

Eared Pitta *Pitta phayrei*: a new species for Bangladesh and the Indian subcontinent

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During a visit to Bangladesh the opportunity was taken to investigate the birds of one of the few tracts of forest remaining in the country.

The Lowacherra Forest Reserve is located 8 km north-east of Srimangal (91°28'E 24°16'N). The forest is readily accessible by a bitumen road and by rail, both of which pass through the seriously degraded forest. Dozens of local people were seen cutting the medium-sized trees, leaving a forest that is rather open in the mid strata, but with many old trees still standing. The tree-felling was going on unchecked by the authorities.

The forest was visited for several hours in the late afternoon, and from the early morning until noon on the following day. This revealed that the avifauna is rather diverse, with many typical forest dwelling species. Due to the rather open mid strata the observations of true forest species were relatively unhindered, and revealed species such as Blue-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctyornis athertoni*, Red-headed Trogon *Harpactes erythrocephalus*, Lineated Barbet *Megalaima lineata*, Blue-throated Barbet *Megalaima asiatica*, Blue-eared Barbet *M. australis*, Rufous Woodpecker *Celeus brachyurus*, Greater Yellow-nape *Picus flavinucha*, Lesser Yellow-nape *P. chlorolophus* and Grey-headed Woodpecker *P. canus*. Also, more skulking species such as babblers, the pitta in question and Kalij Pheasant *Lophura leucomelanos* were encountered. A list of the species seen is provided.

The observation of Eared Pitta *Pitta phayrei* is the most interesting, as this sighting is new for Bangladesh and the Indian subcontinent (not included in Ali and Ripley 1987 or Harvey 1990). However, this observation is not too surprising, as this elusive bird can be readily overlooked, especially in an underwatched country such as Bangladesh. The species is found in Myanmar in rainforest, secondary forest and scrub in Upper Madaya reserved forest in Mandalay District, and in the Pegu Hills. The closest previous occurrence is thus approximately 500 km away. The species is also known from Xiao Mengyang, Yunnan, near the Laotian border in south-eastern China. It has recently also been reported from Hainan, China. The species is believed to be rare over most of its range, which includes Thailand and Indochina.

The Eared Pitta was a juvenile, with papillae in the corners of the mouth, and this strongly suggests that the species breeds in the area. The bird was seen at very close range and did not seem to be shy, although it kept at a distance of about 5 m. It was observed searching for food in a rotten snag within an area of many thin trees in an otherwise, open leaf-littered forest floor. The bird was observed for at least 15 minutes and a sketch was made. The bird was more uniformly coloured than adult birds. The scaly superciliary feathers were already developed into 'ears' and coloured light buffy and fringed dark chocolate brown. The uniformly buffy feathers on the throat and sides of the head were small and incompletely developed, resembling spines.

Below the throat, the feathers were scaled dark brown and white. The breast and most of the belly was uniform rufescent colour, with scattered, faint spots at the tip of some of the feathers, especially on the breast. The back was rather uniform, ochraceous to rusty brown, with pale spots on the scapulars. The bill was stout and brownish, darker at the edges and the tip, and paler ochraceous buff at the base. The tail was apparently absent. The overall impression was that this could only be an Eared Pitta; this was subsequently confirmed by comparison with the illustration of an immature in Lambert and Woodcock (1996).

The time of the year of this observation is consistent with that of the only other immature bird known, collected on 28 October and in the collection of the Natural History Museum, Tring, U.K.

Also seen in the forest were Pig-tailed Macaques *Macaca nemestrina* and at least two calling groups of Hoolock Gibbons *Hylobates hoolock*.

List of other birds observed during the 1996 visit to the Lowacherra forest reserve:

Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus*
 Kalij Pheasant *Lophura leucomelanos*
 Grey-headed Woodpecker *Picus canus*
 Greater Yellow-nape *Picus flavinucha*
 Lesser Yellow-nape *Picus chlorolophus*
 Common Flameback *Dinopium javanense*
 Lineated Barbet *Megalaima lineata*
 Blue-throated Barbet *Megalaima asiatica*
 Blue-eared Barbet *Megalaima australis*
 Red-headed Trogon *Harpactes erythrocephalus*
 Blue-bearded Bee-eater *Nyctyornis athertoni*
 Green-billed Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus tristis*
 Great Eared Nightjar *Eurostopodus macrotis*
 Emerald Dove *Chalcophaps indica*
 Thick-billed Green Pigeon *Treron curvirostra*
 Asian Fairy Bluebird *Irena puella*
 Golden-fronted Leafbird *Chloropsis aurifrons*
 Common Green Magpie *Cissa chinensis*
 Rufous Treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*
 Grey Treepie *Dendrocitta formosae*
 Black-hooded Oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*
 Small Minivet *Pericrocotus cinnamomeus*
 Short-billed Minivet *Pericrocotus brevirostris*
 Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike *Hemipus picatus*
 Bronzed Drongo *Dicrurus aeneus*
 Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus*
 Black-naped Monarch *Hypothymis azurea*
 Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia*
 Asian Paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone paradisi*
 Brown-breasted Flycatcher *Muscicapa muttui*
 Red-throated Flycatcher *Ficedula parva*
 Chestnut-tailed Starling *Sturnus malabaricus*
 Black-crested Bulbul *Pycnonotus melanicterus*
 Red-vented Bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*
 White-throated Bulbul *Alophoixus flaveolus*

Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*
 Greater Necklaced Laughingthrush *Garrulax pectoralis*
 Abbott's Babbler *Malacocincla abbotti*
 Puff-throated Babbler *Pelloroneum ruficeps*
 Rufous-capped Babbler *Stachyris ruficeps*
 Brown-cheeked Fulvetta *Alcippe poiocephala*
 Nepal Fulvetta *Alcippe nipalensis*
 White-bellied Yuhina *Yuhina zantholeuca*
 Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum cruentatum*
 Purple-throated Sunbird *Nectarinia sperata*
 Little Spiderhunter *Arachnothera longirostra*
 Black-headed Munia *Lonchura malacca*

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World record count of roosting harriers *Circus* in Blackbuck National Park, Velavadar, Gujarat, north-west India

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The existence of a large, regular winter roost of harriers *Circus* at Blackbuck National Park, Velavadar, Bhavnagar District, Gujarat, north-west India, has been known since at least the mid 1980s, and assessments of the numbers of birds present at peak times have ranged up to 2,000 birds (Clarke 1996). In 1997, the numbers of birds roosting at Velavadar were clearly very high as early as September, and on 6 December from 16h30 we positioned teams on three (south, west and north) of the four sides of the grassland roosting area and counted the birds entering from those three directions. Wind force amounted to about 1 on the Beaufort Scale, from the south and, although there was a 9/10 cover of hazy cloud, the light was bright and visibility was clear.

The total of harriers counted was slightly in excess of 2,500. Given that we did not have the manpower to cover the fourth side, and the fact that some birds had entered the grassland before we began counting, it seems reasonable to conclude that more than 3,000 birds attended the roost. The great majority were Montagu's Harriers *C. pygargus*, but perhaps 15-25% were Pallid Harriers *C. macrourus* and a few were Eurasian Marsh Harriers *C. aeruginosus*.

The monsoon rains upon which the rain-fed agriculture of this semi-arid region depends had been good in 1997, and this had probably resulted in a high population of Orthoptera on which many of the harriers attending this roost feed (especially Montagu's - Clarke 1996). The principal Orthopteran present was the Tree Locust *Anacridium rubrispinum*. The Desert Locust *Schistocerca gregaria* is said to occur spasmodically in the region, but was not noted there in late 1997.

The pattern of arrival of the harriers from the south differed significantly from that from the west and north, with 76% of birds from the south present by 18h05 but only 54% of birds from the west and 56% of birds from the north. Arrivals peaked between 18h05 and 18h10, but fell off markedly during the following 10 minutes, and ceased by 18h25. Sunset occurred at about 17h56. It is not known what proportions of birds had been pre-roosting close by and what proportion were flying in from further afield, but the great majority flew in directly and quite low. One notable concentration of thermalling harriers drifted over into the grassland from the south-west.

This roost was three times the size of the largest harrier roosts documented elsewhere in recent times - in Africa (1,000 birds - Cormier and Baillon 1991) and in the USA (1,053 birds - McCurdy *et al.* 1995), and appears to be the largest ever documented roost of harriers in the world.

Using the 1% population criterion accepted in many situations for assessing the importance of sites attracting bird concentrations, this roost could well qualify as significant on the world scale. The size of the Asian breeding population of Montagu's Harrier is unknown, but as the area of the breeding distribution of the species in Asia is roughly equivalent to that in Europe, then it may be reasonable to double the European figure to arrive at an estimate of the world breeding population. The figures for breeding pairs (or nests) in Europe in both Clarke (1996) and Hagemeyer and Blair (1997) broadly agree (apart from a very low figure for Spain in the latter and an error multiplying the total European