Threatened Birds of Asia:
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Editors
N. J. COLLAR (Editor-in-chief),
A. V. ANDREEV, S. CHAN, M. J. CROSBY, S. SUBRAMANYA and J. A. TOBIAS

Maps by
RUDYANTO and M. J. CROSBY

Principal compilers and data contributors

BANGLADESH P. Thompson
BHUTAN R. Pradhan; C. Inskipp, T. Inskipp
CAMBODIA Sun Hean; C. M. Poole
CHINA MAINLAND CHINA Zheng Guangmei; Ding Changqing, Gao Wei, Gao Yuren, Li Fulai, Liu Naifa, Ma Zhijun, the late Tan Yaokuang, Wang Qishan, Xu Weishu, Yang Lan, Yu Zhiwei, Zhang Zhengwang.
HONG KONG Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (BirdLife Affiliate); H. F. Cheung; F. N. Y. Lock, C. K. W. Ma, Y. T. Yu.
TAIWAN Wild Bird Federation of Taiwan (BirdLife Partner); L. Liu Severinghaus; Chang Chin-lung, Chiang Ming-liang, Fang Woei-horng, Ho Yi-hsian, Hwang Kwang-yin, Lin Wei-yuan, Lin Wen-horn, Lo Hung-ren, Sha Chian-chung, Yau Cheng-teh.
INDONESIA BirdLife International Indonesia Country Programme; Ria Saryanthi; D. Agista, S. van Balen, Y. Cahyadin, R. F. A. Grimmett, F. R. Lambert, M. Poulsen, Rudyanto, I. Setiawan, C. Trainor
JAPAN Wild Bird Society of Japan (BirdLife Partner); Y. Fujimaki; Y. Kanai, H. Morioka, K. Ono, H. Uchida, M. Ueta, N. Yanagisawa
KOREA NORTH KOREA Pak U-il; Chong Jong-ryol, Rim Chyun.
SOUTH KOREA Lee Woo-shin; Han Sang-hoon, Kim Jin-han, Lee Ki-sup, Park Jin-young
LAOS K. Khounboline; W. J. Duckworth
MALAYSIA Malaysian Nature Society (BirdLife Partner); K. Kumar, G. Noramly, M. J. Kohler
MONGOLIA D. Batdelger; A. Bräunlich, N. Tseveenmyadag
NEPAL Bird Conservation Nepal (BirdLife Affiliate); H. S. Baral; C. Inskipp, T. P. Inskipp
PAKISTAN Ornithological Society of Pakistan (BirdLife Affiliate)
PHILIPPINES Haribon Foundation for Conservation of Natural Resources (BirdLife Partner); N. A. D. Mallari, B. R. Tabaranza, Jr.
SINGAPORE The Nature Society (Singapore) (BirdLife Partner); Lim Kim Seng
SRI LANKA Field Ornithology Group of Sri Lanka (BirdLife Affiliate); S. Kotagama; S. Aryaprema, S. Corea, J. P. G. Jones, U. Fernando, R. Perera, M. Siriwardhane, K. Weerakoon
THAILAND Bird Conservation Society of Thailand (BirdLife Partner); U. Treesucon; R. Jugmongkol, V. Kongthong, P. Poonswad, P. D. Round, S. Suparathavikorn

BLACK-BREASTED PARROTBILL  
*Paradoxornis flavirostris*

This tall grassland specialist is inferred to have a small, rapidly declining population as a result of extensive loss and degradation of grasslands. It therefore qualifies as Vulnerable.

**DISTRIBUTION** The Black-breasted Parrotbill (see Remarks 1) has been recorded in the north-eastern plains and neighbouring foothills of India, from West Bengal, through Assam, to Arunachal Pradesh and northern Bangladesh, with possible records from Nepal, Sikkim and the Chittagong region (Bangladesh). A possible undated record from the Nepal terai (specimen in BMNH, Sharpe 1883) lacks precise location information (see Remarks 2). Reports that it extends to the Chin hills (Baker 1922–1930) and is resident on Mount Victoria, Myanmar (Smythies 1986), are the result of confusion with Spot-breasted Parrotbill *Paradoxornis guttaticollis* (see Remarks 1).

**INDIA** The species is restricted to northern West Bengal, the Brahmaputra valley in Assam and surrounding foothills in Arunachal Pradesh. Although listed for Meghalaya and Nagaland (e.g. Baker 1922–1930; Grimmett et al. 1998) and possibly occurring at the lowland fringes of these states, no confirmed primary records have been traced (see Remarks 3). A record from near Darjeeling (specimen in BMNH; also Ali 1962) is not accepted here (see Remarks 4). Another specimen (in BMNH), purportedly from an unspecified locality in Sikkim, pre-1880 (Ali 1962), has “Nepal” written on an earlier label and, even if it was collected in old Sikkim, it is likely to have come from that part now encompassed by West Bengal (see Remarks 2).

Records are from:

- **West Bengal** near Hoolan, in the Titi forest between Hantapara and the Torsa river, winter, year unspecified (Inglis 1933, 1951–1969); Buxa duars, centre on Buxa Duar town, January–February 1878 (eight specimens in BMNH); Gorumara, winter, year unspecified (Inglis 1933, 1951–1969); Sarugaon, winter, year unspecified (Inglis 1951–1969); Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary, three, February 1984 (B. F. King verbally 1998);

- **Arunachal Pradesh** Mishmi hills (presumably from adjacent lowlands), pre-1895 (specimen in BMNH); D’Ering Memorial Wildlife Sanctuary, “a group”, March 1998 (Singh 1999); Noa Dihing river, March 1877 (male in BMNH);

- **Assam** Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, in the Amarpur section (outside the current park boundary) at Mingmung, two, December 1993 (Choudhury 1995), daily in groups of 2–3, March 1998 (Allen 1998a), and within the park on the north bank of the Dibru river, 5 km east-north-east of Gujjan, March 2000 (Oriental Bird Club Bull. 32 [2000]: 66–76); Dibru river (Debroo), February 1874 (specimen in UMZC), possibly from within Dibru-Saikhowa National Park; Dibrugarh, December 1873 (two specimens in AMNH), February 1869, April 1876, (two specimens in BMNH, J. R. Cripps in Hume 1888); Hassemarara (Hessamarara), February and April 1905 (nest found in latter month), January 1906 (11 specimens in AMNH, BNHS, USNM and YPM, Stevens 1914–1915, Inglis 1951–1969, Abdulali 1968–1996); Gagaldubi (Gogaldhube), 1901–1911 (Stevens 1914–1915); Joything, 1901–1911 (Stevens 1914–1915); Diju (Dejoo), 1901–1911 (Stevens 1914–1915); North Lakhimpur, February 1905, April 1905 (two males, one female in AMNH); Silonibari, 1901–1911 (Stevens 1914–1915); lower courses of the Burhi Dihing river (Dehing river), and the Desang river, several kilometres above their confluence with the Brahmaputra, undated (J. R. Cripps in Hume 1888); Hulmari,
1901–1911 (Stevens 1914–1915); near Sibsagar, December, pre-1895 (specimen in BMNH), and nearby at the base of the Naga hills, pre-1895 (Godwin-Austen 1874b, specimen in BMNH; see Remarks 3); Badati (Boduti), 1901–1911 (Stevens 1914–1915); low plain country skirting the Dafla hills (including the Bishnath plain), several during winter, undated (Godwin-Austen 1870b, 1876b; see Remarks 5); Komolabari, 1901–1911 (Stevens 1914–1915); Dhunsirimukh, in Kaziranga National Park, 1901–1911 (Stevens 1914–1915), and at Debeswari (3 km east of Dhunsirimukh), one pair, March 1998 (Barua and Sharma 1999); Nikori Chapri, January, pre-1895 (two specimens in BMNH); Bhutan duars, April 1874, March 1876, January 1878 (five specimens in BMNH); unspecified localities in North Cachar, and specifically at Laisong (Laisang), two, undated (Baker 1894); Cachar plains, 1870 (specimen in AMNH), April 1878, pre-1884, pre-1886, pre-1898 (six specimens in BMNH), and in north-eastern Cachar on the Barak river, two, March, pre-1876 (Hume 1877a).

**BANGLADESH** The species was recorded during the nineteenth century in the far north of the country. Although it was also listed for the Chittagong region in the south-east (Rashid 1967; and thereafter mapped or mentioned for Chittagong by Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, Grimmett et al, 1998), there is no confirmed evidence to support its occurrence there (see Remarks 2 under Manipur Bush-quail *Perdicula manipurensis*). Indeed Rashid (1967) failed

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**The distribution of Black-breasted Parrotbill *Paradoxornis flavirostris***: (1) Hoolan; (2) Buxa Duar; (3) Gorumara; (4) Sarugaon; (5) Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary; (6) Mishmi hills (foot of); (7) D’Ering Memorial Wildlife Sanctuary; (8) Noa Dihing river; (9) Dibru-Saikhowa National Park; (10) Dibru river; (11) Dibrugarh; (12) Hassemara; (13) Gagaldubi; (14) Joyning; (15) Diju; (16) North Lakhimpur; (17) Burhi Dihing river; (18) Silonbari; (19) Desang river; (20) Halmari; (21) Sibsagar; (22) Badati; (23) Dafla hills; (24) Komolabari; (25) Dhunsirimukh; (26) Nikori Chapri; (27) Bhutan duars; (28) Laisong; (29) Cachar plains; (30) Barak river; (31) Bholaganj; (32) Inayetpur.

○ Historical (pre-1950) ● Recent (1980–present) □ Undated
to list the species from the north of Bangladesh where genuine records in fact exist, these being from: Bholaganj (Bolagunj), Sylhet, several in the high grass of jheels, December 1869, breeding, April 1870 (specimen in BMNH, Godwin-Austen 1870b); Kushiara river, below Inayetpur (“Inayetgunj”), Sylhet, February 1874 (two males in BMNH, Stray Feathers 2 [1874]: 457–458).

**POPULATION** The population size of this species is unknown but given the relative paucity of recent records and the widespread reduction in the area of its tall grassland habitat it is believed to be declining (Choudhury 2000c).

**India** Historically, it was regarded as “rather common in Assam” (Jerdon 1871–1872), “not uncommon... at a good many places” up to 900 m in North Cachar Hills district (Baker 1894–1901), again “not uncommon” in Cachar itself (Baker 1894–1901), and frequent in high reeds along the rivers of Assam and Cachar during the wet season (J. R. Cripps in Hume 1888). In the Bhutan duars, however, it was a “rare bird” (Inglis 1933, 1951–1969), and it could not be found around Jalpaiguri (Inglis *et al.* 1920). It was also deemed “rare and very local” in the Khasia hills where it was restricted to lower elevations (Baker 1907b). Although also reported to be not uncommon in the Naga hills, as R. C. Tytler “repeatedly took its nest” there (Baker 1922–1930), these birds are assumed to be *guttaticollis* (see Remarks 3). More recently the species has been described as “scarce in the hills, locally common in the plains” (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998). The few recent sightings have come from remaining tall, wet grasslands in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. “Good populations” are present in the Amarpur section adjacent to Dibru-Saikhowa National Park (Allen 1998a) with “several family flocks being observed each day”. While the pattern of records suggests that the species is truly local and scarce, the alternative explanation is that it merely seems uncommon because it is difficult to detect; according to Choudhury (2000c) “the rarity of the species is mostly due to its shy and elusive nature and dense habitat”.

**Bangladesh** While it was “not very numerous” along the Kushiara river (Stray Feathers 2 [1874]: 457–458), two other pieces of evidence imply that a large population once thrived in Bangladesh. First, it was described as “rather common” in Sylhet (Jerdon 1871–1872), and second, it was regularly encountered when travelling by boat through this district (J. R. Cripps in Hume 1888). There are, however, no records this century (Harvey 1990) and the species might well be extinct in the country (P. M. Thompson *in litt.* 1997).

**ECOLOGY** **Habitat** The Black-breasted Parrotbill ranges from the lowlands perhaps up to 900 m, but above this altitude there appear to be no authenticated records. Previous assertions that it occurred up to c.2,400 m in the Naga hills (Baker 1922–1930; repeated by Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, Ripley 1982, Grimmett *et al.* 1998, Choudhury 2000c), where it apparently “breeds freely” between 2,150 and 2,450 m (Baker 1894–1901), appear to be the result of confusion with Spot-breasted Parrotbill *P. guttaticollis* (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998; see Remarks 1 and 3). A record from 1,900 m in Sikkim (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, Grimmett *et al.* 1998) is also unreliable (see Remarks 4). Godwin-Austen (1874b) shot *flavirostris* in “low marshy country at the base of the [Naga] hills”, while he shot *guttaticollis* higher up in the same range. Subsequently, Godwin-Austen (1876b) found the species on the north side of the Brahmaputra, in “low plain country skirting the [Daffa] hills”. It appears that *guttaticollis* is an upland replacement of *flavirostris* (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998) and it seems likely that the latter is virtually restricted to the extreme lowlands.

It frequents dense thickets of reeds, or tall grassland, especially along the banks and beds of rivers and, at least in Bangladesh, around stagnant wetlands; also noted in bamboo and wild cardamom (Godwin-Austen 1870b, Stray Feathers 2 [1874]: 457–458, Hume 1877a, Baker 1894–1901, 1907b, 1922–1930, Stevens 1914–1915, Inglis 1951–1969, Ripley 1982). It has been found in “sun grass” (possibly an Imperata), “ekra” Erianthus ravaneae (Baker 1894–
1901), and tall grassland dominated by species of *Saccharum* in Dibru-Saikhowa National Park (Choudhury 1995). It is at least seasonally gregarious, sometimes travelling in flocks of up to 12 individuals, but usually 6–7 (Baker 1894–1901, D. Allen verbally 1999).

**Food** The diet includes a mixture of small invertebrates and seeds (Jerdon 1871–1872, Stevens 1914–1915, Inglis 1951–1969). Stomachs of specimens have contained an insect like a cockchafer *Melolontha melolontha*, “insect and vegetable matter” (AMNH label data), and the seeds of a climbing plant that was abundant in its habitat (Baker 1984–1901). Jerdon (1871–1872) asserted that birds “feeds chiefly on insects”, and he mentioned that local Assamese snared them in traps baited with “a winged white ant”. Conversely, Stevens (1914–1915) described the diet as “chiefly vegetable substances; seeds of ‘nul’ grass, larvae, earwigs &c., found in the flowers and crevices”; he also mentioned that the mandibles make a distinctly audible sound as birds “nibble at the flowers of the reeds and grasses”. Lastly, Meinertzhagen (1927) stated that his specimen from Sikkim had been eating “pure bamboo shoots” (and this is repeated by Ali and Ripley 1968–1998), but as the specimen was almost certainly fraudulent (see Remarks 4), this information should be discounted.

**Breeding** This parrotbill has been recorded breeding in April, May and the early part of June, with a nest containing eggs being found as late as 18 July (Stevens 1914–1915, Baker 1922–1930). Birds were reported singing in February in Sylhet, Bangladesh (*Stray Feathers* 2 [1874]: 457–458).

Details of nest construction have been reported by Baker (1894–1901, 1895–1896, 1922–1930, 1932–1935), but these should be treated with some caution as some information relating to Spot-breasted Parrotbill in the Naga and Khasia hills appears to be included. Apparently authentic nests were sited in “reeds, bamboo clumps or in bushes, low down and generally well concealed but sometimes quite exposed” (Baker 1922–1930). They were deep, strong and compact, constructed from a few narrow strips of bamboo leaves, occasionally a dead leaf or two and more rarely a few very elastic twigs, with a lining of very fine pieces torn from the yellow inner bark of *Erianthus ravaneae* (Baker 1894–1901), or fine grass stems coated with cobwebs (Baker 1894–1901, 1922–1930). The clutch apparently contains 2–4 eggs (Baker 1894–1901, 1895–1896, 1922–1930).

**Migration** Movements of the species are poorly known and probably minor. It has been described as a resident (Ripley 1982), although as it was normally encountered “during the rains” in riverside vegetation of Sylhet and Cachar (J. R. Cripps in Hume 1888), it may make local seasonal movements (or else be seasonally more detectable).

**THREATS** The Black-breasted Parrotbill is one of three threatened bird species that are entirely restricted to the “Assam Plains Endemic Bird Area”, threats and conservation measures in which are profiled by Stattersfield *et al.* (1998). The key threat to the species is the loss in area and quality of its grassland and marshland habitat (Choudhury 2000c).

Huge areas of grassland in northern India, including the Brahmaputra valley, have been lost as a result of conversion to agriculture and forestry plantations, edaphic grasslands have been altered as flooding regimes have been changed by dam and irrigation schemes, and many remaining grasslands are subject to high grazing pressure from domestic livestock and intensive harvesting by local communities, often associated with grassland burning (Rahmani 1988b, 1992c, Javed and Rahmani 1991, Bell and Oliver 1992, Peet 1997). In many areas grasslands of conservation value are virtually confined to protected areas wherein they continue to suffer degradation (Bell and Oliver 1992, Peet 1997). Moreover, grasslands are generally poorly represented in protected area systems (Rahmani 1988b, 1992c), although in Assam there is a preponderance of grassland in protected areas and a shortage of forest (Choudhury 2000c). An account of pressures on grassland habitats in north-east India appears in Threats under Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis*. In general the species is thought to have declined because of habitat clearance and conversion to agriculture, along with the
widespread reclamation and siltation of reedbeds (Choudhury 2000c). At Amarpur, to the north of Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, tall grassland is often burned and cleared to make way for agriculture, while other suitable areas within the park are overgrazed such that habitat is no longer suitable for the species (Allen 1998a, Choudhury 2000c).

In Bangladesh, the rapid increase in the human population has caused widespread damage to natural habitats and a loss of indigenous wildlife (Karim undated). It appears that no extensive patch of tall grassland remains in Bangladesh, with remaining fragments generally heavily used and harvested up to three times a year for fodder, thatching and building materials (P. M. Thompson in litt. 1993). The reedlands of north-east Bangladesh were leased out for paper production in the twentieth century and are reported to have been entirely destroyed and settled by human populations; this dramatic loss of suitable habitat has quite possibly resulted in the extirpation of the species in Bangladesh (P. M. Thompson in litt. 1997, 1999).

**MEASURES TAKEN India** D’Ering Memorial Wildlife Sanctuary (190 km²) protects appropriate habitat in Arunachal Pradesh, while in Assam the species occurs in and around Dibru-Saikhowa National Park (340 km²; the important Amarpur section was once included in the park, but it has subsequently been excised: Choudhury 2000c) and Kaziranga National Park (430 km²); in West Bengal it has been recorded in Jaldapara Wildlife Sanctuary (216 km²).

**MEASURES PROPOSED** The conservation requirements of the Black-breasted Parrotbill should be viewed in combination with the needs of a variety of other threatened grassland birds within its range, so that a programme of habitat management and research can be implemented with benefits to each of these species (see Measures Proposed under Bengal Florican). In Assam and Arunachal Pradesh this species shares habitat not only with the florican but also with several other threatened species including Swamp Francolin *Francolinus gularis*, Bristled Grass-warbler *Chaetornis striatus*, Marsh Babbler *Pellorneum palustre*, Jerdon’s Babbler *Chrysomma altirostre* and Slender-billed Babbler *Turdoides longirostris*, all of which would benefit from a concerted grassland conservation programme in north-east India involving a network of protected areas and effective habitat management.

D’Ering Memorial Wildlife Sanctuary has been proposed for upgrading to national park status (Rodgers and Panwar 1988), and adjacent areas of grassland in the Dibang Valley district should also receive protection (Singh 1999). The Amarpur area, adjacent to (and previously included within) Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, contains important tracts of tall grassland that should be annexed once more to the protected area (Choudhury 2000c). As current knowledge suggests that this locality might be the global stronghold for the Black-breasted Parrotbill, it should not be cleared for agriculture, degraded patches should be allowed to regenerate, cattle numbers reduced and succession to forest controlled by management (Allen 1998a). In addition, the area should be managed for thatch production on a rotational system so that areas of unburnt and uncut grassland are always available (Allen 1998a).

Surveys of any remaining pockets of tall grassland in Sylhet, Bangladesh, are required to establish whether the species remains there, and in north-east India (including any suitable areas of the Brahmaputra valley and also at the earliest opportunity Cachar) to clarify its current range and status. If any localities are found to support the species in Bangladesh, these should immediately be considered for elevation to protected-area status. Surveys should make use of its distinctive calls, apparently the best clue to its presence. One of these is described by Stevens (1914–1915) as a “striking whistle best represented by the syllables ‘phew,’ ‘phew,’ ‘phew’ ‘phuit’ commencing in a low tone, which is increased in rapidity both in volume and inflection”. If necessary, recordings of this song could be used during rapid assessments of range and status (see equivalent section under Marsh Babbler), as the species is strongly responsive to playback (D. Allen verbally 1999); but care must be taken not to cause undue disturbance to the birds by overplaying these tapes, particularly in the breeding season.
PARADOXORNIS FLAVIROSTRIS

REMARKS (1) The Spot-breasted Parrotbill Paradoxornis guttaticollis (of north-east India, east Bangladesh, west and south China, Myanmar, north Thailand, north Laos and north Vietnam) was at various times considered conspecific with P. flavirostris (e.g. Ripley 1982), causing some confusion in early literature and therefore making it difficult to distinguish between records of the two taxa where their ranges approach or overlap. The differences between these forms were first noticed in the nineteenth century (Godwin-Austen 1874b, Stray Feathers 3 [1874]: 391–414), and the lack of intergradation in the area of overlap between them, along with strict altitudinal and ecological separation, led Ali and Ripley (1968–1998) to conclude that they indeed justified separation at the species level, and were perhaps the result of “a double invasion of Assam of similar ancestral stock after long isolation”.

(2) One label on B. H. Hodgson’s original specimen (described by Gould 1836), is marked “Nepal Tarai”, while a second label reads “Sikkim”; Sharpe (1883) merely entered the specimen as from “N. E. India”. Thus although eastern Nepal has been repeatedly mentioned in the range of the species (see Ripley 1961, Inskipp and Inskipp 1991), there is nothing on record to confirm the collecting locality (Biswas 1960–1962). Given that Hodgson’s collection was largely amassed in Nepal or nearby in India, the likelihood is very great that the species was more widespread in the terai, ranging considerably further westward than it does today.

(3) Although H. H. Godwin-Austen’s specimen from the base of the Naga hills may well have been collected in present-day Nagaland (albeit at its border, as the state is predominantly mountainous), it is equally likely to have been made in Assam in erstwhile Sibsagar district (including present-day Jorhat and Golaghat districts). As all other museum specimens labelled “flavirostris” from the Naga hills (e.g. from Lhota and Kuchai) prove to be Spot-breasted Parrotbill P. guttaticollis (JAT), records from this range are not accepted here. Harington (1914–1915), intentionally or otherwise, also omitted Nagaland from the range of the species. While Baker (1907b) listed it for the Khasia hills, he included foothills outside present-day Meghalaya and it is in these that the species is most likely to occur. (4) A Meinertzhagen specimen (in BMNH) from Rangiroon, Darjeeling, shows signs of tampering (P. C. Rasmussen in litt. 1999, 2000). As it is presumably misappropriated from elsewhere it has not been included in distributional data. (5) Encounters with the species in the low plain country skirting the Dafla hills (Godwin-Austen 1870b, 1876b) presumably resulted in the seven undated Godwin-Austen specimens (in BMNH) labelled “Miri hills” (an adjacent range).