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## THE LESSER GRAYBIRDS (*CORACINA*) OF ASIA AND MALAYSIA

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Few groups of passerine birds have so long remained in a state of confusion as the small species of Graybirds, or Cuckoo-Shrikes, which are found in India, China, the Indo-Chinese countries, and Malaysia. They have been wrongly ascribed, even very recently, to two different genera: *Campephaga* Vieillot, 1810, an African genus of bright and glossy black plumage in the males; or *Lalage* Boie, 1826, a purely Australasian and Malaysian genus of fairly long-legged, only partly arboreal birds, of different proportions and color pattern. Also a special genus, *Volvocivora*, was set up for them by Hodgson in 1838. There seems to be no doubt, however, that they belong to the large genus *Coracina* Vieillot, 1816, which is widely distributed throughout Africa and the Mascarene Islands, Asia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and the Australasian region. All are closely related, having the same general proportions, color, and life habits. The comparatively small size and weak bill of the birds with which we are here concerned do not constitute a solid ground for a generic division. It is true that they are of a much lighter build than the larger species occupying the same area, but several African species (*coesia*, *graueri*), which no one so far has proposed removing from *Coracina*, are also small and have a weak bill. *Edoliisoma* should also be considered a synonym of *Coracina*, as their slender bill does not warrant generic distinction.

One of the lesser Asiatic *Coracina*, so far known as *sykesi*, has always been recognized as a distinct species, as it is fairly distinct in pattern, and its range widely overlaps that of another form, *melaschistos*, in northern and eastern India where both com-

monly breed, although at different altitudes. The others have been variously treated. There has been a tendency in the last decade or two to unite them all in a single species. But, on the one hand, it is now certain that two of them coexist and breed in some areas and probably do so in several others. On the other hand, the groups differ widely in size and in the proportions of the wings and tail. That they are indeed three distinct species is also indicated by the fact that their geographical variation takes place on divergent lines. They could not be understood and explained as a single species.

Considerable trouble has been experienced in making certain of the names that should be applied to the different forms. I have fortunately been able to examine virtually all the type specimens, many of which are deposited at the British Museum in London. Also Dr. J. Steinbacher, of the Senckenberg Museum, Frankfurt-am-Main, has kindly lent me the type of *Ceblepyris melanoptera* Rüppell, which no one had actually studied for a long time. It was an important point, as it has made possible the correction of an old error which had caused the misuse of the name.

The systematic study of these birds is so studded with difficulties that it is not surprising that it has not been done heretofore with any great degree of accuracy. Only adult males can be used, females and immature specimens being too variable to show clearly important characteristics. These are often tenuous and puzzling, and not easily interpreted, particularly in the case of migratory forms, as several species and subspecies are frequently met with together during the winter months. Such somber-plumaged birds are always more difficult to sort out than brighter ones. Also, in many cases, the species vary so gradually that intermediate, sometimes unstable populations occur, and it is hard to separate accurately the different subspecies unless adequate series of breeding birds are available. This is unfortunately not always the case, several forms being very poorly represented in collections. Although often common in suitable localities, these Lesser Graybirds do not attract much attention. They live unobtrusively, high on the trees, singly or in pairs, or in small flocks during the winter, hunting insects which compose their food. They do not call much, and their gray and black coloration makes them inconspicuous. Accordingly they are not usually collected in any great numbers.

A careful study of the available material in America and in Europe, however, permits us to come to the conclusion that the Lesser Graybirds can be divided into four species, each with a number of subspecies.

*Coracina polioptera* in many ways appears to be the most generalized and primitive species. It is sedentary, found from Tenasserim and southwest Siam to Cambodia and Cochinchina, north to northern Annam, Laos, and Siam, and to southern Burma. Its range overlaps in the north that of a larger and darker species, *C. melaschistos*, which breeds on mountains and far to the north, in the Himalayas, northeastern India, Assam, Burma, northern Siam, Indochina, Hainan, and China. The northernmost populations migrate south as far as the north of the Malay Peninsula, southern Siam, and southern Indochina during the winter, while others move vertically, nesting on high ground and wintering low down. The ranges of both *C. polioptera* and *C. melaschistos* overlap, near their southern boundaries, that of the Malaysian species, *C. fimbriata*, which is very small and dark, and has a short tail. The fourth species, *C. melanoptera* (= *C. sykesi*) is widely distributed in India and Ceylon, its range overlapping very broadly that of *C. melaschistos* in the north.

### **Coracina polioptera**

A medium-sized species, with a comparatively short and little-graduated tail (central rectrices not more than 20 mm. longer than the outer ones), the central rectrices always showing some gray in adult birds, all having white tips, which are, however, narrow and sometimes abraded on the central pairs. The birds in their full plumage are plain gray, paler or even white on the lower abdomen, vent, and under tail coverts; all the flight feathers are bordered with pale gray and the basal half of the inner web is always largely white; lores blackish. Bill and feet black, iris red to brown, as in all other species. Young birds are whitish, irregularly barred with black, on the under parts, the lower back and rump, face, ear coverts, and supercilia. Many more barred than plain-colored birds are seen and collected, so that the barred plumage is probably retained for several years. The great majority of females are barred, plain-colored ones being very scarce and perhaps unusual.

The species lives at low and moderate altitudes, in open for-

ests and gardens. Its range extends from Cochinchina to southern Tenasserim, north to southern Burma, northern Siam, Laos as far north as the Tranninh, and Annam. Its breeding range overlaps that of *C. melaschistos* in the north, and also that of *C.*

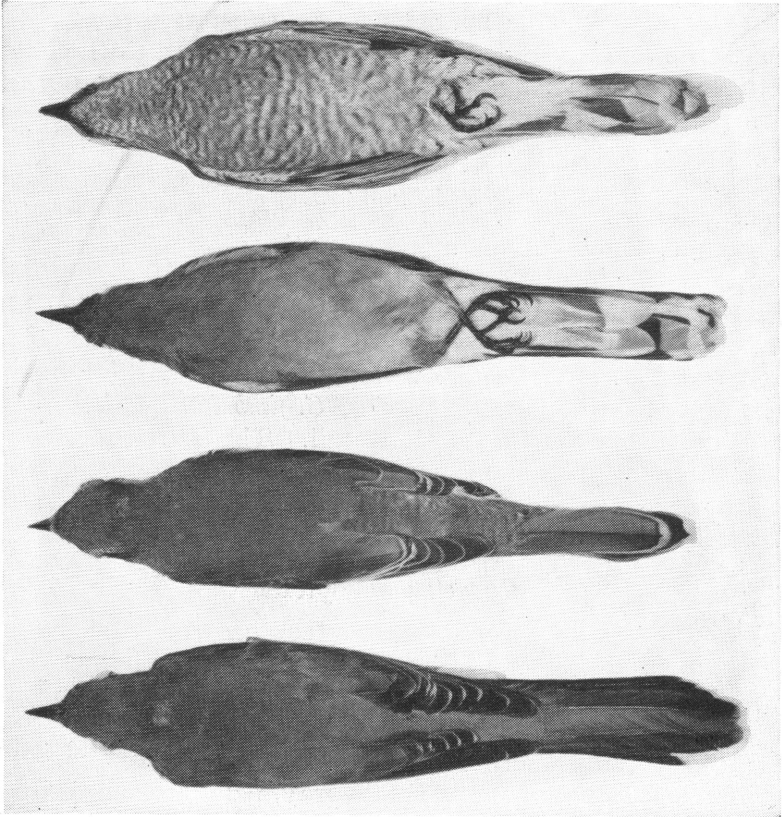


FIG. 1. *Coracina polioptera indochinensis*. Reading from top down: ventral view of female, Thateng, Laos, November 23, 1931; ventral view of male, Phu Kongtoul, Laos, December 12, 1931; dorsal view of female, Thateng, Laos, November 23, 1931; dorsal view of male, Thateng, Laos, November 11, 1931.

*fimbriata* in peninsular Siam and Tenasserim, although more precise records are desirable. Three subspecies are recognized.

### ***Coracina polioptera polioptera***

*Campophaga polioptera* SHARPE, 1879, Catalogue of the birds in the British Museum, vol. 4, p. 69—Cochinchina.

A very light gray bird; the lower abdomen, vent, and under tail coverts white or very nearly so. Wing, 95–110; tail, 75–83; tarsus, 21–23; culmen, 14–15 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: Cochinchina, Cambodia, and southern Siam.

### ***Coracina polioptera indochinensis***

*Lalage fimbriata indochinensis* KLOSS, 1925, Bull. Brit. Ornith. Club, vol. 46, p. 7—Dran, south Annam.

Darker and slightly larger than *C. p. polioptera*. Abdomen mostly gray, pale borders of the wing feathers narrower; barred birds are darker, the barring less distinct. Wing, 105–118 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: Southern Annam (Langbian), southern and central Laos (Bolovens, Savannaket, Vientiane, Tranninh), central and northern Siam, southern Burma (Pegu, southern Chin Hills, Toungoo, southern Shan States, Karennee, Tenasserim). The transition between *polioptera* and *indochinensis* seems to take place more or less along the line Saravane, Ubon, Raheng, as some specimens from these localities are intermediate.

### ***Coracina polioptera jabouillei*, new subspecies**

Decidedly darker than *C. p. indochinensis*; under parts of a uniform deep gray, and central rectrices black, showing only a little gray near the base.

TYPE: Male, British Museum (Natural History), London, No. 10.23.420, collected at Pleiku, Kontoum Province, Annam, October 2, 1933, by P. Jabouille. Wing: 110 mm.; two other males (Pleiku and Napé), 110, 113 mm.; three females: 106, 111, 115 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: Central and northern Annam, from Kontoum Province (Pleiku, Kontoum, Dakto) to the region of Vinh (east of Napé). Also found in the provinces of Thuatien (Col des Nuages) and Quangtri (Hailang, Khesanh).

This subspecies is named in memory of my late friend and co-worker Pierre Jabouille, whose contribution to the knowledge of Indochinese birds has been outstanding.

### ***Coracina melaschistos***

A large and dark species, with a long and well-graduated tail (central rectrices always more than 30 mm. longer than the

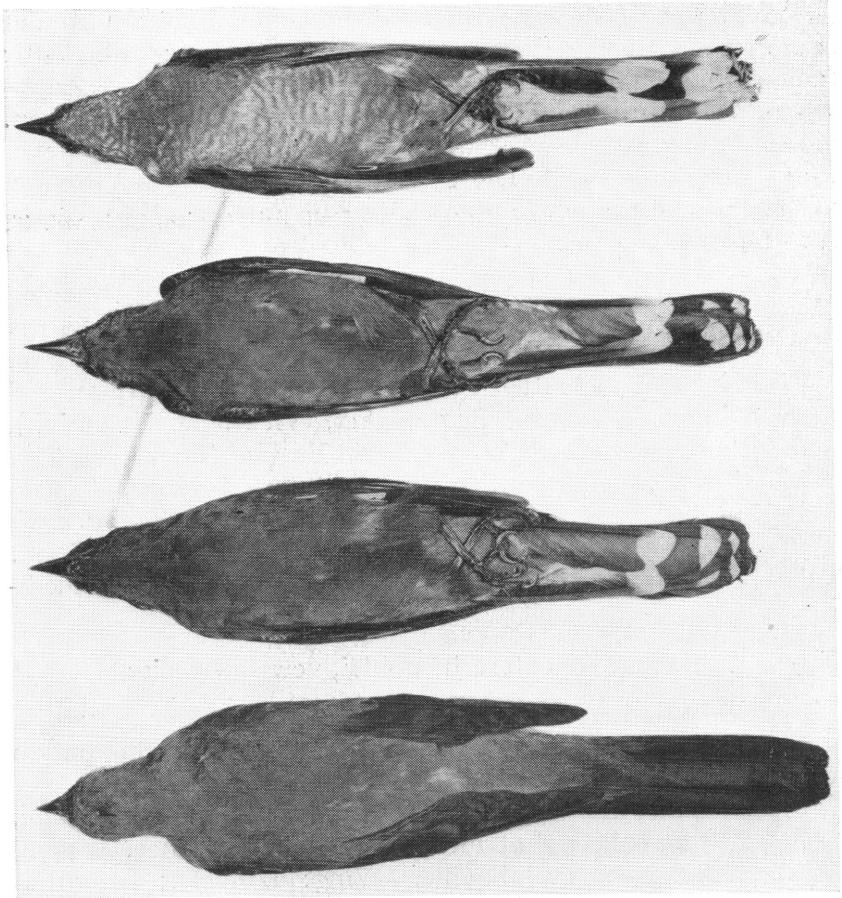


FIG. 2. *Coracina melaschistos*. Reading from top down: ventral view of juvenal female of *C. m. avensis*, Phong Saly, Laos, May 1, 1929; ventral view of female of *C. m. saturata*, Thateng, Laos, November 9, 1931; ventral view of male of *C. m. saturata*, Phu Kongtoul, Laos, November 28, 1931; dorsal view of male of *C. m. avensis*, Pakse, Laos, December 1, 1931.

outer ones); rectrices of adults completely black, with small white tips; no white patch on the wings, which are completely black, but the young and a few females have a small patch of white usually mixed with gray. Nestling boldly barred and spotted all over. Immatures indistinctly barred light and dark gray underneath, their wing feathers dark gray, with a narrow white border, central rectrices gray except near the tip. This barred plumage seems to be retained one year only.

The present species is usually found in forest, often deep and damp, rarely in more open growths. It breeds at high altitudes and is migratory to a great extent in the north of its ranges, less so and more altitudinally in the south. As far as known today, it breeds in the Himalayas, from Murree to Assam in India, south to about latitude 16° N. in Burma, in China north to the Tsingling Mountains and Chihli, in northern Siam, northern Indochina, and Hainan. It winters in the plains and valleys throughout Burma, Siam, Indochina, south to the northern approaches of the Malay Peninsula. Its breeding range overlaps that of *C. polioptera* in northern Indochina (Tranninh, Savanaket, etc.), also probably in northern Siam and in southeastern Burma, and that of *C. fimbriata* in southern Tenasserim.

Four subspecies are recognized, but the whole picture is still rather confused on account of the winter migrations and of the lack of adequate breeding records. Specimens of all four subspecies have been found in southern Yunnan (Hokow, Mengtze) in winter and spring.

### **Coracina melaschistos melaschistos**

*Volvocivora melaschistos* HODGSON, 1836, Indian Rev., vol. 1, p. 328—Nepal.  
*Ceblepyris lugubris* SUNDEVALL, 1837, Physiographiska Sällskapets Tidskrift, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 52—Nepal.

*Graucalus maculosus* HORSFIELD, 1839 (1840), Proc. Zool. Soc. London, p. 159—Assam.

*Volvocivora melanura* HARTLAUB, 1865, Jour. f. Ornith., p. 162—India?

A large and dark form, very uniform throughout its range; under parts dark slaty gray. Wing, 116–130; tail, 100–120; tarsus, 20–23; culmen, 15–17 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: The Himalayas, from Murree to upper Assam, south to Manipour and Chittagong, northern Burma (upper Chindwin and northeastern Burma), and northwestern Yunnan (Likiang). Nests on the mountains and winters in the plains and valleys, migrating southward to some extent.

### **Coracina melaschistos avensis**

*Campephaga avensis* BLYTH, 1852, Catalogue of the birds in the Museum Asiatic Society, p. 327. New name for *C. melanoptera* Blyth, 1846, Jour. Asiatic Soc. Bengal, vol. 5, p. 307—Arracan; not *Ceblepyris melanoptera* Rüppell, 1839, Mus. Senckenbergianum, vol. 3, p. 25.

A slightly lighter subspecies, the gray parts of the plumage less

dark, particularly the rump and the vent, which are light gray. Size much as in *C. m. melaschistos*; wing, 115–130 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: The mountains of central and southern Burma, northern Siam, northern Indochina (south to about 17° N.), western, southern, and eastern Yunnan, and western Szechwan (Wanhsien). Migrates in winter to the valleys and plains, and south as far as southern Burma, Siam, and Indochina, where it is found associated with the two following subspecies.

### ***Coracina melaschistos intermedia***

*Volvocivora intermedia* HUME, 1877, Stray Feathers, vol. 5, p. 205—Tenasserim.

*Campophaga innominata* OATES, 1883, A handbook of the birds of British Burmah, vol. 1, p. 205—Tavoy.

*Volvocivora koratensis* KLOSS, 1918, Ibis, p. 193—Lat Bua, Kao, eastern Siam.

Lighter than *C. m. avensis*; head, neck, mantle, and under parts light gray; much the same size; wing, 115–133 mm. I have examined the types of *intermedia* and of *innominata*; both are perfect representatives of the pale form breeding in China, taken on winter migration. The type of *koratensis* is a not completely adult specimen of this pale subspecies, still showing traces of the immature barred plumage.

DISTRIBUTION: Eastern and central China, north to the Tsinglings and Chihli. Winters in Indochina, Siam, and eastern Burma, where it is often found associated with *avensis*, and sometimes with *saturata*; passing through Yunnan.

### ***Coracina melaschistos saturata***

*Volvocivora saturata* SWINHOE, 1870, Ibis, p. 242—Hainan.

Resembles *C. m. melaschistos*, but smaller and generally darker. Some specimens are very blackish, almost glossy above, but there seems to be a great deal of individual variation in color. Wing, 110–123 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: The island of Hainan, eastern Tonkin, northern and central Annam (Hokow, Backan, Phuqui, Khesanh, Col des Nuages, Bana), where we believe that it nests and is sedentary, as specimens have been taken in May. Others migrate, however, to the south and west, as they have been collected at Kontoum (Annam), Paksé and the Boloven Plateau (Laos), Sambor (Cambodia), and Khun-Tan (northwest Siam) during the winter months.



***Coracina fimbriata***

Malaysia is the home of a very small, short-tailed species. In its tone of gray, it varies much as *C. melaschistos*, but the light

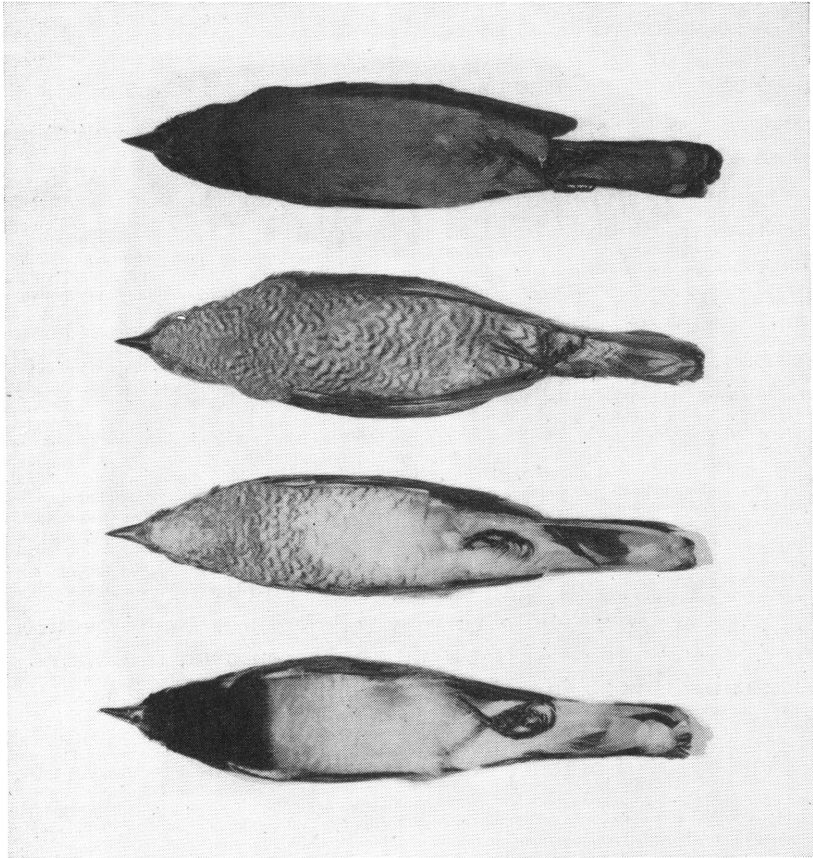


FIG. 3. Reading from top down: ventral view of male of *Coracina fimbriata schierbrandi*, Kina Balu, Borneo, March 9, 1887; ventral view of female of *Coracina fimbriata schierbrandi*, Kina Balu, Borneo, March 9, 1887; ventral view of female of *Coracina melanopectera sykesi*, Nilambus, Madras, March 5, 1937; ventral view of male of *Coracina melanopectera sykesi*, Bheraghat, Central Provinces, May 27, 1946.

tips on the tail feathers are always comparatively more reduced in size and often grayish. Nearly all the females in collections are barred underneath, and it is probable that they remain so throughout life. As in *melaschistos*, immature females show a

white patch, much reduced in size, only on the inner webs of some of the primaries and secondaries, and have their wings dark gray, with narrow, white borders, while adult males have them pure black. Birds of this species live among trees in forests and near cultivation, at low and moderate altitudes.

### **Coracina fimbriata neglecta**

*Volucivora neglecta* HUME, 1877, Stray Feathers, vol. 5, p. 203—south Tenasserim.

The largest and lightest subspecies, having the body feathers a light gray, much as in *C. m. intermedia*, and fairly large white tips to the tail feathers. Wing, 105–108; tail, 85–88 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: Southern Tenasserim and peninsular Siam, where it meets *C. p. polioptera* and probably *C. melaschistos avensis* in the north of the range, south to Patani and the State of Perlis and the neighboring islands, where it intergrades with *C. f. culminata*.

### **Coracina fimbriata culminata**

*Ceblepyris culminatus* A. HAY, 1845, Madras Jour., vol. 13, pt. 2, p. 157—Malacca.

Smaller and darker than *C. f. neglecta*, much the same in color as *C. m. avensis*; white tips to tail feathers much reduced. Wing, 93–99; tail, 72–78; tarsus, 17–19; culmen, 14–15 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: The Malay Peninsula, south of Patani and Perlis.

### **Coracina fimbriata schierbrandi**

*Volucivora schierbrandii* PELZEN, 1865, Reise der Oesterreichischen Fregatte Novara, Vögel, p. 80—Borneo.

*Campephaga borneensis* SALVADORI, 1868, Atti R. Accad. Sci. Torino, vol. 3, p. 532—Borneo.

*Campephaga minor* DAVISON, 1892, Ibis, p. 99—Pahang.

Generally darker than *C. f. culminata*; the head, throat, neck, and mantle blackish and slightly glossy; tips of rectrices pale gray. Same size.

DISTRIBUTION: Sumatra and Borneo.

### **Coracina fimbriata compta**

*Campephaga compta* RICHMOND, 1903, Proc. U. S. Natl. Mus., vol. 26, p. 154—Simalur Island.

Little known, but appears to be similar to *C. f. schierbrandi* but larger. Wing, 100–103 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: Siberut and Simalur Islands, west of Sumatra.

### ***Coracina fimbriata fimbriata***

*Ceblepyris fimbriata* TEMMINCK, 1824, Nouveau recueil de planches coloriées d'oiseaux, pls. 429, 450—Java.

*Volucivora vidua* HARTLAUB, 1865, Jour. f. Ornith., p. 163—Java.

Very similar to *C. f. schierbrandi*, but larger, with a still blacker head in the adult male. Wing, 98–105 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: Java and Bali.

### ***Coracina melanoptera***

The fourth species of Lesser Graybirds is the most distinct of all. Like the Malaysian *C. fimbriata*, it is small in size and it shows a striking dimorphism in the plumage of the sexes. The male has the body light gray, passing to white on the abdomen, vent, and under tail-coverts, the head, neck, and upper breast black; the tail is rather short and slightly graduated; the central pair of feathers is gray, more or less tinged with black, the other rectrices black, with a white tip, larger on the outer pairs; the flight feathers are black, with whitish gray borders that gradually wear out, so that specimens have entirely black wings before the molt. There is always a white patch on the inner webs. The female is a slightly brownish gray above, the wings and tail much as in the male, but duller, the back and rump lightly barred with dark gray; under parts buffy white, widely barred with black.

This black-headed Graybird is found throughout Ceylon and India, north to the Himalayan foothills and valleys below 4000 feet, in open woods and cultivated country where sufficient trees remain. Like the others, it is completely insectivorous and arboreal. It varies little geographically, although individual differences in size, and also in plumage according to age and season, are rather considerable. But it was not until 1936 that a subspecies was described for birds discovered in northern Punjab, a great extension of the range of the species. The taxonomy of the species has long been erroneous. It has so far been known as *Lalage sykesi*, but it is not a true *Lalage*, and its specific name is really *melanoptera*.

In the course of my studies of this group of small *Coracina*, I tried to examine all the type specimens of the various described forms, and Dr. J. Steinbacher, the curator of the bird collection in the Senckenberg Museum, Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany, was kind enough to lend me the type of *Ceblepyris melanoptera* Rüppell. Since Sharpe's statement in the "Catalogue of the birds in the British Museum" (1879, vol. 4, pp. 67-68), confirmed by Hartert (1892, "Katalog der Vogelsammlung im Museum der Senckenbergischen naturforschenden Gesellschaft"), no one doubted that it represented a form of the large birds related to *melaschistos*. Even C. E. Ticehurst (1938, *Ibis*, pp. 414-415), on Hartert's assertion, goes so far as to fix Pegu as the type locality. Hartlaub (1865, *Jour. f. Ornith.*, p. 162) had stated, however, that it was close to *sykesi*. Sharpe had probably never seen the type, and Hartert, then a beginner, lacked comparative material. The identification of the type of *melanoptera* came as a surprise. It had been stated by Rüppell that it probably came from "Neu Holland" (Australia), but this was corrected to "Birma" by an anonymous worker on the original label, which reads as follows:

<i>Campephaga</i>	1246
<i>Ceblepyris melanoptera</i>	(Rüpp.)
Museum Senckenberg Vol. III, taf. 2	
(Birma)	
?Neu Holland!	Geochentoon
	Dr. Rüpp. 1838
Typus	

I have submitted this type specimen to various friends in Paris, London, Washington, and New York, among them Prof. J. Berlioz, Sir Norman Kinnear, Dr. E. Mayr, and Mr. H. D. Deignan. All agreed with me that it did not belong to the *melaschistos* group or to any Australasian species of the family Campephagidae. But it is similar to *C. sykesi*, only larger and darker than most specimens. I had not yet seen, however, *C. sykesi eximia* which Van Tyne and Koelz described in 1936 as a larger and darker form, and Mr. Deignan called my attention to it. Dr. Van Tyne kindly sent me his birds, and there was then little doubt that they were like the type of *melanoptera*. The seven specimens, all male, although collected from April 18 to May 11, 1933, at Bhadwar, Kangra District, northern Punjab (2000 feet), differ much among themselves. Four appear to be

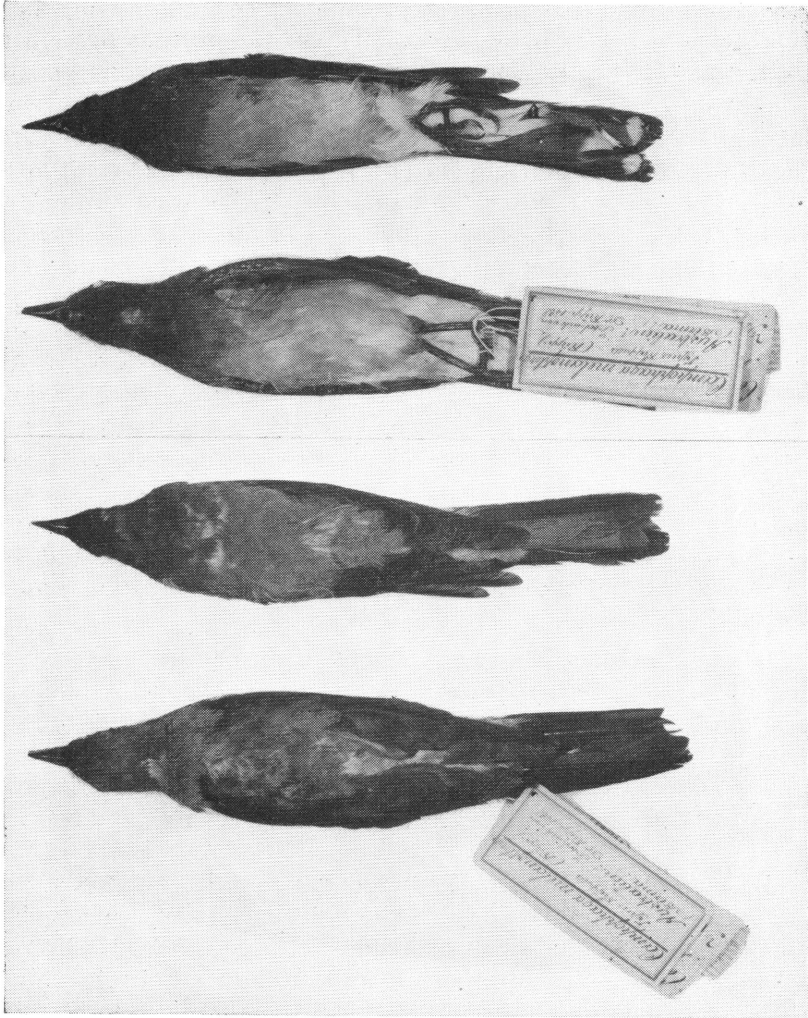


FIG. 4. *Coracina melanoptera melanoptera*. Reading from top down: ventral view of male, Bhadwar, Kangra, Punjab, May 9, 1933; ventral view of the type; dorsal view of male, Bhadwar, Kangra, Punjab, May 9, 1933; dorsal view of the type.

in fairly fresh plumage, with many of the wing feathers well lined with whitish gray, while the other three have them wholly black, as in the type of *melanoptera*. Four have a pure black head and neck, but three have the crown and nape dark gray, as has the *melanoptera* type. Furthermore, two other speci-

mens in the Koelz collection, taken at Kathgodam, northern United Provinces (Kumaon), August 18 and 20, 1948, show the same differences in the color of the wings and head. These are probably due to age and molt. All these birds, like the type of *melanoptera*, are darker on the back and upper tail-coverts, lower breast and belly than the rest of the Indian and Ceylonese populations, as stated by Van Tyne and Koelz in their description of *Lalage sykesi eximia* (1936, Occas. Papers Mus. Zool., Univ. Michigan, no. 334, p. 4). As to size, these northern birds tend to be larger, but they vary individually (see table 1).

TABLE 1

	Wing	Tail
Type of <i>melanoptera</i>	112	95
Type of <i>eximia</i>	109	89
Other Bhadwar specimens	109, 108, 109, 110, 111, 112	92, 95, 96, 94, 94, 90
Two Kathgodam specimens	103, 104	92, 86

Although smaller, the two Kathgodam birds undoubtedly belong to the northern subspecies, as they are very dark on the back and abdomen. A single specimen (male) collected at Hitaura (Hetora), Nepal, by Koelz, May 21, 1947, definitely belongs, however, to the southern subspecies having a pale gray rump and a white abdomen; the wing measures 106, and the tail 94 mm.

Whistler (1936, Ibis, p. 722) recognizes the validity of the northern subspecies, but doubts the difference in size. He mentions two dark-bellied birds collected in the Hoshiarpur District in August, 1934, with wings of 109 and 110 mm. Southern birds seldom measure more than 105 mm. in the wing, occasionally only reaching 110 mm.; the smallest males have a wing of 98 mm.

There is no doubt that Rüppell's *Ceblepyris melanoptera* really represents the northern subspecies of the species so far known as *sykesi*, which must now be called *Coracina melanoptera* with two subspecies: *C. m. melanoptera* (Rüppell, 1839) and *C. m. sykesi* (Strickland, 1844). The type of *melanoptera*, very old and faded but in fair condition, has a black face; blackish gray crown, throat, and neck; gray body; black wings, with a small white

patch, and white tips to the rectrices except the central pair. All these characteristics are perfectly well stated by Rüppell in his original description, and one wonders how Sharpe, Hartert, and subsequent authors could ever confuse it with any form related to *C. melaschistos*. Blyth earlier had avoided such a mistake when he renamed *avensis* the bird he had first inadvisedly called *melanoptera*, then ignoring Rüppell's name.

I now fix the type locality of *Coracina melanoptera* (Rüppell) as Bhadwar, Kangra District, Punjab.

### **Coracina melanoptera melanoptera**

*Ceblepyris melanoptera* RÜPPELL, 1839, Mus. Senckenbergianum, vol. 3, p. 25, pl. 2, fig. 1—?Neu Holland; error = Bhadwar, Punjab.

*Lalage sykesi eximia* VAN TYNE AND KOELZ, 1936, Occas. Papers Mus. Zool., Univ. Michigan, no. 334, p. 4—Bhadwar, Punjab.

A darker and rather larger form with a longer tail. Under parts mostly gray. Wing, 103–112; tail, 92–96; tarsus, 19–22; culmen, 15 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: Northern Punjab and United Provinces of India, in valleys, at low altitudes.

### **Coracina melanoptera sykesi**

*Lalage sykesi* STRICKLAND, 1844, Ann. Mag. Nat. Hist., vol. 13, p. 36—Calcutta.

A lighter and rather smaller form, with a shorter tail; abdomen mostly white. Wing, 98–110; tail, 70–80 mm.

DISTRIBUTION: Ceylon and India, north to a line from Mt. Abu, Sambhur, Bareilly, southern Nepal, Chota-Nagpur, and the border of Bengal and Assam.

