

## Rediscovery of the Oriental Bay-Owl *Phodilus badius* in peninsular India

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The Oriental Bay-Owl *Phodilus badius* is an enigma in Indian ornithology. Three disjunct, widely separated populations exist, and the bird is apparently very rare in all three areas. What little that is known about the species is from occasional observations of the northern race *P. b. saturatus*, the range of which extends from Sikkim through Manipur to Viet Nam. Of the other two populations, *P. b. ripleyi* apparently occurs in a very small section of the southern Western Ghats of India. Until recently it was known only from a single specimen taken at Periasolai (10°36'N 76°40'E) in the Nelliampathy Hills, Kerala (Hussain and Khan 1978). The third race, *P. b. assimilis*, occurs in Sri Lanka, whence it is known from about a dozen specimens.

On 14 February 1992 my tribal field assistant Natarajan, while leading a group of tourists inside Karian Shola, a well-known patch of forest in the Anaimalai Hills, came across an Oriental Bay-Owl sleeping on the limb of a small tree in deep evergreen forest. The bird was photographed and I was able to confirm the identification from the prints. This record was from about 30 m to the west of the Tamil Nadu - Kerala border, in the Sungam range of Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary (10°28'N 76°50'E). The spot is about 1.2 km from Top Slip town in Tamil Nadu. Natarajan informed me that one of the members of the group poked the sleeping bird with a long stick, resulting in the bird opening its eyes briefly before going back to sleep. On further disturbance the bird reluctantly took flight and settled elsewhere. This incident lends support to the statement in Ali and Ripley (1987) that it 'Is greatly incommoded by, and practically helpless in daylight'.

I combed the area next day with Natarajan, but failed to see the bird. From then on I kept a sharp look-out for the species during daily forays inside Karian Shola and, on 6 April, in deep evergreen forest along the trail towards Pandaravarai Hill, I spotted an Oriental Bay-Owl perched on the rim of a tree-hole about 10 m up. I made a careful field sketch and showed the bird to my tribal tracker, Velli. The most striking feature of this handsome owl is the broad V extending across the flat pale face. The little ear-tufts and faint spots on the breast could be seen with binoculars. It stared at me with half-open eyes for a while and then, almost imperceptibly shuffled deeper into the cavity. This sighting was about 1 km north-east of the February record, within the Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary, Tamil Nadu. I presume that these two sightings relate to different individuals, considering the time and distance between the two encounters. The fact that a careful search for the bird was successful in finding it suggests that it may be more common than

is believed - it may well have been overlooked due to its strictly nocturnal habits and the low density of populations. It may occur further south in sanctuaries such as Kalakkad (Tamil Nadu) and Periyar (Kerala), where similar habitat exists. A thorough, systematic survey is needed to ascertain the true status and distribution of this subspecies.

The Periasolai area in the Nelliampathies, where the type specimen was collected in a coffee estate, was largely 'wet evergreen forest' (Hussain and Khan 1978), but is now a vast clearing with tapioca plantations (K. Subban, Tamil Nadu Forest Department, verbally). Much of the Nelliampathy Hills are now denuded but the Anamalais, with two wildlife sanctuaries covering over 1,250 km<sup>2</sup>, enjoy better protection, especially with the recent elevation of Karian Shola to the status of a National Park. This must be important for the survival of this rare owl, which is only known from the Anamalai-Nelliampathy hills.

I thank Natarajan for first reporting the species to me and for presenting the photograph to me; Arul Jothi for his description from the February sighting; and to V. Santharam, K. K. Neelakantan and Z. Futehally for their comments and suggestions.

This note is dedicated to the late Professor Neelakantan for his contributions to the ornithology of Kerala. He reviewed this manuscript but, unfortunately, did not live to see it in print.

#### REFERENCES

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- R. Kannan, *Hornbill Project, Indira Gandhi Wildlife Sanctuary, Top Slip 642 141 (via) Pollachi, India.*

## Black-billed Magpie *Pica pica*: a new species for Thailand

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On 7 and 8 April, 1989, Julia Watola and I watched a Black-billed Magpie *Pica pica* at Doi Ang Khang, north Thailand. It was present at 10h00 on both occasions, perched in a small leafless tree about 30 m from the road. When we stopped to observe it more closely, it flew off giving a chatter I knew as

characteristic of the species.

The bird's size, slightly larger than Green Magpie *Cissa chinensis*, black and white plumage, and long graduated tail made it unmistakable. I had no doubt as to its identity, being familiar with the species in Britain and Europe.

I observed it through 8x40 binoculars and took brief notes on a mini-cassette recorder. The black head and breast, white belly and scapulars, and white wing flashes in flight were all noted. There do not appear to be any similar species in South-east Asia mentioned in King *et al.* (1975).

At the time I did not realise the significance of this record, having seen Eurasian Jays *Garrulus glandarius* on Doi Inthanon a few days before, and I had erroneously assumed that Black-billed Magpies had a similar status in Thailand. I had also seen the plate of Black-billed Magpie and *Corvus* species in King *et al.* (1975) and this reinforced my view! On reading King *et al.* (1975) more closely on our return home, I was surprised to see that the Black-billed Magpie had not actually been recorded in Thailand, and was found only as close as northern Laos and eastern Myanmar.

P. D. Round (*in litt.* 1989), stated that the Black-billed Magpie is not found in the Shan States across the border in Myanmar, but it 'could be a species extending its range with deforestation'.

While this is the first record of Black-billed Magpie for Thailand, the ever-increasing records of new species for that country may indicate that lack of observers rather than vagrancy is responsible for the limited sightings of some species. There have been hardly any observations of birds in Myanmar and Laos in recent years, and some open country species such as the Black-billed Magpie may be more widespread than realised.

#### REFERENCE

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## Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*: a new species for Thailand

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On 27 December 1991, Peter Cuerel and Somsri Thongsatja were birdwatching at Chiang Saen Lake (20°15'N 100°03'E), Chiang Rai Province, Thailand, when they found a drake Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*.

The lake is situated about 8 km south-west of the town of Chiang Saen, 4-5 km from the Mekong River and about 25 km due south of the most northerly point in Thailand. On 26 December we had been taken to a secluded bay by local people. This bay contained a large number of ducks and although nothing exceptional was seen, it was noticed that there was a considerable movement of birds in the area, with several large groups of ducks being seen in flight over the surrounding countryside. We therefore returned to the site on the following day.

At about 15h00 on 27 December, PC was searching through a flock of about 600 ducks using a telescope (magnification 30x) at a range of approximately 150 m. The species present were mainly Lesser Whistling-Duck *Dendrocygna javanica*, with good numbers of Garganey *Anas querquedula* and Northern Pintail *A. acuta*, together with some Common Teal *A. crecca*. It was hoped that the search might produce a Thai rarity such as Gadwall *A. strepera*. Instead, however, a familiar bird was seen and quickly identified as a drake Mallard *A. platyrhynchos* in breeding plumage. The bird remained in view for about 1 3/4 hours, mainly resting. It flew briefly, once, during a disturbance, but travelled only about 20 m. It remained in the same general area in which it was first sighted. The identification was checked by consulting King *et al.* (1975), for the benefit of ST. Notes were taken and used to compile the description given below.

A medium or large-sized duck, appearing about the size of a Northern Pintail, but with a slightly heavier build. The large bill was yellowish, with a touch of green and was darker on the nostrils. The head and neck were entirely dark green, and a narrow white collar at the base of the neck separated these areas from the body. The breast was dark brown, dull with no sheen, but with some lighter speckling. The folded wings and upperparts visible while the bird was at rest appeared pale grey, with some light brown marks. The back was light brownish and the rear end of the body was black with some white visible in the tail. The underparts were whitish and the legs and feet were orange. A very dark bluish speculum, edged with white at the front and rear, was visible in flight. An unexpected feature was that the eye was yellow instead of dark; the latter colour is typical of the Mallard at all stages.