

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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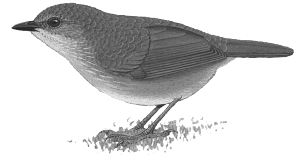
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TAWNY-BREASTED WREN-BABBLER

Spelaornis longicaudatus



Critical —

Endangered —

Vulnerable B1+2a,b,c,d,e; C1; C2a

This poorly known babbler qualifies as Vulnerable because it has a small, declining, severely fragmented population and range owing to clearance and degradation of moist evergreen forest.

DISTRIBUTION The Tawny-breasted Wren-babbler (see Remarks 1) is endemic to India, occupying a restricted range in the north-eastern states where it has been recorded in the hills of Meghalaya, Assam and north-west Manipur (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, Grimmett *et al.* 1998). Although elsewhere said to occur in the Naga hills (Baker 1922–1930) or Nagaland (e.g. Grimmett *et al.* 1998) the species is absent from Mount Japvo and not thought to extend to the Barail range (Ripley 1950c); there are apparently no confirmed records for the state. Records are from:

- **INDIA** ■ **Assam** Guilong, North Cachar Hills district, c.1,200 m, 1888 (Baker 1894–1901);
- **Meghalaya** Khasia hills at **Shillong**, pre-1886 (two specimens in BMNH), in April, May, pre-1895 (seven specimens in BMNH), July–October, December 1877, June 1895 (16 specimens in BMNH, USNM and YPM), June 1907 (BMNH egg data), two, April–May



The distribution of Tawny-breasted Wren-babbler *Spelaornis longicaudatus*: (1) Guilong; (2) Shillong; (3) Mawphlang; (4) Laitlyngkot; (5) Pynursla; (6) Cherrapunji; (7) Mawsynram; (8) Kedimai.

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

1979 (Grimmett 1979), and April 2000 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 32 [2000]: 66–76); **Mawphlang**, 1949–1954 (34 specimens in ANSP, CM, FMNH, LACM, UMMZ), also April 2000 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 32 [2000]: 66–76); **Laitlyngkot** (Laitlyngkoi), July 1949 (11 specimens in UMMZ); **Pynursla** (Pynursia), August, September 1949 (eight specimens in UMMZ); **Cherrapunji**, 1,350 m, September 1896 (specimen in AMNH), May 1906, May–June 1907, May 1909 (BMNH egg data), June 1952 (specimens in BMNH, CM and UMMZ) and also Cherra (Cherra Tehsil, near Cherrapunji), July c.1870 (Godwin-Austen 1870a, specimen in BMNH), and presumably nearby at Wahbareit, on the road to Bangladesh, April 2000 (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 32 [2000]: 66–76); **Mawsynram**, one, February 1996 (D. Allen *in litt.* 2000); Tackubama (untraced), Khasia hills, July 1950 (one in UMMZ);

■ **Manipur Kedimai** (Kidimei), pre-1895 (specimen in BMNH);

unknown state: Mahadeo (untraced), 1,500 m, June 1906 (specimen in AMNH), pre-1886 (juvenile in BMNH).

POPULATION Historically, the Tawny-breasted Wren-babbler bred “in considerable numbers” in the Khasia hills but was regarded as “much more rare” in the adjoining Cachar and Naga hills (Baker 1922–1930). Indeed, there are only two records from outside Meghalaya and the species is apparently absent from Nagaland. A large number of specimens was collected in Meghalaya early in the twentieth century, suggesting that it was relatively common. At Shillong, for example, the species was “so common” that Hume (1888) collected “over 50 specimens” and it was also described as “very numerous” in the “large woods below the peak of Shillong” (Godwin-Austen 1874b). There have been few visits to this area in recent years, but records suggest that the species remains common locally and tolerates a degree of habitat degradation (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 32 [2000]: 66–76). Nevertheless, the overall range is very small and there has been considerable habitat loss within it, so that total numbers of this species must be both small and declining, and many populations must now be permanently separated from one another.

ECOLOGY Habitat The species is largely terrestrial, often creeping and climbing about boulders in a fashion typical of the genus (Baker 1922–1930, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998). It is “a shy bird keeping to the dense underwood” (Godwin-Austen 1874b) which flies reluctantly, generally scuttling away on foot or dodging into crevices when disturbed (Baker 1922–1930). It is encountered solitarily or in pairs, and is rather silent (Baker 1922–1930, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998). It occurs in damp evergreen forests, mainly of oak *Quercus* and *Rhododendron*, but also pine *Pinus*, with well developed herbaceous and fern understoreys, especially in ravines or on steep hillsides with rock and boulder outcrops covered with moss and orchids between 1,000 and 2,000 m (Baker 1922–1930, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, Ripley 1982). It also occurs in non-forest habitats, particularly secondary growth and dense fern growth (*Oriental Bird Club Bull.* 32 [2000]: 66–76); Baker (1894–1901) stated that it was “found in all suitable bush-covered ravines at sufficiently high altitudes”.

Food It appears to be “entirely insectivorous” (Baker 1922–1930).

Breeding Breeding begins in April, with the egg-laying period extending to the end of June (Baker 1922–1930, Grimmett 1979). The nest of birds in this genus is highly distinctive, being elliptical and usually completely domed with the outer part consisting of “dead leaves, withered grass, a few roots and sometimes a few bamboo spathes”, and entirely “damp and rotten” such that it falls apart completely if moved from its original position (Baker 1922–1930). The inner lining is a layer of a papier-mâché type substance “apparently made of skeleton leaves and some soft fibrous stuff worked into a pulp and then spread over the whole interior of the nest in a very neat cup”, and entirely watertight (Baker 1922–1930). The species nests on the forest floor amongst boulders, herbaceous growth or scrub (Baker 1922–1930, Ali and Ripley 1968–1998). The clutch comprises 2–4 eggs (Baker 1922–1930).

THREATS The Tawny-breasted Wren-babbler is one of nine threatened species entirely restricted to the Eastern Himalayas Endemic Bird Area (EBA), threats and conservation measures in which are detailed by Stattersfield *et al.* (1998). It is rather difficult to assess specific threats to this wren-babbler as its current distribution and status are poorly known, while knowledge of the pressures on the forests it inhabits is equally scant. A threat common to all forest birds in north-east India, however, is the widespread damage to habitat caused by semi-shift cultivation or “jhum”; although this practice has encouraged bamboo growth it has caused widespread loss of forest except in steep inaccessible areas where cultivation is difficult (Choudhury 1992a, R. Kaul verbally 1999). Habitat in the Shillong–Cherra–Mawphlang area of the Khasia hills was recently described as a mosaic of cultivation and patches of broadleaved evergreen forest (sometimes mixed with pine), but with habitat covering the ridge above Shillong being in particularly good condition (C. R. Robson *in litt.* 2001). Elsewhere in the area remaining forest was either confined to low-stature (perhaps secondary) locally protected (sacred) groves or restricted to very steep inaccessible slopes (C. R. Robson *in litt.* 2001). Although there are no direct data, the area is likely to suffer gradual destruction and degradation of forest through conversion to agriculture, small-scale logging and grazing of livestock (R. Kaul verbally 1999). While the species appears to tolerate some habitat degradation (see Ecology) and its populations might therefore appear to be relatively secure, it may well survive in scrubtier vegetation only when adjacent to higher-quality forest; moreover, babblers are notoriously sedentary, so that they appear very unlikely to disperse between habitat patches, and therefore could not be expected to recolonise fragments in which they became extinct for stochastic reasons.

MEASURES TAKEN None is known apart from the existence of locally protected sacred groves (including Mawphlang) that might provide important protection for the species (C. R. Robson *in litt.* 2001).

MEASURES PROPOSED There is an immediate need to undertake a survey of this species to establish its current distribution and population status and to identify potential areas within its range for protection, particularly in the Khasia hills (P. Singh verbally 1998). Threats to forests in the Khasia hills should be investigated and quantified so that action can be taken to minimise them. One or more appropriate protected areas should be established and a programme designed to increase conservation awareness in the area.

REMARKS (1) The type locality of the species was originally designated as “North India” (Moore 1854). The type specimen was entered into the old India Museum catalogue as coming from Afghanistan while its stand is marked with “Darjiling”; it was, however, presumably collected by Griffith in the Khasia hills (Sharpe 1883). Despite the considerable similarity (and the confusion of names, since *longicaudatus* means long-tailed) between this species and its congener the Long-tailed Wren-babbler *S. chocolatinus*, they are apparently sympatric around Kedimai, Manipur, proving that they are separate species (Ripley 1954). The Long-tailed Wren-babbler itself is perhaps separable into further species, as the races *reptatus/kinneari*, *oatesi* and *chocolatinus* appear to differ significantly in plumage and vocalisations (Inskipp *et al.* 1996). At least one of the resultant forms (*S. oatesi* of the Chin hills, Myanmar, and Mizoram, India) would probably qualify as a threatened species (P. C. Rasmussen verbally 1997).