

Notes on the Endemic birds: Sri Lanka Red-faced Malkoha

Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus (Pennant) 1769

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Order	Cuculiformes
Family	Cuculidae
Sub Family	Phaenicophaeinae
Tribe	Phaenicophaeini
Species	<i>Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus</i> (Pennant) 1769
Synonyms	<i>Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus</i> <i>Phoenicophaes pyrrhoecephalus</i> <i>Phoenicophaes pyrrhocephalus</i> <i>Phoenicophaus pyrrhocephalus</i>
Common Name	Sri Lanka Red-faced Malkoha
Alternative Common Names	Red Faced Malkoha Red -Faced Cuckoo Malkoha Crimson Headed Malkoha
Sinhala Names	Sri Lanka Watha-rathu Malkoha, Watha-rathu Malkoha, Mal - Kaendetta, Warrelliya
Tamil Names	Not available

Taxonomy

The Red-faced Malkoha is placed among cuckoos in the family Cuculidae of Order Cuculiformes. It was first described as *Cuculus pyrrhocephalus* by Thomas Pennant, based on a painting by John Gideon Loten, (Dutch Governor of Ceylon from 1752 to 1757), in his famous publication "Indian Zoology". Although there was earlier some uncertainty relating to the year of publication, it is now accepted that it first appeared in 1769. However, in 1781 John Reinhold Forster translated this book into Latin and German under the title "Indische Zoologie". As a result of this, many species including the Red-faced Malkoha have sometimes been erroneously accredited to Forster, 1781 (Allen, 1908). This species is considered monotypic and no geographical variations have been identified (Payne, 1997)

Related species

The Blue Faced Malkoha and Sirkeer Malkoha, both belonging to the genus *Phaenicophaeus*, are the closest relatives of the Red faced Malkoha in Sri Lanka. A total of 12 species of this genus are present in the Oriental region (Payne, 1997).

Identification and description

Identification of the species is relatively easy, since it has several unmistakable characteristics. As its name implies, the red face patch is a distinctive feature of this bird. The face patch consists of naked bright red skin which extends from the base of the bill to just beyond its ears. The bird can be described as a black and white bird with a long tail and is approximately the size of a Greater Coucal (*Centropus sinensis*) but with a more slender body, and a longer graduated tail. Since the bird is a canopy dwelling species, its most easily detected field-characteristic is the long tail with white edges.

The bird's upperparts are black glossed with metallic green. The underparts are white except for neck and the upper breast which are the same colour as the back. The dark green crown, nape and neck are flecked with white. The long tail feathers are more greenish than the back and are edged with white. It has a robust, light green bill. The tarsus and feet are bluish green. The sexes can be differentiated by the colours of their irides, those of the males are brown, whereas the females have white irides

Habitat

The habitats of this species are dense tall forests in the wet zone and riverine forests in the dry zone. In the wet zone it is confined to the fairly undisturbed lowland rain forests. Almost all recent records from the dry zone of the



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island are from riverine forests or other dense forests associated with waterways. Many records have come from Wasgomuwa, Yala, Udawalawa, Galoya and Lahugala forests. Further, a few records are also available from fairly dry intermediate forests (Perera, 2002).

Recent studies showed that in the lowland Wet Zone the species is primarily a canopy dweller (Kotagama & Goodale, 2004), but birds are also encountered close to the ground wherever the undergrowth is very dense and also depending on availability of food at ground level.

Behaviour

The birds occur in pairs or small groups in the canopy of tall forests. They usually make short flights from one tree to another, often by gliding. On reaching the crown of a

tree they conceal themselves in the foliage, showing little or no evidence of their presence. They search for food within the crown and seldom emerge from the foliage.

Feeding

Legge (1880) describe this species as being primarily a frugivorous bird. However, he observed remains of insects in the stomach contents. Many others considered that the main food of this bird is fruits and berries (Grimmett *et. al.* 1998, Wait, 1931, Henry, 1955). However, according to Rasmussen and Anderton (2006), they feed mainly on large caterpillars and insects, less so on fruits and berries.

Many recent observers reported instances where Red-faced Malkohas has been feeding on large insects

(Rathnayake, Pers. Comm, Salgado, 2006). The author had an opportunity to observe three birds together with few other species feasting on winged termites (Alates) at Wasgomuwa National Park. Kotagama and Goodale (2004) identified it as a frugivorous cum insectivorous species and a regular participant in mixed species feeding flocks in Lowland rain forests. However, their observations also suggest that when moving in mixed species flocks the species is primarily insectivores. Leaf gleaning is the main foraging technique of the species when associating with the flocks (Kotagama and Goodale, 2004). Considering all these observations, it is clear that the species is best described as omnivorous.

Vocalization

Virtually all observers consider that this species is silent most of the time. However, Legge (1880) described a monosyllable call like "kaa" which is made when the bird is about to fly. Henry (1955) reported a short, single-note yelping whistle; a note like 'kok'- imitated by a sucking action of the tongue; and a low petulant-sounding 'kra'. Rasmussen and Anderton (2006) note a dry low, creaking growl 'grrr-GRRRRR-GRRRRR-(gt'tt)' as the main vocalization (given especially during chases). However it is, in general, a rather silent bird.

Breeding Biology

Most early authors (Legge, 1880, Murray, 1890, Holdsworth, 1872) did not report on the breeding of this species, however Lewis (1890) and Wait (1931) reported that breeding takes place in May while others reported nest building during January, April and May (Phillips, 1953, 1975, Grimmett *et.al.* 1998, Harrison, 1999). There are reports of breeding in August and September as well (Henry, 1955, Kotagama & Wijayasingha, 1994, Harrison, 1999). It is, therefore, difficult to define a specific breeding season for this species and it is best to defer this until further records of nesting are obtained. Nevertheless, it is clear that most of breeding activities are reported during the first half of the year.

The nest is described as a loose shallow cup made up of grass, roots and twigs (Henry, 1955). Nests are placed on high bushes in the dense forest undergrowth (Henry, 1955, Grimmett *et.al.* 1998, Harrison, 1999). According to the "Handbook of the Birds of the World" the nest is located close to the ground (Payne, 1997). Since, the bird is primarily a canopy dwelling species, it is difficult to accept

that nests could be located close to the ground and this could very well be a misinterpretation of vertical placement in the layered rainforest in the wet zone. The sub canopy layer which is around 10-15m from the ground could possibly be the region referred to as "high bushes" by Henry (1955). Rathnayake (Pers. comm) observed a nest which was covered by lianas in the sub-canopy layer about 10-12 m from the ground at Sinharaja Forest Reserve. However, the author observed a nest on the crown of a tall tree (approx. 15m) close to a stream at Nilgala. It seems therefore that the nests are placed at a greater elevation in the dry zone forests perhaps because the forest canopy is more open compared to lowland rain forests.

The normal clutch size is reported as 2-3 chalky white eggs. Wait (1931) describes the eggs as "Short, broad ellipses, practically the same at both ends". Eggs measure approximately 35.8 x 27mm (Henry, 1955). No reports exist on the hatching and fledging periods.

Measurements

Legge (1880), Whistler, (1944), and Ali & Ripley (1969) provided basic measurements of the species. Data is summarized in the following table.

	Wing (cm)	Tail (cm)	Bill (cm)	Tarsus (cm)
Male	148-157	249-286	34-40	30-40
Female	153-163	265-287	34-42	35-36

Threats and conservation

The principle threats to the species are undoubtedly habitat loss and habitat degradation. Since, the wet zone lowland rain forests, which are the primary habitats of the species, are subjected to fragmentation and increased deforestation the species have become highly threatened in the wet zone.

Layard, (Annals and magazines of Nat Hist. II) reported hunting by local people for meat as a threat during his time. However, it is doubtful that this practice continued for long. At present, there are no reports of collection for meat or any other purposes such as the pet trade.

Considering the low population estimates and based on the degradation of habitat the species is considered to be threatened. The most recent evaluation, considers the species to be globally threatened under the category "Vulnerable" (BirdLife International, 2007). Further, recently published National Red List also lists it under the

'Vulnerable' category (IUCN Sri Lanka & MoENR, 2007). However, the species is protected in Sri Lanka under the 'Flora and Fauna Protection Ordinance' which is the primary legislation for the conservation of species in the island. At present, knowledge of the biology and ecology of the species is very limited. Hence it is vital to initiate a comprehensive study which should include distribution studies and patterns which will help future conservation and management of the species.

Distribution

There is a general agreement that the species inhabits mainly in the lowland rain forest of the wet zone and some of the riverine forests of the dry zone (Grimmet *et al.* 1998, Kotagama & Wijayasinghe 1998, Rasmussen & Anderton 2005.) Although, the species is usually considered to be a lowland bird, records indicate that it may occur up to an elevation of ca.1800m above m.s.l. (BirdLife International, 2001, Rodrigo, 1998).

Legge (1880) mentions that the species was far more numerous in the Eastern Province than it was in the Northern districts. Some early records of the species, reveal that it had a fairly wide distribution throughout the island. Some of the presently urbanized areas such as Anuradhapura, Negombo, Kandy, Avissawella, Balangoda, Wellawaya, Kurunegala, and Mahara were also noted for the occurrence of this species in 19th century (BirdLife International, 2001).

The Sri Lanka Red faced Malkoha is reported from 18 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) in the island (Kaluthota *et al.* In Prep.). Since it is a very shy and silent bird, observing the species is often difficult. However, it is probable that the bird occurs in other locations in the low land wetzone that are yet to be discovered.

Comments on the Indian records

There are a few reports on the occurrence of the species from South India. The first record is reported in Fauna of British India (Baker 1927) who mentions that a specimen was obtained in South Travencore by a collector called Stewart. However, there is no evidence of the existence of the specimen to date. Because of the uncertainty of this record and the unsuitability of the habitats in the recorded area, this report has not been accepted as a valid record (Ali, 1937).

Biddulph (1956) published a short note of a sighting of the species at Madura nearly 25 years after the alleged

encounter. He claimed that the bird was observed at close quarters on 26th November 1931. Further, he had also reported of hearing its vocalization. However, there were many incongruities in his report, especially concerning vocalization, and in his reference to Legge's (1880) description of the species. Nevertheless, this record resulted, in inclusion of the species for South India in many later publications (Ali & Ripley 1969, Ripley 1982).

Another observation of a Red faced Malkoha was reported from a location in Karnataka state, India, on 25th August 1996 (Nanda, 1996). The bird was recorded further north of the area in which the previous record was made. Although, if correct, this would be an important sighting, this and the previous note give little information on the observations, thereby giving rise to doubts on their reliability. A series of publications that questioned the occurrence of the species in India have been published (Tirimanna 1981, Hoffmann 1996, Hoffmann 2004, Lamfuss 2005). However, as there is no reliable data on the occurrence of the species in India, most authors considered the species to be endemic to Sri Lanka (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998, Harrison 1999, Kotagama & Wijayasinghe 1998, Rasmussen & Anderton 2005)

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