



Bombay Natural History Society

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Media Release

September 12, 2006

Discovery of new Bird Species in India

A professional astronomer has made the most sensational ornithological discovery in India for more than half a century [1, 2]. Dr. Ramana Athreya has found a new species of bird in remote Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary of north-eastern India. The *Bugun Liocichla*, a kind of babbler, is strikingly coloured. Its overall plumage is various shades of olive, with a black cap, bright yellow patch in front of eye, golden-yellow, crimson, black and white patches on the wing, and red-tipped tail feathers which are flame-coloured on the underside.

Although two *Bugun Liocichlas* were caught, both were released and no scientific specimen was collected. "We thought the bird was just too rare for one to be killed," said Dr. Ramana. "With today's modern technology, we could gather all the information we needed to confirm it as a new species. We took feathers and photographs, and recorded the bird's song [3]."

But detailed examination of the Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary birds in comparison with specimens and tape recordings of *Emei Shan Liocichlas* revealed many plumage and vocal differences.[4, 5] The known population of the *Bugun Liocichla* consists of only 14 individuals including three breeding pairs. The species is not particularly shy and is very distinctive, so it must be very rare or it would certainly have been found earlier.

"This is the kind of paper you dream about receiving," said Aasheesh Pittie, Editor of "Indian Birds" where the description of the *Bugun Liocichla* was published. "The discovery of a new bird is really special, but when it's a stunning species with no geographically close relatives, and in a part of the world where bird collectors have sampled birds for more than a century, it's nothing short of miraculous [6]."

Dr. Asad R. Rahmani, Director, BNHS commented, 'I congratulate Ramana Athreya on his discovery. I am extremely happy with the discovery of new bird species in India.' He further added, 'This discovery again proves the importance and need of extensive research and exploration in north-eastern India. We must also see that the habitat is protected for such species. Presumably the new species has a tiny range, so habitat protection is very important for its survival [7].'

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Notes:

1. The last species discovered in the field in mainland India was the Rusty-throated "Mishmi" Wren-babbler *Spelaeornis badeigularis*, described by Ripley from eastern Arunachal Pradesh in 1948.
2. Dr. Ramana Athreya is an astronomer at the National Centre for Radio Astrophysics, Pune, which is the radio astronomy group of Tata Institute of Fundamental Research. He spends most of his spare time working on biodiversity documentation and conservation issues related to Arunachal Pradesh. He is a life member of BNHS.
3. The normal procedure when a new species is described is to preserve a dead individual in a museum as the "type specimen," which acts as proof of the species' existence and of the features that distinguish it from other species. The description of a new bird species without a formal specimen is not without precedent. In 1988 a male Bush-shrike of an unknown species was trapped in Somalia and later described as the Bulu Burti Boubou *Laniarius liberatus*. To date it remains the sole example of the species ever recorded. The materials from the new *Liocichla* are the Bombay Natural History Society's collections in Mumbai, India.
4. The bird was discovered during the course of the Eaglenest Biodiversity Project, a multi-faceted conservation project led by Dr. Athreya in partnership with Mr. Indi Glow of the Bugun tribe. Dr. Athreya has been working on the Eaglenest Biodiversity Project for the last 3 years. The objectives of this project are to understand the faunal assemblage of Eaglenest, the factors affecting their long-term conservation and to involve the local communities in the protection of Eaglenest. The last necessarily involves understanding the socio-economic developmental imperatives of those local communities. The Buguns live on the periphery of Eaglenest and one of the goals of the project is to help the community profit from ecotourism to the area. The project was assisted by grants from the Rufford-Maurice-Laing Foundation (UK) and Ford Foundation/Winrock India.
5. The Bugun *Liocichla* is only the fourth known species of *Liocichla*, a particular genus within the highly diverse bird family known as babblers or Timaliidae. The other *Liocichlas* are Red-faced *Liocichla* *Liocichla phoenicea*, which is widespread in South-East Asia, Emei Shan *Liocichla* *Liocichla omeiensis* (sometimes spelled Omei Shan), confined to a few mountains in Central China, and Steere's *Liocichla* *Liocichla steerii*, which occurs only in Taiwan.
6. The formal descriptions of Bugun *Liocichla*, including the species' scientific name, appear in the July/August issue of Indian Birds. The paper can be downloaded at www.indianbirds.in
7. The Bombay Natural History Society is the largest and oldest NGO in India, working in the field of conservation research. It is a premier organisation on bird species and habitat research. It is the BirdLife International partner organisation in India. BirdLife International is a global alliance of conservation organisations working in more than 100 countries, together they are the leading authority on the status of birds, their habitats and the issues and problems affecting them.



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