

Systematic notes on Asian birds. 30.
An undescribed acoustic display
of the eared pitta *Anthocincla phayrei* Blyth, 1863

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In this paper an apparently undocumented, mechanical, acoustic display of the eared pitta *Anthocincla phayrei* Blyth, 1863 is described.

On 26 May 2000 I followed a male eared pitta in disturbed, valley bottom, semi-evergreen forest at ca. 300 m elevation, near Ban Krang, Kaeng Krachan National Park, Phetchaburi Province, SW Thailand (12°48'N; 99°27'E). The bird was calling at intervals with the typical, drawn-out, airy, whistling call, *wheow-whit* (cf. Lekagul & Round, 1991). As I moved towards the bird, I imitated this call in order to stimulate further vocalising, and to facilitate seeing it. I also taped the call using a Sennheiser ME88 microphone and a Sony Walkman Professional WMD6C cassette tape recorder. As I was taping the bird I became aware of an intermittent double, occasionally triple, resonant, hollow, knocking sound, which I at first assumed was made by a woodpecker. However, the apparent regularity of the call, and its coincidence in both direction and timing with that of the eared pitta calls made me suspicious. The male pitta was calling frequently and as I moved in, I was able to see it perched on a horizontal branch roughly 1-1.3 m above the ground, at a range of ca. 10-15 m. On a few of occasions when it called, I clearly saw the bird flick and spread both wings forward, flirting or cocking the tail upwards as it did so. The wing-flicking exactly coincided with the knocking sound, two flicks coinciding with two knocks and three flicks with three. During 3 min. 15 sec. of tape-recording there were 18 whistled calls and four double knocks. The knocks were made 2-7 sec. preceding a whistled call. A small white crescent at the base of the underside of the primaries was visible each time the wings were spread. The wings were not struck against anything so it was not immediately evident how the knocking sound was made. Possibly the wings were extended far enough forward to clash together at their leading edges, though this was not reliably determined. No unusual adaptation of the primaries which might account for the noise was evident among specimens of *Anthocincla phayrei* examined.

A sonagram (fig. 1) depicts both the vocalisation and the knocking sound. Additionally recordings of these displays are available for scrutiny in Scharringa (2001).

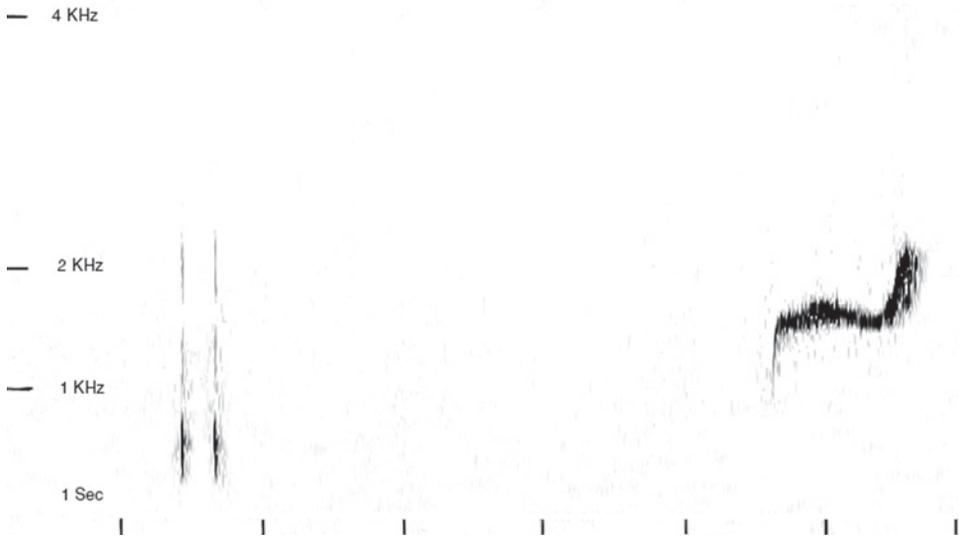


Figure 1. Sonagram of the mechanical and vocal displays of eared pitta *Anthocinclia phayrei*: the double knock followed ca. 4 secs. later by the upward-inflected whistle. 26 May 2000, ca. 300 m, near Ban Krang, Kaeng Krachan National Park, Phetchaburi Province, SW Thailand (12° 48' N; 99° 27' E).

Wing-flicking behaviour is well known among pittas and described by Zimmerman (1995) for rainbow pitta *Pitta iris* Gould, 1842, in the context of alarm, and by Lansdown *et al.* (1991) for hooded pitta *P. sordida* (Statius Müller, 1776). A slight audible flutter or clap, attendant upon wing movement, is sometimes audible. Wells (in prep.) makes mention of "an audible wing-clap" for Gurney's pitta *P. gurneyi* Hume, 1875, as the wings are flapped against the side of the body. Rainbow pittas also have a wing-spreading display, apparently given in response to predators. This may be accompanied by alarm calls but not by any mechanical sound (Zimmermann, 1995). However, the display that I describe for eared pitta differs in some respects from wing-flicking in other pittas, which occurs either in synchrony with calling, or is given without any association with the territorial call, possibly in an alarm context. In addition, any slight sound produced is made by clapping the wings against the side of the body, not by extending the wings well forward of the body in the manner observed for eared pitta. Certainly nothing approaching the volume and resonance of the sound made by eared pitta has ever been described for any other pitta species.

Although it is not yet known how frequent and typical the eared pitta "knocking" behaviour is, the eared pitta is aberrant in a number of features compared with other members of the family. It is the only pitta to possess entirely russet or brown, non-iridescent plumage as an adult, and one of very few species to possess elongate, somewhat erectile, "ear-tufts". It differs in other respects, too, having a slightly longer, more slender and curved bill, and proportionately shorter tarsi than other pittas. It tends to occur in drier areas, and possibly more disturbed habitats than other non-migratory pittas, often showing an association with drier secondary growth, although there is considerable overlap with blue pitta *P. cyanea* Blyth, 1843, and the two species

are often found together. Feeding behaviour also differs. Eared pitta tends to move around much less when feeding, often spending many minutes foraging under the same bush or same few square metres of forest floor, in contrast to other pittas which tend to "patrol" through their territories when feeding, seldom remaining in any one location for more than a few seconds. There is one observation of an eared pitta probing in rotten wood (D. Scott, *in litt.*, cited in Lambert & Woodcock, 1996), a behaviour not recorded in any other pitta. Although it is not yet entirely clear whether a similar knocking sound might not occasionally be made by any other pitta, the apparent absence of any reference to this in the literature suggests not. This, and the other pronounced biological differences, outlined above, make it appropriate to revert to treating the eared pitta as the sole member of the genus *Anthocincla* following Sclater (1888). This is discussed in Dickinson & Dekker (2000).

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