

NOTES

Observations on the Breeding of the Blue Pitta (*Pitta cyanea*) in Thailand

The Blue Pitta (*Pitta cyanea*) is recorded by LEKAGUL & CRONIN (1974) as a rare resident in forests and secondary growth throughout most of Thailand, except for the central plains and the southern peninsula. In our experience, however, it is a common but highly secretive resident bird in dry evergreen forest in Khao Yai National Park, Northeast Thailand, between 700-800 m in elevation. We have also found the Blue Pitta in bamboo and mixed deciduous forest at 300 m in Huai Kha Khaeng Wildlife Sanctuary, Uthai Thani Province, and in hill evergreen forest up to at least 1100 m in the mountains of the northwest. It is extremely difficult to observe and is most likely to be seen by a stationary observer or by an observer moving swiftly but silently along a forest trail. Under the latter circumstances, the bird may be surprised and flushed. After flying or hopping along the ground for a few metres, it will often alight briefly upon a low bough in order to examine its pursuer. The species is easily detected by its call, which is a fluty "pleeoow-whit", the long first note having a peculiar sliding quality, descending in pitch while the second note is sharper and higher. When excited, for example in response to a taped playback or whistled imitation of its call, the bird may give a slightly different note in which the first two syllables are more truncated ("priaw-pit"; U.T.). Sometimes, when an individual becomes alarmed in the presence of an observer, for example if it has a nest or young in the vicinity, a rather harsh "skyeew" note is given. These calls may be heard at any time of year, but the species appears to be most vocal between April and October.

The only published description of a nest of Blue Pitta in Thailand is that of HERBERT (1924). Although he did not see the nest "in situ", his collector brought him a nest and five eggs, together with an adult female, which was obtained at Chiengrak Noi, Pathum Thani Province, in early June. The nest was dome-shaped, with a side entrance and was built of dried bamboo leaves. The collector reported that it was situated on the ground, at the foot of a bank and close to a clump of bamboo. There are no recent records of Blue Pitta at this locality which, with complete deforestation and agricultural development, must have changed out of all recognition since HERBERT's day. In India, the nest is usually placed on the ground or on top of a rock or a dead tree stump (ALI & RIPLEY, 1970).

In 1982, we found three Blue Pitta nests at Khao Yai. All three were dome-shaped, with a side entrance, constructed of dry sticks, leaves or grass and were situated off the ground, at the side of a tree trunk, resting on a clump of the epiphytic fern *Asplenium nidus* Linn. Such epiphytes frequently catch leaf debris and other matter which falls from the canopy and may form quite substantial nesting platforms. The Khao Laem nest is shown in Figure 1. Full details of all three nests are given in Table 1. In each case, the nest was found by chance, the incubating or brooding bird being disturbed, flying off the nest in response to the accidental proximity of the observer. The eggs (4), examined in the first nest, were whitish with round lavender spots, mostly grouped towards the blunt end.

On 5 September 1981, one of us (P.D.R.) found a pair of Blue Pittas with at least one young in hill evergreen forest on Doi Suthep, near Chiang Mai. The juvenile had dark brown upperparts with prominent whitish spots on the tips of the greater and median coverts and white spots in the otherwise brown tail. The underparts were whitish, spotted or barred dark and there was a prominent red base to the bill. The face pattern recalled that of the adult, save that there was no orange on the crown or nape. The description of juvenile Blue Pitta in ALI & RIPLEY (1970) corresponds with this, save that they describe the tail as being blue. This may suggest that their description was based upon an immature rather than juvenile individual (i. e., one that had already undergone a post-juvenile moult of flight feathers). Both parents were seen with ease on two successive visits a few hours apart and appeared much less secretive and shy than is usual. This may have been a form of distraction behaviour, the function of which was to lure a potential predator away from the young, although no display was noted other than the utterance of both the "pleeooow-whit" and "skyeew" calls.

Unlike the majority of insectivorous forest birds in Thailand, which breed between February and June (McCLURE, 1974; ROUND, 1982), spanning both the late dry season and early wet season, the Blue Pitta appears to breed mostly in the middle-to-late wet season. At least some other pittas breed similarly late in the year in Thailand. Nests and eggs of the Blue-winged Pitta (*P. moluccensis*) have been found in late June (own observations; HERBERT, 1924); of the Hooded Pitta (*P. sordida*) in late July and of Gurney's Pitta (*P. gurneyi*) in early October (HERBERT, 1924).



Figure 1. Nest of Blue Pitta found near Khao Laem (Mountain), Khao Yai National Park, in July, 1982. Arrow indicates entrance.

Table 1. Details of nests of Blue Pitta (*Pitta cyanea*) found at Khao Yai National Park, Thailand, in 1982.

Location	Date	Contents	Nest diameter (cm)	Orientation of nest entrance	Height above ground (m)	Tree diameter (cm)	Additional details
1. Khao Laem	7 July	4 eggs; male incubating	25	NW	2.5	13	understorey tree, at streamside
2. Mawsingto	21 Aug.	not recorded; male incubating or brooding	not recorded	NNW	2.5	24	understorey tree, height ca. 15 m
3. Mawsingto	12 Sept.	2 nestlings; female brooding	25-30	SW	4.0	50	canopy tree, > 15 m

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