

LITTLE-KNOWN ASIAN BIRD

First images in the wild of Blackthroat *Luscinia obscura*, Asia's most enigmatic robin

WEI QIAN & HE YI

Background

The Blackthroat *Luscinia obscura* is known to breed only in the mountains of south-west China, where there are a few scattered records from Sichuan, Gansu and Shaanxi, together with even fewer presumed non-breeding records from Yunnan (southern China) and northern Thailand. It is an extremely poorly known species classified as Vulnerable because it is inferred to have a small, declining population as a result of destruction of temperate forest within its breeding area as well as habitat loss in its likely wintering areas (BirdLife International 2001, 2011).

Since its description in 1891, there have only been nine records from China, including some uncertain ones. These records comprise one each from Gansu and Shaanxi, two from Yunnan, presumed to be during migration, and four from Sichuan, all detailed in BirdLife International (2001), and a recent sight record of a male and

probably a female from Baihe Nature Reserve, Sichuan, on 3 June 2007 (Anderson 2007). Additionally, a few captive birds, assumed to have been caught in the vicinity of Chengdu, have appeared in Chengdu bird market (Wang 2004). All other records are from Thailand and presumed to be either wintering birds or passage migrants (BirdLife International 2001).

Observations

On the morning of 2 May 2011, we visited Sichuan University to observe and photograph migrating birds in a small patch of wood and shrubbery in the south-eastern corner of the campus. At about 09h20 a bird abruptly flew into the shrubbery, which we quickly located and identified as a male Blackthroat *Luscinia obscura*. We continued to observe it until about 17h20 when we left and obtained what we believe to be the first images of this species in the wild (Plates 1 & 2).

Plate 1. Male Blackthroat *Luscinia obscura* perching on the ground, Sichuan University, Chengdu, China, 2 May 2011.





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Plate 2. Another view of Male Blackthroat at Sichuan University, Chengdu, China, 2 May 2011.

The bird had a plumbeous-blue head, nape and back, with a metallic lustre; the rump was similar but paler. The chin, undercheeks, throat and breast were coal-black without any gloss; belly white; flanks light grey; wings black-brown; uppertail black except for the basal one third of the third and fourth feathers which were white; undertail dirty-white tinged with rufous; crissum rufous. The bill was black, iris dark, eye-ring dark grey, and legs and feet light grey. We suggest that the bird may have been a second-year male as when compared with the captive adult male taken in Chengdu market (Plate 3) there was less white on the base of the tail and the area of coal-black feathering was less, particularly around the cheeks.

Plate 3. An adult male Blackthroat *Luscinia obscura*, found in the bird market, Chengdu, China, before 2004.



PHOTOGRAPHED FROM WANG (2004) BY WEIQIAN

The bird remained in an area of about 20–30 m² until we left. The area in which it was feeding included camphor trees *Cinnamomum*, shrubs and a fence. It often fed in the understorey of shrubs, and jumped to the ground to pick up insects, turning over rotting leaves and searching for insects under them. A male Siberian Blue Robin *Luscinia cyane* was foraging in the same area and, in contrast to it, the Blackthroat spent less time feeding on the ground, but preferred resting and preening in the shade of the understorey. The two birds indulged in some territorial behaviour and chased each other from time to time when the Blackthroat appeared to be the more aggressive.

Discussion

The Blackthroat was considered to be a colour morph of the Firethroat *Luscinia pectardens* (Goodwin & Vaurie 1956), but this was rejected by Ripley (1958). At present it has full biological species status (BirdLife International 2001). However, it seems that the systematic and phylogenetic relationship among *Luscinia* species needs to be comprehensively revisited (Hartert 1907, Vaurie 1955, Ripley 1964, Stepanyan & Loskot 1998, Sangster *et al.* 2010).

The Blackthroat is one of the most enigmatic Asian species. Knowledge of its breeding biology, distribution and current conservation status remains

poorly documented and even the morphological description of the species is not complete, because the field identification of females and juveniles is still obscure. Our observations and photos represent the most recent and vivid information of this species and may arouse further interest in carrying out surveys on their breeding range. Moreover, our record suggests that the Chengdu plain may be within the species's spring migratory route.

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Wei Qian

Editorial office of China Bird Watch
Chengdu, 610000, China
Email: weiqian.bird@gmail.com

He Yi

Department of Blood Transfusion, Sichuan Provincial
People's Hospital, Chengdu, 610072, China
Email: trekerman@qq.com