

Mandelli's, or the Assam, Spotted Babbler.

*Pellorneum ruficeps mandellii* (Blanford)

By

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(With a coloured plate.)

*Field identification* :—A small, skulking Babbler, rufous-brown in colour above, with dark brown streaks on the mantle; a rufous crown and creamy-white eyebrow and streaks on the side of the neck; keeping much to undergrowth and the ground and whose loud musical note “pretty-dear, pretty-dear” is often heard.

*Description* :—The coloured plate will suffice for a description of this Babbler. There are several races in India and Burma only differing in tone and depth of colouration and whether the mantle is streaked or not.

*Distribution* :—The distribution of Mandelli's Spotted Babbler is given by Stuart Baker as follows: “Nepal and Sikkim to the extreme East of Assam both North and South of the Brahmapootra River.” (*Nidification of Birds of the Indian Empire*. Vol. 1., p. 204). The Manipur birds, though intermediate, are considered to belong to this subspecies. We found it common in the forests of the Duars both in the foothills and right into the plains where it breeds. In the Darjeeling District it is resident up to about 4000 feet. Stevens writes:—“mainly confined to the *Teraï* of the foothills which supports a *plains fauna*.”

*Habits* :—This Babbler is found in undergrowth, shrub, bamboo and thin forest and is more often heard than seen. If, however, one remains perfectly still one can see them, usually in small parties of about half a dozen, turning over leaves, on the ground, in search of insects reminding one much of the Jungle Babbler, or Seven Sisters (*Turdoides t. terricolor*). These parties keep up a continual chatter and if disturbed quickly vanish into the undergrowth. They keep to this never haunting the tops of trees. Stuart Baker writes about them “They often appear to be very undecided as to whether some article of food is good enough to eat or not, and they contemplate it in a melancholy way with

their heads on one side, until another bird decides for them by eating it himself, or else he seems to make up his mind to eat and risk the result." Their food consists, mainly, of insects. The notes of Mandelli's Spotted Babbler are, usually, pleasant and musical the usual one sounds like *pretty dear, pretty dear.*" They have some harsh ones as well, such as *kraa* uttered when alarmed.

They breed in the plains and in some parts of the Himalayas as high as 6000 feet. Mandelli took a nest, presumably of this bird, near Darjeeling at an elevation of about 4000 feet. The breeding season is from March to May but many are double-brooded and eggs have been found up to July or August. The nest shown in our coloured plate was taken in the Rehti Forest, close to the Binnaguri Tea Estate, on the 28th March 1938 and contained 3 fresh eggs.

The nest is a round mass of grass stems, or leaves, very loosely built and with a few roots as a lining, sometimes the tendrils of a creeper are incorporated in the structure, if it can be called by that name, of the nest. Some nests are cup-shaped, lying on the side, and others semi-domed. They are placed on the ground, amongst fallen leaves which often cover them, and situated in scrub, thin forest, bamboo jungle, or just inside ekra or sungrass. According to Stuart Baker they have a predilection for such, apparently, unsafe places for their nests as alongside well-worn tracks of Elephant, Gaur etc. The nest is often well concealed and only given away by the bird quietly leaving it.

The eggs number 3 or 4 and exceptionally 5. Their ground colour is usually white but may be tinged with either buff or grey. They are profusely marked with specks and blotches of various shades of brown, some nearly black and also underlying blotches of pale lavender. The spots are more numerous, and often larger, at the broad end of the eggs, sometimes forming a cap or ring there.

Stuart Baker gives the average size of 200 eggs as 22.4 x 16.3 m.m.

The Nepali name for this Babbler is *Khörkhöray*.