

Field Notes

Possible First Breeding Record of the Western Hooded Pitta (Sunda) *Pitta sordida mulleri* in Peninsular Malaysia

Saravanan Palanisamy & Mohd Semail

Introduction

In the 2023 edition of the Clements Checklist (Clements *et al.*, 2023) there are listed five subspecies of the Western Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida*. Of these two are found in Malaysia. The Western Hooded Pitta (Chestnut-crowned) *P. s. cucullata* which breeds in northwestern Peninsular Malaysia (Perlis and Kedah) and is a passage migrant and winter visitor throughout the peninsula (Wells 2007; Lambert & Woodcock 1996; Erritzøe & Erritzøe 1998). The second is the Western Hooded Pitta (Sunda) *P. s. mulleri* which is found in Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak) (Lambert & Woodcock 1996; Kirwan & Erritzøe 2023; Phillipps & Phillipps 2014). Wells (2007) describes one specimen of an all black headed bird, possible *P. s. mulleri*, occurring in the north of the peninsula but there is no confirmation and Thailand images south to Songkhla affirm only *cucullata*. Erritzøe & Erritzøe (1998) states that their presence requires affirmation.

The key plumage differences between the two subspecies are that *P. s. mulleri* has a completely black head with a variable size white wing patch and reduced or absent black on the belly. *P. s. cucullata* has a black face and throat with a rich brown forehead and crown; the white wing patch is large and there is some black on the belly (Erritzøe & Erritzøe 1998). Plate 1 illustrated the differences with the head colour being the most distinctive feature.



Plate 1: *P. s. mulleri* (left, seen at Ganchong, Pahang, May 2023) compared to a *P. s. cucullata* seen at Taiping Perak, February 2024).

This report suggests the presence of *P. s. mulleri* in Peninsular Malaysia with a report of breeding.

Field Observations

In May 2023 Mohd Semail observed a Western Hooded Pitta (Sunda). He saw a bird dashed in front of him when he was riding his bike to his rubber plantation in Ganchong, Pahang. At first, he assumed it could be a kingfisher. A closer observation changed his assumption; it was a Hooded Pitta. Yet, this Hooded Pitta did not look like the ones we usually see on migration.

Mohd Semail later set up a feeding station in the active rubber plantation, in order to photograph the pitta that he had seen. Up to three Western Hooded Pittas (Sunda) visited the feeding station (see Plate 2). This attracted many bird enthusiasts. One of the pittas was noted to be a little smaller and had immature calls when compared to the other two and was suspected to be an immature bird. One of the birds was seen collecting small twigs at the plantation, which suggested that they could be nesting nearby. However, no nest was found at that time. After approximately a month, the sightings of these pittas were less frequent, until they were not seen at all.



Plate 2: Western Hooded Pittas (Sunda), Ganchong, Pahang, June 2024 & May 2023.

In May 2024, up to five Western Hooded Pittas (Sunda) were seen at another location. This was an abandoned rubber estate, approximately two kilometres away from the first site (see Plate 2 & 3). One of those pittas was also seen gathering nesting materials. A nest of this Hooded Pitta was found on 11 July 2024. It was built on a small fig tree, approximately two meters high from the ground. The nest was made of a variety of twigs and leaves (see Plate 4). One Western Hooded Pitta (Sunda) was observed entering and leaving the nest a few times. Unfortunately, this nest was raided and destroyed by a troop of Long-tailed Macaques *Macaca fascicularis* on the same day it was found.

No Western Hooded Pitta (Chestnut-crowned) type birds were seen at either site in 2023 and 2024.



Plate 3: A clearer view of the head of a Western Hooded Pittas (Sunda), Ganchong, Pahang, June 2024 to show the all-black crown.



Plate 4: Western Hooded Pittas (Sunda) nest, Ganchong, Pahang, July 2024.

Discussion

Some bird watchers who observed the pittas suggested that the Western Hooded Pittas (Sunda) found at Ganchong, Pahang were migratory birds from Sabah. Wells (2007) had considered the possibility of "*long-distance, over-sea vagrancy (chance remote but not inconceivable as mulleri has occurred on Krakatau and Bangka islands, and there is circumstantial evidence of movements off-shore around Borneo)*". Lambert & Woodcock (1996) offer data from Borneo that *P. s. mulleri* might undertake regular long-distance movements. They also note that birds were only seen during some months in Borneo and absent between October and April. The experience in our observation is similar with bird seen during the May to July period, when nesting.

A review of images in the Macaulay Library (2024) for Malaysia showed no other nests reported. One image of nest building is from Sabah. There are 19 posts from Pahang state. 16 are images of *P. s. cucullate* and are dated from 25 November to 2 April. One post is from Saravanan showing an all black headed bird, dated 30 Jun 2024. There are 2 images of the same bird by Lars Mannzen dated 10 July 2024 from Taman Negara NP, Mutiara Resort, Pahang, Malaysia but the quality is limited and the crown cannot be seen. He notes it was "*Definitely behaving like a resident, endlessly calling*". He observed two birds. A review of images for Western Hooded Pitta in Thailand (Macaulay Library 2024) showed no images of black crowned birds; all had a chestnut cap.

These observations suggest the presence of *P. s. mulleri* in Peninsular Malaysia. The nest observation is possibly the first breeding record for *P. s. mulleri* in Peninsular Malaysia and continental South East Asia.

Acknowledgement

The authors wish to thank Amar-Singh HSS for the assistance in writing this article. Frank Lambert and David Wells offered valuable ideas to improve the quality of the manuscript. We would like to thank Aizat Akhir for allowing us to use his image in the manuscript.

References

1. Clements, J. F., P. C. Rasmussen, T. S. Schulenberg, M. J. Iliff, T. A. Fredericks, J. A. Gerbracht, D. Lepage, A. Spencer, S. M. Billerman, B. L. Sullivan, and C. L. Wood. 2023. *The eBird/Clements checklist of Birds of the World: v2023b*. [online] <https://www.birds.cornell.edu/clementschecklist/download/> Accessed on 03 August 2023.
2. Erritzøe, J., and H. B. Erritzøe (1998). *Pittas of the World: A Monograph on the Pitta Family*. The Lutterworth Press, Cambridge, UK.
3. Kirwan, G. M. and J. Erritzøe (2023). Western Hooded Pitta (*Pitta sordida*), version 1.0. In Birds of the World (B. K. Keeney, Editor). *Cornell Lab of Ornithology*, Ithaca, NY, USA.
4. Lambert, F & Woodcock, M. (1996). *Pittas, Broadbills and Asities*. Pica Press, Sussex, England.
5. Macaulay Library. (2004). Western Hooded Pitta *Pitta sordida*. Cornell Lab of Ornithology . [online]. Accessed on 03 August 2024.
6. Phillipps, Q. & Phillipps, K. (2014). *Phillipps' Field Guide to the Birds of Borneo* (3rd edition). John Beaufoy Publishing, UK.

7. Wells, D.R. (2007). *The Birds of the Thai-Malay Peninsula: Vol. 2 (Passerines)*. London: Christopher Helm.

Citation: Saravanan Palanisamy & Mohd Semail. (2024). First Breeding Record of the Western Hooded Pitta (Sunda) *Pitta sordida mulleri* in Peninsular Malaysia. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 3/2024, Sept 2024: pg. 5-9.

Commentary on the Observation:

Frank Lambert

I wonder if a single bird might have dispersed to Malaysia, most likely from Sumatra, and hybridised with *cucullata* to produce a small population of dark-headed individuals. Some of the photos have the suggestion of some chestnut feathers on the forehead and onto the centre of the forecrown. I also think it is possible that an Indonesian could have brought a pet one to Malaysia that was released or escaped and then bred with *cucullata*.

Genetic studies show that *bangkana* is a true hybrid between *cucullata* and *mulleri* (Ericson 2019). That also has some 'brown' markings in the crown. So, I suspect these birds are probably hybrids. The bird trade could easily be to blame.

David Wells

An apparently stabilized hybrid subspecies *bangkana* marooned on what is now Bangka island implies (ice-age?) the breeding range of *cucullata* once extended further into Sundaland than it does now. With no non-wintering season occurrences on record that appears to include all Malaysian territory east of the Main Range, so if any *cucullata* genes were involved at Ganchong, they appear not to have been collected locally.

Note that there was one or more birds observed at Taman Botani Negara, Shah Alam, Selangor from January to early April 2023, with mixed cap characters, having a black median stripe on otherwise brown cap; with calling recorded there in late February and March of that year (Macaulay Library 2024). This requires investigating and suggests at least that some migrants could be coming from as nearby as the mixed gene zone of the breeding range.

Perhaps Hooded Pitta breeders are in the process of (re-)invading Peninsular Malaysia, just as Blue-winged Pitta *Pitta moluccensis* apparently has done over the last few decades?

Reference

Ericson, P.G.P., Qu, Y., Rasmussen, P.C. Blom, M.P.K., Rheindt, F.E. & Irestedt, M. (2019). Genomic differentiation tracks earth-historic isolation in an Indo-Australasian archipelagic pitta (Pittidae; Aves) complex. *BMC Evol Biol* 19, 151. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12862-019-1481-5>.