

# Records of Blue Pitta *Pitta cyanea* in Dampa Tiger Reserve, Mizoram, and a review of its status in north-eastern India

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Singh, P., & Macdonald, D. W., 2016. Records of Blue Pitta *Pitta cyanea* in Dampa Tiger Reserve, Mizoram, and a review of its status in north-eastern India. *Indian BIRDS* 11 (2): 45–47.

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Manuscript received on 04 November 2015.

The avian Family Pittidae comprises 30 species globally (Erritzoe 2003a). These are restricted to the Old World, mostly to South and South-east Asia barring few in Australia and Africa (Erritzoe 2003a). Of these, six are found in India. These include the Indian Pitta *Pitta brachyura*, Hooded Pitta *P. sordida*, Blue-naped Pitta *P. nipalensis*, Blue Pitta *P. cyanea*, Mangrove Pitta *P. megarhyncha*, and a more recent inclusion, the Blue-winged Pitta *P. moluccensis* (Manchi & Kumar 2014). The Hooded Pitta, Blue-naped Pitta, and the Blue Pitta have a distribution in north-eastern India (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Rasmussen & Anderton, 2012), with the Blue Pitta being the rarest, having never been photographed in India (Grewal 2012).

Global distribution of the Blue Pitta is vast, stretching from Bangladesh in the west to Vietnam in the east (Erritzoe 2003b). While the species is frequently reported from its eastern range in Thailand, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Erritzoe 2003b), it is rarely recorded from other parts of its range. Its elusive nature, and forest habitat make the Blue Pitta an infrequently sighted bird (Round & Treesucon 1983; Erritzoe 2003b). This is true, particularly, along its western distributional extremity in the countries of Bangladesh, India, southern China, and Myanmar. The only reports of Blue Pitta from north-eastern Bangladesh date back to 1988, while its status in Myanmar is unknown (Erritzoe 2003b).

Within India, the Blue Pitta is a local resident, with an expected distribution across the north-eastern states of Assam, Mizoram, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh (Ali & Ripley 1983; Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Choudhury 2009; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), Nagaland (Ali & Ripley 1983; Rasmussen & Anderton

2012), the Garo Hills of Meghalaya (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; VertNet 2015a), and Tripura (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). It is known to inhabit tropical, and sub-tropical moist forests, broad-leaved evergreen forests (Erritzoe 2003b; Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012), and bamboo forests along steep (Round & Treesucon 1983; Erritzoe 2003b), and moist ravines (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). However, most information regarding the distribution of Blue Pitta in India is based on old records, some of them from before the twentieth century (Table 1). The only evidence of the species occurring in Tripura is a specimen given to Godwin-Austen by a member of the Topographical Survey, working in Tripura in the second half of the nineteenth century (Godwin-Austen 1874). A few years later, in 1899, two specimens were also collected in Hangrum, in the North Cachar Hills, by Stuart Baker (Boev 1997).

Although Blue Pitta distribution includes states such as Manipur, and Nagaland, no site-specific information exists on sightings from these states. Preferring dense forested habitat, the Blue Pitta is easier heard than observed (Round & Treesucon 1983). Recent records of Blue Pitta from Mehao Wildlife Sanctuary in Arunachal Pradesh, and Jatinga in Cachar Hills are both based on calls (Robson 1999; Jalan & Phukan 2015). The only sightings of Blue Pitta, reported from India in recent times have been from either Assam or Mizoram. The Blue Pitta has been recorded, once each, from Assam's Kaziranga National Park, and the adjoining Panbari Reserved Forest (Barua & Sharma 1999; Barua, *in litt.*, e-mail dated 01 October 2015). In Mizoram, the species was recorded from Dampa Tiger Reserve on four different occasions

Table 1. Records of the Blue Pitta from India

Year	Observers	Location	State	Notes	References
Undated	G.C.Crozier	Unknown	Assam		Vertnet 2015a,b,c,d,e
1870s	Specimen given to Godwin-Austen by Mr. Chennell	Unknown	Tripura		Godwin-Austen 1874
26 December 1895	Stuart Baker	Gunjong, N Cachar Hills	Assam	Male	Vertnet 2015a,b,c,d,e
26 June 1899	Stuart Baker	Hangrum, N Cachar Hills	Assam	Male and female	Boev 1997
20 February 1950	Walter N Koelz	Garo Hills, Tura	Meghalaya	Female	Vertnet 2015a,b,c,d,e
02 April 1951	Rupchand Thakur	Lushai Hills, Zabauk	Mizoram	Male	Vertnet 2015a,b,c,d,e
01 February 1953	Rupchand Thakur	Lushai Hills, Pangzawl	Mizoram	Female	Vertnet 2015a,b,c,d,e
19 April 1999	Craig Robson	Ham Pu Ped Peak, Jatinga, Cachar Hills	Assam	Identified from call	Robson 1999
1993–1999	Sonowal	Kaziranga NP	Assam	In Semi-evergreen habitat	Barua & Sharma 1999
April 2007	Polash Bora	Panbari RF	Assam		Barua <i>in litt.</i> , Email 2015
August 2012	Bikram Grewal	Nagaland	Nagaland	Dead specimen filmed	Grewal 2012
14 April 2015	Maanav Jalan & Raj Phukan	Mehao WLS, Frogmouth Camp	Arunachal Pradesh	Heard at dusk	Jalan & Phukan 2015

**Table 2.** Records of Blue Pitta from Dampa Tiger Reserve

Date	Observers	Location	Forest type	Time of day
19 December 1994	Raman, T.R.S. <sup>1</sup>	Between Pathlawitlang and Dampatlang	Mature	0930 hrs
16 February 1995	Raman, T.R.S. <sup>1</sup>	Tuichar area	Mature	Unknown
03 April 1995	Raman, T.R.S. <sup>1</sup>	Damparengpui trail	Mature	Unknown
11 April 1995	Raman, T.R.S. <sup>1</sup>	Chawrpialtlang	Mature	Unknown
15 March 2014	Ingle & Raman <sup>2</sup>	Pathlawitlang	Unknown	0700 hrs
13 March 2014	Ingle & Raman <sup>2</sup>	Pathlawitlang	Unknown	0655 hrs
28 March 2014	Raman, T.R.S. <sup>2</sup>	Along Tuichar Lui	Mature	0722 hrs
27 March 2014	Raman, T.R.S. <sup>2</sup>	Tuichar area	Mature	0650 hrs
08 February 2015	Singh & Macdonald <sup>3</sup>	Near Terei-Damparengpui Rd	Bamboo	1512 hrs
09 February 2015	Singh & Macdonald <sup>3</sup>	Near Terei-Damparengpui Rd	Bamboo	0557 hrs
09 February 2015	Singh & Macdonald <sup>3</sup>	Near Terei-Damparengpui Rd	Bamboo	0611 hrs
12 February 2015	Singh & Macdonald <sup>3</sup>	Near Terei-Damparengpui Rd	Bamboo	1428 hrs
02 February 2015	Singh & Macdonald <sup>3</sup>	Near Terei-Damparengpui Rd	Bamboo	1452 hrs
13 February 2015	Singh & Macdonald <sup>3</sup>	Near Terei-Damparengpui Rd	Bamboo	1637 hrs
17 February 2015	Singh & Macdonald <sup>3</sup>	Near Terei-Damparengpui Rd	Bamboo	0655 hrs

Source of Information: <sup>1</sup>Raman, T.R.S. 1995 & eBird; <sup>2</sup>eBird; <sup>3</sup>Data shared in this paper.

during an ecological study on bird communities in the 1990s (Raman 1994; Raman 1995a,b,c,d). Thereafter, in a bird survey in the same area, in 2014, it was again recorded on four different occasions, based either on calls, or direct sightings (Ingle & Raman 2014a,b; Raman 2014a,b) (Table 2).

In February 2015, while conducting a camera-trapping study in Dampa Tiger Reserve, Mizoram, we recorded the Blue Pitta on camera traps. We think this is the first photographic evidence of live Blue Pittas from India.

Dampa Tiger Reserve is an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) located in the Lushai Hills of north-western Mizoram (BirdLife International 2015). To its west is located the Chittagong Hill Tract region of Bangladesh. The 500 km<sup>2</sup> core area of Dampa is highly undulating terrain, with an average elevation of 400 m asl (BirdLife International 2015). Until around two decades ago, some parts of this area were under shifting cultivation. However, with shifting cultivation banned within the core area of the Reserve, secondary vegetation, chiefly comprising bamboo (*Melocanna* sp.), has become dominant.

Between December 2014, and March 2015, we conducted camera trapping in the north-eastern part of the core area of Dampa Tiger Reserve, to enumerate populations of clouded leopards *Neofelis nebulosa* in the region. For the purpose of our study, we placed 79 pairs of Cuddeback Ambush IR (Model 1187) camera traps, each placed one kilometer apart.

At camera trap location '11', along the north-eastern margin of the study area, we recorded Blue Pitta. In 76 trap nights, between 06 January 2015, and 22 March 2015, the camera traps photographed Blue Pittas on seven different occasions. All Blue Pitta photographs were obtained within a period of



50. Male Blue Pitta photographed by a camera trap in Dampa Tiger Reserve in February 2015.

ten days, between 08 February 2015, and 17 February 2015. Only one of the photographs was in colour [50], while all the others were taken using infrared technology, due to low light conditions, and hence were monochromatic. However, features such as the black stripe through the eye, the black moustachial stripe, and the barring pattern on the undersides, were distinct in all, but one, photograph, and were used to identify the species. In one case, where the bird was foraging, the black central crown stripe along with the black stripe through its eye were used to determine its species.

The camera traps were located at an elevation of 450 m asl in the midst of bamboo thickets. All photographs, taken by these cameras, were either in early morning (500-700 hrs) or late afternoon-evening (1400-1700 hrs). Due to low image quality, we could not determine the sex of all individuals. However, given the territorial nature of pittas, most of these images probably belong to either the same individual or the same pair.

Based on our records, and those from previous studies in Dampa, the Blue Pitta, although rare, does appear to have a fairly large distribution in the north-eastern part of Dampa Tiger Reserve. The species has been recorded in this area from mid-December to the first week of April. All sightings or records of the Blue Pitta in Dampa have been obtained from elevations between 400 and 600 m asl with vegetation ranging from late-secondary successional bamboo to mature evergreen forests.

While we recognise that the photographs we obtained, of the Blue Pitta, were incidental, they prove the utility of camera traps in documenting not just mammalian species frequenting forested areas but also forest dwelling, uncommon, terrestrial avian species. The Blue Pitta has been recognised as a very rare species in India (Grewal 2012), and across its entire western distributional range. Under such circumstances, protected areas, such as Dampa Tiger Reserve, could be important and safe areas for lesser known or rare species like the Blue Pitta.

## Acknowledgements

We express our deep gratitude to the Department of Forests, Mizoram, and the present and ex-Field Directors of Dampa Tiger Reserve for permissions to conduct camera-trapping in Dampa. We are grateful to Ecosystems-India, and Nandita Hazarika for administering and co-ordinating this study. We are very grateful to K. Lalhanpuia, Maunkima, Kaolauma, and Thangliana for assisting with the study, while Pu Vanlalrema ACF, Pu Vanlalbera RO Terei for administrative and other local help. We also thank Deepankar Barman for his help in field. PS expresses deep gratitude to Bikram Grewal for confirming the identity of the Blue Pitta, and Shashank Dalvi, and Rashid Raza for helping source references for this publication. Camera-traps used in the study were funded by various donations to WildCRU.

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## White-browed Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus schisticeps* in the Indian Sundarbans

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Ash, D., Nandy, S., Mitra, T., & Chowkidar, N., 2016. White-browed Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus schisticeps* in Indian Sundarbans. *Indian BIRDS* 11 (2): 47–48.

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Manuscript received on 24 August 2015.

The White-browed Scimitar Babbler *Pomatorhinus schisticeps* is a resident of the Himalayan foothills, the hills of north-eastern India, and eastern Bangladesh (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). It has been recently discovered in the mangrove forests in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh (Halder 2008). This note describes more sightings from mangrove habitats, but from the Indian side of Sundarbans.

On 25 June 2015, at 0750 hrs, we observed four birds at the Sudhanyakhali Compartment (22.10°N, 88.80°E) of Sundarban Tiger Reserve, South 24-Parganas District, West Bengal, and photographed one of them [51, 52]. It was identified as a White-browed Scimitar Babbler by its pale eyes, white throat, breast, and under parts, chestnut flanks and collar, black lores and ear-coverts with long white supercilium, and down-curved yellow bill. Subsequently, we recorded the species thrice from the same area (see Table). It must be mentioned that Jayanta Manna reported sightings of this species from this area in October 2012, and

twice in December 2014. On all occasions, the bird responded to artificial callback (Jayanta Manna, *verbally* in November 2015).

Though the White-browed Scimitar Babbler is not known to occur in mangrove forests, Halder (2008) reported it as 'common' in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh. Grimmett *et al.* (2011) accepted this record. This is a rather surprising record, as the Sundarbans is isolated from its main distribution, in the eastern Bangladesh, and north-eastern India, by the deltas of the Ganges, and the Brahmaputra rivers. This area is separated from its population in northern Bengal by about 500 km. Infact, the distribution of Indian Scimitar Babbler *P. horsfieldii* reaches as far as central Odisha, and would only be 500 km from the Indian Sundarbans. Interestingly, Chatterjee (2004) lists the Indian Scimitar Babbler [=Slaty-headed Scimitar Babbler] from the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve. However, details about that bird are lacking, to comment on its identity. Considering the fact that these two species are completely allopatric in the rest of their