

# The Yellow-throated Fulvetta *Alcippe cinerea* in Indochina

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While the Yellow-throated Fulvetta *Alcippe cinerea* is rather common in Kachin state in northern Myanmar, in South-East Asia it is otherwise known with certainty only from a highly disjunct cluster of four localities in rugged mountains on the international border between Laos and Vietnam: Phou Kabo, Ban Muang-Ngat and Phou San (all in the Xiangkhouang highlands), Laos, and Pu Mat Nature Reserve (northern Annamite mountains), Vietnam. There is no obvious biogeographic explanation of this distributional pattern, which is most unlikely to be an artefact of fieldwork bias. Improved conservation status of forest within the range of the species is desirable.

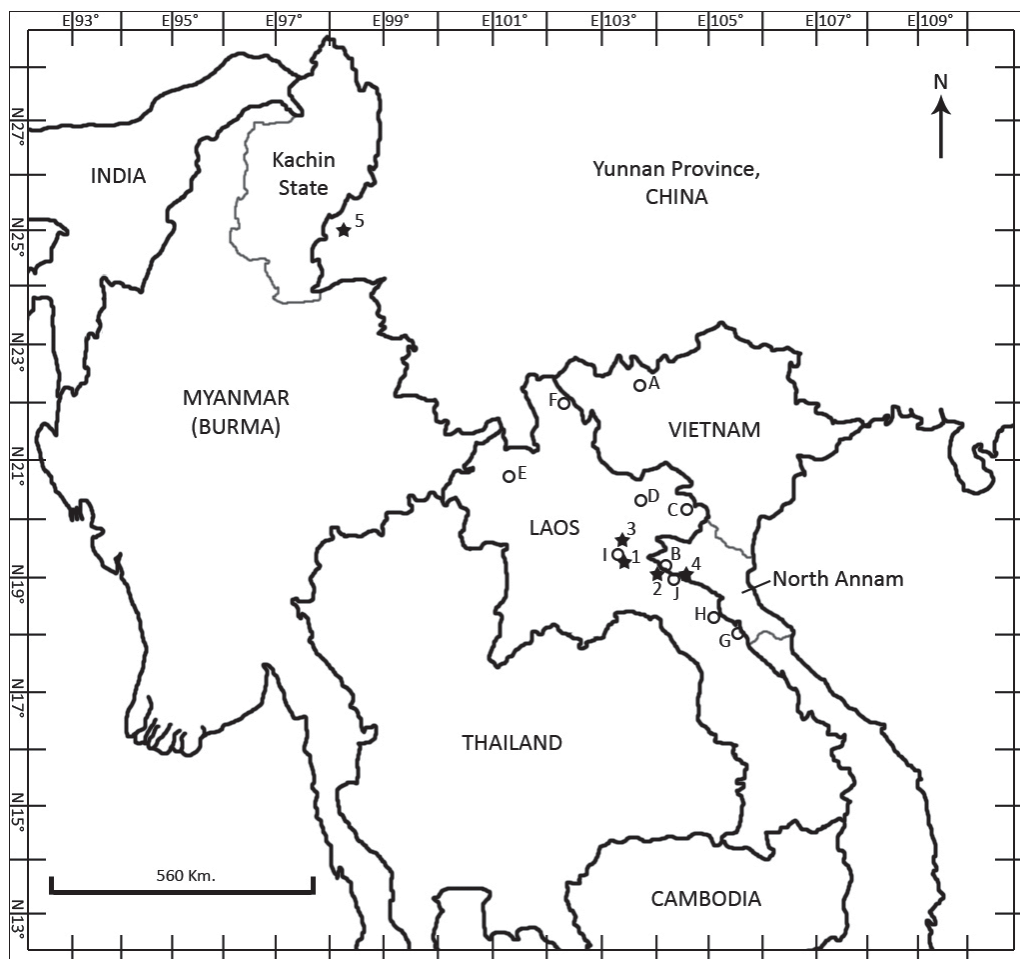
## INTRODUCTION

The Yellow-throated Fulvetta *Alcippe cinerea* is primarily an eastern Himalayan species, occurring from Sikkim and Bhutan east through most of the north-east Indian hill states to small parts of southern China and adjacent northern Myanmar (Collar & Robson 2007, where called *Pseudominla cinerea*). The first South-East Asian record was from northern Myanmar on 1 April 1933 (Stanford & Ticehurst 1935) and the next was the listing for the northern highlands of Laos in David-Beaulieu (1939), at least 1,100 km to the south-east. Despite the upsurge in bird survey in South-East Asia since the late 1980s, there remain remarkably few records in South-East Asia away from Kachin state, Myanmar, resulting in a separation exceeding 800 km between the main Himalayan range and records elsewhere in South-East Asia. This note assembles these latter records, and draws attention to the peculiar distribution, and regional conservation concern, of the bird. Figure 1 shows the South-East Asian localities mentioned in the text.

## RECORDS

### Laos

David-Beaulieu (1939) simply listed this fulvetta for Tranninh (an area similar to today's Xiangkhouang province, but also including some of today's northern Vientiane province), later stating (David-Beaulieu 1944) that it was first recorded there by Delacour & Greenway (1940). These latter (in fact, probably F. Edmond-Blanc: Edmond-Blanc 1944) collected five skins on Phou (= Mount) Kabo (as Phou Kobo; 19°16'N 103°25'E), evidently during December 1938 and/or February 1939 (Hennache & Dickinson 2000). David-Beaulieu (1944) himself, despite collecting widely in the Tranninh highlands, found it only at two sites, Phou Kabo (his main collecting area, then a well-forested mountain rising to 2,155 m), where he observed big flocks but found them only rarely, and around Ban (= village of) Muang-Ngat (as Muong-Ngat; 19°06'N 104°03'E), where it was common and readily found. The latter lay amid partly wooded hilly grassland at 1,150 m, but within 3 km the hills rise to 1,748 m; Phou Muang-Nhat, 8 km to



**Figure 1.** Lao and Vietnamese locality records of Yellow-throated Fulvetta *Alcippe cinerea*, and other South-East Asian localities mentioned in the text. Individual records for Kachin state, Myanmar, have not been collated and are not mapped, but none lies south of the Chinese record marked. The main range of the species is in Kachin state and in the regions of India and other countries to the west of it. Locality records (stars): 1, Phou Kabo; 2, Ban Muang-Ngat; 3, Phou San; 4, Pu Mat NR; 5, latitude of southernmost Chinese record. Other localities mentioned in the text (dots): A, Fan Si Pan; B, Phou Xaylaileng; C, Nam Xam NPA; D, Nam Et–Phou Louey NPA; E, Nam Ha NPA; F, Phou Dendin NPA; G, Nakai–Nam Theun NPA; H, Nape; I, Phou Gnouan; J, Nam Chouan proposed NPA.

the north, peaks at 2,406 m. He collected nine specimens, of which he sent one (from Phou Kabo, 26 April 1940) to Bourret (1943). Six others are now in Yale Peabody Museum, New Haven, USA (YPM 19634–19639): four are from Phou Kabo (one on 7 May 1939 and three on 26 April 1940), and singles came from Ban Muang-Ngat on 14 and 15 January 1940 respectively; none has a specific altitude recorded (K. Zyskowski *in litt.* 2007). The David-Beaulieu collection in Chulalongkorn University Zoological Museum, Bangkok, Thailand (see Dickinson 1970) contains none (E. C. Dickinson *in litt.* 2009); many David-Beaulieu specimens are held at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle, Paris, France but we have not checked whether any are of this species.

The only other Lao record is from these same highlands, from Phou San (19°39'N 103°23'E; rising to 2,218 m): two were found foraging at 2–3 m above ground in dense bamboo beside a small stream amid logged forest at 1,850 m on 8 June 2009. The forest on Phou San is mostly on fairly gentle terrain, and is rich in epiphytes, with bamboo common; within 1 km of the sighting lie some unlogged stands of magnificent tall (30–35 m) trees and such forest was presumably extensive prior to logging. However, persistent thick mist meant only two days were spent in the forest of Phou San, so it is unclear how common the species is there (Duckworth *in press*, JWD).

### Vietnam

This fulvetta is known only from Pu Mat Nature Reserve (NR), which lies in the northern Annamite mountains. Single birds were seen at two different locations at c. 1,400–1,500 m (perhaps as high as 1,600 m) near 'Camp 4' (19°01'N 104°31'E), on the slopes of Pu (= Mount) Mat itself, in the understorey (broad-leaved plants) on 24 April 1999 and in dense low ground herbage the next day. Here the forest was typically montane with many epiphytes and much bamboo. The first sighting was within good-quality tall forest on steep slopes, the second on a ridge-top. Six observer-days were spent in this area, between 1,200 and 1,841 m (SFNC 2000, PDR).

The species was listed, with no text discussion, in a January–March 1995 baseline survey for part of Vietnam's tallest mountain, Fan Si Pan (c. 22°18'N 103°46'E), in the Hoang Lien Nature Reserve (Appendix 7 in Kemp *et al.* 1995). In the 'notes' column is '??', indicating (presumably) a great degree of uncertainty: the species was not illustrated in any field guide to South-East Asian birds then available, and the authors seem not to have checked skins. The report's section 10 makes it clear that the authors were evolving their bird identification skills for the region, and the species is not mentioned in their discussion of globally threatened and near-threatened species (it then fell in the latter category: Collar *et al.* 1994) recorded by the survey. Because this area has been subject to fairly high survey combining historical and recent efforts (see below) without any other records, and despite the acceptance of the record by Tordoff *et al.* (1999), we consider there to be at high chance of an error being involved.

### Myanmar

Yellow-throated Fulvetta is evidently common and widespread in northern Kachin state, which is fundamentally contiguous with its main Himalayan range (Stanford & Ticehurst 1935, 1938–1939, Stanford & Mayr 1940–1941, Smythies 1949, King *et al.* 2001, Smythies 2001, Renner & Rappole 2011, Eames & Steinheimer *in prep.*, Than Zaw verbally 2005 [many photographs examined by JWD and RJT], JWD and RJT own observations 2007–2010). It has not yet been found in any other state or division of the country.

## DISCUSSION

The Yellow-throated Fulvetta's distribution in northern Myanmar is almost the eastern extremity of its Himalayan range: it continues

into the north-western part (Gongshan) of Yunnan (Cheng 1987) and is otherwise known in China only in south-east Xizang Autonomous Region (Cheng 1987, Collar & Robson 2007). The Lao and Vietnamese records are highly disjunct from this main range: although J. Hornskov (*in litt.* 2009) has found it somewhat south of the Gaoligongshan range given by Cheng (1987), at c. 25°N, there is no known connection in range from northern Myanmar to Laos via Yunnan or Thailand. This is despite heavy survey and birding focus on the latter's northern montane avifauna in recent decades, although there is no published compilation more recent than Deignan (1945), King (1966), Round (1988) and Lekagul & Round (1991).

It is implausible that the bird has been widely overlooked in South-East Asia. Although Delacour & Greenway (1940) considered it difficult to see and obtain, they seem alone in this stance. It is particularly conspicuous during the cold season, when it is 'a beautiful sight to watch a large flock cascading down a hillside, every bird in incessant movement, darting in and out of the undergrowth and bustling to and fro' (Stanford & Mayr 1940–1941: 77). Although its attachment to dense understorey and ceaseless movement made it, before the use of mist-nets, difficult to collect (Stanford & Mayr 1940–1941, David-Beaulieu 1944), the same behaviour makes it easy to find (at least in the cold season) in Kachin state, Myanmar (Stanford & Mayr 1940–1941, King *et al.* 2001, JWD and RJT). Umesh Srinivasan (*in litt.* 2009) agrees that, if present, it is 'extremely easy' to find (and one of the most commonly seen birds) in both western and eastern Arunachal Pradesh (Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary and Namdapha Tiger Reserve: Srinivasan *et al.* 2010), where it occurs from 600 to 2,100 m, with abundance peaking around 1,500 m. It is in the cold season that much survey and recreational birding takes place on Thailand's mountains, and not withstanding the occasional finding new for Thailand of resident passerines in these forests (e.g. Round & Pattanavibool 2003, Treesucon 2007), it is unlikely that such a conspicuous species has been overlooked.

The Lao and Vietnamese records come from one area of rugged highlands spanning the international border. Ban Muang-Ngat, the only Indochinese locality where it has been called common, is on the Nam (= River) Mo, amid, for Laos, a large tract exceeding 2,000 m; hills to the west exceed 2,400 m, whilst to the east, Phou Xaylaileng (19°12'N 104°11'E), on the Vietnam border, rises to 2,711 m. Pu Mat NR abuts the Lao–Vietnam border, extending north to 19°12'N although diverging from the border some way south of this, such that the highest terrain along the border is excluded from the protected area: the massif itself rises only to 1,841 m and 90% of the reserve lies below 1,000 m (SFNC 2000). Phou Kabo and Phou San are two of the many peaks that lie north-west of the Nam Mo headwaters. Surveys of montane forest in Laos even further north and west (Nam Xam National Protected Area [NPA]: Showler *et al.* 1998; Nam Et–Phou Louey NPA: Davidson 1998, 1999; Nam Ha NPA: Tizard *et al.* 1997; Phou Dendin NPA: Fuchs *et al.* 2007) have not found the species, and, whilst it would be rash to assert its absence from any given area, the combined lack of records implies that it is highly localised in Laos's northern highlands. In Vietnam there has also been recent extensive survey and hobby birdwatching in the highland forests around Fan Si Pan (rising to 3,148 m) and to a lesser extent elsewhere (Tordoff *et al.* 1999 and references therein, Tordoff *et al.* 2000, Swan & O'Reilly 2004a,b, Vogel *et al.* 2003), without any credible records of the bird. However, the western border areas north of Pu Mat NR remain poorly covered (J. C. Eames *in litt.* 2010).

There is no evidence that Yellow-throated Fulvetta extends from Pu Mat NR southwards along the Annamite spine (Eames *et al.* 2001), although various areas rise higher than Pu Mat and retain large tracts of little-degraded forest. However, R. J. Timmins (*in litt.* 2009) cautions that on his surveys of Nakai–Nam Theun NPA,

which yielded many montane passerines new for Laos and even more for Central Laos (Evans & Timmins 1998), he focused on getting as high as possible and the altitude band around 1,500 m (which included taller forests than he surveyed) was poorly covered, and so might hold additional species.

The known distribution in Laos and Vietnam does not strongly resemble that of any other bird species. That of Rufous-vented Laughingthrush *Garrulax gularis* is perhaps the most similar: in Vietnam, this species is also recorded only from North Annam (Robson 2008), and in Laos most records come from Xiangkhouang province, with one from Nam Et–Phou Louey NPA and, perhaps, another from Ban Nape, although the basis for this latter seems not to have been clarified (Duckworth *et al.* 1999); a further parallel is that this species is also known from North Myanmar (essentially, Kachin state plus the land directly to its west) but not elsewhere in that country or from Thailand (Robson 2008).

The Yellow-throated Fulvetta's Lao and Vietnamese distribution is not readily explained by any obvious biogeographic or physiographic feature or biological, vegetational or physical constraint suspected to be a determinant of Indochinese bird distribution. The Pu Mat NR records, especially because they fall plausibly during the breeding season, indicate that the species is not simply a higher montane specialist. Were this so, it should be present, and have been found, in Vietnam's northern highlands, notably around Fan Si Pan. Also, it seems unlikely to be restricted to (near) pristine forest, given the precise observation spot on Phou San and David-Beaulieu's (1944) description of habitat around Ban Muang-Ngat, and repeated reference from elsewhere in its range to the use of bamboos, glades, streambanks and other edge habitats (e.g. Collar & Robson 2007). It was evidently localised within the Tranninh highlands even in the 1940s, meaning that the lack of records (surely indicating genuine absence) from the only other recently relatively well-surveyed mountain in these highlands, Phou Gnouan (Duckworth *et al.* 2002, Duckworth *in press*), is unlikely to be due simply to the area's retaining only a small forest patch. Without further precise locality records of this fulvetta in Indochina and/or ecological study at its few known sites, meaningful speculation on the reasons governing its peculiar distribution is not possible. The same is true for the various other species in South-East Asia with strangely localised distributions that cannot easily be fitted into multi-species patterns, such as Rufous-vented Laughingthrush and Black-bibbed Tit *P. (palustris) hypermelaena*.

Close examination of the records available across the species's much wider range in the Indian subcontinent also suggests that it may be absent from some fairly large blocks of adequately surveyed suitable habitat (T. P. Inskipp *in litt.* 2009) and in China it is 'rare' (precise meaning ambiguous) (Cheng 1987: 723).

This fulvetta was listed (with no discussion) as globally Near Threatened by Collar & Andrew (1988), but this status was rescinded by BirdLife International (2000), since when the species has been considered Least Concern (BirdLife International 2009). While there is no reason to question this at the global level, the disjunct Indochina population may warrant local-level conservation attention because its known range is so small, and maintenance of a species throughout its recent range is a generally accepted conservation aim. The bird is far too small to be a hunting target, but habitat status is of great concern. The Xiangkhouang highlands retain only small relicts of forest above 1,500 m (R. J. Timmins *in litt.* 2009, from examination of satellite images). Even these are subject to ongoing destruction and degradation: the small patch on Phou Gnouan profiled in Duckworth *et al.* (2002) had, by 2009, been internally fragmented by a network of mining exploration tracks and lost most of its large trees (Duckworth *in press*). Pu Mat NR, by contrast, has probably suffered little, if any, habitat conversion at altitudes over 1,000 m in the last decade (B. Long verbally 2009). Most of this general area of Laos, namely the swathe

of highlands from Phou Kabo south-east to Phou Xaylaileng, felt reasonably likely to hold the species but is as yet unexplored for birds, holds insurgents and is not open for surveys or site-based conservation projects. Within Laos, where the bird is not known from any NPA, Phou San—recently declared a provincial protected area but not under any active management—may therefore be a conservation priority. It is quite plausible that, because it holds such a localised bird species, it also supports herpetofauna, plants, invertebrates and perhaps other birds of high conservation significance.

The eastern Nam Mo headwaters form the northern part of the Nam Chouan proposed NPA (pNPA) (Berkmüller *et al.* 1995), and Ban Muang-Ngat lies only 5 km west of the proposed border. Nam Chouan pNPA extends south along the international border (contiguous with Pu Mat NR) to about the Nam Theun Extension pNPA, and was identified during the 1990s as a high priority for wildlife survey; follow-up has been impossible and no information is available on its avifauna. The likely presence of Yellow-throated Fulvetta suggests other special species may occur; and the lack of very high land in Pu Mat NR suggests that Nam Chouan pNPA would be found to hold many additional species and would not simply be biologically equivalent to the Vietnamese protected area.

No subspecies of Yellow-throated Fulvetta are recognised: the sole synonym for the species, *A. delacouri* (as used by David-Beaulieu 1939, 1944), was proposed by Yen (1935, reiterated in Yen 1936) as a *nom. nov.* for *Minla cinerea* Blyth, 1847, which he believed to be preoccupied, once the species was transferred to *Alcippe*, by *Alcippe cinerea* Blyth, 1844, used for Scaly-crowned Babbler *Malacopteron cinereum*. But the 1844 name is not available, so the 1847 name does not need to be replaced (Stanford & Mayr 1940–1941). Given the Yellow-throated Fulvetta's highly disjunct distribution it would be instructive to compare the genetic structure of Indochinese with Himalayan birds, and there seems to be no information to suggest that any modern morphological reassessment has been attempted.

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