Taxonomic notes on some Asian babblers (Timaliidae)

N. J. COLLAR

A reconsideration of the taxonomy of Asian babblers (Timaliidae) (Collar 2006) indicated that much work remains to be done. Here I briefly pursue various issues, for which I examined specimens of birds in the American Museum of Natural History, New York (AMNH), Natural History Museum, Tring, UK (BMNH), Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris (MNHN), Philippine National Museum, Manila (PNM), National Museum of Natural History, Washington DC (USNM), and Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology, Caramillo, California (WFVZ), following a system for assessing species limits outlined in Collar (2006), modified and advanced by Tobias et al. (2010). Differences between taxa in morphological characters are graded such that an exceptional one scores 4, major 3, medium 2, minor 1, and scores are allowed for a maximum of three morphological characters (others are mentioned, with the letters ‘u’ for ‘unscored’, but with the putative score I judge appropriate in square brackets), two vocal characters, two biometric characters (assessed for effect size using Cohen’s d where >0.2 triggers minor, >0.5 medium, >0.75 major and >1.5 exceptional) and one behavioural or ecological character. A total score reaching or exceeding the threshold of 7 qualifies the taxon for species status (further details in Tobias et al. 2010). An online calculator (http://www.uccs.edu/~faculty/lbecker/) was used to determine Cohen’s d effect sizes. Measurements (bill tip to skull, wing curved) were taken in millimetres, and differences between taxa were compared using two-tailed t-tests.

Rhinocichla (mitrata) treacheri as a species

Judgement on the validity of this split came too late for inclusion in Collar (2006), and it was made without supporting justification in Collar & Robson (2007).

The form treacheri (Borneo) differs from nominate mitrata (Peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra) in its orbital ring being yellow and incomplete, not white and complete (3), ear-covert and nape chestnut, not grey (2), upper submoustachial and interarmal area chestnut, not black, and greater extent of chestnut on chin (2), underparts ochreish and with shaft-streaks (u [1]), narial feathering, lores and superciliary area paler chestnut (u [1]), and forecrown-blaze greyer (u [1]), total 7. Mensural differences are very slight (10 of each taxa examined). Photographs in Pilgrim et al. (2009:30) show the most salient of these characters well.

Liocichla (phoenicea) ripponi as a species

Again, judgement of the specific status of L. ripponi came too late for presentation in Collar (2006), and the split in Collar & Robson (2007) was without justification.

The form ripponi (with wellsii) differs from nominate phoenicea (with bakeri) in having the crimson of the face and black lateral crown-stripe replaced by much brighter scarlet extending clearly over the eye, onto the lores and over the malar area onto the chin (3), crown grey (2), upperparts greyer (u [1]), underparts markedly paler and buffy-grey (2), undertail buffy-grey with an orange wash (where phoenicea is bronzy-red (u [1])), and a longer tail (phoenicea/bakeri mean 100.3 ± 3.31, n = 10 phoenicea, 10 bakeri; ripponi/wellsii 107.3 ± 3.58, n = 10 ripponi, 11 wellsii; effect size = 2.05) (2), total score 9. (While all phoenicea material was unsexed and most wellsii, which is rare in collections, were male, the sample for bakeri and ripponi consisted of five males and five females, and while females averaged smaller than males the differences were too slight to suggest that sexual bias in the other taxa could have affected mensural comparisons.)

Delacour (1933:88) reported that specimens in BMNH indicate that the forms ripponi and bakeri intergrade in the ‘Kauri-Kachin tract’ in Upper Burma. I have checked the Myanmar material held in BMNH and can find only a single skin, 1905.8.16.156 (taken by G. Rippon in the said tract; undated), which might be interpreted as an intergrade, owing to its rather poorly differentiated crown and underparts: indeed its facial and undertail colours and patterns are as in ripponi (whether the red meets on the throat cannot be judged as this area is abraded to the skin) while its measurements are those of bakeri (tail 99 mm). It is difficult to know what to make of this specimen, which is in very poor condition, but a zone of hybridisation or intergradation is allowed for by Tobias et al. (2010); species status for ripponi is not invalidated.
By comparison with Short-tailed Scimitar Babbler J. danjoui, ‘Naung Mung Scimitar Babbler’ was found to possess a ‘longer bill, tarsus, hallux, and hallux nail…; single, thick, black malar stripe, rather than two thin dark stripes separated by a white stripe; absence of rufous breast band; brown rather than rusty sides and flanks’; and was consequently accorded species status (Rappole et al. 2005). However, the measurements of J. naungmungensis in Table 2 of Rappole et al. (2005) were at variance with those given in the text for the holotype (holotype: bill ‘33.5’, tarsus ‘30’, wing ‘78’, tail ‘52’; range of measurements of naungmungensis material in Table 2: bill ‘38.2–39.2’, tarsus ‘33.3–44.0’, wing ‘70.5–77.7’, tail ‘40.2–47.6’), the data on hallux and hallux nail were nowhere presented, and the ‘malar stripe’, as illustrated on the cover of the issue of Auk containing the description, proved to be a thick black moustachial line above a white submoustachial stripe and a very narrow black malar line, a configuration found in J. danjoui parvirostris (Collar & Pilgrim 2007). Because of these confounding factors, and given the considerable similarity of the taxa, Collar and Robson (2007) preferred to place naungmungensis as a subspecies of J. danjoui (using the genus Rimator), I have examined and measured two specimens (including the holotype; both female) of J. naungmungensis available in USNM and compared them directly with three specimens of nominate danjoui in the same museum. The new form is certainly darker and colder in upper and flank coloration than nominate danjoui. The blackish moustachial and malar lines, separated by a narrow whitish submoustachial, are stronger and bolder than in danjoui, where they are mid-brown and pale buff respectively, although the photograph of a live specimen of naungmungensis in Martens & Bahr (2007), reproduced in Collar & Pilgrim (2007), suggests that the markings are not as heavy as depicted on the cover of Auk (also reproduced in Collar & Pilgrim 2007) or in the illustration in Collar & Robson (2007). The bill and legs appear more blackish and the bill is somewhat more decurved. However, the measurements given in Table 2 of the type description are indeed seriously awry (so much so that I sought independent confirmation of my own measurements). Rappole et al. (2005) wrote: ‘The main differences between the two… are in body shape… naungmungensis has a longer, more decurved bill…, a longer wing, a shorter tail [and] a longer tarsus…’ In reality, however, naungmungensis is mensurally very close to danjoui: Table 1 shows my sample of two specimens nesting inside the ranges of 11 danjoui for bill, tarsus and wing, and with an overlap in tail length.

There is no doubt that naungmungensis is darker than other taxa in danjoui (score 1, which includes bare-part differences), with stronger-marked moustachial and indeed malar lines (1), and a faint ochreish breast-band (but this is a soft-edged wash, variable in intensity, in danjoui, not a sharply defined, obviously consistent feature) (2, which is perhaps generous). However, a score of 4 is insufficient to achieve species status for naungmungensis. Newly published vocal evidence and some revised mensural data on naungmungensis do not affect this assessment: Rappole et al. (2008) acknowledged that a published description of J. danjoui sounds quite similar to what we heard from J. naungmungensis’, and their measurements for the first reported male naungmungensis (bill 32.3, tarsus 32, wing 74, tail 55) show it to be largely consistent with the range I found for J. d. danjoui (Table 1).

A new subspecies of Siva cyanouroptera

All seven specimens in BMNH and MNHN assigned to Siva cyanouroptera orientalis from the Boloven (Bolovens) Plateau in Laos (BMNH 1932.5.14.131, 159, 161; MNHN 1933.131, 132, 195, 196) are morphologically distinguishable from specimens of orientalis from Annam in adjacent Vietnam.

Siva cyanouroptera wirthi subsp. nov.

Diagnosis.—Very like S. c. orientalis but with an ochre-tinged buff wash to the back, rump and uppertail-coverts (thus rather warmer than the cold pale mouse-brown of orientalis), and mensurally somewhat smaller (Table 2).

Table 2. Measurements (mean ± standard error in mm) of Siva cyanouroptera wirthi and S. c. orientalis. Sample of wirthi involved four males, one female and two unsexed; of orientalis three males, five females and two unsexed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Taxon</th>
<th>Bill</th>
<th>Tarsus</th>
<th>Wing</th>
<th>Tail</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wirthi</td>
<td>14.9 ± 0.34</td>
<td>22.3 ± 0.29</td>
<td>62.4 ± 0.65</td>
<td>72.6 ± 1.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>orientalis</td>
<td>16.3 ± 0.30</td>
<td>21.9 ± 0.38</td>
<td>64.6 ± 0.73</td>
<td>76.4 ± 0.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>t</td>
<td>3.18</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>2.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>0.0069</td>
<td>0.0039</td>
<td>0.043</td>
<td>0.047</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Type specimen.—BMNH 1932.5.14.159, male, from ‘Thateng’, Boloven Plateau, Laos; taken 11 December 1931 by J. Delacour.

Remarks.—Delacour (1932) himself considered that the Boloven Plateau birds were slightly different from those (orientalis) of the Langbian Plateau in Vietnam, in having (my translation) ‘their plumage perhaps even more washed-out, the fringes of the remiges slightly less bluish and the crown with less violaceous reflections’. These features are difficult to be confident of; but the ochreish wash, which Delacour missed, is consistent in all specimens I have examined. Localities on the Boloven Plateau at which these specimens were taken are ‘Thateng’, ‘Pakson’, ‘Phou Kong-Ntou’ and ‘Pakhout’.

Etymology.—Roland Wirth, director of the Zoologische Gesellschaft für Arten- und Populationsschutz, has dedicated his life to the conservation of neglected species, subspecies and populations of higher vertebrates, especially in Indochina. Without his unswerving commitment, good-natured advocacy and encyclopedic knowledge, deployed now over three decades, many taxa would very probably never be extinct, and I salute him in the hope that S. c. wirthi is never added to his list of target animals.

Lore colour in Ophrydornis albogularis

From his work in Sabah, Borneo, Sheldon (1987) reported that in the field the White-throated or Grey-breasted Babbler O. albogularis has a bright white supercilial line and yellow lorees that render its facial appearance reminiscent of some of the fantails Rhipidura, but that in skins ‘this eyeline is faded and unremarkable’. Dutson et al. (1991) reported that ‘Barito Ulu and Tanjung Puting birds had white, not yellow, lorees’. This apparent difference in the loral colour of northern vs central and southern Bornean birds was mentioned in Collar & Robson (2007), and the possibility that it might be subspecific in nature needed to be checked.

It is not. Specimens from various parts of the range of the species, viewed in BMNH and WFWZ (Sheldon’s birds), are inconsistent on this feature. Wells (2007), in a more accurate account of the phenomenon than any other, reached the same conclusion: ‘Supercilium from bill-base… white, and broadest over the lorees where upstanding feathers are variably tinged tawny orange (in some individuals not at all)’. The specimen evidence indicates that the difference is not sexual, but perhaps there will prove to be an age or seasonal factor.

Table 1. Means and range (in parentheses) in mm of Jabouilleia naungmungensis (2 specimens in USNM; both female) and 11 J. danjoui danjoui (3 in USNM, 2 from Museum of Comparative Zoology on loan to AMNH, 4 in BMNH and 2 in MNHN; six males, five females).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Bill</th>
<th>Tarsus</th>
<th>Wing</th>
<th>Tail</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>naungmungensis</td>
<td>40 (40, 40)</td>
<td>31 (31, 31)</td>
<td>70.5 (70.71)</td>
<td>57 (55, 59)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>danjoui danjoui</td>
<td>36.3 (30–41)</td>
<td>30.1 (29–32)</td>
<td>73.3 (67–80)</td>
<td>61.8 (57–67)</td>
</tr>
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A reassignment of Trochalopteron (erythrocephalus) woodi

In revising the highly variable Garrulax [Trochalopteron] erythrocephalus complex, Collar (2006) allocated the form woodi, with some uncertainty, to the newly restricted species G. [T.] erythrocephalus, but in Collar & Robson (2007) woodi was reassigned, without explanation, to G. [T.] chrysopterus. This was because, on reconsidering the specimen evidence, geographical relationships and a newly described taxon, ailoasahnensis from central Yunnan, it was felt that woodi more appropriately fits with the taxa in chrysopterus (absence of black on throat, plain silvery ear-covert pattern, dirty olive shade to scapulars and lower back). In reality, however, the taxa in the erythrocephalus complex between and including Assam and Yunnan need considerably more study in order to arrive at a more definitive judgement about their separability into two species. I suggest maintaining the status quo of Collar & Robson (2007) for the time being, but accept this is very likely to change.

An island range extension for Robsonius sorsogonensis

During a visit to PNM in April 2007 I found that one (register no. 166566) of three specimens there of Grey-banded Babbler R. sorsogonensis (formerly Naphora rabori; see Collar 2006, Collar & Robson 2007) was collected by P. C. Gonzales at ‘camp 1’ on the island of Catanduanes on 6 March 1988. Despite Gonzales’s co-authorship of Kennedy et al. (2000), this notable record is omitted from that work. It is, however, difficult to imagine that the label is erroneous in the provenance it gives, so Catanduanes appears in the range for the species, previously known only from Luzon, in Collar & Robson (2007). Nothing in the plumage or morphometrics of this specimen, a male, suggests geographical variation.

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References


Eating aliens: diet of the Grey-headed Fish-eagle Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus in Singapore

DING LI YONG

Introduction

Three species of large piscivorous raptors (family Accipitridae) are resident in the Thai-Malay Peninsula (Wells 1999). The genus Ichthyophaga is represented by two closely related and similar-looking species (Grey-headed Fish-eagle I. ichthyaetus, Lesser Fish-eagle I. humilis), both of which occur by large forested rivers and lakes (Wells 1999), sometimes sympatrically, and also exhibiting similar distributions across tropical South and South-East Asia (Ferguson-Lees & Christie 2001). Both species were historically known to occur on Singapore Island, but there are no recent records of the Lesser Fish-eagle I. humilis and it is currently considered locally extinct (Gibson-Hill 1950, Lim 2009). The Grey-headed Fish-eagle I. ichthyaetus presently occurs on a number of Singapore’s inland and coastal reservoirs, but its population is presumed to be small and suspected to be in decline; therefore it is considered ‘critically endangered’ in the Red Data Book of Singapore (Davison et al. 2008, Lim 2009). Globally, it is listed as Near Threatened on basis of a declining population due to habitat loss and degradation across its range (Tingey et al. 2006, Birdlife International 2011).

The Grey-headed Fish-eagle is ecologically sympatric with the widespread White-bellied Fish-eagle Haliaeetus leucogaster in Singapore. On Singapore’s inland reservoirs, there is much evidence of ecological overlap, leading to direct competition between the two species in diet and possibly nesting sites (Lee T. K. in litt. 2009). Compared to the White-bellied Fish-eagle, the distribution of the Grey-headed Fish-eagle is more restricted, with relatively fewer records from coastal areas. Most records of Grey-headed Fish-eagles originate from inland reservoirs within the Central Catchment Nature Reserve (CCNR), Singapore’s largest protected area, and from flooded, disused quarries (e.g. Bukit Gombak). Few recent records are from coastal reservoirs (e.g. Kranji, Sarimbun, Serangoon) and mangrove swamps (e.g. Sungei Buloh) (see Wang & Hails 2008, Lim 2009).

Despite the ease of observations owing to their conspicuousness and the accessibility of many local sites (e.g. reservoir parks), a review...