

Scaly-sided Merganser (*Mergus squamatus*) on Doi Inthanon: an Addition to the List of Thai Birds

On 30 January 1991, at ca. 1000 h, PDR and a KingBird Tour Group (Donald Dann, Peary and Roberta Stafford, and Dr. Thomas Weir) were standing at the side of the main highway at Km 13 (ca. 400 m elevation), in Doi Inthanon National Park, Chiang Mai Province, (ca. 18° 31'N; 98° 40'E) after birdwatching in surrounding deciduous dipterocarp woodland, when PDR noticed a duck flying upstream following the course of the Nam Mae Klang. As we put our binoculars on the bird, and in the few seconds that it was in view before it disappeared upstream, it was immediately obvious that it was a female or immature merganser, *Mergus* sp., due to its long and slim head and neck, grey upperparts, rufous-brown head and square white wing-patches. But which species? On size, PDR thought Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*) but the two tour participants who ventured an identification suggested Common Merganser (*M. merganser*) on the basis of the relatively sharp demarcation between the whitish of the breast and sides of the throat, and the rufous-brown head. PDR immediately thought that the possibility of Scaly-sided Merganser (*M. squamatus*) should be considered, since this species was also listed for S.E. Asia by KING ET AL. (1975).

Whatever the species, it was clearly an exciting find since there were no previous records of any merganser for Thailand. However, we had two full days scheduled to birdwatch the higher elevations of the mountain, and since the bird was lost from view we decided to drive up to the park accommodation.

While leaving the mountain on the afternoon on 1 February, we stopped at intervals to scan the river, which runs roughly parallel with the road. An approximately 300–400 m-long stretch of relatively quiet, still water is visible from the road upstream of the Km 14 milestone, and when we stopped there at roughly 1500 h, in order to search for the merganser, we noticed it sitting on the river upstream, towards furthest extremity of this stretch, just downstream of a significant bend in the river course. We put a telescope on 20x on the bird. However, our drivers and guide were talking very loudly, quite oblivious to the goings-on, and this clearly disturbed the bird even at this great range. It took up more alert posture, stretched its head and neck, and swam back upstream, round the bend and out of view. Before it disappeared, PDR and Peary Stafford, in brief views through the telescope, both saw about three distinct vertical scale markings on the flanks, sufficient to establish the identification as Scaly-sided Merganser.

PDR succeeded in getting further brief views by stalking down to the river at a point further upstream, where a fisherman's footpath extended down to the water's edge. The bird was sitting on a boulder near the stream edge but as PDR crawled through the streamside bushes, it slipped into the water and disappeared downstream. We were not able to relocate it.

On 19 February, FV and G. De Smet flushed a merganser from the river at Km 12.5. The bird flew around in circles several times above the observers' heads (FV and GS were now joined by E. Vercruyssen), at a range of about 40 m, enabling positive identification

as a Scaly-sided Merganser. After circling for roughly 5 minutes, the bird disappeared out of sight. However, it was flushed again from the same spot in the late afternoon, this time flying away low over the river and not allowing any further detailed views. PDR together with Jon Dunn and a Wings Tour Group searched the area on 22 February, but the bird could not be found and it was presumed to have gone.

Description: A female merganser appearing closer in size to Red-breasted Merganser than to Common Merganser, being more slender and smaller than the latter. Head closer in shape to Common Merganser than to Red-breasted Merganser (PDR) having a slight crest. (D. Dann commented that the head (meaning crest) lacked the spiky appearance of Red-breasted Merganser.) Colour of head rufous-brown or dull brownish (PDR); rufous (FV). Upperparts grey (PDR) or pale blue-grey, like Common Merganser (FV), with a bold white longitudinal stripe visible along the flanks when on the water (PDR). White breast and belly, and whitish flanks with vertical dark barring or scaling seen as the bird swam off upstream (PDR). FV stated that, from his flight views, scaling on the flanks was present, but was difficult to see and showed as fine vertical streaks rather than as depicted in the illustration in MADGE & BURN (1988). PDR thought the brown of the head extended on to the sides of the throat, but was sharply and clearly demarcated from the grey of the body. FV, however, thought from his flight views that the rufous of the head was not clearly demarcated from the neck and that the throat and chin were pale (whitish). In flight, all observers noted the square white patch on the secondaries which was subequally divided by a distinct black bar, recalling Red-breasted rather than Common Merganser. Rest of upperwing greyish, darker on the primaries; underwing proximally whitish, becoming greyer distally. Bill dusky reddish; feet reddish.

The bird therefore showed a mixture of characters of two species, Common Merganser (head shape; sharp demarcation on sides of neck and rather pure grey upperparts), and Red-breasted Merganser (size, slim build and wing-pattern).

FV is very familiar with both these species, seeing several hundred every winter in Belgium. PDR was formerly familiar with both species, but at time of the observation had not seen either for about ten years.

The Scaly-sided Merganser inhabits fast-flowing small rivers in forested hilly country in extreme S.E. Russia and in adjacent areas of Heilongjiang Province, N.E. China and North Korea. Information on its movements is limited. It may be mainly a short-distance migrant, moving to the lower reaches of rivers in winter. However, there are many records for further afield, including Japan, Korea, and southern China. It has also been recorded in northern Vietnam (DELACOUR ET AL., 1928), Taiwan, and possibly N. Burma (COLLAR ET AL., 1994; MADGE & BURN, 1988). It is listed as vulnerable in COLLAR ET AL. (1994) with a declining world population currently estimated at about 4,000 individuals.

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