

Bird study in China key to eco-health

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Chestnut-tailed Minla (*Minla strigula*). Credit: Steb Fisher

(Phys.org) —A Monash University ecologist is assisting in an international study into birdlife in an environmentally threatened area of China.

Dr Wendy Wright from the School of Applied Sciences at the University's Gippsland campus has joined a team travelling to a remote part of south-west [China](#) under pressure due to a loss of habitat and a proposal to build a series of dams.

Dr Wright will spend two weeks in the Sichuan Province, studying the type and number of birds in the area surrounding the upper [Yangtze River](#), to help provide a picture of the wider biodiversity in the region.

Dr Wright said birds are often called "flying data collectors" because they can indicate a change to an ecosystem.

"As a group, birds are highly versatile, making a living in all kinds of habitats. They respond to [environmental change](#) in measurable ways, in both space and time," Dr Wright said.

"Unfortunately, dramatic changes in the ecosystems near the upper Yangtze River are likely to occur as a result of permanent flooding when the dams are built.

"But the planned flooding also gives us an opportunity to study what happens to birds and ecosystems where significant landscape changes occur."

Dr Wright said relatively little was known about the flora and fauna of the valleys where the dams are proposed, hence the reason for the study.

"A major obstacle to investigating changing patterns in the distribution of bird species in China is a basic lack of data to start with," Dr Wright said.

"There are no published lists of [bird species](#) known to inhabit this area of China, so our aim is to find out and document what [birds](#) do exist, in order to provide [baseline data](#) for future ecosystem management.

"It's exciting to be part of such a significant international project."

This is Dr Wright's sixth visit to Sichuan Province and fifth visit to this particular remote field location, where many of the local farmers have not met westerners before.

Provided by Monash University

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