

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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Recommended citation

BirdLife International (2001) *Threatened birds of Asia: the BirdLife International Red Data Book*. Cambridge, UK: BirdLife International.

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ISBN 0 946888 42 6 (Part A)

ISBN 0 946888 43 4 (Part B)

ISBN 0 946888 44 2 (Set)

British Library-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

First published 2001 by BirdLife International

Designed and produced by the **Nature**Bureau, 36 Kingfisher Court, Hambridge Road, Newbury, Berkshire RG14 5SJ, United Kingdom

Available from the Natural History Book Service Ltd, 2–3 Wills Road, Totnes, Devon TQ9 5XN, UK. Tel: +44 1803 865913 Fax: +44 1803 865280 Email nhbs@nhbs.co.uk
Internet: www.nhbs.com/services/birdlife.html

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WHISKERED PITTA

Pitta kochi

Critical —

Endangered —

Vulnerable A1c,d; A2c,d

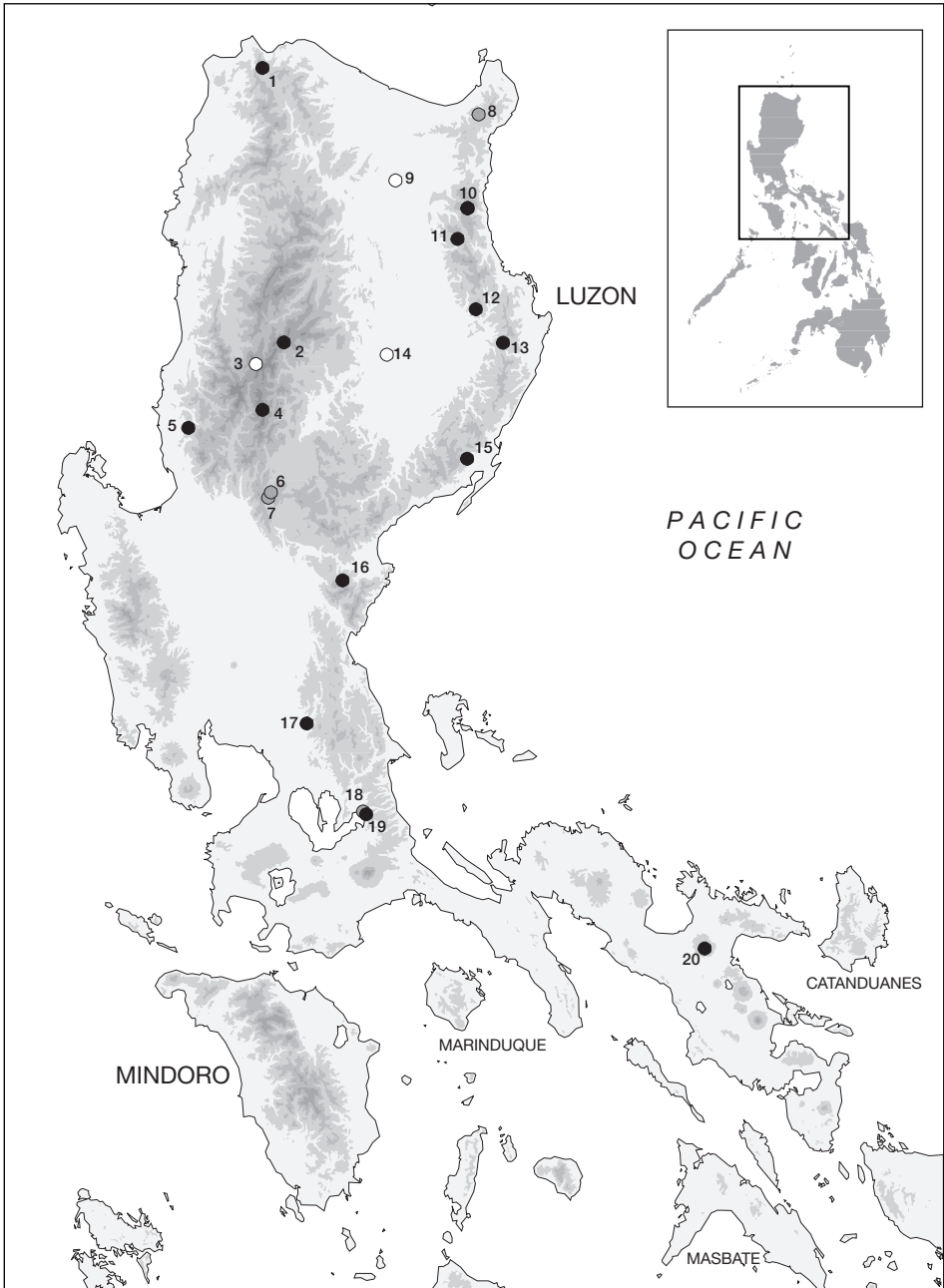


This species is thought to be declining rapidly, owing to very rapid reductions in the area of its lowland and montane forest habitats, locally compounded by hunting, qualifying it as Vulnerable.

DISTRIBUTION The Whiskered Pitta is endemic to Luzon in the Philippines, where it is confined to forest in the Cordillera Central and the Sierra Madre and Bicol region. It is judged to be widespread in the Sierra Madre than current evidence suggests, and its apparently disjunct range in the south is also likely to prove to be an artefact of observer coverage (Lambert 1996). Records are from:

■ **PHILIPPINES** *Luzon (western)* south-west of **Adams**, Ilocos Norte, 1,000 m, February 1993 (Jakobsen and Andersen 1995, Poulsen 1995), March 1994 (D. Allen *in litt.* 1994); **Mt Polis**, February 1997, six calling (T. H. Fisher verbally 1997); **Mt Data** at 2,275 m, January and February 1895 (eight specimens in AMNH, BMNH, DMNH; hence Ogilvie-Grant 1895c, Whitehead 1899b; see Remarks 1); **Mt Pulog** at Akiki, December 1990 (Jensen *et al.* 1994, Jakobsen and Andersen 1995); **Sablan**, Mountain province, at 520–1,050 m, May 1959 (male in FMNH, female in UPLB) and December 1990 (Jensen *et al.* 1994); **Atbu**, Nueva Vizcaya, 1,200 m, February 1973 (three females in DMNH); **Dalton Pass**, 750–900 m, January and February 1967 (two specimens in DMNH; also McClure and Leelavit 1972); unspecified locality, Bataan (de Elera 1895); (*eastern*) **Mt Cagua** at Gonzaga, Cagayan, April 1960 (female in FMNH; also Dickinson *et al.* 1991); **Orioung** (“Orión”), before 1895 (de Elera 1895); **Mt Cetaceo**, May 1992 (Danielsen *et al.* 1994, Jakobsen and Andersen 1995, Poulsen 1995), November 1997 (P. L. Alviola verbally 1997); **Los Dos Cuernos**, 950–1,150 m, May 1991 (Danielsen *et al.* 1994, Jakobsen and Andersen 1995, Poulsen 1995), with over 10 adults seen or heard, 800–1,050 m, February 1995 (P. A. J. Morris *in litt.* 1996), and including Hamut, 360 m, at the base of Los Dos Cuernos, December 1993 (N. J. Redman *in litt.* 1996; see Jakobsen and Andersen 1995, Poulsen 1995) and there at 900–1,000 m, March 1996 (W. Simpson *in litt.* 1997) and c.840 m, February 1997 (B. Gee *in litt.* 1997); **Minuma** (Minuma Creek), Bintacan, Isabela, 500 m, March 1992 (Danielsen *et al.* 1994, Jakobsen and Andersen 1995, Poulsen 1995) and May 1994 (Davidson ms); **Mt Dipalayag**, one or two adults and an adult and immature in primary forest at 650–950 m in April 1991 (Altamirano 1993, Danielsen *et al.* 1994, Jakobsen and Andersen 1995, Poulsen 1995); **Alcala**, before 1895 (de Elera 1895); **Amro watershed**, Dilasog, Aurora province, 600 m, September 1995 (A. Duya verbally 1997); **Maria Aurora Memorial National Park**, May 1997 (R. S. Kennedy *per* T. H. Fisher verbally 1997); (*central*) **Angat Dam**, March 1996 (W. Simpson *in litt.* 1997; see Remarks 2); **Balian**, 1964 (McClure and Leelavit 1972); **UP Laguna Land Grant**, undated (Gonzalez 1995); (*southern*) **Mt Isarog**, March 1988 (Goodman and Gonzales 1990) and February 1997 (T. H. Fisher verbally 1997).

POPULATION Although judged rare and local overall (Dickinson *et al.* 1991, Jakobsen and Andersen 1995), recent experience shows that this highly unobtrusive bird can be locally fairly common, with (e.g.) seven birds being found in one day at Los Dos Cuernos (including six birds singing along 200 m of logging road in degraded forest), six in a day at Mt Polis (T. H. Fisher verbally 1997), considered common at Maria Aurora Memorial National Park (R. S. Kennedy *per* T. H. Fisher verbally 1997) and 13 in one day at Mt Cetaceo (where



The distribution of Whiskered Pitta *Pitta kochi*: (1) Adams; (2) Mt Polis; (3) Mt Data; (4) Mt Pulog National Park; (5) Sablan; (6) Atbu; (7) Dalton Pass; (8) Mt Cagua; (9) Orioung; (10) Mt Cetaceo; (11) Los Dos Cuernos; (12) Minuma; (13) Mt Dipalayag; (14) Alcalá; (15) Amro watershed; (16) Maria Aurora Memorial National Park; (17) Angat Dam; (18) Balian; (19) UP Laguna Land Grant; (20) Mt Isarog.

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

considered “very common”), although the trend may still be downwards (Altamirano 1993, Danielsen *et al.* 1994, Jakobsen and Andersen 1995, Poulsen 1995; see Threats). It is considered uncommon at Mt Dipalayag and Minuma, fairly common (on voice) at Los Dos Cuernos (Danielsen *et al.* 1994), and uncommon in the Cordillera Central (A. Jensen *in litt.* 1994), although this may need revision following the above records from Mt Polis.

ECOLOGY Habitat This is a ground-haunting species, mainly inhabiting montane forest usually above 1,000 m (Dickinson *et al.* 1991, Danielsen *et al.* 1994, Poulsen 1995, Lambert 1996, T. H. Fisher verbally 1997) although the specimens collected in 1959 were from 520–1,050 m (see Distribution; see Remarks 3) and records in 1990–1992 were from 500 to 2,200 m, with one subsequent record as low as 360 m (Jakobsen and Andersen 1995; see Remarks 2); highest densities are at 900–1,400 m (Lambert 1996). Habitats vary considerably: (a) primary lowland evergreen forest with steep slopes, boulders and large areas of open litter-rich understorey; (b) primary montane oak-dominated forest on steep slopes, canopy cover 75–100%; (c) degraded montane forest (<70% canopy cover) with a dense understorey of ferns, grasses and saplings and only small open litter-rich patches; (d) selectively logged lowland evergreen forest with canopy lower than 20 m and around 70% complete; (e) primary ridge-slope mossy forest with canopy 5–12 m high, canopy cover 75–100% (Jakobsen and Andersen 1995). The high frequencies of contact reported under Population came from habitats (b) and (c). Evidence of wild pigs was found at all the study sites in the Sierra Madre and on Mt Pulog where the bird was observed, and their rooting in the soil may assist the birds by uncovering insects, worms and snails (Danielsen *et al.* 1994, Jensen *et al.* 1994, Poulsen 1995, NADM). The bird at Mt Pulog in December 1990 was caught by trappers in relatively flat mossy forest dominated by oaks up to 12 m height and 10–40 cm diameter (at breast height) with a relatively open understorey dominated by ferns and rhododendrons (Jensen *et al.* 1994). The bird at the Amro watershed was in logged forest near a stream (A. Duya verbally 1997). In the Sierra Madre it has not been recorded from forest on limestone (NADM).

Food This species, like all pittas, is a terrestrial foraging bird, digging for food with its bill in wet soil, turning aside leaves with a flip of the head, and snatching food items from the earth surface before hopping to another position (Jakobsen and Andersen 1995, NADM). Remains of small beetles were found in a stomach and some faeces examined (Jakobsen and Andersen 1995, Poulsen 1995).

Breeding Although peak calling in Whiskered Pitta is said to occur at the start of the rains in late April to mid-May (Lambert 1996), local people have reported eggs being laid from early February (Lambert 1996) or, at Mt Pulog, in March–May, with song heard in February–March (Jensen *et al.* 1994). This conforms with certain evidence: a newly fledged juvenile was netted, an adult and juvenile seen, and two adults noted collecting and flying off with food, as if feeding young, all in mid-April (Danielsen *et al.* 1994, Jakobsen and Andersen 1995; see Remarks 4). However, four specimens from Mt Data, late January, are juveniles (in AMNH, BMNH), and at least two of these are judged to have fledged “several months previously” (Lambert 1996); possibly seasonal schedules are somewhat different at this site, but in any case singing intensity may have more to do with brood dispersal following breeding than with territorial advertisement (the same pattern apparently being shown by Azure-breasted Pitta *Pitta steerii*—see relevant account). Nests are reportedly either on the ground or in a bush within 1 m of the ground (Jensen *et al.* 1994). Three nests in Mts Dipalayag (two, April) and Cetaceo (one, May) were in low light conditions (70–85% canopy cover) either along the ridge or on a steep slope, somehow giving an impression of a small, shallow cave; hardened footprints indicated that one nest was obviously in the dried mudhole of a wild pig (NADM).

Migration Records of birds in Nueva Vizcaya in January and February refer to within-island migrants whose destination is unclear. The bird ringed at Balian was presumably migrating within Luzon. The nature and significance of these movements can only be guessed

at; it is not even clear in which direction the birds were heading at that season, nor if the records of the species from Mt Isarog in February and March (see Distribution) represent wintering individuals or a resident population. T. H. Fisher (verbally 1997) conjectures that there is a post-breeding movement to lowland areas during the rainy season.

THREATS The Whiskered Pitta is affected by habitat loss, compounded by hunting with snares (including at Mt Pulog) (Danielsen *et al.* 1994, Jensen *et al.* 1994, Poulsen 1995). Mt Data is now reported to be devoid of forest (NADM). Habitat loss is a current problem in the forest of Mt Divalayag, c.30 km east of San Mariano, Isabela, where exploitation has already been quite severe (NADM); the Hamut area of Los Dos Cuernos, and possibly the whole mountain, suffers from rattan collection, with a permanent collector's camp and extensive clearance of the understorey over a wide area, plus chainsaw logging and clearance for agriculture also noted in 1997 (B. Gee *in litt.* 1997, F. R. Lambert *in litt.* 1997). Clearance of forest is rife at the southernmost site for the species, Mt Isarog (A. S. Manamtam *in litt.* 1996). The bird's seeming patchiness, its particular vulnerability to snaring by native hunters, and the small current and large potential levels of deforestation combine to suggest that a considerable decline may be in progress. The problem of conserving the species is compounded if it proves to be a full-scale migrant within Luzon (it is known to suffer occasional trapping at Dalton Pass), although the evidence generally does not support this.

MEASURES TAKEN The Whiskered Pitta is included on Appendix I of CITES. It occurs in one CPPAP site (Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park) and two NIPAP sites (Mts Pulog and Isarog National Parks; see Appendix). Maria Aurora Memorial National Park has not been incorporated into these programmes and the effective protection conferred by its status remains unclear.

MEASURES PROPOSED Apart from the areas targeted for conservation above, the species is known from five "key sites" (Mt Cagua, Mt Cetaceo, Mt Los Dos Cuernos, Mt Polis and Angat Watershed) and these deserve formal designation and protection, at least in part, under the NIPAS process. The Northern Sierra Madre Natural Park should be extended to embrace Los Dos Cuernos. This exceptionally beautiful animal could be used as a flagship species for key site conservation and enhanced protected area management in the Cordillera Central and at Mt Isarog. It merits an individual study to obtain clearer knowledge of its density and abundance at various sites, in different habitats and at several elevations throughout its range, including an analysis of differences between breeding regimes in the Cordillera Central and the Sierra Madre, with an intensive ringing study to test for site fidelity and dispersive capability. These data should be used in conjunction with details available for the suite of threatened species wholly or largely reliant on the forests of Luzon (see equivalent section under Green Racquet-tail *Prioniturus luconensis*) in order to formulate an appropriate strategy for their conservation.

REMARKS (1) Whitehead (1899b:244) mistakenly dated these records January 1896. (2) Habitat at Angat Dam may be as low as 300 m (F. R. Lambert *in litt.* 1997). Rand (1970b) listed the upper altitudinal limit as "7,500 feet" but there is nothing so high in Distribution. (3) The view of Gonzales and Alcala (1969) that the species is confined to terrain above 1,800 m in patches of pine forests in ravines certainly now appears mistaken, as indeed is their assumption that the species "is not eaten by people". (4) Jakobsen and Andersen (1995) reported an interesting phenomenon, namely that although their evidence indicated that the breeding season in the northern Sierra Madre started in late February, singing activity was highest from the end of April to the middle of May, coinciding with the start of the rainy season.