

ID FORUM

Identification of *Hierococcyx* hawk cuckoos, and the first record of Northern Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx hyperythrus* for continental South-East Asia

JAMES A. EATON

Introduction

Hierococcyx hawk cuckoos are known to vocalise mainly on their breeding grounds, making identification there a relatively straightforward matter, particularly as they are largely allopatric. However, when silent individuals are observed at other times of the year, these cuckoos can become one of Asia's most difficult identification puzzles, with the presence of up to five species in some areas.

All eight species of *Hierococcyx* hawk cuckoo are found in Asia. Of these, two and four taxa were previously united into two polytypic species and have only recently been separated into individual species (King 2002). The first former polytypic species was made up of only two members: Large Hawk Cuckoo *H. sparverioides* and Dark (or Bock's) Hawk Cuckoo *H. bocki*. (The latter species's English name is unfortunate and I would recommend referring to it as Bock's Hawk Cuckoo, as the bird is not actually darker

than Large Hawk Cuckoo!). The second former polytypic species comprised the former Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo *H. fugax* complex, made up of the following four members: Northern Hawk Cuckoo *H. hyperythrus*, Whistling Hawk Cuckoo *H. nicolor*, Philippine Hawk Cuckoo *H. pectoralis* and Malay Hawk Cuckoo *H. fugax*. The two remaining hawk cuckoos, Common Hawk Cuckoo *H. varius* and Moustached Hawk Cuckoo *H. vagans*, are straightforward to separate from the other species given good enough views and are therefore not discussed further.

Identification of *Hierococcyx* hawk cuckoos

I have studied specimens, images and birds in the field and Tables 1 & 2 summarise the identification features of adult and first-year birds of the six most troublesome South-East Asian *Hierococcyx* hawk cuckoos to aid in their identification in the field. Much of this work is already included in Eaton *et al.* (2016).

Table 1. Identification features of adult *Hierococcyx* hawk cuckoos.

	Northern <i>hyperythrus</i> (Plates 1 & 2)	Whistling <i>nicolor</i> (Plate 3)	Malaysian <i>fugax</i> (Plate 4)	Philippine <i>pectoralis</i> (Plate 5)	Large <i>sparverioides</i> (Plate 6)	Bock's <i>bocki</i> (Plate 7)
Chin	Dark grey smudge	Grey smudge	Tiny black smudge	Tiny black smudge	Small dark grey/black smudge	Tiny black smudge
Underparts	Uniform salmon pink; no streaking	Variably streaked rufous	Narrow, dark brown streaks	Uniform reddish-rufous; no streaking	Rufous throat; barred belly	As Large, but rufous brighter and more extensive
Head	Slate grey	Slate grey	Brownish-grey	Paler slate grey	Slate grey	Slate grey
Upperparts	Slate grey, slightly brighter than Whistling; no contrast with head	Slate grey, no contrast with head	Rich brown, contrasting with head	Slate grey, no contrast with head	Rich brown, contrasting sharply with head	Brownish-grey, slight contrast with head
Nape patch	Medium to large	Absent or small	Medium, distinct	Absent	Absent	Absent
Tertial patch	Large and distinct	Reasonably distinct	Small, indistinct	Large and distinct	Absent	Absent
Bill	Yellow base, black tip	Yellow base, black tip	Yellow base, black tip	Yellow base, black tip	Black; yellow base to lower mandible	All black; limited yellow on lower mandible

Table 2. Identification features of first-winter *Hierococcyx* hawk cuckoos.

	Northern (Plate 8)	Whistling (Plate 9)	Malaysian (Plate 10)	Philippine (Plate 11)	Large (Plate 12)	Bock's (Plate 13)
Chin	Extensive black patch	Small black smudge	White, some spotting	Variable sized black smudge	Black smudge, with two diagonal lines	If present, tiny dark smudge
Underparts	Pencil-thin black streaks with white background. With age, salmon pink begins at neck sides	Long, rufous-edged, dark brown streaks	Small, narrow dark streaks with white background	Dark streaks; more rounded than Whistling. Becoming rufous-edged with age	Extensive rufous throat with dark streaks, extending to belly	As Large but rufous more extensive; belly barring more conspicuous
Head	Slate grey, distinctly hooded. In autumn can be sooty black	Slate grey	Slate grey	Slate grey	Slate grey	Darker grey than Large
Upperparts	Brownish-grey, with indistinct rufous barring (sometimes absent)	Brownish-grey, with rufous barring	Dark grey, little contrast with head. Indistinct rufous barring	Brownish-grey, with rufous barring	Brown, with rufous barring, strongly contrasting with head	Brownish-grey, less contrast with head than Large
Nape patch	Usually large and distinct	Absent or indistinct	Distinct	Variable: from absent to fine neck crescents or distinct neck patch	Absent; rufous wash	Absent
Tertial patch	Pale and conspicuous	Slightly paler, less conspicuous	Slightly paler, less conspicuous	Slightly paler to conspicuous	Absent	Absent
Tail	Narrow rufous (not grey) bar closest to broad black subterminal band	Narrow greyish bar closest to broad black subterminal band	Fairly even tail bars	Uppertail more rufous than grey bars; undertail bars less distinct; narrower subterminal band	Fairly even tail bars with broader subterminal band	Fairly even tail bars with broader subterminal band
Bill	Yellow base, black tip	Yellow base, black tip	Yellow base, black tip	Yellow base, black tip	Black; yellow-based lower mandible	All black; limited yellow on lower mandible

With good views of both the under- and upperparts, particularly if good images are obtained, few hawk cuckoos should remain unidentified given the diagnostic suite of features of all the species covered here. The exception is the separation of immature Northern and Philippine Hawk Cuckoos; the latter appears to be very variable, with further research required.

Hopefully this article will lead to further records of Northern Hawk Cuckoo from South-East Asia, and a better understanding of its migration routes and wintering haunts.

Northern Hawk Cuckoo *H. hyperythrus*: a first record for continental South-East Asia

Undoubtedly the lack of records of Northern Hawk Cuckoo in continental South-East Asia, and the scarcity of records in general, is in part due to the challenge of identification, which has long been shrouded in mystery, particularly in the immature plumages.

The species breeds from Fujian, south-east China, northwards to the Khabarovsk Krai in south-east Russia, including Korea and Japan. Its wintering range is poorly understood due to its cryptic, unassuming nature when not vocalising, but appears to be primarily concentrated in the mountains of northern Borneo (most records are from Sabah) and northern Sulawesi (Eaton *et al.* 2016). Vagrants have been reported from Palau, Micronesia and the Cocos Islands (del Hoyo *et al.* 2018), while passage birds are rarely encountered, with no confirmed records from the Philippines (R. Hutchinson pers. comm.). Even in Hong Kong it is considered a vagrant, with only 4–5 records, dated between 9 September and 27 October (G. Carey *in litt.*).

On 7 April 2018, while birdwatching in the late afternoon with seven others at the edge of deciduous and coniferous forest close to Tuyen Lam Lake, South Annam province, Vietnam, I spotted a *Hierococcyx* cuckoo. It was perched 3 m



JAMES EATON

Plate 1. Adult Northern Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx hyperythrus*, front view, Vietnam, 7 April 2018. Note unmarked salmon pink breast, black chin and, even at this angle, conspicuous white tertial and nape patches.

Plate 3. Adult Whistling Hawk Cuckoo *H. nicolor*, Singapore, 3 December 2008. Note darker pink-rufous streaked breast with a small nape patch and reasonably distinct tertial patch.



CON FOLEY



JAMES EATON

Plate 2. Adult Northern Hawk Cuckoo, back view, Vietnam, 7 April 2018. Unmarked slate-grey upperparts indicate an adult. Only adult Northern shows both large white nape and tertial patches.

Plate 4. Adult Malay Hawk Cuckoo *H. fugax*, Singapore, 22 August 2015. Breast streaking and brown wings of adult more like immature hawk cuckoos.



CON FOLEY



MIKE NELSON

Plate 5. Adult Philippine Hawk Cuckoo *H. pectoralis*, Mindanao, 24 February 2016. Breast similar to Northern but note less hooded appearance and less well-marked undertail.



JAMES EATON

Plate 6. Adult Large Hawk Cuckoo *H. sparveroides*, Mishmi Hills, Arunachal Pradesh, India, 4 May 2017.

off the ground in a small glade, no more than 30 m away. We watched the bird for 15 minutes as it sat quietly, making the occasional dart to the ground, presumably in pursuit of prey, before being lost to view.

It was quickly identified as a *Hierococcyx* hawk cuckoo due to its slate-grey upperparts with white tertial and nape markings. Having observed many Whistling Hawk Cuckoos at the same site over the past 15 years, I had been watching out for this species. However, the slightly bluer, brighter upperparts and much larger-than-expected nape and tertial patches created initial excitement as we waited for the bird to turn around. It finally obliged, allowing several images to be taken and scrutinised immediately on-site (Plates 1 & 2), confirming suspicions that the bird was a Northern Hawk Cuckoo. The identification proved relatively straightforward given good views and, more importantly, images.

The bird was distinguished from the anticipated and similar Whistling Hawk Cuckoo by its uniform salmon-pink breast, lacking any streaking or rufous tones, and more conspicuous white nape and tertial patches (Eaton *et al.* 2016). Although not a feature mentioned in any reference material, the upperparts appeared slightly bluer and brighter than those of Whistling Hawk Cuckoo, and a later check of

Plate 7. Adult Bock's Hawk Cuckoo *H. bocki*, Aceh, Sumatra, Indonesia, 23 May 2015. Brighter, more rufous throat and smaller chin patch than Large Hawk Cuckoo.



AGUS NURZA



CRAIG BRELSFORD

Plate 8. Immature Northern Hawk Cuckoo, Shanghai, China, 6 October 2010.

Plate 10. Immature Malay Hawk Cuckoo, Singapore, 1 October 2013.



CON FOLEY



CON FOLEY

Plate 9. Immature Whistling Hawk Cuckoo, Singapore, 21 November 2011.

Plate 11. Immature Philippine Hawk Cuckoo, Philippines, 24 March 2016. Very similar to Whistling but shows more rounded blotches than streaks on breast (and more rufous on uppertail bars). This individual easily separable from Northern by reduced chin smudge and broad, distinct wing-barring, but this appears to be variable.



PETER SIMPSON



CON FOLEY

Plate 12. Immature Large Hawk Cuckoo, Singapore, 4 January 2015. Note lack of yellow on upper mandible, also rufous nape and belly barring not yet emerging.

specimens at the British Natural History Museum, Tring, UK, confirmed this feature. Another potential confusion species was the Large Hawk Cuckoo, but this could be discounted as it lacks white tertial and nape markings, shows barred underparts and has an all-black upper mandible, whereas this bird had a clearly pale mandible base.

One can speculate whether this record involved a vagrant, given its current status—this is the first record for South-East Asia—or in fact a passage migrant through Vietnam. I suspect the latter, as the lack of reference material confirming how to identify the species has left us in the dark about its actual migratory routes, apart from a contribution by Leader (2011). With this record now documented, it is hoped that observers will pay more attention to any *Hierococcyx* encountered in Vietnam, and also in all coastal areas of the region, particularly Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines and East Malaysia.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to participants on the Birdtour Asia Vietnam tour for their patience and willingness to pin down and help identify the Northern Hawk Cuckoo; to Geoff Carey and Paul Leader for confirming the status of the species in Hong Kong; Phil Round for confirmation of the Vietnam



TONY SAWBRIDGE

Plate 13. Immature Bock's Hawk Cuckoo, Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, 30 March 2018. Note lack of black chin, darker head, all black bill and belly barring emerging compared with immature Large Hawk Cuckoo.

record and its (lack of) status in Thailand; the photographers for allowing use of their images, especially Con Foley for his wonderful suite of images; Rob Hutchinson for discussing the status of *Hierococcyx* species in the Philippines; Mark Adams for access to specimens at the British Natural History Museum, Tring; Frank Rheindt for in-depth discussions of *Hierococcyx* identification over the past few years and for reviewing and commenting on the manuscript together with David Bakewell.

References

- Eaton, J. A., van Balen, B., Brickley, N. W. & Rheindt, F. E. (2016) *Birds of the Indonesian Archipelago: Greater Sundas and Wallacea*. Barcelona: Lynx Edicions.
- del Hoyo, J., Collar, N. & Kirwan, G. M. (2018) Northern Hawk Cuckoo *Hierococcyx hyperythrus*. *HBW Alive*. Accessed at <https://www.hbw.com/node/467243> on 10/09/2018.
- King, B. F. (2002) The *Hierococcyx fugax*, Hodgson's Hawk Cuckoo, complex. *Bull. Brit. Orn. Club* 122(1): 74–80.
- Leader, P. J. (2011) The status and identification of Hodgson's and Northern Hawk-cuckoos in Hong Kong. *Hong Kong Bird Report* 2007-08: 347–359.

James A. EATON
 Petaling Jaya, Selangor, Malaysia
 Email: jameseaton@birdtourasia.com