BIRDS of MALAYSIA
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Birds of Malaysia

by

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Introduction

Malaysia, a particularly large and interesting group of islands to which the Malay Peninsula is added, constitutes a southern extension of the Asiatic continent. Due to its diversity of climates and altitudes, and to its situation astride the equator, Malaysia possesses so rich a bird life that any book trying to embrace the entire avifauna would have to be rather bulky, even when reduced to the barest essentials, as has been tried here.

An excellent Handlist of Malaysian Birds was published in 1935 by F. N. Chasen (Bull. Raffles Museum, No. 11, Singapore), and it will long remain the basis for further studies. But it cannot be used by nonprofessional readers, as it contains no keys, no descriptions, and no mention of habitats or habits.

The only other general works existing on the birds of certain parts of Malaysia are The Birds of the Malay Peninsula by H. C. Robinson and F. N. Chasen (Witherby, London, 1927–39, 4 vol., incomplete), and The Birds of the Island of Java by N. Kuroda (Tokyo, 1933–36, 2 vol.). Naturally restricted to one peninsula or one island, these volumes have the further disadvantage of being practically impossible to procure today.

It therefore seemed desirable to produce a practical handbook of Malaysian birds, succinct, but complete and up-to-date. The present volume, like the others in the series, is intended mostly for persons interested in birds, but without any special technical knowledge. Any keen observer of living creatures can become a field naturalist and make a considerable contribution to science by adding to our meager knowledge of animal life in

the oriental tropics. This handbook, it is hoped, will enable him to identify the birds he will encounter.

Complete and detailed descriptions being impossible in such a short space, simple keys have been drawn up and the main characteristics of the birds supplied, together with their geographical distribution, and a few hints on habitats and habits.

There are others who would have been more qualified than I to write this book; unfortunately, none of them is available today. The best one of all, F. N. Chasen, was one of the first victims of the war in the Pacific, and his loss will always be lamented both by his friends and by all persons interested in the Malaysian fauna. I possess but a scanty personal knowledge of Malaysia, which I have only partly and casually visited. I was much impressed, however, with the beauty and interest of the little I saw of it. But I am very familiar with Indo-China, situated just to the northeast, which resembles Malaysia to a certain extent, particularly in its southern part. I have spent forty months there, in the course of seven expeditions, between 1923 and 1939, during which I was able to do extensive collecting and to make observations on most species of birds. All these years in oriental jungles have perhaps been the most exciting I have lived.

The first Malaysian birds were brought to Europe in the eighteenth century and described by Linnaeus and other early naturalists.

A great deal was learned during the first part of the nineteenth century, and Sir Stamford Raffles was prominent among the scientists of those days. Important contributions, particularly those of J. Whitehead, were made during the latter part but the decisive period came at the beginning of the present century.

During the last thirty years, the knowledge of Malaysian birds has been greatly advanced, thanks mostly to the work of the successive directors of the Federated Malay States Museum and the Raffles Museum, Singapore: H. C. Robinson, C. B. Kloss, and F. N. Chasen. It has been my privilege to visit them.
INTRODUCTION

on many occasions and to discuss with them subjects of common interest. More recently, useful studies have been conducted by various authors, particularly Ernst Mayr, Erwin Stresemann, R. M. de Schauensee, and S. Dillon Ripley. The excellent work of W. R. Dammermann, M. Bartels, A. Hoogerwerf, and other workers connected with the Buitenzorg Institute, Java, have also helped considerably.

In the preparation of this work, I have greatly benefited by the help of Ernst Mayr, my friend and frequent collaborator of the American Museum of Natural History. Dean Amadon has also kindly read the proofs. I am deeply grateful to them.

It is probable that only a relatively small number of forms of Malaysian birds still remain unknown. Some parts of the large islands, however, particularly of Borneo, and the mountains of several others, such as Sumatra and Palawan, no doubt keep some surprises in reserve. But our knowledge of the distribution, movements, and habits of many Malaysian birds is so inadequate that an immense field for investigation remains open to future students.

All the known forms of Malaysian birds that have been recognized as valid are listed in the following pages. All species are sufficiently described for identification, with the exception of the seabirds and shorebirds, which are generally widespread and very often erratic or migratory. Lack of space has prevented detailed treatment of these groups, and the reader is referred for more information to Birds of the Southwest Pacific by Ernst Mayr (Macmillan, 1945), where they have been studied in special chapters. For persons particularly interested in these birds, I recommend W. B. Alexander’s Birds of the Ocean (Putnam, 1928).

The pattern adopted in Birds of the Philippines (Macmillan, 1946), written by the present author in collaboration with Ernst Mayr, has been followed in this volume, and numerous passages have been reproduced or adapted whenever possible, in order to make easier the use of both works.
Size.—The average total length (in inches) is given for each species, to provide a rough indication of general size. These are absolute measurements, while the attributes “large” or “small” are relative. A “small” hawk is, of course, larger than a “large” sunbird. To provide a comparative yardstick, I list here the sizes of some well-known European and American birds (in inches): Kinglet (3½–4), House Sparrow (5–6), Starling (7½–8½), European Blackbird or American Robin (9–10), American Blue Jay (11–12), European Jay (13–14), Crow (19), American Red-tailed Hawk or European Buzzard (19–24), Golden Eagle (30–40). One inch = 2.5 centimeters.

Names.—English vernacular names used by Chasen have often been adopted. Changes, however, have been made when such names were considered to be decidedly misleading. As a rule, native names have been avoided as too often they vary from one locality to another and become merely a source of confusion. Only species have been given vernacular names. For subspecies, one may easily supplement the name given to the species with a geographical adjective. The scientific or technical names (in Latin) are indispensable in expressing exactly the identity of a given bird and its relationship. Binomials are often used collectively to indicate species composed of several subspecies, the so-called “polytypic” species. Most Malaysian species are polytypic, since geographical segregation has taken place frequently in this archipelago, and many populations have become isolated.

The nomenclature is generally that of F. N. Chasen in his Handlist, although the sequence of families, genera, and species has been somewhat altered. It has been modified and completed only in accordance with the results of more recent researches. Substantial simplifications have followed in a number of cases.

Taxonomic questions have been discussed by the author in a recent article (Zoologica, 1946, Vol. 31, pp. 1–8), to which ornithologists are referred. They will also find there a bibliog-