

Baikal Bush-warbler *Locustella davidi* from Dibru-Saikhowa National Park and Biosphere Reserve, Assam, India: A new species for India

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Baikal Bush-warbler *Locustella davidi* is a rather nondescript, small, short, and stiff-tailed, skulking *Locustella* that breeds from north-central China (from north-east Sichuan) to Siberia, wintering in northern south-east Asia (eastern Myanmar to northern Thailand) (JAE pers. obs.; Robson 2010). It is typically found breeding in low-lying scrub and grass in open, forest glades up to 2500 m, and winters in rank grassland and marshes below 1400 m (JAE pers. obs.). Due to their similarity, it was long considered conspecific with Spotted Bush-warbler *L. thoracica* until recently (Round & Loskot 1994; Alstrom *et al.* 2008) when its vocalisations became better known. It is in fact sympatric with Spotted Bush-warbler in the southern part of its range (Alstrom *et al.* 2008; JAE pers. obs.). It is olive-brown above with pale brown and greyish white throat and grey breast. The breast-spots are weaker than those present in most breeding-plumaged Spotted, but this is variable in both species. In winter both may have pale lower mandibles (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012).

This note describes three records of Baikal Bush-warbler from Dibru-Saikhowa National Park (NP) and Biosphere Reserve (27°34'N, 95°21'E) c.10 km from Tinsukia town in Tinsukia district, Assam, India. The first two were sightings in successive years documented with a call recording, and the third was more recent photo documentation.

On 22 April 2012, while leading a Birdtour Asia tour to Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, JAE and seven other birders visited Dibru-Saikhowa NP, primarily in search of the endangered Black-breasted Parrotbill *Paradoxornis flavirostris*. The weather was dull and overcast, initially with moderately heavy rain. Within five minutes of leaving the boat on the River Dibru, JAE heard a familiar insect-like noise emanating from the nearby elephant grass (*Saccharum* sp.), and immediately presumed that the sound originated from a Baikal Bush-warbler, a bird with which he is very familiar from north-central China. He was already aware of the importance of the record, having predicted that the species would winter here. He immediately played a pre-loaded recording of the species (from Sichuan, China), and within seconds an all-dark olive-brown *Locustella* appeared just three metres in front of the group. It showed the broad, well rounded tail, all black bill and lower throat faintly spotted as is typical of many members of the genus, and in particular the Spotted/Baikal Bush-warbler complex. Because of the heavy rain, JAE did not have his camera to hand, though one birder, Jacqui Probst did, and she managed to take several photos of the bird as it sang in full view for several minutes. Unfortunately, due to the dull conditions, the photos



100. Baikal Bush-warbler *Locustella davidi*. Photo: R. K. Das

were not of sufficient quality to reproduce here. JAE did however obtain several sound recordings of the bird, which was in full song (Fig. 1). The song can be described as a single, long cricket-like buzz, lasting 5.5 seconds at a constant 4-7 khz.

Another Baikal Bush-warbler was heard only, approximately 50 m away on the same day. In the late afternoon on 03 April 2013, again at Dibru-Saikhowa NP JAE, again guiding a Birdtour Asia group, heard at least five further individuals, one of which was seen at that time.

Unaware of these records, RKD, visited Motapung-Maguri beel, situated near Dibru-Saikhowa NP, on 02 December 2013 to photograph Spotted Bush-warbler with Binanda Hatiborua, a local birding guide. It was around 0645 hrs when he entered the thick grassland located near the water bodies of Dibru River. Binanda played the call of Spotted Bush-warbler just for a few seconds, when suddenly the bird came out from the dense grassland and RKD obtained a record shot [98]. As RKD wanted to take full-body photographs of the bird, he decided to try for a few more minutes. But, to his surprise, another bush-warbler came out from the opposite direction after just four minutes and sat exposed, so RKD was able to take some clear photographs [99-101]. Initially, this individual was also thought to be the same species, the Spotted Bush-warbler. However, later RKD decided to transmit the series of photographs to Krys Kazmierczak who further circulated them to Peter Kennerley and Philip Round for help with identification. With their help, it became clear that RKD had photographed both Spotted (the first bird that responded by playback), and Baikal Bush-warbler (second bird that gave a clear view), at the same wintering site together, almost in the same patch!

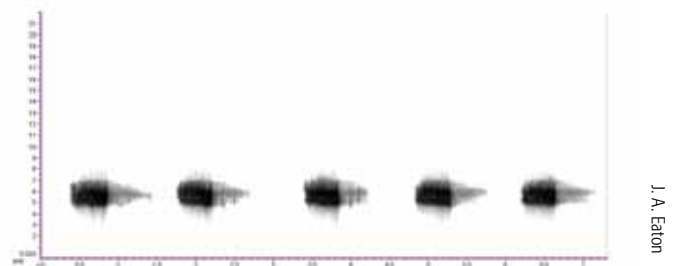


Fig. 1. Sonograph of a Baikal Bush-warbler's song, Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, 22 April 2012.

98. Spotted Bush-warbler *Locustella thoracica*99. Baikal Bush-warbler *Locustella davidi*101. Baikal Bush-warbler *Locustella davidi*

Photos: R. K. Das

Because of their remarkable similarity, Spotted- and Baikal Bush-warblers have long been treated as races of a single species. Here we highlight the important differences between them based on our photographs. Subtle features like differences in size (Baikal slightly smaller) and bill length (slightly shorter in Baikal) are best appreciated in hand and hence not of much use for field IDs. [99-101] (Baikal) shows that the bird has slightly more olive tones to its upper parts plumage compared to [98] (Spotted); these pictures were shot with the same camera in the same light conditions with no extra post-processing. Baikal has a whiter supercilium compared to that of Spotted as seen in these figures. One of the crucial ID features used was the width of the white on the under tail coverts, which is wider in the case of Baikal, than the white under tail band of the Spotted (Philip Round *in prep.*); though the picture of Spotted [98] does

show this feature clearly – [99 & 101] shows this clearly enough to separate the Baikal. The *sushkini* race of Baikal, which the wintering birds in north-eastern India might belong to, shows a cleaner white throat as seen in [99 & 101]. In winter, the lower mandible of Baikal is believed to be entirely pale according to some works (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005), but this is not the case with this particular individual, which has a dark tip to the bill, and such inconsistencies have been reported earlier (Round & Loskot 1994). This is expected since the bill colour transitions from an all-black bill in breeding plumage to a largely pale lower mandible in non-breeding plumage. Additionally, Baikal has a slightly shorter tail, which can be appreciated in these photographs.

Baikal Bush-warbler was considered hypothetical for the South Asian region by Rasmussen & Anderton (2005), as the identification of only putative specimen from India from W. Assam in BMNH (Round & Loskot 1994) was considered doubtful. However, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) accepted this species for India and South Asia based on JAE's records. There are more recent ringing records from neighbouring Bangladesh (Ul Haque 2012), and also from Nepal (Round & Baral 2013). The identification of the BMNH Assam specimen could perhaps be confirmed by molecular analysis in a future project. This is perhaps the first photographic record of this species from India.

All these records are rather unsurprising, as Baikal Bush-warbler is a common and widespread breeder, with only small numbers found in winter in northern Indochina, so its occurrence further west is to be expected, especially at Dibru-Saikhowa NP due to the area's huge potential for harbouring wintering bush-warblers and other little-known wintering migrants. This adds to the value of Dibru-Saikhowa NP, not just for the rare Brahmaputra floodplain resident species, but also as a major wintering site for many birds breeding further north. Further study is recommended on the importance of the site for Baikal Bush-warbler and other wintering migrants.

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