

Current species identities and scientific names of Indian birds: doubts, queries and counsel

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It is theorized here that several 'races' of Indian bird species require upgradation through careful taxonomic revisions, as is being undertaken by systematic ornithologists abroad. Bird students are prudently advised to revert to using names in the New Synopsis, which included subspecies, with their diagnostic characters and geographical ranges explained in the Indian Handbook, and also to incorporate updates in the recent Ripley Guide. Unless currently treated polytypic species are identified to the correct trinomial, several 'species' names used now would be suspect or erroneous, being only rough and incomplete identifications, and therefore scientifically incorrect for leads to relevant information.

Exactly 80 years ago, Hugh Whistler¹ had written an 'open letter' to the editors of the *Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*, emphasizing dangers of the new subspecies concept that the *New Fauna* of Stuart Baker² had then introduced to Indian ornithological literature, which was different from the species concept of the *Old Fauna* of Oates³ and Blanford⁴ which he was familiar with.

My own detailed Open Letter⁵ had attempted to re-emphasize Whistler's warning and make a case for a return to reality, to true species, as existing in nature. I had also written^{6,7} on the difficulties of accurate identification of bird species that had more than two recognized races^{8,9}. I had recommended the *Indian Handbook*⁸ and *New Synopsis*⁹ as being critical aids to correct identifications (especially for hints on precise distributional ranges, behaviour, habits, habitat, food and nesting). The recent illustrated field guides¹⁰⁻¹² are only useful for initial species recognition of birds in the outdoors by amateur birdwatchers, and cannot be relied on for leads to more exact determinations. This, since several polytypic (2 + races) species are potential superspecies and many such assumed races are good species. The subspecies concept, I consider, brought in an unfortunate 'caste or class' system in taxonomy, which assigned a 'low' racial status to *real species* which were difficult to identify in the field, but many of which exhibited diagnostic differences and were inhabitants of allopatric ranges, therefore being reproductively isolated populations and so justifying the species definition! Even analysts of the utility of the subspecies concept^{13,14} disagree with benefits in taxonomic application through

retention of trinomials. Thompson¹⁵ had concluded that: 'I accept the logic of Wilson and Brown (1953)¹³ and others and thereby feel that subspecies are largely meaningless biological concepts, and their names are an unnecessary nomenclatural burden.' The example of the species-complex now needlessly re-named the 'Orange-headed Thrush,' *Zoothera citrina* Latham, was taken as a case in point by me⁵ to explain the folly of accepting many currently lumped species. A parallel superspecies, the Jungle Babbler, *Turdoides striatus* Dumont, was also used to demonstrate the fallacy of ignoring 'subspecies' recognized by researchers^{2,8,9}. I had expanded^{5,16} on these species limit blunders (q.v.). However, it may also be noted that in some polytypic species like the Indian Iora (*Aegithina tiphia*), whose many 'forms and morphs' are the focus of intrigued birdwatchers currently online, the races recognized are probably just variants and polymorphs, without separate reproductively isolated populations (gene pools), 'subspecies', inhabiting distinct ranges (allopatry). Therefore, taxonomists with access to sufficient comparative material and with systematic education and *adequate experience on birds of our subregion* need to study and determine species limits in all our polytypic taxa, whether being 'lumped' or just polymorphic intergrades. As a Postscript⁵, I had also appended and discussed 10 other examples of species-limit muddles, of which nine had been specifically mentioned by Whistler¹ as being especially problematic. The *pattern* of bird-life here and the evolutionary history of this subcontinent and of its birds were also mentioned⁵, which I maintain give useful clues to the *process* of speciation here.

Species limits and scientific names

Like Whistler¹ had warned, we must wake up now to a 'more precise type of scientific nomenclature (alluding) to Indian ornithology'. Species names must mirror reality in nature and recognized genera must show true phylogenetic affinities and reflect homogenous species-groups distinguished by evolutionary gaps. *Only scientific binomens are real and usable*, in my studied opinion – 'common' names and trinomials (subspecies, races) simply confuse the issue and lead us astray (see also Thompson¹⁵).

The standardized list of Manakadan and Pittie^{17,18} urged the use of what were believed to be correct species identities and nomenclature a decade ago – giving only the then valid binomial names, but correctly proposing a return to the English names (why termed 'common?') used by others^{8,9}. Their list was based on the *Annotated Checklist of Oriental Birds*¹⁹, which had hastily and uncritically accepted the proposed 'new' family sequence and higher classification of Sibley and Monroe^{20,21}, and applied it to taxa of our biogeographical region. These radical changes were based only on DNA–DNA hybridization and have been widely criticized and are not corroborated generally now^{12,22}. I had tried to show^{5,23-25} that such hasty nomenclatural changes were presumptuous and would only breed confusion, error and misinterpretation in the understanding of the reality of our species limits in nature.

Whistler¹ had begun his open letter stating: 'A perusal of several recent articles in the *Journal* has induced me to write on a matter of considerable importance to the study of Ornithology. We are face to face with a danger which has

arisen in most countries but at the moment is particularly evident in India. I refer to the indiscriminate use of sub-specific or racial names.' Indian ornithology has turned a full circle – the danger now is in the promiscuous and uncritical use of what are believed to be good species identities. When Whistler arrived in India (in 1909, the year the famed Richard Bowdler Sharpe of the British Museum died) and began work on our avifauna, his constant guide, companion and friend was found within the covers of the four volumes of Oates³ and Blanford⁴. I urge all serious birdwatchers and ornithologists to consult this perhaps overlooked, but then timely, argumentative warning of Whistler¹ and also scan the Introduction in his primal *Handbook*²⁶, as well as study appendix 1 in Sālim Ali's autobiography²⁷ which included suggestions by Whistler on how to run a bird survey. Whistler¹ had also written, in apparent despair: 'Now the point of my letter appears. An ornithological public in India is proceeding to treat the *New Fauna* as they treated the old. It is to provide a standard catalogue into which all the birds of India are to fall in neat compartments, ticketed and docketed and filed with the precision of a Government office. If ornithological science in India is to prosper, this tendency requires to be stopped at once and the author of the *New Fauna* would be the first to agree with this.'

Similarly, current species names are also being promiscuously and uncritically used as correct, precise. Almost twice as many species that were recognized as valid, before Baker² and Ripley⁹ reduced them to racial status, are being ignored as 'irrelevant' subspecies. Several readings of the open letter by Whistler¹ will educate and inform us all of the amount of work needed to be done on the avifauna of our subcontinent, based on comprehensive analyses of polytypic species, using the available databases (specimens, including types, and literature²⁸). Also by making fresh field observations and samplings of contentious 'races', of what could be real species as they were recognized earlier^{3,4}. Whistler and Kinnear had actually initiated a careful taxonomic review of peninsular Indian species in their 17-part report of the Eastern Ghats Ornithological Survey (*J.B.N.H.S.*, 1930–1937, **34**, 386 to **39**, 463), but which remains largely unfinished for birds of that and other areas

here, though Abdulali (*J.B.N.H.S.*, **65**, 182 to **98**, 354; 1968–2001 and Unnithan, *J.B.N.H.S.*, **101**, 360 to **102**, 15, 2005) had continued this work, and Rasmussen^{12,22} gave a summary of the existing situation, leaving the taxonomy of many undecided in endnotes, and encouraging taxonomic study¹². I submit that we are therefore in no position to accept and uncritically adopt species names (binomens) used now^{10,11,17–19} as accurate. Unless these 'species' identifications are also made to trinomials and further taxonomic researches and phylogenetic analyses are carried out, preferably by field ornithologists and museum specialists (taxonomists) working together, 'we shall find ourselves in India in a hopeless muddle which will delay all further progress. It is not an imaginary evil which I am describing', Whistler¹ had warned us 80 years ago and I am here reiterating this present existent danger. Therefore, like Dickinson²⁹ had recommended, I agree it would still be best for us now: '... to use Ripley (1982) as the baseline for scientific names and sequence. As the same names and sequence are essentially followed in Ali & Ripley (*Handbook*) there must be a fairly widespread availability of these ...'.

Recommendations and counsel

I appeal that the *Ripley Guide*¹² be used for its superior, relatively accurate colour plates and well-summarized, scientifically analysed, text updates, which has begun reinstating good species that were downgraded as subspecies by authors after Baker² and Ripley^{9,30}. Kazmierczak¹¹ may be consulted for his fairly completely researched distribution maps. Ripley's *Synopsis numbers must also to be used* by authors for each species (see below). In addition, Dickinson's updated world checklist³¹ is worth consulting for globally confirmed races of bird species that could be of good, allopatric species status. The 'Systematic Notes on Asian Birds' series of papers (2000 et seq.) by Dickinson and Dekker²⁸ is a preliminary but fairly comprehensive revision of the taxonomy and nomenclature of our birds and should be checked by serious birdwatchers and ornithologists for new discoveries, corrections and additions. I believe we are still far from finality and yet on our way to finding out from nature what the real species limits, distributions

and lifecycles of our living birds are. Our avifauna could number anything between 1500 and 1700 or more confirmed species (including those in Burma and Afghanistan, which belong to the Indian subregion), and not just 1200–1300, as is presently understood and recorded in recent commercially oriented 'DIY' guidebooks. Even our bird genera have apparently been lumped (and poorly analysed), having been currently reduced to some 400, from the 600 or so recognized before Ripley^{9,30} entered the Indian ornithological scene.

Finally, where a 'species' listed by Manakadan and Pittie^{17,18} has more than one *Synopsis/Handbook number* placed in parentheses after the English name 'approved' by them, care must be taken to try and identify that taxon down to the correct 'subspecies' ('minor' differences and distributional ranges are vital here) by referring to the *Ripley Guide*¹², *Handbook*⁸, *Synopsis*⁹ and *Fauna*^{2–4}, besides consulting a specialist if available and accessible! Whether these names are considered to be subspecies or good species is perhaps irrelevant, provided *polytypic species are identified to the trinomial name*. Whatever name one uses, English and/or scientific, I urge citation of the pertinent *Synopsis/Handbook number* as well in publications, which I have found help trace the actual taxon in question, from Rasmussen and Anderton¹², Manakadan and Pittie^{17,18}, Kazmierczak¹¹ (Grimmett *et al.*¹⁰ unfortunately do not cite these identity numbers!), Ali and Ripley⁸, and Baker² back to Oates³ and Blanford⁴ and earlier (through Hume, Blyth and contemporaries to Jerdon), the scientific name used notwithstanding.

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