Threatened Birds of Asia:
The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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SRI LANKA WHISTLING-THRUSH

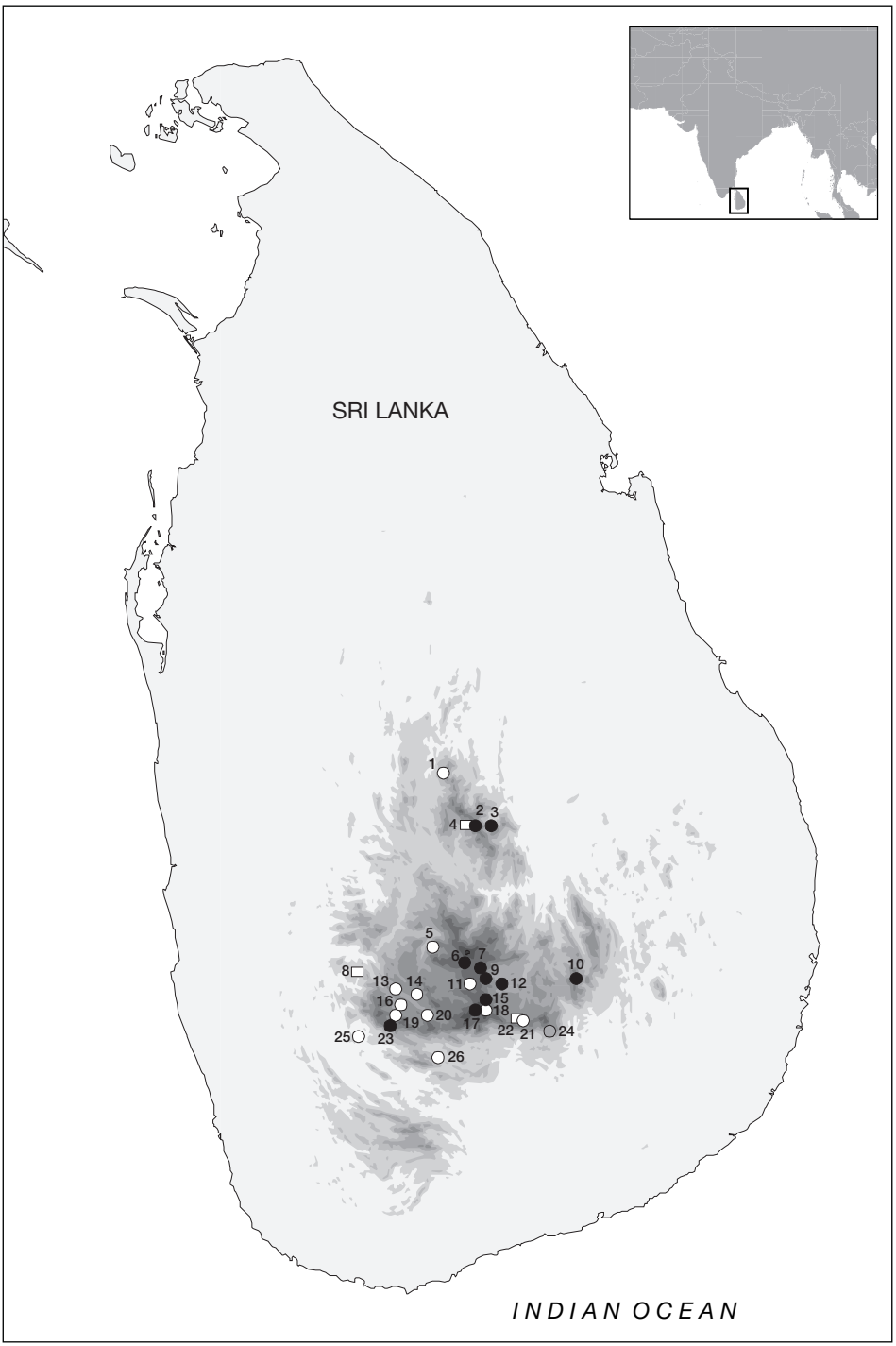
Myophonus blighi

Critical □ —
Endangered ■ B1+2a,b,c,d,e; C2a
Vulnerable □ C1

This species has a very small, severely fragmented, declining population and range as a result of degradation and destruction of upland forest. Pollution of streams by agricultural chemicals is an additional threat. It therefore qualifies as Endangered.

DISTRIBUTION The Sri Lanka Whistling-thrush is confined to a few suitable sites in the montane forests (above c.900 m) of the hill zone, in the mountains of central Sri Lanka. Its forest habitat is now highly fragmented within its small range (see Threats), and was recently estimated to total only c.700 km^2 within a range of only c.1,700 km^2 (Warakagoda 1997). From the evidence below, the species has been recorded at 10 sites since 1990. Records (arranged approximately from north to south) are as follows:

■ ***SRI LANKA*** **Gammaduwa**, at "Forest Hill", February 1941 (clutch of two eggs in BMNH), at "Yammadua" (presumably Gammaduwa), 900 m, August 1938 (juvenile male in BMNH); **Knuckles** range, Laggala Gap, undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997), one, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC/FAO 1997); **Midlands Estate**, 1,200 m, female, March 1997 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* March 1997); **Bambrakelly** (Bambarakelle, Bambarella), east of Madulkele, undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); **Punduloya**, April 1889, May 1890, April 1895 (three clutches of 1–2 eggs in BMNH), May 1895 (female in BMNH); **Nuwara Eliya**, 1,800 m, June 1870 (Holdsworth 1872, juvenile female in AMNH), July 1870 (Legge 1880), March 1886 (two specimens in BMNH), April–May 1896 (clutches of one and two eggs in BMNH), April 1908 (clutch of one egg in BMNH), below the lake, December 1973 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* December 1973), at the golf course, December 1974 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* December 1974), April 1984 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* April 1984), at the lake, January 1988 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* January 1988); Sitaeliya, presumably in **Kandapola Sitaeliya Forest Reserve**, December 1981 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* December 1981), at Kandapola Forest Reserve-Bambaraeliya Oya dam, March 1982 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* March 1982), one, March 1997 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* March 1997); **Kabaragala**, at "Kabaragala-Nawalapitiya", 900–1,150 m, undated (Legge 1880), undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); **Hakgala**, at "Hakgala road", 1875 (Legge 1880), many records until at least January 1998 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* February 1993, many observers *in litt.* 1998), including at Hakgala waterfall, October 1981 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* October 1981) and one seen and one heard, December 1990 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* December 1990), by the Hakgala–Nuwara Eliya road, 1982 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* March 1982, April 1982), in Hakgala Strict Nature Reserve, May–October 1995 (Ranawana and Bambaradeniya 1998), and in Hakgala Ravine, January 1998 (P. J. Hines *in litt*. 1998); **Pedro**, one, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC/FAO 1997); **Elk plains**, Nuwara Eliya, juvenile female collected, April 1923, juvenile male collected, May 1927 (Whistler 1944); **Welimada**-Surrey, February 1981 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* February 1981); **Osborne estate**, Dickoya, April 1924 (clutch of one egg in BMNH); **Dickoya** (Dichroga), c.915 m, April 1919 (clutch of two eggs in BMNH); **Pattipola-Ambawela**, two, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC/FAO 1997); **Maskeliya**, at "Maskeli Oya-Maskeliya", 1,150 m, December 1876 and January 1877 (Legge 1880), below Meriacotta Peak, undated (Lewis 1898); **Horton Plains**, undated (Legge 1880), at "Arrenga Pool", December 1981 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* December 1981) and undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* March 1982), December 1982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(*Ceylon Bird Club News* December 1982), up to five in the area 1999–2000 (D. Warakagoda verbally 2000), also at the Dayagama Road, January 1985, February 1992, December 1992, January 1993 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* January 1985, February 1992, December 1992, January 1993), and at the Kirigalpotta road, January 1993, February 1993, August 1993, November 1993, March 1995, February 1996, November 1997, December 1998 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* January 1993, February 1993, August 1993, November 1993, March 1995, February 1996, November 1997, December 1998); **Ohiya**, 1,800 m, male collected, April 1927 (Whistler 1944); **Adam's Peak**, Central Province side, three sightings, undated (Lewis 1898); **Bogawantalawa**, April 1911 (female in AMNH, clutch of two eggs in BMNH); Lemastota Oya-Pitaratmale, **Haputale**, 1,275 m, 1868 (Legge 1880), at "Haputale West", July 1931 (specimen NMGC); **Tangamalai Sanctuary**, undated (Ranasinghe 1982); Peak Wilderness, now **Peak Wilderness Sanctuary**, undated (Legge 1880), one heard, December 1990 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* December 1990), one, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC/FAO 1997); **Poonagalla** (Veryan-Poonagala), September 1970 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1970); **Gilimale** forest, undated (Lewis 1898); **Morahela** forest, above 1,200 m, two, undated (Lewis 1898); Dandukelewa (not mapped), breeding March 1922 (Tunnard 1922); Meda-Maha Nuwara (untraced), July 1966, in a cardamom plantation (three specimens in FMNH); Tabrobanian (untraced), breeding, 1887 (Tunnard 1922).

POPULATION The Sri Lanka Whistling-thrush has always been considered rare. Legge (1880) referred to it as "one of our rarest hill-birds" but noted that it might be commoner than it appears, as it is easily overlooked, a view supported by others (e.g. Warakagoda 1997, G. de Silva Wijeyeratne *in litt*. 1999). Whistler (1944) thought it "moderately rare", while Henry (1955) considered it "scarce". Phillips (1978) described it as occurring "in small numbers" in its habitat. There are few recent published records concerning its present abundance but Kotagama and Fernando (1994) considered it "very rare" and Wijesinghe (1994) "scarce", and there is strong evidence that its population must be both small and declining (Hoffmann 1984, R. Perera *in litt*. 1997; see Threats). During a major survey of over 200 forest sites in Sri Lanka in 1991–1996, this species was recorded in only four forests (IUCN/WCMC/FAO 1997), although this very low figure is in part a reflection of the species's very limited range. Given its very small range and the reduction in the area of its forest habitat, it is unlikely that it currently numbers more than a few thousand individuals.

ECOLOGY ***Habitat*** This is a secretive, ground-dwelling bird, usually only emerging into the open at dawn and dusk (Warakagoda 1997). It is confined to relatively undisturbed dense mountain forests in the central uplands of Sri Lanka above c.900 m (Legge 1880, Phillips 1978, Hoffmann 1984), although it is now found mainly between about 1,200 and 2,100 m (Warakagoda 1997). Henry (1955) described its habitat as "densely wooded, ferny ravines and gorges, especially those that have a rapid torrent running through them, for it is seldom seen far from a stream". This requirement for streams is noted by many other authors (e.g. Legge 1880, Lewis 1898, Wait 1931, etc.), although birds have sometimes been seen feeding away from water during the daytime (Warakagoda 1997). Most records are from undisturbed areas, but a pair has been found occupying a short stretch of stream running parallel to a much frequented highway (T. W. Hoffmann verbally 1997).

The distribution of Sri Lanka Whistling-thrush *Myophonus blighi* (map opposite): (1) Gammaduwa; (2) Knuckles; (3) Midlands Estate; (4) Bambrakelly; (5) Punduloya; (6) Nuwara Eliya; (7) Kandapola Sitaeliya Forest Reserve; (8) Kabaragala; (9) Hakgala; (10) Pedro; (11) Elk plains; (12) Welimada; (13) Osborne estate; (14) Dickoya; (15) Pattipola-Ambawela; (16) Maskeliya; (17) Horton Plains; (18) Ohiya; (19) Adam's Peak; (20) Bogawantalawa; (21) Haputale; (22) Tangamalai Sanctuary; (23) Peak Wilderness Sanctuary; (24) Poonagalla; (25) Gilimale; (26) Morahela.

○ Historical (pre-1950) ◍ Fairly recent (1950–1979) ● Recent (1980–present) □ Undated

Food Insects are reported to be the main food of this species (Legge 1880, Henry 1955), but snails are also considered an important part of its diet (Delacour 1924a). It sometimes feeds on small reptiles and amphibians: the bones of a tree-frog, probably *Polypedates*, were found in a stomach (Legge 1880), and it has been observed eating small frogs and geckos (Henry 1955), and lizards (either *Calotes* or *Ceratophora*) (Warakagoda 1997).

Breeding Pairs maintain territories throughout the year, although communal roosts of up to four males have been observed where territories adjoin (Warakagoda 1997). It has been reported to breed only from January to May, and not to have a second breeding season after the south-east monsoon (Tunnard 1922, Henry 1955), yet it has also been found nesting in September (Wait 1931, Whistler 1944). The nest is a large but compact, solid structure of moss and fern roots, lined with grass and placed on a ledge of rock by the side of a waterfall or a rapid (Tunnard 1922, Wait 1931, Henry 1955). One nest was found on a rock ledge 2 m above a rocky stream (at 900 m) (BMNH egg data). It also sometimes nests in a tree-fork or on a stump (Henry 1955). The full clutch appears to be two (Henry 1955; *contra* Tunnard 1922).

THREATS The Sri Lanka Whistling-thrush is one of (now) seven threatened members of the suite of 23 bird species that are entirely restricted to the "Sri Lanka Endemic Bird Area", threats and conservation measures in which are profiled by Stattersfield *et al*. (1998).

Habitat loss The main threat to this rare species is the clearance of its forest habitat (Hoffmann 1984, 1998); a general survey of forest loss in Sri Lanka is made in the equivalent section under Red-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus*. The main causes of forest loss and degradation within the range of this species have been the conversion of forest to timber plantations (Hoffmann 1984), firewood collection around Nuwara Eliya, Maskeliya and the Bogowantaalaw areas (T. W. Hoffmann verbally 1997, D. Warakagoda *in litt*. 1999), the clearance of land for agricultural development (R. L. Fleming Jr. 1977), and gem pit-mining (D. Warakagoda *in litt*. 1999). Another concern is that forest die-back in the montane region is affecting the habitat of this species (Kotagama 1994). Preliminary and sporadic studies indicate that air pollution, causing acid clouds, rain and mist, mainly during the south-west monsoon, could be responsible (Hoffmann 1997).

Pesticides This species may be threatened by agrochemical pollution of streams within its range (R. Perera *in litt.* 1997). The development of numerous vegetable farms around Nuwara Eliya and throughout upland areas such as Horton Plains is producing insecticide run-off into the streams, almost certainly harming stream-dependent birds such as the Sri Lanka Whistling-thrush, even if the forest areas around about them remain undisturbed (R. L. Fleming Jr. 1977).

MEASURES TAKEN ***Legislation, habitat protection, research*** A brief review is made in the equivalent section under Red-faced Malkoha.

Protected areas The species occurs in several national parks and forest reserves, including Peak Wilderness Sanctuary and Hakgala Strict Nature Reserve (see Distribution).

MEASURES PROPOSED ***Habitat protection, protected areas*** A brief review is made in the equivalent section under Red-faced Malkoha.

Research Given that this species may have been under-recorded (see Population), a census of potentially suitable riverine sites is recommended in order to improve understanding of its status, with fieldwork carried out at dawn and dusk when birds are most active and vocal (see Warakagoda 1997). A study of the effects of pesticide pollution on this (and other) riverine species in the mountains of Sri Lanka is also important. Despite the wealth of data generated by the National Conservation Review in 1991–1996, much more detailed and wide-ranging surveys will be required to plan and monitor the management of individual conservation forests once they are established (IUCN/WCMC/FAO 1997).