

Red-faced Malkoha

Little-known Oriental bird: Red-faced Malkoha

by Richard A. Fuller and Johannes Erritzøe, from *OBC Bulletin* 26, November 1997.

The cuckoos are a fascinating group with a cosmopolitan distribution, and exhibit great diversity of form and life history. Owing to their generally secretive nature, many cuckoos are among the least known of the World's birds, and the Red-faced Malkoha, *Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus*, is no exception.

The large-billed and boldly patterned malkohas are restricted to the Oriental region, and are represented in Sri Lanka by Blue-faced Malkoha, *Phaenicophaeus viridirostris*, Sirkeer Malkoha, *P. leschenaultii*, and Red-faced Malkoha, *P. pyrrhocephalus*. The former are also found in South India, but even the distributional range of the last remains the subject of controversy. This article aims to provide a summary of current knowledge, indicate the status of current populations and examine possible future trends.

Taxonomy

The Red-faced Malkoha was described in 1769 by an illustration in Thomas Pennants Indian Zoology as *Cuculus pyrrhocephalus*. Joan Gideon Loten, who collected the first examples, commissioned Pieter Cornelis de Bevere to paint plates of his living or freshly dead specimens, as methods for the preservation of skins were then poorly developed. Loten loaned these outstanding plates to various zoologists at the time, who described many species from his work. Pennants work can still be found in the library of the British Museum, but there is no trace at that institution of Lotens specimens, also thought to be deposited there. (16,21) This form subsequently became the type of *Phaenicophaeus* Stephens (Shaws Gen. Zool., 9, pt. 1, 1815, p. 58). The genus has variously been considered to contain up to twelve species, but is now sometimes treated as monotypic, following Peters (17) and later authors but contra Sibley and Monroe. (18)



Red-faced Malkoha © Lester Perera

Distribution and Habitat

Within Sri Lanka, the range of the Red-faced Malkoha has been contracting for many years, in parallel with the drastic reduction in forest cover. Legge shot a pair as far north as Trincomalee in about 1870, when 70-80% of the island was covered with forest (Hoffmann in litt.), but it is probable that the main centre of the range has always been in the wet zone (south-western part of the island) where the main requirement seems to be tall, undisturbed, heavy forest with dense, tangled undergrowth. It is rarely seen near cultivation.²⁰ Remaining isolated populations within the dry zone (north and east Sri Lanka) are found exclusively in riverine forests such as Wasgomuwa National Park, along the Heen Ganga, and Kumbukkan Oya, Menik Ganga and at Lahugala. (10) It is probably rarer in the dry zone than in the wet zone. There is great vertical utilisation of the forest. Most reports indicate that it prefers the foliage canopy of trees and shrubs, but it also descends almost to the ground especially where the understorey is thick (Warakagoda, in litt.). It is said by Fisher et al. 6 to favour undergrowth, and indeed may breed at lower levels within the forest.

The Red-faced Malkoha has been reported from sea level up to 1700 m. (2) A specimen (1951 (25) (30)) in the British Museum of Natural History at Tring (BMNH) was collected on 15th August 1950 at Haputale at a stated altitude of 1539 m, although there are doubts that it still occurs regularly at such altitude. Many contemporary observers have not observed this species at high elevations, and de Silva (in litt.) has suggested that fragmentation of formerly continuous forest cover has denied the Red-faced Malkoha access to the highlands. It is possible that it is (or was) a seasonal altitudinal migrant. Further detailed study is required to test this hypothesis.

Although the Red-faced Malkoha is considered by many authors to be one of the 26 species restricted to Sri Lanka, there is a couple of controversial and intriguing records from the Tamil Nadu and Kerala provinces of South India. Baker (3) indicates that it was found in the 'South of Travancore, where it was obtained by Stewart together with its nests'. This rather vague reference was followed in November 1931 with a report by C. H. Biddulph of a Red-faced Malkoha in the Madurai district of southern Tamil Nadu. This was eventually published in 1956 and, while accepted by Ali¹ and Ali and Ripley, (2) is tantalisingly inconclusive. Salim Ali later agreed with the Ceylon Bird Club that lacking a specimen from India it should be treated as a Sri Lankan endemic. Biddulph says, 'I noted its approximate size and shape, colouration, shape of beak and length of tail in relation to the body', but unfortunately does not give these details in the note. See Hoffmann (10) for a reasoned rejection of this record, who demonstrates that it would not stand up to a modern records committee, but see also below. The habitat in the Madurai area is considered unsuitable for Red-faced Malkoha. (19) A 1935 Indian record referred to by Fisher *et al.* (6) is presumably an error.

Yet another twist in this story is provided by a recent note in the Newsletter for Birdwatchers (15) in which a sighting of this species near Madikeri in Karnataka province is reported. The observer and his wife described the bird independently and came to the conclusion that it was a Red-faced Malkoha. Following this, Hoffmann (11) reports receiving a painting of a 'Red-faced Malkoha' from a correspondent in Trivandrum – the bird depicted is considered by Hoffmann to most resemble the Green-billed Malkoha, *P. tristis*, a Lower Himalayan species! The safest treatment is to consider the Red-faced Malkoha a Sri Lankan endemic until watertight records for south India are published with descriptions. It is strange that such a distinctive species has been responsible for a debate of this nature.

Plumage and Variation

The Red-faced Malkoha is approximately the size of a Greater Coucal *Centropus sinensis* (40-50 cm). Legge (13) indicates that the female may be the larger of the two sexes, but measurements are too scanty to be sure. No weights have been published. Biometrics of skins examined in BMNH (RF, pers. obs.) indicated that males may be bigger and longer-billed, although shorter-tailed than females, but sample sizes were small. It should be noted that these measurements are not comparable with those taken from live birds as certain biometrics may change with time from death, and great care has to be taken when measuring specimens to avoid damage.

Adult Red-faced Malkohas are black above, glossed with metallic green and blue. The feathers of the crown, nape and chin are flecked with white, the extent of which is subject to marked individual variation. The throat and breast are also black, but the rest of the underparts are white. When viewed from underneath, as this species usually is, it appears strikingly black and white. The tail is long and graduated, and underneath appears black at the base and distally white or pied; it is black above with a white terminal bar. The crimson-red face is not bare, but composed of short, bristly hair-like feathers, and in many birds protrudes above the crown. The large, laterally compressed bill is apple-green, the lower mandible slightly paler, and is dusky towards the base and around the nostrils. Feet and legs are bluish, bluish green or slate blue. Bold patterning coupled with long tail, red face and green bill make this species extremely distinctive. However there is at least one seriously misleading description in the literature; Wikramanayake (22) asserts that, 'its green body and red face make identification a simple matter!' The plumage of the sexes is thought to be identical, but irides are white in females and brown in males. (2) Legge shot a male in tail moult in December 1871.

Juveniles are shorter-tailed than adults, show a much reduced brick-red face patch and a browner bill. The crown, nape and breast have a brownish ground colour, with off-white flecks in the crown, nape and chin. Although the mantle is black with blue and green iridescence, the remiges and rectrices are browner, and have more pointed tips (R. F., pers. obs. BMNH).

A variety of call notes has been described, but this species is generally considered rather silent. Legge (13) compares a low monosyllabic 'kaa' uttered in flight and on alighting with one of the notes of 'our jay at home' (*Garrulus glandarius*?). He also talks of a much harsher and louder cry which contra Hoffmann (10) is not inconsistent with Biddulph's description of the call he heard from a perched bird in India, although Legge does not refer to this call in a later work. (14) A low petulant 'kra', a soft 'krrr' compared with the purring of a cat, 'kree-kree-kree', a 'kok' and short yelping whistles are also described.

Breeding

Dated records and gonadal examinations indicate that Red-faced Malkohas breed at least from January to May and probably again in the autumn, and Ali & Ripley (2) suggest that breeding may be continuous. More dated records of breeding evidence are required. The nest is usually described as a shallow saucer of grass, roots and twigs 'carelessly' put together, although what appears untidy to the human observer should probably not be anthropomorphised as careless; indeed, an untidy nest is probably better camouflaged.

In May 1978, Shirley Perera observed a breeding attempt on the banks of the Walawe River in the Uda-Walawe National Park. The well-anchored and well-concealed nest was in the topmost fork of a Kunumella tree *Diospyros malabarica* about 9-12 m from the ground. The stout platform was formed of interlocking branching twigs 15-20 cm long; over this was placed a thick layer of twigs, presumably imparting the untidy appearance, and over this a layer of Kunumella leaves. The cup was deep and neatly lined with leaf midribs, although Baker (3) indicates that the nest is shallow and lined with fresh leaves. Both sexes participated in nest building, and during a period of about a week, the male was observed following the female uttering a soft 'kree-kree-kree'. Unfortunately this nest was abandoned owing to disturbance from a pair of Greater Racket-tailed Drongos, *Dicrurus paradiseus*, nesting nearby (Perera, in litt.). A nest found in the Sinharaja forest in February 1995 was in dense foliage in the lower canopy of a tree ca. 18 m high. One bird was incubating.

The clutch consists of two or three rounded oval eggs, measuring about 36 x 27 mm and unmarked white with a chalky surface. There are no details of subsequent stages of breeding, although a pair 'soon returned' to their nest after being flushed (3).

Diet and Habits

This species feeds mainly on berries of forest trees, but insects are also taken (perhaps when feeding young?). One has been observed eating a large caterpillar about 5 cm long, and another taking the caterpillars of a common moth pest of teak (Ceylon Bird Club Notes). It usually feeds in mixed-species foraging groups where one to four birds is the norm. Larger flocks occur occasionally, the largest reported group is of nine birds.

The Red-faced Malkoha is described as a rather silent, shy, restless and sprightly dweller of tall forest canopy. Fleming (7) describes this bird as agile, active and conspicuous, although wary of observers and indicates that it is active mainly in the morning and afternoon. Henry (8) presents a vivid picture of its locomotion, 'It cleverly threads its way through tangled twigs, creepers and foliage. Owing to the short, rounded wings, its flight is feeble, slow and direct and, if it has any distance to cover, it commonly prefers to hop from branch to branch until it reaches the top of a tree, and then to flutter and volplane from that vantage-point; in flight, the wings produce a musical hum.' Legge (13) notes that a female, 'on alighting each time, uttered its low call and elevated its tail', and that a pair 'flew with short flights from tree to tree, one after the other.'

Status and Frequency

The Red-faced Malkoha is currently listed as Vulnerable (5). It faces a high risk of extinction in the medium-term future through habitat decline and fragmentation, and will show an estimated continuing decline of at least 10% within 10 years (12).

Since 1873, the Red-faced Malkoha has been considered everything from 'extremely rare' to 'quite common' in no obvious chronological order, although care must be taken when describing the status of a localised species, which may be common in some areas but rare as a whole. There can be little doubt that the retiring habits of this largely silent dense forest canopy-dweller result in some under-observation, and this may account for the varying estimates of its abundance; reports that it was common in antiquity are probably exaggerated. Many dire warnings have been sounded (6, 8, 22) and it could be argued that numbers have remained relatively stable since the middle of the present century. However, advances in quality and quantity of field ornithology in Sri Lanka may mean that a growing proportion of a dwindling population is being recorded.

Shooting has been cited as contributory to the apparent decline at least in the dry zone. (9) Reports indicate that the flesh is tender and not unpleasantly flavoured, (8) but hunting is unlikely to be a widespread contemporary problem (Wijesinghe in litt.). The Red-faced Malkoha is undoubtedly local, owing to fragmentation of its forest habitat; it is not uncommon in some restricted areas (9) and enforced protection of key forest reserves, e.g. Sinharaja and surroundings is generally considered essential to its continued survival. It is important to note that some ornithologists do not consider this species to be under particular actual threat (e.g. Perera in litt.), providing the integrity of current forest reserves is maintained. However, this is a rather large proviso. Under the Flora and Fauna Protection Ordinance, many National Parks and Sanctuaries have been declared, but development continues unchecked in many areas and laws are rarely enforced. Unless a coordinated strategy is adopted, continuing fragmentation of forest reserves may result in the extinction of this, and several other Sri Lankan endemics. Hoffmann (10) has cited the presence of various international conservation organisations in Colombo as exacerbating this problem, each of them not wanting to bite the hand that feeds, and it is perhaps time for these organisations to critically review their role in the process of conservation in Sri Lanka.

Very little of the Red-faced Malkoha's life history has been recorded, particularly its breeding biology, biometrics and moult strategies. Its geographical and altitudinal distributions remain controversial, population densities and dynamics, detailed niche requirements and threats to survival other than deforestation are all unknown.

As far as its conservation is concerned, there is an urgent need for further study of the Red-faced Malkoha, to paint a rational picture of the status of this enigmatic species. Too many dire warnings can result in desensitisation of the public and the government, and it is imperative that such warnings are based on firm empirical study to ensure that what little political will there is can be harnessed to the greatest effect. At this stage, it seems safe to say that further fragmentation of forest habitat will certainly result in further decline of this beautiful cuckoo.

The authors are currently working on a monograph of the cuckoos and turacos.

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