

REVIEW

"*A Field Guide to the Bird Songs of South-East Asia*", compiled and edited by Terry White. The British Library National Sound Archive 1984. Price 10 pounds sterling (add one pound for addresses outside Britain) from the Curator of Wildlife Sounds, British Library National Sound Archive, 29 Exhibition Road, London SW7 2AS.

A number of authors have produced discs or cassettes of bird sounds of the Sunda region, especially in West Malaysia, but this is the first published general sound

identification guide. Although not expressly stated, it is clearly intended as a companion to the book of nearly the same name (King, Dickinson & Woodcock, 1975), and applicable to the area covered by that book, namely the mainland of SE Asia. However as stated in the preface, many of these birds are common throughout the Oriental region. Out of the 136 *spp* listed, 115 occur in Indonesia, mainly in Sumatra and Kalimantan (only about 65 in Java). Indeed 20 were actually recorded in Indonesia, most of these in Java by H. Bartels and H. Groeneveld, but three were made in Sumatra by this reviewer.

A casual visitor to the forests of Sumatra and Kalimantan is frequently disappointed by the apparent paucity of his observations, which belies the richness of the habitat. Forest birding requires determination, patience and especially time. A good ear is also a very useful asset. With experience, more and more reliance is placed on vocalizations. I have personally succeeded in observing only once or twice each barbet making each of its diagnostic calls, but through sharing knowledge with others I am now sufficiently confident to confirm the presence of barbet *spp* wherever I go, based entirely on their calls. But herein lies the greatest danger. While some species have calls that are immediately and absolutely diagnostic, there are a great many pitfalls of which the newcomer may be totally unaware. Indeed he should make it his aim to personally confirm every 'diagnostic' call that he has learnt through others or from cassettes.

In my early years in the region, I remember fooling the experts of that time, quite unintentionally: a tape I sent them for confirmation of identification included a Red-winged Babbler *Stachyris erythroptera* giving a slow soft version of its song, or sub-song, recorded at very close range. The experts were unanimous in naming it a trogon. This experience emphasizes the risk of hearing recorded bird voices out of context, as it were. Listening to the short high-pitched whistle of the Buff-necked Woodpecker *Meiglyptes tukki* (no. 64), it occurred to me that at least one babbler and one flycatcher have a very similar call (another reviewer has identified it as a bulbul! - see *Addendum*). On site one might realize that the call was not from a small lower-storey passerine, but this cannot be determined from a recording. Even on site, it is very difficult to distinguish the long drawn-out monotone whistle of the Garnet Pitta *Pitta granatina* (no. 71) from that of another skulking ground bird which is not represented, the Malaysian Rail Babbler *Eupetes macrocerus*. Often however, the compiler has taken care to indicate such similarities, for example under no. 111 he notes that *Stachyris ruficeps* has a song very similar to that illustrated for the Golden Babbler *S. chrysaea*. To this must be added the song of *S. rufifrons*!

Several of the barbets have two distinct calls, one I call the "tok-tok" call and the other the "trilling" call. Only the trilling call is given for the Gold-whiskered Barbet *Megalaima chrysopogon* (49), and the tok-tok call for the Red-throated Barbet *M. mystacophanos* (51), but the accompanying notes mention the alternative calls for both species. It is not generally known that the Blue-eared Barbet *M. australis* (56) also has its version of the trilling call, which once gave me a lot of trouble to track down. Incidentally the frequency with which this barbet occurs as a background to other recordings reflects a very real situation in the forest, as any SE Asian bird recordist will be aware (cicadas and gibbons are the other 'nuisance noises', and the whine of a mosquito in front of hand-held microphone!). In passing, we should

note that barbets are something of an enigma, as their constant calls do not appear to be always concerned with either territory or courtship. Has anyone studied just what makes a barbet "tok"?

One might dispute the selection of species in places. For example, no. 29 *Collocalia esculenta* is not helpful. Having indicated the innovative nature and wide variety of calls of the drongos *Dicrurus* sp (90 — 93), we are left to question whether the songs recorded for each of the four species provide any clues to identification. It might have been more useful to compare, for example, the Common Iora *Aegithina tiphia* (75) with the Green Iora *A. viridissima*, or the Slender-billed Crow *Corvus enca* (99) with the Large-billed Crow *C. macrorhynchos*, or to have added *Criniger ochraceus* and *Malacopteron cinereum* to compare with others in those genera. But of course time restrictions in a sound-guide are as critical as space restrictions in a book, and inevitably bedevil the selection process, inviting unjust criticism. In this respect it is satisfying to see that the compiler is already planning a further edition.

The tapes are particularly useful for several groups of difficult birds that regularly confound the experts, such as the bulbuls and babblers that are difficult to identify even when it is possible to get a good view, but which sometimes have distinctive songs. But once again, very strong warnings are called for. For example, it has been suggested that the songs described in King *et al*, and quoted here, for *Malacopteron magnirostre* (103) and *M. affine* (104) are reversed; the "errand boy" song actually may belong to *magnirostre* and *vice versa*. I have yet to see these songs confirmed one way or the other. What is needed now is a thorough study of the songs of the various babbler groups, not only *Malacopteron* but also *Trichastoma* and *Stachyris*, to compare both the inter-specific differences and the intra-specific, between islands, to complement the morphological studies on speciation such as that made by Voous (1950). Regional variations in song must be taken into consideration: I have never heard in Sumatra such a simple, tuneless "errand boy" as those heard so commonly in Borneo. In the next issue we plan to publish a note on the Sumatran song of *Trichastoma abbotti*.

There are similar variations in other species, such as Rufous-tailed Shama *Copsychus pyropygus* (129), and the Banded Kingfisher *Lacedo pulchella* (not represented). The Javanese birdwatcher will not recognize the call of the Chestnut-backed Scimitar-Babbler *Pomatorhinus montanus* (109), as the triple hoot that is characteristic of this usually solitary and secretive bird in Sumatra and Borneo is very different from the varied noisy chatterings of the conspicuous, gregarious bird that goes under that name in the mountains of Java (basis for separating off the Javanese races?)

This suggests the application of vocalizations in taxonomy, as used by Marshall (1978), and which played a major role in establishing that the Little Cuckoo *Cuculus poliocephalus* does not occur in SE Asia (Becking 1975, and Wells & Becking 1975). The montane cuckoos in Java formerly described as *C. poliocephalus* or *C. lepidus* (no. 13), are now identified as *C. saturatus*, the same as no. 12 (the call of *C. poliocephalus* is quite different).

Perhaps one day, the Mountain Tailorbird *Orthotomus cuculatus* (134), with its remarkably varied musical repertoire, will be given a generic rank of its own; one need but compare its song with the extreme monotony that is the only achievement of its cousins in the same genus (compare with 132 and 133).

This reviewer detected three major errors in the text (but see also the *Addendum*), including the misnaming of the cuckoo in no. 13, already discussed. Confusion in babbler songs is well illustrated further by no. 117, where it is *Stachyris nigricollis* not *erythroptera* that can be heard twice on the recording - though there is another call that just might be the latter bird! Finally there is the howler in no. 82: a Javanese birdwatcher listening to this will at once identify the background call as that of the Bar-winged Wren-Warbler *Prinia familiaris*, and not the Himalayan species named in the text!

In summary, the compiler must be congratulated on a cassette production that will ease the teething problems of a great many resident and visiting ornithologists in Sumatra and Kalimantan. For recordings intended to be used for identification rather than listening pleasure, quality is generally more than adequate, especially when it is realized that some must be third or even fourth generation copies. Nevertheless the functional brevity is sometimes a bit severe, thinking especially of the sad contraction of the Helmeted Hornbill's magnificent song (*Rhinoplax vigil*, no. 45). Those seeking the aesthetic qualities of bird songs should turn to several other published recordings, for which lists can be found in Boswall (1973) and Boswall & Dickson (1981). For a haunting experience, my favourite is the Large Hawk Cuckoo *Cuculus sparveroides* on Teeuwen (1970).

The price of these two cassettes is very reasonable, particularly when measured against the years of experience contained within them, and we look forward to the promised second volume, which hopefully will fill many of the gaps in the important groups already so well represented.

D.A.H.
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References

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ADDENDUM

Since preparing this review, I have read another made by Jelle Scharringa in *Dutch Birding* (Vol.7: 28—29, March 1985). He notes the following errors in addition to those discussed above:-

- Band 5: the call for the Great Argus *Argusianus argus* is that of the male, not the female as stated.
- Band 46: the background call is Oriental Cuckoo *Cuculus saturatus*, and not the Hoopoe *Upupa epops*.
- Band 47: the description is inaccurate and the background call belongs to Blue-throated Barbet *Megalaima asiatica*, not *M. australis*.
- Band 64: the reviewer identifies this whistle as that of the Hairy-backed Bulbul *Hypsipetes criniger*, and not *Meiglyptes tukki*.
- Band 74: he identifies this call as Green Magpie *Cissa chinensis*, and not the Large Cuckoo-Shrike *Coracina novaehollandiae*.