



# TAIWAN

The Republic of China

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When the Portuguese revealed Taiwan to the western world, they dubbed it 'Formosa' – The Beautiful Island. Although in the modern era Taiwan is best known for its political defiance of mainland China and the electronic shopping malls of Taipei, the island has a wealth of natural resources, including some of the most stunning birds and mountain landscapes in Asia.

At 35 800 square kilometres, Taiwan is about 1.5 times the size of the Kruger National Park or a quarter the size of England. It is a continental island, formed by the action of tectonic plates on the eastern edge of the Asian shelf; this dramatic uplift has given it the most remarkable topography. Only 400 kilometres long and on average 150 kilometres wide, the island rises from a shallow western coastal plain to reach 4 000 metres above sea level at its highest peak. Lying on the Tropic of Cancer, the coastal lowlands are distinctly tropical, warm and muggy, but with over 15 peaks that rise more than 3 000 metres above sea level, the interior of the island comprises a series of concentric vegetation bands that terminate in temperate coniferous forest and arctic-like alpine tundra at the highest limits. In winter the highest peaks are blanketed in snow and ice, which only the Alpine Accentor is brave enough to endure.

The Taiwanese bird list stands at an impressive 450 species. What very few birders realise is that Taiwan has a host of fascinating endemic birds. The current number of endemics totals 15 species and the eventual application of the

Phylogenetic Species Concept (PSC) should see at least five other endemic subspecies raised to full species status. For example, a work published in 2000 showed that the Alishan Bush Warbler was a good species, and a new Taiwanese endemic. Although most of the endemics inhabit the highest montane portions of the country, a few are found at lower altitudes. One of these is the magical Taiwan Blue Magpie; nearly 70 centimetres long and a co-operative breeder,



**Above** An incredibly scarce but classy endemic, the Taiwan Yellow Tit inhabits low- and mid-elevation forest on Formosa.

**Opposite** The Mandarin Duck, arguably the world's most spectacular waterfowl, is an uncommon resident in the misty pools and lakes of Taiwan's broad-leafed woodlands.

flocks of this gaudy creature can be surprisingly difficult to find. I was thus incredibly relieved when, as I was trudging through Yang-min-shan National Park, six of these purple-and-black beasts came bounding out of the forest, resembling a flock of woodhoopoes on steroids. The lowlands of the east coast, particularly south of the magnificent Taroko

Gorge, support Styan's Bulbul. Unfortunately its closest congener, the Chinese Bulbul, seems to be displacing it and some hybridisation is occurring, pushing this locally common endemic further south.

On the steep slopes of the mountains, the mid- to high-altitude mixed broad-leafed and coniferous forests support most of the endemics. The two endemic pheasants are the most spectacular and difficult to see. The Mikado Pheasant has been dubbed 'king of the mists' because of its elegant plumage and its secretive habits; it prefers foraging in misty or rainy conditions. Generally found between altitudes of 1 800 and 3 800 metres, this species was described in 1900 – the last endemic discovered by scientists. When the second endemic pheasant, Swinhoe's Pheasant, was discovered, it was described as 'the most beautiful bird in the world'. Although it is more common than the Mikado and occurs at slightly lower altitudes, its timidity, agility and propensity to be startled mean it is seldom seen for long before it once again merges with the undergrowth, never to be seen again. Our chance encounter with one on a forest path in the early morning was my most treasured memory from 'The Beautiful Island'.

Although some of Taiwan's spectacular endemics are tricky to find, the majority are in fact quite easily attainable. In the central highlands of She-Pa National Park we saw 10 endemics in a day, including the co-operative, fruit-eating babblers such as the Taiwan Yuhina with its quaint crest, the white-moustached Taiwan Sibia, Steere's Liocichla, >



Taiwan Barwing, Taiwan Laughing Thrush, Johnstone's Bush Robin, Taiwan Island Thrush, Taiwan Firecrest, Alishan Bush Warbler and Taiwan Yellow Tit. Joining the endemics in the mixed-species parties, other spectacular birds we saw included the tailless Pygmy Wren Babbler, the Eurasian Nuthatch, Vivid Niltava, Rusty-fronted Scimitar Babbler, White-sided Laughing Thrush, Himalayan Treepie, several species of fulvettas, Red-headed and Green-backed tits, Vineous-throated Parrotbill, Vinaceous Rosefinch and Bevan's and Brown bullfinches.

With such steep slopes and high rainfall, there are the associated impressive waterfalls, gushing torrents and lakes. These hold another guild of exciting birds, including the dapper Brown Dipper, which dives into the fast-flowing water, immersing itself and scrambling along riverbeds looking for amphipods and arthropods. The dipper has to share its home with another real special of the Asian streams, the Little Forktail. By far the most diminutive of this group of specialised Asian river birds, which resemble Long-tailed Wagtails in their



**Opposite** The Red-headed Tit regularly gathers in flocks exceeding 50 birds at high altitudes in Taiwan's central ranges.

**Top** Endemic Taiwan Yuhinas. The noisy chattering of this gregarious little babbler is omnipresent and usually the first indicator of a mixed-species flock.

**Above** The Green-backed Tit is one of several members of the tit family in Taiwan and is another mixed-species flock member.

nature and habits, the Little Forktail is elsewhere found only in mainland China and in parts of the Himalaya mountain chain. Seeing these little riverine treasures darting in and out of the rapids was an incredible treat. The edges of the river scrub or the eaves under bridges are the favoured nesting habitat of the endemic Formosan Whistling Thrush, an iridescent violet-blue resident of the riparian vegetation. When the water slows and forms ponds and lakes, it is possible to see the scarce Mandarin Duck, perhaps the most spectacular of the world's waterfowl. Although it has been introduced to Europe and elsewhere, there is nothing like seeing a beautiful bird in its natural home.

The rivers draining the precipitous interior terminate in estuaries and mangroves, and being located astride one wing of the East Asian flyway, Taiwan is a critical stopover point for migrants between mainland China and the Philippines. It is annually bolstered by both specialised summer and winter visitors; the best times for migrants are September and October, and March and April, when thousands of waders and waterfowl pass through on passage. ▸

Every year over half of the world's Black-faced Spoonbills come to the Tsengwen estuary, just north of Tainan. The world's rarest large wading bird, with a total global population of some 400, the spoonbills come from their North Korean breeding grounds and faithfully spend the winter at Tsengwen. Joining them are some other rare waterbirds, such as Saunder's Gull, another globally threatened species with large numbers in Taiwan. Even in the middle of busy Taipei, the Kang-du Nature Park holds thousands of migrant shorebirds each year. Among the Spot-billed Duck, Tufted Duck, Tattlers, Little Ringed Plover, Red-necked Stints and hordes of Dunlin, inevitably vagrants turn up, occasionally including some of the world's most sought-after waterbirds, such as the Chinese Merganser or Spoon-billed Sandpiper.

Other migrants include raptors such as the Chinese Sparrowhawk, which can occur in kettles of hundreds, Grey-faced Buzzard and Eastern Marsh Harrier. However, one of the most complex and interesting suites of migrants are the passerines, mostly thrushes and robins from the Eastern Palaearctic woodlands and steppes of Siberian Russia and China. Perhaps the most famous of these is the



**The Taiwan Blue Magpie. Despite being huge, gaudy, gregarious and noisy, this spectacular endemic can be surprisingly difficult to find.**

highly sought-after Siberian Rubythroat, which is common in Taiwan in winter, and found even on the outskirts of Taipei. Other special passerines include the Red-flanked Bluetail, White's Ground Thrush and Dusky Thrush. The migrant passerines also include 10 warblers, nine buntings, and six flycatchers and shrikes, making winter (November–January) a highly profitable time for the birder in Taiwan.

However, summer (April–June) also has its special visitors, most notably the rare Fairy Pitta, which migrates from the

Philippines and Borneo to breed in the montane forests. The onset of hot tropical conditions in summer triggers breeding, and the islands surrounding Taiwan support colonies of Bridled and Black-naped terns. In June 2000 the rocky offshore islet of Matsu revealed one of the most exciting seabird finds of the last decade: three pairs of Chinese Crested Tern, a species that ornithologists had been convinced was extinct, were discovered breeding.

This emphasises how poorly known Taiwan is from an ornithological perspective. But a growing community of locally-based birders and ornithologists is changing that status. Due to language difficulties, it is a country that is seldom visited by Western birders, and it is consequently ignored by the international birding community. What is unarguable, however, is that Taiwan is exceptionally richly endowed with very exciting birds and it is poised to challenge for its rightful place on birding's global stage. □

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## FACT FILE

### GENERAL INFORMATION

The Taiwan government has initiated a relentless information campaign about the island's parks and natural resources and a great deal of information in the form of pamphlets is available island-wide. The only difficulty is that outside of Taipei, English is not widely spoken.

### TRAVEL

Several international airlines fly to Taipei from the UK and Europe. Malaysia Airlines flies from Cape Town/Johannesburg to Taipei, via Kuala Lumpur, three times a week. This is the cheapest option, and with the availability of a stopover to soak up some of the stunning Malaysian birds on offer. It is also possible to fly via the US, but that is more expensive.

There is an excellent network of express and local buses and railways around the island. Hire cars are available at Chiang-Kai Shek International Airport.

### ACCOMMODATION

A range of accommodation options is available near most of the important birding sites. Accommodation is generally more expensive than it is in southern Africa.

### BOOKS AND LITERATURE

- Brazil, M. 1992. 'Finding Birds in Taiwan.' *OBC Bulletin* 16: 40–44.
- MacKinnon, J. *et al.* 2000. *A Field Guide to the Birds of China*. Brand-new, outstanding field guide illustrating the 1 250 species in China, one of the world's most fascinating but poorly known areas ornithologically. A little cumbersome for a short trip to Taiwan. Oxford University Press.
- Sargeant, D. 1998. *A Birder's Guide to Taiwan*. Excellent, a must if you



**Taiwan is one of the best places in the world to see the Brown Bullfinch, a rare and localised resident throughout its global range.**

visit Taiwan for birding. Available via Natural History Book Service in England (<http://www.nhbs.com>) or available from the Wild Bird Society of Taipei, 1st Floor, No 3, Lane 160, Sec.2, Fu-Shing South Road, 106, Taipei, or directly from the author at 34 Pine Walk, Weybourne, Holt, Norfolk, NR25 7HJ, England.

- Wu, S., Yang, H. and Taniguchi, K. 1991. *A Fieldguide to the Wild Birds of Taiwan*. Taiwan Wild Bird Centre and the Wild Bird Society of Japan, Taiwan. Excellent illustrations, but text in Mandarin. ISBN-957-9578-00-1

### EXCELLENT WEBSITES

- <http://www.tboc.gov.tw/> – Taiwan tourist information page.
- [http://peacock.tnit.edu.tw/INDEX/ADD/bird/bird\\_home.html](http://peacock.tnit.edu.tw/INDEX/ADD/bird/bird_home.html) – Taiwan