASSERIFORMES: Prunellidae**
Robin Accentor  
Rufous-breasted Accentor  
Brown Accentor  
* Black-throated Accentor  
Maroon-backed Accentor

**PASSERIFORMES: Motacillidae**
[Himalayan] White Wagtail  
[Amur] White Wagtail  
* [Masked] White Wagtail  
Citrine Wagtail  
Grey Wagtail  
Richard’s Pipit  
Tawny Pipit  
Olive-backed Pipit  
Rosy Pipit

**PASSERIFORMES: Urocynchramidae**
Przevalski’s Pinktail  

**PASSERIFORMES: Fringillidae**
Plain Mountain Finch  
Brandt’s Mountain Finch  
Mongolian Finch  
Common Rosefinch  
Himalayan Beautiful Rosefinch
Pink-rumped Rosefinch  
Carpodacus eos  
Pale Rosefinch  
Carpodacus stoliczkae beicki  
Chinese White-browed Rosefinch  
Carpodacus dubius  
Streaked Rosefinch  
Carpodacus rubricilloides  
Great Rosefinch  
Carpodacus rubicilla severtzovi  
Red-fronted Rosefinch  
Carpodacus puniceus  
Roborovski's Rosefinch  
Carpodacus roborowskii  
Red Crossbill  
Loxia curvirostra himalayensis  
*  
Oriental Greenfinch  
Carduelis sinica  
Black-headed Greenfinch  
Carduelis ambigua  
*  
Twite  
Carduelis flavirostris miniakensis  
*  
Fire-fronted Serin  
Serinus pusillus  
Brown Bullfinch  
Pyrrhula nipalensis  
Grey-headed Bullfinch  
Pyrrhula erythaca  
Collared Grosbeak  
Mycerobas affinis  
White-winged Grosbeak  
Mycerobas carnipes

**PASSERIFORMES: Emberizidae**

Kozlov's Bunting  
Emberiza koslowi  
Pine Bunting  
Emberiza leucocephalos fronto  
*  
Godlewski's Bunting  
Emberiza godlewskii khamensis  
*  
Red-headed Bunting  
Emberiza bruniceps  
Meadow Bunting  
Emberiza cioides  
*  
Reed Bunting  
Emberiza schoeniclus pyrrhuloides

**MAMMALS**

*  
Grey Marmot  
Marmota baibacina  
Himalayan Marmot  
Marmota himalayana  
Alashan Ground Squirrel  
Spermophilus alashanicus  
Siberian Chipmunk  
Tamias sibiricus  
Plateau Pika  
Ochotona curzoniae  
Glover's Pika  
Ochotona groveri  
Long-eared Pika  
Ochotona macrotis  
*  
Tarim Basin Hare  
Lepus yarkandi  
Woolly Hare  
Lepus oioostolus  
Tibetan Fox  
Vulpes ferrilata  
Red Fox  
Vulpes vulpes  
Wolf  
Canis lapes  
Kiang  
Equus hemionus  
Red Deer / Wapiti  
Cervus elaphus  
White-lipped Deer  
Cervus albirostris  
Tibetan Gazelle  
Procapra picticaudata  
Przewalski's Gazelle  
Procapra przewalskii  
Goitered Gazelle  
Gazella subgutturosa  
Tibetan Antelope  
Pantholops hadgsonii  
Blue Sheep  
Pseudois nayaur

* Xinjiang extension only
255 species recorded including six heard only

For information regarding our tours to the Tibetan Plateau and Xinjiang, or other Chinese destinations, please click [here](#). Alternatively please contact us via [email](#) or telephone us [+441332 516254](#) regarding organising a custom tour.