

# The status of the Black-rumped Magpie *Pica (pica) bottanensis* in India

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The presence of the Eurasian Magpie *Pica pica* (*sensu lato*) in India (Praveen *et al.* 2016) is predominantly based on the well-documented occurrence of the race *bactriana* in the north-western Himalayas east to northern Himachal Pradesh (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; Dickinson & Christidis 2014). However, the question as to whether the taxon *bottanensis* may additionally occur, or have occurred, in Sikkim has recently resurfaced as a result of a comprehensive molecular phylogenetic study of the genus *Pica* by Song *et al.* (2018), who recognised *Pica (p.) bottanensis* to be an anciently diverged and distinctive lineage. Taking into account additional evidence from morphology (Madge 2009) and vocalizations (Kryukov *et al.* 2017), Song *et al.* (2018) advocated its recognition as a full species within their revised taxonomy of the genus. In doing so, they vindicated the far earlier conclusion of Hume (1877, 1880), who strenuously argued for the species status of *bottanensis* on the basis of its morphological distinctiveness. Song *et al.* (2018) did not suggest an English name, but we use the name Black-rumped Magpie, which has a long history of exclusive use for *P. bottanensis* (e.g., Oates 1889).

The distribution of *bottanensis* predominantly encompasses the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau region, but includes Bhutan and, putatively, Sikkim (Rasmussen & Anderton 2012). Its occurrence in Sikkim appears to rest on just three specimens: two collected on behalf of Louis Mandelli (1833–1880) that subsequently passed via Allan Octavian Hume into the collection of the Natural History Museum (NHMUK), where they are registered as 1886.3.1.435 (interior of Native Sikkim, Sikkim; September 1873) and 1886.3.1.436 (Sikkim; April 1873); and one in the collection of Richard Meinertzhagen (1878–1967), whose collection also passed to NHMUK, where it is registered as 1965.M.19302 (male; Gyagong, Sikkim–Tibet border; 21 November 1925). Gyagong, in fact, lies well within northern Sikkim (see: <https://www.scribd.com/doc/38056732/Map-of-Sikkim>; accessed on 02 January 2018), as Meinertzhagen (1927, plate 12) himself showed on the map accompanying his paper on the birds he claimed to have collected during his visit there in winter 1925–1926.

As previously alluded to in a synopsis of large-scale fraud in his bird collection (Rasmussen & Prŷs-Jones 2003), there is ample reason to dismiss the validity of Meinertzhagen's specimen. According to the colourful information written by Meinertzhagen on his label for the specimen, it was collected by him from "on a yak! one of a pair" [51]. However, in its make-up 1965.M.19302 is entirely typical of the Mandelli series of *bottanensis* (1886.3.1.435–445), in particular two from "Thibet" (1886.3.1.443, 444: October 1877) [52]. Both the Meinertzhagen and Mandelli specimens are extremely flattened and, most unusually, are stuffed with dried moss that is easily visible in their unsewn belly incisions [53]. Furthermore, X-rays of the Meinertzhagen 1965.M.19302 and the Mandelli 1886.3.1.444 reveal nearly identical preparation styles, lacking salient differences [54]. One Mandelli specimen (1886.3.1.445: Thibet; November 1877) is now missing from the NHMUK collection, and this must surely be 1965.M.19302, stolen and relabelled by Meinertzhagen. This conclusion was inadvertently corroborated by Meinertzhagen himself, who when discussing his 1925–26 fieldwork in Sikkim wrote: "No Magpie was met with in northern Sikkim. It seems doubtful whether *P. p. bottanensis* has ever occurred

within Native Sikkim, any such records having more probably been a mistake for southern Tibet," (Meinertzhagen 1927: 371). There is thus a clear contradiction between his own writings and the existence of his specimen, from which we deduce that he most likely stole the specimen later, relabelling it without consulting what he had previously written.

Moreover, Meinertzhagen's 1927 dismissal, without cited evidence, of the provenance of Mandelli's Sikkim *bottanensis* specimens has influenced subsequent authorities (e.g., Baker 1932; Ripley 1961, 1982; Ali 1962; Ali & Ripley 1987) to follow suit. As manager of a tea plantation in Darjeeling, Mandelli was physically isolated from other ornithologists and very restricted in his travel opportunities, so had to assemble his bird collection almost entirely through the use of native collectors (Pinn 1985; Collar & Prŷs-Jones 2012). This clearly, in principle, provided scope for errors of provenance to creep in, but based on our considerable wider study of Mandelli specimen material we are not aware of any precedents to make us doubt their stated origins, regardless of the failure of later Sikkim visitors to record *bottanensis*.

In addition to the specimen evidence



51. Close-up of reverse of Meinertzhagen's label on specimen 1965.M.19302, in his handwriting, except for NHMUK registration number.



52. Ventral view of Mandelli's specimen 1886.3.1.444 (left), and Meinertzhagen's specimen 1965.M.19302 (right).



53. Ventral X-ray images of Mandelli's specimen 1886.3.1.444 (left, 8A), and Meinertzhagen's specimen 1965.M.19302 (right, 8B).



54. Close-up of Fig. 2, showing stuffing material protruding from belly incision of Mandelli's specimen 1886.3.1.444 (left), and Meinertzhagen's specimen 1965.M.19302 (right).

cited above, Baker (1932: 24) states that "Mr. St. J. Hickley sent me nests and eggs [of *bottanensis*] which I understood from him were taken in Northern Sikkim. Since then, however, Stevens, Meinertzhagen and Bailey have not observed this Magpie in Sikkim and it is possible that they came from across the border in South Tibet." Unfortunately, Hickley's specimens appear not to have entered Baker's collection, being neither mentioned under the relevant taxonomic heading in volume 1 of Baker's hand-written catalogue, held in NHMUK, nor being physically present within the NHMUK, where much of Baker's egg collection now resides. Unless and until future research into Hickley and his collection, should it still exist, suggests otherwise, the true provenance of Hickley's Sikkim *bottanensis* egg/nest specimens must remain an open question. Finally, based on an extrapolation of comments made by Ludlow & Kinnear (1944), both Ripley (1982) and Ali & Ripley (1987) raise the possibility of *bottanensis* occurring in potentially suitable habitat in Arunachal Pradesh, which is probably also what Goodwin (1986) means when he refers to it as occurring in Assam, but no evidence to support this supposition seems to have become available.

In their account of *Pica (p.) bottanensis*, Rasmussen & Anderton (2012: 596) stated: "Mandelli Sikkim specimens here considered probably valid; Meinertzhagen's fraudulent." In this paper we have provided the available specimen facts on which this conclusion was reached in order to facilitate potential consideration as to the admissibility of this putative species to the official Indian list.

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### A comment on the status of *Pica (pica) bottanensis* in Sikkim

Prŷs-Jones & Rasmussen (elsewhere in this issue) put forward a strong case for the existence of the *Pica (pica) bottanensis* in Sikkim based on the assessment of a controversial specimen. Their work should discount all claims that Meinertzhagen has put on that particular Mandelli's specimen and cast doubts on the reliability of his subsequent comments. However, as rightly pointed out by the authors, no individual or team have actually found the *bottanensis* in Sikkim since then; and that needs further pondering.

The habitat within the Himalayas where this species is known to occur, namely, the Bumthang Valley of Bhutan, does not resemble the habitats found in northern Sikkim. It is very likely that Ludlow, Ripley and Ali have exclaimed about the possibilities of this species occurring in Arunachal especially in the extreme eastern part like Upper Dibang Valley and Anjaw which have a habitat similar to the Bumthang Valley. During my trips to Bhutan till date, I rarely found it occurring far away from human habitation and it was not a shy bird. If we consider that the species occurred in Native Sikkim during a period in history, we must also try to dig out what may have brought about its local extinction within some decades. In very recent years a few of the birdwatchers from Sikkim and even myself have ventured into the interior valleys of North Sikkim viz. Lhonak, Muguthang, etc., which can only be accessed on foot. Though most of the Tibetan Plateau species have been found to occur, no habitat having resemblance with the ones in Bhutan were observed.

Mandelli was stationed in the Darjeeling District and was in charge of quite a few tea gardens, and had no other way than appointing people for making the collections – as also pointed by the authors. During those days, only traders and Yak herders used to ply across North Sikkim to Tibet apart from a few expeditions. It is very much likely that the specimens of Mandelli's collection may have changed multiple hands, and that the origin of the collection was in Tibet. It is quite unlikely that Mandelli's local collectors ventured to extreme North Sikkim or Tibet keeping in mind the time involved in such travel during those days. The local collectors must have had to involve further recruiters or may have passed the message to the regular travellers for collection of specimens. Another major aspect in misrepresenting the place of collection was the language. Most of Mandelli's direct collectors were supposed to be Gurkhas or Nepalese because of his place of work and association with tea gardens. Whereas the traders or Yak herders were mainly Bhotias (not Bhutanese; Bhot = Tibet) who did not know the local language (Nepalese) well enough or not at all. So there is every possibility that the location names got muddled and the actual specimens were collected somewhere in Tibet.

Hence, it is highly unlikely *Pica bottanensis* have ever occurred in Sikkim and the species should still be kept out of the list of Indian birds until unassailable evidence is gathered.

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## Ethno-ornithology of Karen and Ranchi inhabitants of the Andaman Islands: An annotated checklist of local names and etymology

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Mohanty, N. P., & Chakravarty, R., 2018. Ethno-ornithology of Karen and Ranchi inhabitants of the Andaman Islands: An annotated checklist of local names and etymology. *Indian BIRDS* 14 (3): 73–78.

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The importance of community knowledge has long been recognised in ecological research and has also been adopted into systematic analytical frameworks (e.g., Pillay *et al.* 2014). Ethno-ornithology provides insights into the interactions of the local community with the avifauna of the region, including its utilitarian and cultural values. For example, Agnihotri & Si (2012) examined the ethno-ornithology of the

Solega community in Karnataka to discern dynamic processes underlying folk taxonomy and the importance of birds in folklore. Ethno-ornithological knowledge can also form the basis of community-based conservation (see Gosler 2010).

The avifauna of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands has been well documented and is subject to regular ecological research (see references in Pittie 2007; Sundaramoorthy 2010; Koparde &