



THE AVIFAUNA OF SRI LANKA: AN OVERVIEW OF THE CURRENT STATUS

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Abstract

Sri Lanka has a high diversity of avifauna, with 236 breeding and 203 purely migrant species. Among the former, 33 species and a further 68 subspecies are endemic to it. Since the systematic study of the birds of the island began in the 18th century intermittent discoveries of breeding and migrant taxa have led to a gradual increase in the total number of taxa known to occur in it. Different taxonomic treatment over time has resulted in the number of endemic species recognised varying from 47 in 1880 to 21 in 1978 and 33 in 2005. The present enumeration of species in the avifaunal list for Sri Lanka is based on the work of the Ceylon Bird Club Rarities and Records Committee, as embodied in Henry (1998) and relative to standard ornithological publications for the region. An authentic list for a country reflects the true diversity of the avifauna within it and contributes to the mapping of correct global distribution especially of widespread or migrating taxa. 46 species of birds in Sri Lanka, including 16 endemic to it, are recognised as Threatened.

Key words: Birds, country list, endemic, Threatened, breeding species, migrant species

Avifaunal diversity in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a large continental land-bridge island, located both in the tropical belt and in the South Asia region. The latter is recognised today as a significant avifaunal entity (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005). The geographic position and topography of Sri Lanka has given the island three major climatic zones and a wide variety of habitats

within each. These zones and habitats support an avifauna of high species diversity.

The majority of these species are breeding residents. Originally from a common landmass shared with India, many have evolved in to distinct forms within the island's substantial montane massifs which have

remained isolated for a long time, despite close proximity and intermittent connection of the island to the mainland (Newton, 2003).

The rest are seasonal migrants. As Sri Lanka is at the tip of Peninsular India many species migrating annually from the northern autumn-winter to the tropics along the Central Asian-Indian flyway end their southward journey in this island. Likewise, certain pelagic species which migrate from the southern autumn-winter, northward to the Indian Ocean, occur within the oceanic limits of the country.

The current status of avifauna in Sri Lanka is presented on the basis of authentic records of species known from the island. To date these stand at 236 breeding and 203 purely migrant species. By the latter term is meant migrant species with no resident population in the island. The resident species belong to 66 families, and the migrant species to 29 of these and to a further 15 families with no representative resident species (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005).

Most bird species in Sri Lanka are shared with the adjacent Indian mainland and the rest of Asia. The distribution of every resident species in Sri Lanka except those endemic to it extends northward beyond the island either as the same or a different subspecies (Rasmussen, 2005a; Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005). Many migrant species occurring in the Indian mainland also occur in Sri Lanka (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005).

The uniqueness of the avifauna of Sri Lanka is reflected in the diversity of the taxa confined to the island. At present 33 species and 68 subspecies among the other resident species are recognised as endemic to Sri Lanka (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005). Other than the species endemic to the island, 54 species occurring in it, including six winter migrants, are considered endemic to the South Asia region (Gjershaug *et al.*, 2008; Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005).

Changes in records over time

After systematic study of the avifauna of Sri Lanka began in the 18th century the diversity of bird species recorded in it increased gradually over the years, with the recognition from time to time of more breeding species and still more migrant species. The major ornithological work for the island in the 19th century featured a total of 371 species (Legge, 1880). This figure has now risen to 439, according to the records shown below.

Most of the increase since then has been due to the identification of new migrant species during the last and present centuries.

Four resident species were added to the total during this time. The Blue-eared Kingfisher *Alcedo meninting* Horsfield, 1821 and Common Coot *Fulica atra* Linnaeus, 1758 were first recorded in 1894 and 1924 respectively (Whistler, 1944). A species new to science was discovered in 2001, the Serendib Scops Owl *Otus thilohoffmanni* Warakagoda & Rasmussen, 2004, endemic to Sri Lanka (Clements, 2007; König & Weick, 2008; Warakagoda & Rasmussen, 2004). In 2003 a long-overlooked species was identified from a museum specimen: Marshall's Iora *Aegithina nigrolutea* (Marshall, 1876), otherwise known only in India (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005; Wells *et al.*, 2003).

The number of resident species further increased by three as a result of taxonomic revisions among certain closely related taxa, *viz.* two resident owlets of the genus *Glaucidium* Boie, 1826 (König *et al.*, 1999; Sibley & Monroe, 1990), two resident *Dicrurus* Vieillot, 1816 drongos and a group of one resident and two migrant *Hirundo* Linnaeus, 1758 swallows (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005).

A high endemism in the island's avifauna has been recognised since the 19th century. By its end 47 species had been recognised as endemic to Sri Lanka amongst a total of 289 resident species as then considered (Legge, 1880).

However, in the first half of 20th century the Biological Species Concept was applied in a broad manner to birds in the Indian region (Wijesinghe, 2007). This led to many taxa closely related evolutionarily and isolated geographically which were previously classified as distinct species being treated as subspecies of a smaller number of widespread polytypic species. A result of this practice was a gradual reduction in the number of species endemic to Sri Lanka. This had decreased to 21 by the late 1970s (Phillips, 1978).

Since the 1990s, however, ornithologists began gradually re-elevating some populations of distinct taxa thus considered subspecies back to their original species status. This caused a rise again in the number of endemic species in Sri Lanka to 23 (Sibley & Monroe, 1990), 26 (Wijesinghe, 1994) and 33 (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005). It appears that further revisions in species-level taxonomy may

increase the endemic species in Sri Lanka still closer to the number recognised in Legge (1880).

Recording the status of avifauna: a history

The birds of Sri Lanka, as mentioned above, first drew attention as a subject for systematic study in the 18th century. This was initiated by the Dutch governor J. G. Loten (Wijesinghe, 1997). Since then the avifauna of the island has attracted great interest, and throughout the British colonial era studies were carried out relating to their diversity, distribution and taxonomy. The results were reflected in Legge (1880), by far the most comprehensive work before the 20th century, and several major publications around the end of that era, *viz.* Wait (1931), Whistler (1944), Phillips (1953) and Henry (1955).

The last checklist for Sri Lanka with extensive annotation and reflecting the status of these three aspects of its avifauna was Phillips (1978). This was based on the work of two centuries on the birds of the country. It features a total of 392 species. 230 species are recorded as breeding residents, including 21 endemic species and a further 81 endemic subspecies. 162 species are recorded as pure migrants.

This was the major reference work on the status of the avifauna of Sri Lanka for two decades until the publication of the third revised edition of G.M. Henry's popular *Guide to the Birds of Sri Lanka* (Henry, 1998). The latter work updated species diversity, distribution and taxonomy, with the recognition of 26 species endemic to the island. Its taxonomy was based on Wijesinghe (1994), a checklist with brief annotations, updated to its time. Henry (1998) featured a total of 430 species for the island. Compared with Phillips it recognised one more breeding species, with the 'splitting' of two resident taxa of owlets (see above), and 37 new migrant species, according to the decisions of the Ceylon Bird Club Rarities and Records Committee (CBCRRC) (see below).

The current status

This paper discusses and presents the status of the species diversity of birds in Sri Lanka based on (a) Henry (1998), and thereafter (b) the subsequent authoritative work of the CBCRRC and (c) the regional works of recognised international ornithologists.

(a) We use Henry (1998) as the basis for our evaluation as it is the most recent national work which records the species accepted into the main country list by the CBCRRC at the time of its publication.

(b) The CBCRRC was formed in 1985 (as the CBC Rarities Committee) by the Ceylon Bird Club (CBC), established in 1943 (*Ceylon Bird Club Notes*, 1985). The club recognised the importance of having such an evaluating committee in line with the practice in other countries where care is exercised to maintain authentic records of bird species occurring within them for their country lists.

The chief reason for forming this body was the increase in reports of sightings of new and rare migrant species in Sri Lanka since the 1980s, mainly due to a large increase in birdwatchers and the availability of new literature on bird identification. Identification of such species by sight only (without a specimen) is often found to be erroneous when a high degree of care is not exercised in the field. A less careful observation of what appears to be an unusual bird in the field may well result in a misidentification of species.

In order to evaluate reports of sightings of new or rare migrants, submitted to it or published elsewhere, the Committee seeks, *inter alia*, detailed notes describing important identification features of the species made during observation and preferably a sketch made in the field. Today it is possible to provide further evidence through photographs, video footage and sound recordings if the relevant equipment was available with the observer/s.

The other task of the Committee was to look into records, which had already existed in the country list for any length of time, which it regarded as doubtful.

The remaining species in the list were those each with at least one specimen held in a museum, authentically known to be from Sri Lanka and of which the identification was not in doubt, and those observed in the field whose identification was beyond doubt in the evaluation of the Committee.

Since its inception the Committee has consisted of ornithologists with a high level of knowledge and skill in field observation, and extensive experience in the identification of birds in the field and in museum collections. Several years ago the Committee was broadened to include recognised

international experts in the ornithology of the South Asian and Asian regions, to enhance the standard of evaluation.

(c) The third source for inclusion of species in the country list is recent publications based on work of regional scope by recognised authorities. Chief among these is Rasmussen & Anderton (2005), the most recent standard work for the region. This was the result of 1½ decades of comprehensive and meticulous work on museum specimens, records of

field observations and audio recordings of vocalisations (Rasmussen, 2005b). The other pertinent works are: Wells *et al.* (2003), Rasmussen (2005a), Collar (2006) and Gjershaug *et al.* (2008).

Accordingly, subsequent to Henry (1998) the country list has changed by the recognition of six breeding, species, the acceptance or recognition of eight migrant species, and the removal of two species by the CBCRRC. Details are provided in Tables 1 - 3.

Table 01: Breeding species recognised subsequent to Henry (1998)

Indian Spot-billed Duck <i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i> Forster, 1781 ^a (Gunawardena & Sirivardana, 2003)
Bridled Tern <i>Sterna anaethetus</i> Scopoli, 1786 ^a (Perera, 2003)
Serendib Scops Owl <i>Otus thilohoffmanni</i> Warakagoda & Rasmussen, 2004 (Clements, 2007; König & Weick, 2008; Warakagoda & Rasmussen, 2004).
Blue-tailed Bee-eater <i>Merops philippinus</i> Linnaeus, 1766 ^a (Samarasinha, 2003)
Marshall's Iora <i>Aegithina nigrolutea</i> (Marshall, 1876) (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005; Wells <i>et al.</i> , 2003)
Ceylon Crested Drongo <i>Dicrurus lophorinus</i> Vieillot, 1817 ^b (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005)

^a These species were already in the country list as migrants.

^b *D. lophorinus* was formerly treated as a subspecies of a polytypic resident species *D. paradiseus* (Linnaeus, 1766). It is treated now as a distinct species.

Table 02: Migrant species accepted / recognised subsequent to Henry (1998)

Rufous-necked Stint <i>Calidris ruficollis</i> (Pallas, 1776) (<i>Ceylon Bird Club Notes</i> , 1998)
Pacific Swift <i>Apus pacificus</i> (Latham, 1802) (<i>Ceylon Bird Club Notes</i> , 1998)
Yellow-rumped Flycatcher <i>Ficedula zanthopygia</i> (Hay, 1845) (<i>Ceylon Bird Club Notes</i> , 2004)
Pectoral Sandpiper <i>Calidris melanotos</i> (Vieillot, 1819) (<i>Ceylon Bird Club Notes</i> , 2004)
Bay-backed Shrike <i>Lanius vittatus</i> Valenciennes, 1826 (<i>Ceylon Bird Club Notes</i> , 2004)
Dusky Warbler <i>Phylloscopus fuscatus</i> (Blyth, 1842) (<i>Ceylon Bird Club Notes</i> , 2004)
Common Rosefinch <i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i> (Pallas, 1770) (<i>Ceylon Bird Club Notes</i> , 2004)
Red-rumped Swallow <i>Hirundo daurica</i> Laxmann, 1769 ^c (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005)

^c *H. daurica* was formerly represented in Sri Lanka by a breeding resident subspecies *H. d. hyperythra* Blyth, 1849 and two migrant subspecies. The resident taxon is now recognised as a distinct species *H. hyperythra*, endemic to the island. Thus, *H. daurica* is now added to the country list as a separate migrant species (in two subspecies).

Table 03: Species removed from country list by CBCRRC subsequent to Henry (1998)

Nordmann's Greenshank <i>Tringa guttifer</i> (Nordmann, 1835) ^d (<i>Ceylon Bird Club Notes</i> , 1998)
Java Sparrow <i>Padda oryzivora</i> (Linnaeus, 1758) ^e (CBCRRC list: in preparation)

^d Formerly included as a vagrant species.

^e Formerly included as an escaped and occasional breeding species.

This brings the current total of the country list to 439 species, with 236 breeding species, and 203 pure migrants, including rare, very irregular migrants and vagrants.

33 species are now recognised as endemic to Sri Lanka, according to Rasmussen & Anderton (2005).

The present authors are aware that reports of several more new migrant species currently await evaluation by the CBCRRC. Of these the ones accepted by this committee will thereby be added to the country list. The authors believe, considering relevant documents perused by themselves, that a further 13 species have been reported with positive evidence, and that it is very probable these will be accepted by the CBCRRC. They believe so with a lesser, but still high, degree of probability, of four more species. On the foregoing the country list may

increase to between 452 and 456 species in the near future.

The importance of correct avifaunal records

A list with authentic records reflects the true natural diversity of the avifauna of a country. For widespread or migrating taxa records in such lists form an essential part of the information used to map their global distribution and movement in winter. An incorrect record of the occurrence of such a taxon in Sri Lanka leads to an incorrect idea of its range in these aspects. It is therefore important to maintain criteria of a high standard in the evaluation of reports and previous records when including a migrant species into the country list.

Endemic taxa

33 species of birds are recognised as endemic to Sri Lanka (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005). They are listed in Table 4.

Table 04: Species endemic to Sri Lanka

Ceylon Spurfowl <i>Galloperdix bicalcarata</i> (Forster, 1781)
Ceylon Junglefowl <i>Gallus lafayetii</i> Lesson, 1831
Ceylon Woodpigeon <i>Columba torringtonii</i> (Blyth & Kelaart, 1853)
Ceylon Green Pigeon <i>Treron pompadora</i> (Gmelin, 1789)
Ceylon Lorikeet (Hanging-Parrot) <i>Loriculus beryllinus</i> (Forster, 1781)
Layard's Parakeet <i>Psittacula calthropae</i> (Blyth, 1849)
Green-billed Coucal <i>Centropus chlororhynchos</i> Blyth, 1849
Red-faced Malkoha <i>Phaenicopaeus pyrrhocephalus</i> (Pennant, 1769)
Serendib Scops Owl <i>Otus thilohoffmanni</i> Warakagoda & Rasmussen, 2004
Chestnut-backed Owlet <i>Glaucidium castanonotum</i> (Blyth, 1852)
Ceylon Grey Hornbill <i>Ocyroceros gingalensis</i> (Shaw, 1811)
Yellow-fronted Barbet <i>Megalaima flavifrons</i> (Cuvier, 1816)
Ceylon Small barbet <i>Megalaima rubricapillus</i> (Gmelin, 1788)
Crimson-backed Woodpecker (Flameback) <i>Chrysocolaptes stricklandi</i> (Layard, 1854)
Ceylon Swallow <i>Hirundo hyperythra</i> Blyth, 1849
Ceylon Wood Shrike <i>Tephrodornis affinis</i> Blyth, 1847
Black-capped Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus melanicterus</i> (Gmelin, 1789)
Yellow-eared Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus penicillatus</i> Blyth, 1852
Spotted-winged Thrush <i>Zoothera spiloptera</i> (Blyth, 1847)
Ceylon Scaly Thrush <i>Zoothera imbricata</i> Layard, 1854
Ceylon Whistling-Thrush <i>Myophonus blighi</i> (Holdsworth, 1872)
Dusky-blue Flycatcher <i>Eumyias sordidus</i> (Walden, 1870)

Ashy-headed Laughing-Thrush <i>Garrulax cinereifrons</i> Blyth, 1852
Brown-capped Babbler ^f <i>Pellorneum fuscicapillus</i> (Blyth, 1849)
Ceylon Scimitar Babbler ^f <i>Pomatorhinus melanurus</i> Blyth, 1847
Ceylon Rufous Babbler <i>Turdoides rufescens</i> (Blyth, 1847)
Ceylon Bush Warbler <i>Elaphrornis palliseri</i> (Blyth, 1852)
Legge's Flowerpecker <i>Dicaeum vincens</i> (Sclater, 1872)
Ceylon White-eye <i>Zosterops ceylonensis</i> Holdsworth, 1872
White-headed(-faced) Starling <i>Sturnia albofrontata</i> (Layard, 1854)
Ceylon Hill-Mynah <i>Gracula ptilogenys</i> Blyth, 1846
Ceylon Crested Drongo <i>Dicrurus lophorinus</i> Vieillot, 1817
Ceylon Blue Magpie <i>Urocissa ornata</i> (Wagler, 1829)
^f These two species each comprises two subspecies. The other species are monotypic.

68 subspecies of birds are recognised as endemic to Sri Lanka among the species resident in the island other than the endemic species (Rasmussen & Anderton, 2005). 55 of them are each differentiated from one or more closely related subspecies in the Indian mainland by biometrics and/or mere shade of plumage colour. The other 13 are more distinct than this from such closely related taxa by differing in biometrics and in colour/s of discrete elements in

plumage.

In the opinion of Wijesinghe (1994), Rasmussen & Anderton (2005) and the present authors five taxa in this last group are adequately distinct from such related subspecies in biometrics and/or coloration of plumage they may reasonably be considered for taxonomic revision elevating them to species status. These are listed in Table 5.

Table 05: Endemic taxa which may be elevated to species status

Red-backed Woodpecker (Black-rumped Flameback) <i>Dinopium benghalense psarodes</i> (Lichtenstein, 1793)
Ceylon (Asian) Paradise Flycatcher <i>Terpsiphone paradisi ceylonensis</i> (Zarudny & Härms, 1912)
Indian Blackbird <i>Turdus simillimus kinnisii</i> (Kelaart, 1851)
Black-(Dark-)fronted Babbler <i>Rhopocichla atriceps nigrifrons</i> (Blyth, 1849) / <i>R. a. siccata</i> Whistler, 1941
Ceylon Hill (Black-throated) Munia <i>Lonchura kelaarti kelaarti</i> (Jerdon, 1863)

Threatened species

According to *The 2007 Red List of Threatened Fauna and Flora of Sri Lanka* (IUCN & MENR, 2007) 46 bird species in Sri Lanka are threatened, and these include 16 endemic species.

Numerical summary

Table 06: Status of avifauna in Sri Lanka as at December 2008

Breeding species	236
Purely migrant species	203
Total number of species in country list	439
Species endemic to country	33

Subspecies endemic to country of other resident species	68
Threatened species:	
Breeding resident	46
Endemic (among the above)	16

Note to table: See also the last paragraph in the section 'The current status'.

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Appendix: An overview of publications subsequent to Henry (1998) recording the avifauna of Sri Lanka

After Henry (1998) there have been four publications in English which list the birds of the country. As they are few they are reviewed here.

1) *A Field Guide to the Birds of Sri Lanka* (1999) by J. Harrison and T. Worfolk.

This is an excellent field guide, which has proved its value in bird identification and is widely used. It features all the species accepted by the CBCRRC to the above time. Its major flaw is that it includes (illustrates and describes) species whose occurrence in the island still needs confirmation (even to the time of this paper), and which were therefore listed outside the authentic country list by the CBCRRC, as reflected in Appendix I of Wijesinghe (1994). That gives an incorrect impression to most users that there are authentic records of the occurrence of these birds in Sri Lanka. This has led some observers to misidentify as these species individuals of other species with a similar appearance, which occur regularly in Sri Lanka.

2) *A Checklist of the Birds of Sri Lanka* (2001) by G. de Silva Wijeyeratne and D. Warakagoda.

This is designed in the form of a 'tick list' of species and subspecies of the birds of Sri Lanka to mark those noted in the field by a reader. The list comprises the species recorded authentically to that date as published in Henry (1998), those additionally accepted by the CBCRRC and six others, which in the opinion of its authors have been recorded reliably. A total of 434 species is listed. The six species mentioned above were all subsequently accepted into the country list by the CBCRRC.

3) Avifaunal List of Sri Lanka by S. W. Kotagama et al. in *The Fauna of Sri Lanka: Status of Taxonomy, Research and Conservation* (2006).

This is an enormously inflated list of species, which gives a corresponding idea of the diversity of the avifauna of Sri Lanka, with 482 species included. It lists many species from reports not considered authentic in many ornithological works dating back to the early 20th century and thus not included in them. Several other species are listed on the basis of reports which had not been accepted by the CBCRRC, and reports whose contents fall well short of the level of authenticity required by a standard rarities committee. A clearly inadequate criterion is used for accepting sight records of rare migrants: viz. merely being "confirmed by more than one observer" as an alternative to a proper published description. Such defects have even drawn into this list, from a report in the last decade, a species known to date to be endemic to Indochina and its vicinity.

4) *Birds of Sri Lanka: A Pictorial Guide and Checklist* (2008) by G. de Silva Wijeyeratne

This is similar to de Silva Wijeyeratne & Warakagoda (2001) in its format and the basis used to list species, with the addition of photographs of a large number of these. It deals with reports to May 2007. The total number of species presented is 444.