

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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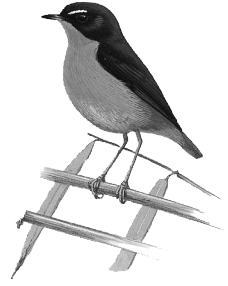
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RUSTY-BELLIED SHORTWING

Brachypteryx hyperythra

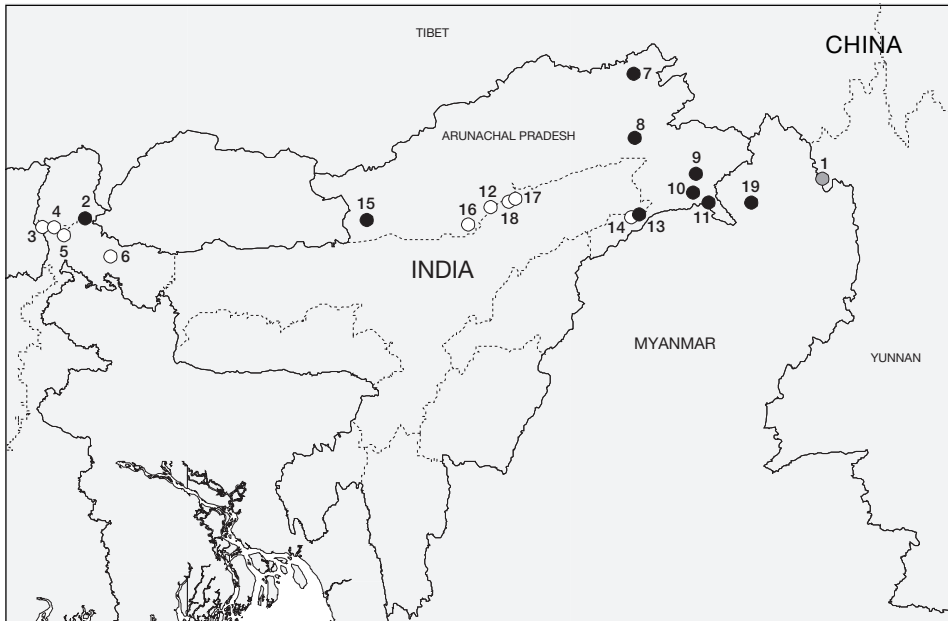
Critical —
Endangered —
Vulnerable C1



This species has a small, declining population which qualifies it as Vulnerable. Its decline is thought to be a result of forest clearance and degradation.

DISTRIBUTION The Rusty-bellied Shortwing is endemic to the eastern Himalayas where it has been found in India from West Bengal to extreme western Arunachal Pradesh. There is one record from southern China and one from northern Myanmar, and it is likely to occur in Bhutan although it has not yet been found there. A specimen apparently taken from “Nepal” is possibly mislabelled (Heath 1988). In addition, a record of a male at Asalu in the North Cachar hills, c.1869 (Godwin-Austen 1870a, and repeated by Hume 1888, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998), is considered doubtful by Heath (1988) and indeed apparently involves a description of a male White-browed Shortwing *Brachypteryx montana* (JAT). Records are from:

■ **CHINA** ■ *Yunnan Maku*, western side of Dulong river valley, Gongshan county, 1,880–1,900 m, May 1973 (Peng Yanzhang *et al.* 1980, male and female in KIZCN);



The distribution of Rusty-bellied Shortwing *Brachypteryx hyperythra*: (1) Maku; (2) Lava; (3) Tonglu; (4) Darjeeling; (5) Mangpu; (6) Haldibari; (7) Mehao Wildlife Sanctuary; (8) Dibang Valley Wildlife Sanctuary; (9) Kamlang Wildlife Sanctuary; (10) Namdapha National Park; (11) 77-mile camp; (12) Diju river; (13) Ramnagar camp; (14) Tirap; (15) Eagle Nest Wildlife Sanctuary; (16) Panchnoi river; (17) Hassemara; (18) Gagaldubi; (19) Putao.

○ Historical (pre-1950) ● Fairly recent (1950–1979) ● Recent (1980–present)

■ **INDIA** ■ **West Bengal** (see Remarks 1) **Lava**, on the road to Neora (“Neora valley”), up to nine singing males, April–May 1996 (Mauro 1996, Mauro and Vercruysse 2000), one, May 1997 (P. Alström, U. Olsson and D. Zetterström *in litt.* 2000), one, April 1998 (H. Hendriks *in litt.* 1999); **Tonglu**, c.2,900 m, male, January 1912 (Stevens 1923–1925); Lepchajugga–Marybong road, near Ghoom, just south of **Darjeeling**, 2,300 m, pair, June 1945 (Baillie 1949); **Mangpu**, c.1,100 m, in “cold weather,” undated (Stevens 1914–1915, 1923–1925), one, May 1920, 1,150 m (Matthews and Edwards 1944); **Haldibari**, one, March 1930 (Inglis 1951–1969);

■ **Arunachal Pradesh** **Mehao Wildlife Sanctuary**, at Mayodia saltlick, two, June 1992 (Katti *et al.* 1992); in the “Upper Dibang valley”, and therefore in or near **Dibang Valley Wildlife Sanctuary**, January–February 1994 (Kaul *et al.* 1995b); **Kamlang Wildlife Sanctuary**, January–February 1994 (Kaul *et al.* 1995b); **Namdapha National Park**, three collected in or near the park, 1987–1988 (Athreya 1996, Athreya *et al.* 1997), one male sub-singing near Embeong, March 1998 (Hornbuckle 1998a, D. Allen *in litt.* 1999); **77-mile camp**, Noa Dihing river, east-south-east of Miao, 1,000 m, two males, January–February 1987 (Ripley *et al.* 1991); **Diju river** (Dejoo), base of Dafla hills, one male, December 1907, one male and one female, January 1911 (Stevens 1914–1915); **Ramnagar camp**, Noa Dihing river, 78 km east-south-east of Miao, 1,150 m, February 1988 (two specimens in USNM); “Margherita”, December 1902, January 1903 and 1905 (four specimens in AMNH), January 1903 (male in BNHS, Stevens 1914–1915), this probably being Margherita district, rather than the town, an area that extended into current day Arunachal Pradesh, with the specific site probably being in the region of **Tirap** (T. P. Inskipp *in litt.* 2000); between Lama camp and Saltlick, in or very close to **Eagle Nest Wildlife Sanctuary**, 2,600 m, one male, October 2000 (Choudhury 2000); **Pachnoi river** (Pachin river), base of Dafla hills, one male, November 1905 (Stevens 1914–1915);

■ **Assam** **Hassemara** (Hessamara), one male, January 1905 (Stevens 1914–1915); **Gagaldubi** (Gogalhubie), pre-1911 (Stevens 1914–1915, 1923–1925);

■ **MYANMAR** near **Putao**, five seen and another 4–5 probables heard, November 1998 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 31 [2000]: 49–57).

POPULATION This small bird is poorly known and apparently rare (Baker 1922–1930, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998). Inglis (1951–1969) only obtained one specimen and judged it “a very rare bird” in the duars. However, Hume (*Stray Feathers* 5 [1877]: 499–500) mentioned that L. Mandelli had “repeatedly procured” it (apparently in present-day West Bengal; see Remarks 1), indicating that it was at least locally regular. Since then, however, it was virtually unknown (Heath 1988) until a recent spate of records. The discovery of up to nine singing males in the Lava area of West Bengal in 1996 (Mauro and Vercruysse 2000) was the first record in the Darjeeling area since 1945 (not 1920 as stated), and confirmed that fairly dense populations survived in at least this area. In particular, the fact that this discovery was made in a relatively well-watched locality suggests that the species might to a large degree be overlooked rather than rare, particularly because of the logistical and security problems attending travel into and through much of its range (Mauro and Vercruysse 2000). Similarly, at one site in Myanmar, several birds were seen and apparently heard (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 31 [2000]: 49–57), suggesting that a fairly dense population was present. Concerted efforts to locate the species in Bhutan, however, have failed, and thus the possibility remains that the species is extremely local. There are only two (none recent) records from Assam and only one from China, and it is very rarely observed in Arunachal Pradesh.

ECOLOGY **Habitat** The species has been recorded from the base of hills to 2,900 m (Ripley 1982). Wintering birds in India have been recorded in dense reeds, thick secondary scrub,

forest undergrowth and “nullahs” (small valleys) (Stevens 1914–1915), and it has been found frequenting dense undergrowth and thickets, e.g. of “maling or ringal” bamboo *Arundinaria* (Stevens 1923–1925). The bird found at Haldibari was in “rather high grass jungle” near a stream (Inglis 1951–1969) and a bird seen at Glao lake was in reeds (R. H. Raza *in litt.* 1994). In West Bengal presumed breeding territories are held by the species in the undergrowth of “relatively steep, damp, densely vegetated gullies within secondary scrub”, this habitat type being thought “the decisive factor in the occurrence of the species” (Mauro and Vercruysse 2000). In this area, habitat degradation is tolerated “to some extent”, and the species has been observed in secondary growth (Mauro and Vercruysse 2000). In Namdapha National Park it has been seen in the undergrowth of evergreen forest (D. Allen verbally 1999), but it is not clear whether the bird in question was at its breeding or wintering site, or indeed on migration. In China, it has been found (presumably breeding) only by the Dulong river at 1,800–1,900 m where it was noted to perch mainly in oaks in evergreen broadleaf forest, and in small trees and bushes at low level (Peng Yanzhang *et al.* 1980); but Ali and Ripley (1968–1998) noted that it has rather long tarsi and apparently terrestrial habits (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998). It is also fairly skulking and inconspicuous (Stevens 1914–1915, D. Allen verbally 1999, Choudhury 2000), unless responding to playback of its voice (Mauro and Vercruysse 2000), factors that have presumably added to the impression of its rarity.

Food The stomachs of the birds collected in Yunnan, China, in May 1973 contained only beetles (Yang Lan *in litt.* 1999).

Breeding Nothing is on record concerning the breeding biology of this species. Males are in full song in May in West Bengal (Mauro 1996, Mauro and Vercruysse 2000), and therefore they are likely to be on breeding territories at this time.

Migration Until recently the species was recorded in India primarily in winter (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998) and thus was thought to migrate north to mountain areas of southern China, where birds presumed breeding were recorded in Yunnan. More recently, singing birds on territory in West Bengal (and sub-singing in Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh), suggest that breeding occurs in India. Several winter records are in scrubby lowland habitat at the base of the Eastern Himalayas in Assam/Arunachal Pradesh and thus migration appears to be short-distance and largely altitudinal. In winter birds have been observed down to c.540 m (Mauro and Vercruysse 2000), but while this suggests that movements downslope are made in that season (see, e.g., Stattersfield *et al.* 1998), it should be noted that the highest record (2,900 m) was in January.

THREATS The Rusty-bellied Shortwing is one of nine threatened members of the suite of 19 bird species that are entirely restricted to the “Eastern Himalayas Endemic Bird Area”, threats and conservation measures in which are profiled by Stattersfield *et al.* (1998). Loss of hill forest habitat through logging and shifting cultivation is presumably reducing populations of this species. In particular, forest in West Bengal, including around the Lava area where this species has recently been recorded, is shrinking rapidly and being constantly fragmented (B. F. King verbally 1998). Details of threats to forest in north-east India and Yunnan, China, are outlined in the equivalent section under Rufous-necked Hornbill *Aceros nipalensis*.

MEASURES TAKEN *Protected areas* In China the species is recorded from one protected area: Nu Jiang Nature Reserve in Yunnan. This reserve covers 3,754 km², contains forests and other habitats and is apparently in very good condition (MacKinnon *et al.* 1996). Birds have also recently been recorded in or adjacent to Mehao, Kamlang and Eagle Nest Wildlife Sanctuaries and Namdapha National Park, all in Arunachal Pradesh, India. Tonglo (where an old specimen was procured) is immediately adjacent to Singhalila National Park, West Bengal, suggesting that the species might occur there.

MEASURES PROPOSED *Protected areas* MacKinnon *et al.* (1996) recommended that Nu Jiang Nature Reserve in Yunnan, China, should be managed as part of the Nu Jiang-Lancang Jiang “Convergence unit”. In India, effective conservation of protected areas will go some way towards ensuring that habitat in the wintering (and possibly breeding) range of this species is preserved. Other reserves should be established in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam and West Bengal (particularly in the Lava area) to increase the area of forest and scrubland protected.

Research As this species is so poorly known, a major component of any conservation programme should involve fieldwork to locate populations and clarify its movements and ecological requirements. In particular, surveys in its potential breeding range should be conducted so that important sites can be identified and suitable habitat protected. The most effective survey methods will involve speculative playback of recorded song (always bearing in mind that the song is apparently similar to that of the Lesser Shortwing *Brachypteryx leucophrys* and the latter can respond to playback of Rusty-bellied Shortwing song: B. F. King verbally 1998) and/or mist-netting.

REMARKS (1) There are six specimens in BMNH labelled as from “Sikkim” (dated August, October, November 1873, May 1875, April 1876), all procured by L. Mandelli’s collectors; all or at least some of these were presumably taken within present-day West Bengal.