Identification, vocalisations and taxonomy of *Pnoepyga* wren-babblers

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Apart from an isolated, subspecifically distinct population on Taiwan, the Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler *Pnoepyga albiterner* has a distribution that lies almost entirely within that of the much wider-spread but extremely similar Pygmy Wren-Babbler *P. pusilla*. The literature proves confusing on their separation in the field. Altitude is no clear guide, and in fact only a bird that is heavily spotted on head and mantle can be confirmed as *albiterner*. Song is the best character, with *albiterner* giving a fast, wren-like warble and *pusilla* a high, persistent 'see... saw'.

The Pygmy Wren-Babbler *Pnoepyga pusilla* is widespread in the Oriental region, ranging from western Nepal to Timor. Its closest relative, the Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler *P. albiterner*, has a much more restricted distribution, encompassing the Himalayas from Duala Dhar eastwards, the hills south of the Brahmaputra, Mount Victoria and the hills of north-east Burma, south-west China (south and south-east Xizang Autonomous Region, Sichuan and north-west Yunnan) and northermost Viet Nam; throughout all but the westernmost portion of its range, the Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler is sympatric with the Pygmy Wren-Babbler (see Figure 1). (The wren-babbler on Taiwan has been variously assigned to both species and is discussed in greater detail below.) Pygmy and Scaly-breasted

![Figure 1. Distribution of Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler *Pnoepyga albiterner* and Pygmy Wren-Babbler *P. pusilla*.](image-url)
Wren-Babblers are very similar in appearance and King et al. (1975) is the only readily available reference that offers any plumage criteria for their separation in the field. Their songs are, however, widely given as distinctive.

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTIFICATION

On 24 May 1985 in the Langtang Valley, central Nepal, between Chongong (Lama Lodge) and Syabru (Shabru), 28°10'N 85°24'E, at an altitude of c.2,000m, Neil Simpson and I had excellent views of a singing wren-babbler Pyrrhopygia. I made the following notes:

'Song, lasting about 1½s, "see-u see-u zer-zi-ze-ze". Upperparts plain, with only the faintest of marks on the coverts. Underparts pale brown-white, evenly scaled throughout. No pale throat, except when it pointed its bill skywards to sing – then a very small unmarked whitish chin was visible."

No less than six others were singing in the same area. The question was, which species had we seen? The characters advanced in the literature for the separation of the two species are outlined under the four headings that follow.

Size and Voice

Pygmy is 9 cm long and Scaly-breasted 10 cm (Ali and Ripley 1983; see below for details of wing lengths). Average weights give a better picture of the difference in size: 20.9 g (n = 10) for Scaly-breasted compared with 12 g (n = 8) for Pygmy (Ali and Ripley 1983).

Plumage

The species are extremely similar, even showing the same white and buff phases of underpart coloration, and many authors consider them inseparable. However King et al. (1975) state that Scaly-breasted 'usually has fairly numerous rusty-buff spots on mantle (and often on head); throat paler than breast (black scales more prominent on breast but nearly lacking on throat); buff phase often has toshish throat'. Pygmy has 'throat usually not paler than breast. Pale spotting on upperparts (when present) usually limited to the wings and lower back'. Baker (1922) even suggests that Pygmy has 'the median and greater coverts and innermost secondaries... more plentifully and more regularly spotted' than Scaly-breasted.

Altitudinal distribution

Both species are alitudinal migrants in at least parts of their ranges, descending in winter to as low as 275 m in the Himalayas (Insikkp and Insikkp 1985), though apparently resident further south and east. They are separated altitudinally to some extent during the breeding season. In the Himalayas, Scaly-breasted breeds at 2,400–4,000 m and Pygmy at 1,500–3,000 m (Ali and Ripley 1983, Insikkp and Insikkp 1985); in

difficult to locate'. Smythies (1986) noted the call of Pygmy as being sharper and thinner than that of Scaly-breasted, and to be uttered more frequently. However, Ali and Ripley (1983) maintain that the two are indistinguishable and it would seem that any difference must be slight, though they go on to say that Pygmy Wren-Babbler 'utters a sharp single "tsik" every half-second or so, alternatively higher and lower with a semi-tone difference; this note is given more frequently and over longer periods than in the calls of Chirurgus'. However, this description may refer to Pygmy's song, rather than its call; see below. A shrill, piercing whistle given in extreme alarm has also been noted for Scaly-breasted by Ludlow and Kinnear (1937), and Ali and Ripley (1983) give a sharp, explosive, scolding 'chiruk chiruk' as the alarm-call of Pygmy.

Pygmy's song is described by Smythies (1986) as 'a loud, shrill whistle, followed after an interval of about one second by a lower note... the whistle having a penetrating quality... The bird calls on the move, at intervals of 10–20 seconds for several minutes'. King et al. (1975) give a 'loud, shrill, penetrating 2- or 3-note whistle, each successive note separated by a long interval and lower in pitch', and Fleming et al. (1979) "a loud, slowly squeezed out "see... saw", a second long with two second intervals, repeated up to thirty times".

Regarding Scaly-breasted, Smythies (1986) refers to Heinrich's description (in Stresemann and Heinrich 1940): 'The song is short and trilling like the first part of the song of Brachypteryx ruficeps [= B. montana White-browed Shortwing]. Baker (1922) likened it to the song of Northern Wren Troglydotes troygodes, Fleming et al. (1979) describe a "fine strong warble: "tzez-zez-zez-tuz-tuz-tuz"", rising and ending abruptly", and Ludlow and Kinnear (1944) state that the song of Scaly-breasted is a 'pretty trill of seven or eight notes, quite indescribable, but quite distinct from the double-noted whistle of P. p. pusilla'.

It seems, then, that the two species have completely different and distinctive songs. However, Ali and Ripley (1983) also give the following description of Scaly-breasted's call: a loud, squeaky long-drawn double-noted "skek... skek" like an unrolled "pata" (Indian swinging bed) swinging back and forth (SA) ... These notes are markedly ventriloquial, the "skek" seeming to come from an entirely different direction to the "skek" that follows a half-second later. There seems to be little doubt that this is a description of the song of Pygmy Wren-Babbler (a very accurate description, in fact), mistakenly attributed (as a call) to Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler.
Scaly-breasted. On white-phase birds, the white feathers have thin dark fringes resulting in a scalloped effect. On Scaly-breasted, in addition to the dark fringes shown by Pygmy, bold dark feather-centres are also present, especially on the breast. The overall effect is darker than Pygmy but the complexity of the pattern means that it is doubtfully distinguishable in the field.

VOICE

In the following discussion it must be remembered that the identification of birds seen and recorded from areas of sympatry between the two species has not been confirmed by examination in the hand.

Calls

Tape-recordings and field observations indicate that both species give a very similar, if not identical, explosive sharp 'tsik' or 'tchik' (at least sometimes in alarm): see Figure 2. In addition, Pygmy gives a harsh, low-pitched 'chreew-chreew-chreew-chreew' (recordings from Malay and Java).

Songs

Recordings from the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, and Darjiling (north-east India) of Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler reveal a fast, warbling song which is, as Baker (1922) indicated, reminiscent of a Northern Wren (see Figure 3). There does not seem to be geographical variation.

Recordings also indicate that the song of Pygmy Wren-Babbler is a distinctive, stereotyped high-pitched whistle. Though there is some variation, it is easily recognisable. The basic theme is 'sec... saw' or perhaps better 'tec... twe', repeated at fairly regular intervals; occasionally, just one of the notes may be given. The major variation on this theme is to insert a third note between the 'sec' and the 'saw', to produce a...
series of three notes, descending in pitch (somewhat reminiscent of the nursery rhyme ‘Three Blind Mice’); see Figure 4.

The song has been found to vary as follows (I have no information from Flores or Timor, which may be of significance, since Vaurie [1954] considered the population on Timor to be the only one worthy of recognition as a separate subspecies):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>area</th>
<th>no. of notes</th>
<th>source</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(Fleming et al. 1979)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(J. Scharringa in litt.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Darjiling</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>(tapes: S. C. Madge, B. King)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>north-west Thailand</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(pers. obs.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>2, rarely 3</td>
<td>(pers. obs., tape: F. G. Rozendaal)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Java*</td>
<td>2 or 3</td>
<td>(tapes: B. van Balen, A. B. van den Berg)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sumatra</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>(J. Scharringa in litt., Robinson et al. 1924)</td>
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*In the Yang Highlands, East Java, the notes do not differ in pitch (B. van Balen in litt.).

In addition a fast, high-pitched cadence, ‘tsi-zi-zi-zi-zi-zi-zi-zi-zi’ is occasionally given by Pygmy (tape, Java), somewhat reminiscent of the song of a Willow Warbler Phylloscopus trochilus. (A high-pitched ascending trill, vaguely reminiscent of Black-and-yellow Broadbill Eurylaimus ochromalus, may also be attributable to Pygmy Wren-Babbler; tape, Malaya.)

The Taiwan wren-babbler

Ingram (1909), when describing P. formosana, considered it to be a subspecies allied to P. albiventer. Hartert and Steinbacher (1932-1938) listed it as P. albiventer formosana and Vaurie (1959) also apparently aligned it with albiventer. However, at some point in time there was a general shift towards treating it as a race of pusilla; the date and reasons for this have not been traced but Kinnear (in Ludlow and Kinnear 1937), Wynne (1956), Deignan (1964) and many subsequent authors have followed this treatment. What are the affinities of formosana?

The song of formosana is a fast strong warble, rather shorter but otherwise very similar to that of Scaly-breasted Wren-Babbler (tapes: Severinghaus and Scharringa); see Figure 5. All the populations of Pygmy Wren-Babbler for which information has been obtained possess a highly stereotyped song, despite a widespread distribution, encompassing several islands.

Two specimens of formosana were examined in the British Museum (Natural History) and have the crown, mantle, and scapulars spotted with buff. Their throat is white, with small dark feather-centres and fine dark feather-fringes forming a finely scaled pattern. The feathers of the breast and belly are heavily marked with extensive dark centres and fine dark tips (the throat appears slightly paler in contrast, though still clearly scaled). Thus, in plumage pattern, formosana is closer to Scaly-breasted, only the scaled throat
CONCLUSIONS

The wren-babbler I observed and heard singing in the Langtang Valley must have been Scaly-breasted which is thus, in central Nepal at least, found (presumably on territory) as low as 2,000 m in summer. The albituencer
Recent records of birds from Viet Nam

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From April to July 1988 a survey of forest birds at a selection of sites in Viet Nam, including proposed protected areas, was undertaken. Surveys were focused on threatened pheasants. The surveys provided information on the condition of Vietnamese forests and the status of forest birds. Information was gathered on Vietnamese Pheasant *Lophura heinitzensis* and Crested Argus *Rheinarta osculata* and other little-known forest birds such as Red-collared Woodpecker *Picus rabiieri*, Short-tailed Scimitar-Babbler *Jabouillela danjouii*, Grey-faced Tit-Babbler *Macronous kelleyi* and White-winged Magpie *Urocissa whiteheadii*.

From late April to mid-July 1988 we took part in a survey of forest-dependent birds at a selection of sites in Viet Nam, including proposed protected areas. This survey, which was endorsed by the International Council for Bird Preservation, paid particular attention to threatened pheasants. The localities that we visited included Viet Nam's first national park, Cuc Phuong, and two newly proposed protected areas, Kien Cha Rang and Tam Dao. A wealth of information on the condition of Vietnamese forests and the status of forest birds was obtained. In particular, valuable information was gathered on Vietnamese Pheasant *Lophura heinitzensis* and Crested Argus *Rheinarta osculata* (two globally threatened pheasants) and a number of little-known birds, some endemic to Viet Nam and Indochina, including Red-collared Woodpecker *Picus rabiieri*, Short-tailed Scimitar-Babbler *Jabouillela danjouii*, Grey-faced Tit-Babbler *Macronous kelleyi*, White-checked Laughingthrush *Garrulax vassali*, White-winged Magpie *Urocissa whiteheadii* and Ratchet-tailed Treepie *Tremnura temmincki*. The surveys concluded that Viet Nam holds the largest known population of Crested Argus in the world and that other species such as Bar-bellied Pitta *Pitta ephippium* (endemic to Indochina) are sufficiently common that they may be deleted from the ICBP World Checklist of Threatened Birds (Collar and Andrew 1988). A considerable number of new distributional records were made and information on these constitutes the main body of this paper.

**REGIONS IN VIET NAM**

Various authors have divided Viet Nam into ornithological regions. King *et al.* (1975) split the country into five regions following Delacour and Jabouille (1991). These regions, based on a combination of zoogeographical and political boundaries, have been modified by Vo Quy (1983). The regions put forward by Vo Quy are intended to follow stricter zoogeographical boundaries. For the purposes of this paper, when discussing new distributional information, we have first referred to the regions put forward.