1: River near Atapuan at 1,200 m, habitat for the endemic Luzon Water Redstart *Rhyacornis bicolor*. (Photo: Michael Køie Poulsen)

2: Deforested mountains beyond Mt Pulog National Park. (Photo: Michael Køie Poulsen)

3: Luzon Water Redstart *Rhyacornis bicolor*, Mt Pulog National Park. (Photo: Michael Køie Poulsen)

**Figure 1:** Map showing localities where Luzon Water Redstart has been recorded, namely:
1 Talubin bridge; 2 Mt Polis; 3 Banaue; 4 Mt Data; 5 Lagawe Gorge; 6 Lutab; 7 Kabayan; 8 Mt Pulog National Park; 9 La Trinidad; 10 Irisan; 11 Baguio; 12 Bued River canyon; 13 Dalton Pass; 14 Naganduyan; 15 Mt Palanan; 16 unspecified site in Quirino subprovince; 17 Maria Aurora Memorial National Park; 18 Dioksi; 19 Tilago; and 20 Mt Roosevelt.
Little-known Oriental bird
Luzon Water Redstart *Rhyacornis bicolor*

Nigel Collar gives an overview of the status and distribution of a threatened Philippine endemic streamside species about which still much needs to be learned on its distribution and ecology.

Birds colonised the Philippine archipelago by several routes. Some came up from Sulawesi or else Borneo, and some came down across the South China Sea from Asia. In some cases the invaders clearly spread everywhere, but in others they got no further than the first main island they reached. We see this in the Crossbill *Loxia curvirostra* on Luzon and Mindanao Lorikeet *Trichoglossus johnstoni* on Mindanao, two forms whose ancestors derived from lands further north and further south respectively. The Luzon Water Redstart *Rhyacornis bicolor* falls into this pattern, as it shows only minor development – colours more intense, chestnut more extensive on the belly, female like a pale male rather than having a distinct plumage – from an immigrant stock of Plumbeous Water Redstarts *R. fuliginosus*, a species that ranges from the Himalayas through most of China onto Taiwan² but whose representatives, on reaching and speciating on Luzon, apparently went no further.

However, while Plumbeous Water Redstart is a familiar enough species for most Asian birdwatchers, Luzon Water Redstart is decidedly not. This is in part a consequence of the relative scarcity of ornithological attractions in the highlands of Luzon, but it is also true that those highlands are not always easy of access and that the target species is nothing like so easy to encounter. It certainly has a highly restricted range, whose core (sites 1-13 on Figure 1) covers an area no bigger than Yorkshire in the U.K., and outside of this area the chances of finding it seem – although perhaps this is only an illusion – to be very small indeed.

It was the indefatigable explorer John Whitehead who, arriving at La Trinidad in Benguet on the last day of 1893,³⁶ found the first Luzon Water Redstart a few days later as he prospected the adjacent area, his collector shooting one ‘among some huge boulders in a mountain-torrent’.³⁸ A year later he penetrated further north to Mt Data and re-encountered the species in good numbers, collecting 14 specimens in as many days, at 1,500 to 1,820 m! D. S. Rabor was to find the water redstart on Data again in April–May 1946,³ but since then nobody appears even to have looked.

In the first decade of the century the species was found at four more sites (Lutab, Irisan, Baguio and the Bued River canyon) in Benguet, and in 1948 at another (Kabayan).³ At none of these places, however, has it been reported subsequently. In the 1960s four birds were collected at Dalton Pass, but no evidence of large-scale intra-island movement was discovered as it was for certain other Philippine endemic species.³⁴ Nobody appears to have recorded the bird in the 1970s, but then came the era of the birdwatcher. Tim Fisher found birds at Banaue in Ifugao province in 1981 and south of Mt Data at Lagawe Gorge in 1985.³⁶ Thereafter records came from Talubin Bridge just north of Mt Polis,³⁷ from Mt Polis itself,³⁷ notably at Bay-yo, and from Mt Pulog in the national park at several sites.³⁸ Mt Polis, Banaue and Mt Pulog have proved to be the places at which visiting birders have been successful in finding the species in the 1990s.

We certainly tend to think of the Luzon Water Redstart as a bird of the Cordillera Central (localities 1–13 in Figure 1). However, the situation is more complicated. To begin with, there have been records from five sites in the Sierra Madre (localities 14–18 in Figure 1) since 1982 three of them during 1997. Then, much more surprising, the Philippine National Museum proves to possess two specimens collected in the 1960s on Mindoro – one at Tilago near the west coast (surprisingly low but presumably some way inland) in June 1965, and one on Mt Roosevelt in July 1963. Aldrin Mallari found the skins in April 1996 when Dr Pedro Gonzales kindly allowed us full access to the collection to work on *Threatened birds of the Philippines*; for 35 years this notable range extension went unpublished, emerging for the first time in a table of restricted-range species in BirdLife’s *Endemic Bird Areas of the world* earlier this year.³⁹

So the Luzon Water Redstart is not a Luzon endemic after all. The questions of course now must be (a) whether the birds on Mindoro represented residents or migrants, and (b) whether the species occurs even more widely. Although we tend to think of the Philippines as reasonably well known, thanks in large part to another indefatigable
As with so many other species in the Philippines, we need much more information, much more long-term study, much clearer understanding of ecological needs and circumstances, before we can better judge how to classify and how to manage the ecological needs and circumstances before we can search for suitable habitat in mountains away from Luzon Water Redstart. Birdwatchers can help by studying the known sites, revisiting some of the old ones in Benguet, seeking to obtain population estimates on stretches of stream, making note of the birds' feeding habits, and documenting the state of the local environment. Ultimately, however, the survival of the species will depend on the elimination of economic activities that are incompatible not only with the ecology of the water redstart but also with the health and safety of the human populations who depend on the water resources of the region.

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