

Sighting of Yellow-breasted Babbler *Macronous gularis* in South India

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Yellow-breasted Babbler *Macronous gularis* is considered as one of the rarest birds in South India. This report describes the sightings (with photographic evidence) of this bird near Vazhathottam, about 14km outside the Mudumalai Sanctuary, Nilgiris District, Tamil Nadu.

Location: All the sightings are from a place near Vazhathottam, 8km from Masinagudi (c.900m) on the Theppakadu-Ooty Road.

Habitat: Almost drying river/stream bed (flowing west to east) with lots of bamboo clumps on both sides of the stream. Dry deciduous jungles extend further south of the bamboo clumps while dry thorny jungles adjoin the bamboo clumps on the north side of the stream.

Sighting 1: Date: 18-4-2004. Time: 08:45 hours. Two birds. While we (NL and PJ) were birding in these bamboo clumps, checking for Grey-headed Bulbuls, NL saw one Striped Tit-Babbler high up on a bamboo calling a rapidly repeated 'Chouk' note. Before NL could get really good views, an elephant alarm call sounded fairly nearby and we had to hurry back. While hurrying back NL noticed another individual calling in a different clump of bamboo. This time the bird was much lower down and hence was able to clearly confirm the rufous cap and olive upper parts, along with the yellowish under parts with fine dark streaking on the breast.

Sighting 2: Date: 25-4-2004. Time: 06:45 hours. One bird. After having made an unsuccessful attempt to see the babbler on the previous day (24-4-2004, 14:45-17:00hrs.), we (PJ and JKJ) made an early morning foray into the bamboo jungle. Just as we descended into the jungle stream, we could hear the loud "chonk-chonk-chonk" calls of the bird. The monotonous call was made 5-6 times followed by a short silence. We could record the calls, but the bird escaped (!) unnoticed and disappeared into some thicket (or stopped calling). Though, this was not a direct sighting, we could get some evidence for the presence of this babbler from this particular patch of forest.

Sighting 3: Date: 25-4-2004. Time: 08:00 hours. One bird. This time we (PJ and JKJ) tried a different track to reach the same thicket and the next few minutes proved to be the most exciting moments of the trip as the Tit-Babbler started calling quite near by. With some attempt, we could spot the bird and soon it came out into the open. The identification was easy: a small babbler of the size of Black-headed Babbler *Rhopocichla atriceps*, breast with a yellowish wash and thin dark streaking on the breast, rufous cap, yellow supercilium which gives an impression of a dark stripe through the eye. The bird was quite vocal, not shy, but kept to the

upper foliage of the bamboo clumps, always kept 20-25 feet above the ground, and the call notes were always the same "chonk-chonk-chonk-chonk-chonk" (i.e. 5 or 6 times). This went on for about 15 minutes. After sometime, the bird caught a smallish caterpillar and was seen softening its prey by hitting it on the bamboo stem and finally devouring it.

The only known record of this Babbler from South India is by Salim Ali, who mentions having collected four specimens (three males and one female) from Antarsante and Manchgowdanhalli in 1939. The Yellow-breasted Babbler was met with in a small patch, of ½ Mile Square of deciduous bamboo jungle on the bank of the Kabini River. This area lies somewhere in the boundary of Nagarhole and Wynad (pers comm. L Shyamal). The nearest contiguous distribution range for this bird is in Vizag hills. This is a 'rediscovery' after a period of 65 years!

Another interesting point to be noted is that *Macronous gularis* is considered a lowland species in the Indian subcontinent 'usually below 600m (up to 900m in the Peninsula)' (Ali and Ripley 1987, p. 439). The present sighting at an elevation slightly above 900m indicates that the altitudinal distribution of this species in South India requires an additional re-look. Though all the sightings are of just one or two individuals, the birds might certainly be around; present in better profusion somewhere in the neighborhood and these individuals could have been a few occasional strays from their favourite grounds. It will be an interesting study to find more about the distribution range of this species in South India, the bird seemingly is very partial to bamboo clumps which are a natural habitat in Bandipur, Mudumalai, Nagarhole and parts of Wynad. People visiting these areas should look out for this bird, more importantly the calls, the call could be overlooked for a Tailor Bird *Orthotomus sutorius* but once familiarized, there is no confusion.

References

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