

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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BLUE-HEADED PITTA

Pitta baudii

Critical —
Endangered —
Vulnerable A1c; A2c



As a bird of lowland forest on an island that has suffered extremely rapid destruction of this habitat as a result of commercial logging and uncontrolled fire, this species is inferred to have undergone rapid population declines that are likely to continue, so qualifies as Vulnerable.

DISTRIBUTION The Blue-headed Pitta is endemic to the island of Borneo, where it is widely distributed but with relatively few records from Kalimantan (Lambert 1996). An examination of the map derived from the following records suggests that it may be much commoner in the northern quarter of its range. Records are from:

■ **MALAYSIA** ■ **Sabah Benkoka**, September and October 1885 (two specimens in AMNH, Sharpe and Whitehead 1889–1890); **Bongon**, January 1893 (male in BMNH; also Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998); **Pandasan**, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Paitan**, July 1892 (two specimens in USNM; also Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998); **Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve**, 1970s (de Silva 1981), March 1984 (Smith 1984), May 1987 (Lomosse and Lomosse 1987), September/October 1991 (Verbelen 1991); **Betotan** (Bettotan), July/August 1927 (Chasen and Kloss 1930); **Sandakan**, 1870s (Sharpe 1881); **Kinabatangan river**, presumably therefore in the Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press; also Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998); **Sapugaia or Sapagaya river**, November 1887 (specimen in AMNH) and December 1891 (male in BMNH); **Suanlamba**, undated (Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998); **Gomanton** (Gomantong) to Telupid, March 1984 (Smith 1984); **Sukau**, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Saliwangan**, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Tabin Wildlife Reserve**, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Ulu Tiulon**, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Silam**, 1885 (Guillemard 1885); **Danum river**, mid-1970s (Smythies 1981), this presumably now being in the **Danum Valley Conservation Area**, July 1986 (Smith 1986), many subsequent dates (Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998) and June 1998 (I. Mauro *in litt.* 1999), including Ulu Segama Forest Reserve and the Bole river, between May 1989 and October 1990 (Lambert 1992); **Maliau**, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press; also Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998), with a record (in Lambert 1996) from the “Maliau basin” at 1,200 m, here treated as provisional; **Baturong**, Kunak district, August 1980 (Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998, Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Ulu Samuran**, Sapulut, Nabawan district, May 1981 (Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998, Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Batu Punggul**, August 1992 and/or May 1993 (Heath 1994, Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Sibuan**, Darvel Bay, 1883 (male in AMNH); **Kalabakan Forest Reserve**, May–July 1982 (Mitra and Sheldon 1993); **Gunung Magdalena**, 300 m, June 1956 (female in BMNH; also Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998); 18 km north of **Kalabakan**, 200 m, October–November 1962 (Thompson 1966, female in USNM); **Quoin hill**, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Brumas** (lumber camp, 80 km north-west of Tawau), March and April 1977, May and June 1982 (Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998, Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Tawau hills**, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Ulu Merutai Besar**, 50 km north of Tawau, 150 m, June 1956 (male in BMNH); Segilind river (untraced), undated (Nicholson 1883);

■ **Sarawak** Mengalung or **Mengalong river**, July 1899 (Blasius 1901); **Baram river**, 1891 (five specimens in AMNH); Gunung Mulu presumably in what is now **Gunung Mulu National Park**, February 1898 (two males in AMNH, BMNH), explicitly at the foot of the mountain, August 1891 (female in AMNH) and at 300 m, September–December 1893 (Sharpe 1893–1894) and Long Pala, just outside Gunung Mulu park limits, breeding, May 1978 (Wells *et al.*

1978, Davison 1980, Smythies and Davison 1999); **Gunung Batu Song**, 300–450 m, January and February 1892 (two specimens in AMNH); **Kubaan river**, Tutoh, 400–600 m, February 1965 (Fogden 1976); **Gunung Dulit**, up to 600 m, 1890s (Hose 1893) and Long Pau, 120 m, Belaga river, near Gunung Dulit, October 1932 (male in BMNH); upper **Mujong river**, Rajang, July 1929 (male in AMNH); 15 km south of **Kuching**, June 1910 (male in AMNH); Samunsam Wildlife Sanctuary, listed by MacKinnon *et al.* (1996); Gunung Silikan (Salikan) (untraced),



The distribution of Blue-headed Pitta *Pitta baudii*: (1) Benkoka; (2) Bongon; (3) Pandasan; (4) Paitan; (5) Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve; (6) Betotan; (7) Sandakan; (8) Kinabatangan river; (9) Sapagaya river; (10) Suanlamba; (11) Gomanton; (12) Sukau; (13) Saliwangan; (14) Tabin Wildlife Reserve; (15) Ulu Tiulon; (16) Silam; (17) Danum Valley Conservation Area; (18) Maliau; (19) Baturong; (20) Ulu Samuran; (21) Batu Punggul; (22) Sibuan; (23) Kalabakan Forest Reserve; (24) Gunung Magdalena; (25) Kalabakan; (26) Quoin hill; (27) Brumas; (28) Tawau hills; (29) Ulu Merutai Besar; (30) Mengalong river; (31) Baram river; (32) Gunung Mulu National Park; (33) Gunung Batu Song; (34) Kubaan river; (35) Gunung Dulit; (36) Mujong river; (37) Kuching; (38) Tutong river; (39) Sungai Rampayoh; (40) Labi; (41) Peleben; (42) Long Pujungan; (43) Sungai Birang; (44) Sungai Segah; (45) Sungai Karangan; (46) Sungai Merah; (47) Sungai Bengen; (48) Tabang; (49) Sungai Menganne; (50) Sungai Blu; (51) Kutai National Park; (52) Sembera; (53) Klumpang Bay; (54) Banjarmasin; (55) Muara Jolo; (56) Tumbang Maruwei; (57) Riam; (58) Tanjung Puting National Park; (59) Gunung Palung National Park.

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

Baram, July 1895 and May 1898 (two specimens in BMNH); Gunung Poeh (Poi) (untraced), undated (Everett 1889, Sharpe 1893–1894);

■ **BRUNEI Tutong river**, April 1898 (male in AMNH); **Sungai Rampayoh**, May 1984 (Counsell 1986, Mann 1987); **Labi**, May 1984 (Counsell 1984); Ulu Temburong National Park, July 1988, probably (Sparks undated);

■ **INDONESIA Kalimantan** ■ **East Kalimantan Peleben**, at the junction of the Kajan and Bahau rivers, mid-July/mid-October 1935 (Stresemann 1938a); between **Long Pujungan** and Long Ketaman, undated (Lambert 1996), this presumably likely to be near camp 3, north of Mandurau (untraced), on the Bulungan (or Kajan) river, early 1914 (Voous 1961); **Sungai Birang**, September 1912 (male in USNM; also Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998); **Sungai Segah**, November 1912 (two specimens in USNM; also Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998); **Sungai Karang**, December 1913 (two specimens in USNM; also Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998), including Tokong-Tokong, December 1913 (Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998); **Sungai Merah**, April 1914 (male in USNM; also Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998); **Sungei Bengen**, October 1956 (two specimens in MZB); **Tabang**, September–October 1956 (three males in MZB); **Sungai Menganne**, undated (Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998), this presumably the same as Sungai Mengama, September 1913 (male in USNM; see Remarks 1); **Sungai Blu**, upper Mahakkam, 1898 (two specimens in RMNH; also Finsch 1905); **Kutai National Park** at Mentoko, July–August 1990 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 13 [1991]: 47–52; hence presumably Lambert 1996); **Sembera**, east Kutai, February 1940 (male in MZB); ■ **South Kalimantan Klumpang Bay**, April 1908 (male in USNM; also Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998); **Banjarmasin**, 1842 or 1843 (four specimens in RMNH); ■ **Central Kalimantan** above **Muara Joloi** at the confluence of the Busang and Murung rivers, 120–250 m, Barito Ulu (Barito river headwaters), July–September 1989 (Wilkinson *et al.* 1991a,b); **Tumbang Maruwei**, September/November 1915 (Voous 1961); **Riam**, Kotawaringin, November–December 1935 (Mayr 1938); **Tanjung Puting National Park**, since c.1970 (bin Jalan and Galdikas 1987); ■ **West Kalimantan Gunung Palung National Park** at Cabang Panti, 1986–1995 (Laman *et al.* 1996).

Erritzoe and Erritzoe (1998) listed several localities which appear to be mistranscriptions from museum labels: thus they have both “Balu Song” and “Batu Sang” on the Baram river, “Banjernalping” (=Banjarmasin), “Beltotan” (=Bettotan), “Benkoken” (=Benkoka), “Kueling” (=Kuching) and “Riano” (=Riam).

POPULATION The species is or was locally common throughout Borneo (Smythies 1957), including Sabah (Gore 1968). Although J. Whitehead considered it “apparently rare” in northern Borneo, since he only saw three birds during his entire time on the island (Sharpe and Whitehead 1889–1890), it is common in Danum Valley, where up to six birds were seen in a day, June 1998 (I. Mauro *in litt.* 1999), and as many as two pairs per km² were found there in forest recovering from selective logging nine years previously (Lambert 1992). It was also common in the Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve in the 1970s (de Silva 1981). Nineteen were collected at Bettotan in July/August 1927 (Chasen and Kloss 1930) and the species was abundant at Kalabakan, although only seen once at another major collecting site (Thompson 1966). In Sarawak Fogden (1976) reported it common (defined as “seen regularly in small numbers”) in the Tutoh headwaters in early 1965. In Kalimantan possibly as many as three males were calling in a 1 km² plot in Barito Ulu (Wilkinson *et al.* 1991a), but the species has been judged “uncommon” in Gunung Palung National Park (Laman *et al.* 1996). As noted under Distribution, the map suggests that this pitta becomes rarer in the south of its range, and has its highest concentration in eastern Sabah.

ECOLOGY Habitat The Blue-banded Pitta is a bird of lowland primary evergreen rainforest (“an old-jungle bird, preferring the forests, and not visiting clearings like *P. granatina*”),

ranging up to 600 m (Hose 1893; also Gore 1968) or only 500 m (Sheldon *et al.* in press), with a second-hand record from 1,200 m, here treated as provisional, in Lambert (1996). River terrace within primary forest seems to be particularly favoured, but birds also use riparian and occasionally old secondary and logged forest (Lambert 1992, 1996, Sheldon *et al.* in press). The view that the species “has a wide range of habitat preferences” (Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998) is mistaken. Indeed, its use of logged forest may only be possible when adjacent to intact or virtually intact areas such as those along rivers, which act as sources of birds for the more damaged area (Lambert 1996); this means that logged forest may be a “sink” habitat, insufficient in quality to provide for self-sustaining populations. The species has only been recorded in lowland (not swamp or upland) forest in Gunung Palung (Laman *et al.* 1996), and at Gunung Mulu it was in floodplain alluvial forest but not in freshwater swamp forest (Wells *et al.* 1978). In the Danum Valley it appears to separate ecologically from Banded Pitta *Pitta guajana* by occupying low flat areas while the latter uses slopes and hills (Lambert 1996); at Barito Ulu it appears to separate ecologically from Blue-banded Pitta *P. arquata* by occupying level river terraces with closed-canopy dipterocarp forest (Wilkinson *et al.* 1991a). Male (in particular) Blue-headed Pittas often forage along broad leafy trails (Lambert 1996). Birds roost in undergrowth shrubs and on horizontal branches of saplings within 1 m of the ground, in one case at the tip of a narrow branch, in another on the loop of a vine (Lambert 1996).

Food Small earthworms and iridescent beetles were found in a June specimen (in AMNH), beetles and beetle larvae in an October specimen (in BMNH). Caterpillars and orthopterans have also been recorded (Sheldon *et al.* in press), and Lambert (1996) additionally mentioned ants and crickets. Birds forage by turning over leaves (“scattering leaves with powerful jabs of its bill”: Smythies 1981), but also make a “nose-dive” or “head-butting” action immediately after bounding forward (Lambert 1996).

Breeding The breeding period may be extended; the inconclusive evidence indicates that most effort is focused in the middle of the year (Lambert 1996). Gonads of a male and female (in BMNH) taken in June, Sabah, were inactive, but those of single males taken in March, May and June were developed (Sheldon *et al.* in press), and a female from July was soon to lay (Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998). A nest—a dome of leaves on a mound of soil left by the roots of a treefall—with two eggs was found in May (Davison 1980, Smythies and Davison 1999), eggs and young in April–May (Wells *et al.* 1978), a pullus between mid-July and mid-October (Stresemann 1938a). A male from January (in BMNH) and another from April (in AMNH) are in immature (female-like) plumage, while a third from July (in BMNH) is moulting into adult male plumage; Sharpe (1893–1894) referred to a male from September as juvenile, Lambert (1996) to two immatures from April and September.

Migration The species is probably sedentary (Erritzoe and Erritzoe 1998).

THREATS Very recently it was remarked that “considering the extensive amount of forest left in Borneo, and its tolerance of selectively logged forest, Blue-headed Pitta cannot be considered threatened at the present time” (Lambert 1996). However, rates of forest loss, including logged forest, have been so great that this position has changed. Deforestation in the Sundaic lowlands—biologically one of the most diverse biomes of the world—has proceeded at catastrophic speed in the past few decades, seriously compromising the future of every one of the uncountable multitude of primary-forest life-forms in the region, including that of this particular species, even inside key protected areas (for an outline of the crisis, see Threats under Crestless Fireback *Lophura erythrophthalma*). As a Bornean endemic (for others see Threats under Bornean Peacock-pheasant *Polyplectron schleiermacheri*), this species is all the more at a disadvantage.

In Sarawak, all species of pitta are judged “extremely rare or locally extinct, due partly to hunting of birds and eggs” (Bennett *et al.* 1997).

MEASURES TAKEN Although legally protected in both Sabah and Sarawak (Smythies and Davison 1999), the only real conservation this species has experienced is through protected areas (in which category “forest reserves” do not fall). It is known from (*Sabah*) Danum Valley Conservation Area, Tabin Wildlife Reserve and Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary (for new status of this last, see Measures Taken under Storm’s Stork *Ciconia stormi*), (*Sarawak*) Gunung Mulu National Park (possibly also Samunsam Wildlife Sanctuary), and (*Kalimantan*) Kutai, Gunung Palung and Tanjung Puting National Parks (see Distribution). The probable Ulu Temburong record in Brunei would have come from within Ulu Temburong (Batu Apoi) National Park (see Dawn 1993).

MEASURES PROPOSED Urgent concerted survey of and conservation effort for major tracts of extreme lowland primary forest in the Sundaic region are called for in the equivalent section under Crestless Fireback.

The ecology of the Blue-headed Pitta needs to be clarified through studies of population density, breeding success, feeding patterns, dispersal and survival in a number of carefully evaluated habitats, and with particular emphasis on the factors that promote separation from other sympatric pitta species. The results of this work will allow for improved reserve design and habitat management in all future efforts to secure viable populations of the species.

Total protection of all pittas has been urged in Sarawak (Bennett *et al.* 1997).

REMARKS (1) Although “Sungai Mengama” appears more likely to be correct than “Sungai Menganne”, the latter name was used not only by Erritzoe and Erritzoe (1998) but also by Smythies (1981), who provided coordinates.