

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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SHORT-TOED COUCAL

Centropus rectunguis

Critical —

Endangered —

Vulnerable A1c; A2c



This species qualifies as Vulnerable because it is restricted to low-lying forest in a region where this habitat type is being cleared and degraded at such a rate that rapid and continuing population declines are inferred.

DISTRIBUTION The Short-toed Coucal is endemic to the lowland forests of the Sunda region. Sight and sound records in Sabah have been considered provisional, owing to the difficulty in distinguishing the species from the larger lookalike Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis* (Sheldon *et al.* in press), and this warning must apply across the board, e.g. to the report from Thailand below, given Wells's (1999) evidence that the northernmost limit in the Peninsula is 5°20'N. An examination of the map generated from the following records indicates a distribution heavily clustered in the Malaysian sector of Borneo; as with the Large-billed Blue-flycatcher *Cyornis caerulatus*, which possesses a somewhat similar concentration of records (but is absent from the Malaysian Peninsula), it is difficult to believe this is entirely an artefact of field effort, and it may well be that distribution is much patchier, or density much lower, in most of Kalimantan (see also under Population) and indeed Sumatra, as a result of unidentified ecological factors such as competition. Records are from:

■ **THAILAND** Hala-Bala Wildlife Sanctuary, in the Bala area, 1998, and Khlong Hala, April 1999 (*Bird Conserv. Soc. Thailand Bull.* 15, 7[1999]: 14–15, *Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 30 [1999]: 55);

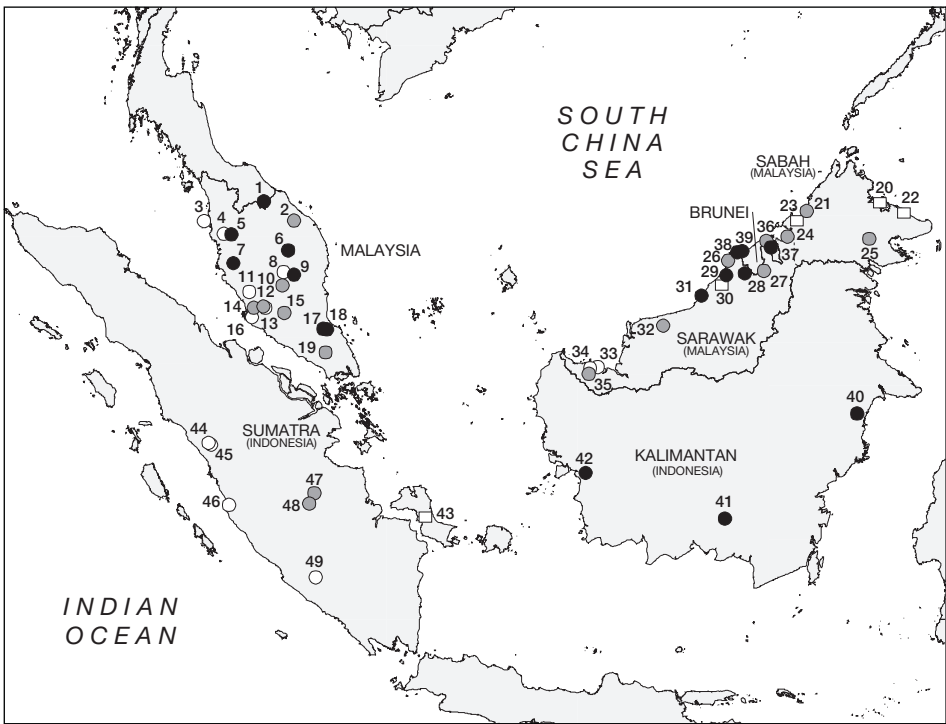
■ **MALAYSIA** ■ *Peninsular Malaysia* Gunung Lawit on the lower south-east slope, February 1974 (Wells 1982); **Penang**, 1871 (specimen in BMNH); **Pondok Tanjung Forest Reserve** (Pondok Tanjung), Larut hills, Perak, 1918 (male in ZRCNUS; also Chasen 1939a); **Belum Forest Reserve**, May 1998 (Lim Kim Chye *in litt.* 2000); **Taman Negara National Park**, at Kuala Tahan, November of an unspecified year (specimen in ZRCNUS; also Chasen 1939a), and early 1986 (Harrap 1986); **Tumboh Forest Reserve**, Perak, March 1991 (A. C. Sebastian *in litt.* 1999); Temenggor Forest Reserve, August 1993 and March 1994, probably (Davison 1995); **Kuala Tembeling**, Pahang river, 60 m, August 1905 (specimen in BMNH); **Tekam Forest Reserve**, February and August 1969 (Wells 1972), April 1979 to June 1981 (Johns 1986) and March–June 1987 (Johns 1989); **Kuala Lompat**, Pahang, September 1979 (Wells 1984); **Ginting Bidei**, Selangor–Pahang boundary, 700 m, May 1909 (two males in BMNH; also Chasen 1939a); **Ampang Forest Reserve**, November 1968 (Medway and Wells 1970); **Dusun Tua**, Selangor, November 1916 (female in BMNH); **Subang Forest Reserve**, July 1969 (Wells 1972); **Pasoh Forest Reserve**, November 1968 (Medway and Wells 1970); **Rantau Panjang**, Selangor, March 1906 (male in BMNH; also Chasen 1939a); **Sungai Kinchin**, May 1989 (*Enggang* 2,6: 3); **Endau-Rompin Conservation Area**, Pahang, June 1986 (A. C. Sebastian *in litt.* 1999); **Rengam Forest Reserve**, May 1969 (Wells 1972); Panti Forest Reserve (unmapped), 1990s (Lim 1994b);

■ **Sabah** **Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve**, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Papar**, November–December 1966 (Gore 1968); Kulamba, presumably **Kulamba Wildlife Reserve**, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press); **Klias**, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press); Menggalong forest, presumably **Marintaman Menggalong Forest Reserve**, near the head of the Marantongan river, March 1975 (Wells 1976); Danum Forest Reserve presumably in what is now **Danum Valley Conservation Area**, mid-1970s (Smythies 1981), and Bole river, undated (Sheldon *et al.* in press);

■ **Sarawak** south of **Tanjong Lobang**, Miri, December 1964 (Fogden 1965); **Gunung Mulu National Park**, undated (Wells 1976, Wells *et al.* 1978), April–May 1978 (Wells *et al.* 1978); **Sungai Tutuh**, June 1983 (Duckett 1985); **Sungai Melinau**, June 1983 (Duckett 1985); **Batu Niah estate**, undated (Duckett 1985); **Similajau National Park**, mid-1980s (Duckworth and Kelsh 1988); **Mukah**, at Kuala Mukah and Penat, April and December 1962 (Smythies 1963, also 1981); **Sutama**, **Samarahan**, November 1919 (male in BMNH); **Kuching**, February 1893 (Smythies 1957); **Semengo Forest Reserve**, March 1965 (Fogden 1965);

■ **BRUNEI** **Kota Batu**, near Brunei town, 1950/1954 (Smythies 1957, 1981); **Bangar**, October 1980 (White and Neighbour 1981); **Seria**, August 1989 (Mann 1991: 99); **Kuala Belait**, August 1989 (Mann 1991: 99);

■ **INDONESIA** **Kalimantan** ■ **East Kalimantan Kutai National Park** at Mentoko, July–August 1990 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 13 [1991]: 47–52); ■ **Central Kalimantan** upper catchment



The distribution of Short-toed Coucal *Centropus rectunguis*: (1) Hala-Bala Wildlife Sanctuary; (2) Gunung Lawit; (3) Penang; (4) Pondok Tanjong Forest Reserve; (5) Belum Forest Reserve; (6) Taman Negara National Park; (7) Tumboh Forest Reserve; (8) Kuala Tembeling; (9) Tekam Forest Reserve; (10) Kuala Lompat; (11) Ginting Bidei; (12) Ampang Forest Reserve; (13) Dusun Tua; (14) Subang Forest Reserve; (15) Pasoh Forest Reserve; (16) Rantau Panjang; (17) Sungai Kinchin; (18) Endau-Rompin Conservation Area; (19) Rengam Forest Reserve; (20) Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve; (21) Papar; (22) Kulamba Wildlife Reserve; (23) Klias; (24) Marintaman Menggalong Forest Reserve; (25) Danum Valley Conservation Area; (26) Tanjong Lobang; (27) Gunung Mulu National Park; (28) Sungai Tutuh; (29) Sungai Melinau; (30) Batu Niah estate; (31) Similajau National Park; (32) Mukah; (33) Samarahan; (34) Kuching; (35) Semengo Forest Reserve; (36) Kota Batu; (37) Bangar; (38) Seria; (39) Kuala Belait; (40) Kutai National Park; (41) Sungai Sebangau; (42) Gunung Palung National Park; (43) Pulau Bangka; (44) Gunung Singgalang; (45) Padang Highlands; (46) Pasir Ganting; (47) Sungai Tembesi; (48) Sungai Ketalo; (49) southern Barisan Range.

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

of the **Sungai Sebangau**, 20 km south-west of Palangkaraya, 1993–1995 (Page *et al.* 1997); ■ **West Kalimantan Gunung Palung National Park** at Cabang Panti, 1986–1995 (Laman *et al.* 1996);

Bangka undated (Mees 1986);

Sumatra ■ **West Sumatra Gunung Singgalang**, Padang Highlands, undated (Salvadori 1879); **Padang Highlands**, undated (Büttikofer 1887); **Pasir Ganting**, June 1914 (male in BMNH); ■ **Jambi Sungai Tembesi**, 1976 (D. A. Holmes *in litt.* 1999); **Sungai Kelato**, 1976 (D. A. Holmes *in litt.* 1999); ■ **South Sumatra southern Barisan Range**, undated (Robinson and Kloss 1918a); Lahat (untraced), undated (Vorderman 1882).

POPULATION The true status of this species is difficult to determine because of its similarity to other coucal species, but it appears to be genuinely rare throughout much of its range.

Peninsular Malaysia Although once considered rare (or indeed “very rare”: Chasen 1939a), this coucal is actually frequent in tall forest of the lowlands (Wells 1984), and its status in general is “more or less regular and uncommon to more or less common”, with evidence from vocalisations suggesting that birds (or at least territorial birds) are spaced at a naturally low population density (Wells 1999).

Borneo It remained “a rare and mysterious bird” into the 1950s, and one tranche of fieldwork, 1950–1954, obtained only a single specimen as against 23 Greater Coucals *Centropus sinensis* (Smythies 1957); subsequently it was found “commoner than was supposed... in a wide range of habitats” (Smythies 1981, based on Fogden 1965: see Ecology). Nevertheless, it is remarkable that in the entire collection of RMNH, which houses a massive body of material from the Greater Sundas, there appears to be (and is registered) not a single specimen of Short-toed Coucal, implying its extreme scarcity in Kalimantan and Sumatra. In Sabah it is “probably a scarce resident” (Gore 1968) and it is considered “rare” in Gunung Palung National Park, Kalimantan (Laman *et al.* 1996).

Sumatra The species has an “enigmatic” status on Sumatra (van Marle and Voous 1988), and although it may have been overlooked, there were no records at all from 1987 to 1995 (Holmes 1996). A remark that it was the commonest cuckoo around Deli (Hagen 1890) was regarded as referring to Lesser Coucal *Centropus bengalensis javanensis* (Hartert 1902a).

ECOLOGY Habitat This is a species of the ground and understratum of both primary and old secondary closed-canopy lowland evergreen and peatswamp forest, in contrast to other coucals at least in the Malaysian Peninsula, occasionally penetrating up hill slopes to around 600 m (Chasen 1939a, Wells 1999), and, in Taman Negara, often around small streams (Harrap 1986). In Sabah and Sarawak the situation may be different, since birds have been reported “on padi-fields” (Gore 1968) and from casuarinas and scrub by a beach, in thick secondary scrub, and in long grass, all of which suggested “a wide range of habitat” (Fogden 1965; hence Smythies 1981), although Smythies (1981) himself expressed doubts about the paddyfield record. Smythies (1957) reported a specimen taken with a Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis* in a swamp by a stream with rubber gardens and scrub jungle and no “heavy forest” for many miles, and later reported that it “frequents long grass” at Mukah (Smythies 1981), although this simply referred to two sightings on successive days in such habitat (Smythies 1963). However, the comment that it “emerges into scrub and rank grass in small clearings, but mostly stays inside forest” (Wells 1999) equally suggests that any habitats outside forest are used opportunistically and are in no way major or primary habitats which could support the species independently of forest, and again Smythies (1981) indicated that “the usual habitat” is closed-canopy forest including peatswamp and riverside forest. Certainly in Sabah it is stressed to be a forest bird, extending only from sea-level to 400 m (Sheldon *et al.* in press). It has only been recorded in lowland (not swamp or upland) forest in Gunung Palung (Laman *et al.* 1996), and in alluvial forest on Gunung Mulu

(Wells 1976). It prefers denser, shadier habitat to that of Greater Coucal, and was found in shrub jungle at one site and in shrubby riverside areas close to dense jungle in two others (Duckett 1985).

Food The species forages mainly on the ground, and is evidently an opportunistic predator: one was seen killing and eating a large frog (Sreedharan 1987) and another that visited mist-nets killed (by biting the skull) all trapped birds it could reach (Wells 1999).

Breeding A nest was found in September, Peninsular Malaysia, consisting of “an untidy ball of leaves”, lined with teased palm-frond pith, 2 m up in the fronds of a stemless *Salacca* palm in primary forest (Wells 1984, 1999). Dependent juveniles have been recorded twice in May (Chasen 1939a, Wells 1999). The species is noisiest in November–March, but calling has also been recorded in May and August (Wells 1999).

THREATS In Peninsular Malaysia, on the basis especially of calling records, the core habitat of this species lies below the hill-foot boundary, with no records from recently logged forest; both these factors “place this coucal in the front rank of species threatened by habitat-loss” (Wells 1999; see also Johns 1986, 1989). 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*).

MEASURES TAKEN Although legally protected in Sabah (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 has been recorded from *Thailand* Hala Bala Wildlife Sanctuary; *Peninsular Malaysia* Taman Negara National Park and Endau Rompin National Park; *Sabah* Danum Valley Conservation Area; *Sarawak* Gunung Mulu and Similajau National Parks and Kulamba Wildlife Reserve; *Kalimantan* Kutai and Gunung Palung National Parks; and *Sumatra*, presumably (based on records), Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park (see Distribution). However, many of these areas are under great threat (see Threats under Crestless Fireback).

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

The ecology of the Short-toed Coucal needs to be clarified through studies of population density, breeding success, feeding patterns, dispersal and survival in a number of carefully evaluated primary and secondary habitats, in particular with regard to its separation from Greater Coucal. 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.