

16. THE DIAGNOSTIC PLUMAGE CHARACTERS OF THE RED-HEADED BABBLERS *STACHYRIS RUFICEPS* AND *S. RUFIFRONS*

In 1847 Blyth described a new small babbler, *Stachyris ruficeps*: a drab olive bird with a slender tapering bill and rufous cap. He stated that the crown was ferruginous, the lower parts whitish with a fulvous tinge on the sides of neck and breast, and the chin and mid-throat white. In his catalogue of birds of the Asiatic Society's museum (Blyth 1849) he indicated that the holotype was a specimen from Darjeeling collected by C. S. Bonniwell. A similar description was used by Horsfield and Moore (1854) in their catalogue of birds of the East India Company's museum, based on specimens collected by B. H. Hodgson.

Hume (1873) described a new species, *S. rufifrons*, from Burma. It was differentiated from *S. ruficeps* in having, *inter alia*, the rufous of the head extending to the occiput, and in lacking the yellow tinge to the underside which Hume stated was present in *ruficeps*. Harington (1915) described the subspecies *S. rufifrons ambigua* from Assam, and commented on the published descriptions of *S. ruficeps*, querying the reference to a white throat. Subsequently *S. rufifrons ambigua* has been found occurring north to the foothills of Sikkim (Ali & Ripley 1971).

On present information and specimens there appear to be two sibling species. The more northerly Red-headed Babbler *S. ruficeps* occurs in Taiwan, through much of China and south into northern Vietnam with an isolated population in southern Vietnam, into the hills of north-west Burma and the Indian border, and through the eastern Himalayas. The Red-fronted Babbler *S. rufifrons* is a southern species occurring from Borneo and Sumatra, north through Malaya into northern Thailand and southern Burma, through the hills of

western and northern Burma, and along the Himalayas.

I have not found any evidence to support Deignan's proposal (Peters 1964) to regard *ambigua* and *rufifrons* as separate species. E. C. Dickinson has suggested (*in litt.*) that Deignan was influenced by problems of apparent sympatry in northern Thailand (Deignan 1945) which were resolved by retaining *S. rodolphei* Deignan 1939 as a full species. However, in Peters' Checklist Deignan (1964) lists a series of apparently allopatric subspecies of *rufifrons/ambigua* but divides them into two species. There is material of both in the British Museum (Natural History) and I can find no characters for such a specific separation, nor any statement by Deignan concerning the specific characters of his *S. ambigua* which might justify such a separation.

Where *ruficeps* and *rufifrons* overlap in general range there is usually an altitudinal separation with *rufifrons* at lower altitudes. However, there may be some degree of altitudinal overlap and in the collection of the British Museum (Natural History) there are specimens of both species labelled Darjeeling.

The two species are generally similar but two diagnostic characters are apparent. *S. rufifrons* has a chestnut cap extending back no further than the hind-crown and usually with some indistinct dark streaking along the feather shafts, while *S. ruficeps* has a uniform chestnut cap extending right back to the nape where it merges with the mantle, not "sharply defined" from it as stated in Ali and Ripley (1971). *S. rufifrons* has a white throat, usually with some fine blackish streaks along the feather shafts, and this is separated from the rest of the underside by a transverse zone of

slightly rufous buff colour which also borders the throat. *S. ruficeps* has a very pale throat, usually with a faint yellow tint, which merges gradually into ochraceous-buff on the upper breast and cheeks. The yellowish suffusion of the underside and back, making the latter appear greener, is referred to in most recent literature but is variable in character, and is absent over most of the underside in some Chinese subspecies.

Mr. H. Abdulali has recently queried (pers. comm.) Blyth's description of the type of *S. ruficeps* as having a white throat when it should be pale yellow, the white throat being regarded as a character of *S. rufifrons*. I have not been able to trace the present location, if any, of the holotype of the former species. Horsfield and Moore (1854) used specimens collected by B. H. Hodgson which in the absence of the holotype of *S. ruficeps* provide information on the type of material available at the time. Some of these Hodgson specimens from the East India Company's museum are now in the collection of the British Museum

(Natural History) and these lack a yellow suffusion, and are therefore white-throated.

This might be attributed to later fading and exposure to light, but a specimen of *ruficeps* from Hodgson which appears to have come straight to the museum and was registered in 1859 (no. 1859. 3.4.267) is wholly without yellow colour and has a white throat, while other specimens collected only a little later still retain the yellow. It is possible that a preservation technique was used which affected the lipochrome pigments but not the melanins. There is therefore a strong possibility that Blyth's type specimen may have lost its yellow colour prior to being described. The fact that he refers to fulvous colour at the sides of the throat and breast, and does not refer to a rufous-buff transverse zone on the upper breast which would have been present in *rufifrons*, appears to confirm that the specimen he described was in fact *ruficeps*. His reference to a white throat would not therefore affect the nomenclature of these species.

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September 3, 1982.

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Harrison, C J O. 1984. "THE DIAGNOSTIC PLUMAGE CHARACTERS OF THE REDHEADED BABBLERS STACHYRIS-RUFICEPS AND STACHYRIS-RUFIFRONS." *The journal of the Bombay Natural History Society* 81, 197–198.

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