

Beautiful Nuthatch (*Sitta formosa*), a Species New to Thailand

Early in 1986 I found two Beautiful Nuthatches, *Sitta formosa*, on the summit of Doi Pha Hom Pok, in Chiang Mai Province. This species has not been previously recorded in Thailand. It is a secretive bird, and could possibly occur in suitable habitat elsewhere in the north of the country.

On 10 January 1986 I was climbing to the summit of Doi Pha Hom Pok (co-ordinates 20° 04' N, 99° 09' E; altitude 2285 m) in the company of M. Crosby and A. Merritt from England, and R. Cassidy and T. Salinger from South Africa. We had reached the final ridge that includes the summit and were examining several bird flocks, mostly fulvettas, babblers and sunbirds, when we located two large nuthatches, *Sitta sp.*, feeding together in the canopy. Their size and plumage were immediately striking, and we had no difficulty in identifying them as Beautiful Nuthatch, *Sitta formosa*. The canopy was low, 20 m tall hill evergreen forest, with dense encrustations of mosses and epiphytes, and had already been found to contain such species as Black-eared Shrike-Babbler *Pteruthius melanotis*, Rufous Winged Fulvetta *Alcippe castaneiceps*, and Cutia *Cutia nipalensis*. The nuthatches were feeding unobtrusively in the mossy crevices and branches, and we were able to follow their movements for about 20 minutes, at distances of down to 20 m. They were part of a mixed species flock that included Gould's Sunbird *Aethopyga gouldiae*, Rufous-winged Fulvetta, and Golden Babbler *Stachyris chrysaea*, although no close association between the nuthatches and the other species was noted. We suspected that the species was new to Thailand; this was confirmed by P.D. Round. The following description was made from memory, as the original was lost during travelling.

Size and structure. Typical nuthatch structure, with long, dagger-like bill, compact body and short tail. A large bird, the biggest nuthatch any of us had seen, although subsequent views of Giant Nuthatch, *Sitta magna*, elsewhere in northern Thailand, showed the two species to be similar in size, with the former bulkier and more solidly built.

Plumage. Despite the dim lighting conditions, both birds were brightly coloured. The crown was bright blue, with paler nape streaks, contrasting with a dark, matt-blue collar and mantle. Two extensive white wing bars on otherwise bright, intense blue wings, were very striking, and were what first caught my attention. The tertials were blue with fringes, and the tail dark. The underside was bright orange, grading into buff on the throat and ear coverts.

Species distribution. Beautiful Nuthatch has not previously been recorded in Thailand, although the avifauna of most northern mountains is very poorly known. Prior to the Migratory Animal Pathological Survey (MAPS) collecting expedition in October 1965 (KING, 1966), the only ornithologist to visit Doi Pha Hom Pok was Meyer de Schauensee's collector, Lucas Bah, in 1938 (MEYER DE SCHAUENSEE, 1938). Since 1970 only a handful of birdwatchers and research workers have surveyed the

small area of forest, and it is currently inaccessible for security reasons.

Throughout its range, which extends from Sikkim to Yunnan, Beautiful Nuthatch is rare and often described in the literature as "elusive and local". According to SMYTHIES (1953), the species inhabits evergreen forests of the higher hills and is "probably resident where found" though MEYER DE SCHAUENSEE (1984) states that it sometimes descends to the lowlands in winter. ALI & RIPLEY (1983) state that while it is found in summer between 1500 to 2100 m, it extends as low as 300 m in winter. Its known distribution appears to be mainly west-centred, with many sight records and skins from Darjeeling and Assam (ALI, 1962; BETTS, 1956; MATTHEWS & EDWARDS, 1944). Although it appears to be rarer in Burma, with scattered records across the north and east (SMYTHIES, 1953), this may be due to the less intensive coverage of this country.

Two records which are of particular relevance to the bird's occurrence in Thailand are a specimen from the Salween-Mekong watershed in Kentung state, Burma, (SMYTHIES, 1953) and a record from Laos, at Phu Kobo, near to Xien Khouang (DELACOUR & GREENWAY, 1940). These are sited respectively north, and due east of Doi Pha Hom Pok; taken together they suggest a range that could include other mountains in the far north of Thailand, along the Laotian border, in Nan and Chiang Rai Provinces. Although these have a lower elevation than Doi Pha Hom Pok, there are nevertheless approximately 350 km² of forest and secondary growth remaining above 1500 m elevation elsewhere in this region which might be suitable for the species (Conservation Data Center, in litt.).

Whatever the distribution of Beautiful Nuthatch, the destruction or degradation of moist, high elevation forest may represent a major threat to the species in Thailand and elsewhere in its range and the species is listed by COLLAR & ANDREW (1988) as a threatened species.

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