

CHINA - LHASA AND THE TIBETAN PLATEAU

“We’d only been on site for a short time when suddenly there it was, perched on a fence less than 15 metres away. This, our first Pink-tailed Bunting (a taxonomic enigma that was once a rosefinch but is now a bunting with its own family) was a female and she soon moved off the fence to feed her tiny fledgling. Her chick, clearly satiated, wasn’t having any more food and we delighted in the ensuing shenanigans! We went on to see a further five Pink-tailed Buntings during the day including a similarly close range gorgeous male. Nevertheless the bunting didn’t win the end-of-tour ‘Bird of the Trip’ poll. It was piped by the fantastic Lammergeier encounter we’d had as we’d walked to the bunting site earlier that very morning. The first Lammergeier we saw sat atop its rock pinnacle as we approached – allowing us to ‘scope him from every conceivable angle and eventually to walk right below him! A stunning encounter that was enjoyed by all but perhaps more so by our two video photographers.

We were less than a third of the way into our tour onto the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau and we’d already seen what would turn out to be the top two species in the end-of-tour ‘Bird of the Trip’ poll. We’d already seen a wealth of birds including Blue Eared Pheasants, a couple of very noisy Northern Goshawks, some extremely obliging Siberian Rubythroats that we eventually walked away from, umpteen gorgeous redstarts, both Chinese and Przewalsky’s Nuthatches, Kessler’s and Chestnut Thrushes, White-browed Tits and the confusingly similarly named but radically different looking White-browed Tit-warblers to mention but a few. What’s more we would go on to see much, much more.

The tour started well with two full days at Huzhu Beishan – a forested reserve to the north of Xining, Qinghai Province’s historic capital. The reserve’s primary avian targets were Blue Eared Pheasant, Chinese Grouse, Przewalsky’s Nuthatch and Gansu Leaf Warbler and, by the end of our time here, we’d seen three of the four – only the ever elusive grouse had eluded us.

The next day saw us venturing up onto the Plateau proper. The habitat and avifauna changed abruptly and we’d no sooner crested the final pass than we were greeted by a Saker Falcon - an awesome adult perched atop a roadside telegraph pole. Incredibly we’d go on to see another 35 of these magnificent creatures but few would deny this first encounter was the most enjoyable! Rolling grasslands with larks galore were the main feature of much of the rest of the day – but the Mongolian Larks Paul had watched two weeks earlier were nowhere to be found and we’d have to wait another three days for them to grace us. Qinghai Lake with its waterfowl, gulls and migrant shorebirds can never be neglected and today was no exception – several parties of majestic Black-necked Cranes graced its shoreline while Red-crested Pochards and Great Crested Grebes vied for our attention out on the water. It was on one of the many scrub-covered hillsides overlooking the lake where we saw not only the Pink-tailed Bunting and Lammergeiers noted earlier but also our first, and only, Red Fox and Red Deer of the entire tour!

Moving on we paused the very next day on the Rubber Mountain Pass to enjoy several White-winged Redstarts before descending into the deserts to the west. Here Desert Wheatears, Plain-backed Snowfinches, a superbly cooperative Mongolian Ground-jay and several Rufous-tailed Shrikes were all added to our list. Two days later we took our vehicles to almost 4500 metres in a successful search for some higher altitude species such as Plain and Brandt’s Mountain Finches. Three of us stayed on for a strenuous hike to a nearby ridge top and were rewarded with a superb encounter with a pair of Tibetan Snowcock and a solitary Wallcreeper.

We all spent the following morning birding around Gonghe – seeing our only Black-faced Bunting of the tour as well as a couple more Pine Buntings.

For many the 24 hour train journey from Xining to Lhasa was a highlight of the trip – the beds were comfortable (if a little short for some), the company outstanding and the scenery on this, the planet’s highest rail road, often stunning. Scaling the Tangula Shan Pass that peaked at a mighty

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5072 metres the rail trip also produced an impressive number of interesting birds including no-less-than nine Black-necked Cranes, 95 Upland Buzzards, two Golden Eagles, 33 Saker Falcons, 98 Common Ravens, five more White-winged Redstarts and 230 Rufous-necked Snowfinches! But it was the five species of mammal that included 11 Tibetan Antelope, 305 Tibetan Gazelle and 169 Kiang (or Tibetan Wild Ass) that were the real highlights of the journey.

Lhasa lived up to our expectations and we spent much of our first full day in Tibet sightseeing in and around the Potala and the Jokhang Temple while our final day's birding produced several more highly sought after species – with Tibetan Eared Pheasant, Giant Babax, Brown-cheeked Laughingthrushes and Pink-rumped Rosefinches to mention but a few. Yet again all were seen, and seen superbly well, from the car park – a relief considering that we were already at 4100 metres above sea level and few of us revelled in the thought of a strenuous walk up to the nearby Nunnery!

Once again however we experienced much more than just a tally of birds and mammals. We experienced the *real* China - the warm hospitality, the friendliness of our guides and agents and of course the food. The varied and plentiful food is, for many, a particularly appealing feature of Sunbird's China tours and the culinary curiosities and delights never ceased.

The views we had up on the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau were often truly spectacular. Distant, and sometimes not so distant, snow-capped peaks, glaciers, the seemingly endless rolling Tibetan steppe grassland dotted with domesticated yaks, goats and sheep and with the turquoise waters of Qinghai Hu as a back-drop. Who wouldn't have been impressed?

And then, all too soon, it was all over. We'd seen so much in the two weeks we'd been in China. Moreover this had been the first trip to China for more than half of the group – and what a revelation it had been. We'd marvelled at Beijing and the massive construction projects that were underway; we'd gawped at the contrast between there and rural China where fields were still being ploughed by bullocks and grain dried on the roads. We'd been treated to some outstanding food, met some delightful people and basically had a thoroughly good time. Right now is clearly **the** time to be visiting China." – *Paul Holt*

Bird List:

The ornithological taxonomy, nomenclature and order follow those used in the preferred regional field guide, MacKinnon, J. and Phillipps, K. (2000). *A Field Guide to the Birds of China*. Oxford University Press. Except where marked with an asterisk *

The animal taxonomy, nomenclature and order follow Smith, A. & Xie, Y. (2008). *A Guide to the Mammals of China*. Princeton University Press, Princeton & Oxford.

No leader or participant only species are included on the bird list. Only species that were seen, or heard, by the leader and at least one participant are included.

Key to the status codes:

- Column A = Number of tours on which this species was recorded
- Column B = Number of days this species was seen on the last tour
- Column C = Maximum daily count for that particular species
- H = Denotes a species that was heard but was not seen
- (H) = denotes a species that was heard more often than it was seen

Globally threatened species as defined by BirdLife International (2004) *Threatened birds of the world 2004* CD-Rom Cambridge, U.K. BirdLife International are identified as follows: EN = Endangered; VU = Vulnerable; NT = Near-threatened.

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Chinese endemics and endemic breeders are also highlighted.

A	B	C	
2 Tibetan Snowcock	2	2	
1 Chestnut-throated [Monal] Partridge (End)	1	4	H
1 Daurian Partridge			
2 Tibetan Partridge	2	5	(H)
2 Tibetan Eared Pheasant	1	12	
2 Blue Eared Pheasant (End)	1	3	
2 Common Pheasant	5	10	
2 Chinese Grouse (NT)(End)	1	1	H
1 Whooper Swan	1	30	
2 Greylag Goose	1	5	
2 Bar-headed Goose	3	700	
2 Ruddy Shelduck	6	300	
1 Eurasian Wigeon			
2 Mallard	2	8	
1 Chinese Spot-billed Duck	1	6	
1 Chinese or Indian Spot-billed Duck			
1 Northern Pintail	1	1	
1 Common Teal			
2 Red-crested Pochard	2	1500	
2 Common Pochard	3	10	
2 Tufted Duck	2	20	
1 Common Goldeneye			
2 Common Merganser	1	62	
1 Eurasian Wryneck			
2 Great Spotted Woodpecker	4	1	(H)
1 Black Woodpecker			
2 Grey-headed Woodpecker	1	2	
2 Eurasian Hoopoe	10	118	
2 Common Cuckoo	3	2	
2 Common Swift	5	30	
2 Fork-tailed Swift	6	50	
2 Little Owl	1	2	
2 Feral Rock Pigeon	12	40	
2 Hill Pigeon	12	40	
2 Oriental Turtle Dove	4	380	
1 Spotted Dove			
2 Eurasian Collared Dove	4	6	
2 Black-necked Crane (VU)	2	27	
2 Eurasian Coot	1	50	
1 Common Snipe			
2 Black-tailed Godwit	1	200	
2 Eurasian Curlew	1	10	
1 Spotted Redshank			
2 Common Redshank	6	30	
2 Common Greenshank	2	3	
			<i>Tetraogallus tibetanus</i>
			<i>Tetraophasis obscurus</i>
			<i>Perdix dauurica</i>
			<i>Perdix hodgsoniae</i>
			<i>Crossoptilon harmani</i>
			<i>Crossoptilon auritum</i>
			<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>
			<i>Tetrastes sewerzowi</i>
			<i>Cygnus cygnus</i>
			<i>Anser anser</i>
			<i>Anser indicus</i>
			<i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>
			<i>Anas penelope</i>
			<i>Anas platyrhynchos</i>
			<i>Anas zonorhyncha</i>
			<i>A. zonorhyncha</i> or <i>A. poecilorhyncha</i>
			<i>Anas acuta</i>
			<i>Anas crecca</i>
			<i>Rhodonessa rufina</i>
			<i>Aythya ferina</i>
			<i>Aythya fuligula</i>
			<i>Bucephala clangula</i>
			<i>Mergus merganser</i>
			<i>Jynx torquilla</i>
			<i>Dendrocopos major</i>
			<i>Dryocopus martius</i>
			<i>Picus canus</i>
			<i>Upupa epops</i>
			<i>Cuculus canorus</i>
			<i>Apus apus</i>
			<i>Apus pacificus</i>
			<i>Athene noctua</i>
			<i>Columba livia</i>
			<i>Columba rupestris</i>
			<i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>
			<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>
			<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>
			<i>Grus nigricollis</i>
			<i>Fulica atra</i>
			<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>
			<i>Limosa limosa</i>
			<i>Numenius arquata</i>
			<i>Tringa erythropus</i>
			<i>Tringa totanus</i>
			<i>Tringa nebularia</i>

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2	Green Sandpiper	2	1		<i>Tringa ochropus</i>
2	Wood Sandpiper	1	25		<i>Tringa glareola</i>
1	Terek Sandpiper				<i>Xenus cinereus</i>
2	Common Sandpiper	3	4		<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>
1	Red-necked Stint	1	1		<i>Calidris ruficollis</i>
2	Temminck's Stint	1	10		<i>Calidris temminckii</i>
1	Long-toed Stint	1	1		<i>Calidris subminuta</i>
1	Sharp-tailed Sandpiper	1	1		<i>Calidris acuminata</i>
2	Curlew Sandpiper	1	2		<i>Calidris ferruginea</i>
1	Pacific Golden Plover	1	1	H	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>
1	Little Ringed Plover				<i>Charadrius dubius</i>
2	Kentish Plover	3	25		<i>Charadrius alexandrinus</i>
2	Lesser Sand Plover	1	6		<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>
1	Greater Sand Plover	1	1		<i>Charadrius leschenaultii</i>
2	Pallas's Gull	7	83		<i>Larus ichthyaetus</i>
2	Brown-headed Gull	2	20		<i>Larus brunnicephalus</i>
1	Black-headed Gull	1	1		<i>Larus ridibundus</i>
1	Little Gull				<i>Larus minutus</i>
1	Caspian Tern				<i>Hydroprogne caspia</i>
2	Common Tern	7	172		<i>Sterna hirundo</i>
2	Whiskered Tern	1	2		<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>
2	Black Kite	4	6		<i>Milvus migrans lineatus</i>
2	Pallas's Fish Eagle (VU)	2	2		<i>Haliaeetus leucoryphus</i>
2	Lammergeier	2	4		<i>Gypaetus barbatus</i>
2	Himalayan Griffon	6	25		<i>Gyps himalayensis</i>
1	Cinereous Vulture (NT)				<i>Aegypius monachus</i>
2	Eurasian Sparrowhawk	1	1		<i>Accipiter nisus</i>
1	Northern Goshawk	1	2		<i>Accipiter gentilis</i>
2	Himalayan Buzzard	2	2		<i>Buteo biarmicus</i>
2	Upland Buzzard	7	95		<i>Buteo hemilasius</i>
2	Golden Eagle	1	2		<i>Aquila chrysaetos</i>
2	Common Kestrel	7	6		<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>
1	Amur Falcon				<i>Falco amurensis</i>
2	Eurasian Hobby	2	1		<i>Falco subbuteo</i>
2	Saker Falcon (EN)	4	33		<i>Falco cherrug</i>
2	Great Crested Grebe	3	30		<i>Podiceps cristatus</i>
2	Black-necked Grebe	1	10		<i>Podiceps nigricollis</i>
2	Great Cormorant	4	50		<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>
2	Grey Heron	1	4		<i>Ardea cinerea</i>
1	Cattle Egret	2	16		<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>
2	Rufous-tailed Shrike	2	4		<i>Lanius isabellinus</i>
1	Brown Shrike				<i>Lanius cristatus</i>
2	Grey-backed Shrike	12	35		<i>Lanius tephronotus</i>
2	Eurasian Jay	1	2		<i>Garrulus glandarius</i>
1	Azure-winged Magpie				<i>Cyanopica cyanus</i>
2	Black-billed Magpie	10	50		<i>Pica pica</i>
2	Mongolian Ground-jay	1	1		<i>Podoces hendersoni</i>
2	Hume's Groundpecker	7	70		<i>Pseudopodoces humilis</i>
2	Red-billed Chough	11	20		<i>Pyrrhocorax pyrrhocorax</i>

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1	Daurian Jackdaw	1	320		<i>Corvus dauuricus</i>
2	Rook	1	50		<i>Corvus frugilegus</i>
1	Carrion Crow				<i>Corvus corone</i>
2	Large-billed Crow	2	12		<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>
2	Common Raven	1	98		<i>Corvus corax</i>
1	Black Drongo				<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>
2	White-throated Dipper				<i>Cinclus cinclus</i>
1	Rufous-tailed Rock Thrush				<i>Monticola saxatilis</i>
2	Tibetan Blackbird	2	6		<i>Turdus (merula) maximus</i>
1	Chestnut Thrush	2	3		<i>Turdus rubrocanus</i>
2	Kessler's Thrush (End br.)	3	3		<i>Turdus kessleri</i>
1	Grey-streaked Flycatcher				<i>Muscicapa griseisticta</i>
2	Siberian Rubythroat	2	5		<i>Luscinia calliope</i>
1	White-tailed Rubythroat	1	1		<i>Luscinia pectoralis</i>
2	Northern Orange-flanked Bush Robin	1	2		<i>Tarsiger cyanurus</i>
1	Ala Shan Redstart (NT)(End)				<i>Phoenicurus alaschanicus</i>
2	Black Redstart	8	15		<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>
2	Hodgson's Redstart (End)	4	8		<i>Phoenicurus hodgsoni</i>
2	White-throated Redstart	3	4		<i>Phoenicurus schisticeps</i>
1	Daurian Redstart				<i>Phoenicurus aureus</i>
2	White-winged Redstart	3	5		<i>Phoenicurus erythrogaster</i>
2	Blue-fronted Redstart	3	8		<i>Phoenicurus frontalis</i>
2	White-capped Water Redstart	2	6		<i>Chaimarrornis leucocephalus</i>
2	Plumbeous Water Redstart	1	1		<i>Rhyacornis fuliginosus</i>
1	White-bellied Redstart				<i>Hodgsonius phaenicuroides</i>
2	Common Stonechat	1	5		<i>Saxicola torquata</i>
1	Pied Wheatear				<i>Oenanthe pleschanka</i>
2	Desert Wheatear	1	2		<i>Oenanthe deserti</i>
2	Isabelline Wheatear	3	10		<i>Oenanthe isabellina</i>
1	White-cheeked Starling				<i>Sturnus cineraceus</i>
1	Rosy Starling	1	3		<i>Pastor roseus</i>
2	Chinese Nuthatch	2	4		<i>Sitta villosa</i>
2	Przewalsky's Nuthatch (End)	2	1		<i>Sitta przewalskii</i>
2	Wallcreeper	1	1		<i>Tichodroma muraria</i>
2	Eurasian Treecreeper	2	1		<i>Certhia familiaris</i>
1	Winter Wren	1	1	H	<i>Troglodytes troglodytes</i>
1	Marsh Tit				<i>Parus palustris</i>
2	Willow Tit	2	10		<i>Parus montanus</i>
2	White-browed Tit (End)	3	5		<i>Parus superciliosus</i>
2	Rufous-vented Tit	2	1		<i>Parus rubidiventris</i>
2	Grey-crested Tit	1	3	H	<i>Parus dichrous</i>
2	Great Tit	6	6		<i>Parus major</i>
1	Long-tailed Tit				<i>Aegithalos caudatus</i>
2	Pale Martin	9	500		<i>Riparia diluta</i>
2	Eurasian Crag Martin	5	10		<i>Hirundo rupestris</i>
2	Barn Swallow	2	4		<i>Hirundo rustica</i>
1	Red-rumped Swallow				<i>Hirundo daurica</i>
2	Asian House Martin	1	60		<i>Delichon dasypus</i>
1	Light-vented Bulbul				<i>Pycnonotus sinensis</i>

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1	Spotted Bush Warbler				<i>Bradypterus thoracicus</i>
2	White-browed Tit Warbler	1	3		<i>Leptopoecile sophiae</i>
2	Dusky Warbler	2	6		<i>Phylloscopus fuscatus</i>
2	Tickell's Leaf Warbler	5	10		<i>Phylloscopus affinis</i>
2	Yellow-streaked Warbler	2	5		<i>Phylloscopus armandii</i>
2	Buff-barred Warbler	1	3		<i>Phylloscopus pulcher</i>
2	Gansu Leaf Warbler (End)	2	4	(H)	<i>Phylloscopus kansuensis</i>
2	Chinese Leaf Warbler (End br.)	1	1	H	<i>Phylloscopus yunnanensis</i>
2	Hume's Warbler	2	4		<i>Phylloscopus humei</i>
2	Greenish Warbler	2	30		<i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i>
2	Large-billed Leaf Warbler	1	2		<i>Phylloscopus magnirostris</i>
2	Plain Laughingthrush (End)	3	5		<i>Garrulax davidi</i>
2	Elliot's Laughingthrush	2	10		<i>Garrulax elliotii</i>
2	Brown-cheeked Laughingthrush (End)	1	10		<i>Garrulax henrici</i>
2	Giant Babax (NT)	1	5		<i>Babax waddelli</i>
2	Tibetan Lark	2	6		<i>Melanocorypha maxima</i>
2	Mongolian Lark	2	2		<i>Melanocorypha mongolica</i>
2	Hume's Short-toed Lark	5	6		<i>Calandrella acutirostris</i>
2	Crested Lark	1	4		<i>Galerida cristata</i>
2	Oriental Skylark	4	40		<i>Alauda gulgula</i>
2	Horned Lark	6	40		<i>Eremophila alpestris</i>
2	Russet Sparrow	2	3		<i>Passer rutilans</i>
2	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	13	200		<i>Passer montanus</i>
2	Rock Sparrow	6	50		<i>Petronia petronia</i>
1	White-winged Snowfinch	1	4		<i>Montifringilla nivalis</i>
2	Tibetan Snowfinch	2	5		<i>Montifringilla adamsi</i>
2	White-rumped Snowfinch	4	10		<i>Pyrgilauda taczanowskii</i>
1	Small Snowfinch				<i>Pyrgilauda davidiana</i>
2	Rufous-necked Snowfinch	5	230		<i>Pyrgilauda ruficollis</i>
2	Plain-backed Snowfinch	2	12		<i>Pyrgilauda blanfordi</i>
2	White Wagtail	10	30		<i>Motacilla alba</i>
2	Citrine Wagtail	5	10		<i>Motacilla citreola</i>
1	Grey Wagtail	1	1	H	<i>Motacilla cinerea</i>
2	Richard's Pipit	3	5		<i>Anthus richardi</i>
2	Olive-backed Pipit	3	6		<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>
2	Rosy Pipit	4	6		<i>Anthus roseatus</i>
2	Water Pipit	1	2		<i>Anthus spinoletta</i>
2	Robin Accentor	1	6		<i>Prunella rubeculoides</i>
2	Rufous-breasted Accentor	3	5		<i>Prunella strophciata</i>
2	Brown Accentor	4	10		<i>Prunella fulvescens</i>
2	Grey-capped Greenfinch	1	5		<i>Carduelis sinica</i>
1	Eurasian Siskin	1	1	H	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>
2	Twite	6	20		<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>
1	Plain Mountain Finch	1	1		<i>Leucosticte nemoricola</i>
1	Brandt's Mountain Finch	1	2		<i>Leucosticte brandti</i>
2	Mongolian Finch	1	3		<i>Bucanetes mongolicus</i>
1	Desert Finch				<i>Rhodospiza obsoleta</i>
2	Common Rosefinch	3	6		<i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>
2	Chinese Beautiful Rosefinch	3	10		<i>Carpodacus davidianus</i>

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2	Pink-rumped Rosefinch (End)	1	80	<i>Carpodacus eos</i>
2	Chinese White-browed Rosefinch	2	15	<i>Carpodacus thura</i>
2	Streaked Rosefinch	3	8	<i>Carpodacus rubicilloides</i>
1	Red-fronted Rosefinch	1	1	<i>Carpodacus puniceus</i>
1	Tibetan Rosefinch (End)			<i>Carpodacus roborowskii</i>
2	Red Crossbill	2	1	<i>Loxia curvirostra</i>
2	Grey-headed Bullfinch	2	8	<i>Pyrrhula erythaca</i>
2	White-winged Grosbeak	3	15	<i>Mycerobas carnipes</i>
2	Pink-tailed Bunting (End)	1	7	<i>Urocynchramus pylzowi</i>
2	Pine Bunting	2	1	<i>Emberiza leucocephala</i>
2	Godlewski's Bunting	3	10	<i>Emberiza godlewskii</i>
1	Meadow Bunting			<i>Emberiza cioides</i>
1	Yellow-breasted Bunting			<i>Emberiza aureola</i>
1	Black-faced Bunting	1	1	<i>Emberiza spodocephala</i>

Mammals, reptiles and amphibians

2	Himalayan Marmot	5	24	<i>Marmota himalayana</i>
1	Siberian Chipmunk			<i>Tamias sibiricus</i>
2	Plateau Pika	4	100	<i>Ochotona curzoniae</i>
1	Chinese Red Pika			<i>Ochotona erythrotis</i>
2	Woolly Hare	7	6	<i>Lepus oiostolus</i>
1	Tibetan Fox			<i>Vulpes ferrilata</i>
2	Red Fox	1	1	<i>Vulpes vulpes</i>
2	Mountain (Alpine) Weasel	2	1	<i>Mustela altaica</i>
1	Steppe Polecat			<i>Mustela eversmanii</i>
2	Kiang	1	169	<i>Equus kiang</i>
1	Red Deer	1	1	<i>Cervus elaphus</i>
1	Siberian Roe			<i>Capreolus pygargus</i>
1	Goitered Gazelle			<i>Gazella subgutturosa</i>
2	Tibetan Gazelle	2	305	<i>Procapra picticaudata</i>
2	Tibetan Antelope	1	11	<i>Pantholops hodgsonii</i>
2	Blue Sheep	1	27	<i>Pseudois nayaur</i>
2	Qinghai Toad-headed Lizard	1	6	<i>Phrynocephalus vlangalii</i>
2	Toad sp.	1	20	