

Hiding in plain sight: New species of bird discovered in capital city

June 25 2013



A male Cambodian tailorbird, a bird only recently discovered by scientists within the city limits of Phnom Penh. Credit: Ashish John/WCS

A team of scientists with the Wildlife Conservation Society, BirdLife International, and other groups have discovered a new species of bird with distinct plumage and a loud call living not in some remote jungle, but in a capital city of 1.5 million people.

Called the Cambodian tailorbird (*Orthotomus chaktomuk*), the previously undescribed [species](#) was found in Cambodia's urbanized capitol Phnom Penh and several other locations just outside of the city including a construction site. It is one of only two bird species found solely in Cambodia. The other, the Cambodian laughingthrush, is restricted to the remote Cardamom Mountains.

Scientists describe the new bird in a special online early-view issue of the Oriental Bird Club's journal *Forktail*. Authors include: Simon Mahood, Ashish John, Hong Chamnan, and Colin Poole of the [Wildlife Conservation Society](#); Jonathan Eames of BirdLife International; Carl Oliveros and Robert Moyle of University of Kansas; Fred Sheldon of Louisiana State University; and Howie Nielsen of the Sam Veasna Centre.

The wren-sized gray bird with a rufous cap and black throat lives in dense, humid lowland scrub in Phnom Penh and other sites in the floodplain. Its scientific name '*chaktomuk*' is an old Khmer word meaning four-faces, perfectly describing where the bird is found: the area centered in Phnom Penh where the Tonle Sap, Mekong and Bassac Rivers come together.

Only tiny fragments of floodplain scrub remain in Phnom Penh, but larger areas persist just outside the city limits where the Cambodian Tailorbird is abundant. The authors say that the bird's habitat is declining and recommend that the species is classified as Near Threatened under the IUCN's Red List. Agricultural and [urban expansion](#) could further affect the bird and its habitat. However, the bird occurs in Baray Bengal Florican Conservation Area, where WCS is working with local communities and the Forestry Administration to protect the Bengal florican and other threatened birds.

This same dense habitat is what kept the bird hidden for so long. Lead

author Simon Mahood of WCS began investigating the new species when co-author Ashish John, also of WCS, took photographs of what was first thought to be a similar, coastal species of tailorbird at a construction site on the edge of Phnom Penh. The bird in the photographs initially defied identification. Further investigation revealed that it was an entirely unknown species.

"The modern discovery of an un-described bird species within the limits of a large populous city – not to mention 30 minutes from my home – is extraordinary," said Mahood. "The discovery indicates that new species of birds may still be found in familiar and unexpected locations."

The last two decades have seen a sharp increase in the number of new bird species emerging from Indochina, mostly due to exploration of remote areas. Newly described [birds](#) include various babbler species from isolated mountains in Vietnam, the bizarre bare-faced bulbul from Lao PDR and the Mekong wagtail, first described in 2001 by WCS and other partners.

Colin Poole, Director of WCS Singapore and a co-author of the *Forktail* study said, "This discovery is one of several from Indochina in recent years, underscoring the region's global importance for bird conservation."

Co-Author Jonathan C. Eames of BirdLife International's OBE said: "Most newly discovered bird species in recent years have proved to be threatened with extinction or of conservation concern, highlighting the crisis facing the planet's biodiversity."

Steve Zack, WCS Coordinator of Bird Conservation, said, "Asia contains a spectacular concentration of bird life, but is also under sharply increasing threats ranging from large scale development projects to illegal hunting. Further work is needed to better understand the

distribution and ecology of this exciting newly described species to determine its conservation needs."

Provided by Wildlife Conservation Society

Citation: Hiding in plain sight: New species of bird discovered in capital city (2013, June 25)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-06-plain-sight-species-bird-capital.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.