

# Notes on Philippine birds: interesting records from northern Luzon and Batan Island

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Details are given of a visit to northern Luzon and Batan Island in the Philippines in 1996 and a further visit to Pasaleng, Luzon in 1997-1998. The more interesting species seen included two vagrant Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*; many migrating Grey-faced Buzzards *Butastur indicus*; three Spotted Buttonquail *Turnix ocellata*, an uncommon endemic species, many Fork-tailed Swifts *Apus pacificus*; a range extension for Violaceous Crow *Corvus (enca) violaceus*; an early breeding record for Blue Rock Thrush *Monticola solitarius*; the first Luzon record of the Batanes race of Japanese Paradise-flycatcher *Terpsiphone atrocaudata periophthalmica*; and the first Philippine record of the lugens race of White Wagtail *Motacilla alba*.

## INTRODUCTION

In the last ten years or so, the Philippines have become a popular destination for birding tourists. At least 185 endemic bird species occur in the archipelago. Most of them are forest birds and, since primary forests are disappearing rapidly, many species are threatened. Increasing numbers of birdwatchers are trekking from island to island in search of these endemics, realising that within a measurable space of time there may be no more opportunities left to see Philippine Eagle *Pithecophaga jefferyi*, Philippine Cockatoo *Cacatua haematuropygia*, Rufous-headed Hornbill *Aceros waldeni* and other appealing species.

Up to 1990, the far north of Luzon was best avoided by visitors, as the rebellions of the New People's Army were very active in this region. Nowadays, however, this area is considered to be more or less as safe as any other place in the Philippines. Reassured by this latest development, I made an ornithological tour through northern Luzon and Batan Island from 20 February to 31 March, 1996. Most of this period I spent at Pasaleng, a Barangay of Pagudpud, located at Pasaleng Bay on the northern coast of Luzon, in the Ilocos Norte Province (18°35'N 120°52'E). Thus, geographically, it is a good location during spring migration. Moreover, its surroundings are still well forested and it is an area that has been proposed by the Philippine government to be declared as a national park.

In December 1997 - January 1998 I returned to Pasaleng and was happily surprised to see that boards with texts like 'Enjoy the pristine beauty of the Calbario-Patapat National Park' and 'Help us to conserve our forest' had recently been installed. The landscape of this national park is spectacular and extensive virgin lowland and mid-mountain forest remains, populated with abundant wildlife. The near-threatened Rufous Hornbill *Buceros hydrocorax*, the largest of the 9 or 10 endemic Philippine hornbill species, is still common here and their loud calls can be heard throughout the park. Philippine Falconets *Microhierax erythrogenys* are common too; on a walk of less than 5 km, up to 20 falconets can be counted, living in parties of up to 6 or 8 birds. The White-bellied Sea Eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*

has its nest on the forested sea cliffs and hunts sea snakes in Pasaleng Bay.

Nevertheless, in spite of its protected status, illegal logging and kaingin (slash and burn) agriculture goes on. Red-crested Malkohas *Phaenicophaeus superciliosus* and near-threatened Rufous Coucals *Centropus unirufus*, both endemic species restricted to Luzon and some of its satellite islands, were seen on 11 January 1998, while the noise of chainsaws and a falling giant tree was heard nearby. In the Philippines, where 50% of the population live below the poverty line, few people have an eye for the avifauna around them. Birds are considered as 'communal property' and are hunted extensively for food. It is not surprising that much remains unknown and much has still to be discovered on Philippine birds.

## DISCUSSION ON SOME INTERESTING SPECIES

### MALLARD *Anas platyrhynchos*

The Mallard is a vagrant to the Philippine Islands. The only known record is that of a specimen collected in July 1948 on Batan Island (Dickinson *et al.* 1991).

On 28 February 1996, a male was present on Lake Paoay, Ilocos Norte. It was seen among a flock of at least 150 endemic Philippine Ducks *Anas luzonica* and some tens of Tufted Ducks *Aythya fuligula*.

On 13 January 1998, a female was seen on the same lake, this time in company with 118 Philippine Ducks and 90 to 100 Tufted Ducks. If these records refer to genuine vagrants and not to escaped birds, these are the second and third records for the Philippines and the first records for Luzon.

Other interesting birds seen on Lake Paoay on 13 January 1998, were three Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus* and one Great Cormorant *Phalacrocorax carbo*. The latter is a rare winter visitor of which Dickinson *et al.* (1991) do not mention any records in January.

### GREY-FACED BUZZARD *Butastur indicus*

The Grey-faced Buzzard has a limited breeding range in East Asia, including Japan (except Hokkaido), Korea,

Manchuria and the Khabarovsk region in eastern Siberia. It leaves its breeding range entirely to winter in mainland South-East Asia, southern China, the Philippines, the Greater Sundas and New Guinea (McClure 1974). In the Philippines, it is a common passage migrant and winter visitor (Dickinson *et al.* 1991).

On 13 March 1996, during a two day stay on Batan Island, 250 to 300 Grey-faced Buzzards passed overhead in barely half an hour. I first noticed the birds when they were soaring south-west of Basco town. Then they glided north-eastward towards Mount Iraya. There, above its southern slopes, they began to soar again, gaining height until many disappeared in the clouds that surrounded the mountain summit. Nevertheless, many, if not all of the birds apparently did not migrate any further; many glided around seemingly aimlessly and a number of them eventually glided to the east and perched in the trees. That was at about 14h00, at a time when it was probably too late in the day for them to venture across the sea. The weather was sunny with a half-clouded sky and a weak wind blowing from the east. On Honshu Island, Japan, the Grey-faced Buzzards start to move down through the highlands in mid September. In southern Kyushu and Yakushima Island (northern Ryukyus), the birds pass in early October, when tens of thousands of birds fill the sky for several days. Then they follow the Ryukyus southward via Tokunoshima Island. Their next major stop is Miyakojima Island in the southern Ryukyus (Austin and Kuroda 1953). On this island, 2,486 Grey-faced Buzzards were ringed during the Migratory Animal Pathological Survey (MAPS) in the 1960s. Although only 6 of these birds (0.24%) were recovered in Taiwan and 98 (4%) in the Philippines between 1964 and 1972 (McClure 1974), the birds probably all move via Taiwan, where up to 30,000 birds were counted per day in early October in Kenting National Park at the southern tip of the island (Dr. D. Blakesley, pers. comm.). The explanation as to why so many more birds were recovered in the Philippines is that the period of occurrence is much longer here, and because hunting pressure in the Philippines is probably much higher. For that matter, almost all of the 98 recoveries in the Philippines were killed birds. Apart from these recoveries, three cases are known of birds coming in from Taiwan (McClure 1974).

In Batanes, most birds pass in mid October (McGregor 1910). However, time of migration depends on the weather conditions. In autumn, the weather on Batanes is often rainy and stormy for long periods, with typhoons striking the islands frequently. The bulk of the birds must pass through the islands during the relatively few days when the weather is fine; hence, migration is likely to be concentrated on a few peak days. McGregor (1904) saw large numbers in September and October 1903 migrating over Calayan Island, Babuyan group. He saw the first flocks on 18 September and counted up to more than 40 birds in a flock. In October they passed 'in long straggling bands'. There are no indications that they fly further south than the Philippines; moreover, most birds stay on Luzon (McClure 1974).

This species seems not to be heavily dependent on rising warm air currents. McGregor (1910) reported that birds moving in from the north in autumn, were caught

on Batan Island as they arrived at dusk. The birds have to migrate long distances over the open sea and both McGregor (1910) and Austin and Kuroda (1953) reported that the birds were exhausted upon arrival on Batan Island and Tokunoshima Island respectively.

In spring, northward migration in the Philippines takes place in March and April (Dickinson *et al.* 1991). Although 'hawk migration' is a well known phenomenon over the Batanes Islands, to my knowledge no systematic counts have been carried out yet. Complete counts on Batan throughout both migration seasons would facilitate a better understanding of the importance of this migration route for birds of prey. Since this route is taken by virtually the whole Philippine wintering population of Grey-faced Buzzards, a comparison between spring and autumn counts would indicate the importance of the high hunting pressure on this population (McClure 1974). Furthermore, it is very likely that several other raptors also use the Batanes and Babuyan Islands as stepping stones on their migration (e.g. Oriental Honey-buzzard *Pernis ptilorhynchus orientalis*, Eastern Marsh and Pied Harriers *Circus aeruginosus spilonotus* and *C. melanoleucos*, Japanese and Chinese Sparrowhawks *Accipiter gularis* and *A. soloensis*, Common Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* and Peregrine Falcon *F. peregrinus*). To date, very little is known about this. McGregor (1904) called the Chinese Sparrowhawk fairly common on Calayan in autumn 1903, but none was seen after 4 October, although he stayed until December. During the same autumn, he collected also about a dozen Eastern Marsh Harriers on Calayan. From 11 to 13 March 1996 the Common Kestrel was a common bird on Batan Island, while one Peregrine Falcon was seen. No true migration of these species was noticed, however. The Peregrine might have been a local breeding bird, but the Kestrels were surely migrants.

On 5-6 April 1997, Raf Drijvers saw flocks of up to 100 or more Chinese Sparrowhawks migrating over Quezon National Park, southern Luzon, while more than 20 Oriental Honey-buzzards were counted here daily from 5-7 April (Drijvers 1997).

#### **SPOTTED BUTTONQUAIL *Turnix ocellata* (near-threatened; Collar *et al.* 1994)**

The Spotted Buttonquail is an uncommon endemic species. Until recently it was only known from Luzon, but it has now also been found on Negros in the central Philippines. On Luzon two subspecies occur, one in central Luzon, and the other in the highlands of northern Luzon (Dickinson *et al.* 1991).

On 29 February 1996, a female was caught by a native boy in Pasaleng. On 22 March 1996, a male was seen east of Pasaleng on the road to Claveria, while a bird of unknown sex was seen on the same place on 8 January 1998. Hornbuckle (1994) mentions a sight record in the north of Ilocos Norte province, without giving a date or exact location. Some other large, unidentified buttonquails seen in Pasaleng probably belonged also to this species.

Considering the secretive habits of buttonquails in general, this species might not be rare at all near the northern coast of Ilocos Norte province. Nevertheless, apart from sight records at the beginning of this century in Ilocos Norte, the species was only known from the lowlands in central Luzon and the highlands of Abra,

Benguet and around Baguio. A bird collected in Isabela could not be subspecifically identified (Dickinson *et al.* 1991, Parkes 1968). The bird caught on 29 February was not measured and so the subspecies is unknown.

#### **FORK-TAILED SWIFT *Apus pacificus***

Apart from the Batanes and Babuyan Islands, the Fork-tailed Swift is an irregular migrant in the Philippines. Dickinson *et al.* (1991) list only a few places where this species has been recorded and, presumably, only small numbers are involved. On the Batanes Islands, the race *kanoi* is a common bird and it is suspected to breed there. On Camiguin Island (Babuyan Islands) it was 'often seen' by McGregor in June and July 1907.

In Pasaleng, this swift was surprisingly found in large numbers at the end of February 1996. Several hundred birds were seen every day, especially in the early morning and late afternoon. Making an exact estimate of their numbers was impossible as they occurred in scattered flocks, often mixed with Grey Swiftlets *Collocalia (vanikorensis) amelis* or Purple Needletails *Hirundapus celebensis*. At night, they were often observed along with bats as they remained active until dark. In March, the birds markedly decreased in number and the last few birds were seen on 20 March. The species was not recorded during the last week of December in 1991 and 1997, or from 8-16 January 1998 when I was in Pasaleng. Most likely, these birds were migrants. Migrating Fork-tailed Swifts often fly high and, as such, remain unnoticed (Cramp 1985). It is possible that considerable numbers migrate north and south over the Philippines annually without being noticed. The birds which were seen in February-March 1996 might have hesitated to continue their migration northwards at the northern coast of Luzon, when the weather was often poor and, at sea, there was often no clear view.

It remains unclear whether these birds belonged to the nominate race *pacificus* or to the race *kanoi*. *A. p. pacificus* is a long-distance migrant, breeding in Siberia, northern China and Japan and wintering in Indonesia, Melanesia and Australia. *A. p. kanoi* is thought to move from central and southern China (and possibly Batanes) to the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia (Cramp 1985).

It is interesting to make a comparison with the White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus*, which breeds in Siberia and Japan, and winters in Australia. Although the Philippines are located right between the breeding and wintering range of this species, there are no records as yet.

#### **VIOLACEOUS CROW *Corvus (enca) violaceus*:**

The Violaceous Crow is closely allied and probably conspecific with the Slender-billed Crow *Corvus enca*, from which it has been split recently. Further field study is required to unravel the taxonomic relationships of these crow taxa. Birders have been invited to report behavioural notes and give descriptions of the calls (Madge and Burn 1994).

Three races occur in the Philippines: *pusillus* on Balabac, Palawan and Mindoro, *sierramadrensis* on Luzon and *samarensis* on Samar and Mindanao. On Luzon, *sierramadrensis* is rare to uncommon in the Sierra Madre mountains along the east coast. Some sight records are known also from the Cordillera Central

mountains in Kalinga-Apayao province, north-west Luzon (Dickinson *et al.* 1991).

On 14 January 1998, 2 Violaceous Crows were observed 7 km south of Pasaleng, near sitio Maligligay, Adams. This seems to be the first record for Ilocos Norte and confirms the species's presence in the northern Cordillera Central mountains. At first, the birds were seen alone crossing a clearing in good primary forest, but then they joined a mixed flock of Bar-bellied Cuckooshrikes *Coracina striata*, Philippine Fairy Bluebirds *Irena cyanogaster* and Luzon Hornbills *Penelopides manillae*. The most striking feature was the atypical flight action compared with other congeners. The birds had rather fast, laborious, flapping wingbeats, recalling a Black Woodpecker *Dryocopus martius*, but faster. The birds were highly vocal. The three Philippine races have different calls (Madge and Burn 1994). In March 1997, Raf Drijvers made a good tape recording of *pusillus* at St. Paul's Subterranean National Park on Palawan. I compared the two calls on 14 January and found them quite similar, but *sierramadrensis* sounded to me somewhat less cawing.

#### **BLUE ROCK THRUSH *Monticola solitarius***

The race *philippensis* is a common and widespread winter visitor in the Philippines. A small breeding population occurs on the Batanes Islands. It is known to breed there from April to June (Dickinson *et al.* 1991). On 12 March 1996, however, when we were on Batan Island, a newly fledged juvenile hardly able to fly, was seen on the town plaza of Uyugan.

#### **JAPANESE PARADISE-FLYCATCHER *Terpsiphone atrocaudata* (near-threatened; Collar *et al.* 1994) :**

The Japanese Paradise-flycatcher breeds in Japan, the Ryukyus, Taiwan, Lanyu (off southern Taiwan) and the Batanes Islands. The species is divided into three subspecies, of which the form *periophthalmica*, which breeds on Lanuy and Batanes, is very distinct from the other two (Alcasid 1965). McGregor (1907) proposed to recognise this form as a separate species. The Japanese Paradise-flycatcher is apparently absent from Batanes from September to March, but it is largely unknown where it winters. The only known data for *periophthalmica* outside of its breeding range are:

- 22 and 27 February and 1 March 1964 on Mount Calavite, Mindoro: 3 adult males collected while others were seen (Alcasid 1965);
- 18 October 1980: An immature male collected from Buena Vista, Palawan (Gonzales and Kennedy 1989);
- One old record of a male from Malabon, Manila, which has long been considered doubtful (McGregor 1907, Richmond 1917).

On 4 and 5 March 1996 an adult male in full breeding plumage was seen in Pasaleng. The bird was seen well and belonged definitely to the race *periophthalmica*, having the following characters (after descriptions in McGregor (1907) and Jouy (1910)):

- Rather small, ill-defined white belly-patch instead of extensive, sharp-cut white belly of the northern races;
- Absence of brown and chestnut in the plumage.

On each side of the very long central tail streamers was a feather of intermediate length. All specimens collected or seen outside Batanes have been males.

**WHITE WAGTAIL *Motacilla alba***

The subspecies *ocularis*, breeding in north-eastern Siberia from about Yenisey east to Chukotsk and central Kamchatka, is a rare winter visitor in the Philippines (Dickinson *et al.* 1991). However, I found it to be fairly common on Batan Island from 11-13 March 1996, and it was regularly seen in Pasaleng up to 20 March. Previously, the last known winter date for this species in the Philippines was 10 March on Luzon (Dickinson *et al.* 1991).

On 28 February 1996, a very different White Wagtail belonging to another subspecies, was seen. The bird stayed in a ditch along the road in Pansian, just west of Pasaleng. The following characters were noticed:

- No trace of grey in the plumage;
- Upperparts pitch black, apart from a large white patch on the flight feathers, a white forehead and forecrown;
- Sides of head white. Eye-stripe black; supercilium white, separating the black eye-stripe from the black nape;
- Underparts white. Extensive black patch on chin, throat and breast;
- Bill and legs black.

This bird belonged undoubtedly to subspecies *lugens*, breeding in southern Kamchatka and along the southern shores of the Sea of Okhotsk south to Japan and Ussuriland, and wintering in southern Japan, north-east China and Taiwan (Cramp 1988). This is the second record of this subspecies in the Philippines. One bird was seen on the American Cemetery in Manila by Nick Gardner on 3 March 1995 (*OBC Bulletin* 21: 72).

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