

Caught on camera in the field

AN OCCASIONAL SERIES OF IMAGES OF UNEXPECTED BIRDS IN UNUSUAL LOCATIONS

Swinhoe's Rail *Coturnicops exquisitus* surprises bird photographers in Beijing, China

The Temple of Heaven, an impressive tourist site, attracts thousands of visitors daily and is on the itinerary for most first-time visitors to Beijing, China. In spring and autumn it is also something of a migrant trap and in one small fenced-off area, local bird photographers congregate and wait to photograph the latest migrants that have dropped in for a rest—these are usually relatively common species such as thrushes, robins and flycatchers.

On 12 October 2014, whilst a Chinese Thrush *Turdus mupinensis* was being photographed, a tiny rail ran across in front of the startled photographers. One of them, Zhou Zhongping, was quick enough to get some images but I am not sure he realised the significance of the sighting immediately. However, an image was circulated and one of the recipients, Wei Min, forwarded it to the Birding Beijing WeChat group, where it caused a sensation—probably the best-ever images of the Vulnerable Swinhoe's Rail *Coturnicops exquisitus* taken in the wild (the only images on the Oriental Bird Images website are of a bird trapped at Shijiuto, Hebei, in October 2005). It is regarded as very rare in south-east Siberia and rare in Japan and known from only a few breeding sites; recently recorded at Zhalong Nature Reserve, Heilongjiang, and Khanka Lake, on the border between Primorye, Far East Russia and Heilongjiang province, north-

east China. Seldom recorded on passage or in winter, recent records are of small numbers on autumn passage at Beidaihe, and one at Poyang Lake, south China, in 1989 (Taylor *et al.* 2014). Not surprisingly, this bird was the first record of the species for Beijing. It was only seen by a handful of those present and unfortunately, it appears that one of the photographers 'caught' it and, once released, it flew off into deep cover and was not seen again that day or the next despite thorough searches by birdwatchers.

[Editors' note: Little is known about the ecology of Swinhoe's Rail, but it is interesting to note that this bird demonstrated much of the behaviour attributed to the species in BirdLife International (2001) during the short time that it was in view, including running to escape rather than flying, hiding in deep cover and apparently being easy to catch—the writer of a label attached to a museum specimen stated that the bird had 'very feeble flight' and (he) 'could have caught it in a net'.]

References

- BirdLife International (2001) *Threatened birds of Asia: the BirdLife International Red Data Book*. Cambridge UK: BirdLife International.
Taylor, B. & co-authors (2014) Swinhoe's Rail (*Coturnicops exquisitus*). *HBW Alive*. (<http://www.hbw.com/node/53582> accessed 23.12.2014).

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Plates 1 & 2. Swinhoe's Rail *Coturnicops exquisitus*, Temple of Heaven, Beijing, China, 12 October 2014.



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