

Bird Identification Series:

Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius* and Dark-necked Tailorbird *O. atrogularis*

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Introduction

It's a strange quirk of human nature that we pay least attention to the things we see most often. The same applies to birders and birds. So, while we may spend long periods studying a rarity, we tend to quickly dismiss a common species and look for the next one. This habit can and does lead to surprisingly frequent misidentifications.

[eBird](#) (eBird 2021) is a brilliant resource for all sorts of reasons, and one is that it shows us how likely we are to make mistakes. For example, (as of 14 Aug 2023), of the 343 photographs taken in Malaysia identified as Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*, 46 are actually of Dark-necked Tailorbird *O. atrogularis* - an error rate of 13%!

So – how well do you know your tailorbirds?

There are four species of tailorbird *Orthotomus* sp. in Peninsular Malaysia, three of which also occur in Bornean Malaysia. A fifth so-called "tailorbird", occurring in both Peninsular and Bornean Malaysia, Mountain Tailorbird *Phyllergates cuculatus*, is actually a bush warbler *Cettiidae* (Eaton *et al.* 2021). All four Malaysian tailorbirds are characterized by chestnut on the head and pale underparts. Two – Ashy *O. ruficeps* and Rufous-tailed *O. sericeus* - have grey upperparts, and two – Common and Dark-necked, are olive-green above. Of this last pair, Common does not occur in Bornean Malaysia, so the confusion between Common and Dark-necked Tailorbird is a purely Peninsular problem!

In Peninsular Malaysia, Common Tailorbird is typically a bird of parks and gardens, while Dark-necked prefers forest (primary and secondary) and forest edge. Dark-necked tends to be more arboreal, often foraging in the canopy, whereas Common is frequently seen at eye-level or even on the ground. However, there is considerable overlap in the habitat use of both species, so it is not safe to assume the identity of an individual based purely on where it is observed.

The vocalizations of both species are distinctively different. [Dark-necked Tailorbird's song](#) is characterized by rolling trilled phrases, while [Common Tailorbird's song](#) is a repetitive single or double-syllabled phrase monotonously repeated.

The appearance of the two species is not particularly similar either, and yet, according to the photographic records on eBird, we regularly get our identification wrong.

Why are we so confused?

Most published literature focuses on the extent of rufous on the crown, vent colour and presence or absence of a dark throat as features to separate Common and Dark-necked Tailorbird. While attention to these can be helpful, they can also be misleading. Both species can show dark markings on the neck, or none at all! The crown is not always visible on a bird foraging above eye level, while the vent is often obscured by the wings, and even when visible, discerning the difference between pale yellow and off-white is not always easy.



What is needed is a more holistic set of differentiating characteristics.

What to look for?

Features	Common Tailorbird	Dark-necked Tailorbird
Head		
Chestnut crown	Isolated from the eyeline by an indistinct <i>greyish supercilium</i> extending from the bill base to the rear of the ear coverts, <i>notably behind the eye</i> , and from the olive-green mantle by a <i>greyish or greyish brown nape</i> .	Usually brighter than on Common and <i>extends to, or below the eyeline, notably behind the eye</i> . In females and immature birds, there may be a whitish loreal line between eye and bill, but even then, the <i>chestnut reaching the eyeline or below behind the eye</i> is a diagnostic feature. The rear edge of the chestnut on the crown merges directly with the <i>bright olive-green nape</i> .
Ear coverts	Grey with whitish <i>mottling</i> .	<i>Plain</i> grey or whitish.
Eyering	Thin, orange-yellow.	Thin, usually pale pink, greyish or whitish. Yellowish only in juveniles.
Bill	Long, thicker at base and tapering to sharp point. Daggerlike.	Very long, and of even thickness throughout, with slightly blunt tip.
Upperparts		
Back and wings	<i>Mantle stands out as the greenest part</i> , contrasting with <i>brownish or greyish nape and brownish wings</i> .	<i>Uniformly bright olive-green from nape to tail</i> , including wings (broad olive-green fringes to the flight feathers make the wings and mantle appear uniform).
Tail	Strongly graduated (all outer feathers shorter than central pair); tail feathers rounded at tip. Males in breeding plumage have diagnostically <i>much longer central feathers</i> . Tail may appear browner than rump.	Tail graduated, but the central three pairs of feathers are similar length and usually rather square-tipped; resulting in the tail appearing distinctively <i>square-ended</i> . Tail usually appears similarly bright olive-green to rump, with subtle dark grey band near the tip and <i>yellow feather tips</i> when fresh.
Underparts		
Carpus edge (the front edge of the folded wing)	Buff or whitish and <i>inconspicuous</i> .	<i>Bright yellow</i> , standing out conspicuously from olive-green upperparts and greyish flanks. A surprisingly useful identification feature when other parts of the bird may be obscured.
Breast and throat	When present, dark grey or blackish marks on the throat often appear as <i>two lobes on either side of the neck</i> . <i>Throat always whitish</i> .	When present, dark grey or blackish on the throat <i>extends across the breast and up onto the throat</i> .
Vent and Tail	Vent <i>white or cream</i> . Undertail brownish. Paler tips usually inconspicuous or absent.	Vent <i>bright yellow</i> in adult male. Paler <i>yellow</i> in females and immatures. Undertail olive-green, with darker grey subterminal spots and often conspicuous <i>yellow tips</i> .
Tibial feathers*	Adult and juv: <i>buff to chestnut</i> .	Adult: <i>rich ochre to golden yellow</i> . Juvenile: <i>olive-green</i> .

*Tibial feathering is not often visible and of limited use in the field. However, there are some differences between the two species and possibly also between age classes.

Try it out!

Armed with the set of features outlined in this article, try testing your skills on the gallery of Common and Dark-necked Tailorbird photographs on eBird. See how many mistakes you can find!

To do so,

- i. Go to [Explore eBird](#) and key in "Dark-necked Tailorbird" in the white "Enter species name" box.
- ii. Scroll down to "Top photos" and click "View all".
- iii. Click on the drop-down menu labelled "Location" and key in "Malaysia" to filter the photographs you see.
- iv. See if you can spot any wrongly labelled photos. Some of them might be yours! (If they are, please correct them).

Extra tip: Look out for several photos of the beautiful *humphreysi* race of Dark-throated Tailorbird, which is endemic to North-eastern Sabah. There are also a couple of photos of the *anambensis* race, endemic to the Tioman, Anambas and Natuna Islands.

Conclusion

The aim of this series is to highlight the crucial differences between similar pairs or groups of species so that we can improve our bird identification skills. Hopefully, the result will be greater confidence and accuracy in identifying what we see. If you have other species pairs or groups you would like to see featured, please contact the Editor.

References

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2. eBird. 2021. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Cornell Lab of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York. Available: <http://www.ebird.org> Accessed: 14 Aug 2023.

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Plate 1: Male Common Tailorbird in breeding plumage, 7 Feb 2022, Perak, Malaysia. Amar-Singh HSS. The long central tail feathers are diagnostic but only present in breeding plumage. The olive-green mantle stands out in contrast to the dull grey-brown nape and browner wings. The chestnut crown does not extend as far as the eyeline; the ear coverts are strongly mottled and the eyering is yellow. The black marks on the neck are only on the neck sides and the entire throat is white. The vent is white. Note the dagger-shaped bill.



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Plate 2: Male Dark-necked Tailorbird, 19 May 2010, Perak, Malaysia. Amar-Singh HSS. The tail is short and not strongly graduated. The entire upperparts from nape to tail, including wings, are uniform bright olive green. The rich chestnut crown extends down to and below the level of the eye and is bordered at the rear by an olive-green nape. The ear coverts are plain greyish-white and the eyering is whitish. The black on the breast extends across the breast and up onto the throat. There is a hint of bright yellow carpus feathers at the bend of the wing. The vent cannot be seen. Note the long, rather parallel-sided, blunt-tipped bill.



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Plate 3: Non-breeding male or female Common Tailorbird, 31 March 2014, Perak, Malaysia. Amar-Singh HSS. This bird looks rather bright olive-green above, including the wings and uppertail. However, the nape is greyish brown, isolating the chestnut crown from the olive-green upperparts, and a greyish supercilium separates the crown from the eye. The thin eyering is orange-yellow. The vent cannot be seen. The ear coverts on this bird are not strongly mottled. An inconspicuous buff-white carpus feather can be seen at the wing bend.



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Plate 4: Female Dark-necked Tailorbird, 20 June 2009, Perak, Malaysia. Amar-Singh HSS. The bright olive-green nape, uniformly bright upperparts, yellow at the carpal joint and vent, short tail and long narrow bill easily identify this as a Dark-necked Tailorbird. The lack of grey or black on the throat, the pale buff loreal line and restricted chestnut on the crown identify this bird as a female. The golden yellow tibial feathers are clearly visible in this photo.



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Plate 5: Female Dark-necked Tailorbird, 19 May 2010, Perak, Malaysia. Amar-Singh HSS. A greyish supercilium in front of and over the eye gives this bird a Common Tailorbird-like appearance. Furthermore, the bird appears to have a yellowish eyering, which is more usually a feature of Common. Note, however, that the chestnut of the crown reaches the eyeline behind the eye, the ear coverts are plain, unmottled grey and the nape is olive-green, concolorous with the rest of the upperparts, including the wings, all diagnostic of Dark-necked. The olive-green tibial feathering, yellowish eyering and weak chestnut colouration of the crown indicate that this is an immature bird.



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Plate 6: Juvenile Common Tailorbird, 13 May 2017, Kedah, Malaysia. Neoh Hor Kee. This recently fledged juvenile shares many of the diagnostic traits of adults: grey nape and supercilium isolating the pale chestnut crown, yellow eyering, olive-green mantle standing out from the browner wings and greyer nape, and white vent.



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Plate 7: Juvenile Dark-necked Tailorbird, 16 Sep 2009, Perak, Malaysia. Amar-Singh HSS. The bright olive-green nape and uniform olive-green upperparts are diagnostic features even at this age. The extent of the crown colouration, reaching the eyeline behind the eye, is the same as adults, even though the colour is olive-green rather than chestnut. Note the pale yellow eyering and olive-green tibial feathering, which are both uniquely features of juvenile Dark-throated Tailorbird. The vent is rather pale yellow.