

Articles

Bird Identification Series: Hume's in the Hills, Swinhoe's on the Shore?

Identification and distribution of *Zosterops* white-eye in Peninsular Malaysia

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Introduction

Zosterops is one of the most speciose passerine genera with more than 100 'white-eye' species occurring across tropical Africa and Asia (Winkler *et al.*, 2020). Asian white-eyes are generally remarkably similar in appearance and behaviour and are instantly recognisable in the field. They are sensibly and eponymously named for their distinctive white eye rings (*zosterops* means 'eye-girdle') and often occur in active and rapidly moving flocks. The genus is a notable speciator with numerous island endemics, particularly in the Pacific and Indian oceans, many of which are globally threatened including some of the rarest passerines globally (Winkler *et al.*, 2020).

The taxonomy of white-eyes in mainland Asia is confusing and underwent significant revision in the 2010s as genetic studies demonstrated that the widespread 'Oriental White-eye' was paraphyletic i.e. containing forms that were not each other's closest relatives (Lim *et al.*, 2019). At the same time a re-assessment of some of the type specimens for *Zosterops*, which were collected across Asia in the 19th century, revealed some species were incorrectly named (Wells 2017). This research resulted in major changes in species limits and names for *Zosterops* in the region. Under current taxonomy four *Zosterops* species occur in mainland South-east Asia (Table 1), two of which are found in Peninsular Malaysia.

Table 1: *Zosterops* white-eye taxa in mainland South-east Asia.
Forms occurring in Peninsular Malaysia are highlighted.

Species	Sub-species	Distribution
Chestnut-flanked White-eye	<i>Zosterops erythropleurus</i>	Breeds NE China and Russian Far East; winters N South-east Asia south to C Thailand & Cambodia
Swinhoe's White-eye	<i>Zosterops simplex simplex</i>	Breeds E China/Taiwan with some moving in winter into N SE Asia
	<i>Zosterops simplex williamsoni</i>	Resident coastal forest in Gulf of Thailand (Thailand & Cambodia)
	<i>Zosterops simplex erwini</i>	Resident coastal forests of Thai-Malaysia peninsula and Sumatra
Indian White-eye	<i>Zosterops palpebrosus palpebrosus</i>	Central and eastern Himalayas east to southern China (Sichuan, Yunnan)
	<i>Zosterops palpebrosus siamensis</i>	Mountainous regions from S Myanmar north over much of mainland Southeast Asia east through to Vietnam
Hume's White-eye	<i>Zosterops auriventer auriventer</i>	Poorly known; type specimen from S Myanmar
	<i>Zosterops auriventer wetmorei</i>	Hilly areas of SW and E Thailand and W Cambodia
	<i>Zosterops auriventer tahanensis</i>	Extreme S Thailand and Peninsular Malaysia

Whilst it has long been recognised that two species of *Zosterops* white-eye occur on Peninsular Malaysia their names and relationship with other *Zosterops* taxa were revised



during the recent re-assessments. Swinhoe's White-eye in Peninsular Malaysia were formerly part of Oriental White-eye (now Indian White-eye). Hume's White-eye in Peninsular Malaysia were previously considered a subspecies of Everett's White-eye *Z. everetti*; a species which, under the new taxonomy, became a southern Philippine near-endemic (van Balen & Limparungpatthanakij, 2020).

Identification in Peninsular Malaysia (see images in the Appendix)

Field identification of Swinhoe's and Hume's White-eye is difficult (Table 2). Swinhoe's is generally a **brighter, yellower bird** with more **contrasting whiter underparts**, a **thinner and more diffuse yellow-breast band**, and a **thicker eye-ring**. However, these features are subjective and variable. The most consistent and reliable plumage feature seems to be the **colour of the sublores**: the area immediately above the black lores (Figure 1). In Swinhoe's this area is **bright yellow presenting a contrast with the greener forehead**. In Hume's the **sublores are the same colour as the rest of the head**. In good light, and with some luck, this feature can be observed in the field. Eaton *et al.*, (2021) also described consistent differences in the voices between the two species. In Hume's "*the call is like a chicken chick, continually calling. This is a lovely, cheery song, usually sang at dawn. Swinhoe's in contrast is a lower-pitched, buzzy call, that lacks a real song-type away from this*".

Table 2: Summary of identification features for Swinhoe's and Hume's White-eye in Peninsular Malaysia. Derived from Eaton 2021 *et al.*, ¹, Wells 2007² and personnel examination of Macaulay Library photographs.

Feature	Swinhoe's White-eye <i>Z. s. erwini</i>	Hume's White-eye <i>Z. a. tahanensis</i>	Notes
Sublores (area above the black lores)	Bright yellow forming a distinct patch above the black lores which contrasts with the greener forehead.	Olive – the same colour as the forehead with no contrast.	Consistent and reliable feature. Can be visible in the field but not obvious. Usually visible in good photographs.
Eye-ring	Thicker; <i>roughly equal width to eye's diameter</i> ¹	Thinner; <i>width of lower portion roughly 50-70% of eye's diameter</i> ¹	Difficult to see in field; best with photos
Lores	Black and generally straight and narrow meeting upper mandible. Some black extending below eye-ring.	Black and generally thicker and more diffuse than in Swinhoe's. The black can extend below the eye.	Feature appears variable and light dependent. Best observed in photos.
Underparts	White-grey	Grey-white	Darker in Hume's
Overall colouration and contrast	Olive-Yellow	Olive-green	Swinhoe's is a brighter bird with greater contrast between white undersides and yellower tones above
Belly pattern	Yellow mid-ventral band running ' <i>almost to but not quite joining</i> ² yellow upper breast and ' <i>often interrupted towards the vent</i> '.	Broader yellow mid-ventral band ' <i>pinched off by grey, never quite meeting</i> ² the yellow upper breast	The broadness of ventral band appears variable within species but is <i>generally</i> narrower and more diffuse in Swinhoe's
Rump pattern	Same olive-yellow colour as the back	Yellow contrasting with olive back	Feature is light dependant and can be difficult to discern in field or on photos.

Voice	<i>Only known to produce series of call-like notes reminiscent of a chicken check.:</i> <i>(i) downslurred, sharp, slightly buzzy “tzeep”, 3-6 kHz;</i> <i>(ii) hard, slightly ascending rattle “p’r’r’r’t’t”, lasting <0.5 s Chips like a chicken chick¹ // a metallic dza-dza, repeated several times, and a shriller, twittering dzi-da-da²</i>	<i>Song: clear, pleasant, sweet but rather weak series of twittering notes.</i> <i>Call: (i) “tsee-tsee” or metallic “spreet” or “peet” while perched and in flight; (ii) high-pitched buzzing “dzee”;</i> <i>(iii) more musical, inflected “dzee-ap”, mainly in flight¹ a high-pitched, buzzing dzee and an inflected¹ rather more musical dzee-ap²</i>	Voice is highlighted as a consistent feature for species identification and for those with a good ear, and attention, one of the most reliable identification features (J. Eaton, pers. com.).
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Note that the forms of both species in Borneo are subtly different from birds on Peninsular Malaysia and the features described above may not be accurate in Sabah or Sarawak.

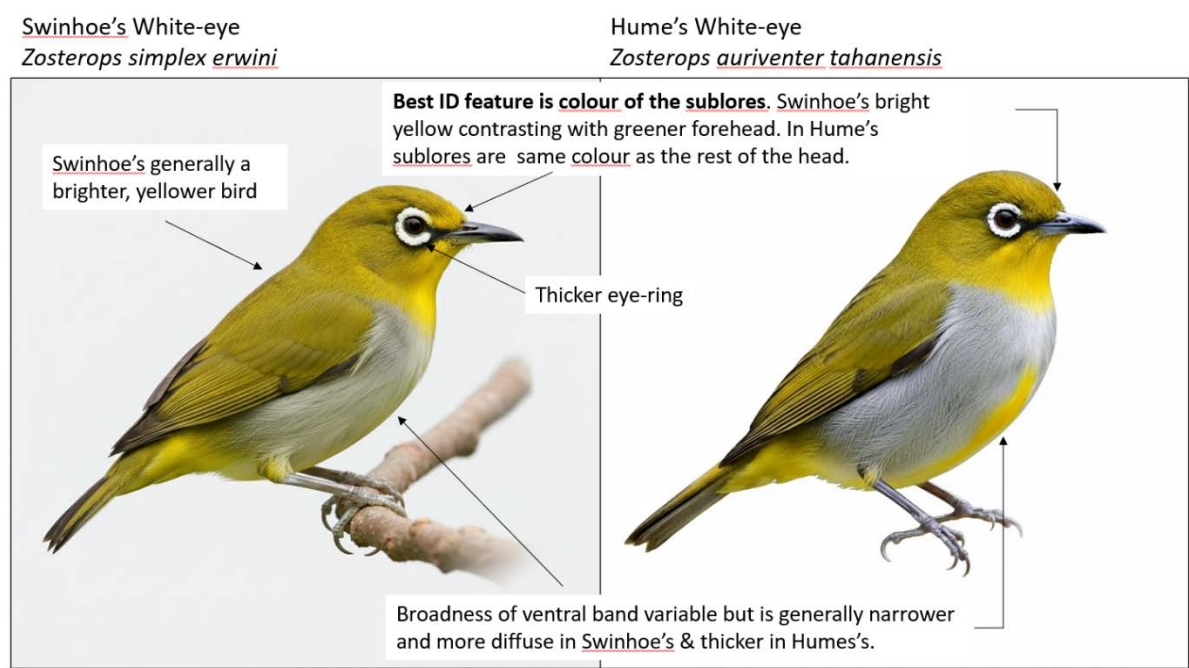


Figure 1: AI generated image to illustrate the key differences between Swinhoe’s and Hume’s White-eye. Graphic created by Amar-Singh HSS.

Distribution & Status of *Zosterops* in Peninsular Malaysia

Swinhoe’s and Hume’s White-eyes have different, and fairly consistently defined, habitat preferences within Peninsular Malaysia (Table 3). However, partly as a result of the taxonomic changes described earlier, combined with identification difficulties in the field, numerous records within citizen science platforms such as eBird are misassigned and eBird distribution maps of the two forms in Peninsular Malaysia are fairly inaccurate (Figure 2).

I reviewed photographs of *Zosterops* from Peninsular Malaysia published in Macaulay Library and the location of confirmed Hume’s and Swinhoe’s records largely matched the previously published knowledge of their distribution and habitat preferences.

Table 3. Status and habitat preference of Hume's and Swinhoe's white-eye in Peninsular Malaysia from publications on Malaysian birds.

Source	Swinhoe's white-eye	Hume's white-eye
Wells 2007	Resident, regular in core coastal vegetation and, on coasts, more or less common from Kedah to Pahang. Core habitat is described as mangrove forest, mature & regenerating open strand woodland especially with stands of casuarinas, and coastal and sub-coastal scrub. Foraging parties, sometimes large, also wander inland	Throughout occurring south to Pantl and Pulau peaks. Lowland dry-land forests, descending into the top of forest-edge growth, at all elevations but more numerous, or at least more visible, above the steep-land boundary up to 2000m in the Main Range
Jeyarajasingam & Pearson (2012)	Fairly common resident at low elevations along the coastal plain south to Johor in mangroves, casuarinas, beach scrub, forest edge, and wooded areas.	Locally common resident principally in hilly country up to 2000m south to Negeri Sembilan in forests and forest edge
Puan <i>et al.</i> , (2020)	Locally common resident throughout lowlands especially mangroves and other coastal vegetation	Locally common resident occurring at all elevations but commoner in montane and submontane forests

Confirmed Swinhoe's White-eye records were almost exclusively from coastal mangrove and peri-urban coastal habitat particularly on the west coast (Selangor to Melaka), around Johor Bahru, and in areas on the Pahang coast (particularly Kuantan and Cherating). The furthest record from the coast was ~30 km in the Klang Valley (Putrajaya Wetland Park & Taman Tun Dr Ismail) and 12 to 20 km from the coast in urban Seremban and Melaka. Wells (2007) documented Swinhoe's occurrence '*an extreme 80km from the sea*' suggesting such records were inconsistent due to itinerant parties of birds. The maximum confirmed elevation from eBird photographs was at 95 m with a number of records around 50 m.

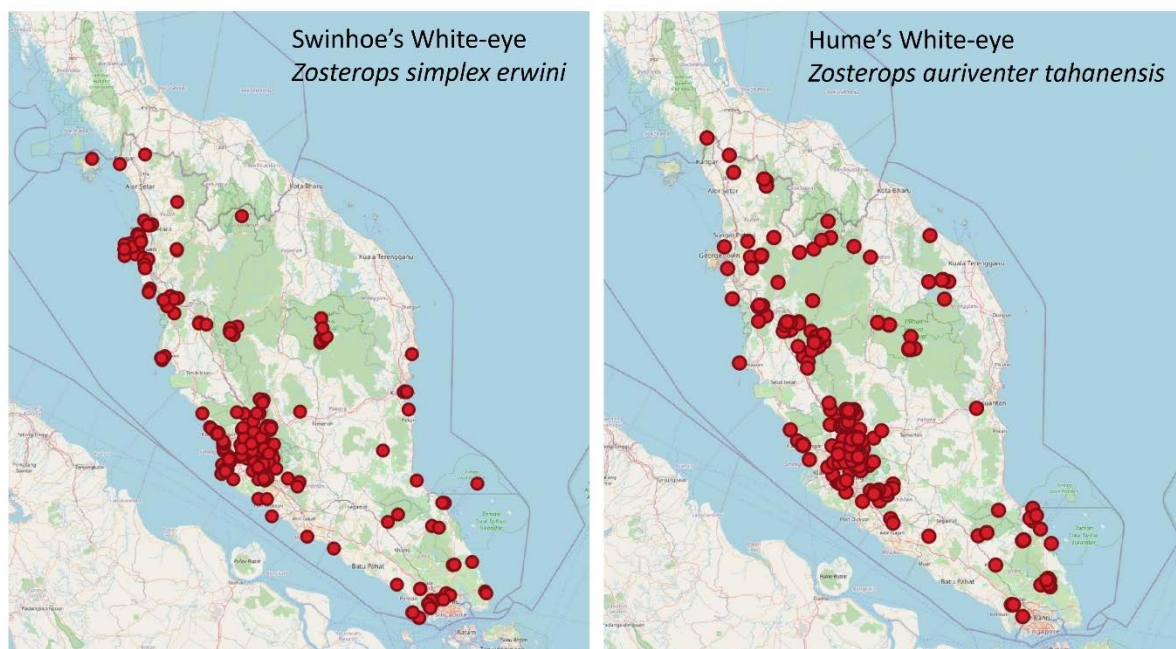


Figure 2: Records of Swinhoe's and Hume's White-eye from Peninsular Malaysia (1975 to Aug 2025) submitted to the citizen science platform eBird. Non-coastal records of Swinhoe's, particularly outside the Klang Valley, are likely erroneous as are coastal records of Hume's. Subsequently an assessment of Swinhoe's records away from coastal areas has been conducted by an eBird Reviewer which will have removed a number of the incorrect records (J Eaton, pers. com.). Graphic created by Amar-Singh HSS.

Hume's White-eye was widely recorded from forested areas throughout the Peninsular. Records were from ~20 km from the east coast in Johor and from >30 km from the coast in Selangor. The species showed elevational overlap with Swinhoe's White-eye with occurrences as low as ~30 m in Johor and ~40 m in Selangor.

In urban Kuala Lumpur and Selangor/Petaling Jaya Swinhoe's and Hume's White-eye occur in close sympatry. Hume's White-eye has definitively been photographed within Bukit Kiara (~50 m) and further east in Selangor at popular birding spots such as Sungai Congkak and the Old Gombok Road. Swinhoe's White-eye have been photographed in the Taman Tun Dr Ismail area (< 2 km from Bukit Kiara), around urban Kepong, and Kota Damasara. It seems likely that Swinhoe's occur along waterways and urbanised areas, including small city parks, whilst Hume's is likely restricted to larger forest blocks within the Klang Valley.

Who were Swinhoe & Hume?

A significant proportion of Southeast Asian birds are named, in English, after dead white men. The 'new' names for *Zosterops* in Peninsular Malaysia match this trend. Robert Swinhoe and Allan Hume were amongst the most active and influential ornithologists in East Asia and the Indian subcontinent respectively during the 2nd half of the 20th century.

Robert Swinhoe (1836-1877) was a professional British diplomat, born in colonial Kolkata, and who served as a British envoy, consul, and governor in China and Taiwan between ~1855 and 1873. He died at the age of 41, of syphilis. Robert was a passionate and detail-oriented naturalist and extensively collected and surveyed areas of China and Taiwan documenting 93 new species of birds and 17 mammals. Alfred Wallace, co-originator of the theory of evolution, wrote following Swinhoe's death "*due to Mr. Swinhoe's own exertions...there is probably no part of the world (if we except Europe, North America, and British India) of whose warm-blooded vertebrates we possess fuller or more accurate knowledge than we do of the coast districts of China and its islands.*" Robert's brother, Charles Swinhoe (1838-1923) was also a colonial-era naturalist, and soldier, and largely served in India. Hall (1987) provided a detailed bibliographic article on the biological achievement of Robert Swinhoe.

Allan Hume (1829-1912) was one of the most prominent and significant political figures in British India in the second half of the 19th century and a champion, within the constraints of his time and class, for Indian independence and self-determination. Hume was also one of the most active and best regarded naturalists across British India and is viewed as the 'father of Indian ornithology'. A detailed and excellent biography was published in Birding Asia in 2012 (Collar & Prys-Jones 2012) which details his life and work from a 'birders' perspective and highlights the approximately 40 bird species which Hume described. These include some of Malaysia's familiar species, such as spectacled bulbul *Pycnonotus erythrophthalmus* as well some of Asia's most threatened birds including White-shouldered Ibis *Pseudibis davisoni*, White-bellied Heron *Ardea insignis*, and Gurney's Pitta *Pitta gurneyi*.

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Appendix: Image Gallery of the Swinhoe's & Hume's White-eyes

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Swinhoe's white-eye showing distinct, but narrow, yellow subloral area above the black lores and contrasting with the rest of the head, a thick eye-ring, and an overall yellow-green colour without a significant rump patch.

Cheow-Lim Lee, Lotus Pond,
Bukit Kepayang
26 Oct 2021.

Macaulay Library ML639286346



© Kwang-Ming Teh

Swinhoe's White-eye showing thin yellow subloral stripe, thick eye-ring and general yellowish colour.

Kwang-Ming Teh, Mangrove
Point, Port Klang, Selangor,
Malaysia
18, Jan 2025



© Kwang-Ming Teh

Swinhoe's White-eye showing yellow sublores and white underparts with a faint and diffuse ventral stripe.

Kwang-Ming Teh, Mangrove
Point, Port Klang, Selangor,
Malaysia
18, Jan 2025



© Amar-Singh HSS

Hume's White-eye showing the typical grey underparts and broad well-defined mid-ventral stripe.

Amar-Singh HSS, Kledang-Saiong Forest Reserve, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 03 Dec 2018.

Macaulay Library ML645581424



© Cheow-Lim Lee

Hume's White-eye showing green sublores with no contrast with the rest of the head, a thin eye-ring, and overall greenish-olive upperparts and grey-white underparts.

Cheow-Lim Lee, Talang Birdwatching Trail, Talang-Langkap Road, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, 10 Jul 2022.

Macaulay Library ML468221451



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Hume's White-eye showing olive-green sublores, a thin eye-ring, grey underparts, and a strongly defined, albeit relatively narrow, yellow mid-ventral stripe.

Amar-Singh HSS, Kledang-Saiong Forest Reserve, Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia, 21 Oct 2021.

Macaulay Library ML384580871



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Hume's white-eye showing an all olive-green head lacking any yellow on the sublores, a thin eye-ring, and grey underparts. Note the fairly diffuse and pale mid-ventral stripe highlighting the variation in this feature.

Kwang-Ming Teh, Bukit Tinggi,
Pahang, Malaysia, 17 Mar 2024

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