Blue-rumped Pitta *Pitta soror annamensis*

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On the seasonality and distribution of Gurney's Pitta *Pitta gurneyi*

PHILIP D. ROUND

Since its rediscovery in 1986, almost nothing further has been published on the biology or conservation status of Gurney's Pitta *Pitta gurneyi*. Fieldwork carried out during 1987-1988 (Gretton *et al.* 1993) was restricted to the months March-August: there is an almost complete lack of information for other times of year.

This paper discusses the seasonal distribution of records based on data acquired during March 1990 to February 1993 at Khao Pra-Bang Khram Non-Hunting Area (Khao Nor Chuchi), Krabi and Trang provinces, peninsular Thailand.

The synthesis in Collar *et al.* (1986) implied that while Gurney's Pitta was probably present year-round in southern Thailand, with specimen records from all months except November and June, and a sight record involving a nesting pair in June, it was perhaps a seasonal non-breeding visitor to southern Myanmar (Burma). This was based on an examination of Burmese specimen records, which came from the months of December through June, combined with Davison's assertion (Hume and Davison 1878) that, in south Tenasserim, the species normally began to appear around 10 February; remained scarce until mid-April; became more numerous until the end of May and then disappeared with the onset of the monsoon. Some birds apparently stayed on into July. Thus for the months August to November inclusive, Gurney's Pitta was apparently absent from southern Myanmar and Davison speculated that Burmese birds went to breed 'probably to Siam or into the higher portions of the hills dividing Siam from Tenasserim'.

Year	1990-1991		1991-1992				1992-1993 Total
Month	seen	heard	seen	heard	seen	heard	
March	–	–	16	5	16	13	50
April	2	–	15	8	27	11	63
May	19	5	7	12	21	17	81
June	10	10	–	3	5	8	36
July	4	10	–	1	1	3	19
August	1	–	1	1	1	1	5
September	–	–	–	–	–	3	3
October	–	–	–	–	–	–	–
November	–	1	–	–	–	–	1
December	4	4	2	1	2		13
Janiuary	4	4	3	2	4	3	20
February	3	2	20	2	6	–	33

Note: observations of birds at a nest were only scored once, at time of discovery. Subsequent sightings of birds at the nest were discounted so as to avoid bias.

Table 1. Seasonal distribution of records of Gurney's Pittas at Khao Nor Chuchi, March 1990–February 1993

Coverage has been maintained year-round at Khao Nor Chuchi since March 1990 and all encounters with Gurney's Pitta (sightings and birds heard) logged (Table 1). Four further active nests were found during this period, all in June.

The seasonal pattern of registrations at Khao Nor Chuchi closely approximates to that shown for Myanmar: the frequency of encounters increased during December through February, peaked during the months March to May (when 60% of registrations occurred) and then declined thereafter. There was an almost complete dearth of records during August to November, only 2.7% of sightings falling within this period (Table 1). In other words, the period when Davison considered that birds were absent from Myanmar is when they also appeared to be largely absent from the Khao Nor Chuchi study area too, and coincides with the nesting and post-nesting period. Gretton *et al.* (1993) recorded a similar decline in detectability (based on calls) after the end of May.

To a slight extent differences in observer coverage have contributed to this seasonal variation in the frequency of sightings, since Khao Nor Chuchi received many more visiting birdwatchers, whose records contributed to these totals, during December to May than at other times. Nonetheless, the overall pattern remains clear.

If we are to accept that Gurney's Pitta is migratory, then it would have to be migratory throughout its entire Thai-Burmese range with the non-breeding quarters where the birds spend the period August to November being unknown. However, the continued presence of birds at Khao Nor Chuchi during this period, as indicated by a low frequency of encounters, combined with a nest record from Thung Song, Nakhon Si Thammarat

province, peninsular Thailand during October (Herbert 1924) would seem to exclude this possibility. Why should Gurney's Pitta need to migrate at all, since it inhabits the interior of forest and moist, shady, well-watered secondary growth, usually in close proximity to permanent water in small streams? No other Sundaic forest bird species shows a similar migratory pattern. Hooded Pitta *P. sordida* and Blue-winged Pitta *P. moluccensis*, both of which are migrants, instead are absent from Myanmar and Thailand during the dry season (November to April) but return to breed in the wet season, during May to October (Smythies 1986, Lekagul and Round 1991). It was suggested in Collar *et al.* (1986) that perhaps the extremely high rainfall in southern Tenasserim (now Mon State) and across the Thai border in Ranong (where over 800 mm of rain per month has been recorded during July-September), forced Gurney's Pitta to move elsewhere to nest, but this argument is unconvincing.

A much more likely explanation is that Gurney's Pitta is resident both in southern Myanmar and in Thailand, and that any apparent seasonal difference in numbers is due solely to changing detectability. At Khao Nor Chuchi, the onset of nesting coincides with a reduction in the frequency of vocalizing. Once nesting has commenced, the birds scarcely call at all unless alarmed and can be exceedingly difficult to detect: once the young have left the nest, we lose track of both adults and young completely. It thus seems more than likely that, in spite of his considerable, and perhaps unparalleled, field experience Davison may have overlooked Gurney's Pitta due to its reduced detectability during the nesting period.

In Collar *et al.* (1986) mention is also made of four Gurney's Pittas, including a nestling, said to have been taken on the mountain of Khao Phanom Bencha, Krabi at elevations of 600-1,060 m, by collectors for Meyer de Schauensee, and which constitute the only apparent records of Gurney's Pittas away from the lowlands or foothills. As mentioned by Round and Treesucon (1986), these records are highly doubtful and can almost certainly be discounted. Although, admittedly, there has been little, if any, further ornithological exploration of mountain slope habitats in peninsular Thailand since 1986, there are still no records of Gurney's Pittas higher than 140 m a.s.l. Besides, Gurney's Pitta, Meyer de Schauensee (1946) also listed Malayan Peacock-Pheasant *Polyplectron malacense*, Gould's Frogmouth *Batrachostomus stellatus*, Striped Wren-Babbler *Kenopia striata*, Chestnut-rumped Babbler *Stachyris maculata* and Black-throated Babbler *S. nigricollis* from the same mountain at elevations of 3,000-3,500 feet (914-1,067 m). All of these species are recognized today as being mainly or entirely restricted to forests of the lowlands throughout the Malay peninsula (Wells 1985 and *in litt.*, Round 1988).

Deignan (1955) has already commented on the dubious provenance of some of Meyer de Schauensee's specimens, and reported on bird specimens collected by 'a party of Asiatic collectors without supervision' from Khao

Luang, Prachuap Khiri Khan province at c. 11°40'N. Among these was a Mangrove Whistler *Pachycephala grisola* reported as having been taken at an elevation of 3,400 feet! Deignan, therefore, concluded that the collectors had falsified their data. It seems virtually certain, therefore, that Meyer de Schauensee's unsupervised collectors did likewise at Khao Phanom Bencha, simply pretending that certain specimens had been collected from the upper elevations of the mountain in order to avoid the exertion and discomfort of a wet-season ascent.

This paper thus provides some bad news, as well as some (qualified) good news. The bad news is that the fate of Gurney's Pitta continues to be entirely dependent on the fate of remaining lowland forest fragments within its range. The good news is that there may be reason to suppose that Gurney's Pitta nests in south Tenasserim (Mon State), as well as in Thailand, and efforts to survey remaining forests there should be accorded priority as part of any integrated package aimed at its conservation. Even if Gurney's Pitta should be proved to nest in south Tenasserim (Mon State), it will almost certainly be similarly at risk there, since Thai logging companies have been ravaging Burmese forests over the past few years. There are anecdotal reports of huge areas in Pakchan having been clear-cut since 1988. In addition, Myanmar lacks the kind of protected area infrastructure which exists in Thailand.

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Moustached Hawk-Cuckoo *Cuculus vagans* and Booted Eagle *Hieraeetus pennatus* in Laos: two species new for Indochina

WILLIAM DUCKWORTH

During a four-month wildlife survey of the Xe Piane proposed protected area in southern Laos (Thewlis *et al.* 1996), I found two bird species new to Indochina (Laos, Cambodia and Viet Nam). Xe Piane is a large area (2,400 km²) of mainly undegraded semi-evergreen forest on gently-rolling terrain.

Moustached Hawk-Cuckoo *Cuculus vagans*

On 10 December 1992 I was sitting quietly in an extensive area of bamboo-dominated forest (14°32'N 106°14'E. 150 m a.s.l.) when an evident cuckoo *Cuculus* crash-landed in a clump at eye level only 10 m away. Although in quite dense bamboo, the head and foreparts were completely unobscured. The distinctive face pattern was immediately striking: the crown was dark, contrasting with the pale cheeks, into which intruded a bold dark moustachial stripe and a dark crescent to the rear of the ear-coverts (vaguely reminiscent of a Eurasian Tree Sparrow *Passer montanus*). The white underparts were thickly streaked black on the breast. Also noticeable were a bright yellow eyering, yellow legs and the dark grey-brown upperparts, reminiscent of a female Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus*. After two minutes concentrating on what was visible, I shifted slightly to get a better angle on the bird, but it flew off out of sight.

The species is generally rather elusive and is not considered common anywhere within its known range - Java, Borneo, the Malay peninsula and south-east Thailand (King *et al.* 1975). A record in south-west Laos is not unexpected as the country is so poorly known. It is impossible to guess at the status of the species there, but in neighbouring Thailand it is thought to be an 'uncommon resident' (Lekagul and Round 1991).

Booted Eagle *Hieraaetus pennatus*

Around noon on 5 January 1993 I detected a distant medium-large raptor flying south-west at a height of perhaps 60 m over rice paddies near the vilage of Ban Phalay-bok (14°40'N 106°07'E). It passed lazily almost overhead in a blue sky with very strong sunlight. On first sighting it, I considered Eastern Marsh-Harrier *Circus spilonotus* and Black Kite *Milvus migrans*, but was rapidly strongly reminded of African Hawk-Eagle *H. spilogaster*. The proportions were rather average and the silhouette lacked striking features; among raptors of this size, the wings were relatively narrow for the length and