

Recent Publications & Research

Recent Taxonomic Changes of Birds in Malaysia (Part I: Non-Passerines)

Jing-Yi Tou

Introduction

The last official checklist for birds of Malaysia was compiled and published in 2021 (MNS Bird Conservation Council, 2021) based on the taxonomical placement of Clements Checklists of the Birds of the World 2019 (Clements *et al*/2019). The Clements checklists usually receive an annual update every year in the latter half of the year. However, due to the Covid-19 lockdowns worldwide throughout 2019-2020, there were no updates in 2020. The annual updates resumed in 2021 onwards. This article is focused on the taxonomical changes that happened after the publication of the checklist (Clements *et al*/2021, 2022, 2023).

Malayan Crestless Fireback *Lophura erythrophthalma* and Bornean Crestless Fireback *L. pyronota*

The Crestless Fireback *L. erythrophthalma* was long considered a single species, but the distinctive Bornean subspecies was often proposed to be treated as a distinct species. Compared to the Malayan form, the males of the Bornean form have distinctive pale streaks on their breast, and an isolated distribution range. The Clements checklist split the species into two in the 2022 update.

Malayan Crested Fireback *Lophura rufa* and Bornean Crested Fireback *L. ignita*

The Crested Fireback *L. ignita* was another fireback that was long considered a single species, where its Bornean subspecies was often proposed to be treated as a distinct species. Compared to the Malayan form, the males of the Bornean form have a distinctive chestnut lower breast to flanks. The Clements checklist split the species into two in the 2022 update.

Malayan Crested Argus *Rheinardia nigrescens*

This species was all along considered a subspecies of the Crested Argus *R. ocellata*, which includes a population along the Annamite range in Vietnam and Laos, and a disjunct population in the limited mountains in and near Gunung Tahan, in Peninsular Malaysia. The Malaysian population was poorly known and was not recorded for a period until a recent study by Perhilitan uncovered that they were still surviving well in the known range. Despite strongly believed to be a distinct species for many years, the lack of specimens for genetic studies probably the only reason that held back the decision for most parties to accept it as a distinct species that is endemic to Peninsular Malaysia. The Clements checklist has finally confirmed that the Crested Argus should be split into Vietnamese Crested Argus *R. ocellata* and Malayan Crested Argus *R. nigrescens* since the 2021 update. This treatment is also widely accepted by other major standards. Besides the disjoint distribution, the Malayan Crested Argus shows a longer crest in the males.

Chestnut-necklaced Partridge *Tropicoperdix chرتونii* and Sabah Partridge *T. graydoni*

In 2021, the Chestnut-necklaced Partridge was moved to its own genus, *Tropicoperdix*, instead of its originally assigned genus for the hill-partridges, *Arborophila*. They were not even considered that closely related in Phasianidae. In 2022, the disjunct population in Sabah, that

was previously considered as a subspecies of Chestnut-necklaced Partridge was finally accepted as a distinct species, the Sabah Partridge, in the Clements checklist, although Birdlife International/IBW had been using this treatment much earlier. The Sabah Partridge has a disjunct population and is endemic to north-eastern Borneo, where for the time being, it is recorded only in Sabah. However, there is a high potential for them to be discovered in north-eastern Kalimantan in the future. The Sabah Partridge shows a whitish ear covert and darker chestnut necklace compared to the Chestnut-necklaced Partridge in the Peninsular.

Spotted Dove *Spilopelia chinensis*

The Spotted Dove was originally assigned in genus *Streptopelia* but was later discovered to consist of three distinct genetic lineages. Instead of lumping *Nesoenas* into a broad *Streptopelia*, the third lineage was also treated as a genus, *Spilopelia* in order to continue to recognize *Nesoenas* as a valid genus, which is reflected in the 2022 Clements update.

White-browed Crake *Poliolimnas cinereus*

This small crake was in the past widely included in genus *Porzana* with other similarly small crakes. It was a surprise that recent studies indicated that it has a much closer relationship with Bush-hens/Waterhens (genus *Amaurornis*) and was briefly reassigned to the genus. In the 2021 Clements update, the species was shifted to a monotypic genus, *Poliolimnas*, but maintains a close relationship with *Amaurornis* instead of *Porzana*.

Oriental Plover *Anarhynchus veredus*, Greater Sand-Plover *A. leschenaultii*, Malaysian Plover *A. peronii*, and Kentish Plover *A. alexandrinus*

Genetic research has found that many members that were originally assigned to *Charadrius* turned out to be in the same group as the Wrybill *A. frontalis* and were not that closely related to the remaining members of *Charadrius*. All these members, including the next 3 species are now moved to *Anarhynchus* in the latest 2023 Clements update, enlarging the originally monotypic genus.

Siberian Sand-Plover *A. mongolus* and Tibetan Sand-Plover *A. atrifrons*

Genetic studies by Wei *et al* (2022) has shown that the two populations of the Lesser Sand-Plover *Charadrius mongolus* were not one another's closest living relatives, where the Siberian Sand-Plover is more closely related to the Greater Sand-Plover than to the Tibetan Sand-Plover, and therefore the species is split into two in the latest 2023 Clements update. The Siberian Sand-Plover is only recorded in Malaysian Borneo and has yet to be identified in Peninsular Malaysia. Both species are also moved to *Anarhynchus* in the same update.

White-faced Plover *A. dealbatus*

It was not until rather recently that Bakewell and Kennerley (2007) published their discovery about a potentially overlooked species of plover in Malaysia and Southeast Asia. These mysterious plovers resemble the Kentish Plover and Malaysian Plover but show a whiter face, with pale or white lores. It was later discovered that the form was likely breeding in South China and had previously been described as a subspecies of Kentish Plover *Charadrius alexandrinus dealbatus* but ever since then was a lost taxon. In the 2021 update, it was finally updated as a distinct species of its own, and together with other associated species, it is moved to *Anarhynchus* in the 2023 Clements update.

Swinhoe's Storm-Petrel *Hydrobates monorhis*

The genus *Oceanodroma* is merged into *Hydrobates*, resulting in the update for the genus name in the 2021 Clements update.

Asian Woolly-necked Stork *Ciconia episcopus*

The African Woolly-necked Stork was recently recognized by Clements as a distinct species in the 2022 Clements update, resulting in the Asian population now recognized as a distinct species. The Asian species has a more well-defined black cap that contrasted well with the white neck.

Eastern Cattle Egret *Bubulcus coromandus*

The Cattle Egret *B. ibis* was accepted by some parties as two distinct populations for years. In the latest 2023 Clements update, the split is now accepted. Compared to the Western Cattle Egret *B. ibis*, Eastern Cattle Egret develops buffish feathers on the face and throat during breeding whereas these parts remain white in the western counterparts during breeding. Structurally, our species has slightly longer bill and legs.

Medium Egret *Ardea intermedia*

Birdlife has been treating the Intermediate Egret *A. intermedia* as three different species for years, with separated distribution range and different full breeding plumage. This treatment is now accepted by Clements in the latest 2023 update, with the English name changed to avoid confusion with the original widely used name, which is retained by Birdlife for this Asian form.

White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Ichthyophaga leucogaster*, Lesser Fish-Eagle *I. humilis* and Gray-headed Fish-Eagle *I. ichthyaetus*

Traditionally, the White-bellied Sea-Eagle was placed in genus *Haliaeetus*, and the 2 Asian Fish-Eagles were placed in genus *Ichthyophaga*. Genetic evidence suggested that the Fish-Eagles are associated with the members in *Haliaeetus* and therefore moved into *Haliaeetus* in recent years. However, the newest molecular studies split them back into two genera, and most of the original members of *Haliaeetus*, including the White-bellied Sea-Eagle, are now associated with the Fish-Eagles in genus *Ichthyophaga*.

Dusky Eagle-Owl *Ketupa coromandus* and Barred Eagle-Owl *K. sumatranus*

The Fish-Owls that were placed in genus *Ketupa* were found to be part of the *Bubo* clade and were often lumped into *Bubo*. The Clements 2022 update reassigned some members of genus *Bubo* to genus *Ketupa* based on genetic evidence.

Collared Owlet *Taenioptynx brodiei* and Sunda Owlet *T. pardalotus*

The only owlet in Malaysia is traditionally placed in genus *Glaucidium* together with the other owlets throughout the world. The Clements 2021 update has split a few Asian owlets as genus *Taenioptynx*. At the same time, the Bornean and Sumatran populations were split into a separate species, Sunda Owlet, from the widespread Asian mainland form.

Malaysian Blue-banded Kingfisher *Alcedo peninsulae*

The Blue-banded Kingfisher *A. euryzona* was split into two, where the Javan Blue-banded Kingfisher was the nominated form and took the name in the 2022 Clements update. The

subspecies *peninsulae* was therefore raised as a species. The females of the Malaysian Blue-banded Kingfisher lack the breast band that is present in both sexes for the Javan Blue-banded Kingfisher.

Black-eared Barbet *Psilopogon duvaucelii*

This barbet was considered by most as a subspecies of the Blue-eared Barbet *P. cyanotis* traditionally. The local form is however with a blackish instead of blue ear coverts and is now finally accepted by Clements as a distinct species in 2023. The south most distribution of the Blue-eared Barbet after the split is uncertain but is somewhere in the northern parts of the Malay Peninsula. Hybrid of both forms could potentially occur down south into northern Peninsular Malaysia.

Orange-backed Woodpecker *Chrysocolaptes validus*

Genus *Reinwardtipicus*, including only this species is now merged into *Chrysocolaptes* in the 2023 Clements update, now sharing the same genus as the Greater Flameback *C. guttacristatus*.

Buff-rumped Woodpecker *Meiglyptes grammithorax*

The Buff-rumped Woodpecker *M. tristis* is split into two where the Javan form, the Zebra Woodpecker, retained the original scientific name. The widespread form that occurs in Malaysia has an updated scientific name after the split, in the 2023 update. The Buff-rumped Woodpecker has entirely barred underparts compared to the Zebra Woodpecker.

Olive-backed Woodpecker *Gecinulus rafflesii*

The woodpecker was originally placed in *Dinopium* due to the many similar characteristics it shares with members in that genus. It is now moved to genus *Gecinulus*, joining the Bamboo Woodpecker *G. viridis* in the latest 2023 Clements update.

Potential Future Changes

With the advancement of molecular studies in birds, where more subspecies were examined, many future changes to the taxonomy are expected. Eaton *et al* (2021) included a good number of potential splits/merges proposals.

Eurasian Teal *Anas crecca*

The Green-winged Teal *A. crecca* is split into two by IOC, where the Old World species is split as the Eurasian Teal and the New World species retained the current name, Green-winged Teal *A. carolinensis*. The Eurasian Teal lacks a vertical shoulder strip in the males and instead has a horizontal white stripe on the back.

Eastern Spotted Dove *Spilopelia chinensis*

The western population in India of the Spotted Dove *S. chinensis* is often proposed to be further split into Western Spotted Dove *S. suratensis* which primarily shows a different wing covert pattern than the eastern species. This split is accepted by Birdlife/IBW.

Sunda Brush Cuckoo *Cacomantis (variolosus) sepulcralis*

The Brush Cuckoo is split by IOC, where the local species is known as Rusty-breasted Cuckoo *C. sepulcralis*. The Sulawesi Brush Cuckoo *C. virescens* is sometimes further split off from Rusty-breasted Cuckoo, leaving the local form as the Sunda Brush Cuckoo. The Australian Brush Cuckoo *C. variolosus* has grey breast instead of a rusty one. All the similar forms of the species complex share a similar but slightly different call.

Penan Hawk-Cuckoo *Hierococcyx (bocki) sp.*

The Bornean population of the Dark Hawk-Cuckoo wasn't considered a subspecies of the currently monotypic species. However, it has distinctive calls which potentially warrant it as a distinct species.

Kinabalu Cuckoo *Cuculus (lepidus) insulindae*

The Bornean subspecies of the Sunda Cuckoo is said to have a distinctive voice and could potentially be a distinct species.

Monsoon Eared-Nightjar *Lyncornis (macrotis) cerviniceps*

The subspecies of the Great Eared-Nightjar from mainland Asia which occurs in northern Peninsular Malaysia is sometimes considered to be a distinct species to be split off from the eastern populations.

Himalayan Needletail *Hirundapus (caudacutus) nudipes*

The Himalayan breeding subspecies of the White-throated Needletail is often proposed to be split off based on the differences in appearance and breeding range. The Himalayan Needletail lacks the white lores, have a browner mantle and darker, blue-glossed upperparts.

Eastern Palm Swift *Cypsiurus (balasiensis) infumatus*

The southeast Asian population of the Asian Palm Swift might potentially be split from the nominated race in the Indian subcontinent.

Eastern Baillon's Crane *Zapornia pusilla*

The eastern subspecies of the Baillon's Crane might be considered a distinct species from the western subspecies.

Eurasian Whimbrel *Numenius phaeopus*

The Old World population of the Whimbrel is split by IOC from the New World population. The Eurasian Whimbrel usually have a paler instead of dark rump, and a greyish instead of cinnamon-buff tone on the underwing, when compared to the Hudsonian Whimbrel *N. hudsonicus*.

Small Buttonquail *Turnix (sylvaticus) dussumier*

The Asian population of the Small Buttonquail might be distinct from the nominated subspecies in Africa and therefore might have an update in the scientific name when it is split.

Heuglin's Gull *Larus (fuscus) heuglini*

The Lesser Black-backed Gull subspecies that visits Malaysia, has a greyer back and was often considered a distinct species. It is possible that the Lesser Black-backed Gull would be split into multiple species instead of maintaining the current placement.

Black-footed Egret *Egretta (garzetta) nigripes*

The black-toed subspecies of the Little Egret is uncommon in Malaysia compared to the nominated race. It is sometimes considered a distinct species.

Oriental Honey-Buzzard *Pernis (ptilorhynchus) ruficollis*

The migratory race of the Oriental Honey-Buzzard, *orientalis*, was in the past considered to be distinct from the resident form that is sometimes split as Crested/Sunda Honey-Buzzard. This placement has not reached a finalized consensus and, potentially, future splitting of the two is possible.

Shikra *Tachyspiza badia*, Chinese Sparrowhawk *T. soloensis*, Japanese Sparrowhawk *T. gularis*, and Besra *T. virgata*

Genetic studies showed that genus *Circus*, the harriers, were embedded within the current genus *Accipiter*. Otherwise, the huge genus will need to be broken into many smaller genera, most of the sparrowhawks, except the Eurasian Sparrowhawk *Accipiter nisus* would be recommended to be split as genus *Tachyspiza*. The Asian population of the Shikra might be further split off from the African population as the Asian Shikra *T. badia*.

Crested Goshawk *Lophospiza trivirgatus*

The local goshawk would be split as genus *Lophospiza* if genus *Accipiter* is revised to maintain genus *Circus* as a distinct genus.

Steppe Buzzard *Buteo (buteo) vulpinus*

The Common Buzzard is split into many species in recent years. The only known subspecies after the split is *vulpinus* in Malaysia, which is often considered a further split.

Grass Owl *Tyto capensis*

The Australasian Grass-Owl *T. longimembris* is now considered a distinct species from the African population. However, the genetic and morphological differences might not be that major. It is possible that they will lump it back into a single species in the future when more evidence is examined.

Eastern Barn Owl *T. (alba) javanica*

The Barn Owl is often split into more than one species, with IOC accepting the eastern population to be the Eastern Barn Owl. The Barn Owl has an almost worldwide distribution, which could possibly represent multiple species in reality.

Bornean Scops-Owl *Otus brookii*

The mysterious and rare Rajah Scops-Owl is poorly known in Borneo, but it differs in plumage with the commoner Sumatran subspecies, which probably were two distinct species.

Chinese Scops-Owl *O. (sunia) japonicus*

The subspecies of Oriental Scops-Owl that visits the region might be separated with two other subspecies as a distinct species, compared to the subtropical forms.

Sabah Dwarf-Kingfisher *Ceyx (rufidorsa) motleyi*

The Sabahan subspecies appears like an intermediate form between the Black-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher *C. erithaca* and the Rufous-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher *C. rufidorsa* and has therefore been placed in both species after the split. Genetic studies showed that it is more closely related to the Rufous-backed Dwarf-Kingfisher and is therefore reassigned there. However, the subspecies is stable and did not seem to intergrade with the adjacent form of Rufous-backed Dwarf-Kingfishers, probably showing that they were likely a distinct species.

Black-faced Kingfisher *Lacedo (pulchella) melanops*

The Bornean form of Banded Kingfisher is split by Birdlife/HBW. It shows a black face instead of dark rufous face in the males.

Gray-and-buff Woodpecker *Hemicircus (concretus) sordidus*

The Javan form of the Gray-and-buff Woodpecker is sometimes treated as a distinct species, causing the remaining form to change the scientific name after the split.

Sunda Yellownape *Picus (chlorolophus) rodgeri*

The Sunda form of the Lesser Yellownape is sometimes considered to be a distinct species from the population elsewhere.

Black-naped Woodpecker *P. (canus) guerini*

The Gray-headed Woodpecker is split by Birdlife/HBW where the Asian form has a black nape compared to the western forms.

Checker-throated Woodpecker *Chrysophlegma (mentale) humii*

The Javan form is sometimes considered as a distinct species, causing the remaining form to change the scientific name after the split.

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