



# SINGAPORE AVIFAUNA

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## A note from the Editors

### New Changes to SINGAPORE AVIFAUNA

Starting January 2008, SINAV will be available on-line at the NSS Bird Group website at <http://wildbirdsingapore.nss.org.sg>

Our goal of going on-line is to reach out to as many birders, bird photographers and interested readers on happenings in the birding scene in Singapore as well as our neighbors.

We mention bird photographers as the numbers of this group of enthusiasts has taken off by leaps and bounds in recent years. Go to any of our birding sites and you will often see individuals and groups pursuing their passion with those huge and long bazooka look-alike tele-lenses. Very often this group of enthusiasts are the first to turn up very exciting discoveries.

Another change is SINAV will now be published monthly. With the sheer increase in the number of people going into the field to bird and to photograph, we are optimistic that there will be a corresponding increase in the numbers of bird records and observation. Hence by publishing it monthly, we hope to bring this publication more current and hopefully to encourage more readers to submit their sightings and observations.

We hope readers will like these changes. We welcome your comments.

Lim Kim Chuah  
Lim Kim Seng  
Yong Ding Li



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## Bird Report

January 2008

### Highlights

The birding year of 2008 started off with a bang with rare migrants and uncommon residents a constant feature throughout the month. As has been the case in recent years, birders and photographers barely had time to embrace the first sunrise of the New Year before reports of **Himalayan Vulture** sent them scouring the island in search of these rare and spectacular wanderers, with a lucky few not only managing to see them but take pictures for good measure!



*Orange-headed Thrush (male) at Hindhede Nature Park  
Photo ©Tan Gim Cheong – 15 Jan 2008*

Hindhede Nature Park, despite recent disturbance, still proved to be a magnet for both returning migrants & residents alike with uncommon migrants such as **Orange-headed Thrush**, **Blue-and-white Flycatcher**, **Hodgson's Hawk-cuckoo** as well as the uncommon **Red-legged Crake** all showing well to various observers.

Elsewhere around the island, sightings of a pair of **Jerdon's Baza** in the Western Catchment continue to fuel speculation that the species may be more than just a non-breeding visitor to our shores, with the additional sighting of a juvenile in Chinese Garden thrown in for good measure. A **Hooded Pitta** crash-landing in Tuas early in the month was in good enough condition to be released that same evening. In the east, remnants of the once extensive grasslands at Marina East sustained a solitary female **Siberian Stonechat** that was present throughout the month, while a high count of 3 **Chestnut-winged Cuckoos** in the grasslands around Sungei Simpang in the northeast was a good record.

Undoubtedly the avian highlight of the month was the sighting of a **Barred Eagle-owl** by Yong Ding Li while carrying out research in Nee Soon Swamp Forest at night. This species, which has been recorded intermittently over the past decade, with all records possibly referring to the same bird, remains one of the local Avian Enigmas whose provenance remains a mystery, hence its classification under Category D of the Singapore Checklist.

## Summary of sightings

This report covers noteworthy bird sightings in January 2008 for Singapore and the surrounding region. In general, the report will include but are not limited to the following categories: rarities, breeding or nesting records, arrival and departure dates for migratory species, new locality records, escapees and unusual behaviour.

In addition, contributors are also advised to be as precise as possible concerning records. Please remember to include details such as how many birds were seen, the plumage, sex and age of the birds, the type of habitat in which they were observed, the food they were eating (if possible, identify the plant or animal), the weather encountered (what was the wind direction, tide conditions, etc.). Although it is not necessary to have such details for all record submissions, it is a good habit to cultivate and is normally required for very rare or unusual species.

Please send all your records of interest to Lim Kim Seng @ [denislim@starhub.net.sg](mailto:denislim@starhub.net.sg) or Lim Kim Chuah @ [pittalover@yahoo.com.sg](mailto:pittalover@yahoo.com.sg) or Yong Ding Li at [zoothera@yahoo.com](mailto:zoothera@yahoo.com). Alternatively you can also post your sightings at the NSS Bird Group website at <http://wildbirdsingapore.nss.org.sg> Please send your records no later than one week after the end of every month. Your contributions will be greatly appreciated and acknowledged.

Unless stated otherwise, nomenclature and systematic follow K.S. Lim's (2007) "Pocket Checklist of the birds of the republic of Singapore" for Singapore, K.S. Lim & K.C. Lim's (1999) "Pocket checklist of the birds of Johor, Peninsular Malaysia" for Johor, and B.L. Monroe Jr. & C.G. Sibley's (1993) "A World Checklist of Birds " for the rest of the region.

We would like to thank the following contributors for their reports:

Safizah Abdullah (SA), Jimmy Chew (JC), Alfred Chia (AC), Heng Fook Hai (HFH), James Heng (JH), Ho Hua Chew (HHC), Kenneth Kee (KK), Nessie Khoo (NK), Lau Weng Thor Danny (LWT), Ben Lee (BL), Lee Tiah Kee (LTK), Lim Kim Chuah (LKC), Lim Kim Seng (LKS), Cyril Ng (CN), Ong Kiem Sian (OKS), Alan Owyong (AOY), Gloria Seow (GS), G.Sreedharan (GSR), Tan Gim Cheong (TGC), Tan Kok Hui (TKH), Yong Ding Li (YDL), Simon Cockayne (SC), Mike Hooper (MH), Margie Hall (MH), Ah Huay (AH), and all those who contributed by posting their sightings in the wildbirdsingapore E-group.

In addition, we would like to thank Tan Gim Cheong & Danny Lau for allowing us to use their photos in this report.

### **Abbreviations used:**

BTNR: Bukit Timah Nature Reserve  
CCNR: Central Catchment Nature Reserve  
CCK: Choa Chu Kang  
SBWR: Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve

### **Laced Woodpecker** (*Picus vittatus*)

1 male observed along the Ulu Pandan Park Connector 15/1 (TGC)

### **Common Flameback** (*Dinopium javanense*)

1 pair observed along the Ulu Pandan Park Connector 15/1 (TGC)

### **Lineated Barbet** (*Megalaima lineata*)

2 observed along the Ulu Pandan Park Connector 15/1 (TGC)

**Chestnut-winged Cuckoo** (*Clamator coromandus*)

A high count of 3 birds was reported in the area around Sungei Simpang 25/1 (SC).

**Hodgson's Hawk-cuckoo** (*Hierococcyx fugax*)

1 sub-adult photographed at Hindhede Nature Park 21/1 (OKS/LTK)

Editor: Sub-adult Hodgson's and Malaysian Hawk-cuckoo are confusing. To learn more about their differences, turn to Bird in Focus in this issue of SINAV.

**Violet Cuckoo** (*Chrysococcyx xanthorhynchus*)

1 seen at the Lim Chu Kang Chinese Cemetery 27/1 (SC)

**Asian Drongo Cuckoo** (*Surniculus lugubris*)

1 heard at MacRitchie Reservoir, CCNR 20/1 (LKC)

**Blue-crowned Hanging Parrot** (*Loriculus galgulus*)

1 over Ulu Pandan Park Connector 15/1 (TGC)

**Barred Eagle Owl** (*Bubo sumatranus*)

1 heard & subsequently seen in flight over the Nee Soon Pipeline Trail could be the same bird that has been reported intermittently over the past decade within the CCNR 18/1 (YDL)

**Buffy Fish Owl** (*Ketupa ketupu*)

1 photographed within the CCNR 4/1 (BL)

**Spotted Wood Owl** (*Strix seloputo*)

1 observed at length within the Toa Payoh Housing Area being mobbed by crows is an unusual locale for the species. A video of this avian drama has subsequently been uploaded onto youtube.com 19/1 (GS)

**Grey Nightjar** (*Caprimulgus indicus*)

1 photographed at Chinese Garden 1/1 (HFH)

**Red Turtle Dove** (*Streptopelia tranquebarica*)

1 female photographed at Chinese Garden 4/1 (AOY) was unusual given the species' general preference for Open Country habitat.

**Whimbrel** (*Numenius phaeopus*)

250 counted at SBWR 6/1 (KK) was noted to be the highest count thus far for the site.

**Common Redshank** (*Tringa totanus*)

120 counted at SBWR 6/1 (KK)

**Marsh Sandpiper** (*Tringa stagnatilis*)

40 counted at SBWR 6/1 (KK)

**Common Greenshank** (*Tringa nebularia*)

90 counted at SBWR 6/1 (KK). 1 particular individual was noted to be feeding in a manner akin to spoonbills, moving its bill from side to side in shallow water.

**Pacific Golden Plover** (*Pluvialis fulva*)

102 counted at Lower Seletar Dam on 20/1 (DA/NK/LKS).

**Grey Plover** (*Pluvialis squatarola*)

An unusual count of 10 birds at SBWR 21/1 (LKC)

**Jerdon's Baza** (*Aviceda jerdoni*)

2 birds observed & photographed at CCK Chinese Cemetery 26/1 (LWT/TKH). 1 was subsequently observed feeding on a Changeable Lizard. In addition, a juvenile was reported over Chinese Garden on 13/1 (JS)

**Grey-headed Fish-eagle** (*Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus*)

1 heard at its usual haunt along the MacRitchie Reservoir 16/1 (LKC). In addition, 1 was observed at Jurong Lake, a rather unusual location 16/1 (AH) and 1 was counted during the AWC at Khatib Bongsu 20/1 (HHC/CN)

**Himalayan Vulture** (*Gyps himalayensis*)

First reported at Upper Seletar on 3/1 (LTK). Subsequently three juveniles were seen and photographed at BTNR (on page1) on 23/1 (LTK/JC/OKS/GSR). 1 circling over Simpang Grassland and then flying north into Johor 26/1 (JH)

**Crested Serpent Eagle** (*Spilornis cheela*)

1 was photographed at Venus Drive 15/1 (JH) & another at King's Avenue, Sembawang 28/1 (MH)

**Common Buzzard** (*Buteo buteo*)

1 seen along Changi Coastal Road 21/1 (AC)

**Peregrine Falcon** (*Falco peregrinus*)

1 observed at Capital Square, CBD 19/1. 1 over Lower Pierce Reservoir 26/1 (TGC)

**Little Egret** (*Egretta garzetta*)

60 counted at SBWR 6/1 (KK).

**Hooded Pitta** (*Pitta sordida*)

1 crash-landed individual at Tuas was in good enough condition to be released at BTNR that same evening 4/1 (KK).

**Tiger Shrike** (*Lanius tigrinus*)

1 juvenile was observed along the Ulu Pandan Park Connector 15/1 (TGC)

**Ashy Minivet** (*Pericrocotus divaricatus*)

12 at Kent Ridge Park 1/1 (LKC), 2 at Ulu Pandan Park Connector 15/1 (TGC) & 20 at SBWR 20/1 (LKC).

**Crow-billed Drongo** (*Dicrurus annectans*)

1 at SBWR 20/1 (LKC)

**Orange-headed Thrush** (*Zoothera citrina*)

1 of race *innotata* was seen and photographed by Tan Gim Cheong at Hindhede Nature Park on 15/1 and 16/1. The bird was also seen to be singing as it forages on the ground. Numerous observers probably observed the same bird over the course of the month.

**Blue-and-white Flycatcher** (*Cyanoptila cyanomelana*)

1 first-winter male seen and photographed at Hindhede Nature Park 17/1 (MH) was probably seen again by various observers in the last 2 weeks of the month.

**Siberian Stonechat** (*Saxicola maura*)

1 female was present throughout the later half of January in the remnant grassland at Marina East (MH).

**Black-headed Bulbul** (*Pycnonotus atriceps*)

1 seen briefly in the CCNR during the SBG trip there is an encouraging sign that this nationally threatened species continues to persist in our forests 28/1 (AC)

**Short-tailed Babbler** (*Malacocincla malaccensis*)

One bold individual hopped onto the jogging trail of MacRitchie Reservoir and was not intimidated at all despite the observer's distance of barely two meters from the bird 20/1 (LKC).

**Purple-throated Sunbird** (*Nectarina sperata*)

4 pairs first reported feeding on the flowers of a Yellow Saraca first reported on 22/1 (JH) at Lower Peirce Reservoir were still present on 27/1 (TGC) where the photo on the right was taken.



*Purple-throated Sunbird Male at Lower Peirce Reservoir*  
Photo ©Tan Gim Cheong – 27 Jan 2008

## ESCAPEES

**Storks** (*Mycteria sp.*)

16 observed flying towards Johor from SBWR 6/1 (KK).

# Raptors Report

January 2008

## Summary

A total of 123 migrating raptors were reported (higher than the 102 for December) from a total of 7 species. **Black Bazas** still tops the number of migrating raptors with a total count of 93, making up 76% (compared to a count of 82 and 80% last month) of the total migrating raptors. The ratio so far seems to be quite consistent.

Alfred's sighting of the **Common Buzzard** at the Changi Coastal Road on the 26th was the highlight of the month. This was also the first for this season. Danny and Kok Hui recorded two rare **Jerdon's Bazas** catching and eating their prey at the CCK Cemeteries. This was the second year that they recorded the Jerdon's Baza there. Thanks to the alertness of Ee Ling, we had the second record of a **Peregrine Falcon** sighting in the city, this time at Capital Square, Church St. on the 19<sup>th</sup>. Gim Cheong also had one soaring over Lower Pierce Reservoir on the 25<sup>th</sup>.

As for the residents, Ah Huay spotted a **Grey-headed Fish Eagle** flying over Jurong Lake on the 16<sup>th</sup> and Hua Chew and Cyril reported one at Khatib Bongsu on the 20<sup>th</sup>. The **Crested Serpent Eagle** seemed to have returned to the Central Catchment Area with James Heng's sighting of an individual perched along Venus Drive on the 15<sup>th</sup>. Both the counts of the **White-bellied Sea Eagles** (24) and **Brahminy Kites** (17) boosted the total number of resident raptors to 56 (compared to only 15 last month). This is largely due to the sightings during the Asian Waterbird Census on the 20<sup>th</sup> where raptors were being counted as well.

The early excitement for 2008 is the sighting of a single **Himalayan Griffon Vulture** at Upper Seletar on the 3rd. Twenty days later on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, Lee Tiah Khee posted a spectacular photo of two soaring H. G. Vultures over Bukit Timah Hill. A total of three were seen that day by Tiah Khee, Sian, Jimmy and Sree. The rest of us went searching for these Vultures at Turf City and Bukit Batok the following days but it was James Heng who saw an individual circling from the north of Simpang grassland on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup>.



Interestingly, all the vultures seen were in a strong and healthy state (flying high) unlike the past years where they were found weak and starving. Though strictly not considered as raptors, these were notable and significant records for Singapore.

*Himalayan Griffon Vultures  
flying over Bukit Timah Hill by  
Lee Tiah Khee*



Table 1

No	Migrating Raptors	Total for the month
1	Black Baza	93
2	Crested Honey-buzzard	16
3	Peregrine Falcon	2
4	Japanese Sparrowhawk	3
5	Jerdon's Baza	3
6	Osprey	5
7	Common Buzzard	1
	<b>Total</b>	<b>123</b>

Table 2

No	Resident Raptors	Total for the month
8	White-Bellied Sea Eagle	24
9	Brahminy Kite	17
10	Changeable Hawk-eagle	6
11	Black-winged Kite	5
12	Crested Serpent Eagle	2
13	Grey-headed Fish Eagle	2
	<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>

Note : The total numbers in Table 1 & 2 are just an indicative figure for this report only as there could be a possibility of double-counting the same bird in a small island like Singapore.

### 1. Black Baza

Date	No.	Location	Reported by.
3 <sup>rd</sup>	4	Marina South	Mike Hooper
5 <sup>th</sup>	3	Tampines Ave 10	Sher Chyet Fang
6 <sup>th</sup>	2	Main Hide Sungei Buloh (SBWR)	Kenneth Kee
6 <sup>th</sup>	2	Marina East	Mike Hooper
7 <sup>th</sup>	1	Turf City flying overhead	KC Tsang
7 <sup>th</sup>	1	SBWR	Mike Hooper
7 <sup>th</sup>	1	Lorong Halus	Sher Chyet Fang
12 <sup>th</sup>	3	Marina East	Mike Hooper
13 <sup>th</sup>	1	Chinese Gardens	John Spencer
13 <sup>th</sup>	3	Punggol HDB estate	Willie Foo
15 <sup>th</sup>	1	Ulu Pandan Camp	Gim Cheong
16 <sup>th</sup>	3	Pulau Ubin seen soaring	Gim Cheong
19 <sup>th</sup>	2	Botanic Gardens	Kok Hui
20 <sup>th</sup>	1	Khatib Bongsu during AWC	Hua Chew & Cyril
21 <sup>st</sup>	9	Pulau Ubin. 3 perched and 6 flying	Willie Foo
21 <sup>st</sup>	17	Marina East	Harry Ong
25 <sup>th</sup>	5	Simpang Grassland	Simon Cockayne
26 <sup>th</sup>	6	Chua Chu Kang Cemeteries	Kok Hui and Danny
26 <sup>th</sup>	16	Muslim Cemetery, maybe from the same flock	Alan OwYong
26 <sup>th</sup>	1	Marina East	Mike Hooper
28 <sup>th</sup>	8	CCK Cemeteries.	Simon Cockayne
31 <sup>st</sup>	1	Telok Blangah Hill	KC Tsang
?	1	Bedok. Photographed by	Timothy Pwee



## **2. Crested (Oriental) Honey-buzzard**

<b>Date</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Reported by</b>
2	1	MacPherson Area	Lena Chow
6	1	Marina East	Mike Hooper
7	1	Turf City	KC Tsang
12	1	Katong Park	Mike Hooper
13	2	Chinese Gardens	KC Tsang
13	1	Punggol Estate	Willie Foo
13	1	Soaring and perched at Toa Payoh	Gloria Seow
19	1	Toa Payoh, maybe the same bird	Gloria Seow
19	1	Stamford Road	Gloria Seow
19	1	Dark morph at Hindhede Park	Alan OwYong
25	1	Simpang Grassland	Simon Cockayne
25	2	Pale morph at Turf City	Alan and KC
25	1	Turf City	KC Tsang
25	1	Keppel Road	Alan OwYong
26	1	Circling over Muslim Cemetery	Alan OwYong
27	1	Pasir Ris	Sher Chyet Fang
31	1	Ang Mo Kio Ave 10	Sher Chyet Fang

## **3. Peregrine Falcon**

19<sup>th</sup> Ee Ling was alert enough to spot one at Capital Square, Church St perched, preening and flying around the area.

25<sup>th</sup> One was seen by Gim Cheong soaring over Lower Pierce Reservoir.

## **4. Japanese Sparrowhawk**

6<sup>th</sup> One reported at Marina East by Mike Hooper

25<sup>th</sup> One perched at the back of Turf City by KC Tsang

25<sup>th</sup> One seen flying over Keppel Road by Alan OwYong.

## **5. Jerdon's Baza.**

13<sup>th</sup> One was reported by John Spencer flying low over the Chinese Gardens in a northerly direction. Second sighting of this rare migrant at CG.

26<sup>th</sup>



Danny and Kok Hui, for the second year running came across this Baza at the CCK Cemeteries. They had two this time round. The Baza caught a lizard and was seen tearing up the meal. Danny managed to photograph one of them perched.

Well done!

*Jerdon's Baza by Danny Lau*

## **6. Osprey**

- 5<sup>th</sup> Amy, KC Tsang, Yang Pah Liang and Alan OwYong saw one flying across the Seletar Reservoir, while on a trip to look for the H. Vulture.
- 8<sup>th</sup> One was reported by Con Foley over at Punggol
- 16<sup>th</sup> Gim Cheong had one perched at Mandai besides the reservoir.
- 20<sup>th</sup> One was seen perched on a kelong at the Straits of Johor by Alan and Yangchen during AWC. On the same day, Mike Hooper reported seeing one at Chek Jawa.

## **7. Common Buzzard**

- 21<sup>st</sup> Trust Alfred to come up with the raptor of the month. He spotted it perched on the perimeter fence along the Changi Coastal Road, its favorite haunt.

## **RESIDENT RAPTORS**



*White-bellied Sea Eagle fishing by Lee Tiah Khee*

## **8. White-bellied Sea Eagle**

<b>Date</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Reported by</b>
5	4	2 adults and 2 juveniles fishing at the Upper Seletar Reservoir	Amy, KC Tsang, Pah Liang, Alan
13	1	Chinese Garden	KC Tsang
16	1	In flight over at Mandai	Gim Cheong
20	2	Khatib Bongsu during AWC	Hua Chew & Cyril
20	3	Seen from Changi Boardwalk across to Ubin	Ping Ling
20	1	Kranji Dam during AWC	Alan & Yangchen
21	2	Ubin West during AWC	Willie Foo
26	1	Simpang Grassland	James Heng
26	5	Changi Village	Sher Chyet Fang
27	2	Hindhede Park	Kenneth Kee
27	2	Lower Pierce Reservoir	Sher Chyet Fang

**9. Brahminy Kite**

Date	No	Location	Reported by
6	1	Tuas Grassland	Alan & KC Tsang
7	3	Flying over Turf City	KC Tsang
16	4	Circling over Jurong Lake	Ah Huay
19	1	Botanic Gardens	Kok Hui
20	1	Seen from Changi Boardwalk	Ping Ling
21	1	Pulau Ubin West	Willie Foo
26	1	CCK Cemeteries	Kok Hui & Danny
26	2	Flying over Muslim Cemetery	Alan OwYong
26	1	Pulau Ubin	Sher Chyet Fang
27	1	Juvenile at Hindhede Park	Kenneth Kee
31	1	Telok Blangah Hill	KC Tsang

**10. Changeable Hawk-eagle**



*Changeable Hawk-eagle with squirrel by KC Tsang*

- 16<sup>th</sup> One heard at P. Ubin by Gim Cheong.
- 20<sup>th</sup> A dark morph was flying between the Abizias at Hindhede Park reported by Ui Leong and Alan OwYong
- 26<sup>th</sup> Two were seen flying around the CCK cemeteries by Danny and Kok Hui
- 31<sup>st</sup> A dark morph was captured in a dramatic photograph by KC Tsang with a plantain squirrel in its talons in flight.
- 31<sup>st</sup> One was seen flying over the CBD by Mike Hooper. Good sighting

### **11. Black-winged Kite**

- 20<sup>th</sup> One was counted at Khatib Bongsu during AWC by Hua Chew and Cyril  
26<sup>th</sup> Two at Simpang Grassland reported by James Heng  
26<sup>th</sup> One at the CCK Cemeteries by Kok Hui and Danny  
26<sup>th</sup> One at the Muslim Cemetery by Alan OwYong.

### **12. Crested Serpent Eagle**

- 15<sup>th</sup> One was spotted by James Heng perched at Venus Drive. This could be the central catchment forest resident appearing once in a while at the forest fringes.  
28<sup>th</sup> The one reported by Margie Hall at Sembawang last month is still hanging around the King's Avenue area.

### **13. Grey-headed Fish Eagle**

- 16<sup>th</sup> Ah Huay reported one flying over Jurong Lake, a significant record for this nationally threatened and globally endangered bird.  
20<sup>th</sup> One was counted at Khatib Bongsu during the AWC by Hua Chew and Cyril.

*Compiled by Alan OwYong from postings on WildbirdSingapore e-group. Edited by Kenneth Kee. Many thanks to the many contributions and reports from the birders and to KC Tsang, Danny Lau and Lee Tiah Khee for the use of their photographs.*

## Bird in Focus

### Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo: A Birder's Nightmare

Yong Ding Li

#### Introduction

Taxonomic revisions have always been the bane of the birdwatcher, though it often offers a whole new perspective for world bird listers. Species get split, lumped, chugged into 'dumping ground families', thrown into totally new families or struck off original family groupings. Classic cases of taxonomically confusing oriental birds include the Malaysian Rail-Babbler, White-bellied Yuhina and the Mountain Tailorbird complex. In terms of taxonomy, Southeast Asia is still relatively poorly known and every year new revisions come into place. The Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx (Cuculus) fugax*, unfortunately fell victim to taxonomic splitting, kicking off splitting headaches for many regional birders. These taxa, taxonomy aside, has also been of interest to naturalists for its close resemblance to *Accipiter* hawks, suggesting a case for avian mimicry (Payne, 1997; King, 2002).



(Above) Immature **Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo** at the Central Catchment Forest (Ashley Ng)



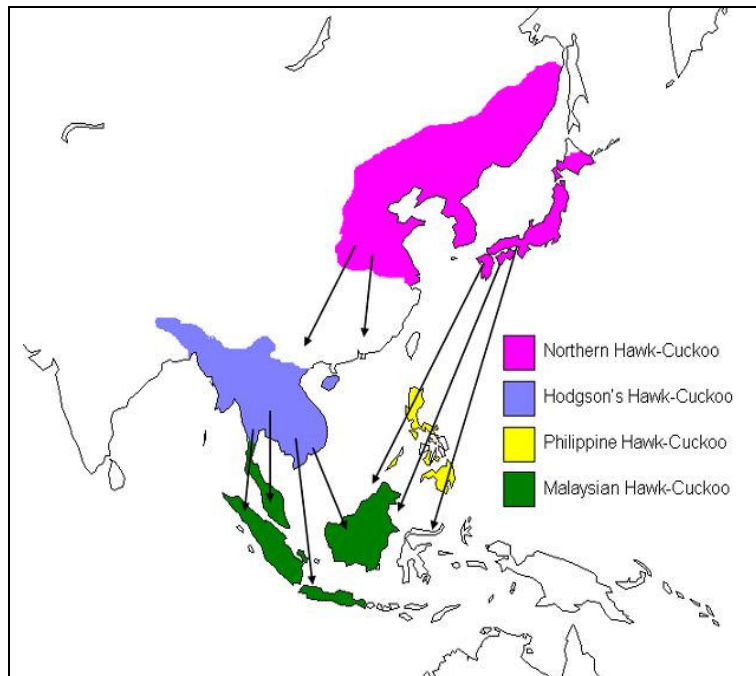
(Above) Immature **Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo** at Hindhede Park, Bukit Timah (Ong Kiem Sian)

#### The Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo Problem

The case of the Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo is nonetheless confusing because it was originally described as four separate species, re-lumped and finally evaluated and re-split by King (2002). Distributed throughout much of tropical and temperate east Asia, the original **Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo** *Hierococcyx fugax* is now split into four distinct species, **Northern Hawk-Cuckoo** *Hierococcyx hyperythus*, **Philippine Hawk-Cuckoo** *Hierococcyx pectoralis*, **Hodgson's Hawk-Cuckoo** *Hierococcyx nicolor* and Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo *Hierococcyx fugax* (King, 2002). In Singapore, the situation is particularly tricky because two very similar-looking species occur here, the migratory Hodgson's Hawk-Cuckoo *H. nicolor* of subtropical Asia (wintering in Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Borneo and Java) and the probably resident Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo *H. fugax* (Lim, 2007). Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoos are aptly named, being resident and confined largely to the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Borneo and some islands in-between (King, 2002).



Both species can be distinguished by subtle differences in songs, plumage and morphometrics. The problem lies therein that the average birdwatcher in the field is not going to spot that 3 mm of difference in the culmen length or the 2-3 mm of difference between their longest primary feathers (King, 2002). Neither would he be able to tell them by call because most of these migratory Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo would be as taciturn as it gets. The last piece of clue will lie in their plumage patterns, naturally. Adults of both species are easy to tell apart. The adult Hodgson's Hawk-Cuckoo has an orangy rufous wash on its breast when compared to the heavy streaking on the adult Malaysian. The problem arises in distinguishing the adult or immature Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo forms with the immature Hodgson's Hawk-Cuckoo forms.



(Above) The breeding range of the four Hawk-Cuckoo species is shown here in four colours. Notice that there is very little overlap in their breeding ranges. The arrows show the rough migration routes of the cuckoos into their wintering ranges.

### So, why split?

Contrary to what many people think, splitting of a taxon into two or more species is not quite an anthropogenic, arbitrary concept. Ornithologists and bird taxonomists normally do not split species to increase the number of their published works nor do they do it arbitrarily based on individualistic opinions. As argued by Mayr (1996), concepts of species are fundamental, concrete units of nature (Mayr, 1996), the outcomes of evolutionary events and processes like allopatric speciation. And only when we know best and most objectively the true boundaries of a species can we then grasp its evolutionary and biological dimensions.

The history of the Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo's taxonomy has been complex, ridden with splitting, lumping and re-splitting by different authorities. Most of the major works in the 1990s treated all the four forms of Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo as conspecific, which in taxonomist lingo refer to belonging to one single species. In this case they are all geographic races or so called subspecies. However, a subsequent review found that the Philippine Hawk-Cuckoo *H. pectoralis* does exhibit a song distinct from all the other



(Above) Immature **Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo** (Ashley Ng). Note the Pale tertial feather.

forms, and so it was placed as a separate species (Payne, 1997). In the latest review, King (2002) split the Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo complex into four distinct species based on grounds of plumage, biometric, vocalization differences and more or less allopatric (non-overlapping) breeding range (King, 2002).

Evaluation of the song types of the four geographic races and found them to be quite different in structure and frequency, falling into three distinct sets (King, 2002). These song differences existed consistently between the geographic races though there was some overlap between Malaysian and Hodgson's Hawk-Cuckoo. Differences in song and other forms of vocalizations play an increasingly important role in understanding bird taxonomy and distinguishing differing species from one another (Alström, 2001). Most easily separated in the quartet are the Northern and Philippine Hawk Cuckoo duo. They both exhibit significant differences in their song types, wing and tail lengths. Furthermore Northern Hawk-Cuckoo, unlike its congener, is highly migratory (King, 2002). It gets a little more problematic when dealing with the similar looking Hodgson's and Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo, especially in the young birds. However, the adult plumages of both species are again very distinct.

Coupled with lack of breeding sympatry and hybridization (King, 2002), a clear case for treating the two as separate species is once again presented.



(Above) **Hodgson's Hawk-Cuckoo** immatures (1-3) **Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo**, adults and immatures (4-8) Note the more spot-like streaks on the breast of Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo (RMBR)





(Above) **Hodgson's Hawk-Cuckoo** immatures (1-4) **Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo**, adults and immatures (5-9)

Note the presence of a white, barred tertial feather in the Hodgson Hawk-Cuckoo. Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo lacks this but has a white-fringed secondaries and tertials.

### Identification in the Field

When confronted with this threefold problem, there are two subtle identification hints to look out for. Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo immatures tend to have a small white patch near the nape. This feature is generally noticeable and consistent, especially if seen from the back or the profiles.



(Above) **Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo** (1), **Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo** (2). Note the present of the white/pale tertial feather. Also note that both have white nape patches though this is less clear in (1). Clearly the white nape cannot be used as a reliable definitive feature.

Another feature to look out for, in the event that the white nape patch is inconspicuous are the whitish to faint fringes to the feathers on the lower mantle and wing coverts. Robson (2005) also noted the pale innermost tertial feather of the immature Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo and its generally warmer plumages (Robson, 2005) when compared to the darker plumages of the Malaysian Hawk Cuckoo juveniles. On the bright side, thanks to sometimes intermediate forms and often poor viewing conditions, even experts may be misled and King (2002) acknowledges the difficulty in identification of the

immature forms (King, 2002). The table below should hopefully address some of the identification pointers encountered in the field.



TABLE 1. A summary of some of the visible differences between the Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo *H. fugax* and the Hodgson's Hawk-Cuckoo *H. nicolor*.

<b>Immature Features</b>	<b>Malaysian Hawk-Cuckoo</b>	<b>Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo</b>
<b>White nape patches</b>	Present in all specimens. Small and mostly at where the nape meets the cheeks.	Occasionally present in some individuals. Variable and can be absent, patchy or extensive.
<b>Wing linings/fringes</b>	Pale whitish, sometimes faint. Hard to see.	Buffy to rusty buff
<b>Innermost tertial feather</b>	Less pale (more brownish)	Pale (often very faint) to white. Barrings present.
<b>Bands on underside of primaries</b>	Generally broader. (Hard to see)	Comparatively less broad (Hard to see)
<b>Streaks on underparts</b>	More spot-like	More streak-like and elongate
<b>Underparts</b>	Generally whiter and cleaner	Often has a slight rufous orangy wash
<b>General plumage coloration</b>	Generally darker brown	Generally lighter and richer rufous brown

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