

## LITTLE-KNOWN ASIAN BIRD

# Second record of Rufous-headed Robin *Luscinia ruficeps* outside its breeding range and a description of its first-winter plumage

SIMON P. MAHOOD, JAMES A. EATON &amp; PAUL J. LEADER

**Introduction**

Rufous-headed Robin *Luscinia ruficeps* is a beautiful and enigmatic bird. It is known to breed only in the Min Shan range in northern Sichuan province and the Qinling Shan range in southern Shaanxi province, China, but has not been seen in the latter since 1905. Other than two records from Wanglang Nature Reserve and one from Huanglongsi Nature Reserve in the 1980s, all records since 1905 have come from two valleys in Juihaigou National Park, Sichuan province (BirdLife International 2001). Within this tiny distribution it is found between 2,400 m and 2,800 m and only in narrow valleys where it occupies areas that support heavily moss-clad successional habitat within deciduous woodland where the vegetation includes stands of riparian willow *Salix* (BirdLife International 2001). Records from breeding areas span the period mid-May to early August. Outside

its breeding grounds there is only one previous record: an adult male caught in a mist-net at 2,180 m on Batu Berinchang, Peninsular Malaysia on 15 March 1963 (McClure 1964).

All records of Rufous-headed Robin to date have been adult birds; the plumage of subadults is unrecorded (*contra* BirdLife International 2001: examination of photographs of the specimen referred to in that publication as an immature female *Luscinia ruficeps* indicates that it is an adult: moreover, it was collected on 6 July 1905, and all available evidence suggests that the species is unlikely to have fledged young by this date). To our knowledge, females have never before been photographed and indeed are very rarely seen, even on the breeding grounds. Here we document the second record of Rufous-headed Robin outside its breeding grounds, a first-year female, and propose criteria for the identification of subadult birds.

**Plate 1.** Rufous-headed Robin *Luscinia ruficeps*, Simon Mahood's garden, central Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 20 November 2012.





JAMES EATON

**Plate 3**, Rufous-headed Robin, 20 November 2012

**Plate 4**, Rufous-headed Robin, 18 November 2012



ROBERT MARTIN

### The first record for Cambodia

On 16 November 2012 SPM found a brown-coloured *Luscinia* in his small, urban garden in central Phnom Penh, Cambodia (11.558°N 104.931°E) and quickly took some photographs. Of the three *Luscinia* species previously recorded in Cambodia it was easy to eliminate Siberian Rubythroat *L. calliope* and Bluethroat *L. svecica* based on a rapid assessment of plumage, and the shape of the bird seemed wrong for Siberian Blue Robin *L. cyanea*, being well-proportioned and upright, and it did not shiver its tail like that species. Because of this, SPM checked carefully for the rufous tail that would indicate that it was Rufous-tailed Robin *L. sibilans* (unrecorded in Cambodia, but fairly common during winter in Vietnam). The bird was confiding and, with the naked eye from 2 m, SPM noticed that although the tail was the same colour as the back and wings, there was some rufous near the base of the tail or on the rump. The bird was dark, heavily scalloped below, and showed rufous tones on the face, particularly on the forecrown and supercilium in front of the eye.

Realising that this bird was probably not a Siberian Blue Robin and therefore must either be a Rufous-tailed Robin or something rarer, SPM downloaded the photographs that he had taken earlier. Unable to satisfactorily identify the bird, he

sent the photographs to JAE, questioning the features that appeared to rule out Siberian Blue Robin. SPM checked online photographs of Rufous-headed Robin (only photographs of adult males were available) and noted the rufous sides to the upper part of the outer tail-feathers. JAE pointed out that the first-winter plumage of Rufous-headed Robin was undescribed, advised SPM to contact PJJ and wrote 'I'm going for Rufous-headed Robin...'. SPM sent four photographs to PJJ who quickly responded 'I don't think that this is either a Siberian Blue Robin or a Rufous-tailed Robin...I would suggest you need to consider...Rufous-headed Robin'.

The bird was seen at intervals throughout the afternoon, feeding on mealworms (provided by SPM in the hope that it would stay long enough for better images to be obtained). Since the plumage of subadult Rufous-headed Robin was unknown, identification could only be based on the elimination of other species, structure, and extrapolation from adult plumages (MacKinnon & Phillipps 2000, Robson 2011). The bird was still present the next day when better views and photographs were obtained, and at this point it became clear that it could only be a Rufous-headed Robin. The bird then settled into a routine whereby it would feed actively on mealworms from soon after dawn until midday, resting periodically, bathing, preening and often allowing approach to about 30 cm. When resting the bird chose a broad, solid perch up to 30 cm above the ground, usually a plant pot, log or brick, typically in the darkest part of the garden. It rarely perched higher or on thin stems such as bamboo. It was extremely confiding, in contrast to its behaviour on the breeding grounds. It departed from the garden around midday and did not return until the next morning, but where it spent the afternoons and where it roosted was never discovered. It was last seen just prior to midday on 20 November 2012.

Plate 2. Rufous-headed Robin, 20 November 2012.



JAMES EATON

### Identification, ageing and sexing

Separation from Siberian Blue Robin and Rufous-tailed Robin was by plumage and bare-part features, reinforced by structure and behaviour. The legs were greyish-pink rather than pale flesh as in the other species. It showed six evenly spaced primary tips projecting beyond the tertials, the same number as Rufous-tailed Robin; Siberian Blue Robin shows seven. The Phnom Penh robin showed rufous uppertail-coverts and outer webs to the uppertail, a feature shown by adult Rufous-headed Robin but not by closely related species. The tail, mantle, back and wings were otherwise entirely mid-brown, although they could appear olive or even bluish-grey in certain lighting conditions. Face and underpart colouration did not match other *Luscinia*

species in any plumage. Rufous tones were visible on the head, particularly on the forecrown and supercilium in front of the eye, and to a lesser extent on the ear-coverts, crown and nape. The chin was whitish and the throat buff, scaled dark grey and enclosed by a narrow blackish border on the lower edge. The underparts were buff with smudgy, dark grey scaling. The bird was broadly similar in structure to Rufous-tailed Robin but slightly bulkier, whilst retaining a typical *Luscinia* elegance. It was not as dumpy, front-heavy, long-legged or short-tailed as Siberian Blue Robin. Unlike that species it did not quiver its tail but occasionally cocked and depressed it, a behaviour sometimes exhibited by birds on breeding grounds (JAE pers. obs.). Sometimes this was accompanied by head bobbing.

The bird was judged to be a first-winter based on the pale tips to the greater coverts, with less obvious pale tips on the tertials, like other closely related *Luscinia* species (Leader 2009). Although the first-year plumage of Blackthroat *L. obscura* is also undescribed, this species was considered unlikely based on the rufous uppertail-coverts and the absence of any plumage features indicating that it belonged to that species. In addition, photographs on Oriental Bird Images of adult male and female Blackthroat on the breeding grounds all show birds with distinctly grey legs. Based on extrapolation from other *Luscinia* species this feature is unlikely to be dependent on age or time of year and should serve as a good identification pointer for Blackthroat outside the breeding grounds, even in subadult plumages.

The bird was judged to be a female because it lacked any suggestion of the distinctive adult male plumage and the upperpart colouration was as in the adult female. In common with other members of the genus, it is likely that first-year Rufous-headed Robins moult some or all of the contour feathering, rump, uppertail-coverts, lesser, median and greater coverts, and scapulars. These moulted feathers would then be adult-like, making a first-year male Rufous-headed Robin very distinctive.

## Discussion

This constitutes only the second record of Rufous-headed Robin outside its breeding grounds. Because the bird was present for only five days it was probably still on passage to the wintering grounds. The 1963 record and inference from the distribution of passage and winter records of more abundant migratory species from central China, such as Green-backed Flycatcher *Ficedula (narcissina) elisae*, Zappey's Flycatcher *Cyanoptila cumatilis* (Leader & Carey 2012) and Brown-chested Jungle Flycatcher *Rhinomyias brunneata*, indicate that Peninsular Malaysia might constitute the wintering grounds for

Rufous-headed Robin (but note that the main breeding range of these species is further east than that of Rufous-headed Robin). The 2012 Phnom Penh record does not contradict this supposition, since the city is located approximately between the breeding grounds and Peninsular Malaysia and it coincided with two records of Green-backed Flycatcher.

In Indochina, passage records of breeding migrants from central China are few. However, the scant data available indicate that there is nothing unusual about the time of occurrence of the Phnom Penh Rufous-headed Robin. Green-backed Flycatcher has been recorded three times in Cambodia on 19 or 20 November (F. Goes *in litt.*, R. Martin *in litt.*, SPM pers. obs.).

The discovery of Rufous-headed Robin in an urban environment does not diminish the mystery surrounding the species. It is an extremely poorly-known species on its breeding grounds, where until thorough surveys are conducted it is impossible to know if it is genuinely very rare and localised or merely under-recorded. The dearth of records outside the breeding season perhaps indicates that the population is small. Alternatively it is plausible that it has a small non-breeding range or is restricted to locations and habitats in which there are few observers. In South-East Asia outside of Thailand passerines on passage are grossly under-recorded. This is demonstrated by the dramatic upsurge in Brown-chested Jungle Flycatcher records in Hanoi since 2010, which is thought to be directly associated with increased observer enthusiasm and awareness (Mahood *et al.* in press). Assuming that the species overwinters in Peninsular Malaysia it probably migrates through Thailand, hence the lack of records from that country adds weight to the notion that it is scarce. However, the *Luscinias* are typically found in dense bushy or forested environments, and are skulking and hence difficult to observe. Adult female and first-year Rufous-headed Robins might also be relatively easy to confuse with other species, especially as many birdwatchers would not be expecting to encounter the species. However, adult males (and probably first-year males) are unmistakable and therefore the theory that the paucity of non-breeding records is due to identification difficulties cannot be entirely true.

We urge birdwatchers and photographers throughout southern China and South-East Asia to be vigilant to the possibility of encountering Rufous-headed Robin and other rarer *Luscinias* on passage and on their wintering grounds. More observers including photographers taking images of ground-dwelling skulkers that defy immediate identification may lead to an increase in the number of records of Rufous-headed Robin. The same is true for

Blackthroat, which should also be identifiable outside its breeding areas, even in the unknown first-year plumages. The latter is particularly likely to occur in northern Thailand where it has already been recorded (BirdLife International 2001).

We hope that the information presented here will facilitate the identification of first-year Rufous-headed Robin. This record demonstrates again that rare migrants may be found even in familiar and unexpected locations.

### Acknowledgements

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Simon P. MAHOOD  
Wildlife Conservation Society Cambodia Programme  
House 21, Street 21, Sangkat Tonle Bassac  
Phnom Penh, Cambodia  
Email: smahood@wcs.org

James A. EATON  
A-3A-5, Casa Indah I, Persiaran Surian  
Kota Damansara, Selangor, 47410, Malaysia  
Email: jameseaton@birdtourasia.com

Paul J. LEADER  
AEC Ltd., 127 Commercial Centre  
Palm Springs, New Territories, Hong Kong  
Email: pjl@aechk.hk



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