

Behavioral and Distributional Notes on the Red-tailed Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron milnei* in Thailand

*Philip D. Round*¹

The Red-tailed Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron milnei* (Fig. 1) inhabits montane forests from northern and eastern Myanmar, through Northwest Thailand, Lao PDR, to Northwestern Vietnam, South and Southeast China (COLLAR & ROBSON, 2020). Though described as “locally common” in montane forest habitats in northern, central and southern Lao PDR (THEWLIS *ET AL.*, 1998; DUCKWORTH *ET AL.*, 1999) in Thailand it is scarce and restricted in range, and known presently from only three mountains in the Northwest.

The first country records of Red-tailed Laughingthrush were obtained by H. M. Smith who collected a total of 16 specimens: seven males and nine females, at Doi Nangka on 9 November 1930 and during 22–27 April 1931 (RILEY, 1938). The locality for one further male that Smith collected, on 5 May 1931, Pang Meton, was identified by RILEY (1938) as the name of a village on that same mountain. DEIGNAN (1945), in referring to these records, mentions only 15 specimens, but states that Smith “found it in large flocks”. Doi Nangka, identified in RILEY (1938) as “a mountainous area northeast of Chiangmai” (*sic*), is presumably more or less coincident with the 2031-m peak marked on present-day maps as Doi Mae Tho, also known as Doi Langka Luang, which lies on the common boundary of Khun Jae National Park, Chiang Rai Province, and Jae Sorn National Park, Lampang Province, at N 19° 00′, E 99° 24′. The occurrence of Red-tailed Laughingthrush at a second site, on Doi Pha Hom Pok, Thailand’s second highest mountain (2285 m), lying on the Thailand–Myanmar border at N 20° 04′ E 99° 08′, within the present-day Doi Pha Hom Pok National Park, Chiang Mai Province, was first mentioned by DEIGNAN (1945) who reported that collectors for Meyer de Schauensee obtained “a fine series” there. This evidently constituted five males, seven females and one of undetermined sex, specimen numbers 131091–131097, 131099–131104, collected during January to February 1938 (The Ornithology Collection at the Academy of Natural Sciences of Drexel University, <https://ansp.org/research/systematics-evolution/ornithology/ornithology-resources/>). Although Deignan may never have visited either mountain, and never saw Red-tailed Laughingthrush in the field, he described it as “a common bird at higher elevations” on both mountains (DEIGNAN, 1945). Somewhat belying Deignan’s assessment of abundance, KING (1966) subsequently collected just seven Red-tailed Laughingthrushes among 761 bird specimens taken on Doi Pha Hom Pok over 49 days (during 19 October to 8 December 1965), at elevations of 1891 m to the mountain summit. Providing additional indication of the relative scarcity of the species, during that same period, only one further individual was banded and released. This compared with no fewer than 57 Silver-eared Laughingthrushes *T. melanostigma* banded and released (three more were collected as specimens); and 33 Scarlet-faced Liocichlas *Liocichla ripponi* banded, alongside 22 specimens (KING, 1966, McCLURE & LEEAVIT, 1972).

¹ Department of Biology, Faculty of Science, Mahidol University, Rama 6 Road, Bangkok 10400, Thailand.

E-mail: philip.rou@mahidol.ac.th

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All three species are roughly similar-sized and occupy similar habitats in the same elevational zone and vegetation stratum, mainly understory, often on, or close to the ground.

The only other Thai mountain from which the Red-tailed Laughingthrush has been recorded is Doi Ang Khang, Chiang Mai Province (maximum elevation 1907 m, N 19° 52', E 99° 03') where the first record, a field sighting, was on 26 December 1983 (P. Kennerley, *in litt.* to the author). The precise elevation of the sighting was unrecorded, but was thought to be around 1600–1700 m. In the ensuing nearly 30 years only another ten subsequent independent sightings of Red-tailed Laughingthrush, totaling no more than 12 individuals, were logged from Doi Ang Khang on eBird (<https://ebird.org/home>), even though this mountain is one of the most heavily visited sites for watching montane birds in the country. Additionally, on Doi Pha Hom Pok (both in the vicinity of its summit, and on its north-eastern ridge, Doi Lang, c. N 20° 06', E 99° 08'), just four independent field sightings were logged: of a single individual, two sightings of three birds and a flock of six (<https://ebird.org/home>). The author was present and involved in two of these sightings, one of which is referred to below. Taken together, these records would seem to indicate that Red-tailed Laughingthrush is either one of the scarcest, or most difficult to observe and elusive, resident montane forest birds in northern Thailand. In contrast to Doi Pha Hom Pok and Doi Ang Khang, the site where Red-tailed Laughingthrush was first recorded, Doi Langka Luang, is comparatively little studied and lacks contemporary records of the species. All three locations (Fig. 2) were shown in the species distribution map in LEKAGUL & ROUND (1991).

On 21 April 2006, together with Woraphot Bunkhwamdee and Akalak Kunsorn, the author observed three Red-tailed Laughingthrushes moving through the dense understorey/ground storey vegetation of hill evergreen forest in a moist stream gully on Doi Lang at c. 2000 m elevation (the record is cited on eBird under the name of the first-listed observer, above). During this period the laughingthrushes visited a clump of fruiting *Aralia thomsonii* Seem. ex C. B. Clarke, a tall herb (Family Araliaceae), at the side of a small stream-bed, in order to take its ripe blackish fruits. The Red-tailed Laughingthrushes visited the plant twice in approximately three hours of observation, each time for only a few minutes, during 1100 h to 1400 h. On the following day the same fruiting clump of *Aralia* was watched by the same observers from 0950 h to 1257 h. During that period, it was visited four times by at least two Silver-eared Laughingthrushes; by (presumably the same) three Red-tailed Laughingthrushes once (for a period of four minutes); on two occasions by a single Whiskered Yuhina *Yuhina flavicollis*; twice by a single Striated Bulbul *Pycnonotus striatus* and on two occasions by Mountain Bulbuls *Ixos mcclllandii* (two and one individuals). Fruits of Theaceae were the only plant items, alongside various invertebrates, previously listed in the diet of Red-tailed Laughingthrush by COLLAR & ROBSON (2020).

The Red-tailed Laughingthrushes were not seen simultaneously with, nor did they otherwise associate with, the much commoner and more widespread Silver-eared Laughingthrushes, even though the two species are highly similar in size and shape, and ostensibly share similar, moist montane forest habitat preferences and general ecology. On one occasion a Red-tailed Laughingthrush was displaced from the *Aralia* clump by a Silver-eared Laughingthrush and rapidly moved off. In contrast to the rather noisily vocal Silver-eared Laughingthrushes, the Red-tailed Laughingthrushes uttered no audible calls during either day of observation and indeed this species appears to be remarkably silent and unusually unobtrusive among laughingthrushes and other members of the bird family Leiothrichidae. After first becoming familiar with the song of the species (from an analogue tape-recording,



Figure 1. Red-tailed Laughingthrush *Trochalopteron milnei*, Gaolingongshan Nature Reserve, Western Yunnan, People's Republic of China, 24 December 2017. Photograph by Ding Li Yong.

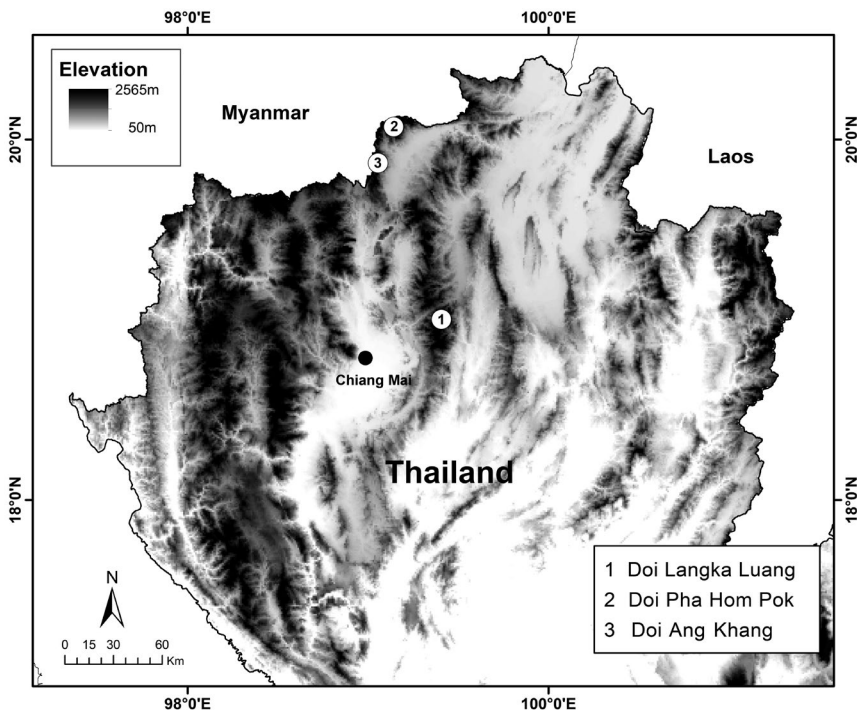


Figure 2. Map of northern Thailand to show the three principal localities mentioned in the text.

from Lao PDR, provided by P. Davidson during the mid-1990s) the author has only heard the Red-tailed Laughingthrush singing on a single occasion, on 19 June 1998, on Doi Ang Khang. Possibly the species is strongly seasonal in calling pattern and more inclined to remain undetected during the October–April dry season, when most observations of birds are made. Among the 15 independent records of Red-tailed Laughingthrush on eBird from the two localities mentioned above there was only a single report from the early wet season (July), when breeding might be expected, and one other in September. On the other hand, its extreme vocal reticence might be a response to the presence of the much more common and widespread Silver-eared Laughingthrush in regions where the two are sympatric, perhaps in order to avoid direct conflict or competition with that species. J. W. Duckworth (*in litt.* to the author) also observed that Red-tailed Laughingthrush was neither very vocal, nor inclined to join flocks of other laughingthrushes in Lao PDR. In contrast, P. Kennerley (*in litt.*) recalled Red-tailed Laughingthrushes on Ba Bao Shan, Guangdong Province, South-east China, inside Nanling National Forest Park, where it is apparently the only laughingthrush present in moist forest of the montane zone, as being highly vocal, though skulking. P. Thompson (*in litt.*), also from observations in China, concurred, describing the species as “skulking” and “unobtrusive” in dense understorey vegetation.

Red-tailed Laughingthrush is treated as nationally Endangered by ONEP (2017) and as Vulnerable by the Bird Conservation Society of Thailand (2022) on the basis of its extreme scarcity and restricted range in high-elevation forest habitat. The earlier anecdotal accounts of its relative abundance, as reported in DEIGNAN (1945), seem at variance with its present low detectability, but it remains unclear whether there has been any genuine decline. The core area of Red-tailed Laughingthrush habitat, on a few mountain peaks, largely above 1800 m, and lying within present-day protected areas, remains little changed. Notwithstanding the likely occurrence of the species in the illegal wildlife trade, the Red-tailed Laughingthrush (with four constituent subspecies; DICKINSON & CHRISTIDIS, 2014) is treated globally as Least Concern (BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL, 2023). However, the species’ ecology, habitat use and its interactions with the congeneric Silver-eared Laughingthrush in its few Thai localities would clearly reward more detailed study. This would further greatly enhance our knowledge of the present status of the Red-tailed Laughingthrush in the kingdom.

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