

World's least known bird rediscovered

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This is the habitat of the large-billed reed warbler. Credit: Photo credit: WCS Afghanistan

A species of bird, which has only been observed alive on three previous occasions since it was first discovered in 1867, has been rediscovered in a remote land corridor in north-eastern Afghanistan. The discovery was made as part of an international collaboration, which included researchers at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden.

During the summer of 2008, the American ornithologist Robert J Timmins was commissioned by the American aid organisation USAID to compile an inventory of [bird species](#) in the Badakshan province in north-eastern Afghanistan. He managed to record the call of a species of bird that was as yet unknown.

The recording found its way to the Swedish ornithologist Lars Svensson, who was quick to note that the recorded birdsong did not resemble that of any known species of bird. But from Timmins' description of the species, he soon began to suspect what kind of bird was on the recording.

Lars Svensson and Urban Olsson at the Department of Zoology, University of Gothenburg, had in fact shown in a previous study that about a dozen stuffed birds in museum collections all around the world had been incorrectly classified: they were not of the common species of reed warbler the curators had assumed, but rather a far rarer species known as the Large-billed Reed Warbler (*Acrocephalus orinus*) - observed on just three documented occasions since 1867.

In their previous study Svensson, Olsson and co-workers had pinpointed North-Eastern Afghanistan as an area where the Large-billed Reed Warbler probably bred in the 1930s. When both the Swedish colleagues heard the recording of the mysterious birdsong they realised that they were on the trail of an ornithological sensation.

A year later, in June 2009, the Afghan [ornithologists](#) Naqeebullah Mostafawi, Ali Madad Rajabi and Hafizullah Noori from the Wildlife Conservation Society Afghanistan managed to travel to the Badakshan region, despite the war and ongoing clan conflicts. They used nets to capture 15 individuals of the mysterious species of bird. They sent photographs and feather samples to Lars Svensson and Urban Olsson, who used DNA analyses to confirm that after 142 years of searching, the breeding site of perhaps the world's least known bird had been found.

News of the find was published this week in the journal *Birding Asia* and has aroused huge interest in ornithological circles. The Large-billed Reed Warbler is not hunted, but is regarded as being under acute threat since its breeding sites are being deforested by the local population in their hunt for fuel.

"That's why it's vital that we protect both the species and its habitat now," says Urban Olsson.

The Large-billed Reed warbler belongs to the reed warbler family; a group of small brown and white [birds](#) usually found in habitats where there are willows, reeds, sedge and other vegetation, in or close to water. The Large-billed Reed Warbler is the same size as a reed warbler, approximately 13-14 centimetres long, and is also similar in colour: the upper plumage is an even brown colour with pale greenish-grey variation, while the underside is a rusty beige-white colour.

There is a short, pale streak above the eye, apart from which the bird lacks any distinctive features. The bird's name indicates that it has a long beak, somewhat longer in terms of its proportions than that of Swedish reed warblers. Furthermore the wings are short and rounded, while the tail feathers are quite long.

The species was found in the Wakhan region in the province of Badakshan in north-eastern Afghanistan. The Wakhan region forms a 300km-long corridor up to the Himalayas, which runs between Tajikistan, Pakistan and China. The area is known for its rich birdlife, but is extremely difficult to access for field studies due to the ongoing conflicts. Accessing the region also takes several days' travel.

More information: www.orientalbirdclub.org/publications/immings-LBWarbler.pdf

Provided by University of Gothenburg

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