Threatened Birds of Asia: 
The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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WHITE-SPECKLED LAUGHINGTHRUSH

*Garrulax bieti*

**Critical —**
**Endangered —**
**Vulnerable C1; C2a**

This poorly known laughingthrush qualifies as Vulnerable because it is inferred to have a small, declining, severely fragmented population as a result of destruction of temperate and subalpine forest through logging and conversion to agriculture and pasture.

**DISTRIBUTION** The White-speckled Laughingthrush is a poorly known Chinese endemic, known from the mountains of south-west Sichuan and north-west Yunnan. Records (by province) are from:

- **CHINA**
  - **Sichuan** Ma Huang valley, Kangwu Liangsi, 35 km north-west of Muli, Muli county, seen and tape-recorded, “fairly common, but difficult to observe”, 3,100–3,200 m, April 1989, in bamboo (King 1989a); Mt Gibboh, south of Muli lamasery, **Muli county**, 3,960–4,270 m, April 1929 (Riley 1932, female in USNM);
  - **Yunnan** “Mekong–Salwin divide”, 3,050 m, September 1921, in mixed forests (Rothschild 1923a, 1926, male and female in BMNH); **Huang-fu-ping** (Hofuping mountains), Mekong valley, November 1923 (Riley 1926, specimens in AMNH, MCZ and USNM), collected at Ndamucho, south of Lütien and west of the Yangtze river on the Yangtze–Mekong divide.

The distribution of White-speckled Laughingthrush *Garrulax bieti*: (1) Ma Huang; (2) Muli county; (3) Mekong-Salwin divide; (4) Huang-fu-ping; (5) Tsékou; (6) Lijiang-Daju; (7) Lijiang range; (8) Litiping mountains; (9) Ludian; (10) Tao-mung-chung; (11) Mt Gyi-na-loko; (12) Yulongxue Shan.

4,270 m, October 1929 (Riley 1932, male in USNM); Tsékou (Zigu), Deqen county, one collected (the type), c.1897 (Oustalet 1897, Ingram 1912, Rothschild 1926); km 47 on the Lijiang–Daju road, April 1988 (S. Jensen per C. R. Robson in litt. 1989); north-west flank of the Lijiang range (Lichiang range), 2,740–3,350 m, December 1921, August 1922, in forests and thickets (Rothschild 1923a,b, 1926, two specimens in AMNH); Litiping mountains, Yangtzé–Mekong divide, 3,660 m, November 1923 (Riley 1926, male and female in USNM); Ludian, Lijiang county, 2,500 m, August 1956 (Li Guiyuan et al. 1979, four males in KIZCN); Tao-mung-chung, south-west of Lütien, Lijiang district, southern slopes of the Yangtzé–Mekong watershed, 3,050–3,660 m, April–May 1931, in spruce and fir forest (Greenway 1933, four specimens in MCZ), collected at Chou-yu-gko, above Tao-mung-chung, 3,960–4,570 m, April 1931, in fir and rhododendron forest (Greenway 1933, male and female in MCZ); Mt Gyi-na-loko, east slopes of Lijiang (Likiang) snow range, 3,050–4,570 m, October–November 1931 (male in MCZ); Yulongxue Shan (Yulong Shan, Mt Yu-lung), March–April and June–July 1960 (Tan Yaokuang and Cheng Tso-hsin 1964).

**POPULATION** There is very little information available on the population of this poorly known species. It was found to be “fairly common, but difficult to observe” at a site near Muli in Sichuan in 1989 (King 1989a), and several specimens have been collected at some of the localities where it was recorded in the past (see Distribution), indicating that it can occur at quite high densities in suitable habitat. However, the paucity of records suggests that it is probably highly localised in distribution and could have a small total population, and it is also likely to have declined because of habitat loss.

**ECOLOGY Habitat** The habitats and altitudinal range of the White-speckled Laughingthrush are very poorly understood, but the paucity of records suggests that it probably has specialised requirements. It appears to occur mainly in forest in the upper temperate and subalpine zones, and is recorded from 2,500 to 4,270 m, and possibly as high as 4,570 m (see Distribution, Remarks 1). It has apparently been found in a variety of forest types, including “mixed” forests and thickets (Rothschild 1923a,b, 1926) and spruce–fir and fir–rhododendron forests (Greenway 1933). In the Kianwu Liangsi area the forest consisted mostly of fir and spruce, some broadleaf trees and a few pines at 3,000–3,600 m, with some dense high-altitude scrub at the treeline on some slopes, rhododendron common throughout, and secondary forest and bushy growth predominant in the area, with scattered old trees and small patches of primary forest; bamboo was common in the cooler, wetter, north-facing slopes throughout this elevation range, and the species was seen in areas of bamboo between 3,100 and 3,200 m (King 1989a). The forests in this part of Sichuan are very dry compared with those found close to the Sichuan basin (King 1989a).

**Food** Fruits and insects have been reported (Peng Yanzhang et al. 1987).

**Breeding** Nothing is known.

**THREATS** The White-speckled Laughingthrush is the (now) one threatened member of the suite of three bird species that are entirely restricted to the “Yunnan Mountains Endemic Bird Area”, threats and conservation measures in which are profiled by Stattersfield et al. (1998).

**Habitat loss** The main threat to this species is likely to be the loss and fragmentation of its forest habitat. The forests of Yunnan are part of China’s second most important region for forestry, but the loss of forest land there appears to be by far the worst in China, and forest cover in the province is estimated to have declined from c.55% in the early 1950s to c.30% in 1975, with annual consumption of wood being approximately double its growth rate (Smil 1984). Forest cover has also declined rapidly in Sichuan since the late 1960s, because timber quotas have consistently been set above sustainable levels, and forest has been cleared for cultivation and pasture; the province’s forest cover is estimated to have declined from 19% to
12.6% between the early 1950s and 1988, mature natural forest being particularly affected (Smil 1984, 1993). Substantial areas of the upper temperate and subalpine zone forests where this species is assumed to breed have been lost (Table 1). When Muli Forestry Bureau began operations in 1966, the entire area was primary forest, but since then nearly all of the Kianwu Liangsi area (where this species was seen in April 1989) has been logged, with only a few patches of primary forest remaining; second growth forest and bushy growth now predominates, with scattered old trees and small patches of primary forest (King 1989a).

### MEASURES TAKEN

**Protected areas**

White-speckled Laughingthrush does not appear to have been recorded in any protected areas. However, there are several reserves in Yunnan which probably contain suitable habitat for it, including some which were established to conserve the threatened Yunnan snub-nosed monkey *Rhinopithecus bieti*, which overlaps in range and habitat requirements with this species (see Long and Kirkpatrick 1991). These include: Baima Xue Shan National Nature Reserve (1,901 km², forests apparently in good condition), Haba Xue Shan Nature Reserve (219 km², forests apparently in fine condition), Bitahai Nature Reserve (141 km², forests apparently in good condition) and Yulong Xue Shan Nature Reserve (260 km², forests apparently in fine condition) (size and condition from MacKinnon et al. 1996).

### MEASURES PROPOSED

**Legislation**

White-speckled Laughingthrush should be listed as a nationally protected species in China.

**Protected areas**

King (1989a) suggested that the Ma Huang valley in Sichuan appeared to be ideal for a small reserve to protect this species, since it seemed to be fairly common there, and there had not been any recent cutting, so the vegetation was in good shape; he suggested that all that would be needed is commitment to eliminate hunting and prevent any further logging, that revenue loss would be small, and that it would be a fine place for wildlife tourists in a few years if properly managed.

**Research**

Studies are required to establish the habitat requirements, altitudinal range and population status of this species. Surveys are needed to determine whether it occurs in any of the protected areas in or near to its known range (see Measures Taken and MacKinnon et al. 1996).

### REMARKS

(1) Although Greenway (1933) reported that this species was found in fir and rhododendron forest at 3,960–4,570 m, it was probably not recorded at the upper extreme of that altitudinal range, as potentially suitable forest or even scrub is unlikely to be found at such a high altitude. (2) This taxon was treated as a subspecies of Barred Laughingthrush *Garrulax lunulatus* by Cheng Tso-hsin et al. (1987), but it is considered to be a full species in most recent publications (e.g. Sibley and Monroe 1990, 1993, Inskipp et al. 1996).