

## Intraspecific Conflict in the White-breasted Waterhen

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### Introduction

The White-breasted Waterhen *Amaurornis phoenicurus* is a common resident and migrant railid in Malaysia (Wells 1999). It can be found in a wide range of habitats, including urban parks and gardens, wetlands and the forest edge (Wells 1999). Little is known about its intraspecific (within the same species) or interspecific (between different species) interactions (Taylor & van Perlo 1998; Wells 1999; Taylor et al. 2023). In one extended survey, the authors concluded that the White-breasted Waterhen "*avoided interspecific conflicts with other wetland birds in the same feeding and breeding grounds*" .... "*by hiding themselves*" (Akhtar et al., 2013). No mention was made about intraspecific conflicts. In general, rails are characterised by intensive antagonistic behaviour directed not only towards conspecifics, but also towards other species (Taylor & van Perlo 1998).

This brief report describes some observations on intraspecific conflicts.

### Observations

#### Conflict 1

In August 2022 at Bishan-AMK Park, Singapore, Mohamed Ali witnessed a White-breasted Waterhen multi-individual territorial dispute. The fight appeared to have begun when an 'outsider' White-breasted Waterhen intruded on another group's territory. The intruder was then attacked by a 'resident' White-breasted Waterhen (Plate 1).



Plate 1: Two White-breasted Waterhens involved in a fight, Bishan-AMK Park, Singapore, Aug 2022.

Eventually, two other 'residents' joined the fight, bringing the total to three birds attacking the 'intruder' simultaneously (Plate 2). Agonistic behaviours included aerial kicks, bill-jabbing, pecking, and grappling with feet/claws. At times the birds had claws locked while seated (Plate 3). Mohamed Ali was unfortunately unable to witness the resolution of the conflict.



Plate 2: Two White-breasted Waterhens attacking a third, Bishan-AMK Park, Singapore, Aug 2022.



Plate 3: Two White-breasted Waterhens with claws locked, Bishan-AMK Park, Singapore, Aug 2022.

Mohamed Ali has previously observed the White-breasted Waterhen being very territorial with other species (interspecific conflicts). This was the first time he witnessed them fighting so violently.

#### Conflict 2

In December 2024, at Sibul, Sarawak, Malaysia, Dixon Lau came across two White-breasted Waterhens moments before the fight broke out. One bird slowly approached another bird, while continually making soft but 'strong-toned' calls. The other bird was faced away but was also vocalising in the same manner. There was no immediate 'charging' of the other bird. A short while later the two birds engaged in a fight (Plate 4). It was a very brief conflict and stopped with one individual slowly backing off and walking away. No third individual seen. A link to a video of the activity: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4A4kWHo4ZA>.



Plate 4: Two White-breasted Waterhens involved in a fight, Sibul, Sarawak, Malaysia, Dec 2024.

### Conflict 3

On 08 January 2026, in Perak, Malaysia, Sein-Chiong Chiu was driving a village road, bordered by a pond on one side and wetlands on the other side, when he came across two pairs of White-breasted Waterhens in the midst of a fight. Two birds had their claws tightly locked in a clamp and were sitting in the middle of the road while another two birds stood facing off on the side of the road (Plate 5). The two birds locked claws for around 17 seconds before disengaging and running to the right side of the road and then continued to jump at each other with claws extended. The other two birds jumped once at each other and then continued to just face off. After about 32 seconds the fighting birds split up and one pair ran towards the wetlands while the other pair ran towards the pond. As there were two pairs it was unlikely that they were fighting over a mate and also no food was seen. This was very likely a territorial fight. A link to a video of the activity: <https://youtu.be/c42B7hVvex8>.



Plate 5: Video screen grab of two pairs of White-breasted Waterhens involved in a fight, Perak, Malaysia, 08 Jan 2026.

### Discussion

Taylor & van Perlo (1998), quoting other sources, state that while "*remarkably little information is available on its social organisation and behaviour... territorial birds are intolerant of conspecifics, and individuals have been seen driving off approaching birds...*"

These observations suggest that intraspecific conflicts do occur and can be quite forceful. Whether these are purely territorial or if there is a breeding element is uncertain. Two of the three documented episodes occurred during the migratory season and it is uncertain if any migratory birds were involved. Breeding in Peninsular Malaysia is documented to occur year round (Wells 1999) and this aggression may well have a breeding/nesting defence component.

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### References

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