

Taxonomic titbits: Another babbler not a babbler?

By Yong Ding Li



(Above) Pygmy Wren-Babbler (*Pnoepyga pusilla*) at Fraser's Hill, Peninsular Malaysia (Con Foley). With a better understanding of its taxonomic status, 'wren-babbler' may be a misnomer for this species.

The babbler family (Timaliidae) has been the focus of intensive research in recent years, with dire consequences for birdwatchers and researchers alike. Firstly, according to recent revisions, Timaliidae has been moved down the taxonomic hierarchy to the rank of a tribe, under the family Sylviidae which is familiar to most birdwatchers traditionally as the family associated with warblers. Going by that, it is as good as saying that babblers are actually a type of warbler. Secondly, as evolutionary relationships amongst the members of the babblers become clearer, certain non-babbler oddities were discovered, to have been erroneously classified with the babblers previously. In the past, these species were classified as babblers because they appeared to share some morphological and behavioural features with the other 'true-babblers'. Now that their taxonomic relationships are better understood, these aberrant species evicted and are now pending relegation to their relevant family groups. Examples of such include the White-bellied Yuhina and the *Pteruthris* shrike-babblers which are now known to be close relatives of the vireos, a previously strictly American family of perching birds. In another example, the Malaysian Rail-Babbler was removed from the Timaliidae, placed near the Jewel-Babblers, then into its own family Eupetidae and now into a largely African group of perching-birds which includes the unfamiliar Rockjumper (*Chaetops*) and Rockfowls (*Picartharthes*). In a few cases, new members are added to the Timaliini, which recently just got inflated thanks to the addition of the Zosteropidae White-eyes, which are

apparently now known to be 'within' the babblers. In the most recent review of the tribe Timaliini, the *Pnoepyga* wren-babblers, which includes the familiar Pygmy Wren-Babbler is now found to be unrelated to the rest of the babblers and the authors proposed that it be pushed to a new family altogether, the Pnoepygidae. No names have been proposed for this new family or its members, but if it does occur, it will no doubt change the way we perceive wren-babblers in the future. Would this be the end of the road? Most probably unlikely. With a revolution of molecular techniques in understanding how birds are related to each other, more changes will be expected in the near future.