

## THE STATUS OF ABBOTT'S BABBLER IN BORNEO

By

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### Summary

We reviewed the occurrence of Abbott's Babbler *Trichastoma abbotti* on Borneo as a first step towards understanding why this species, which is common in most of its range, is so rare on the island. We were able to find only 21 documented Bornean records, most of which derived from areas of scrub habitat at low altitudes, especially near the coast.

### Introduction

*Trichastoma abbotti*, Abbott's Babbler (Blyth) 1845, is widespread in Southeast Asia. It occurs in Nepal, Assam, Burma, Thailand, Kampuchea, Annam, Laos, Malaysia, Sumatra, Borneo, and the island of Bawean. Throughout most of its range it is a common resident below 1000 meters elevation in gardens, thickets, second growth, forest edges, or most scrub habitats (King *et al.* 1975). In Borneo, however, it is a decidedly rare species, whose occurrence and habitat requirements are a mystery (Smythies 1957, 1981).

To determine the status of Abbott's Babbler in Borneo, we compiled a list of specimens and documented records. Data on habitat and altitude were examined and specific locations were plotted on a map. In all, we compiled only 21 records dating back to 1894 (see Table I). In addition to these 21 well-documented records are five sight and two mistnet records that are considered too tentative to list in Table 1. They include single bird sightings: (i) at Sabah Softwoods in seven year old *Albizia* during the study of Mitra and Sheldon (1993); (ii) at Bukit Ibul, Sabah, in montane forest at 1200m (J. Payne pers. comm); and (iii) at Quoin Hill, Sabah (250m) in primary upland Dipterocarp forest (J. Payne pers. comm.). Two individuals were purportedly netted and banded by members of the Sabah Museum staff 1970, one at Tuaran and one at Kg. Ambong near Kota Behid (McCLure & Leelavit 1972). However, the banders were probably too inexperienced to have identified the birds reliably. Finally, two additional sightings were made at Temburong and Labi in Brunei during the Royal Air Force Ornithological Society's expedition (D. Counsell unpubl ms). However, Abbott's Babbler has never been confirmed in Brunei (C. Mann pers. Comm).

It is possible that Abbott's Babbler has been overlooked in Borneo because of its "shy and skulking" habits (Croxall 1969:396) and its preference for dense undergrowth and thickets, but the fact that Abbott's Babbler is commonly recorded in other parts of its range suggests that this is not the only reason for its scarcity in Borneo.

### Identification

Abbott's Babbler can be difficult to distinguish from other *Trichastoma* babblers, and this potential for confusion calls some sight (and even netting) records into question. Horsfield's Babbler *Trichastoma sepiarium* is particularly similar to Abbott's Babbler. It is distinguished mainly by the colour of its head, which is slightly darker than its back. Horsfield's Babbler's head and back are also darker and more olive, and the rufous colouration of its flanks and undertail coverts is brighter and more extensive than in Abbott's Babbler. In the latter, this rufous colouration is restricted mostly to the undertail coverts. There is also a significant difference in tail length between these two species which may aid identification. The tail of *abbotti* is always longer than 49mm and averages 56mm, while the tail of *sepiarium* is always shorter than 49mm and averages between 37mm and 43mm (King *et al.* 1975, Smythies 1981).

Differentiating between these two *Trichastoma* species is further complicated by the presence of two subspecies of *T. sepiarium* on Borneo. The northern Bornean subspecies, *harterti*, is nearly identical in plumage to *T. abbotti*. It is less richly coloured on the underparts, and has a less pronounced contrast between the head and back than the southern Bornean subspecies, *rufiventre*. The subspecies of Abbott's Babbler found on Borneo, *concrete* (formerly known as *buttikoferi*), has a darker, more olive head and back and much less rufous on the underparts than the mainland races, *olivacea* and *abbotti*.

### Song

Abbott's Babbler song varies geographically. Burmese birds sing either a three note song which dips on the middle note or a four note song which dips on the first note (Smythies 1981). In Bako National Park (Fig. 1, #8), Sarawak, Croxall (1969) found that *abbotti* sang both a three note and four note song as described by Smythies. In the graafilelands north of Banjarmasin, Central Kalimantan, D. Holmes (pers. comm.) found birds singing a five to six note song, which is similar to that recorded in South Sumatra (Nash & Nash 1985). For further discussion of the song of Abbott's Babbler see Nash and Nash (1985).

### Habitat Preference

From the locality map in Figure 1, Abbott's Babbler appears to be a bird of the coastal plain in Borneo. In Tanjung Puting National Park, Nash & Nash (1988:108) found that Abbott's Babbler occurs in coastal fringe forest and fire-padang scrubland. They described it as "common, but only in association

with Nipa." The coast in this area has extensive nipa formations which extend well inland, marking the extent of brackish waters. In general, the Park contains "a varied bird fauna representative of the poorer soils of the coastal plain," (bin jalan & Galdikas 1987:34). Holmes (pers. comm.) found Abbott's Babbler to be common in scrub in the grasslands north of Banjarmasin (Fig. 1, #3). He also recorded it in "riverine forest scrub" at Peninggir on the Kedangpahu River (Fig. 1, #4). A record from Sarawak describes the habitat as "dense scrub near mangroves" (Croxall 1969:396). Habitat data from museum catalogue descriptions include "virgin Jungle," "sandy soil forest," and "in *asps*" (Sarawak Museum), as well as "primary forest" (Field Museum cat.# 211986). This latter came from near a coastal area of Sabah which is dominated by mangroves and nipah (Fig. 1, #6).

Fogden (1976) banded three Abbott's Babblers at the Semengo Forest Reserve in Sarawak (Fig. 1, #9) in 1964 as a part of a census of birds in an area of primary mixed dipterocarp forest. He did not, however, include the banded birds in his census because they were caught in an area adjacent to secondary forest and he considered Abbott's Babbler to be essentially a secondary forest species.

There are only two confirmed records of *abbotti* for Sabah, both from the coastal plain. One specimen was taken by Chasen and Kloss on their 1927 expedition on the Bengkoka River off Marudu Bay (Fig. 1, #5) (Chasen & Kloss 1930); the other, which is reported for the first time in this paper, was taken on a Field Museum expedition (e.g. Davis 1962) on the Little Kretam River (Fig. 1, #6) in 1950 (FMNH specimen and catalog data). This latter specimen is listed as coming from "primary forest," but the area is low riverine forest adjacent to extensive mangrove and nipa.

### Distribution

Although the site records indicate that Abbott's Babbler is restricted to the coastal plain, this does not necessarily reflect its distribution accurately. It is conceivable that records from the coast simply reflect areas where ornithological investigations have been most thorough. However, the absence of *abbotti* from checklists and collections based on extensive work (including mist netting) in the interior of Borneo provides negative evidence of its restriction to coastal areas. For example, on expeditions in Eastern and Central Borneo from 1913-1916, during which he collected 207 species of birds, Carl Luhloltz never collected a specimen of Abbott's Babbler. Luhloltz travelled up the Bulungan River from Tanjung Selor on the east coast, and up the Barito River from Banjarmasin on the south coast all the way up to the Busang Tributary in the Muller Mountains. From there he went overland to the Mahakam River which he followed all the way to Samarinda on the east coast (Voous 1961). Similarly, the Bishop Museum 1962-1963 (Thompson 1966), Yale University 1976-1977, and Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology 1981-1983 expeditions to Sabah did not find Abbott's Babbler, even though all of these groups used mist nets extensively in interior forests. Finally, Abbott's Babbler is also not included in the list for the Mahakam River Delta (Eve & Guigne 1989), nor was it found in Gunung Mulu National Park (Anderson *et al.* 1982) or in Brunei (Kidd 1978, Mann pers. comm.).

## Discussion

In Borneo, Abbott's Babbler clearly prefers low altitude riverine and coastal areas and habitats consisting of coastal scrub (especially with Nipa or mangroves), fire-padang scrubland, and secondary or poor foil forests. It seems to be locally common in its appropriate habitat in coastal south and central Kalimantan, as well as southern coastal Sarawak. It is much rarer in northern Borneo, having been found with certainty only twice in Sabah and never in Brunei. However, the records suggest that Abbott's Babbler may occur wherever there is dense undergrowth at a low altitude.

Reasons for Abbott's Babbler low frequency on Borneo, compared with other parts of its range, remain a mystery. Its dispersion and numbers may relate to competition with other species, predation, or lack of suitable habitat. The composition of species on Borneo, for example, may differ from that on the mainland and may present a more formidable suite of competitors and predators. Another possibility is that Abbott's Babbler has only recently colonized Borneo and it has not yet expanded. Such a scenario seems highly unlikely, however, considering that Abbott's Babbler has lived on Borneo long enough to develop into a distinct geographical form.

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LOCALITY	MAP	SEX	DATE	REFERENCE AND NOTES
<b>KALIMANTAN</b>				
Kahajan River, C. Kalimantan	11		15 Sep 1844	NNM - Leiden
"				NNM - Leiden (Schwaner)
Karan River, C. Kalimantan		F	1844	NNM - Leiden (Schwaner)
"			1844	NNM - Leiden (Schwaner)
Podau, Sibau River, C. Kalimantan		M	17 Jun 1894	NNM - Leiden (Buttkofer 1900)
Tanjung Puling National Park	1			Nash & Nash (1988); "common only with nipa"
Banjarmasin	2			British Museum ("Verreaux")
North of Banjarmasin	3		1 Dec 1974	D.A. Holmes (pers. comm.); "common in scrub"
Peninggir, Kedang Pahu River, E. Kalimantan	4		1 Jul 1984	D.A. Holmes (pers. comm.); "riverine forest and scrub"
Southern Barito River, S. Kalimantan				Buttkofer (1900) (Muller et al.)
<b>SABAH</b>				
Bengkoka River, Marudu Bay	5	M	21 Sep 1927	NUSM; Chasen & Kloss (1930) (sea level)
Little Kretam River	6	F	17 Jul 1950	FMNH #211986 (D.D. Davis) (altitude 100m)
Dent Peninsula			Jul/Sep 1987	D.R. Wells (in litt. 1994), in forest edge
<b>SARAWAK</b>				
Kuching River	7	M	22 Apr 1952	Sarawak Mus.
"		M	23 Apr 1952	Sarawak Mus.
Kuday River, Kuching	2	F	7 Nov 1952	Sarawak Mus.
"		M	22 Apr 1952	Sarawak Mus.
"		M	27 Feb 1952	Sarawak Mus.
Bintawak, Kuching		M	4 Jul 1951	Sarawak Mus.; "sandy soil forest"
Bako National Park	8		24 Sep 1968	Croxall (1960)
Semengo Forest Reserve	9		17 May 1905	M. Pogden; 3 banding records
Niah Caves area	10		20 May 1905	M. Fogden; 2 banding records
Sebatong Gedong River, Sadong		F	17 Nov 1953	Sarawak Mus.
<b>UNSPECIFIED LOCALITIES</b>				
Bangkli River		F	25 Feb 1954	Sarawak Mus. "sandy soil forest"
Pending (?)		M	17 Dec 1956	Sarawak Mus. "in nipa"
Kebing/Balang		F	25 Apr 1950	Sarawak Mus.

