

## ID FORUM

## Nepal Wren Babbler *Pnoepyga immaculata*: 25 years on

SIMON HARRAP

In 1985 I observed some singing wren babblers in the Langtang Valley, central Nepal. I had no tape recorder and had to rely on the literature. However, on the basis of the very different songs of Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler *Pnoepyga albiventer* and Pygmy Wren Babbler *P. pusilla*, I identified them as the former species. I was intrigued, however, by some minor anomalies and published my observations, together with the results of an examination of museum specimens, in *Forktail* (Harrap 1989). At the time it did not enter my head that there could be a third, undescribed species of wren babbler in central Nepal. All credit goes to Jochen Martens and Siegfried Eck for recognising this undescribed species for what it was! Their paper (Martens & Eck 1991) describing Nepal Wren Babbler *P. immaculata* listed my Langtang Valley records as one of the sites for the new species. I am sure that readers can imagine my chagrin when I received a copy of this paper!

Twenty-five years later, I would like to put on record formally the fact that my 1989 paper was describing Nepal Wren Babbler from the Langtang Valley. The data on the plumage, vocalisations and altitudinal distribution of the birds refer to that species. The brief notes on the separation of Scaly-breasted and Pygmy Wren Babbler were based on museum specimens that I believe were correctly identified, although it would be desirable to check the identity of any specimens of *P. albiventer* without pale spotting on the upperparts. In particular, it is worth emphasising that Scaly-breasted can show a rather boldly marked throat, while Pygmy can be well-spotted on the upperparts.

In early December 2010, 25 years after my previous visit, I had the opportunity to see Nepal Wren Babbler again. I was in Corbett National Park in Uttarakhand, northern India. Here my group heard at least four Nepal Wren Babblers in song along the main access road to Dhikala, but we only

**Plate 1.** Nepal Wren Babbler *Pnoepyga immaculata* Mangoli valley near Nainital, Uttarakhand, India, 5 December 2010.





SIMON HARRAP

SIMON HARRAP

**Plates 2 & 3.** Nepal Wren Babbler *Phoepyga immaculata*, Mangoli valley near Nainital, Uttarakhand, India, 5 December 2010.

**Plate 4.** Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler *Phoepyga albiventer* near Nainital, Uttarakhand, India, 5 December 2010.

**Plate 5.** Scaly-breasted Wren Babbler near Nainital, Uttarakhand, India, 6 December 2010.



SIMON HARRAP

SIMON HARRAP

managed to obtain poor views of one bird. A few days later we were staying at Nainital when we disturbed a wren babbler in sparse vegetation below the village of Mangoli, about 20 km from Nainital town. It looked a bit plain and unmarked above, so I played the song of Nepal Wren Babbler. The bird responded spectacularly, giving exceptionally close views, and eventually started to sing. I managed to obtain some photographs (Plates 1–3), which confirm the features given in Rasmussen & Anderton (2005): a lack of pale speckling on the upperparts, and (less obvious) narrower dark centres to the feathers of the underparts, giving the breast a more streaked (less scalloped) appearance. This bird shows a very narrow blue-grey eye-ring, a feature also mentioned by Rasmussen & Anderton (2005). The main conclusion of my 1989 note, that identification is most reliable when based on song, remains valid, but with the additional consideration of Nepal Wren Babbler. Pygmy has a very simple, two- or three-note song (varying geographically); Scaly-breasted a short but vigorous warble; Nepal a similarly vigorous warble, but more uniform in pitch—c.8–6 kHz, compared with the more strongly modulated song of Scaly-breasted which varies from c.2.7 kHz to 7.5 kHz (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005). Nepal Wren Babbler sounds rather thinner and

higher in pitch than Scaly-breasted. My 1989 note transcribed its song as seee-u see-u zer-zi-ze-ze and this remains a fairly accurate rendition. The call notes of all three species, an abrupt tslick, sound very similar to my ears, and are unlikely to be more than a rough guide to the caller's identity.

### Acknowledgements

Many thanks to David Christie for translating parts of the type description of *P. immaculata*, and to Rolf Gafvert, Alf & Lorraine Mauff and Dave & Julie Swift for their patience while I was taking photographs of this little gem.

### References

- Harrap, S. (1989) Identification, vocalisations and taxonomy of *Pnoepyga wren-babblers*. *Forktail* 5: 61–70.
- Martens, J. & Eck, S. (1991) *Pnoepyga immaculata* n. sp., eine neue bodenbewohnende Timalie aus dem Nepal-Himalaya. *J. Orn.* 132: 179–198.
- Rasmussen, P. C. & Anderton, J. C. (2005) *Birds of South Asia: the Ripley guide*. Washington DC & Barcelona: Smithsonian Institution & Lynx Editions.

Simon Harrap  
1 Holt Road, Edgefield, Norfolk, NR24 2RP  
E-mail Harrap@onetel.net