

## LITTLE-KNOWN AREA

# Nagaland, north-east India: three Himalayan species new to the Naga Hills

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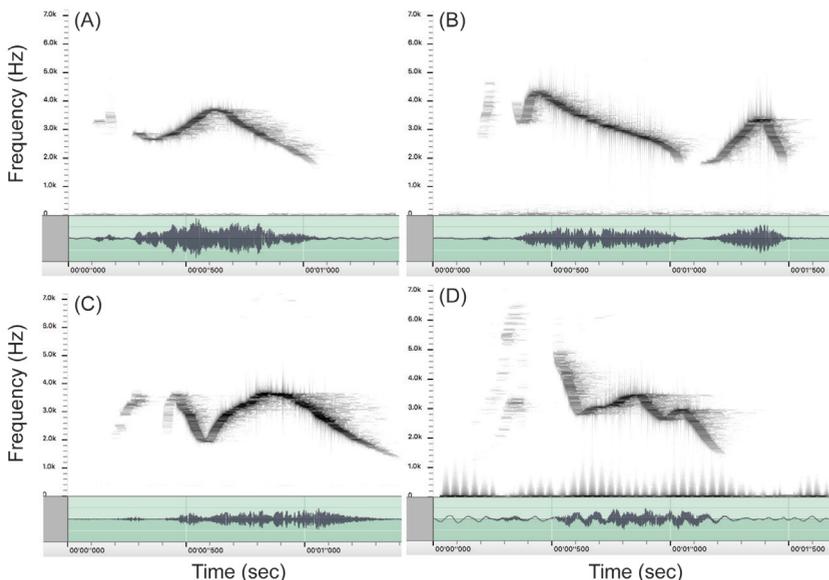
## Introduction

In spring 2015, JB was engaged in project fieldwork (Edwards *et al.* 2016) in shifting agriculture (*jhum*) around Fakim village and in the primary forest of the adjacent Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary, Kiphire district, Nagaland, India, and DPE visited the area between 7 and 13 April 2015. These forests are contiguous with Mount Saramati, the highest peak (3,826 m) in the Naga Hills, lying on the border with Myanmar. Sykes (2011) provides background information on Nagaland, including the Fakim and Pungro area. The Naga Hills are part of the complex mountainous spur that extends southwards from the Himalaya, a series of parallel ridges that arc through the north-east Indian states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram, forming the mountainous political border with Myanmar. On the Indian side of the border, in Arunachal Pradesh, to the south of Namdapha National Park, the Patkai range extends south-west and is contiguous with the Naga Hills, the Manipur Hills and the Mizo Hills (the latter formerly known as the Lushai Hills). South of Manipur, the main ridge, the Chin Hills, lies in Myanmar, with a further southern extension to the Bay of Bengal known as the Rakhine (formerly Arakan) Mountains. The Naga

and Chin Hills are extremely rugged, consisting of steep ridges separated by narrow steep valleys and deep gorges. In Nagaland, the border ridge is a series of peaks over 3,000 m, the highest point being the 3,826 m Mount Saramati, whereas the highest point of the Chin Hills to the south, Mount Victoria (Nat Ma Taung), is only 3,053 m. The other ridges are generally lower, from 1,500 to 1,800 m, with peaks generally no more than 2,100 to 2,500 m.

## Scaly Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron subunicolor*

At 09h30 on 12 April 2015, DPE found a Scaly Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron subunicolor* on the southern flank of the ridgeline that borders the Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary. The bird was in bamboo forest on a steep slope at 2,600 m, and initially was seen only briefly and poorly, but the glimpses were sufficient to confirm it was a Scaly Laughingthrush—grey head, olive-brown body with feathers tipped black, yellow-olive wings and tail tipped white. After extensive playback, DPE obtained a number of audio recordings (available at [www.xeno-canto.org](http://www.xeno-canto.org) XC327874, XC327875, XC327876; see Figure 1A) and one bird was seen very well by DPE and JB. On the same afternoon, DPE saw and heard the species again at a somewhat



**Figure 1.** Sonograms of Scaly Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron subunicolor* recorded in the Naga Hills (A) and at Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh, India (B–D), revealing substantial difference in song.

lower altitude (2,200 m), about 1.7 km from the first observation. A territorial pair and a second singing individual were found, indicating that birds were engaged in breeding activities—about 230 km south-west of the nearest known population in Namdapha National Park (Srinivasan *et al.* 2010). As far as we are aware, the Scaly Laughingthrush has not previously been recorded in the Naga Hills; the species is distributed in the Himalayas from central Nepal, Bhutan and north-east India, to south-west China and the extreme north of Vietnam (BirdLife International 2016a). In South Asia it breeds between 1,830 and 3,660 m, descending to 1,500 m (occasionally 800 m) in winter. The nominate taxon *subunicolor*, recorded from Arunachal Pradesh, north-east India, is geographically closest to the Naga Hills. Given the location and altitude of the Naga Hills, as noted above, the occurrence of Scaly Laughingthrush in this area is not unexpected.

There are clear differences between the song of the Naga Hills birds and those of *subunicolor* from Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh. The Naga birds that we recorded had a pair of short (0.1 second) quiet *tak* notes given at the same pitch (about 3,400 Hz) followed by a single melodious whistle, rising and then falling in pitch and lasting 0.8 second (Figure 1A). In contrast, birds from Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary had longer and more intricate songs (Figure 1B–D). They gave a single short (0.1 second) (Figure 1B & C) or longer (0.25 second) (Figure 1D) rising note, which was then followed by either one (Figure 1C & D) or two (Figure 1B) melodious whistles, such that the song was rising and falling (or falling and rising) in pitch at least twice.

In addition, the birds we observed had a grey not yellow iris, and appeared to have a greyer head than *subunicolor*, with no brownish hue visible; these differences, together with the differences in song, make it plausible that the Naga birds are an undescribed taxon. Unfortunately, we were unable to obtain any images for the record.

### Tibetan Serin *Carduelis thibetana*

At 08h00 on 13 April 2015, DPE found a small flock of about 12 Tibetan Serins *Carduelis thibetana* near Fakim village. The birds were seen in *jhum* abandoned 10 years earlier where sparse alders *Alnus* sp. were growing on a steep slope, next to a small gully holding a strip of forest, along a small stream at 1,685 m. The flock was initially perched in a near-leafless alder about 35 m away. They then made several wheeling flights and alighted on each occasion in the canopies of different trees in the gully. DPE made an audio recording when the flock alighted about 30 m away ([www.xeno-canto.org/XC327877](http://www.xeno-canto.org/XC327877)).

The birds were immediately recognised as Tibetan Serin, a species not previously recorded from this area (Clement 2016). The flock contained six males, with the diagnostic combination of bright yellow underparts, narrow wing-bar, supercilium extending behind the yellow-olive ear-coverts, and yellow-olive upperparts and wings. The females were pale yellowish below, with some brownish streaking on the breast, two yellowish wing-bars and duller olive upperparts. In flight the birds showed a shallow fork in the tail. The species is resident in south and south-west China, north-east India and north Myanmar. Out of the breeding season it may also be found in north Nepal, Bhutan and Assam; it has the reputation of being nomadic. It breeds in submontane and montane conifer and mixed fir *Abies*, hemlock *Tsuga* and birch *Betula* forests with a dense understorey of rhododendrons *Rhododendron* as well as in larch *Larix*, mixed alder *Alnus* and birch forest and scrub between 2,800 and 4,000 m; in Myanmar it breeds above 1,500 m to about 2,140 m. In the non-breeding season, it is found in flocks of up to 200 in similar habitats at lower altitudes (1,000–3,500 m)—in Myanmar down to 610 m (Clement 2016).

The nearest known record is of a flock of 20–25 birds at 900 m in December 2006 from Namdapha National Park (Srinivasan *et al.* 2010)—200 km to the north-east—and the occurrence of the species in the Naga Hills is not surprising. As far as is known, the species breeds in May and June, consequently it is difficult to predict the subsequent movements of a small flock found below 2,000 m in April; as noted above, in Myanmar it breeds as low as 1,500 m.

### Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris*

After two species new to the Naga Hills had been recorded within 24 hours, JB commented that TYY had given her some images he had obtained during a trek to the summit of Mount Saramati in November 2014—these included an Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris* (Plate 1) that had been

**Plate 1.** Alpine Accentor *Prunella collaris* near the summit of Mount Saramati, Nagaland, India, November 2014.



found above the tree-line (probably at around 3,300 m) in short grass and sparse rocks.

The Alpine Accentor is a widespread montane species, found from Morocco and Spain to eastern China and Russia (BirdLife International 2016b), including the Himalaya and Tibetan plateau where it breeds mainly between 3,700 and 5,600 m, although recorded to 7,900 m. In winter in the Himalaya, the species may be found as low as 1,800 m, although in other parts of its range it has been recorded well below 1,000 m. Since this was a winter record, it is not clear whether the bird was a resident, a winter visitor or a vagrant; however, this location is about 350 km to the south of the nearest known records of the species in the Mishmi Hills, Arunachal Pradesh (Rasmussen 2012).

#### The ornithological importance of Fakim-Saramati

The Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary and Saramati area, Important Bird Area IN 421 (BirdLife International 2016c), in common with many areas in north-east India, has been poorly explored by ornithologists. Saramati is the highest peak on mainland Asia south of the Himalaya; with increased survey effort, particularly above 2,700 m, it is possible that further discoveries may be made. However, only the 642 ha Fakim Wildlife Sanctuary is currently formally protected. The total area of the IBA, all of which lies above 2,000 m, is 30,000 ha and consists of montane wet temperate forest and subalpine shrub and grassland. The existing protected area network in Nagaland is inadequate, covering only 1.37% of the state's area, and protection measures are not in place. Formation of new, larger protected areas, adequate protection of existing areas, legal protection of IBAs and development of community conservation areas have been recommended (Islam & Rahmani 2004). Nothing will be achieved without the involvement of the local population and co-operation of village councils, who own 93% of the forests. In a state that boasts a 70% literacy rate, spreading the message of environmental protection should not be difficult (Islam & Rahmani 2004, Sykes 2011).

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