

Six species of bird new to Laos

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During 2004–2005, I observed six bird species previously unrecorded in Laos. They were observed with 10×42 binoculars and none was collected or photographed, hence descriptive details of identification are given here.

Currently, no officially constituted body or individual maintains a list of bird taxa recorded in Laos. Hence, these species are judged to be first records for the country after the exhaustive collation of previous published and unpublished records by Duckworth *et al.* (1999), supplemented by more recent sources. It is possible that the species have been observed recently in Laos, but that this information has not been circulated widely, or that unpublished pre-1950 specimens exist; not all historical collections have yet been written up (see, e.g., Robinson and Kloss 1931).

Of an increasing number of ‘grey literature’ sources, some contain evidently mistaken bird identifications. Duckworth *et al.* (1999) wrote that ‘species lists which present a number of unlikely records without comment suggest that the observer may not have been aware of the records’ significance, and thus was unfamiliar with the avifauna in general. The cautious course is taken of excluding the whole of such lists from this review’. Unfortunately, some such lists are now firmly in the public domain and mention at least some of the species reported below.

As well as a large computer database, presumably using much the same information as discussed by Duckworth (2000), problem sources include two surveys of national protected areas by an international conservation non-governmental organisation for a large conservation and development project; several environmental impact assessments for hydro-electric power projects carried out by an expatriate-staffed consulting company based in Vientiane; and a mid-1990s book by an expatriate development worker entitled (in translation) ‘*The birds of Laos*’. These three sources all include many species way out of geographic and ecological range, some wholly unlikely to occur anywhere in Laos. For example, the several reports from the consulting company included 15 birds not recorded from Laos, of which 11 were resident Sundaic species. Although almost 70 bird species were first recorded in Laos during 1992–1999 (see below), indicating a historically poorly researched avifauna, not one was a Sundaic resident; one new mammal was, and largely on this basis it merited a paper in the prestigious journal *Nature* (SurrIDGE *et al.* 1999). Most tellingly, all of these sources (explicitly purporting to contain comprehensive species lists) lacked common, conspicuous species that would surely have been located at the sites in question by anyone with even a basic familiarity with South-East Asian birds. Some mistakes were obvious, e.g. one source contained multiple claims of Pied Cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus*, a mere vagrant to Thailand and Indochina (e.g. Poole and Evans 2004), but not one of Chestnut-winged Cuckoo *C. coromandus*, which is widespread in Laos and at least locally common (e.g. David-Beaulieu 1944, Thewlis *et al.* 1996); the two species look somewhat similar.

Recent years have spawned additional misleading sources, in part through re-use by secondary compilations of the unreliable 1990s listings, and in part through the field deployment by international organisations of inadequately supervised, inexperienced, personnel. It is fortunate that the organisations do not remove the obviously unlikely species identifications, thereby masking the reports’ general unreliability. Objectively, no records of species on such lists can be used as independent data-points for determining species’ status and distribution (see BirdLife International 2001: 949 for an analogous case).

MANDARIN DUCK *Aix galericulata*

A male Mandarin Duck was flushed from a pool with thick fringing vegetation near Ban (= the village of) Sivilai, Thulakhom District, Vientiane province (18°19′N 102°37′E; altitude 175 m), on 23 January 2005 (Parr and Parr [1998] profiled this site). It flew across the pool, dropped behind flooded tree bamboo, and was not relocated. In the ideal light, the bird was instantly and obviously a male Mandarin; I became very familiar in Korea during 1999–2004 with the species’s distinctive flight shape. Specific features visible were a small, generally dark, dumpy duck, a large block-like head and a complex plumage pattern, including white in the wings, extensive pale on the face, and long spiky rich-orange feathers on the foreneck or breast.

No other species in the world looks remotely similar. This duck is very scarce in South-East Asia. There may be only two records from Myanmar (Smythies 2001). There seem to be no specific, dated, records from Vietnam, but Vo Quy (1981) stated that Mandarins had been collected in the Lai Chau area (in the far north) in winter. There are several records from Thailand, particularly recently (e.g. Robson 1998, 2000b, 2000c, 2002, 2004). Status in nearby Hong Kong is confused by the presence of free-flying, wildfowl-collection birds; but all evidence suggests wild visitors are also very rare there (Carey *et al.* 2001). It is therefore unlikely to be more than a vagrant to Laos. The bird at Ban Sivilai is probably in fact the second record for Laos, because over 24–25 January 2004, two Mandarins were seen on the Mekong from Chiang Saen, Thailand (Robson 2004). This stretch of the Mekong forms the international border between Thailand and Laos. Previous reports on its birdlife (e.g. Deignan 1945: 13, Duckworth *et al.* 2002) did not distinguish whether birds were in Thailand or Laos, but took records as referable to both countries.

GREY-BACKED THRUSH *Turdus hortulorum*

One, probably two, Grey-backed Thrushes were seen on 26 December 2004 in the forest fragment capping Phou Fa (= ‘Fa mountain’) arising from Phongsaly town (21°41′N 102°06′E, altitude c.1,500 m; this site is discussed in Fuchs *et al.* in prep.). The birds were in degraded tall forest with open understorey. A flock of Black-breasted Thrushes *T. dissimilis* had used this area for the preceding few weeks. I concentrated on one bird

in the open for two minutes at about 15 m range. The second bird, behind and less well-lit, looked similar, but all birds in the area were flushed by a passer-by before I could confirm its identity. I immediately recognised the bird as a male Grey-backed Thrush, having observed many in Korea during 2000–2004. The bird had: mid-grey upperparts, including the cheeks, exactly the colour of Korean birds; a cream throat separated from a similarly coloured submoustachial by a bold black malar stripe, the latter leading to a broad grey band across the lower throat and upper breast (coloured as the upperparts); rich orange flanks and clean white belly; and a very slight trace of a pale supercilium before the eye.

Males cannot be confused with any other Asian thrush. This bird fits the 'subadult' male plumage as in Peterson *et al.* (2003). Females can be exceedingly similar to Black-breasted Thrush, which was well distributed and probably common in Phongsaly province in winter 2004–2005 (Fuchs *et al.* in prep.), and might also be confused with Japanese Thrush *T. cardis*, also known from Laos (e.g. Delacour 1929a).

This thrush may be more regular in Laos than records suggest: many thrushes in the region are habitual skulkers and hence are often difficult to see well enough to identify. This species shares a 'seeeh' call with several other species, including Eyebrowed Thrush *T. obscurus* (widespread in Laos in winter; e.g. Thewlis *et al.* 1996, Evans and Timmins 1998, Duckworth *et al.* 2002) and Black-breasted Thrush (common in Phongsaly in winter 2004–2005; Fuchs *et al.* in prep.). However, that it has not been recorded in Thailand (Robson 2005) suggests that it is probably not numerous in Laos, even though it is the commonest wintering thrush in Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2001). It has previously been found in South-East Asia only in East Tonkin and North Annam (both Vietnam), where it may be fairly common in winter (Delacour 1929a,b, Delacour 1930a, Bourret 1943, 1944, Štusák and Vo Quy 1986). Also one was seen on 24 July 1961 in Hanoi (Fischer 1963), a date suggesting perhaps a captive origin or misidentification. Phou Fa is at a slightly higher altitude than given by Robson (2005) for the species in South-East Asia ('up to 1,100 m').

RED-BILLED STARLING *Sturnus sericeus*

At least two Red-billed Starlings were seen at Pakxan wetlands, Bolikhamxai province (18°23'N 103°41'E; 155 m), on 29–30 January 2005 (Wood [in prep.] gives more detail about this site). The precise number was unclear, among the many mobile starlings and mynas in the area. The first bird seen, on 29 January in a tree bamboo, had a plumage pattern obviously differing from the other common sturnids present (c.400 Chestnut-tailed Starlings *S. malabaricus*, c.80 White-vented Mynas *Acridotheres cinereus* and 32 Black-collared Starlings *S. nigricollis*). It was watched for c.2 minutes at c.50 m range in good light, and showed: overall rather fawn body coloration; plain-looking face; mantle concolorous with head; belly slightly paler than head and breast; very pale honey-buff rump; glossy black remiges with a neat white crescent mark on the primary coverts and/or at the base of the exposed remiges; no other pale edges or marks on the exposed remiges; dark tail, probably also glossy black; orange-red legs. Bill structure (colour not visible) resembled Common Starling *S. vulgaris*, the bird being perhaps a little bigger and bulkier. Coincidentally I had examined skins of Red-

billed and White-cheeked Starlings at the Natural History Museum, Tring, UK (BMNH) in August 2004 in connection with the first record of Red-billed Starling for DPR Korea (Duckworth 2004). After several brief flight views of starlings showing various features consistent with Red-billed Starling, in groups of up to nine birds, in the late afternoon of 30 January an adult was located in a tree. It was watched for 10 minutes from 100 m range initially, moving rapidly in to 30 m. It showed: a 'clean'-grey mantle; glossy black exposed remiges with a small white mark on the primary coverts and/or at the base of the exposed remiges; elongated falcate silvery scapulars drooping down over the remiges giving a jagged edge between silver and black; no pale edging or tracery on remiges or secondary coverts; rump much paler than mantle, but not white; tail glossy black with no pale tip, corners or sides; head paler than body, a rather 'dirty'-blond tone; very slightly darker clouding to rear and lower edge of eye; no black ellipse mark around the eye; legs bright straw-orange in colour, bill colour not assessable (hidden by leaves during close views); size rather bigger than Chestnut-tailed Starling.

The second bird could only be an adult Red-billed Starling. Various features, notably the lack of a black eye-patch, rule out the only possible confusion species, Vinous-breasted Starling *S. burmannicus*. The first perched bird was probably that species as well; any Vinous-breasted Starling with a uniform fawn body would not have glossy black wings, and the species never looks plain-faced. Young White-shouldered Starling *S. sinensis* might be an outside confusion risk, but never shows a small white wing mark or brightly coloured legs. Probably, based on flight views, at least nine Red-billed Starlings were present.

In the following winter, one was photographed in a paddy in a former ox-bow from Nam Tha river (20°56'N 101°24'E), 6 km south of Louang-Namtha town, on 20 November 2005 by T. Tizard (*in litt.* 2005).

Apart from an old record in Cochinchina, southern Vietnam (Germain 1912), the Red-billed Starling's recorded South-East Asian winter distribution resembles that of Grey-backed Thrush, being numerous in Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2001), regular, widespread and sometimes common in northern Vietnam (Oustalet 1886, Delacour and Jabouille 1927, Delacour *et al.* 1928, Delacour 1929b, Milon 1942, Bourret 1944, Štusák and Vo Quy 1986, Scott *et al.* 1989, Le Manh Hung *et al.* 2002), but previously unrecorded further west: Oustalet's (1886) suspicion that the bird does not habitually pass west of the Annamite mountains seems to be true. The first Thai records of Red-billed Starling came during January–February of the same winter, of 1–2 birds at two sites (Round and Jukmongkol 2005a,b). The Pakxan birds could also be considered to constitute a Thai record, because the small starlings all flew across the Mekong to roost in Thailand (as do various other birds at this site, e.g. egrets; Wood in prep.). Red-billed Starling was previously noted to mix with dry-season flocks of Chestnut-tailed Starling by, e.g., Germain (1912). Pakxan appears to be perfect habitat for the species, given that in Hong Kong it uses wet agricultural areas (Carey *et al.* 2001).

WHITE-CHEEKED STARLING *Sturnus cineraceus*

A White-cheeked Starling by the inflow of the Nam Khang (= 'Khang river') to the Nam Ou (22°06'N 102°15'E,

c.510 m; within the Phou Dendin National Protected Area, a few hundred yards from the village of Ban Sopkhang) on 6 December 2004 was picking and eating insects out of the crumbling earth river-banks amid overgrown former cultivation. I immediately recognised the bird as a well-marked White-cheeked Starling, having observed many in Korea during 1999–2004, and observed it for five minutes at 20–25 m range; as I approached to within 6 m, it flew to a nearby small tree. It had a blackish cap (extending down to the eye) and throat; white cheeks with white streaking on the lores, crown and to the rear of the cheek-patch onto the dark neck-sides; cold brown upperparts with ‘dirty’-greyish underparts, palest on the flanks and thighs; a white vent; tail and remiges slightly darker than the mantle; white rump, tail-tip, alula and wingbar; and ‘dirty’-orange legs and bill, the latter with dark tip and distal culmen.

White-cheeked Starling is not readily confusable with any other species. A vagrant might be expected to flock with local starlings (see Carey *et al.* 2001). However, non-forest sturnids have declined so severely in the northern highlands of Laos that this was the only wild individual of any species seen during a month of winter fieldwork in Phongsaly province (Fuchs *et al.* in prep.).

This species may well occur not infrequently in Laos, because it is a common but localised winter visitor to Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2001), is regular and sometimes common in Tonkin (Delacour *et al.* 1928, Delacour 1929b, Kinnear 1929, Bourret 1944, Fischer 1961, Štusák and Vo Quy 1986, Scott *et al.* 1989), has been found twice, although not certainly as a wild bird, in Thailand (Round 1998) and has even occurred west to Myanmar where it was assessed as a ‘rare winter visitor’ to the North (Smythies 2001).

ROSY PIPIT *Anthus roseatus*

Rosy Pipits were seen at three sites in Phongsaly province, at each in both December 2004 and March 2005. At Ban Muangyo (21°31'N 101°51'E, c.680 m), there was one on 24 December and seven on 22 March. At nearby Ban Dua (21°29'N 101°51'E, c.690 m), there were nine, probably eleven (tape-recorded), on 25 December and three on 23 March. At Ban Boun-Nua (21°38'N 101°54'E, c.960 m), there were two on 25 December and six, perhaps nine, on 21 March. The call, reminiscent of Meadow Pipit *A. pratensis* of Europe and of Buff-bellied Pipit *A. rubescens japonicus* of north-east Asia, immediately ruled out all pipit species previously recorded in Laos. The first bird was watched for longest and the most detailed notes taken of it, as it foraged slowly in short grass and bare mud beside a small river amid farmland. It was watched in perfect morning winter light at c.15 m for 7–8 minutes, alternating binoculars with a ×15 telescope. It had: a prominent white supercilium from bill to nape; a dark line from fore-crown to culmen; a streaked crown but fairly plain nape; fairly plain ear-coverts between a dark eyestripe and a somewhat prominent dark moustachial stripe along the lower margin and an ill-defined palish spot in the lower rear; a strong pale submoustachial stripe with a big black malar spot, only slightly extending as a streak towards the bill (i.e., the basal two-thirds of the malar stripe were ‘missing’); a clear, slightly buff-tinged, throat; boldly streaked upperparts somewhat reminiscent of Red-throated Pipit *A. cervinus*, including two prominent pairs of dark-bordered pale ‘tramlines’, the outer two of the three blackish stripes being

bolder than the inner; distinct olive-green (almost golden-green in some lights) fringes to the folded remiges and (at least) parts of the greater coverts; breast and flanks with bold well-defined elongated black spots, running as streaks, on a creamy background with a very slight rosy tint on lower throat and upper breast; a clean white vent and undertail-coverts; and bill largely or entirely dark. The rump pattern could not be discerned. It called freely as it made short flights between foraging sites. Most calls were of single notes (a sibilant *psip*) but sometimes 2–3 (e.g. *psipf'ooo* or *pseet eet-eee*). It sometimes pumped its tail in a rather desultory fashion.

The call and bold supercilium rule out the otherwise somewhat similar Red-throated Pipit, which is an abundant winter visitor to much of Laos (e.g. Thewlis *et al.* 1996, Evans and Timmins 1998, Duckworth *et al.* 2002). Although it seems to be scarce in Phongsaly province in winter (Fuchs *et al.* in prep.), one at Ban Dua close to the 25 December flock of Rosy Pipits gave opportunities for direct comparison of call and plumage. The boldness of the upperpart streaking is Rosy Pipit's best distinction from the otherwise rather similar Buff-bellied Pipit, which has not occurred in Laos but is a scarce non-breeding visitor to Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2001) and a vagrant to Thailand (Robson 2005), so must be considered for Laos. An additional distinction from Buff-bellied Pipit is that the eye-stripe seemed to extend right to the bill, although it could not be confirmed this was not an effect of the light. The described strength of the ‘tramlines’ is anomalously bold for Rosy Pipit compared with Robson (2000a), but reflects comparison with Buff-bellied Pipit (the alternative most in mind at time of sighting). Bold supercilium, prominent mantle streaking and call were noted on all subsequent sightings. By March, some had assumed full breeding plumage with extensive rosy throat and bright greenish fringes to the remiges, e.g. four of those at Ban Muangyo, although two there were still in winter plumage.

All birds at Ban Muangyo and Ban Dua were foraging in semi-waterlogged short grass, bare mud and pebble shoals beside and within small shallow rivers amid farmland. Those at Ban Boun-Nua were amid paddy stubbles where one of the town's waste-water channels gave a flush of green vegetation. They were never found in the relatively extensive areas of dry fields in these three sites. Such an association with wet areas was also noted in far-northern Thailand by Round (1983).

These records indicate that the species winters in far-northern Laos, as it does in Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai provinces, north-west Thailand, where it has become scarcer in recent years, probably reflecting agricultural changes (e.g. Round 1983, P. D. Round *in litt.* 2005). There is also a record of a vagrant much further south, in Bangkok on 10 January 1928 (specimen collected by C. J. Aagaard, in Chulalongkorn University Zoology Museum, Thailand; P. D. Round *in litt.* 2005). There seem to be only two published records from northern Vietnam (Tonkin): one collected at Muong Moun on 25 March 1929 (Bangs and Van Tyne 1931), and one taken at Pakha (1300 m) on 26 December 1929 (MNHN CG 1939-834; Delacour 1930a,b, J. Fuchs *in litt.* 2005). It is also a vagrant to Cochinchina (Robson 2005). Unlike all the other species treated here, Rosy Pipit has not been recorded from Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2001); it is commoner to the west, rather than to the east, of Laos,

being widespread, and locally very common, in Myanmar (Smythies 2001). Numbers wintering in the region fluctuate (C. R. Robson *in litt.* 2004), so it cannot yet be assumed that it winters annually in Laos.

JAPANESE GROSBEAK *Eophona personata*

An adult in roadside forest on Phou Taleng, Phongsaly province (21°37'N 101°57'E; c. 1,300 m) on 9 December 2004 was detected by a weak-sounding though far-carrying *kick* call, at first thought to be that of a *Dendrocopos* woodpecker; but a big finch readily visible in the sparsely leaved crown of a small tree was immediately obvious as an *Eophona*. Coincidentally, I had examined exhaustively skins of both species, Japanese and Yellow-billed Grosbeak *E. migratoria*, at BMNH only a few months previously in connection with many observations of the genus in Korea during 2000–2004, and so knew exactly what features to concentrate on. I watched it eating berries and loafing, in perfect light at 25–30 m range, for ten minutes until a passing hawk *Accipiter* flushed it. It had: a neatly bordered pure black mask covering the frons, fore- and mid-crown, including the region around the eye and a thin band below the bill and around the chin; a slightly warm grey body (similar in tone to underparts of female Eurasian Bullfinch *Pyrrhula pyrrhula*), including most of the head and underparts broadly concolorous with the mantle, flanks a little warmer in colour; off-white vent; a discrete white wing-patch about two-thirds of the way down the folded visible glossy black remiges but no white wing-point or white tipping to any remiges; a glossy black tail; a large yellow bill, slightly dusky at the tip and as big as a Hawfinch's *Coccothraustes coccothraustes*, but more pointed. The flight action and silhouette were heavy compared with other finches, as is typical of the genus. The call was tape-recorded when it returned a few minutes later and perched for five minutes in another tree, allowing re-confirmation of head and wing pattern.

The only conceivable confusion species is Yellow-billed Grosbeak, which has been recorded in Laos only as a winter visitor to Xiangkhouang province, where it was formerly regular (Bourret 1943, David-Beaulieu 1944; dates on Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle specimen labels per J. Fuchs *in litt.* 2005). The only known recent claim from Laos, from Phongsaly (in Duckworth *et al.* 1999: 157) was in error and has been withdrawn by the observer (T. Tizard *in litt.* 2005). Yellow-billed Grosbeak is significantly smaller than Japanese Grosbeak: Bourret's (1943) wing measurements of 102 mm and 103 mm confirm the Xiangkhouang birds as Yellow-billed; as do six specimens collected by David-Beaulieu in Xiangkhouang, now in the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, France (J. Fuchs *in litt.* 2005). Yellow-billed Grosbeak varies greatly in plumage with age and sex, but never has a head pattern as shown by this bird, and any bird with a neat black mask also shows white tips to at least some remiges. Although some books (e.g. Lee *et al.* 2000) indicate different plumages for male and female Japanese Grosbeak, the many skins at the BMNH shows that the sexes are not readily distinguishable by plumage.

This is the first record for South-East Asia (see Robson 2005). Its appearance in North Laos is not unexpected, because it occurs, although only rarely, at similar latitudes in Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2001). Indeed apparently the

first record for adjoining Yunnan province, China, came on 7 November 2005 with a single bird in Kunming (J. Hornskov *in litt.* 2005).

Concluding remarks

All six of these species are non-breeding visitors from further north in Asia. During 1992–1999, 67 species were found for the first time in Laos (calculated from figures in Duckworth *et al.* 1999, modified with Duckworth *et al.* 2002, Duckworth and Tizard 2003). Of these, 33 were forest species presumed or known to breed in Laos, hence indicating a generally poor coverage of Laos during the historical era (pre-1950). By contrast, none of the present six novelties is a resident forest species. No significance should be attached to this, because observation was strongly weighted towards non-forest habitats during 2004–2005. Phongsaly, being right at the northern margin of Laos and indeed South-East Asia, is clearly an easy place in which to find northern species around their southern winter limit. Twenty-two of the species first recorded in Laos during 1992–1999 were northern migrants, and judging by species recorded in Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2001) and Tonkin, Vietnam (Robson 2005), it is likely that many more firsts for Laos remain to be found among the non-breeding visitors to Phongsaly province. The resident forest avifauna of the province remains barely explored, and is also likely to contain novelties.

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