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BREEDING THE BLACK-FACED LAUGHINGTHRUSH *Garrulax affinis*

by Nigel Hewston

The Black-faced Laughingthrush is one of many of its congeners with a wide distribution in the Himalayas, ranging from Nepal through Myanmar to western China and Taiwan. Birds present in the UK are of Chinese origin. Rutgers (1969) stated that it is found at higher altitudes than other laughingthrushes, up to 9,000ft (approx. 2,745m) or even 11,000ft (approx. 3,350m), so it is not surprising that it has proved to be hardy in European aviaries. According to Grewal, Harvey & Pfister (2002), in India, it is a common breeding resident in the northern mountains, wintering lower in the foothills. It inhabits forest undergrowth and montane scrub, feeding in pairs or small parties on invertebrates and fruits and nesting in low growth. It is apparently more confiding than other laughingthrushes, running rather than flying from disturbances. Grimmett, Inskipp & Inskipp (1999) described its habitat as forest and shrubberies above the treeline.

It is a predominately brown, but very attractive, medium-sized laughingthrush. The head is blackish brown with broad white moustachial markings and a partial white ring behind the eyes. The breast, mantle and scapulars appear scaled, as the feathers have dark brown margins and paler, greyer centres. In a good light the scapulars and parts of the mantle are also glossed with olive. The rump and vent are a rich chestnut and the flight and tail feathers are golden-olive at the base changing to slaty blue-grey at the tips. The eyes and beak are black and the legs a brownish pink. Western birds have prominent white patches on the sides of the neck, but these are less pronounced in Chinese birds. In the pair which bred these were completely absent in one bird and apparent as silvery-grey smudges in the other. Dave Coles (2000) listed six subspecies, Howard & Moore (1984) seven, of which five are present in The Natural History Museum at Tring (Coles, 2000). I have not examined these skins, so have not identified which subspecies my birds belong to.

The male has a clear, but not very loud or interesting whistled song

usually of only four notes, described by Grewal, Harvey & Pfister (2002) as “wheet wheooo woo”. The female has a more plaintive whistle analogous to that made by female Pekin Robins *Leiothrix lutea* and Omei Shan Liocichlas *Liocichla omeiensis* which are unpaired or separated from their mates, except that with the laughingthrushes I have occasionally heard this while the male is present. It is similar particularly to the liocichla call, but often contains three or even four notes, as opposed to the two of the liocichla. There is also a metallic chattering or whirring call which may be used as a scolding or alarm call, but which is also used in a duetting display, accompanied by wing flicking. There is another harsh, loud call which I have heard from the juvenile bird and, I think, from the adults, the function of which is not clear to me.

I received a pair of these birds early in April 2005 on loan from Andrew Blyth. This pair, plus another pair and a single female, had previously been here from May 2001-March 2002, while Andrew was rebuilding some of his aviaries. They would have stayed longer, but one pair came into breeding condition in January 2002 and became dangerous to smaller birds (Hewston, 2002). At that time I had no suitable breeding aviary which the pair could have to itself, so the pair was returned to Andrew, along with the other three birds, though these had not caused any problems in mixed aviaries. By 2005 three of the five birds survived, including the pair which had shown no signs of breeding during its last stay, and this was the pair which was returned to me. All the birds were imported in 1997, so the pair was at least eight years old at the time of breeding.

On arrival the pair was housed on its own in a 24ft x 12ft (approx. 7.3m x 3.6m) planted aviary with a shelter 8ft x 4ft (approx. 2.4m x 1.2m) in a shed which also contained the shelter for a pair of Omei Shan Liocichlas which arrived at the same time and was housed in an adjacent aviary. The aviary had been empty for two years and had become rather overgrown. The front was fairly open, with a wire roof and sides and a tall, narrow conifer, a low *Lonicera* bush, some young bamboo, a large *Kniphofia* in a pot and a grassed area, but a *Hebe* in the centre had grown up to and through the roof and almost filled the whole width of the aviary. Together with a *Cotoneaster* at one side, a *leylandii* at the other and a hornbeam *Carpinus* sp. also in the middle, they virtually blocked off the back of the aviary, which was enclosed by fence panels at the back and on one side, and the shed on the other, with opaque sheeting on the roof. There was also a large honeysuckle growing up a central roof support behind the *Hebe*. The aviary was furnished with natural perches and had a large log in the middle. The back had been used as a log store while empty, and logs were left stacked about 3ft (1m) high along the back wall. The top was cut off the cotoneaster to allow the birds to fly the length of one side of the aviary. A universal

food, soaked softbill pellets and sultanas, fresh fruit (mainly chopped pear) and mealworms were provided in the shelter.

The birds settled quickly and after about a week a few pieces of nesting material were found dropped on the shelter floor, often the first indication that breeding activity has begun. On April 22nd a nest in the early stages of construction was found about 5ft (1.5m) above the ground near the top of the *leylandii*. A certain amount of dead grass and growing moss were available on the aviary floor, along with bamboo leaves, which were supplemented with tough grass stems, softer grass, moss (provided growing on rocks) and coconut fibre. All these materials were used to make a deep cup, which appeared quite advanced by April 25th, though the first egg was not laid until the 30th. There were two eggs in the first clutch, which were not actually seen until May 16th, the first time since laying that both adults were seen away from the nest. The eggs were incubated until May 21st, when they were candled and found to be clear, so were removed. They were bright blue with a few small dark spots at the large end.

On May 24th the nest was being re-lined, mainly with coconut fibre, and the first egg of the second clutch was laid on May 28th. There were two eggs again and this time they were candled after about six days and were both fertile. Nest inspection was difficult as the sitting bird needed to be flushed from the nest and a mirror used to see inside. The nest with its new lining was now very deep, and the bird trying to leave in a hurry found its way blocked by branches, so inspections were kept to a minimum to avoid stress and possible injury to the sitting bird and damage to the eggs.

On June 12th there were still two eggs in the morning, in the evening one of the birds was seen apparently eating aphids from hornbeam leaves. The next morning there was one chick in the nest, and two by the evening, giving an incubation period of 14-15 days. Mini mealworms were provided ad-lib, with white-skinned ones provided at least three times daily, along with small brown crickets (fed dead, thawed from frozen). After a couple of days waxworms and larger white-skinned mealworms were added, with larger crickets and regular mealworms replacing the smaller ones as the chicks grew.

All appeared to be going well until one chick was found dead below the nest on June 26th. Its body plumage appeared uniformly dark brown and had not spread out from the tracts to cover the whole body. The dark grey flight feathers were only just longer than the coverts. Its skin was pink, it had a prominent yellow gape and its legs were pale flesh coloured. The other chick was still alive but could not be persuaded to raise its head.

However, the second chick did survive and I consulted Dave Coles's excellent handbook to find out when I might expect it to fledge. The youngest fledging age given is 12 days, with the most likely age being 14-16 days. I

was not too alarmed when the chick failed to fledge at 16 days, as Dave states that some chicks take as long as 18 days, but when the chick had not fledged by the morning of July 3rd I thought it must have a problem. However, by the next morning it had fledged and was looking healthy and behaving normally despite having stayed in the nest for at least 20 days or probably 21 days. It had the usual short tail and was duller coloured than its parents, but was a good size and was perching in honeysuckle the following day. It found its way into the shelter at 32 days old, by which time the



Juvenile at 32 days old.

parents were building another nest in the honeysuckle. Three eggs were laid and I made the mistake of assuming that they would be fertile, but when one was found broken below the nest after 10 days' incubation, I candled the others and found they were infertile. There were no further nesting attempts in 2005. The young bird which continued to develop well was still begging, and being fed, on August 24th, though I am sure it was also feeding itself long before then. It was DNA-sexed and found to be a male. I removed it from its parents in late September to be paired with Andrew's other, surviving bird, which fortunately is a female and which he kindly let me have on loan.

This year (2006), the original pair nested three times. The first egg was laid on April 23rd. This year there were two eggs in each clutch, one of which hatched from each of the first two clutches, but both chicks died at five days old. At least one of the eggs in the third clutch was fertile but failed to hatch. Following a winter trim, the conifer that the birds had used

the previous year was not quite the nest site it had been and the birds initially struggled to build a nest in it. However, they took readily to a basket wired to the tree at their chosen site. All three clutches were laid in a nest built, and subsequently re-lined, in this basket.

The new pair, in a smaller (15ft x 6ft (approx. 4.5m x 1.8m)) aviary, was given a dead conifer to nest in which the pair chose in preference to a large clump of bamboo. The pair had the same problem as the first pair and accepted the same solution and had a good nest in the basket by mid-May. No eggs appeared and I eventually noticed that a large lump had appeared on the female's abdomen. I assumed that attempting to breed for the first time at an advanced age had caused a problem in her reproductive tract. She showed no discomfort and was removed to another aviary, to be replaced in early July by another female kindly loaned by Birdworld, near Farnham, Surrey. This bird settled well with the male but no serious attempt was made to nest.

The new female had been in the collection at Birdworld since 1998. I can find no other record of the breeding of the Black-faced Laughingthrush and I am concerned that in 2007, the 2005 male will be the only bird in the UK less than 10 years old, and without very good luck it may be too late to establish this species in captivity, at a time when it seems very unlikely that further stock will become available from Asia in the near future, if ever. I would be very interested to hear from anyone else who keeps this species in the UK or elsewhere. There is a real danger that most species of laughingthrushes now present in aviaries in the UK and elsewhere will be lost unless a concerted effort is made to breed from them in the very near future.

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As described above, the Black-faced Laughingthrush *Garrulax affinis*, has been bred by Nigel Hewston. It is believed to be the first breeding of this species in Great Britain or Ireland. Anyone who knows of a previous breeding is asked to inform the Hon. Secretary.

AVICULTURAL SUPPORT FOR THE ECHO PARAKEET PROGRAMME ON MAURITIUS

by Roger Wilkinson

This is a short account of the Echo Parakeet *Psittacula eques* conservation programme that is run by the Mauritius Wildlife Conservation Foundation (MWF) in partnership with the National Parks and Conservation Service, Mauritius. In particular it highlights the support from Chester Zoo and other conservation organisations in assisting this programme, both through staff involvement and financial support. This account expands and updates an article previously published by the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria (EAZA) in *Proceedings of the EAZA Conference 2004*.

Chester Zoo is also assisting other conservation initiatives on Mauritius, including providing technical and financial support for the Mauritius Fody *Foudia rubra* and the Olive White-eye *Zosterops olivacea* recovery programmes and has assisted with financial support for veterinary research on the Pink Pigeon *Columba (Nesoenas) mayeri*. More recently financial and staff support has been provided for projects on the conservation of threatened endemic plants. In the Mascarenes, Chester Zoo continues to support research on the Rodrigues Fruit Bat *Pteropus rodricensis* and through Shoals Rodrigues also helps to finance both marine conservation and community initiatives.

Chester Zoo is one of several organisations supporting the Echo Parakeet conservation project. The Durrell Wildlife Conservation Trust (Jersey Zoo) is the major sponsor of the Mauritius Wildlife Foundation and significant investments in the Echo Parakeet programme have been made by the World Parrot Trust (WPT), The Parrot Society and the Loro Parque Fundación.

I was able to visit Mauritius and Rodrigues in November 2003 when, staying as a house guest of Carl Jones, I learned so much more about these projects through meeting the MWF staff at the field sites. This was especially the case regarding the conservation programme for the Echo Parakeet. I had several enjoyable days accompanying members of the Echo Parakeet team in the field at the most critical time during that year's Echo Parakeet breeding season.

Conservation history

The Echo Parakeet, which is Critically Endangered, occurs only on Mauritius. In 1986 only eight to 12 birds were known, and only two or three of these were females, although a few other birds may have been overlooked. These were restricted to the Black River gorges and surrounding forests, an area that in 1993 was designated the country's first national park.



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