

A Birder's Guide to the Great Wall



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Introduction

Birders are well known the world over for shunning even the most impressive tourist attractions in favour of a few hours birding, especially if there are a few local specialities to be seen. However, unlike in many capital cities, Beijing offers the chance to record some special birds whilst simultaneously experiencing one of the most impressive tourist attractions in the world - The Great Wall (Chinese: 長城, pingyin: changcheng).

One of the most frequent queries I receive here at Birding Beijing is whether it's possible to combine a day's birding with a visit to the Wall. So I thought it high time I produced this "Birder's Guide To The Great Wall."

The first thing to say is that, whichever part you visit, the Great Wall is majestic and it's entirely possible to forget about birding when walking along the ramparts enjoying the stunning views and trying to imagine the incredible effort that went in to building this monumental construction that stretches from China's east coast in Liaoning, Hebei and Tianjin through Beijing, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi and Shaanxi to Ningxia and Gansu Provinces in the west. The first sections were completed around 200BC; if you are interested in the history of the Great Wall, there is a good piece here: <http://www.history.com/topics/great-wall-of-china>

Overview

There are several sections of the Great Wall within easy reach of Beijing city. The advantages of these sites are that the travel time is relatively short and getting there is relatively easy. The disadvantages are that they are mostly restored sections, meaning they are not the most authentic, and they are busy. And busy in China means BUSY (87,500 visitors were recorded at Badaling on one day at Chinese New Year in 2014 – see here for some astonishing photos of what the crowds can be like at peak times such as Chinese New Year or National Day). For those of you who simply want to say you've seen or visited the Great Wall and want to prioritise birding, these are the sites for you.

For those of you who prefer a more authentic experience and like to have space to turn around, one of the more remote sections might be a better choice. The advantages of these sites are that they are usually, at least partially, in original condition (i.e. unrestored) and attract fewer visitors. The disadvantages are that they are harder to get to, usually requiring multiple public buses or hiring a private car and driver (remember it's not possible to rent a self-drive car in China without a Chinese Driving License) and the travel time will likely be much longer.

Whichever option you choose, I can (almost) guarantee that you will not be disappointed with The Great Wall. It's gobsmacking.

Now I can hear you saying "ok, ok... that's enough about the Wall, but what about the birds?!" Well, as you might expect, the diversity of birds at the Great Wall is relatively low. However, it is possible to see some of Beijing's resident specialities such as **BEIJING BABBLER, PLAIN LAUGHINGTHRUSH, RED-BILLED BLUE MAGPIE,**

CHINESE NUTHATCH, WILLOW TIT, SILVER-THROATED TIT and **MEADOW BUNTING**. And, in winter, there is a chance of something special such as **SIBERIAN ACCENTOR** or **PALLAS'S ROSEFINCH**. The species possible at each site are essentially the same, so there is no major benefit in visiting one site over another in terms of the species you are likely to see. However, that said, the busier sections with greater human disturbance are likely to produce fewer species.

Of course, the potential species will also depend on season and weather, and numbers of the migrant birds will vary from year to year.

Below is a recommendation for those birders with only one free day and who want to combine birding with a visit to the Great Wall. After that is a guide to each individual section of the Great Wall that details accessibility via public transport and by private car, travel time, entrance fees, comments on authenticity and the number of visitors and, finally, a list of potential birds.

Recommendation:

Before providing detailed options, I wanted to give my recommendation for the most common scenario - a birder with only one free day who wants to combine birding with visiting the Great Wall.

For this scenario, provided the date is between late March and late November, I recommend a visit to Yeyahu Nature Reserve combined with the Badaling section of the Great Wall. Yeyahu is an impressive wetland site and a national nature reserve with breeding species including **EASTERN MARSH HARRIER, AMUR FALCON, CHINESE PENDULINE TIT, YELLOW BITTERN, ORIENTAL REED**

WARBLER and, sometimes, **SCHRENCK'S BITTERN** among others. A downloadable PDF guide to Yeyahu, detailing the possible bird species and logistics of getting there and back, is available on the Birding Beijing website. The drive to Yeyahu takes the visitor along the G6 Badaling Expressway, passing the most popular section of the Great Wall - Badaling. A day-trip to Yeyahu can easily be combined with a stop at Badaling, usually on the return journey, if using a private car. A longer stop can also add a visit to the nearby Badaling Forest Park where more mountain species should be possible (e.g. **YELLOW-RUMPED** and **GREEN-BACKED FLYCATCHERS, ASIAN STUBTAIL, YELLOW-THROATED BUNTING** and, possibly, **CHINESE TAWNY OWL**). This combines great birding, particularly in spring and autumn, with a walk along the most famous Wall in the world. Although Badaling is not the most rewarding option for experiencing the Great Wall, one could argue that experiencing the crowds at Badaling, especially at a weekend, adds to the "China experience". Note that Yeyahu Nature Reserve is closed from late November to late March so, if visiting outside this window, one of the options below will be more appropriate.



The impressive tower hide at Yeyahu National Wetland Park, one of Beijing's best birding sites.

Detailed Options

For those visiting birders looking for options to visit the Great Wall and do some birding, the options below are the most convenient. However, please note this list is not exhaustive and there are many additional places to access the Great Wall, some of which are completely wild with no infrastructure and no facilities. Unless one is fully prepared and an experienced hiker, ideally with some Chinese, I would caution against attempting to visit these sites and instead stick to one of the options below. Whichever option you decide, you're sure to have an unforgettable day.

1. Badaling (Chinese:八达岭; pinyin: Bādǎlíng)

Accessibility

Badaling is the section of the Great Wall most easily accessible from central Beijing. It's around 70km from the city but almost entirely along the G6 Badaling Expressway, making the journey straightforward and fast, traffic permitting.

By Public Bus:

Take public bus number 877 from Deshengmen (north 2nd ring road), about 10 minutes' walking from Jishuitan subway station (Exit B2) of subway line 2. It is a non-stop bus, taking about an hour, traffic permitting, and costing CNY 12 per person. The drop-off site is close to the cable car station and about 10 minutes walk to the entrance. Please note that the last departure from Deshengmen is at 12:30.

Bus Operating Time:

From Deshemngmen: Apr. 1 to Nov. 15: 06:00-12:30; Nov. 16 to Mar. 31: 06:30-12:30

From Badaling: Apr. 1 to Nov. 15: 10:30-17:00; Nov. 16 to Mar. 31: 11:00-16:30

By Train:

Trains (number S2) depart from Huangtudian Railway Station, which is near the Huoying Station along subway line 8 and subway line 13. A single journey takes about 1.5 hours and the fare is CNY 6. One should get off at Badaling Railway Station; the entrance to the scenic area is a 15 to 20 minutes' walk. Just follow the passenger flow or

direction boards and one will get there easily. There are free shuttle buses between S2 train station and cable car station.

By private car:

Take the G6 Badaling Expressway from Beijing city and follow signs. Journey time: around 1 hour without heavy traffic. Parking is available for a small fee.

Admission Fee:

CNY 45 (Apr. 1 to Oct.31); CNY 40 (Nov.1 to Mar.31)

Cable Car: CNY 40 (single way); CNY 60 (round trip)

Opening Hours: 06:40 to 18:30

Authenticity

Badaling is a relatively complete section of the Wall but recently renovated, so not completely authentic. Nevertheless, it's impressive.

Crowds

Due to its accessibility, Badaling is probably the busiest section of the Great Wall and numbers of visitors, especially at weekends and during holidays, can be astonishing.

Birds

A number of resident and breeding birds should be possible simply by walking along the Wall, listening and scanning the vegetation either side. In addition, at the foot of the Wall, where the buses drop and pick up passengers, it's possible to walk uphill to a

vegetated gully that can sometimes produce more birds. A visit to the nearby Badaling Forest Park, with a series of quiet forested trails, will likely add more species to your total.

Resident: **COMMON PHEASANT, KOKLASS PHEASANT** (scarce), **GOLDEN EAGLE** (scarce), **COMMON KESTREL, CHINESE TAWNY OWL** (scarce), **PLAIN LAUGHINGTHRUSH, BEIJING BABBLER, VINOUS-THROATED PARROTBILL, GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER, GREY-CAPPED PYGMY WOODPECKER, GREY-HEADED WOODPECKER, HILL PIGEON, EURASIAN JAY, LARGE-BILLED CROW, RED-BILLED BLUE MAGPIE, COMMON MAGPIE, JAPANESE TIT, WILLOW TIT, SILVER-THROATED TIT, ORIENTAL GREENFINCH, MEADOW BUNTING, GODLEWSKI'S BUNTING.**

Summer: **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK** (scarce), **GREY-FACED BUZZARD** (scarce), **EURASIAN CRAG MARTIN, DAURIAN REDSTART, YELLOW-RUMPED FLYCATCHER, GREEN-BACKED FLYCATCHER** (small chance at the Wall), **EASTERN CROWNED WARBLER, CLAUDIA'S LEAF WARBLER, YELLOW-STREAKED WARBLER, CHINESE THRUSH, GREY-SIDED THRUSH** (scarce), **YELLOW-BELLIED TIT, RUSSET SPARROW.**

Winter: **EASTERN BUZZARD, NORTHERN GOSHAWK, EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK, NAUMANN'S THRUSH, RED-THROATED THRUSH, DUSKY THRUSH, BRAMBLING, ALPINE ACCENTOR, PALLAS'S ROSEFINCH** (small chance)

NB: During migration season, many more species will be possible, including flyover migrants.

How to get from Badaling Great Wall to Badaling Forest Park:



Beijing Babbler is a common resident in the hills around Beijing. Listen for its distinctive calls.

2. Mutianyu (Chinese: 慕田峪; pinyin: Mùtiányù)

Accessibility

Mutianyu is a similar distance from central Beijing, also restored, significantly less crowded, and has greener and more scenic surroundings. Historically, most tour groups did not go here, so this is generally a better option than Badaling. The journey is not all along the Expressway, so usually takes a little longer than to Badaling. Mutianyu has a cable car to get onto and off the wall (though walking via stairs is advisable for birders). If you are feeling adventurous, there is a toboggan ride down.

By public bus:

From Dongzhimen Bus Station (northeast 2nd ring road and subway line 2), you should take bus line 916 Express or 916 to Huairou North Avenue (Huairou Beidajie) Station. The 916 Express is recommended and it costs CNY 12 and takes 60-70 minutes. Then, transfer to bus line h23, h24, h35, or h36 to Mutianyu Roundabout. Afterwards, walk about 450 meters to the ticket office of the scenic area.

By private car:

Take the Jingcheng Expressway (G45) to the northeast of Beijing. Take exit 13 onto Beitai Road towards Kuangou. After 3.6km take the left turn to Miao Cheng Road and then right onto Qiaoping Road towards Shengquan Mountain. Follow signs to Mutianyu Great Wall.

Alternative:

The Schoolhouse (a restaurant and lodging company in Mutianyu) also offers a schoolbus that goes to and from the Kempinski

Hotel in Liangmaqiao area of Beijing to their restaurant that is a 10-minute walk from the Wall on Saturdays and Sundays. It departs Beijing at 09:00 and the Schoolhouse at 16:30. The cost is CNY 110 for a one-way trip or CNY 132 for a same day round trip. Reservations must be made online at The Schoolhouse website. If you are worried about taking a public bus but don't want to pay for a tour, this can be a good reliable option.

Admission Fee:

CNY 45, CNY 25 for students only with ID containing a photo. In addition, the cable car to the wall costs more than the wall entrance: CNY 65 for adults (one way), or CNY 80 for a round trip (CNY 45 for children). The total price is CNY 158 for admission, shuttle bus to the ski lift both ways, ski lift and toboggan ride.

Cable Car: CNY 40 (single trip), CNY 80 (round trip); children between 1.2 and 1.4m height CNY 40; children under 1.2m height FREE

Opening Hours: April to October: 8:00 to 17:00; November to March: 8:30 to 16:30

Authenticity

The Mutianyu section of the Great Wall is also restored but is in more beautiful surroundings with vast, albeit not original, forests.

Crowds

Although not as busy as Badaling, Mutianyu still attracts large numbers of visitors, especially at weekends and during holidays. However, by walking just a few hundred metres from the main thoroughfares, it's usually possible to get away from the largest crowds. The walk up and down is far less popular than the cable car,

and the birding can be good, so taking this route is advisable for birders.

Birds

As with Badaling, a number of resident and breeding birds should be possible simply by walking along the Wall, listening and scanning the vegetation either side. The walk up and down, instead of the cable car, is recommended and can produce some good birds. For example, during my most recent visit in early June 2016, it was relatively straightforward to see **YELLOW-RUMPED FLYCATCHER**, **RUSSET SPARROW** and **DAURIAN REDSTART** and we were lucky with a pair of displaying **CHINESE SPARROWHAWKS**.

Resident: **COMMON PHEASANT**, **KOKLASS PHEASANT** (scarce), **GOLDEN EAGLE** (scarce), **COMMON KESTREL**, **CHINESE TAWNY OWL** (scarce), **PLAIN LAUGHINGTHRUSH**, **BEIJING BABBLER**, **VINOUS-THROATED PARROTBILL**, **GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER**, **GREY-CAPPED PYGMY WOODPECKER**, **GREY-HEADED WOODPECKER**, **HILL PIGEON**, **EURASIAN JAY**, **LARGE-BILLED CROW**, **RED-BILLED BLUE MAGPIE**, **COMMON MAGPIE**, **JAPANESE TIT**, **WILLOW TIT**, **SILVER-THROATED TIT**, **ORIENTAL GREENFINCH**, **MEADOW BUNTING**, **GODLEWSKI'S BUNTING**.

Summer: **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK** (scarce), **GREY-FACED BUZZARD** (scarce), **EURASIAN CRAG MARTIN**, **DAURIAN REDSTART**, **YELLOW-RUMPED FLYCATCHER**, **GREEN-BACKED FLYCATCHER** (small chance at the Wall), **EASTERN CROWNED WARBLER**, **CLAUDIA'S LEAF WARBLER**, **YELLOW-STREAKED WARBLER**, **CHINESE THRUSH**, **GREY-SIDED THRUSH** (scarce), **YELLOW-BELLIED TIT**, **RUSSET SPARROW**.

Winter: **EASTERN BUZZARD**, **NORTHERN GOSHAWK**, **EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK**, **NAUMANN'S THRUSH**, **RED-**

THROATED THRUSH, DUSKY THRUSH, BRAMBLING, ALPINE ACCENTOR, PALLAS'S ROSEFINCH (small chance)

NB: During migration season, many more species will be possible, including flyover migrants.



Pallas's Rosefinch is a scarce winter visitor to the hills around Beijing and is a possibility during any winter trip to the Great Wall.

3. Jinshanling (Chinese: 金山岭; pinyin: Jīnshānlǐng)

Accessibility:

The Jinshanling section of the Great Wall is located in the mountainous area in Luanping County, 125 km northeast of Beijing. This section of the wall is connected with the Simatai section to the east and some distance to the west is the Mutianyu section. Although it is further out, meaning fewer visitors, the journey is almost entirely along expressway, the G45 Jingcheng Expressway, meaning the journey time is usually 2-2.5 hours each way, depending on traffic.

By public bus:

Take subway line 13 (Exit D) or subway line 15 (Exit C) to Wangjing West Station. From here it's possible to take a tourist bus to Jinshanling. The bus departs at 8:00 and returns at 15:00. The bus fare is CNY 32. The trip takes about 2 to 2.5 hours each way.

Please note that the direct tourist bus only operates during peak travel season (April 1 to November 15) and departs when there are at least 20 passengers. Otherwise, you need to take an alternative route (see below).

Take a tourist coach from Wangjing West Subway Station to Luanping, and get off at Jinshanling Service Area. Duration is about 100 minutes and ticket price is CNY 32 per person. Then, take a free

shuttle bus to either gate of the scenic area. You can also hike from the Service Area to the scenic area; the distance is about 2 kilometers.

<u>Schedule</u>	<u>Outward Trip</u>	<u>Return Trip</u>
Coach	7:00 to 16:30 every 40 mins	6:30 to 16:00 every 40 mins
Free Shuttle Bus	10:00, 11:00, 13:00, 15:30	10:30, 11:30, 13:30, 15:00

By private car:

Take Jingcheng Expressway from Beijing (towards Chengde) for around 120km and take the exit signposted Jinshanling Great Wall.

Admission Fee:

CNY 65 March 16th to November 15th, CNY 55 November 16th to March 15th.

Cable Car: CNY 40 for single trip

Opening Hours: 0800 to 1700

Authenticity

Jinshanling, although also restored in places, is more authentic and attracts fewer visitors given its distance from Beijing. It connects with the spectacular Simatai section and a hike from one to the other is simply awe-inspiring. At the time of writing, however, the Simatai section is under renovation and it's forbidden to hike from Jinshanling

to Simatai. Even without that option, Jinshanling is still very impressive and my personal favourite section.

Crowds

Being further out than Badaling and Mutianyu, Jinshanling attracts fewer visitors and I have been there on a weekday with the Wall almost to myself. That's unusual but it gives a sense of how much less visited this section is compared with Badaling or Mutianyu.

Birds

As with Badaling and Mutianyu, a number of resident and breeding birds should be possible simply by walking along the Wall, listening and scanning the vegetation either side. The calls of **BEIJING BABBLER** and **PLAIN LAUGHINGTHRUSH** will almost certainly attract your attention at various points along the Wall and doing some homework to learn the calls of these two talented vocalists will help to distinguish them in the field.

Resident: **COMMON PHEASANT, KOKLASS PHEASANT** (scarce), **GOLDEN EAGLE** (scarce), **COMMON KESTREL, CHINESE TAWNY OWL** (scarce), **PLAIN LAUGHINGTHRUSH, BEIJING BABBLER, VINOUS-THROATED PARROTBILL, GREAT SPOTTED WOODPECKER, GREY-CAPPED PYGMY WOODPECKER, GREY-HEADED WOODPECKER, HILL PIGEON, EURASIAN JAY, LARGE-BILLED CROW, RED-BILLED BLUE MAGPIE, COMMON MAGPIE, JAPANESE TIT, WILLOW TIT, SILVER-THROATED TIT, ORIENTAL GREENFINCH, MEADOW BUNTING, GODLEWSKI'S BUNTING.**

Summer: **CHINESE SPARROWHAWK** (scarce), **GREY-FACED BUZZARD** (scarce), **EURASIAN CRAG MARTIN, DAURIAN REDSTART, YELLOW-RUMPED FLYCATCHER, GREEN-BACKED FLYCATCHER** (small chance at the Wall), **EASTERN CROWNED WARBLER, CLAUDIA'S LEAF WARBLER, YELLOW-STREAKED**

WARBLER, CHINESE THRUSH, GREY-SIDED THRUSH (scarce),
YELLOW-BELLIED TIT, RUSSET SPARROW.

Winter: **EASTERN BUZZARD, NORTHERN GOSHAWK, EURASIAN SPARROWHAWK, NAUMANN'S THRUSH, RED-THROATED THRUSH, DUSKY THRUSH, BRAMBLING, ALPINE ACCENTOR, PALLAS'S ROSEFINCH** (small chance)

NB: During migration season, many more species will be possible, including flyover migrants.



The pretty Meadow Bunting is a resident in the hills around Beijing and is commonly encountered during visits to the Great Wall.

4. Other sites

In addition to the three main sites described above, there are many other, wilder, sections that will almost certainly provide the birder with more chance of connecting with the resident birds but will require private transport to get there and back. Two of the better options are Gubeikou and Jiankou.

4.1 Gubeikou

The Gubeikou section of the Great Wall has never been reconstructed. Hence, it is somewhat dilapidated but retains its original beauty and offers a more authentic experience. Even though they are crumbling, the wall and watchtowers are wonderful to hike and, with very few people around, the opportunity to see wildlife will be increased.

Accessibility

Gubeikou is located in the northeast of Miyun County, about 120 kilometers northeast of central Beijing.

By public bus:

Take bus 980 Express from Dongzhimen station to Miyun Bus Station; and then bus Mi 25 to Gubeikou. From there, you will need to hike up to the Great Wall.

Bus schedule:

	Onward Trip	Return Trip	Fare
980 Express	6:00- 20:00	4:30- 18:30	CNY 17
Mi 25	6:10-18:20	6:20- 17:30	CNY 8

By private car:

Take the Jingcheng Expressway. After around 115km take the exit to Gubeikou. Park in the village and hike up to the Wall.

4.2 Jiankou

The Jiankou section of the Great Wall is one of the wildest. It is also the most photographed section due to its precipitous peaks and attractive scenery. "Jiankou" means "arrow nock", because the shape of the mountain is like an arrow, with the collapsed ridge opening as its arrow nock.

Accessibility

To reach Jiankou Great Wall you must go to Xizhazi Village or Wofo Mountain Villa.

Bus routes to the two destinations are initially the same; go to Dongzhimen Station (subway lines 2 or line 13), and then take bus 936 at Dongzhimen Wai Station. Get off at Yujiayuan Station, and then take one of the following:

To Xizhazi Village: transfer to bus H25 at Yujiayuan to Xizhazi Station.

To Wofo Mountain Villa: transfer to bus H36 at Yujiayuan to Xinying Station. Walk north to the mountain villa.

Bus schedule and prices:

Bus	Price	Operating Time
No.936	CNY 6	From Dongzhimen Wai: 6:40 – 17:10 From Yujiayuan: 4:35 – 17:00
No. H25	CNY 4	From Yujiayuan: 11:30, 16:30 From Xizhazi: 6:00, 13:15
No. H36	CNY 3	From Yujiayuan: 6:20, 11:30, 17:40. From Xinying: 7:05, 12:15, 18:30

An alternative for hikers

Another option, especially for those who like to hike, is to take a trip with Beijing Hikers. Although this means you will be with a group (usually 5-20 people), the hikes take place at some spectacular and rarely visited sections of the Wall. The pace is relaxed, meaning you have ample opportunity to stop and scan for birds, and the price is very reasonable when one considers the transport and provision of refreshments (much cheaper than hiring your own car and driver).

Beijing Hikers usually offer several alternative hikes on any given day and pick-ups are usually from the Liangmaqiao area (northeast 3rd ring road, easily accessed by metro line 10). Beijing Hikers is run by lovely people and they have great guides. You can check out their website here: <https://www.beijingshikers.com/>

Disclaimer

Please note that this information is correct to the best of my knowledge at the time of writing. However, things change, so if you are aware of any errors or omissions, please contact Birding Beijing on birdingbeijing@gmail.com so that they can be corrected for the benefit of others. Thank you.