Gee Whiz! Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx fugax nisicolor* in the Sisuwa and Sankhuwa river valleys, Makalu-Barun National Park Buffer Zone.

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The strange calls at midday on 10 June 2002, from bushes fringing Chakele Kharka (27° 30.285' N 86° 59.989' E; *c.* 1745 m altitude) in the upper Sisuwa Khola, were unlike any I could remember. Despite a careful approach the concealed caller slipped away to shrubs 20 m further along the perimeter, and resumed its loud, piercing series of ascending double notes: *PEE weet...PEEE weet...PEEEE WEET!* This increasingly frantic call, given 7-18 times without pause, was usually appended by quicker, rising and falling chatter that was difficult to characterize. Also, the quick series of second calls were less strident and much shorter in duration compared to the first.

Field assistant Dirga S. Rai tried to coax the bird into the open by arcing unobtrusively through forest bordering the *kharka* (meadow). At a distance of *c.*12 m the bird went silent, then 2-3 min later began calling again from a low perch in dense vegetation 25-30 m away. Two more attempts by DSR to flush the individual yielded the same result.

When a monsoon shower set in at 14h25, and soon intensified to a downpour, the regular calling stopped. We abandoned hope of a sighting and turned our attention to lunch. At 15h50 the rain tapered off. Suddenly, a medium-size grey bird flew to the top of an alder *Alnus nipalensis* in the center of the *kharka*. Perched on a middle branch *c.* 8 m above the ground, a cuckoo spread its wings and tail to dry in the bright overcast light, and briefly repeated the previous calls. The open structure of the alder allowed good views of the plumage for 12 min with Swift Ultralite 10 x 40 binoculars from a distance of *c.* 12 m.

The upperparts were dark slaty grey, unlike the paler grey of Large Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx sparverioides*, which was heard calling 30-50 m in elevation above the *kharka*. Size was also noticeably smaller than that species. Underpart feathers were wet and ruffled, showing a pale rufous unstreaked breast, clear whitish throat and belly, and dark grey chin. There was no indication of barring on the underparts. Feet and eye-ring were yellow, and the bill appeared stubby for a cuckoo.

The splayed tail was seen well from above and below. Three grey bands alternated in indistinctly with black ones, the latter most prominent as a penultimate wide band. The tail was tipped pale rufous, grading to whitish distally.

Once these main characters were noted, and the plumages of most other cuckoos in Nepal quickly recalled, I was confident the bird was Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo *H. fugax*. *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* (Grimmett *et al.* 1998) was subsequently consulted, which confirmed the observation. The only discernable characters at variance with the referred account were absence of a frequently shown pale inner tertial (not present? obscured by the angle of view?), "much rufous on underparts" (vs. less extensive pale rufous), and the onomatopoeic rendition of the call: *gee-whiz...gee-whiz.*

Grimmett *et al.* (1998) note that the "throat and breast may show dark grey streaking". Ali and Ripley (1997) have only "the throat and foreneck sparsely streaked with grey" for *H. f. nisicolor*, the subspecies occurring in Nepal. Robson (2000a, b, 2002) and Wells (1999) report a variable amount of pinkish rufous on the breast and upper belly, which appears rather uniform if very finely streaked. Dark underpart streaks are variable or split whitish. Payne (in press) describes the throat as white, and breast light rufous with thin streaks of rufous and brown on the sides. Streaking (if present) on the underparts of the Chakele bird may have been obscured by its wet and ruffled feathers.

The presumed same individual at Chakele was seen later on 10 June at 1680 m. We crossed the Sisuwa below the *kharka* and descended through dense scrub forest. At 17h40 and *c.* 250 m E of Chakele the cuckoo resumed its loud *PEE weet* calls. After several series the more complex adjunct call was added. The bird then emerged and was watched for 10 min at a distance of *c.* 40 m from an obscured, slightly higher vantage point on the opposite bank of the river. The individual made short, hopping flights to open perches 3-5 m above the ground in a dense littoral understorey of shrubs and small trees. Views of the upperparts and underparts corresponded to those at Chakele. While pausing silently on an exposed stump, the bird turned and twisted its neck as if searching below for food.

The habits of Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo are poorly documented on the subcontinent (Ali and Ripley 1997), ostensibly due to its secretive behaviour. As noted in the upper Sisuwa, the species favors low levels in trees and bushes (Ali and Ripley 1997; Grimmett *et al.* 1998), but may move higher when calling (Grimmett *et al.* 1998).

While we camped at Dupdap Kharka (27° 30.280' N 87° 00.398' E; 1614 m) on the morning of 11 June 2002, a Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo (same individual?) was heard calling again from the Chakele Kharka area. In addition, a vocal Large Hawk Cuckoo was seen well near Dupdap at *c.* 1700 m – below its heretofore minimum summer elevation in Nepal of 1830 m (Grimmett *et al.* 2000).

Habitat in the Chakele and Dupdap areas is dense moist broadleaf forest of the upper subtropical zone. Canopy vegetation is comprised mainly by successional alder-hibiscus on landslips along the valley walls and tall alder in the grazed bottom. Larger evergreen and deciduous tree species are well-represented on more stable surfaces. Away from the kharkas, dense understorey vegetation is dominated by thorny thickets of roses and *Ribes* with *Mussandra* and *Osbeckia*. Sedges and ferns form dense ground cover.

Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo was heard again on 11 June at 1500-1550 m in the afternoon, 2.2 km E of Chakele above the settlement of Rem Dobhan (= Paukhumtar; 27° 30.365' N 87° 01.212' E). The main call was given four times at widely spaced intervals in series of 6-7 notes from a distance of *c.* 0.5 km. Calls emanated from a band of scrub forest between mixed broadleaf forest above and corn fields below. The distance between the two sites and the stationary caller positions suggests a second territorial individual.

On 13 June the main call of the species was given briefly at dawn near Kuwapani Kharka (1782 m; 27° 30.148' N 87° 01.578' E). Both calls were heard at close range later in the day

above Bildo Kharka in dense upper subtropical/lower temperate forest at 1900-1950 m while we ascended Chitre Danda. (The two sites are *c.* 700 m and 1 km respectively from Rem Dobhan).

Additional individuals of Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo were subsequently noted in the Sankhuwa Khola, *c.* 9 km E of Chakele Kharka. The main call was heard E of Chirkhuwa village at *c.* 930 m from 16h20 to16h55 on 23 June and 9h40-10h10 on 24 June in steep dense forest of mixed evergreen broadleaves and Nepal Screwpine *Pandanus nipalensis*. A Large Hawk Cuckoo called constantly in the same area on both dates, and was observed at close range on 24 June. The records of Large constitute a new minimum summer elevation for that species in Nepal.

Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo is distributed in southern and eastern Asia. Four subspecies (*fugax, nisicolor, hyperythrus and pectoralis*) are recognized morphologically by Ali and Ripley (1997); three by del Hoyo *et al.* (1997), who elevated *pectoralis* to a separate species. *H. f. nisicolor* is the westernmost form, occurring in summer on the subcontinent from Nepal and the Eastern Himalayas to the NE Indian hills and Bangladesh (Ali and Ripley 1997); and extralimitally resident in S and E Myanmar, Tenasserim, Thailand (except C), N and C Laos, Peninsular Malaysia, W Tonkin and C Annam (Robson 2000a, b). The subspecies migrates S in winter to Sumatra, Java and Borneo (del Hoyo *et al.*1997), but at least some Himalayan birds may be residents wintering nearby at lower elevations (King 2002).

According to Robson (2000a, b, 2002), *nisicolor* differs from the other subspecies by darker grey upperparts, a distinctive tertial pattern (one feather strikingly whiter than the rest; either plain, or barred/notched darker), and the last part of its peculiar second call. In common with the other subspecies, this call begins with a rapid sequence of "ti-ti-tu" phrases that accelerate and ascend to a shrill crescendo or climax(es). In *nisicolor* each climax is followed by a rapid "trrrrr-tititititititrrrtrrr". By contrast, other subspecies append the climax with a slower, more even "tu-tu-tu" that tails off.

King *et al.* (1998) describe a "*pee*" for the second call of the species (ssp. *nisicolor*?) which resembles Robson's (2000a, b, 2002) rendition. They add, however, that after the peaks (= climaxes) the call drops part way in pitch before building to the next peak. After three or four peaks the call trails off rapidly at the end. Both descriptions are phonically consistent with calls heard in the Sisuwa.

In a subsequent study based on vocalizations, King (2002) grouped the four *H. fugax* subspecies as a complex comprising four distinct forms. In addition, he acknowledged the clear morphological differences between adult *H. f. nisicolor* and *fugax* (Chasen 1939; Robson 2002; Payne in press) and recommended their treatment as good species, although interpretation of audiospectagram variations from a limited range of individuals and calls of the two forms was inconclusive. The first and second calls were redefined as songs and "long calls", with the latter of *nisicolor* and *fugax* syllabicated respectively as "*witititititititititititi-ti ti*" and "*wadawadawadawadawadaquedeequedee quedeequedeetototototo-to-to to*".

Payne (in press) has assembled additional audiospectagrams, which collectively show significant differences in *nisicolor* and *fugax* long calls across their allopatric ranges. He resurrects *H. nisicolor* (Blyth 1843) as a distinct species and assigns the common name of Whistling Hawk-cuckoo following Blyth's (1842) descriptive adjective, which Payne contends better describes the shrill long call of this species than the long calls of other hawk cuckoos. King (2002) has recommended Hodgson's Hawk-Cuckoo as the English (common) name for *H. nisicolor*.

Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo is uncommon throughout its subcontinent range (Ali and Ripley 1997; Kazmierczak 2000), although probably overlooked due to its skulking behaviour (Ali and Ripley 1997), especially outside the breeding season when the bird is silent. There are few recent published records from the Indian subcontinent (Grimmett *et al.* 1998), almost all of which are from Bhutan. The first confirmed records for the country date only to May 1994 when Tymstra *et al.* (1997) observed small numbers on several occasions at 1000-2200 m in broadleaf forests of the Nobje and Gasa valleys, and assessed its status as fairly common. Subsequent records from other areas of Bhutan (Bishop 1999; Inskipp and Inskipp1999; Inskipp *et al.* 2000) have led to the species being classified as a frequent summer visitor (Inskipp and Inskipp 1999).

Sheep grazers at Chakele Kharka described the hidden Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo as a black and white bird that is common in summer. (This basic view of the plumage was also related by DSR from his obscured glimpses of the bird at Chakele). The species is therefore indicated as a regular summer visitor in the Sisuwa.

Blyth (1843) described Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo from a specimen taken in Nepal. The species was collected three years later in Nepal from the lower hills by Brian Hodgson (Fleming et al. 1984; Inskipp and Inskipp 1991). Since then the only known records apart from the Sisuwa and Sankhuwa accounts are one bird observed at close range on 11 March 1988 23 km N of Kosi Barrage at *c.* 100 m on the eastern embankment road (Heinen 1990), and a single on 12 June 1999 heard calling at *c.* 1500 m in subtropical broadleaf forest above Sundarijal N of Kathmandu (B. King pers. comm.).

Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo is considered a vagrant to Nepal (Grimmett *et al.* 2000). However, based on recent records, a more appropriate status is rare and local summer visitor to moist forests in the subtropical and lower temperate zones. Further study, particularly of remnant subtropical broadleaved forests in the eastern hills, is needed to ascertain the distribution, status and conservation requirements of this elusive and enigmatic cuculid in Nepal.

Acknowledgements

Appreciation is extended to Dirga S.Rai, Jitan Rai, Rajan Rai, Niraj Rai, Indra Tamang and Kriti Dan Rai for their skillful efforts and determination to accomplish the passage which enabled this article. Hem Sagar Baral, Arun Manandhar, Courtney Shaw of the

Smithsonian Institution's Zoological Libraries, and Robert Payne kindly relayed key reference material. Pamela Rasmussen helped locate reference authors. H. S. Baral, Hathan Chaudary, Phil Hall, Carol Inskipp, Ben King and Robert Payne reviewed drafts of this article and provided a variety of welcome inputs to produce a substantially improved final version.

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