

Hiding in plain sight: New species of bird discovered in capital city

Title

A team of scientists with the Wildlife Conservation Society, BirdLife International, and other groups have discovered a new species of bird with distinct plumage and a loud call, living not in some remote jungle, but in a capital city of 1.5 million people.

Called the Cambodian Tailorbird *Orthotomus chaktomuk*, the previously undescribed species was found in Cambodia's urbanised capitol Phnom Penh and several other locations just outside of the city including a construction site.

Scientists describe the new bird in a special online early-view issue of the Oriental Bird Club's journal *Forktail*. The grey wren-sized bird with a rufous cap and black throat lives in dense, humid lowland scrub in Phnom Penh and other sites in the floodplain.

Its scientific name 'chaktomuk' is an old Khmer word meaning four-faces, perfectly describing where the bird is found: the area centered in Phnom Penh where the Tonle Sap, Mekong and Bassac Rivers come together. Only tiny fragments of floodplain scrub remain in Phnom Penh, but larger areas persist just outside the city limits where Cambodian Tailorbird is abundant.

The authors say that the bird's habitat is declining and agricultural and urban expansion could further affect the bird and its habitat. BirdLife will assess the species' conservation status for the Red List on behalf of the IUCN. This same dense habitat is what kept the bird hidden for so long.

Lead author Simon Mahood of WCS began investigating the new species when co-author Ashish John, also of WCS, took photographs of what was first thought to be a similar, coastal species of tailorbird at a construction site on the edge of Phnom Penh.

The bird in the photographs initially defied identification. Further investigation revealed that it was an entirely unknown species. "The modern discovery of an un-described bird species within the limits of a large populous city – not to mention 30 minutes from my home – is extraordinary," said Mahood. "The discovery indicates that new species of birds may still be found in familiar and unexpected locations."

The last two decades have seen a sharp increase in the number of new bird species

emerging from Indochina, mostly due to exploration of remote areas. Newly described birds include various babbler species from isolated mountains in Vietnam, the bizarre bare-faced bulbul from Lao PDR and the Mekong wagtail, first described in 2001 by WCS and other partners.

Co-Author, BirdLife International's Jonathan C. Eames OBE said: "Most newly discovered bird species in recent years have proved to be threatened with extinction or of conservation concern, highlighting the crisis facing the planet's biodiversity."