

The rediscovery and song of the Rusty-throated Wren Babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis*

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Rusty-throated Wren Babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis* was described by Ripley (1948) from a netted specimen collected on 5 January 1947 at about 1,600 m near Dreyi (near or now possibly known as Lohitpur/Lohatipur) in the Lohit River drainage of the Mishmi Hills, in what is now Arunachal Pradesh state, north-east India, at c.28°0'N 96°17'E. The species was not encountered again in the twentieth century, no doubt due to the inaccessibility of the Mishmi Hills, an area that even Indian citizens need a permit to visit. However, in the late 1990s the permit requirements were relaxed so that foreigners could visit.

Thus from 15 November to 3 December 2004, we visited the Mishmi Hills on a birding tour with KingBird

Tours. Our route was different from that of Ali and Ripley, who concentrated on low-elevation birds on the south-east side of the Mishmi Hills. We travelled north from Roing into the heart of the Mishmi Hills, over Mayodia Pass and north up the Dibang River valley to Anini, Mipi, and Dumdin, in order to search for birds in this remote and little-known area.

One of our prime objectives was to find the Rusty-throated Wren Babbler. To that end, we brought along a tape of the Rufous-throated Wren Babbler *Spelaeornis caudatus*, a very similar-looking relative from the east Himalayas west of the Mishmi Hills. A Rusty-throated Wren Babbler responded the first time we played the tape at c.28°14'N 95°53'E, c.1,900 m, near the km 40 sign on

Plate 1



Plate 2



Plate 3



Plate 4



Plates 1–4. Rusty-throated Wren Babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis*, km 40 from Roing on the Roing–Hunli Road, Mishmi Hills, Arunachal Pradesh, India, c.2,030 m, 2 November 2004.



Plate 5. Habitat at site of rediscovery, km 40 from Roing on the Roing–Hunli Road, Mishmi Hills, Arunachal Pradesh, India, c.1,900 m, 18 November 2004.

the road between Roing and Hunli, 16 km by road south of Mayodia Pass, at 08h00 on 18 November 2004. This is c.9 km in a line north-north-east of Roing and c.47 km in a line north-west of the type locality. The bird responded quite strongly to the playback, but stayed under dense cover and was difficult to see. It took 90 minutes to get good views of the diagnostic white and black barring on the sides and breast.

Eventually we encountered a total of 17 Rusty-throated Wren Babblers. They were common along the road between c.1,800 m and 2,400 m on the more southern-facing slopes between Roing and Mayodia Pass, where we found 15 of the 17 birds. On one 3-km stretch of road at 2,100–2,400 m we heard eight in half a day. On the more north-facing slopes between Mayodia Pass and Hunli we noted only two birds, at c.1,700 m and 2,000 m.

All the Rusty-throated Wren Babblers we saw and/or heard were adjacent to the road in dense low undergrowth 1–3 m high with some trees overhead, but usually with a broken canopy. The dense low vegetation was typical of wet road-cuts and ravines. The broadleaved evergreen forest along the road was mostly secondary growth. The wren babblers were very active, typically difficult to observe, and generally stayed within 1 m of the ground. Persistent playback of first the Rufous-throated Wren Babbler song and then later the Rusty-throated Wren Babbler song eventually brought five or six birds into view, allowing us excellent views and even some video footage and still photographs (Plates 1–4).

IDENTIFICATION

Visual field identification of the species is difficult because of the furtiveness of wren babblers. The key field mark is the white and black barring on the entire breast and sides of Rusty-throated Wren Babbler, with the rusty colour restricted to the throat, while in Rufous-throated Wren Babbler the breast and sides are rusty to rusty-buff and black. There is more white on the chin of Rusty-throated Wren Babbler, which also has a narrow whitish band across the lower throat (which is best seen when the bird is singing). Rufous-throated Wren Babbler lacks this white

band (the feather bases on the throat are blackish). The paintings of these two species in Grimmett *et al.* (1998) are excellent, those in Kazmierczak (2000) poor, while in Ali and Ripley (1983) and in Rasmussen and Anderton (2005) the illustration of Rufous-throated Wren Babbler is poor and that of Rusty-throated Wren Babbler is unrecognisable.

SONG

The song of Rusty-throated Wren Babbler is highly variable, ranging from a simple 3- or 4-note whistle or a short complex warble to a combination of a short warble and a short trill, all consisting of short, staccato, musical whistled notes. Each individual appears to have a repertoire of at least three different songs, including several of the different song types (see Fig. 1).

Rufous-throated Wren Babbler, by contrast, has a much less variable song, with a more rigid, stereotyped structure. The loud, musical, staccato whistles consist of a simple phrase repeated 2–4 times, often introduced by the latter half of the phrase. This species's song is reminiscent of that of the Common Yellowthroat *Geothlypis trichas*.

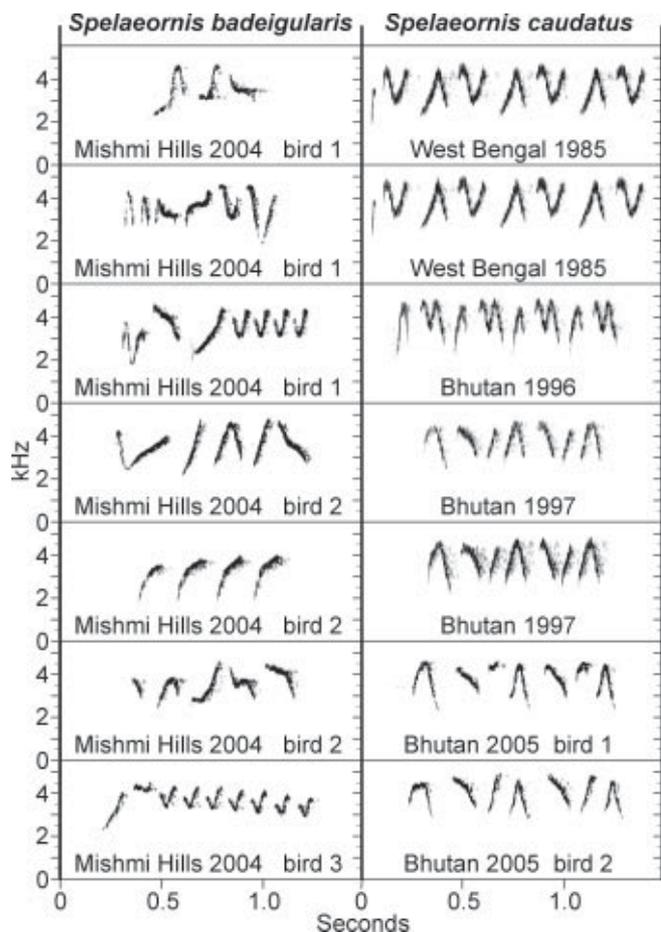


Figure 1. Sonograms of the songs of Rusty-throated Wren Babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis* and Rufous-throated Wren Babbler, *Spelaeornis caudatus*. Note the highly variable structure of the former compared to the rigid, stereotyped structure of the latter, which consists of a single phrase repeated 2–4 times, often introduced with the latter half of that phrase. The notes of the songs of both species are loud, short, staccato, musical whistles.

DISCUSSION

Rusty-throated Wren Babbler is very similar to Rufous-throated Wren Babbler. Ali and Ripley (1948) noted its differences from the latter, '...from which it differs in having a white chin, dark chestnut throat and widely barred breast, abdomen and underparts. In size it is about the same, but has noticeably shorter tail-coverts'. In a brief two-page review of the 14 known taxa of the genus *Spelaornis*, Ripley (1950) maintained the specific status of *badeigularis*, and he continued this treatment in Ripley (1961, 1982). Deignan (1964) provisionally treated *badeigularis* as a subspecies of *caudatus*. In a footnote in Ali and Ripley (1971, 1989), Ripley stated,

A re-examination of the unique type of *Spelaornis badeigularis* and comparison with freshly collected *Spelaornis caudatus* from Bhutan confirms the separation of *badeigularis* as a species. The differences still appear strongly marked. The white chin, the dark chestnut feathers with darker-streaked centres of the throat and upper breast, and the extensive area all over the lower breast, abdomen, flanks and vent of the subterminal white-tipped bistre feathers, give an entirely different appearance to this bird. The upperparts are on the other hand roughly similar.

An added point of difference which I [SDR] had not noted in my original description is the stouter tarsus of *badeigularis*. The type measures 20 mm in tarsal length but also appears thicker and stronger. Three specimens of *caudatus* measure 17–18 mm, a small difference on paper, but appearing significant when these tiny birds are in the hand.

In the description in the main text, the black terminal bar on the feathers of the lower breast, abdomen, flanks and vent (not mentioned in the quote above) is noted.

Clements (2000) and the three recent field guides, Grimmett *et al.* (1998), Kazmierczak (2000) and Rasmussen and Anderton (2005) maintain *badeigularis* as a separate species while Dickinson (2003) lists *badeigularis* as a subspecies of *caudatus*.

We find Ripley's arguments for retaining *badeigularis* as a valid species convincing, and, in spite of the taxon's strong response to the playback of the song of *S. caudatus*, we feel that the different structure of the songs of the two species adds to the evidence for their separation as valid species. However, we note that we did not encounter Rufous-throated Wren Babbler at all in the Mishmi Hills and the two species are not known to be sympatric: the eastern-most record of Rufous-throated Wren Babbler is from West Kameng District, Arunachal Pradesh, south-west of the Mishmi Hills (Ripley 1982, Ali and Ripley 1989, Grimmett *et al.* 1998).

The species is currently listed on the IUCN Red List status as Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2001, 2006), meeting criteria B1a+b(i,ii,iii,v); C2a(ii) owing to its small and declining range and population, which are estimated to be 5,200 km² and 2,500–9,999 individuals respectively. The fact that this species is common in degraded secondary forest along the roadside suggests that it faces no immediate

threat, and the range and population are unlikely to be declining. As such, downlisting it to Near Threatened might be appropriate.

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