

FROM THE FIELD EXTRA

An unprecedented influx of vagrants into Malaysia and Singapore during the 2019–2020 winter period

YONG CHEE KEITA SIN, DILLEN NG & MARTIN KENNEWELL

Introduction

The northern winter of 2019–2020 brought an unprecedented number and variety of vagrants to West Malaysia and Singapore, producing an exceptional number of records, including 10 country firsts (four for Malaysia and six for Singapore) as well as notable high counts of several uncommon migrants. Many of the unusual species recorded have broadly similar wintering ranges in the East Asian and Indochinese regions, as shown in Figure 1, which depicts the ‘normal’ wintering ranges of some 31 non-pelagic species (indicated by † in the species accounts), all of which appeared unexpectedly in Peninsular Malaysia and/or Singapore during this winter period and are included in the species accounts below. Their wintering ranges were adapted from individual species accounts in HBW Alive (del Hoyo *et al.* 2020).

Whilst the reason for this event remains unexplained, given the similar distributions of the species involved, it is possible that regional climatic events propelled their collective southward overshoot. Herein we summarise the sightings recorded from Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore and hope that this article may serve as a reference when/if such events occur again. Taxonomy follows HBW & BirdLife International (2019).

Data from eBird, which became relatively popular in Singapore about three years ago, was used to evaluate the abundance of Whiskered Tern *Chlidonias hybrida*, Red-rumped Swallow *Cecropis daurica* and Yellow-browed Warbler

Phylloscopus inornatus by making a semi-quantitative comparison of their sightings in Singapore over the last three winter seasons.

The observers’ initials are given after their sightings and their full names are given here:

Arfar Nasution (ANa), Adrian Silas Tay (AST), Arthur Toh (AT), Ang Teck Hin (ATH), Chris Chapman (CC), Chris Gibbins (CG), Caroline Ho Bee Geok (CH), Chan Kai Lin (CKL), C. Y. Tan (CYT), Chua Yingzhi (CYZ), Dave Bakewell (DB), David Beaver (DaB), Esther Ong (EO), Fadzrun Adnan (FA), Geraldine Lee (GL), Keith Hutton (KH), Johnny Chew (JC), Khor Harn Sheng (KHS), Kee Jing Ying (KJY), Kenneth Kee (KK), Kelvin Ng (KN), Koh Swee Seng (KSS), Lynette Chia (LC), Long Roslee bin Ngah (LR), Lim Ying Hien (LYH), Martin Edison Lim (MEL), Manju Gang (MG), Norhafiani A. Majid (NAM), Neoh Hor Kee (NHK), Ng Wei Khim (NWK), Ong Kang Woei (OKW), Oliver Tan (OT), Ruth Beaver (RB), Raghav Narayanswamy (RN), Richard White (RW), Pary Sivaraman (PS), Sandra Chia (SC), Stephen Chapman (Sch), Simon Mitchell (SM), Sophia Seen (SS), Teguh Dwi Herlambang (TDH), Tou Jing Yi (TJY), Veronica Foo (VF), Wong Lee Hong (WLH), Yvonne Blake (YB), Y. T. Choong (YTC). YCKS and MK refer to the authors of this paper.

Species accounts

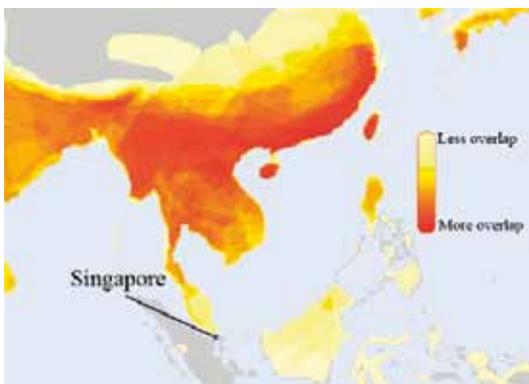
All records dated August–December relate to 2019 and all in January–April to 2020 unless stated otherwise.

Anatidae

The number of migratory ducks in Peninsular Malaysia was comparatively high this year: one †**Tufted Duck** *Aythya fuligula* was at Chuping Sugar Cane Plantation, Perlis, 25 December–5 January (NHK), one was at Pulau Burung landfill, Penang, 11–16 January (NHK) and one or two at Malim Nawar mining pools, Perak, 12 January–2 March (TJY), where a male has been since late 2018 (Roddis & Loseby 2019). One †**Garganey** *Spatula querquedula* was at Sungai Balang, Johor, 1 January (ATH), up to two at Pulau Burung landfill, 12 January–9 March (KHS, Sch, CC) and three at Malim Nawar mining pools, 29 February (ATH). One †**Northern Shoveler** *S. clypeata* was at Malim Nawar mining pools, 10 January (LYH), one †**Eurasian Wigeon** *Mareca penelope* was at Pulau Burung landfill, 11 January–12 March (NHK) and one at Malim Nawar mining pools, 29 February–2 March (ATH, TJY).

In Singapore, where any migratory duck species is a major rarity, a †**Northern Pintail** *Anas acuta* at Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, 7 March (KK) was the sixth record and the first since 1992 (Lim 2009); one at Pulau Pinang was a solitary record from Malaysia (DB).

Figure 1. The normal wintering ranges of 31 non-pelagic migratory species (designated by †) mentioned in this article. Areas with more intense colour reflect an increased degree of overlap in species ranges (19 species in the area with most overlap) and it can be seen that many of the rarities that were observed this season are typically observed wintering around Indochina and East Asia.





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Plate 1. Asian Emerald Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx maculatus*, Ghim Moh, Singapore, 23 March 2020.

Cuculidae

In Malaysia there were at least five †**Asian Emerald Cuckoo** *Chrysococcyx maculatus*, four in Pinang Botanic Gardens, 8 December–5 January and one at Air Hitam Dalam Forest Reserve, Kedah, 4–8 February (KHS). In Singapore a bird by a canal at Ghim Moh, 23 March–4 April (KN) was the third record (Plate 1).

Ciconiidae

In Malaysia †**Asian Openbill** *Anastomus oscitans* were present from August, with a major influx from November of possibly up to 100,000 birds; the largest gathering was 27,000 at Batang Tiga, Melaka, 20 December (FA), with several flocks exceeding 2,000, mainly south of Selangor. On the west coast flocks of several hundred occurred wherever there were paddyfields or freshwater wetlands (DB).

Plate 2. Line of three Black-winged Stilt *Himantopus himantopus*, Jurong Lake Gardens, Singapore, 16 February 2020.



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In Singapore, two birds seen on 6 December were the third country record, following two in March 2019. Subsequently there were many reports, with about 1,500 at Changi, 12 December, 2,000 at Tuas, 29 December, and the highest count, 5,000 at Eastwood Estate, 25 December (NSSBG 2019a). Most birds left soon afterwards, although some flocks exceeding 100 were still present in April.

The first recent Malaysian record of **Asian Woollyneck** *Ciconia episcopus* was a single bird at Sungai Balang, 29 December (DB).

Threskiornithidae

The first recent Malaysian record of †**Black-faced Spoonbill** *Platalea minor* was a juvenile on the north-central Selangor coast, 19 November (OKW).

The fifth Singapore record of **Glossy Ibis** *Plegadis falcinellus* was a bird seen off the coast at Kranji, 28–29 September (NSSBG 2019b).

Sulidae

In Singapore the second record of **Masked Booby** *Sula dactylatra* was a single bird at the East Coast Park, 4 October (Anon.) and the fourth record of **Red-footed Booby** *S. sula* was a bird on Lazarus Island, 30 November (CYZ).

Recurvirostridae

In Singapore a notable record was three **Black-winged Stilt** *Himantopus himantopus* (Plate 2) at Jurong Lake Gardens, 16 February (AST).

Charadriidae

The fifth Singapore record of †**Grey-headed Lapwing** *Vanellus cinereus* was a bird in a wet field at Lim Chu Kang, 16 November (NSSBG 2019c).

Scolopacidae

In Malaysia notable records were: a †**Eurasian Woodcock** *Scolopax rusticola* at Ulu Kali, Selangor, 3 January–7 March (DB);



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Plate 3. Himalayan Griffon *Gyps himalayensis*, one of a flock of 12, perched on top of Carlton City Hotel, Singapore, 9 January 2020.

one †**Spotted Redshank** *Tringa erythropus* at Semaloi, Johor, 2 February (VF) and at least three at Kuala Rompin, Pahang, 9–10 February (ATH); and a †**Dunlin** *Calidris alpina* at Teluk Air Tawar-Kuala Muda, Pinang, 9 March (DB).

In Singapore the fourth record of **Red-necked Phalarope** *Phalaropus lobatus* was a flock of 14 juveniles in the Singapore Straits, 28 September (Roddis & Loseby 2019); the fifth record of †**Green Sandpiper** *Tringa ochropus* was a bird in a canal at Lim Chu Kang (AT, FA), 11–22 January.

Glareolidae

In Malaysia a single **Little Pratincole** *Glareola lactea* was at Sungai Balang, 18–27 January (CG).

Laridae

In Malaysia notable records were a single **Slender-billed Gull** *Larus genei* on the north-central coast of Selangor, 14–16 November (OKW) and up to nine †**Black-headed Gull** *L. ridibundus* on the coast of Selangor (CG) and four at Pinang, January–February, whilst in Singapore, a flock of up to 12 was at Sungei Buloh Wetlands Reserve, 9 December–13 January (EO), with two at Yishun Dam, 5–14 January (NWK).

In Singapore **Whiskered Tern** *Chlidonias hybrida* was more numerous than usual, with record numbers in August–October of 49 individuals, compared with 9 between August–October 2017 and 35 in August–October 2018.

Strigidae

†**Northern Boobook** *Ninox japonica* is a rare migrant to Singapore. The resident Brown Boobook *N. scutulata* is mostly restricted to the Central Catchment Nature Reserve (Lim 2009) and, although plumage differences between the two species have been noted, field identification solely by sight is difficult (Round 2011, Sadanandan *et al.* 2015). Since 2014, *japonica* has been reported annually and a *Ninox* owl at Tuas South, 5 November (NSSBG 2020a) was probably a Northern Boobook, given that it was found during the migration period and observed outside the known range of resident Brown Boobooks. Measurements taken from an injured *Ninox* indicated that it was

probably a Northern Boobook; it was rehabilitated and released at Dairy Farm Nature Park on 17 March (RW). A second casualty with 'Northern-like' underparts was retrieved at Tanjong Katong on 25 April (CKL). The wintering range of the Northern Boobook continues to be unclear and these reports may help elucidate the wintering range of this probably under-recorded species.

The fourth recent Singapore record of †**Short-eared Owl** *Asio flammeus* was a bird at Tanah Merah, 29 November (NSSBG 2020c).

Accipitridae

In Malaysia there were unusually high numbers of eagles at Langkap, Perak, where minimum counts included four **Steppe Eagle** *Aquila nipalensis*, four **Eastern Imperial Eagle** *A. heliaca*, two **Booted Eagle** *Hieraaetus pennatus* and at least seven †**Greater Spotted Eagle** *Clanga clanga* from January to February (many observers).

In Singapore the †**Greater Spotted Eagle** is usually a rare passage migrant. However, a remarkable number were seen this season, with 12 birds recorded from 3–10 November, including three records of two birds together (NSSBG 2020a). The first record of **Shikra** *Accipiter badius* came from Jelutong Tower, 21 November (NSSBG 2019c). Recently there has been an increase in records of **Besra** *A. virgatus*, previously thought to be a less than annual migrant, due to identification from images. Three single birds were recorded this season, at Jelutong Tower, Henderson Waves and Singapore Quarry, on 18, 31 October and 3 November respectively (NSSBG 2020a).

In the past the **Himalayan Griffon** *Gyps himalayensis* has been an accidental visitor to Singapore in small numbers, the highest count being nine (Lim 2009). However, in December–January at least 14 individuals were recorded, all first-year birds: two were seen by more than 100 birdwatchers at Hindhede Park, 28–29 December; subsequently, two were photographed above the Central Business District, 8 January (RN) and another two (presumably different birds) were at Bukit Panjang on the same day (YTC), while that evening 10 were reported at Siglap and then seen at the Central Business District preparing to roost; a minimum of 12 were seen at the same location (Plate 3) the following

morning by many observers, with seven photographed over Bukit Timah Nature Reserve (JC), and on 11 January, 11 were reported over the West Coast Park (CYT), perhaps involving the same group.

Pittidae

The first Singapore record of †**Fairy Pitta** *Pitta nympha* was a juvenile at the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, 8–12 November (Roddis & Loseby 2019). It is of interest to note that one was reported from Java on 24 October (TDH) and one from the Anambas archipelago, Indonesia, on 25 October (ANa).

Artamidae

The second Malaysian record of **Ashy Woodswallow** *Artamus fuscus* was two birds at Langkap, 25 January–22 February (YB et al.).

Paridae

The first Singapore record of **Great Tit** *Parus major* race *minor*, at the Chinese Gardens, 27 October 2012 (WLH), was initially treated as an escapee and only re-evaluated after the sightings below. The second record was a bird at Tuas South, 5 November (Roddis & Loseby 2019), a third was at Pasir Ris Park, 30 November–14 December (NSSBG 2020c) and a fourth at Coney Island, 9 April (MEL). It is possible that all records from this season were the same individual.

Acrocephalidae

The first Malaysia record of †**Booted Warbler** *Iduna caligata* was one bird at Langkap, 12 February (DB). †**White-browed Reed**

Plate 4. Dusky Warbler *Phylloscopus fuscatus*, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital grounds, Singapore, 24 December 2019.



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Warbler *Acrocephalus tangorum* is not listed as occurring in the Thai-Malay Peninsula (Wells 2010) but sightings are on the rise in Malaysia, with records across the Malaysian states of Perlis, Kedah, Penang and Perak throughout the season.

Hirundinidae

†**Red-rumped Swallow** *Cecropis daurica* were frequently seen over Singapore during winter 2019–2020; birds were regularly recorded in their favoured locations—Kranji marshes and along the southern ridges—but in higher numbers and at many more sites (42) than in the previous two winters (22 in 2017–2018 and 27 in 2018–2019), as evidenced by records obtained from eBird. Undoubtedly the numbers recorded have increased substantially year on year, from 98 in October 2017–March 2018 to 203 in October 2018–March 2019 and 716 in October 2019–March 2020. A **Barn Swallow** *Hirundo rustica* with rufous as opposed to white underparts at Neo Tiew, 21 December (PS) was the second record of a bird with this plumage feature. Rufous individuals occur in Peninsular Malaysia in small numbers (Wells 2010); subspecific identification is difficult in the field, partly due to the complicated nature of the species's taxonomy.

Phylloscopidae

†**Yellow-browed Warbler** *Phylloscopus inornatus* is a rare passage migrant and winter visitor to Singapore (Lim 2009) but was very numerous at 19 sites in various habitats, from old secondary forest to roadside trees in industrial areas, with 34 individuals seen between October–March, compared with seven (at only four sites) in October 2017–March 2018 and only four, also at four sites, in October 2018–March 2019. It should be noted that in Indonesia, two birds were recorded on Pulau Temiang, 23 January and one on Pulau Tinjul, 24 January (YCKS), both in the Riau archipelago, and in addition the first record for Java was a bird at Cibodas Botanic Gardens, Bogor, 8 February (SM).

The third Singapore record (and first since 1995) of †**Dusky Warbler** *P. fuscatus* was seen by many birdwatchers in Khoo Teck Puat Hospital grounds (Plate 4), 22–25 December (KH).

Sturnidae

The first Malaysian record of †**Chestnut-tailed Starling** *Sturnia malabarica* was a single bird at Pulau Indah, Selangor, 28 September (KSS, CH).

The first record of †**White-cheeked Starling** *Spodiopsar cineraceus* for Singapore was a single bird at Seletar (Plate 5), 16–25 January (MK). The third to fifth records of †**Chestnut-cheeked Starling** *Agropsar philippensis* were all single birds and may have been the same individual. The third and fourth were in large flocks of Daurian Starling *A. sturninus* at Sungei Pandan and Henderson Waves on 1 and 16 November respectively (NSSBG 2019c, 2020b), and the final sighting was at Jurong Lake Gardens, 9 February (SC). The sixth record of †**Brahminy Starling** *Sturnia pagodarum* was a single bird at Jurong Lake Gardens, 29 January–27 February (NSSBG 2020b).

Turdidae

Orange-headed Thrush *Geokichla citrina*, an annual winter visitor to Peninsular Malaysia and Singapore, is generally



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Plate 5. White-cheeked Starling *Spodiopsar cineraceus*, Seletar, Singapore, 18 January 2020.

represented by races *innotata* and *gibsonhilli* (del Hoyo & Collar 2016). Records of the races characterised by a dark-barred face pattern, *melli*, *courtoisi* and *aurimacula*, appear to be rare. In Singapore, a bird at Dairy Farm Nature Park, 4 January–5 March (SS) and another at Hindhede Nature Park, 14 January–7 March (MK) both showed this feature (Plate 6). The first Singapore record of †**Chinese Blackbird** *Turdus mandarinus* was an extremely elusive bird at Jurong Lake Gardens, 11–16 February (OT).

The first Malaysia record of †**Grey-sided Thrush** *T. feae* was a bird at Genting Highlands, Pahang, 7 November–2 February (LR).

Muscicapidae

In Singapore the third record of †**Chinese Blue Flycatcher** *Cyornis glaucicomans* was at the Central Catchment Nature Reserve, 18

Plate 7. Red-throated Flycatcher *Ficedula albicilla*, Singapore Botanic Gardens, Singapore, 4 December 2019.



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Plate 6. Orange-headed Thrush *Geokichla citrina* showing dark-barred face pattern, Dairy Farm Nature Park, Singapore, 18 January 2020.

February–12 March (Anon.). The first record of **Blue Whistling Thrush** *Myophonus caeruleus* was an individual of race *caeruleus* at Fort Canning Park, 3–24 December (NSSBG 2020c). The provenance of this bird is in doubt because the tip of the upper mandible was chipped, the central and outer tail feathers were moulting and tertials were damaged, but this record is included here for future reference. The first record of †**Red-throated Flycatcher** *Ficedula albicilla* was an individual at Singapore Botanic Gardens (Plate 7), 30 November–14 March (NSSBG 2020c) and a second was at West Coast Park, 22 February–2 April (YCKS). The third record of †**Daurian Redstart** *Phoenicurus aureoreus* was a male at Singapore Botanic Gardens (Plate 8), 12–28 November (NSSBG 2019c), the fourth was at a condominium in Tanjong Rhu, 14–23 January (MG) and the fifth at the National University of

Plate 8. Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus aureoreus*, Singapore Botanic Gardens, Singapore, 24 November 2019.



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Singapore, 30 January–25 February (LC, KJY). The first Malaysia record was at Penang, 18–30 January (DaB, RB).

Motacillidae

White Wagtail *Motacilla alba* is an uncommon migrant to Singapore (Lim 2009) but sightings have recently increased, especially after a large wagtail roost was discovered in Yishun in September 2017 (NSSBG 2017). Taxa so far recorded for Singapore include *lugens*, *ocularis* and *leucopsis* (NSSBG 2020d). Most White Wagtails recorded in Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia are *ocularis* or *leucopsis* (Lim 2009, Wells 2010); the first Singapore record of *lugens* was in 1993 and the second only in December 2015 (NSSBG 2016a); there were several sightings of single birds in 2017 and 2018. In winter 2019–2020 two birds were seen at the Yishun roost, 2 February (YCKS, GL) and one at Bedok canal, 23 February (NAM). In addition, the first Singapore record of nominate race *alba* was photographed at Lim Chu Kang, 9 February (NSSBG 2020d).

Discussion

It should be noted that the number of birdwatchers is rapidly rising, especially in Singapore, and that the high number of rarities reported is probably a consequence of the increased number of observers; the first Red-throated Flycatcher was found by birdwatchers searching for the Daurian Redstart, while the Chinese Blackbird was found by a birdwatcher looking for a Chestnut-cheeked Starling in the same area. Other species such as the Yellow-browed Warbler, typically a scarce bird in the region, have been recorded by various observers in numbers never reported before and is indicative of the peculiarity of the season. The relation of these observations with regional climatic events or global climate change is unclear at the moment and ongoing sustained monitoring in the future is needed to elucidate the cause(s) of this phenomenon.

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Yong Chee Keita SIN

Email: keita_sin@hotmail.com

Dillen NG

Email: dillenn94@gmail.com

Martin KENNEWELL

Email: mkennewell@mac.com