First record of Rufous-throated Wren-babbler *Spelaeornis caudatus* from Buxa Tiger Reserve, West Bengal, India

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The Rufous-throated Wren-babbler *Spelaeornis caudatus* is a member of the Timaliidae. Owing to its restricted global range and an assumed moderately small population, which is likely to be in decline due to loss of habitat, the species has been categorised as ‘Near Threatened’ (BirdLife International 2013).

The Rufous-throated Wren-babbler has a known historic range from eastern Nepal, where it is a scarce resident (Inskipp & Inskipp 1991), into Sikkim and northern West Bengal (Darjeeling district), then across Bhutan to central Arunachal Pradesh—at least (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). As it is a highly skulking species and easily overlooked, further research may reveal it to be more widespread and abundant than current records imply (BirdLife International 2013).

The global population of the species has not been quantified, but the species is described as very rare in Nepal, frequently recorded in Bhutan, and locally common in India (del Hoyo et al. 2007).

The Rufous-throated Wren-babbler occurs in dense damp undergrowth of broadleaved evergreen forest, often in steep gullies, especially where ferns, mossy rocks and fallen trees abound, from 1,500 m to 2,500 m, and perhaps occasionally to 3,100 m (BirdLife International 2013).

Though the species is frequently met with in the Sikkim Himalayas as well as the Darjeeling Himalayas, there is no record of this wren-babbler from Buxa Tiger Reserve, which lies in the far eastern corner of northern West Bengal (26°30’–26°48’N, 89°25’–89°55’E). Based on available records this appears to be the first documented sighting of the species in northern West Bengal outside Darjeeling district.

Neither Inglis (1952–1966), nor Stevens (1923–1925) reported the Rufous-throated Wren-babbler from Buxa Tiger Reserve. The species was further not reported by Allen et al. (1997), Sivakumar & Prakash (2003), and Sivakumar et al. (2006).

During one of my post-monsoon visits to the hills of the Buxa Tiger Reserve on 22 October 2012, at c. 1,800 m a.s.l, around 1600 hrs I heard the call of the Rufous-throated Wren-babbler. I was familiar with the call of the species, having seen, heard and photographed it on quite a few occasions in Sikkim and the Darjeeling area. It took me no time to identify the source of the call. It came from a narrow gully covered with moss and ferns. I played its pre-recorded song (originally recorded by Mathias Ritschard at Loleygaon on 19 January 2006) from my Mp3 player and the bird responded almost immediately. It came out of its cover and perched on a slender twig within close proximity, replying to the playback with its own call, which was noted as ‘witchoo-witchoo-witchoo’. From its plumage the bird appeared to be an immature, probably going into its first winter. The throat was more of a pale cinnamon colour than rufous, the cinnamon running down to the breast. The face and brow area were grey and a scale-like pattern was noticed spreading from the breast to the belly. Despite the very poor light conditions, I managed to take four photographs [113] before it again disappeared into the gully.

The next morning, on my way back from the overnight camp, I heard the Rufous-throated Wren-babbler calling again, from a place a little lower than the area where it was seen the previous day. I had not heard the bird during earlier field trips in July 2011 and November 2011, nor did I hear it on a later field trip in late December 2012. Further study is required to assess the status of the species in Buxa Tiger Reserve.

References


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he Spot-bellied Eagle Owl *Bubo nipalensis* is a very large, chiefly nocturnal owl, native to Bangladesh, Bhutan, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Nepal, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Thailand, China, Cambodia and India (Grimmett et al. 1998). The species is considered ‘Rare and Local’ according to Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) in India. A resident, its range extends from ‘poachers’ near the village of Maredumilli, in East Godavari district, Andhra Pradesh (Rudra 2011). The hilly region hosts rich tropical vegetation characteristic of the ghats; dense moist deciduous forests, with semi-evergreen and evergreen pockets along streams and valleys.

The owl was a large, pale-yellow bird with light spotting, and a pale yellow beak. Its breast was marked with thin ‘V’ shaped markings. Its primaries, secondaries and tail feathers were dark with heavy barring. The ear tufts were small. Its legs were a creamy