

Wild China – Sichuan's Birds & Mammals

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Depart London.
Day 2	Arrive Chengdu, transfer to Dujiangyan.
Day 3/5	Labahe Nature Reserve.
Day 6/7	Wolong NNR & Balang Mountain.
Day 8/10	Ruogai & Baxi.
Day 11	Pingwu.
Day 12/14	Tangjiahe Nature Reserve.
Day 15	Afternoon transfer to Chengdu.
Day 16	Fly London.

Departs

October, November & December

Dates & Prices

See website (tour code CHN05) or the current Naturetrek brochure.

Grading

Grade B. Slow paced walks, but sometimes over rough ground. Lots of spotlighting & some long travel days.

Focus

Birds & Mammals.

Highlights:

- Excellent chance of Red Panda in the forests of Labahe.
- Search for Chinese Mountain, Pallas's & Leopard Cat, plus Tibetan Fox, Chinese Serow & Sichuan Takin.
- Spectacular mountain scenery.
- Early morning & evening spotlighting walks & drives.
- 41 species of mammal recorded on past tours, plus over 200 species of bird.
- Birds including Black-necked Crane, White-browed Tit Warbler, Godlewski's Bunting & Golden Pheasant.
- Led by expert naturalist guides



From the top: Red Pandas, White-browed Tit-Warbler & Pallas' Cat.
Images courtesy of S Francis & T Melling.



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Introduction

With its spectacular mountain forests and high alpine grassland, Sichuan is the very essence of 'Wild China'. The mammals and birds of this diverse province are a rare mix of the temperate and sub-tropical, for Sichuan sits in a biological transition zone where the wildlife of the vast Palearctic realm merges with the Indomalayan fauna and flora to the south. Indeed, this is one the most diverse regions of the Palearctic and is home to a superb variety of exciting and endemic wildlife.



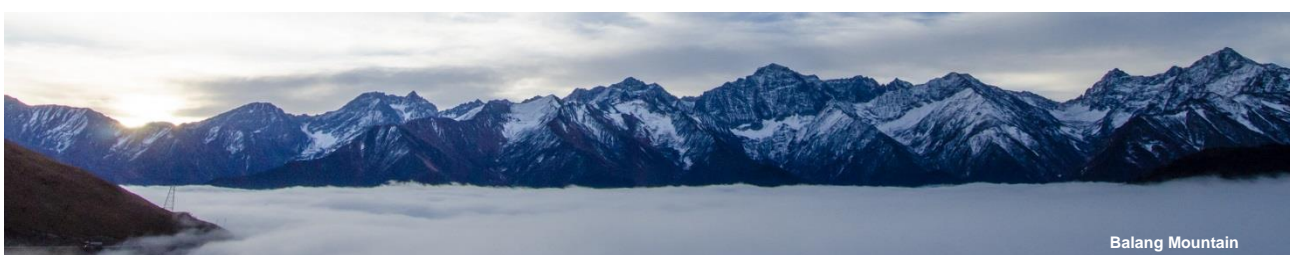
This exciting tour begins with a flight to Chengdu from where we journey south to Labahe Forest Reserve in search of one of China's most endearing animals, the Red Panda. Here, amongst the alpine conifers and bamboo understory, we have an excellent chance of finding this iconic species gorging on berries before the onset of the winter snow. Other mammals of note include Red and White Giant Flying Squirrel (the largest in the world), Tibetan Macaque and Sambar Deer, alongside such beautiful birds as Red-billed Blue Magpie and, for the fortunate, perhaps even the elusive Temminck's Tragopan.



Continuing our journey yet deeper in to the Hengduan Mountains, we travel through the centre of Wolong, China's largest Giant Panda reserve. Whilst this enigmatic species is largely confined to the inaccessible upper slopes of the mountains and very unlikely to be observed, we hope to see an exciting variety of other species including White-eared Pheasant, Guldens's Redstart and Himalayan Blue Sheep. Moving on, we will climb onto the Ruogai Grasslands on the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plateau – part of the ancient

kingdom of Kham. Here, amongst this spectacular landscape, we shall search for Tibetan Wolf, Tibetan Fox, Pallas's Cat, Chinese Mountain Cat, Tibetan Gazelle, Black-necked Crane, Lammergeyer and Hume's Ground-tit. The high alpine forests that borders this area provide habitat for endemics such as Sichuan Jay, Blue-eared Pheasant, Sukatchev's Laughingthrush and Chinese Grouse.

We conclude our tour in Tangjiahe, a world-renowned mammal-watching hotspot, where we will search for such mammals as Golden Takin, Chinese Serow, Chinese Goral, Tufted Deer, Hog-nosed Badger, Chinese Leopard Cat, Himalayan Palm Civet and Malayan Porcupine, with the chance of other more elusive rarities including Golden Snub-nosed Monkey, Asian Black Bear, Forest Musk Deer and Chinese Ferret Badger. The birdlife is equally diverse and includes Tawny Fish Owl, White-crowned Forktail and the beautiful Golden Pheasant.



Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Depart London

We depart London Heathrow's Airport on an overnight flight to Hong Kong.

Day 2

Arrive Chengdu & transfer Dujiangyan

Following a change of aircraft in Hong Kong we complete our journey to Chengdu arriving in the mid-afternoon. After meeting our local guide we quickly leave the city behind as we travel south-west for approximately 1.5 hours to Dujiangyan, where we overnight in a comfortable hotel close to the Qingcheng Mountains. If time allows, we should have a good chance of locating Grey-winged Blackbirds and Great Barbets nearby, with perhaps the added bonus of Collared Scops Owl, Oriental Scops Owl and Northern Boobook as darkness falls.

Day 3 - 5

Labahe Nature Reserve

After a good night's sleep we complete the short journey to Labahe Nature Reserve, where we check in to our hotel located in the heart of the reserve for a 3-night stay.

Labahe Nature Reserve lies in an area of rugged montane habitat, approximately 200 kilometres south-west of Chengdu, in the Hengduan mountain range. Here, amongst the mixed alpine forests and dense bamboo understory, our principal focus will be searching for the elusive Red



Panda. Like their larger namesake, for much of the year Red Pandas feed primarily on bamboo, but during the autumn months, they will often climb to the top of broadleaved trees to feed on berries, taking advantage of this rich food supply before the onset of the winter snow. Typically found between 2,200 and 4,800 metres, Red Pandas are endemic to the temperate forests of the Himalayas, ranging from the foothills of western Nepal to China's Qinling Mountains in the east. Despite its large range, the population is fragmented, rather than continuous, and the total population is estimated to be less than 10,000 mature individuals, leading the IUCN to classify it as 'Endangered'. Red Pandas are the only living species of the genus *Ailurus*. Although previously placed within the raccoon and bear families, recent genetic analysis provides strong support for its taxonomic classification in its own family of *Ailuridae* (which is part of the superfamily *Musteloidea*) and dispelling any previous misconceptions that it is related to the Giant Panda.

Labahe Nature Reserve is widely regarded as one of the best places in the world to view Red Pandas, but even at this time of the year when they are at their most conspicuous and most active during daylight hours, it will still



require a good amount of hard work and patience to find our quarry. As we explore the reserve through a mix of walks and drives, we will likely encounter a variety of other mammals and birds. Troops of Tibetan Macaques are a common sight, whilst Red and White Giant Flying Squirrels, measuring up to a metre in length and able to glide over 20 metres, can be found on steep vegetated cliffs. The forests and stream edges provide good habitat for such birds as Little Forktail, Golden-breasted Fulvetta, Chestnut-vented Nuthatch, Chestnut, Dusky and

Naumann's Thrushes, plus a variety of woodpeckers, including Grey-capped Pygmy, Bay, Darjeeling and Crimson-breasted Woodpeckers. Mixed flocks of parrotbills are also not uncommon and can include Three-toed, Fulvous and Great.

Nightly spotlight forays have the potential to reveal further species, including Sambar Deer, Chinese Serow, Chinese Leopard Cat, Complex-toothed Flying Squirrel and Hog Badger.

Day 6

Wolong

Today we leave Labahe and travel to Wolong, a distance of around 280 kilometres that will likely take much of the day. We will stop frequently enroute, however, to admire the scenery and look for a variety of interesting birds aiming to arrive at our hotel in the later afternoon. This will be our base for the next 2 nights of the tour.

Day 7

Wolong National Nature Reserve & Balang Mountain

Wolong National Nature Reserve is at the core of Sichuan's Giant Panda sanctuaries and is listed as a World Natural Heritage Site. Designated in 1963, Wolong is the first, largest and perhaps best known of China's Giant Panda reserves. Although an encounter with a Giant Panda is extremely unlikely due to their preference to reside in the most inaccessible areas of the forests, there is a fantastic array of other wildlife to enjoy and it is often cited as 'Bio-gene Bank', due to the wide variety of rare and endangered animals and plants present.

During our time in the area we focus our attention on the alpine forest and grasslands of Balang Mountain. We will set out early today to make the most of our time here. On the lower slopes, amongst the mixed forests and up the treeline we will be hoping to encounter one or two of the resident (but very elusive) gamebirds including White-eared Pheasant, Koklass Pheasant, Blood Pheasant and Chestnut-throated Partridge. Smaller birds may include Giant Laughingthrush, Chinese White-browed Rosefinch, Pink-rumped Rosefinch, Dark-breasted Rosefinch,



Common Rosefinch, Sichuan Tit and White-browed Tit Warbler. As we gain altitude, following a steep winding road that takes up to a rocky pass at 4,500 metres the terrain begins to open out, first through Yak pasture and eventually into a harsh alpine habitat of rocky ridges and scree. Here we will look for Tibetan Snowcock, Snow Partridge, Grandala, Alpine Accentor, Brandt's and Plain Mountain Finches and Red-fronted Rosefinch, with a chance of passing Lammergeyers and Himalayan Griffons. Blue Sheep can often be found in the area and although

extremely rare, in recent years Snow Leopards have even been captured on camera traps and are believed to be making a comeback. Birding at such high altitude is always a challenge and we must keep our fingers crossed for clear skies!

Day 8

Ruoergai

We next head north to the vast rolling grasslands and marshes of Ruoergai that lie on the eastern edge of the vast Tibetan Plateau, a wonderfully scenic drive of 430 kilometres that will take much of the day. Arriving at our hotel in the late afternoon or early evening we will check in for a 3-night stay.

Day 9 - 10

Ruoergai & Baxi



Attracted by the abundance of Plateau (Black-lipped) Pika that inhabit the high alpine grasslands at 3,500 metres, Ruoergai now has a reputation for being one of the best places in the world for seeing both Pallas's and Chinese Mountain Cats, alongside good numbers of Tibetan Fox and, with luck, Tibetan Wolf. Tibetan Gazelle are also likely.

This vast montane grassland and marshland is home to an unique avian ecosystem and during our time here we hope to find such Tibetan specialties as Black-necked Crane, Hume's Ground Tit, White-rumped and Rufous-necked Snowfinches, Przevalski's Finch, Tibetan Lark and Tibetan Grey Shrike. Other birds to look out for include Robin Accentor, Godlewski's Bunting, Przewalski's Nuthatch and Snowy-cheeked Laughingthrush. The large colonies of Plateau Pika also provide an important food source for an array of raptors that include Saker Falcon, Upland Buzzard, Eurasian Eagle Owl, Steppe Eagle and Black-eared Kite.

At nearby Baxi we will visit an area of upland forest to look for a range of ungulates that could include Chinese (White-maned) Serow, Siberian Roe Deer, Tufted Deer, Sika Deer and Thomas's Pika. Spotlighting after dinner may yield Mountain Cat, Asian Badger and Woolly Hare.



Day 11

Pingwu

Today we have another long drive to complete, this time of approximately 300 kilometres to the town of Pingwu. This journey will take us over a 3,800 metre pass and through yet more spectacular mountain scenery, home to such birds as Himalayan Griffon, Lammergeier, Grandala, Guldenstadt's Redstart and Red-billed Chough.

Day 12 - 14

Tangjiahe Nature Reserve

This morning we will explore the forests around the town of Pingwu. A winding 10 kilometre road climbs a forested hill which overlooks the town and neighbouring mountains. Here we will look for such species as Spot-breasted Parrotbill, Sooty Tit, Mountain Bulbul, Spectacled Fulvetta and Slaty Bunting. There will also be the

opportunity to visit the Bao'en Temple, an unusually well preserved fifteenth century monastery which is located nearby.

After lunch we will complete the drive to the Tangjiahe Nature Reserve for a 3-night stay. Established in 1978, Tangjiahe occupies an area of approximately 40,000 hectares and provides some of the best mammal viewing in China. According to a recent census, the park is home to over 430 different species of vertebrates and close to 2,500 species of plant, including a large number of state-level and internationally protected species. Although seldom seen, the park is believed to have a population of 60 Giant Panda, as well as over 1,200 Sichuan Takin and in excess of 1,000 Golden Snub-nosed Monkeys. From an avian perspective, over 260 species have been recorded, accounting for 41% of the total in Sichuan province.



Our time in Tangjiahe will be split between a mix of early morning and late afternoon/evening drives, principally searching for mammals and daytime forays in to the forest on foot, exploring the many trails on offer in search of birds. We have an excellent chance of finding the extraordinary Sichuan Takin during our stay here, alongside a fabulous variety of other mammal species, including Reeve's Muntjac, Hog-nosed Badger, Chinese Ferret Badger, Leopard Cat and Masked Palm Civet, with the possibility of such rarities as Asian Black Bear and Forest Musk Deer. Birding in

Tangjiahe can be very exciting, with possible highlights including Tawny Fish Owl, Golden Pheasant, White-crowned Forktail, Sooty Bushtit, Red-billed Leothrix, Himalayan Bluetail, David's Fulvetta, Slaty Bunting and Crested Kingfisher.

Day 15

Chengdu

After a final morning in the reserve, we will begin the 300 kilometre drive back to Chengdu, where we will overnight in a comfortable hotel, transferring to the airport the following morning after an action-packed tour.

Day 16

Fly London

Departing Chengdu mid-morning, we expect to arrive in London later that evening (via a change of aircraft in Hong Kong).

Accommodation & Food

Throughout the tour we will be staying in simple, but comfortable, tourist hotels with private facilities. All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday.

Extra expenses

The cost of the holiday does not include drinks, tips, Chinese entry visa, locally paid airport taxes and all items of a personal nature.

Tour Focus & Grading

This tour is a dedicated mammal and bird watching holiday that will entail long hours in the field and, at times, demand a great deal of patience. It includes several long travel days and we will often involve time at high altitude. Whilst we have allowed several nights at each of the key locations, this holiday will be quite demanding and participants should be prepared for an action-packed itinerary, with plenty of spotlighting walks/drives after dinner and sometimes pre-dawn too. On the travel days, we will be accompanied by an expert naturalist at all times, who will be on hand to point out any wildlife of interest en-route and will endeavour to provide comfort breaks and opportunities to 'stretch your legs' where possible.

Weather

Late October into November typically sees the end of autumn and the beginning of winter in Sichuan, with average daily temperatures hovering around 12 degrees Celsius. However, at higher altitude it will be much colder than this (below zero early in the morning and late in the afternoon) and we may well encounter some snow from time to time. Warm, wind-proof clothing, with plenty of layers will be important, particularly during our time in Ruogai and Wolong. On the plus side, historically the cooler conditions can aid mammal sightings, particularly with Red Panda's in Labahe and Tibetan Wolves on the plateau.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to China. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website: www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/china or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.

Images courtesy of S Frances and T Melling.