

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	Labah Nature Reserve.
Day 6/7	Chuanzhusi.
Day 8/10	Langmusi & Ruogai.
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 & 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 & Tibetan Fox
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. This is one the most diverse regions of the Palearctic and is home to a superb variety of sought-after and endemic wildlife. On this exciting tour we will travel from the moss-draped cloud forests of Labahe, home of the endearing Red Panda, to the high grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau over which Tibetan Foxes roam. The birdlife is also fascinating and this wonderful mix of mammals, birds and other wildlife is set against some of the most dramatic landscapes in all of Asia.

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 Chengdu.

Day 2

Arrive Chengdu & transfer Dujiangyan

We are due to arrive into Chengdu around 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



Tibetan Macaque

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



Labahe

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

Chuanzhusi

Today we leave Labahe and travel to Chuanzhusi, in Songpan County, a long journey that will take us most of the day to complete. In the not so distant past this drive – which cuts through spectacular mountain scenery – would have taken over two days, but today half of the route is now by motorway, made even quicker by an impressive set of tunnels. Chuanzhusi will be our base for the next two nights of the tour.

Day 7

Chuanzhusi

Chuanzhusi is a modern town that also boasts a bullet train and airport connection, lying close to Jiuzhaigou and Huanglong National Parks. It sits adjacent to the eastern edge of the Tibetan Plate and offers easy access to a range of wildlife-rich upland habitats, home to an exciting suite of birds and mammals.



We will focus our attention on the old road to Huanglong National Park which crosses a 4,000-metre pass and offers access to a range of high-altitude birds including Tibetan Snowcock and Gldenstdt's Redstart. The extensive mixed forest leading up are home to both Blue Eared and Blood Pheasants, along with the delightful Crested and White-browed Tit-warblers and the range-restricted Snowy-cheeked Laughingthrush. Commonly-seen mammals include Siberian Roe Deer and Woolly Hare, although Yellow-throated Martin and Wolf live here too.

We will also visit a monastery on a nearby holy mountain that sees a steady stream of local pilgrims who circle the top, while spinning a series of prayer wheels. Part of their pilgrimage consists of leaving food for the local birds, the most striking of which are Blue Eared Pheasants. The food attracts a range of other species too, however, and we hope to also get close views of a range of other species such Giant Laughingthrush, White-browed Rosefinch, Robin Accentor and the attractive Kessler's Thrush.



Day 8

Langmusi



We have only 100 kilometres to travel today to take us up onto the vast grasslands and marshes near Langmusi and Ruorgai that lie on the eastern edge of the vast Tibetan Plateau. The shorter distance enables us to make many bird and mammal watching stops en route and it won't be long before we get our first views of Plateau (Black-lipped) Pika, a small and abundant mammal (related to rabbits and hares rather than rodents) which supports the varied array of plateau predators like Tibetan Fox and Saker Falcon. The pikas also benefit species such as White-rumped Snowfinch and Hume's Ground Tit,

who use their burrows as nesting sites. For the next two nights we will overnight in the temple town of Langmusi, close to a key area for the little-known Chinese Mountain Cat. Alpine Musk Deer is also possible too.

Day 9 – 10

Langmusi & Ruorgai

We now have two full days to explore the high grasslands of the Tibetan Plateau which sit at around 3,200 metres and is home to Tibetan Fox, Tibetan Wolf, Asian Badger and Tibetan Gazelle. Sadly, the numbers of Pallas's Cat in the region have dropped sharply, although there is still an outside chance of a sighting. 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, Przevalski'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 Baixi 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. We will spend our final night in the region in a comfortable hotel in the town of Ruoergai.

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 ten 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.



Sichuan Takin



Red-billed Leiothrix

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 (although hot water can be temperamental at times!). 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 December 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 Chuanzhusi. 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.