

NOTEBOOK

Finding the Malayan Whistling Thrush

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Introduction

Whistling thrushes are special due to their secretive nature and scarcity. Essentially shy forest-dwellers, they prefer riverine environments in moist broadleaved forests mostly in hilly areas, and emerge in the open only briefly, usually at dawn and dusk. They are uniformly dark, medium to large thrushes with a characteristic bright metallic blue “shoulder patch” in the lesser wing-coverts, not always visible under field conditions. This exclusive club contains nine species, all in the genus *Myophonus*, with the membership restricted to the Oriental region (Collar 2005). Their sharp whistle-like vocalisations, which give them their common name, are adapted to carry over the noise of water (Rasmussen & Anderton 2005), thus betraying their presence. Malayan Whistling Thrush *Myophonus robinsoni* is one of the two endemic bird species recorded in Peninsular Malaysia and is classified as Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2001). It is recorded in the hill forests of Pahang and Selangor States from 760–1,770 m (Robson 2000).

A ravine close to the barrier at the top of the old Gap Road at Fraser’s Hill in Pahang, Peninsular Malaysia, is traditionally regarded as the best site for seeing this enigmatic endemic. However, despite hard work, some birders fail to see the species here. I spent six days at Fraser’s Hill from 4–9 October 2005 and had excellent views of it at dawn on four occasions out of five attempts. I also saw it near the waterfall at Fraser’s Hill unexpectedly; a total of five sightings in five days!

Observations

5 October—I arrive at the gate at Fraser’s Hill at 6.25 a.m. It is still dark, but the area is lit by street lights. I have the site to myself, remaining optimistic despite reports that the site is not so good for Malayan Whistling Thrush as before. Anticipating that the bird will cross from right to left, I position myself on the right side of the road facing the barrier, standing behind the second ornamental tree before the black and white painted kerb (hereafter referred as the kerb) Plate 1. The gate keeper bound for The Gap arrives by car at 6.30 a.m., closes the barrier and drives down the road. A one-way system operates on the old Gap Road during the day: traffic comes up during “odd-numbered” hours and down during “even-numbered” hours. At 6.35 a.m. a whistling thrush calls from the ravine on the right; it moves closer, and at 6.40 a.m. a dark bird that



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Plate 1. The “traditional” site of Malayan Whistling Thrush *Myophonus robinsoni* close to the gate—top of the old Gap Road at Fraser’s Hill, Pahang, Peninsular Malaysia.

proves to be a Malayan Whistling Thrush hops along the kerb. It gives excellent views whilst feeding on an insect in the light of the nearby street lamp. Soon it flies to a tree on the right but quickly reappears on the kerb before dropping down to the pavement. It then flies across the road, disappearing into the vegetation flanking the stream on the left and calls again. Moments later it materialises in the same tree and remains there before finally disappearing into the dense vegetation on the right by 6.45 a.m. Later in the day I meet Jimmy Chew, a serious photographer who has driven from Singapore to join me for a few days.

6 October—Some overnight rain. Jimmy and another friend join me and we reach the barrier by 6.25 a.m. and position ourselves as I did yesterday. The gate keeper again passes by at 6.30 a.m. and the Malayan Whistling Thrush calls at around 6.40 a.m. but doesn’t cooperate, although we wait until 7.10 a.m. Were we not disciplined enough, or is the overnight rain a factor?

7 October—No overnight rain. Jimmy and I arrive at 6.25 a.m. and by 6.30 a.m. the gate keeper does his daily ritual. At 6.35 a.m. a Malayan Whistling Thrush starts calling and soon makes an appearance on the kerb; it drops down and hops towards us—too close for Jimmy’s 600 mm lens! Soon it flies to the tree on the right and disappears. At 6.45 a.m. it calls again and materialises on the roof of the first hut before the blue board on the right (referred hereafter as the first hut). Seconds later it drops down and hops around on the kerb and pavement, picks up an insect and flies across the road to a boulder on the left. There it rubs the insect carefully on the rock before swallowing it



JIMMY CHEW

Plate 2. Malayan Whistling Thrush *Myophonus robinsoni* at Fraser's Hill on 7 October 2005.

and flies back to the ravine on the right. Jimmy has got his photograph of the elusive Malayan Whistling Thrush (Plate 2) but he is not totally satisfied. In late afternoon we visit the waterfall at Fraser's Hill and at 4.30 p.m. a Malayan Whistling Thrush makes an appearance on a rock in the stream behind the toilets.

8 October—We are in position sharp at 6.25 a.m., but the gate keeper does not go down until 6.42 a.m. As the light improves, other birds call. Finally at 6.52 a.m. the call of the Malayan Whistling Thrush fills the air, but it doesn't emerge. At 7.05 a.m. as we are about to leave, it appears on the veranda of the first hut. It is an awkward angle for Jimmy, so he goes forward to improve his chances, only to flush it into the ravine on the right. We wait for it to reappear, but at 7.10 a.m. the Fraser's Hill gate keeper enters the gate-house and turns his radio on. It is time for us to move on! Jimmy says good-bye and sets off home.

9 October—It is 6.25 a.m. and I start my final vigil. The gate keeper arrives at 6.30 a.m. and at 6.37 a.m. the bird calls behind the first hut. A minute later it appears on the kerb and feeds on insects under the street lamp. It then flies to a tree on the right, before reappearing on the kerb, then it flies down to the ravine on the right. Moments later it is back on the kerb and then on the roof of the first hut, before disappearing into the thicket on the right.

Discussion

A good strategy is essential to observe shy forest dwellers and Malayan Whistling Thrush is no exception. I adopted a strategy based on my experience of the related Sri Lanka Whistling Thrush *Myophonus blighii*, which is traditionally observed at a somewhat similar riverine site—a ravine cloaked in dense vegetation beside a road, with the latter bisecting a territory. The bird has to cross the road when moving around its territory and may be tempted briefly onto open ground to find an easy meal at dawn.

My experience of these two whistling thrushes is that they usually come to nearby trees prior to flying across the road or descending to open ground to feed and retreat to them if alarmed. An observer should stand well clear of the regular crossing route, the open ground it may visit to find an early meal and the trees it is likely to use in transit. I suggest that many failures to see whistling thrushes are due to observers intruding into this space. It is important to arrive at the site early (before dawn) and settle at the vantage point as unobtrusively as possible with minimum noise and movement. When the bird emerges, it is not advisable to advance towards it as this quite often scares it off. My experience at Fraser's Hill suggests that the best vantage point is the position I took up on 5 October. If the group size is large, standing further back may improve your chances.

At Fraser's Hill, the top barrier of the old Gap Road is usually closed by 6.30 a.m., stopping movement of vehicles on the road and setting the stage for uninhibited movement of the bird, well before the time it emerges. The bird is often tempted to look for an easy insect meal under the street lamp, which also helps observers to view it better in otherwise poorly lit conditions. The site is conveniently located to the accommodation at Fraser's Hill (walking distance from some). Thanks to these features, this site is still good for the Malayan Whistling Thrush if you follow the right strategy.

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