AN INCIDENCE OF DUETTING BETWEEN AN ABBOTTS BABBLER AND A MAGPIE ROBIN

by Anne D. Nash and Stephen V. Nash

Received April 29 1985

On February 10 1985 in the Padang-Sugihan Wildlife Reserve, South Sumatra, a female Abbott's Babbler
Trichastoma abbotti repeatedly uttered its usual notes in duet with an imitation of the male's song, sung by
a male Magpie Robin Copsychus Saularis.

Several babbler species including Abbott's are well known as 'duet' singers, whereby the male's song is
accompanied by one or several notes on the same pitch given by the female. Stuebing (1983) suggested
that such duelling behaviour was to cement (Smythies, 1981), and also sings several regular phrases.
Although the male Magpie Robin will often sing throughout the day, its song is usually heard in the early
morning hours, as with the Abbott's Babbler.

On that morning, a pair of Abbott's Babblers was heard duetting almost continuously. A nearby Magpie
Robin was heard to imitate the song of the male, whereby both babblers fell silent. The Magpie Robin
uttered another imitation of the babbler song, which produced a duetting response from the female
babbler. This was repeated once, after which the male babbler resumed its song, again accompanied by
the female, and the Magpie Robin ceased its imitations.

The incidence of duetting between different species would seem to be very unlikely, as in the case of the
Abbott's Babbler duetting occurs only between mated pairs. For example, other pairs nearby have not
interfered with the observed pair's song patterns. A possible explanation of this event is that the Magpie
Robin's mimicking call was given in an appropriate time sequence with a similar note pattern, eliciting the
response from the female babbler that had already been duetting for several hours.

References

Smythies, B.E., 1981. The Birds of Borneo, third ed. The Sabah Society and the Malayan Nature Society,
Kuala Lumpur.