

Tickell's Thrush *Turdus unicolor* at Zhangmu, Tibet Autonomous Region: a new record for China

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During a birdwatching visit to Zhangmu (also called Zham, 27°59'37"N 85°58'00"E) in Tibet Autonomous Region from 29 June to 2 July 2007, eight Hong Kong birdwatchers including myself observed several Tickell's Thrushes *Turdus unicolor*. This species has not been previously reported in China (Cheng 1987, MacKinnon *et al.* 2000, Zheng 2005) and hence this is the first documented record for the country.

Individual 1. At 09h30 on 30 June, a nondescript grey *Turdus* thrush was noticed perched on a broken tree c.70 m away from us. It was on an open slope c.20 m below the tree line, and directly above some agriculture fields. The thrush was smaller than a Eurasian Blackbird, with overall grey body, except for a paler belly. I did not observe the colour of the legs and bill, but other observers reported them to be yellow. This individual flew away as we approached and no photograph could be taken.

Individual 2. While searching for the bird described above, we found another *Turdus* sp. at a distance of c.50 m from us, and c.100 m from where we saw the first individual. We were better able to examine this individual because light conditions were better and we were able to approach it to within 40 m and photograph it (Plate 1). This bird had brown upperparts and whitish underparts, and it had a distinctive long bright yellow bill. It also had a whitish throat with indistinct malar stripes/streaks (Plate 1). We were able to observe this individual for only a few minutes before it flew down the slope. I did not notice any white on its tail in flight.

Because I could not identify these individuals to species based on my experience of other thrushes in China and Hong Kong, I looked up thrushes in Grimmett *et al.* (2000), and realised that they looked very similar to the

Tickell's Thrush. Therefore, I set out to find these birds again on the next day.

Individual 3. The next morning (1 July) at 07h45 I saw a thrush perched on a branch c. 50 m from me and c.1 km from the area where the thrushes were seen the previous day. The bird flew towards me and perched behind a branch, where I was able to observe it closely and photograph it (Plate 2). Part of its wing was clearly grey, as were the unmarked undertail and vent. The eyebrow and eye-stripe were very indistinct, but a thin yellow eye-ring is visible in the photo. The bill was yellow as was the ankle (Plate 2). These features fit that of a male Tickell's Thrush.

DISCUSSION

Checking Grimmett *et al.* (2000) and MacKinnon *et al.* (2000), I found that only Tickell's Thrush fits the birds described above. The female bird had an indistinct malar stripe (Plate 1) that rules out all *Zoothera* and some *Turdus* species that have been recorded nearby (i.e. White-collared Blackbird *T. albocinctus*, Chestnut Thrush *T. rubrocanus* and Kessler's Thrush *T. kessleri*). A first-winter female Dark-throated Thrush *T. (ruficollis) atrogularis* could be confused with a female Tickell's Thrush, but Dark-throated Thrush has a darker bill and legs and the streaking on the breast is more extensive. In addition, Dark-throated Thrush occurs in Nepal and Tibet only in the winter (Grimmett *et al.* 2000, Lang *et al.* 2007). Another extralimital species, Pale Thrush *T. pallidus*, could also show features similar to a female Tickell's Thrush. However, my experience of Pale Thrush in Hong Kong immediately suggested that what we saw was not a female



Plate 1. Female Tickell's Thrush at Zhangmu, China, 30 June 2007.

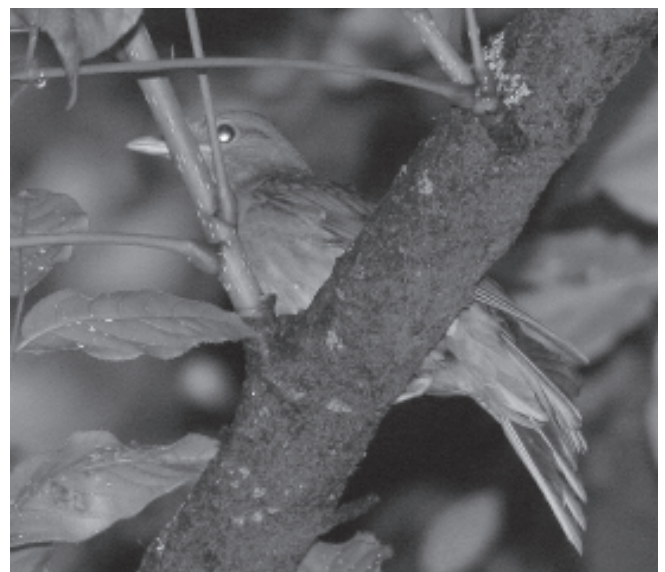


Plate 2. Male Tickell's Thrush at Zhangmu, China, 1 July 2007.

Pale Thrush because this species has distinctive white spots on the tip of the tail, and its bill and legs are not bright yellow. Identification of the male bird was more straightforward due to its overall grey plumage and bright yellow bill and legs (Plate 2). No other thrushes have similar coloration in the plumage and the bare parts.

Tickell's Thrush is endemic to the Indian subcontinent and has a discontinuous breeding range from Pakistan through Kashmir to Nepal and western Bhutan (Grimmett *et al.* 1998, Clement *et al.* 2000). It is a fairly common summer visitor in Nepal and is known to breed in that country just across the border from Zhangmu (Grimmett *et al.* 1998, 2000), hence it is not unexpected for this species to occur where we found it. Our observations involved both male and female individuals, suggesting that this species may breed in Zhangmu. However, we did not observe any juveniles.

Zhangmu is in the southern part of Tibet Autonomous Region and lies on the China-Nepal border but information on the avifauna of the area is relatively scarce. Some birdwatchers, both from other parts of China and abroad are beginning to make other interesting discoveries. Several Himalayan Bulbuls *Pycnonotus leucogenys*, another new record for China, were found here (Zhang *et al.* 2006) and up to 11 Fire-tailed Myzornis *Myzornis pyrrhoura* have been observed at Zhangmu in the winter (China Ornithological Society 2006). With more visits by birdwatchers, further new species are likely to be found in this area.

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