

BROAD-TAILED GRASSBIRD

Schoenicola platyura



Critical —

Endangered —

Vulnerable B1+2a,b,c,d,e; C1; C2a

This species has a small, severely fragmented range and population as a result of clearance and modification of grasslands. It therefore qualifies as Vulnerable.

DISTRIBUTION The Broad-tailed Grassbird (see Remarks 1, 2) is restricted to grassy highlands, principally in the Western Ghats of southern India, at least in the breeding season. Outside this time there is some indication that altitudinal movement occurs, with some birds just possibly dispersing as far afield as Sri Lanka (see Remarks 3).

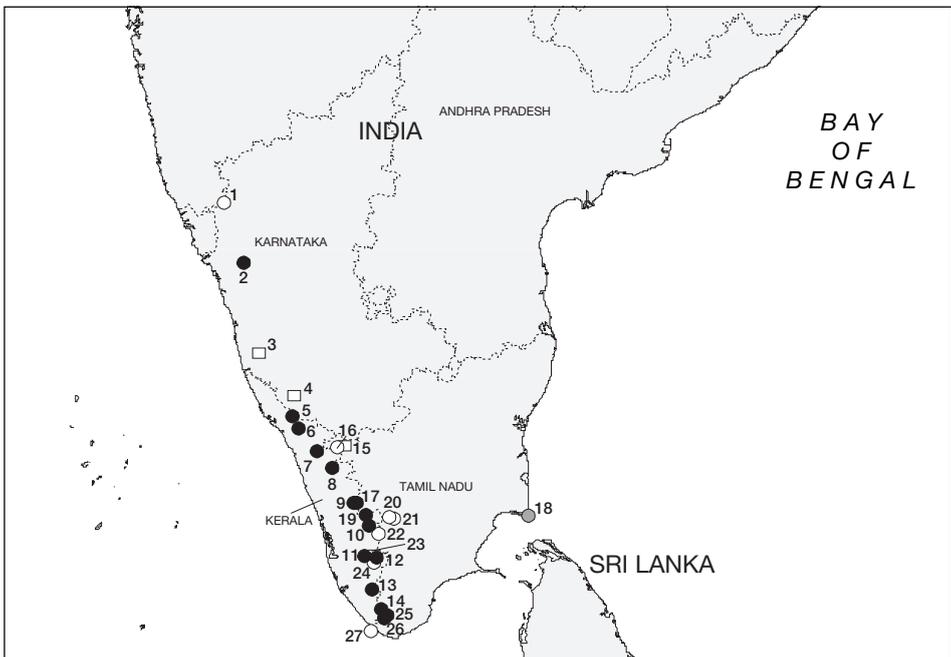
■ **INDIA** This species breeds in damp grasslands in the Western Ghats and Nilgiri hills, occurring largely in Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, with possible outlying records from northern Maharashtra (specific locality untraced) and the Eastern Ghats of Andhra Pradesh (Price 1979, Grimmett *et al.* 1998). It appears to be absent from at least some sites during the non-breeding season, suggesting that seasonal movements might take place, a hypothesis supported by the record of one individual at the coastal migration watchpoint of Point Calimere, Tamil Nadu, in November. Records are from:

■ **Karnataka Belgaum**, five or six pairs, August and September 1880 (seven specimens in BMNH, *Stray Feathers* 9 [1877]: 234–235, E. A. Butler 1881), at One Tree Hill, September 1931 (five specimens in BMNH); near **Anshi** (Anshi National Park), where a bird was seen at “Gotegali minor forest”, 200 m, May 1994 (Uttangi 1994b) although a few mistaken (e.g. Nilgiri Laughingthrush *Garrulax cachinnans*) or unlikely (e.g. Green Avadavat *Amandava formosa*) identifications in this report suggest that confirmation of its presence in the area is desirable; **Mudigere** and **Mercara**, undated (Chakravathy and Tejasvi 1992);

■ **Andhra Pradesh** listed by Taher and Pittie (1989) presumably on the basis of a record from Chinagada, probably in Paderu taluk, a pair, June 1977 (Price 1979), although this locality is not mapped by Grimmett *et al.* (1998);

■ **Kerala Thirunelli**, “uncommon”, 1973–1997 (Zacharias and Gaston 1999); **Periya ghats**, “uncommon”, 1973–1997 (Zacharias and Gaston 1999); two or three observations recorded at unspecified localities in Wynaad, April–May 1881 (Davison 1883), a large area encompassing the **Wynaad ghats**, where the species was recently judged “uncommon”, 1973–1997 (Zacharias and Gaston 1999), **Silent Valley National Park**, in the Poochipara area, December 1990 (Santharam 1996), mapped as present by Gaston and Zacharias (1996) but not Zacharias and Gaston (1999); **Nelliampathy**, “uncommon”, 1973–1997 (Zacharias and Gaston 1999), despite not being found on the Nelliampathy hills in the 1930s (Ali and Whistler 1935–1937); **Munnar**, “uncommon”, 1973–1997 (Zacharias and Gaston 1999); **Pirmed** (Peermade, Pirmeed), 1,000 m, three in February and three males in October 1933 (Whistler and Kinnear 1931–1937, Ali and Whistler 1935–1937), 1956–1963 (Jackson 1971), August 1990 (Sathasivam 1990); **Periyar Sanctuary** (Tiger Reserve), uncommon, undated (Robertson and Jackson 1992, Srivastava *et al.* 1993), or “common” at “Periyar East” and “uncommon” at “Periyar West”, 1973–1997 (Zacharias and Gaston 1999), around four in grasslands near Uppupara, February 1995 (Holt 1995), and five the following year (P. Holt *in litt.* 1999); **Tenmalai**, “uncommon”, 1973–1997 (Zacharias and Gaston 1999); **Agastiamalai** (Agasthyamalai), “uncommon”, 1973–1997 (Zacharias and Gaston 1999);

■ **Tamil Nadu Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary**, listed as resident (Gokula and Vijayan 1996); **Gudalur**, foot of the Nilgiris, undated (Jerdon 1841, 1862–1864); **Grass hills**, two pairs, May 1992 (Kannan 1998); **Point Calimere**, Thanjavur district, one by the sea, November 1975 (Hussain 1977); Top Slip, **Anaimalai hills**, 1,200 m, around 1986 (Abdulali 1968–1996); **Palni hills**, 1,500 m, one, June 1881 (male in BMNH), specifically at Pittur, April 1883 (male in BMNH, Whistler and Kinnear 193–19371, see Remarks 4); **Kodaikanal**, Palni hills, May 1896 (male in BNHS, Whistler and Kinnear 1931–1937), undated (Nichols 1937); **Santhanpara**, Cardamom hills, 1,050 m, 1933 (Ali and Whistler 1935–1937); **Kumili**, 900 m, two females, March 1933 (Whistler and Kinnear 1931–1937, Ali and Whistler 1935–1937), undated (Sathasivam 1990); **Camp Deramalai**, 1,200 m, one male, one female, March 1933 (Whistler and Kinnear 1931–1937, Ali and Whistler 1935–1937); the summit of hills in southern Travancore, c.1900 (Ferguson and Bourdillon 1903–1904), i.e. the Ashambu hills, a range in which three specific localities can be identified, namely **Muthukuzhi** (Muthukuly, Muthukaly), Kanyakumari district, April–May 1901 (Whistler and Kinnear 1931–1937) and at 1,050 m, several, April 1933 (Whistler and Kinnear 1931–1937, Ali and Whistler 1935–1937), February 1947 (specimens in BNHS), May–June, 1995–1997 (S. H. M. Butchart *in litt.* 2000), with at least three individuals at the “Seventh Saddle area, en route to Muthukuzhi”, September 1992 (Santharam 1996), **upper Kodayar** (Kodeyar), near Kodayar reservoir, one, September 1992 (Santharam 1996), and a pair, April–May 1997 (Raman 1998), and **Kolathupuzha** (Calathoorpolay, Coolathoorpulay; see Remarks 5), 1,150–1,200 m, April 1877 and April 1880 (four specimens in BMNH, Hume 1878b).



The distribution of Broad-tailed Grassbird *Schoenicola platyura*: (1) Belgaum; (2) Anshi; (3) Mudigere; (4) Mercara; (5) Thirunelli; (6) Periyar ghats; (7) Wynad ghats; (8) Silent Valley National Park; (9) Nelliampathy; (10) Munnar; (11) Pirmed; (12) Periyar Sanctuary; (13) Tenmalai; (14) Agastiamalai; (15) Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary; (16) Gudalur; (17) Grass hills; (18) Point Calimere; (19) Anaimalai hills; (20) Palni hills; (21) Kodaikanal; (22) Santhanpara; (23) Kumili; (24) Camp Deramalai; (25) Muthukuzhi; (26) upper Kodayar; (27) Kolathupuzha. ○ Historical (pre-1950) ● Recent (1980–present) □ Undated

Untraced localities include Hindalge, breeding, September 1906 (BMNH egg data), and “Dhobi N valley”, three pairs, August 1906 (BMNH egg data).

POPULATION At Belgaum in the nineteenth century the Broad-tailed Grassbird was “very rare”, with only one small breeding population of six or seven pairs discovered (Butler 1881). However, at the outset of the twentieth century it was considered “evidently common in grasslands on the summits of the hills in south Travancore” (an old administrative unit covering southernmost Kerala and Tamil Nadu west of the Western Ghats) (Ferguson and Bourdillon 1903–1904). Some 30 years later the species was still “common on the Travancore Hills” (in this case referring to the Ashambu hills), but “uncommon” around Kodaikanal in the Anaimalai hills (Whistler and Kinnear 1931–1937, Ali and Whistler 1935–1937). It was absent from grass-covered hillsides on the Nelliampathy hills in December 1933, despite the apparent suitability of the habitat (Ali and Whistler 1935–1937). While “on the whole rather scarce”, it is “common in southern Kerala” (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998). Populations have been judged “not denser than about one bird—or more rarely a pair—to an acre,” with individuals generally keeping “widely scattered” (Whistler and Kinnear 1931–1937, Ali and Whistler 1935–1937). In Periyar Sanctuary, it was thought “perhaps not uncommon” by Robertson and Jackson (1992), but “common” in at least parts of the sanctuary by Zacharias and Gaston (1999). Small numbers have been recorded recently on the Grass hills (Kannan 1998), but again a population estimate is impossible. Zacharias and Gaston (1999) thought that the species could be commoner than generally assumed because it is such a skulker for much of the year. However, given that it is apparently very conspicuous during the breeding season, the breeding range is probably well known.

ECOLOGY Habitat This is a bird of dense tall montane grassland, bracken and reed fringes on steep hillsides and tops, including “stretches of *Andropogon* grass and stunted date”, at 900–2,000 m (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998, Grimmett *et al.* 1998). Early workers found it on the summits of the hills (Ferguson and Bourdillon 1903–1904) in “open grassland” (Hume 1878b), “long grass and brushwood at the edges of forest” (F. W. Bourdillon, footnote to Brooks 1880), “reeds and swampy ground” (Jerdon 1862–1864), and in dense screw pine (*Pandanus*) swamps (Davison 1883). Ali and Whistler (1935–1937) stated that it inhabits “tall grass-covered hillsides, often steep and precipitous, and is particularly fond of the marshy or moist flat depressions among the hilltops overgrown with thin matted grass or reeds”. It is also reported in “lemon grass and dwarf dates” in the Nilgiris (Whistler and Kinnear 1931–1937), and from “bracken slopes” in the Kodaikanal area (Nichols 1937). More recently it has been seen in level marshy depressions covered by grass and sedge (Raman 1998), and reported to inhabit “scrub or uplands dotted with *Phoenix* [a dwarf date palm] or paddy fields”, especially when seeding (Chakravarthy and Tejasvi 1992), although it is not clear why, as it is unlikely to consume grain. It was apparently also recorded in “bamboo forest in a marshy area” by Sathasivam (1990), and, “although found mainly in grasslands, [it] frequents especially those tall grass thickets that develop along the margin of sholas” (Zacharias and Gaston 1999).

The species has been described as “far from shy” (Whistler ms) and “not a shy bird,” that “may often be seen perched on the top of a bush or tuft of grass” (Ferguson and Bourdillon 1903–1904). This habit of prominent perching was also noted by E. A. Butler (1881) who mentioned that birds even landed on telegraph wires, and by Nichols (1937). They “take short flights or sit warbling on a bare rock” at dawn (Brooks 1880). Certainly in May and June they “attract attention by their linnnet-like song which is uttered from the top of a bush or while soaring 3–5 m above the ground” with tail-feathers fanned (Jackson 1971). Apart from this brief singing season, and the earliest part of the day, the species hides itself among grasses and is then difficult to find (Baker 1922–1930). Ali and Whistler (1935–1937)

described the species as an “inveterate skulker,” except in the early mornings when he sometimes observed it “clambering up the grass stems to exposed situations”. If it is disturbed, it flies a short distance before diving back into the grass and is difficult to flush again (E. A. Butler 1881, Ferguson and Bourdillon 1903–1904). Birds are generally found singly or in pairs (Robertson and Jackson 1992) and spend much time on the ground where “their comparatively long and strong legs enable them to run and creep about with great activity” (Brooks 1880).

Food The species is presumably insectivorous (Ali and Ripley 1968–1998), although there is no direct evidence of its diet.

Breeding Pairs found at Belgaum by E. A. Butler (1881) were breeding in September. Birds in the Pirmed region appeared to be in breeding condition in both April and September, prompting the thought that the species might be double-brooded or without a definite breeding season (Ali and Whistler 1935–1937). At the same site, Jackson (1971) found nests in July and August. Nests are placed in patches of thick high grass alongside ricefields, well hidden in thick tussocks 0.3–0.6 m from the ground (E. A. Butler 1881). Those found by Jackson (1971) were very well concealed in clumps of *Imperata* grass about 1 m from the ground. They are ball-shaped, rather untidy, with a hole at the side and constructed from blades of coarse grass lined with finer stems and strips but without any real lining (Baker 1922–1930, Jackson 1971). Apparently only one bird builds, presumably the female, while her mate continues “entertaining her with song from vantage points close by” (Jackson 1971). The clutch generally comprises 4–5 eggs (Baker 1922–1930). One nest found by Jackson (1971) contained two young, another three eggs.

Migration It was thought to only be a seasonal visitant to Belgaum (E. A. Butler 1881). In addition, a record from the seashore at Point Calimere prompted speculation that it might migrate across the Palk Strait to Sri Lanka, potentially supporting the unsubstantiated records from that island (Hussain 1976). Several other migrants to Sri Lanka are recorded on passage at this coastal site (Hussain 1976). After pairs were found in song in the Grass hills in May 1992, the area was searched again thoroughly in February 1993 without success, suggesting that the species is either very difficult to detect when not singing (Kannan 1998), or migrates. Ali and Ripley (1968–1998) considered it resident.

THREATS The Broad-tailed Grassbird is one of (now) four threatened members of the suite of 16 bird species that are entirely restricted to the “Western Ghats Endemic Bird Area”, threats and conservation measures in which are profiled by Stattersfield *et al.* (1998). Grasslands in general are insufficiently represented in protected areas of the Indian subcontinent (Rahmani 1992c), a circumstance that urgently needs to be addressed. In the Western Ghats, upland grassland areas are heavily overgrazed and this is of major concern for this species and the near-threatened Nilgiri Pipit *Anthus nilghiriensis*. The Broad-tailed Grassbird in particular frequents rather tall grass and the distribution of this habitat type is becoming increasingly fragmented in southern India (L. Vijayan *in litt.* 1998).

MEASURES TAKEN The species is known from Periyar Sanctuary and Mudumalai Wildlife Sanctuary, with an important population thought to exist in the former. In the Ashambu hills, the Muthukuzhi and Kadayar areas fall within the Kalakad-Mundanthurai Sanctuary (Raman 1998).

MEASURES PROPOSED A comprehensive survey and study of the species is required, looking in detail at its ecology and distribution, so as to determine optimal habitat and management regimes and to identify further key areas to conserve. This needs to be done in the breeding season, so as to assess optimal habitats (identifiable to some degree through measurements of densities of singing males), but should be followed up with fieldwork at

less propitious seasons, using mist-nets, ringing and, sparingly, tape-playback, to build an appropriate profile of the species across a range of sites and habitats, and with a view to determining the extent of its breeding cycle and movements.

REMARKS (1) The affinity between this species and the Broad-tailed Warbler *Schoenicola brevirostris* of Africa was first suspected by A. O. Hume (*Stray Feathers* 9 [1880]: 260–264) and confirmed by Sharpe (1882). Indeed for the following hundred years they were commonly considered conspecific (e.g. Peters 1931–1987) until treated as an allospecies (with no justifying evidence) in 1985 (see Sibley and Monroe 1990). This arrangement is followed here, with the reservation that a clear statement and not a mere assumption of differentiation is needed. (2) Given an apparent difference in colour of Indian birds from northern and southern portions of the Western Ghats, it was suggested that two races might exist (Baker 1922–1930), but this notion was “thoroughly disposed of” when differences were found to be the result of moult and wear (Ali and Whistler 1935–1937). (3) It is thought perhaps to be a vagrant or scarce migrant to the lowlands and lower hills (Grimmett *et al.* 1998; see under Migration) on the basis of two unconfirmed records, as follows: one insufficiently documented specimen in BMNH labelled “Ceylon”, from c.1854, and two possible sight records from unspecified locations by Phillips in 1939: Gammaduwa, East Matale hills, and Waitalawa, Nugatenne in the Rangala hills, c.750 m (Legge 1880, Hussain 1976). Sharpe (1882) considered that there was “not the slightest reason for believing that the specimen in question is not a genuine Ceylonese skin” and had “no doubt that the bird occurs in Ceylon”. P. C. Rasmussen (verbally 2000) has pursued the matter, however, and finds that the collector of the Sri Lankan skin, H. Cuming, has been associated with unreliable provenances in other areas of zoology. With no definite record subsequently coming to light, therefore, the record is here treated as unconfirmed. (4) Curiously, although both H. A. Terry and S. B. Fairbank collected specimens in the Palni hills (now stored in BMNH), neither of them mentioned the species in their lists of the area (Whistler and Kinnear 1931–1937). (5) Although initially published as “Coolathoorpulai Patnas”, and repeated thereafter as such, “patnas” is not part of the locality name but instead refers to “montane grassland” (Beehler undated).