

# Threatened Birds of Asia:

## The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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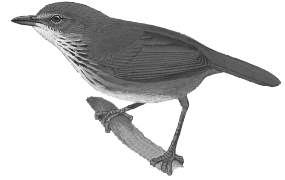
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## MARSH BABBLER

### *Pellorneum palustre*



Critical  —  
Endangered  —  
Vulnerable  A1c; A2c

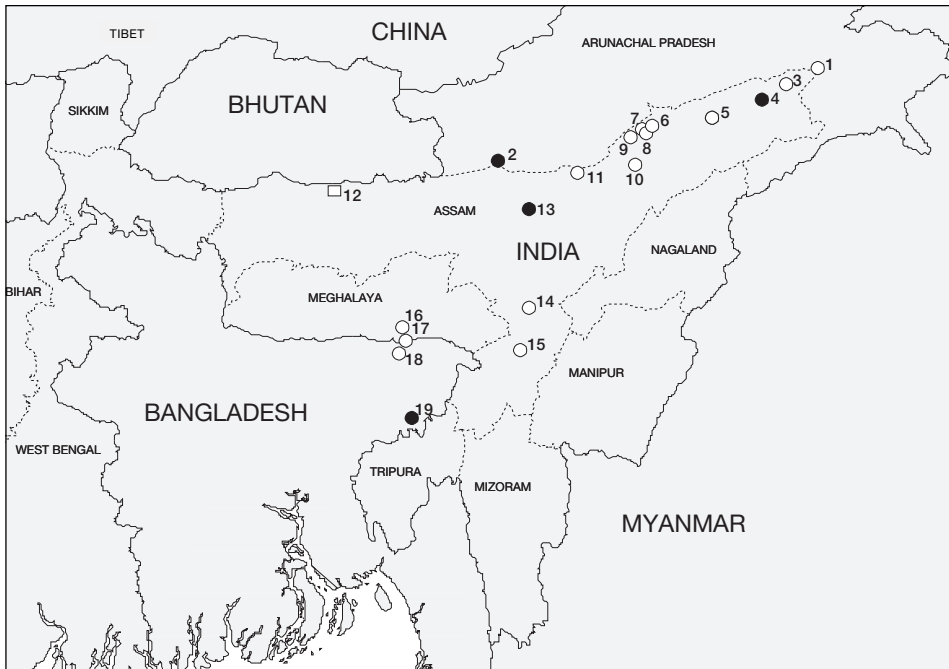
*This grassland specialist is inferred to have a rapidly declining population as a result of widespread loss of its tall grassland habitat. It therefore qualifies as Vulnerable.*

**DISTRIBUTION** The Marsh Babbler is restricted to the floodplain of the Brahmaputra river and its associated tributaries in north-eastern India and adjacent Bangladesh.

■ **INDIA** It is distributed fairly widely in the lowlands of Assam, extending to Meghalaya at the foot of the Khasia hills and to Arunachal Pradesh at the foot of the Mishmi hills. Records are from:

■ **Arunachal Pradesh Mishmi hills** (presumably at their base), pre-1895 (specimen in BMNH); **Tipi**, 400 m, two, June 1994 (Singh 1994);

■ **Assam Sadiya** (Sadia), at “Dibung” (possibly Dibang river, and therefore possibly in Arunachal Pradesh), April–May 1877 (two males in BMNH, Hume 1888); Dibru river and



**The distribution of Marsh Babbler *Pellorneum palustre*:** (1) Mishmi hills (foot of); (2) Tipi; (3) Sadiya; (4) Dibru-Saikhowa National Park; (5) Dibrugarh; (6) Hassemara; (7) Gagaldubi; (8) Bhimpooora bhil; (9) Diju river; (10) Komolabari; (11) Dafa hills; (12) Manas National Park; (13) Kaziranga National Park; (14) North Cachar Hills district; (15) Cachar plains; (16) Cherrapunji; (17) Bholaganj; (18) Chatak; (19) West Bhanugach Reserved Forest.

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

Rungagora, 1901–1911 (Stevens 1914–1915), these localities being within or near **Dibru-Saikhowa National Park**, wherein recent records included 2–3 in February/March 1996 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 24 [1996]: 59–65), two at Kolomi, March 1997 (Kazmierczak and Allen 1997), six, March 1998 (Hornbuckle 1998a), and sightings at Amarpur (just outside the park), March 1998 (Allen 1998a); **Dibrugarh**, April 1876 (specimen in BMNH); **Hassemara**, apparently resident around the Subansiri river, collected in February, April and December 1905, January 1906 (Stevens 1914–1915, Abdulali 1968–1996); **Gagaldubi** (Gagaldhubir; Gagaldhubie), undated (female in BNHS, Abdulali 1968–1996), January 1905 (two specimens in AMNH and USNM, Stevens 1914–1915); **Bhimpoora bhil**, 1901–1911 (Stevens 1914–1915); **Diju** (Deejoo) river, April 1904 (male in MCZ, Stevens 1914–1915); **Komolabari**, Sibsagar, April 1903 (Stevens 1914–1915, male in ZRCNUS); base of the **Dafla hills** (labelled Miri hills), probably c.1875 (three specimens in BMNH); **Manas National Park**, undated (Anon. 1990b); **Kaziranga National Park**, at Daphlang beel, 4–5, January 1995 (Barua and Sharma 1999); north of **North Cachar Hills district**, breeding, undated (Baker 1922–1930); **Cachar plains**, undated (Gould 1872), breeding, undated (Baker 1922–1930); Panidihing Sanctuary (not mapped), 1990s (Barooah 1994); Nameri National Park (not mapped), 1990s (Choudhury 2000c);

■ **Meghalaya** near **Cherrapunji**, Khasia hills, undated (Jerdon 1871–1872), possibly from the lowlands at the border of Bangladesh.

■ **BANGLADESH** The species is listed as occurring in the north-eastern highlands, the Chittagong lowlands and possibly the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Rashid 1967), and its range is thus described as the “hills of Bangladesh south to Sylhet and the Chittagong region” (Ripley 1982). However, as the inclusion of Chittagong in the range of the species is quite probably hypothetical (see Remarks 2 under Manipur Bush-quail *Pedicularia manipurensis*), the record is treated here as provisional (*contra* Grimmett *et al.* 1998). In addition, reports from the Sundarbans (e.g. Sarker and Sarker 1986) are in error. Confirmed records are from: wetlands at **Bholaganj** (Bolaganj) and **Chatak** (and between these sites), Sylhet, at the base of the Khasia hills, c.1869–1870 (Godwin-Austen 1872b, two specimens in BMNH; also Hume 1888), and later found nesting in the “Sylhet plains” probably in the same general area (Baker 1922–1930); **West Bhanugach Reserved Forest** (Lawacharra Forest), two, February 1989 (Thompson *et al.* 1993).

**POPULATION** The Marsh Babbler’s population is unknown but is here inferred to be declining as a result of loss of its tall grassland habitat.

**India** Historically, it was described as a “rare bird” in North Cachar (Baker 1894–1901), although “common about marshy ground” in Meghalaya (*Stray Feathers* 1 [1873]: 4–5), and “not rare in Assam” (Jerdon 1871–1872). There have been few recent records (Grimmett *et al.* 1998), but it was “common” in the Amarpur area adjacent to Dibru-Saikhowa National Park (Allen 1998a) and “uncommon” in the park itself (Choudhury 1997d), and is appearing more regularly at other localities (see, e.g., Choudhury 2000c).

**Bangladesh** The species is presumably scarce as there has been only one recent record, despite the locality where it occurred being relatively well watched (P. M. Thompson *in litt.* 1997).

**ECOLOGY Habitat** The Marsh Babbler is found “principally in the plains” but wanders up to c.800 m (Baker 1922–1930). Its habitat requirements apparently match those of the sympatric Red-capped Babbler *Timalia pileata* (Stevens 1914–1915), and its name is not a clear guide to its whereabouts: its favoured habitat has been described as grass jungle with trees (Allen 1998a), “bushes and low-tree jungle”, or “grass and reeds” (Baker 1894–1901, 1922–1930), and it occurs in tall grassland (also referred to as “elephant grass”), often on swampy ground and alongside rivers (*Stray Feathers* 1 [1873]: 4–5, Godwin-Austen 1872b,

Baker 1894–1901, 1922–1930, Stevens 1914–1915, Ripley 1982, Kazmierczak and Allen 1997). There have also been records from “sun grass” fields (c.0.6 m high; possibly *Imperata*) in North Cachar, stretches of grassland on raised plateaus (Baker 1894–1901, 1922–1930), and “mixed bracken and reeds” (AMNH label data). The recent record from Bangladesh was from damp forest scrub (Thompson *et al.* 1993), an apparently unusual habitat for the species. The Marsh Babbler is a skulking bird that rarely ventures into the open (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998) and is therefore “very difficult to observe” (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). It was usually observed from elephant-back when “beating for game” as it flitted between patches of grass (Baker 1922–1930). However, it calls frequently and usually distinctively (Baker 1922–1930, Grimmett *et al.* 1998), and it tends to respond inquisitively to “pishing” (Kazmierczak and Allen 1997); it has even been described “a fearless bird” (AMNH label data).

**Food** There is nothing on record, but the species presumably feeds primarily on small invertebrates.

**Breeding** The breeding season apparently occupies April–June (Baker 1922–1930), although an individual was seen carrying food (presumably for nestlings) on 29 March (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 32 [2000]: 66–76). On the plains of Sylhet, Cachar and North Lakhimpur, nests were “built in reeds and grass on the banks of rivers and edges of swamps” and elsewhere on the higher parts of swampy land “tucked in amongst the roots of grass or under the protection of some small shrub or weed” (Baker 1922–1930). The nesting habits are similar to the Puff-throated Babbler *P. ruficeps*, which builds a semi-domed nest, roughly and loosely on or just above the ground, in which it lays 3–4 eggs (Baker 1894–1901, 1922–1930).

**Migration** The species is apparently sedentary (Ripley 1982).

**THREATS** The Marsh Babbler is one of three threatened species that are restricted to the “Assam Plains Endemic Bird Area”, threats and conservation measures in which are detailed by Stattersfield *et al.* (1998). The key threat is probably habitat loss and degradation. 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 stock and intensive harvesting by local communities, often associated with grassland burning (Bell and Oliver 1992, Peet 1997). In many regions grasslands of conservation value are practically confined to protected areas wherein they continue to suffer degradation (Bell and Oliver 1992, Peet 1997). Moreover, grassland habitats are generally poorly represented in protected-area systems (Rahmani 1988b, 1992c). The loss of swampy forest and grassland is also the key threat in Bangladesh (P. M. Thompson *in litt.* 1997). A more detailed account of threats to tall grasslands in India and Bangladesh appears in Threats under Bengal Florican *Houbaropsis bengalensis* and Swamp Francolin *Francolinus gularis*.

At Amarpur, to the north of Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, tall grasslands are often burned and cleared to make way for agriculture, while other grasslands within the park are overgrazed such that habitat is no longer suitable for the species (Allen 1998a). Further threats in Dibru-Saikhowa are flood erosion, encroachment and inadequate management (Choudhury 1997). Tall grassland in Manas National Park, where the species has also been recorded, has been overgrazed by domestic livestock, a situation exacerbated by the poor security situation in the park (N. B. Peet *in litt.* 2001).

**MEASURES TAKEN** *India* The species occurs in Dibru-Saikhowa, Kaziranga (430 km<sup>2</sup>, with new areas of grassland recently added: Choudhury 2000c), Manas (391 km<sup>2</sup>), and Nameri National Parks. Tipi is just outside the south-east corner of Eagle Nest Sanctuary (Choudhury 2000b), but this babbler is unlikely to occur inside the sanctuary as the habitat is inappropriate.

**Bangladesh** West Bhanugach Reserve Forest has been proposed as a national park, although the only effect to date of this idea may have been to increase the clearance of undergrowth for cane plantations in a development linked with forthcoming park status, to the detriment of this species (P. M. Thompson *in litt.* 1999).

**MEASURES PROPOSED** The long-term survival of the Marsh Babbler depends largely on the efficacy of conservation action in protected areas in Assam and initiatives to promote sustainable management of remaining tall grasslands allowing both thatch collection by local people whilst maintaining habitat for this and other threatened grassland birds. Its conservation requirements should be viewed in combination with the needs of these other threatened grassland birds 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).

**Habitat management** The Amarpur grasslands should be incorporated with Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, and suitable habitat in both areas protected from clearance for agriculture and managed for thatch production on a rotational system so that areas of unburned and uncut grassland are always available; in addition, cattle numbers should be reduced and succession to forest controlled by active management (Choudhury 1997d, Allen 1998a). Grazing of domestic stock should be controlled in Manas National Park to prevent further degradation of remaining tall grassland (N. B. Peet *in litt.* 2001). Other protected areas, such as Kaziranga and Nameri National Parks and Panidihing Sanctuary, need to be managed if possible with a view to maximising habitat availability for the species.

**Research** Surveys are required to assess the status and distribution of this species in north-east India and particularly in Bangladesh, where visits to any remaining marshes and grasslands in Sylhet are required. A survey of potentially suitable areas in Bangladesh (and indeed in Assam) could run in tandem with surveys for Swamp Francolin, Bristled Grass-warbler *Chaetornis striatus*, Black-breasted Parrotbill *Paradoxornis flavirostris* and Jerdon's Babbler *Chrysomma altirostre*. To aid detection, use should be made of the distinctive call of the Marsh Babbler (and the latter two species listed above), perhaps incorporating playback of recordings in grasslands and marshes to incite responses where a quick survey is required, but avoiding undue disturbance especially in the breeding season. Areas found to hold populations of the species should be assessed for their suitability as protected areas. In addition, the ecology of the species needs further clarification to guide management practice in relevant protected areas.