# Bar-winged Wren Babbler *Spelaeornis troglodytoides*: a first record for Vietnam, with speculation for 17 further avifaunal additions

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## The first record for Vietnam

At 10h30 on 4 May 2010, SPM and DPE found a Bar-winged Wren Babbler *Spelaeornis troglodytoides* just below the summit camp on Mount Fan Si Pan, in the Hoang Lien Son National Park, Sapa, West Tonkin. Mount Fan Si Pan reaches 3,143 m, making it the highest peak in the Hoang Lien Mountains and in Vietnam. The bird was in a rocky gully vegetated with *Rhododendron*, stunted trees and dense *Arundinaria* bamboo at c.2,800 m elevation. It was found when it responded to the broadcast of a pre-recorded cut of Gould's Shortwing *Brachypteryx stellata*. When the cut was played the wren babbler flew up out of the gully, perching openly on a bamboo stem 4 m from the observers, and sang. DPE obtained a number of audio recordings (xc65028, xc65029, xc65030) and FAE obtained a series of photographs (Plates 1 and 2).

Although immediately recognised as a Bar-winged Wren Babbler (confirmed in Plates 1 and 2 by the combination of white throat, rich rufous breast-sides and belly-sides, heavily barred wings and relatively long, barred tail), we were aware that this species had not previously been recorded in Vietnam (Robson 2008). It is distributed in the eastern Himalayas, from western Bhutan to northern Myanmar and Yunnan province, China, and in three disjunct populations within central China (Collar & Robson 2007). The Hoang Lien Mountains of Vietnam are the south-easternmost extension of the Himalayas and thus its occurrence in this region is not altogether unexpected. Since wren babblers are not given to vagrancy, it can be safely concluded that our record represents a breeding range extension of some 550 km from the nearest known population in north-west Yunnan, China.

## A new subspecies?

Seven subspecies of Bar-winged Wren Babbler have been described (Collar & Robson 2007). They differ mainly in tone and pattern of plumage, and possibly also in vocalisations, although vocal variation is not well documented. Plumage variation within recognised subspecies is confounded by apparent sexual dimorphism (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005), unusual in the Timaliidae.

Comparison of Plates 1 and 2 with published descriptions of recognised subspecies (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005, Collar & Robson 2007) and photographs of known subspecies (OBC image database) indicates that the Vietnam bird has a number of unique plumage features, including: (1) blackish lores that lack contrast with the crown, (2) dark grey cheeks that contrast strongly with the ear-coverts, and (3) crown coloration that lacks a rufous tinge. It is also perhaps brighter orange-rufous above and below than other subspecies, and more extensively white below, although it approaches *S. t. sherriffi* (of Bhutan and adjacent Arunachal Pradesh, India) in underpart pattern and coloration. We therefore suggest that the Vietnamese population of Bar-winged Wren Babbler may represent an undescribed subspecies.

However, our observations and photographs concerned a single damp individual and comparison has not been made against specimens. Moreover, wren babblers can show fairly extreme intra-species variation, even within populations of species (see, e.g., Eames & Mahood 2011). No firm conclusions should therefore be drawn regarding the taxonomic distinctiveness (or otherwise) of the Vietnamese population of Bar-winged Wren Babbler without the greater use of specimen evidence. The species as a whole is in need of taxonomic review owing to significant plumage variation across its wide range; this should incorporate vocal and, if possible, genetic data.

Bar-winged Wren Babbler is nowhere regarded as abundant, making it likely to be an uncommon resident in the Hoang Lien Mountains. Our record in Vietnam falls within the published altitudinal range of Bar-winged Wren Babbler in the Indian Subcontinent (2,400–3,355 m; Rasmussen & Anderton 2005) and Myanmar (2,440–2,895 m; Robson 2008), but above that published for China (1,600–2,440 m; Collar & Robson 2007). If the elevational

**Plates 1 and 2**. Bar-winged Wren Babbler *Spelaeornis troglodytoides*: Mount Fan Si Pan, Vietnam, at c.2,800 m elevation, 4 May 2010. Both photos are of the same individual. Note the blackish lores and dark grey cheeks lacking contrast with the blackish crown, and also the extensive white and bright orange-rufous below. (Felicity A. Edwards)

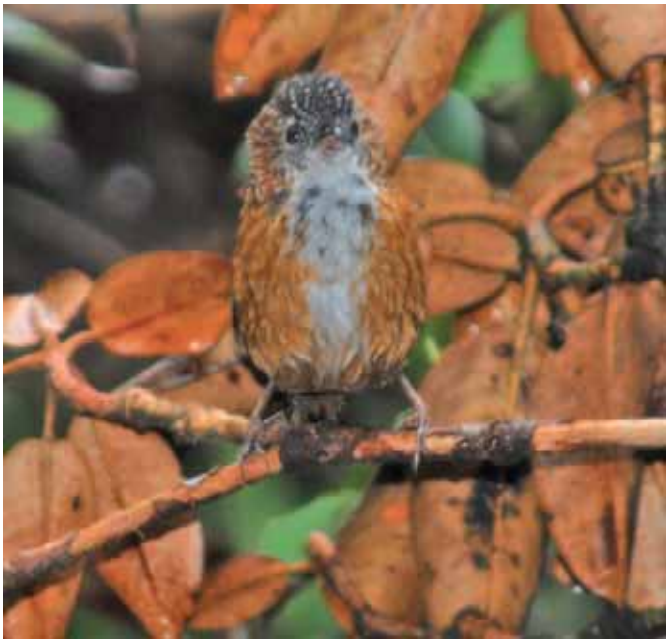

**Table 1**. Species with a similar distribution to Bar-winged Wren Babbler that have not been recorded in Vietnam. Data on habitat and elevation from Robson (2005).

| Species | | Habitat | Elevation (m) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Speckled Wood Pigeon | *Columba hodgsonii* | Broadleaved evergreen forest | 1,675–2,565 |
| Spotted Nutcracker | *Nucifraga caryocatactes* | Open coniferous and mixed broadleaved and coniferous forest | 2,285–3,600 |
| Slaty-backed Flycatcher | *Ficedula hodgsonii* | Broadleaved evergreen forest, secondary growth | 600–2,750 |
| Indian Blue Robin | *Luscinia brunnea* | Bamboo, secondary growth, thickets, broadleaved evergreen forest | 1,480–2,040 |
| Bar-tailed Treecreeper | *Certhia himalayana* | Coniferous and broadleaved evergreen forest | 2,135–3,000 |
| Rufous-vented Tit | *Parus rubidiventris* | Broadleaved evergreen and coniferous forest | 2,745–3,600 |
| Coal Tit | *Parus ater* | Coniferous and mixed coniferous and broadleaved forest | 2,745–3,445 |
| Grey-crested Tit | *Parus dichrous* | Coniferous and broadleaved evergreen forest | 2,745–3,200 |
| Grey-sided Bush Warbler | *Cettia brunnifrons* | Scrub and grass bordering broadleaved evergreen and mixed broadleaved/coniferous forest | >2,100 |
| Moustached Laughingthrush | *Garrulax cineraceus* | Edge of broadleaved evergreen and mixed broadleaved/coniferous forest, scrub and grass, bamboo | 2,220–2,500 |
| Green Shrike-babbler | *Pteruthius xanthochlorus* | Broadleaved evergreen forest | 1,700–2,800 |
| Great Parrotbill | *Conostoma oemodium* | Open broadleaved evergreen forest, bamboo, scrub | 2,775–3,660 |
| Brown Parrotbill | *Paradoxornis unicolor* | Bamboo, open broadleaved evergreen forest | 2,135–3,660 |
| Fulvous Parrotbill | *Paradoxornis fulvifrons* | Bamboo, edge of broadleaved evergreen forest | 2,895–3,660 |
| Vinaceous Rosefinch | *Carpodacus vinaceus* | Edge of broadleaved evergreen forest, secondary growth, scrub, bamboo | 1,830–2,745 |
| Crimson-browed Finch | *Propyrrhula subhimachala* | Broadleaved evergreen and coniferous forest, thickets | 1,830–3,050 |
| Collared Grosbeak | *Mycerobas carnipes* | Broadleaved evergreen and mixed broadleaved and coniferous forest, secondary growth | 2,500–3,655 |

range of the Vietnam population is similar to these others (i.e. 1,600–3,143 m) then there are relatively few remaining suitable locations where this species might occur. Within the Hoang Lien Mountains habitat conversion to agriculture using fire and habitat degradation via clearance of the understorey for cardamom cultivation have been widespread, even within protected areas. Furthermore, severe habitat alteration is continuing apace.

It is possible that the species might also occur on high peaks in East Tonkin, outside of the Hoang Lien range, such as those within Tay Con Linh Nature Reserve (which reaches 2,616 m elevation). The avifauna of north-east Vietnam is under-collected and poorly known, as evidenced by the relatively recent discovery of a new taxon in the genus *Jabouilleia* (Vogel *et al.* 2003) and observations that extend the range of bird species whose Vietnamese distribution was previously thought to be limited to West Tonkin (Vogel *et al.* 2003, Mahood *et al.* in prep.).

## Hoang Lien Mountains: their brief ornithological history and future

Ornithological study of the Hoang Lien Mountains began in late 1923 when J. H. Stevens spent a few months in northern Tonkin. He collected 333 specimens of 219 species, many from 'Ngai Tio', 30 km north of Sapa (Kinnear 1929). J. Delacour spent three months collecting on Fan Si Pan and around nearby Sapa in late 1929 and early 1930, with the aid of the ethnic Hmong amassing c.3,000 bird specimens (Delacour 1930). He was followed by Björkegren, who was based in Sapa from December 1938 to February 1939, where he collected 582 specimens that he purchased from the same hunters as Delacour (Eames & Ericson 1996). Delacour described numerous subspecies and one new species endemic to the Hoang Lien Son—White-throated Wren Babbler *Rimator pasquieri* (Delacour & Jabouille 1930, 1931, Collar 2006). Small-bodied birds are, however, under-represented in these collections, owing to the collectors' dependence on match-lock muskets, which generally either miss small birds completely or damage them too badly to preserve.

The Hoang Lien Mountains were out of bounds to the wider ornithological community for much of the rest of the twentieth century. Once the area was reopened to visitors, surveys conducted by Frontier-Vietnam and visits by birders increased the number of montane species recorded on Mount Fan Si Pan. For example, Ashy Woodpigeon *Columba pulchricollis* was not recorded in the Hoang Lien Son until 1998 (Tordoff 2002) and Rufous-belled Niltava *Niltava sundara* was not recorded until the early 2000s (J. C. Eames unpubl. data). Short surveys of poorly known sites were conducted in the Hoang Lien Mountains, such as Van Ban Nature Reserve and Mu Cang Chai Species and Habitat Conservation Area (SHCA; Tordoff *et al.* 2001, 2002), during the preparation of the Vietnam Important Bird Area Inventory. Although these surveys did not make use of pre-recorded vocalisations, they demonstrated that the avifauna of these sites was comparable with (if not more intact than) that on Mount Fan Si Pan.

Mount Fan Si Pan in Hoang Lien Son National Park is the only readily accessible forested site in the Hoang Lien Mountains. Forest there is, however, heavily degraded and habitat quality continues to deteriorate. Other than at the highest elevations, all readily accessible forest is under cardamom cultivation, with the canopy thinned by 30–70% via the felling of mature trees and with all native understorey vegetation removed. Forest at the highest elevations has lost most trees and much *Rhododendron* scrub to fire (often started accidentally by tourists visiting the peak of Fan Si Pan). This may account for the paucity of recent records of Darjeeling Woodpecker *Dendrocopos darjellensis*, a species that was regarded as 'common' by Delacour, but for which there are few recent records (Delacour 1930). Some of these higher-altitude areas are little more than scrubby grassland, although there are still large areas dominated by dense *Arundinaria* bamboo, such as the area where the Bar-winged Wren Babbler was found.

Van Ban Nature Reserve, south of Hoang Lien Son National Park, still retains a relatively large area of at least superficially intact forest (although cardamom cultivation is reportedly widespread), has a peak reaching 2,913 m (just 230 m lower than Fan Si Pan) and still retains forest at middle and perhaps even lower elevations (Tordoff *et al.* 2002). Mu Cang Chai SHCA, south of Van Ban Nature Reserve has fairly intact forest from 2,000 m to its highest peak at 2,512 m, with many mature *Fokienia hodginsii* and large areas where cardamom has not yet been cultivated. Recent surveys there indicate that past survey effort has been incomplete; new species for the site, such as Lesser Rufous-headed Parrotbill *Paradoxornis atrosuperciliaris*, are easily found (SPM pers. obs.). Both these protected areas, difficult of access, still support large-bodied species that are apparently absent elsewhere: both have Temminck's Tragopan *Tragopan temminckii*, while Mu Cang Chai is one of only two locations in Vietnam (the other being Pu Mat National Park) retaining a population of Rufous-necked Hornbill *Aceros nipalensis* (Le Trong Dat 2009, Le Trong Dat & Luong Van Hao 2008).

Table 1 lists 17 species that have similar global ranges to Bar-winged Wren Babbler, and which therefore could conceivably be resident in the Hoang Lien Mountains. All these species are resident in the eastern Himalayas of north-east India, northern Myanmar, and Yunnan and Sichuan provinces of China. Species only rarely recorded in northern Myanmar (e.g. Rufous-breasted Accentor *Prunella strophiata*) are excluded, as are those that do not occur in Sichuan (e.g. Grey-sided Laughingthrush *Garrulax caerulatus* and Cachar Wedge-billed Babbler *Sphenocichla roberti*), although of course such species might also conceivably occur in Vietnam. Similarly, species that share a similar distribution to another rare Fan Si Pan resident—Red-winged Laughingthrush *Garrulax formosus*—but currently only occur in Sichuan and Yunnan are excluded, because they do not occur in north-east India and northern Myanmar. Also excluded are species that would probably only occur in Vietnam in the non-breeding season, such as Fire-capped Tit *Cephalopyrus flammiceps*.

We believe that with sufficient survey effort, some of our 17 listed species will be found. Most of them are regarded as uncommon within their core range (Robson 2008) and, therefore, could have escaped notice in the poorly surveyed Hoang Lien Mountains. Those dependent on high-altitude coniferous forest, such as Spotted Nutcracker *Nucifraga caryocatactes*, Bar-tailed Treecreeper *Certhia himalayana* and the three *Parus* tits, may be least likely to occur. Two other species, Green Shrike-babbler *Pteruthius xanthochlorus* and Indian Blue Robin *Luscinia brunnea*, also seem unlikely to occur since they are considered common within their ranges, and might therefore be expected to have been recorded already. By contrast, low-density species can easily be missed and we urge greater attention be directed at this neglected but important area of Indochina.

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# Long-tailed Duck *Clangula hyemalis* and Red-breasted Goose *Branta ruficollis*: two new birds for Sichuan, with a review of their distribution in China

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## Long-tailed Duck

One Long-tailed Duck in non-breeding plumage was seen by J. Zhang at Yazihe Reserve, Guanghan, on 31 January 2006 around 14h00. This individual was found in mixed group with Common Coots *Fulica atra* and Ferruginous Pochards *Aythya nyroca* on the river surface near the Chengdu to Mianyang highway bridge.

Long-tailed Duck is a distinctive small diving duck. Although the individual found at Yazihe lacked the typical long tail for an adult male, the white forehead and black patch around the neck as well as mostly white breast revealed this to be a young male in its winter plumage (MacKinnon & Phillipps 2000). This species is widespread in the Holarctic, breeding mainly above the Arctic Circle (Zhao 1995). In eastern Asia its wintering range extends from the northern Bering Sea on pack-ice south along coasts, commonly to northern Japan, rarely to the Korea Peninsula and very rarely in eastern China (Brazil 2009).

La Touche (1934) reported his specimen collection of Long-tailed Ducks from Chinwangtao, east Chihli (now Qinhuangdao, Hebei) and Foochow (now Fuzhou, Fujian). He also stated that the scarcity of records of this species was probably due to lack of observation (La Touche 1934). Shaw (1936) reported his collection from Xin'an, Hopei (now An'xin, Hebei). Guan *et al*. (1963) reported a specimen found at Dongting Lake, Hunan, in December 1959, which turned out to be the first record for the province. Cheng (1987) evaluated this species's status as very rare in China, being a migrant known to occur in Heilongjiang and Lushun, Liaoning. Han *et al*. (1994) reported an observation of wintering Long-tailed Ducks at Dalian Bay during surveys from 13 to 15 January in 1990. On 28 February 2010, two