

FIELD STUDY

Firethroat *Calliope pectardens* and Blackthroat *C. obscura*: notes on winter plumages and habitats

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The Firethroat *Calliope pectardens* (Near Threatened) and closely related Blackthroat *C. obscura* (Vulnerable) are little-known outside their small breeding ranges in central southern China. Goodwin & Vaurie (1956) first raised the possibility that these taxa might be colour morphs of a single species, differing mainly in the chin to breast plumage of breeding males—bright rufous fiery-orange in the Firethroat and jet black in the Blackthroat. Breeding male Firethroat also have a small white spot on the side of the neck, which is absent in Blackthroats. However, Alström *et al.* (2013) reaffirmed that the two are sister species, noting that their breeding ranges are parapatric, their elaborate and mimetic songs similar, although distinguishable, while the molecular divergence between them is comparable with other chat species-pairs. From the few known records, the Firethroat winters in the north-east of South Asia, mainly Bangladesh, but also as far south as the environs of Kolkata, West Bengal, India, with two records from north Myanmar (Garthwaite & Ticehurst 1937, Tordoff *et al.* 2007). Remarkably, a Firethroat was found in north Thailand during December 2014 and is still present at the time of

writing, although the record has not yet been fully documented (Bunkhwamdi *et al.* in prep.). The wintering area of the Blackthroat is even less well known; a single specimen record from north Thailand (Ripley & King 1966) is the only reliably documented record outside China and two records in Chengdu, Sichuan—a spring record of a male in May 2011 (Wei & He 2011) and a first-winter in October 2013—are the only other records away from the breeding area.

Neither Alström *et al.* (2013) nor other recent authors (Wei & He 2011, Song *et al.* 2014) discussed detailed plumage phenology in either species; little attention has been given to the plumage characters of female, immature and non-breeding males of the two taxa but these are dealt with in more detail in the forthcoming *Robins and chats* monograph (Clement & Rose 2015) to be published later in 2015.

This note was occasioned by the capture and ringing during 2012–2013 of 11 Firethroats apparently wintering in *haors* (wetlands) in north-east Bangladesh (Round *et al.* 2014) and a twelfth individual in 2014 (Bangladesh bird club and The Wetland Trust, unpublished data).

Plate 1. Adult male Firethroat *Calliope pectardens* in non-breeding plumage, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal, India, 11 March 2012. Note the blue-edged primaries; the bluish crown and pale sides to head are typical of non-breeding adult males.



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Plate 2. Presumed same individual moulting in orange-red on breast and black sides to breast, throat still whitish, 1 April 2012.



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Plate 3. First-winter male Firethroat in advanced moult into breeding plumage, Piyali Island, South 24 Parganas, West Bengal, India. Note the retained brown-edged unmoulted juvenile primaries, secondaries, outer greater coverts and primary coverts. 10 April 2014.

Contemporaneously, two more male Firethroats were found by Indian birdwatchers in Parganas district, West Bengal, during March–April 2012 and in April 2014. A third individual, a first-winter male, was photographed in Kolkata in October 2014. Images of all three are available on Oriental Bird Images (OBI) database (www.orientalbirdimages.org). In particular, 18 images of the first two individuals, by seven different photographers, provide a unique record of male Firethroats moulting into breeding plumage in late winter–early spring.

Plate 4. Adult male Firethroat showing, unusually, orange feathering on throat and more black on the ear-coverts than is typical of most winter adults. Tanguar Haor, Bangladesh, 8 March 2013.

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The earliest images in this sequence, posted by Abhishek Das, dating from 11 March 2012, show an adult in non-breeding plumage. There is no orange on the throat or breast; the upperparts, including crown, wing-coverts and tertials, are more or less uniform slaty-blue, the sides of the head are brownish and the primaries and secondaries are blue-edged (Plate 1). The plumage appeared more or less the same when it was photographed again by Shantanu Prasad on 20 March. On 1 April AD's and Kshounish Sankar Ray's images show that the (presumably same) individual had moulted in some orange-red on the breast, in the form of an inverted V, although the throat and upper breast were still whitish (Plate 2). There was some black on the sides of the breast and numerous feathers could be seen to be in pin.

Two years later, on 9–13 April 2014, images by AD, Mainak Debnath, Santanu Manna, Anupam Mukherjee and Sumit Sengupta show a male in similar transitional plumage but now with much more extensive orange-red on the throat and breast. There are more feathers in pin on the throat, again indicating that the throat assumed its breeding colour later than the breast. Specifically, this individual can be seen to be a first-winter (second calendar-year) male, differentiated from the 2012 individual by its unmoulted juvenile (brownish-edged) primaries and secondaries, demonstrating unequivocally that the throat and breast pattern of both adults and first-year birds is more or less identical (Plate 3).

In Bangladesh the 12 birds caught and ringed in 2012–2014 comprised three adult males, six first-winter males, one male of undetermined age, and

Plate 5. The same adult male as in plate 4 showing the more typical appearance of winter adults, 22 February 2014.



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two females of uncertain age. An adult male Firethroat caught and ringed on 8 March 2013 was the only individual to show some orange feathering on the throat (Plate 4). It also had more black feathering on the sides of the head and ear-coverts than shown by any other winter adult (Round *et al.* 2014). These were almost certainly atypically retained, rather than newly moulted, feathers (as implied in Round *et al.* 2014) since there was no evidence of any feathers in pin at that time. The same individual was retrapped in exactly the same area of scrub one year later on two consecutive days, 22 and 23 February 2014, when there was barely any trace of orange feathering on the throat (Plate 5). Of greatest importance, the recapture of this bird indicates both regular annual occurrence and winter site fidelity.

Plate 6. First-winter male Firethroat showing brownish head and brownish-buff underparts with pale throat and slaty-blue feathering on mantle, lesser, median and inner greater coverts. Outer greater coverts, tertials, primaries and secondaries are retained juvenile feathers. Pashua Haor, Bangladesh, 12 February 2012.



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Plate 7. Spread tail of a first-winter male Firethroat. White windows are present on inner and outer webs of all tail-feathers except the all-black central pair. Least white (very little basally) on the outermost pair (not visible in photograph). Tanguar Haor, Bangladesh, 20 February 2012.



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Plate 8. Female Firethroat, age uncertain but probably first-winter, thought to differ from female Blackthroat *C. obscura* in paler, more contrasting throat, slightly warmer or more prominently rufous-tinged tail and paler, warmer, more buff (less deeply brown-washed) breast and flanks. Pashua Haor, Bangladesh, 12 February 2012.

Goodwin (1956) mentioned that the browner wings of first-year male Firethroats distinguish them from adults when both are in breeding plumage and he was the first to describe a post-nuptial moult into non-breeding plumage from two individuals collected in north-west Yunnan, China, on 26–27 July, illustrating this with sketches. Goodwin's finding was overlooked in most, maybe all, subsequent references, including Round *et al.* (2014).

As may be expected from the paucity of records of Blackthroat outside its breeding range, there are very few images of this species in anything except breeding plumage. A first-summer male Blackthroat, differing from the adult in showing retained juvenile, brownish-edged primaries and secondaries, is depicted in Song *et al.* (2014). More recently, however, images by Xu Yi-Xin showing the first-winter male in Chengdu, Sichuan, China, on 2 October 2013 have been added to OBI. This suggests that first-winter male Blackthroat is very close in appearance to first-winter male Firethroat, possibly differing only in having a slightly shorter tail, in being sullied greyer on the head, face and underparts, and possibly having paler legs. First-winter male Blackthroat may lack the paler and more contrasting buffy throat usually shown by Firethroats.

Examination of birds in the hand in Bangladesh confirm that adult male Firethroats are unusual in having a non-breeding plumage, and this may be true of Blackthroats. Neither of their close congeners, Siberian Rubythroat *C. calliope* and White-tailed Rubythroat *C. pectoralis*, shows a non-

breeding plumage. Adults and first-year males of both species in autumn have a throat and face pattern which more or less resembles that of breeding adult males. Similarly, Siberian Blue Robin *Larvivora cyane* has a distinctive first-winter male plumage, but adult males in winter are identical to those in breeding plumage.

Firethroat and Blackthroat in winter quarters may differ in their habitat preference, although there are few data. All Firethroats encountered by PDR and colleagues in Bangladesh were in lowland wetland habitats, either low-stature swamp-woodland, scrub or reeds (Round *et al.* 2014). Neither Ripley & King (1966) nor King (2007) gave details of the habitat in which the single winter specimen of Blackthroat was found, but the site was lowland, most likely bamboo and secondary forest, close to a lake shore. An unconfirmed sight record of Blackthroat from north Thailand (BirdLife International 2001) was of two birds by a stream in dry lowland forest in foothills.

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