

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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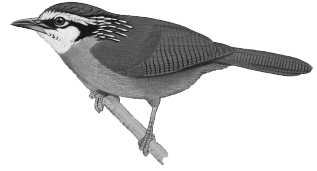
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SNOWY-THROATED BABBLER

Stachyris oglei



Critical —

Endangered —

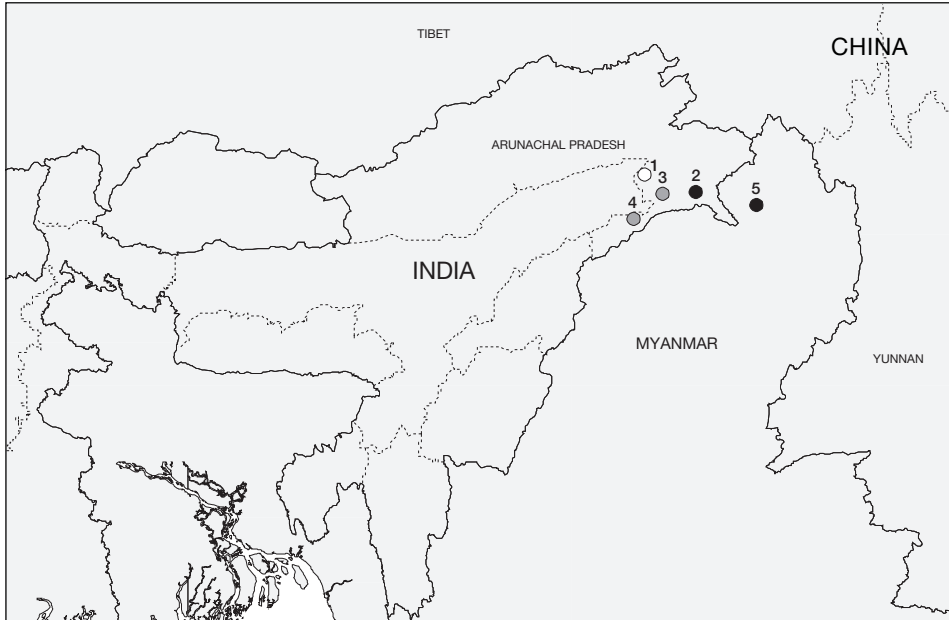
Vulnerable B1+2a,b,c,d,e; C1

This species is inferred to have a small, severely fragmented, declining range and population because of loss of scrub and forest to logging and shifting cultivation. These factors qualify it as Vulnerable.

DISTRIBUTION The Snowy-throated Babbler (see Remarks 1) occupies an extremely restricted range in the forested hills of north-eastern India and extreme northern Myanmar.

■ **INDIA** The species is a rare resident with a restricted range, apparently confined to eastern Arunachal Pradesh (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998). Although many specimens are listed from “Margherita”, Assam (Stevens 1915), it is likely that these are all from above this town in the Naga/Patkai range, and thus near Tirap in Arunachal Pradesh (see Choudhury 2000c). Records are from:

■ **Arunachal Pradesh Manbum Tila**, on the Tenga Pani river near Sadiya (Assam), 250 m, undated (Godwin-Austen 1877, 1878, *Stray Feathers* 5: 340–346); **Namdapha National Park**, March 1979 (Ripley *et al.* 1991), undated (Singh 1994), 20–25, February 1994 (Alström *et al.* 1994b, *Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 19 [1994]: 65–67), October 1994–March 1995 (Athreya 1996), at Embiong Camp, along the Noa Dihing river, c.600 m, December 1981 (two specimens in



The distribution of Snowy-throated Babbler *Stachyris oglei*: (1) Manbum Tila; (2) Namdapha National Park; (3) Miao; (4) Tirap; (5) Putao.

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

USNM), many, March 1998 (Hornbuckle 1998b); **Miao**, March 1979 (two specimens in BNHS, Abdulali 1968–1996); “Margherita”, January 1902–April 1905 (17 specimens in BNHS, USNM and YPM, eggs in BMNH and NMS, Stevens 1915, Abdulali 1968–1996), but this is likely to refer not to the town (in Assam) but to the old district, much of which falls in present-day Arunachal Pradesh (T. P. Inskipp *in litt.* 2000), probably in the region of **Tirap**, where further specimens were taken at 800–900 m in March 1979 (specimens in BNHS, Abdulali 1968–1996).

■ **MYANMAR** The single record is from: **Putao**, one flock of c.8 birds, c.20 km to the north-west, c.400 m, January 1998 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 27 [1998]: 61–66, B. F. King verbally 1998).

POPULATION The tiny global range of this species suggests that overall numbers are low. It has always been thought very rare (Harington 1914–1915, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998), or even “extremely rare” (Baker 1906). Despite ornithologists in India offering “bribes and presents” to Naga tribespeople in return for specimens and nests of this species, only “one or two birds each season” were received according to Baker (1906), who concluded that it “must be very rare everywhere” (see Remarks 2). However, the impression of rarity is at least partly exaggerated by the fact that most of its range is so seldom visited by naturalists. Recently it has been found in good numbers in Namdapha National Park: 20–25 individuals were seen along a few kilometres of road from Deban to Vijaynagar (Alström *et al.* 1994b), and around 20 were seen daily around Embeong (Hornbuckle 1998b).

As there is only one record from Myanmar (it was not detected during early explorations of “Upper Burma”), the species is clearly highly restricted in range. It is nevertheless likely that it remains locally common in the rather remote and infrequently visited forested mountains towards the Indian frontier (B. F. King verbally 1998).

ECOLOGY Habitat The species apparently inhabits moist dense forest or scrub in ravines, keeping to the heaviest undergrowth, and apparently winters at lower altitudes in evergreen forest and bamboo (Baker 1922–1930, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, Grimmett *et al.* 1998). Baker (1906) believed that it frequented “the valleys between the lofty ranges, not ascending the mountains themselves, and probably seldom extending above 5,000 feet [c.1,500 m]”. Later, however, he contradicted this information by stating that it occurred from 1,800 m upwards (Baker 1922–1930), leading Ali and Ripley (1968–1998) to conclude that the nests and specimens brought to Baker came from above 1,800 m. As the exact provenance of these items cannot now be established (see Remarks 2) the upper limit of its distribution is poorly known; records from Namdapha National Park and Myanmar come from as low as 400–450 m (Singh 1994, B. F. King verbally 1998) and its elevational span was recently given as 400–1,800 m (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). A flock near Putao, Myanmar, was observed moving low in forest undergrowth with bamboo on a rocky hillside (B. F. King verbally 1998).

Although initially reported to be silent and skulking (Baker 1922–1930), it has recently been described, perhaps more accurately given the behaviour of its relatives, as “vocal, skulking and very wary”, although unfortunately its voice is “undescribed” (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). It was also thought “not to go about in flocks” (Baker 1906, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998), whereas recent sightings (perhaps in the non-breeding range) in Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar have generally involved groups (e.g. E. Jirle *in litt.* 1994, B. F. King verbally 1998, Hornbuckle *et al.* 1998, D. Allen verbally 1999), often “of 10–25 birds” (Grimmett *et al.* 1998).

Food Very little is on record regarding diet, although it is apparently entirely insectivorous given the stomach contents of specimens (Baker 1922–1930, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998).

Breeding It has been recorded breeding in April–June (Baker 1906, 1922–1930, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998), although one clutch was apparently taken in July (BMNH egg data).

The nest has apparently never been seen by an ornithologist *in situ*, but Naga tribespeople, who brought in several examples with accompanying specimens to collecting camps, stated that they are placed on the ground under bushes in forested ravines (Baker 1906, 1922–1930; see Remarks 2). Baker (1906, 1922–1930) provided the following details: the nest is very bulky (apparently being most like those of scimitar-babblers *Pomatorhinus*), domed or globular with an entrance near the bottom on one side, and constructed from grass and bamboo leaves mixed with roots, twigs, dead leaves and a little moss. The clutch comprises 3–4 eggs (Baker 1922–1930; also NMS and BMNH egg data).

Migration Although movements are clearly minor (specimens labelled “Margherita” come from November–July; see Distribution), it appears that the species is probably an altitudinal migrant as breeding records are from much higher than recent sight records of flocks.

THREATS The Snowy-throated Babbler 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). As there are still fairly large areas of unsurveyed forest in its restricted range the species is probably not in immediate danger. However, these circumstances may change and pressures on the region’s habitat appear to be increasing; an account of threats to forest in Arunachal Pradesh is found under Rufous-necked Hornbill *Aceros nipalensis*. Very little information is available detailing the rate of deforestation in the hills of northern Myanmar, but it is felt that habitat degradation has been rapid in most areas (B. F. King verbally 1998).

MEASURES TAKEN Although none is known in Myanmar, in India the species occurs in Namdapha National Park (1,985 km²) and may well be found in nearby Kamlang Wildlife Sanctuary (783 km²).

MEASURES PROPOSED Proper protection of Namdapha National Park is vital for this species and several others with important populations in the area (e.g. Rufous-necked Hornbill and White-bellied Heron *Ardea insignis*). In addition, further surveys are required to clarify the current range and status of the species in both India and Myanmar, leading to the establishment of appropriate protected areas where possible. Surveys for the species would be facilitated by knowledge of its vocalisations, and these should thus be recorded and described at the earliest opportunity.

REMARKS (1) This species previously went under the names of *Actinura oglei* (Godwin-Austen 1877) and *Thringorhina oglei* (Baker 1922–1930), but is now included within the expanded genus *Stachyris*. (2) Given the method of collection (local people plied with rewards might well be tempted to provide false nests, eggs and information) and the lack of direct field observations of this species, there is some room for caution in accepting the veracity of Baker’s (1906) data (see Remarks 2 under Grey-crowned Prinia *Prinia cinereocapilla*), although he partly countered this by claiming that four roughly identical nests were all brought in with an adult specimen such that “there is little chance of our having been deceived in the matter”. Confirmation of the accuracy of details drawn from Baker’s (1906, 1922–1930) work is nevertheless desirable.