

LITTLE-KNOWN ASIAN BIRD

The Grey-breasted Babbler *Malacopteron albogulare*, a poorly known Sundaic species

DING LI YONG, KIM CHUAH LIM, JAMES A. EATON, KOK HUI TAN, WENG THOR LAU & CON FOLEY

Introduction

Of the many babbler species which occur in Sundaic lowland forests, one of the least frequently encountered and least known is the Near Threatened Grey-breasted Babbler *Malacopteron albogulare*, restricted to Peninsular Malaysia, Sumatra, Borneo and a few intervening island groups (BirdLife International 2014). The species was described by Blyth (1844) from the holotype apparently collected from Singapore, where it either is certainly extinct or may even never have occurred (Wells 2007).

It is possibly overlooked because of its absence from mixed-species flocks, its skulking behaviour, usually within 1.5 m of the ground but seldom on it, and infrequent vocalisation—although skulking behaviour and lack of vocalisation has been disputed by some researchers (Dutson *et al.* 1991), an illustration of the mystery surrounding this species. It has been recorded most frequently in very low-lying peatswamp and heath forests (kerangas) but has been encountered in other habitats and at higher altitudes up to 900 m (Mann 2008). However, together with the Vulnerable Hook-billed Bulbul *Setornis criniger*, it is one of few South-East Asian species with a strong association with nutrient-poor vegetation on acidic soils (Sheldon 1987, Dutson *et al.* 1991, Sheldon *et al.* 2001, Posa & Marques 2012).

Traditionally placed in the genus *Malacopteron*, Grey-breasted Babbler was briefly in the resurrected monotypic genus *Ophrydornis* based on apparent morphological differences from other *Malacopteron* babblers (Collar & Robson 2007) until Moyle *et al.* (2012) clarified the monophyly of the *Malacopteron* babblers, reinstating the species in that genus. Presently, two subspecies are recognised, the nominate *albogulare* (Malay peninsula and Sumatra) and *moultoni* (Borneo).

Recent records of Grey-breasted Babbler

Peninsular Malaysia

Although moderately large tracts of freshwater and peatswamp-forests survive, including the 360,000 ha South Pahang peatswamp-forest and forests adjoining lakes Bera and Chini in Pahang state, there are few recent records. On the west coast, fragmented, degraded swamp-forest remains in the Pondok Tanjong Forest Reserve in Perak state and the North Selangor peatswamp-forest (Plate 1),

Perak–Selangor state. Although specimens were collected there historically (Plate 2), the species has not been found at these sites in the last 10 years.

Much data for the peninsula came from extensive mist-netting studies in the Pasoh Forest Reserve in the 1970s and 1980s (Wells 2007) and in *Gluta* sp. dominated kerangas forest in Endau Rompin National Park (Wells 2007). There is a record from riverine dipterocarp forest in Taman Negara National Park, and a record from Sungei Sedim Forest Reserve in northern Peninsular Malaysia is one of only five in the popular Bird I-witness database as of early 2014 (<http://www.worldbirds.org/malaysia>). Other recent records (2006, 2010, 2013) have been from logged, plains-level rainforest and freshwater swamp-forest mosaics in the 10,100 ha Pantii Forest Reserve, Johor state.

Sumatra

The species's distribution is very poorly known, although this is a consequence of relatively poor ornithological coverage of the large fragments of peat and freshwater swamp-forest which remain on the east coast in Aceh, Jambi and Riau provinces and in localised patches in Rimbo Pantii Nature Reserve, West Sumatra province. Much of this swamp-forest is logistically difficult to access and seldom visited by birdwatchers, except for the low-lying Way Kambas National Park, Lampung province, where the species has been

Plate 1. North Selangor peatswamp-forest, the largest intact area of such habitat on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia, 16 March 2010. Historical records exist from this site.



recorded very occasionally (Parrott & Andrew 1996); here most birdwatching is focused on other sought-after species. The rapid conversion of peat swamps to agriculture and annual forest fires have caused the loss of much suitable habitat in Sumatra. Elsewhere, surveys showed that the species occurs in Bukit Tigapuluh (Danielsen & Heegaard 1995), Berbak (Silvius & Verheugt 1986)

and Sembilang National Parks, where relatively large, albeit fragmented areas of swamp-forest remain, and most recently it has been detected in the Bukit Batu Biosphere Reserve, Riau (Fujita *et al.* 2012) during mist-netting surveys. There are no recent records from Sumatra's offshore Batu islands and Lingga archipelago, where it was recorded historically.

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Plate 2. Specimens of nominate *albobulare* collected in south Perak, Peninsular Malaysia, by C. Boden Kloss.



Plate 3. Specimens of Bornean race *moultani* collected in Sarawak by C. Boden Kloss and Herbert C. Robinson.

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Plate 4. Grey-breasted Babbler *Malacopteron albobulare* in the understorey of freshwater swamp-forest, Panti Forest Reserve, Peninsular Malaysia, 27 July 2013.



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Borneo

The bulk of historical records are from Borneo—Brunei, Kalimantan and Sarawak, with many published records, and Sabah very occasionally. In Brunei, Mann (2008) listed the species at five locations, namely Badas, the Labi area, Andulau, Lamunin and Kuala Belalong in Ulu Temburong National Park. More recently the species was found during peat-swamp-forest surveys in the lower Belait district (Bakewell 2013).

In Sarawak, it has been reported from Gn Mulu, Niah, Similajau (Duckworth *et al.* 1997), Lambir Hills (Mann 2008) and Kubah national parks (D. N. Bakewell pers. comm.), Semenggoh Forest Reserve, the University of Malaysia Sarawak campus near Kuching and most recently at Long Lellang, Kelabit highlands, in September 2013 (Bundgaard 2013a). A number of pre-1940 specimens in the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, Singapore, also originate from Sarawak (Plate 3). There are few recent records from Sabah although the species was reported to be ‘common’ at the Marintaman-Menggalong swamp-forest (Sheldon *et al.* 2001). It was found at the Klias Forest Reserve and at Ulu Rukuruku during recent mist-netting surveys (Sheldon *et al.* 2009), but not recorded by Bundgaard (2013a) at Klias.

In parts of Kalimantan it is regarded as locally common (S. van Balen pers. comm.) and has been recorded at several localities in West, South and East Kalimantan provinces, including Gn Palung and Tanjung Puting national parks (Mann 2008). In January 2010, JAE recorded it several times during three days at Sungai Wain Protected Forest in East Kalimantan, as have other birdwatchers, most recently in July 2013 (Bundgaard 2013b). In Central Kalimantan, it was one of the most frequently trapped species during mist-net surveys of peat-swamp forest at Tuanan research station (Posa & Marques 2012). Woxvold & Noske (2011) trapped it in kerangas and dipterocarp forest during

mist-netting at five sites, south-east of the Barito Ulu Important Bird Area in Kalimantan.

Habitat preference

The Grey-breasted Babbler has most often been found in low-lying forests on nutrient-poor soils (Plates 5 & 6), unlike most other Sundaic lowland babblers. Most records are from peat-swamp-forests and nutrient-poor heath forest with some records from freshwater swamp-forest and dipterocarp patches in kerangas (Sheldon 1987, Dutson *et al.* 1991). However, there are also records from lowland dipterocarp forest, such as Pasoh Forest Reserve and Taman Negara National Park. In Peninsular Malaysia there are very few records above 100 m, although one was seen at about 400 m near the summit of Gn Panti, Johor (Lim K.S. *in litt.*). In contrast, Dutson *et al.* (1991) found it common between 100–250 m and present at 900 m in hilly dipterocarp forest in Barito Ulu, Kalimantan. A recent record at 723 m in the Kelabit highlands, Sarawak (Bundgaard 2013b) is consistent with this and, in common with Malaysian Rail-Babbler *Eupetes macrocerus* and White-necked Babbler *Stachyris leucotis*, the species is found higher in Borneo than in Peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra. Further studies are needed to evaluate the relative importance of different forest types used by the species and any associated movements between different habitat types.

Habits

The Grey-breasted Babbler is insectivorous, but unlike other *Malacopteron* babblers it tends to forage near but not on the ground and is not known to accompany mixed babbler flocks—usually single birds, pairs or adults with a juvenile have been recorded. It gleans for insects in the dense shrubby lower levels of lowland and swampy forests (Dutson *et al.* 1991, Wells 2007). At Sungai Wain, Kalimantan, JAE noted birds gleaning insects off

Plate 5. Freshwater swamp-forest in Panti Forest Reserve, Johor, Peninsular Malaysia, 27 September 2013.



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Plate 6. Peat-swamp-forest in Lower Belait, Brunei, 10 October 2013.



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the undersides of leaves while perched on lianas. In December 2006, DLY recorded a single bird foraging unobtrusively in dense *Hanguana* shrubs in Panti Forest Reserve, Johor, not more than 1.5 m above the ground.

In Panti Forest Reserve, at least one pair, first located by WTL and KHT, was observed regularly between July and September 2013 by all the authors (Plate 4). These birds kept within 3 m of the forest floor, but never foraged in the leaf-litter, unlike the sympatric White-chested Babbler *Trichastoma rostratum*, which was also observed. Most observations were of individuals gleaning leaves for insects on thin vertical branches and lianas, which they gradually ascended before making a short flight to the next vertical stem to repeat the process. In Borneo, JAE and David Bakewell also noted this characteristic behaviour of flying to the bottom of a vertical sapling or liana, and hopping sideways up the stem, frequently changing orientation by 180° with each hop (D. N. Bakewell *in litt.*). The Panti pair was most vocal before 09h00 and usually hard to detect thereafter—see sonagram of a song strophe (Figure 1).

Population trends

The generally low encounter rates suggest the species is relatively rare everywhere (D. N. Bakewell pers. comm.). In a survey of mostly experienced birdwatchers by DLY in 2007–2008, nearly 75% of respondents (29 people), rated the bird as ‘rare’ or ‘extremely rare’, with the remainder describing it as ‘uncommon’. The species had been recorded at the well-visited Panti Forest Reserve, where most low-lying areas are freshwater swamp-forest, less than five times in the 10 years prior to the observations detailed here. In Sarawak, it has only been recorded sporadically or gone undetected during surveys of peatswamp-forest habitat, for example in Loagan Bunut National Park (Laman *et al.* 2006). Bakewell (2013) detected it only twice, despite using song playback, in a 12-day survey of a range of lowland swamp-forest habitat in Lower Belait, Brunei; both times in stands of *Shorea albida* on 9 m deep peat.

Mist-net sampling in forest understorey has often indicated that the species is commoner than

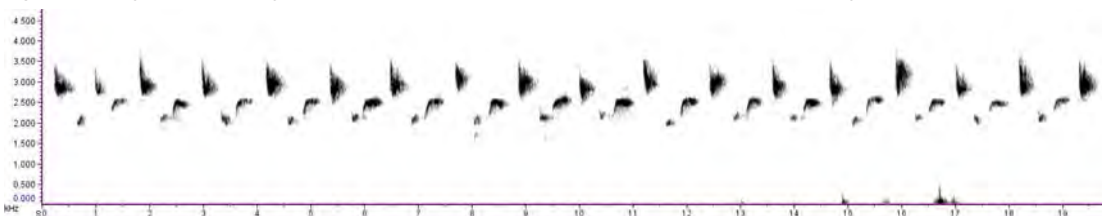
suggested by field observations—notably at Pasoh Forest Reserve (Wells 2007) and Tuanan research station, Kalimantan, where it was the fourth most common species trapped by Posa & Marques (2012). Sheldon *et al.* (2009) and Woxvold & Noske (2011) also only found the species during mist-netting. Given these observations, Grey-breasted Babbler may be commoner than supposed, although against this, the number of sites which historically held the species but no longer appear to do so must be cause for conservation concern.

Conservation needs

Plains-level lowland rainforest and peatswamp-forest are among the most threatened habitats in South-East Asia (Posa *et al.* 2011) given the rapid rate of timber extraction and conversion to agriculture. Peatswamp-forests, especially where drained, are very susceptible to forest fires in dry conditions and in recent years large areas have been burnt in parts of Sumatra and Kalimantan—the use of fire as a convenient means of clearing land for cultivation exacerbates the problem. Clearance of poor-soil forest, including several forest types used by Grey-breasted Babbler, has been very rapid; from 1990 to 2010, peatswamp-forest cover in South-East Asia declined from 76.6 to 35.8% (Miettinen *et al.* 2011). Freshwater swamp-forests are frequently logged for commercially valuable timber—Ramin *Gonystylus bancanus* and various dipterocarp species—and subsequently subject to encroachment and conversion to agriculture.

Grey-breasted Babbler and other swamp-forest inhabitants such as Black Partridge *Melanoperdix nigra*, Hook-billed Bulbul and Brown-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum everetti* have suffered greatly from habitat loss and degradation. The ability of the species to persist in logged or disturbed forests as suggested in Posa (2011) and its appearance in other habitats offer some cautious optimism. But, in view of the backdrop of habitat loss and the fact that, whatever its precise habitat needs, it is more specialised than most lowland forest birds in Sundaic South-East Asia, it is timely to consider uplisting the species from Near Threatened to Vulnerable.

Figure 1. Sonagram of one song variation, recorded in 2013 at Panti Forest Reserve, visualised using Raven Lite 1.0.



Repeated and long-term survey work needs to be increased in peatswamp and nutrient-poor forest types across the Sundaic region to understand the distribution and survival patterns of the specialist bird species. Peatswamp-forests are grossly under-surveyed due to difficulties of access, and remain one of the most poorly understood habitat types in South-East Asia.

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Ding Li YONG
Fenner School of Environment and Society
The Australian National University
Forestry Building, Linnaeus Way
Canberra ACT 0200, Australia
Email: zothera@yahoo.com

Kim Chuah LIM
Email: pittalover@yahoo.com.sg

James A. EATON
Email: jamesaeaton@hotmail.com

Kok Hui TAN
Email: kokhuitan@yahoo.co.uk

Weng Thor LAU
Email: wtlau2100@yahoo.com.sg

Con FOLEY
Email: cfoley@pacific.net.sg