

## Part II

# The Laughing Thrushes

(*Garrulax species*)

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The appearance of living specimens of *Garrulax galbanus* in Europe in 1988 rekindled ornithological interest in what had been a rather obscure, if enigmatic species. It was first described by the British naturalist H.H. Godwin-Austen in 1874, from specimens he collected in the remote Manipur Valley in north-eastern India in 1873 (Long, et al, 1994). Subsequent specimens were collected in Manipur by Godwin-Austen in the 1890s, and, a couple of other persons since then (Ibid, 1994). In nearby Nagaland, the great American ornithologist (and aviculturist) Dillon Ripley collected study skins in 1950.

Other collectors from the 1890s to the 1950s gradually established that this species also occurred in the Chin Hills of Myanmar (Burma) (not far from Manipur), as well as the Indian states of Assam and Mizoram. In addition, there is a probable sight record from the republic of Bangladesh (Ibid, 1994). From these records, it appeared that *G. galbanus*'s remote and little studied range by and large conforms to that of Blyth's Tragopan (*Tragopan b. blythi*), one of the last-discovered and least-known pheasants, and one of the rarest in captivity.

There was one glaring exception to this generalization. In 1919 two specimens were collected very far to the east from the above localities, in Wuyuan, in China's Jiangxi (formerly Shansi) Province. These were originally considered a new species, but in 1930, the great French ornithologist Jacques Berlioz not only lumped them under *Garrulax galbanus*, as the subspecies *G. galbanus courtoisi*, but called into question their Jiangxi collection locality. Long, et al (1994) states that Berlioz gave no reason for doing that. I believe one may gain some insight from Jean Delacour's fond account of office politics at the Department of Birds and Mammals at the Museum of Natural History in Paris, in pages 31-32 of his autobiography (Delacour, 1966). He relates: "The assistant curator, Auguste Ménégaux,

also seemed to belong to the mummy class, but he was much more rugged. Very bald, he always wore a small Greek cap and his high cheekbones, short nose and shaggy moustache immediately suggested a jack-in-the-box. Brusque and rough, with no great interest in his work, he had little patience with young zealots, and we were never very good friends. Trouessart [the head Curator] hated him, and I always suspected that the professor's pronounced friendship for me was partly caused by Ménégaux's antagonism. I had marvellous fun in witnessing extraordinary scenes between these two curious men... not very inspiring to young naturalists... They somehow disorganised for a time the study of mammals and birds in Paris... Fortunately Jacques Berlioz replaced Ménégaux soon after the [First World] war, and the old traditions of the museum were happily carried on again. French ornithology started anew and regained its importance."

In light of the above, given that the original description of *Garrulax courtoisi* was made by Auguste Ménégaux in 1923 (Long, et al, 1994), it is scarcely surprising that Berlioz had doubts about the type locality of this Laughing Thrush, and relegated it to subspecies status. (Jean Delacour, who many readers of this magazine do not need to be reminded was one of the greatest ornithologists of all time, was great friends with Jacques Berlioz—He described the Quangtri subspecies of the Silver Pheasant as *Lophura nycthemera berliози* in 1928).

As it turns out, *Garrulax albanus* *courtoisi* does come from Jiangxi Province after all, a fact established in 1994, three quarters of a century after Ménégaux's specimens were collected. Funded by the Munich based Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations (of which Roland Wirth is Chairman and Founder), an expedition led by the ornithologists He Fen-qi and Zhang yi-sun to Wuyuan turned up "a specimen in a local house" and "People who knew it albeit uncommonly" (Long, et al, 1994).

However the two specimens described by Ménégaux, sent to him by Father Courtoise, Director of the

Shanghai Museum (Berlioz, 1930), and maintained ever since at the Natural History Museum in Paris (France's much older equivalent to our Smithsonian Institution), remain the only ones in any collection. Thus, efforts to conserve this species in Jiangxi are all the more important.

In a September, 1996 communication to Christopher Brown, Curator of Birds at the Fort Worth Zoological Park, Roland Wirth discussed a survey in progress at Wuyuan, jointly funded by his Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations, Stiftung Avifauna Protecta (another German nonprofit organization), and the Oriental Bird Club: "The project aims to survey a whole range of 'mini-protected areas' in the district to record and map the birds and rare plants... It is thought that these areas may contain the major remaining populations of *courtoisi*...". The field researchers are three staffmembers of the Wuyuan Forestry Office and Reserve Management Office, while the Project "Liason Person" and Project Supervisor is Dr. He Fen-qi of the Institute of Zoology of the Academia Sinica in Beijing (China's equivalent to the Smithsonian). Wirth expects to hear some news shortly.

Jacques Berlioz (1930), thinking it most unlikely that a bird known previously from India and Burma should otherwise occur far to the Northeast in Shansi, but considering the two Paris specimens had come from the Shanghai Museum, surmised that they might have originated somewhere in South-east China. As it happens, aside from Jiangxi, the only other known Chinese locality for *Garrulax galbanus* is in Yunan—the province in the far South-west corner of China. There, in Simao, three specimens were collected in March 1956. Two of these are now at Wuhan University, in Central China. The third is in Beijing, at the Academia Sinica.

These three remain the only field-collected museum specimens of the Yunan Yellow-bellied Laughing Thrush. (There has circulated the misconception that the Beijing specimen was the only one in existence, but Long, et al (1994) have clarified that situation.) A scientific description of this

subspecies was not forthcoming for 26 years. In 1982 it was described as *Garrulax aalbanus simaoensis* by none other than Cheng Tso-hsin, the "Father of Modern Chinese Ornithology," and colleague Tang RuiChang.

Making up for lost time (he was imprisoned and kept from his ornithological work during the 15-20 years of the "cultural revolution"), Dr. Cheng attended to unfinished business. This included comparing the three 1956 Yunan-collected *G. galbanus* with the two 1919 Jiangxi specimens (in Paris), and the Indian specimens (at the British Museum, the Smithsonian, and the University of Michigan). Birds from both the Chinese localities were at once distinguished from the Indian and Burmese *Garrulax galbanus galbanus* by the beautiful blue nape and crown of the head ("greyish olive green" in the Indian birds), as well as a bright "lemon yellow" (as opposed to "maize yellow") throat (Long, et al, 1994). On the other hand, the Yunan birds (*G. q. simaoensis*) differed from the Jiangxi birds (*G. q. courtoisi*) in possessing "a broad yellowish-grey band across the chest, which is lacking in *G. q. courtoisi*" (Ibid, 1994).

All of this was neither here nor there to the avicultural community, as *Garrulax galbanus*, collectively, had no captive history at all.

Then, in 1988, living specimens appeared in the commercial bird trade. The first ones, out of Hong Kong, showed up in Europe (Pasini, et al, 1994). Further specimens were not long in arriving in the U.S.

Well aware that all sorts of marvelous birds were arriving in Europe, but not necessarily ending up in America, Dr. James Dolan, Director of Animal Collections for the Zoological Society of San Diego, engaged the services of F. J. Zeehandelaar, in the animal importation business since 1952, bearing the justly earned formidable reputation as the wizard of logistics and red-tape-cutting, the master of getting live animals from point A to Point B. Since the late 1980s, Mr. Zeehandelaar has brought to San Diego a stream of rare birds through Europe, originating from around the world. Thus, on 21 April, 1989, there

arrived twenty Yellow-bellied Laughing Thrushes at the San Diego Zoo. A month later six of these were transferred to the San Diego Wild Animal Park.

I am aware of only one other group of Yellow-bellied Laughing Thrushes that arrived in the U.S. Between 29 November, 1990, and 28 January, 1991, the Lincoln Park Zoo, in Chicago, purchased 10 birds, arriving in three consignments, from the Illinois firm Bird's Haven. It is uncertain whether other specimens were received by this company. I believe they were imported directly from China (or perhaps Hong Kong. At any rate, I don't believe they went through Europe).

Breedings commenced at both the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park in 1990 and continued in both collections for the next two years.

1990 appears to be the year for the first captive breeding of this species. The Duisburg Zoo in Germany also was successful that year. First hatchings at the two San Diego collections were almost exactly a week apart: on 17 April at the Zoo, and 25 April at the Wild Animal Park. Only a single bird hatched at the Park, but was fully reared. Of the 10 hatched at San Diego Zoo that year, only four (all males) survived. Aside from the above-noted first two, these 10 zoo chicks hatched in May. The seven bred at the zoo in 1991 (of which four survived), and the four bred there in 1992 (all dying) were all hatched in April and May (Marvin Jones, pers. comm.). The single bird bred at the Wild Animal Park in 1991 (which died at 17 days of age) hatched in June, but only one of the six bred there in 1992 hatched that month, the rest arriving in April and May. (Two of these six survived). No further specimens have since hatched at the Park. None hatched at the zoo in 1993 or 1994, but 18 were bred there in 1995.

All of the San Diego Zoo and Wild Animal Park hatchings took place out-of-doors, whereas the Lincoln Park Zoo hatchings occurred inside that zoo's venerable, recently remodeled, bird house. This may explain the contrast in time of year this species bred there, as opposed to the San Diego collections. Lincoln Park commenced

breeding this bird in 1991. The 11 hatched that year arrived in May, June, July and August (Joanne Earnhardt, pers. comm.). Only one of those survived more than a month. The nine hatched in 1992 (of which two survived) arrived in April, May, June, July, and August. Again, only two survived out of the six hatched at Lincoln Park in 1993. These were in three clutches of two each, hatching in April, June, and August. Breeding also took place at Lincoln Park in 1996, but I am not yet aware of the number.

I am not aware of any published accounts of the San Diego or Lincoln Park breedings, nor does anything appear to have been written about the 1991 and 1994 hatchings at the National Aviary at Pittsburgh. Aside from these notes, the only published discussion of an American zoo breeding of this species, so far as I know, is the brief account by Hope Bellino (1993), on the hatching of three specimens at the Fort Worth Zoological Park on 11 and 12 May, 1993. The parents (an imported male, purchased from the Lincoln Park Zoo, and the only 1991 Lincoln Park chick to survive to adulthood) were at large, with another Lincoln Park female, in Fort Worth's multi-species outdoor walk-through aviary. The chicks hatched after a 13 day incubation period. "At eleven days, the chicks fledged and were transferred to a .9m x 1.5m x .3m indoor cage attached to the aviary, where the parents continued to feed the chicks." (Bellino, 1993).

Two further hatchings have thus far taken place at Fort Worth, on 10 August 1995. Both babies disappeared three days later. This, with the loss of some adult specimens, has resulted in the establishment of off-exhibit facilities for this bird, in consideration of the importance of propagating it.

In 1996, two groups, each consisting of a male and two females, were set up in adjoining cages, 140 ft. long, 70 ft. across, and 96 ft. high. Nests were shortly built in each aviary, both of twigs and raffia. One was a rather small cup in a *Ficus benjamina*, the other was built in a wire basket in which material had been placed beforehand. Typically, this basket was investigated immediately after its intro-

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duction on 5 June, though serious nest building did not commence until 21 June. Things then proceeded quickly, the construction of an again, rather small, cup-shaped nest amidst the raffia and twigs, being followed by a pair of eggs, laid on the 26th and 27th of June. The breeding pair (a wild-caught male from the San Diego importation, and a Lincoln Park bred female) tolerated their cagemate, one of the Fort Worth-bred 1993 offspring, but it did not take part in incubation. Unfortunately, these eggs proved clear. No eggs were laid in the other cage, where a nest was constructed in the Ficus tree. This may be because the Lincoln Park bred male was hand-raised—though he does feed waxworms to his females.

In October, 1996, a female was transferred from each of these off exhibit aviaries to a compartment of the Fort Worth Zoo's Pheasantry, where these Lincoln Park bred birds joined two newly acquired San Diego Zoo bred males. The females were introduced without complication after a day in a "howdy cage."

During this introduction period, both males hung all over the cage suspended in their aviary, quivering their wings and vocalizing. This provided an excellent opportunity for me to make detailed comparisons between San Diego and Lincoln Park birds. They are, for all practical purposes, identical.

For me, at least, it lays to rest a crucial question in the future management of this bird in American aviculture. There is no subspecific difference between the San Diego birds, imported through Europe, and the Lincoln Park birds, which came directly from

China. The far less important, but certainly very interesting question of which subspecies all these birds are, is, I think, one yet to be definitely answered.

Over the last several years there has been some controversy over the identity of Yellow-bellied Laughing Thrushes in American Zoos. This will be quite apparent to anyone perusing the last several ISIS Bird Abstracts, published by the International Species Information System twice each year, listing all birds reported present by the 461 participating institutions. The same collections, in different years, have variously identified their specimens as *Garrulax galbanus* or *Garrulax galbanus simaoensis*, but the Abstract for 30 June, 1996, complicates matters further.

As of 30 June, 1996, ISIS (1996) indicates that 11 U.S. zoos held a total of 56 specimens, a substantial increase from 31 December, 1995, when Robert Webster (1996), ranking by size ISIS-listed U.S. North American zoo populations of passerine birds, found that, with 47 specimens, *Garrulax galbanus* (collectively) tied for twenty-ninth place with the Eastern Bluebird and the Gold-breasted Waxbill.

The 56 mid-year birds are listed by ISIS (1996) under three separate headings. Thirty-seven of them (scattered throughout nine zoos) are simply listed as "Yellow-bellied Laughing Thrush (*Garrulax galbanus*)."

The pair at Houston and the three pairs at Minneosta Zoological Gardens, as well as a further bird at Fort Worth and three at San Diego Zoo are listed as "Austen's Laughing Thrush (*Garrulax galbanus simaoensis*)."

Finally, seven more of San Diego Zoo's birds are listed as "Austen's Laughing Thrush (*Garrulax galbanus courtoisi*)."

This uncertainty in classification of what appears to be a single taxon of bird is due to the difficulties inherent in comparing living captive specimens with the respectively 87 and 40 year old specimens of *G. galbanus courtoisi* and *G. g. simaoensis*.

Two articles detailing research in this direction both reached the same conclusion: The birds that arrived in Europe, commencing in 1988, are *G. g. simaoensis* (Long et al, 1994; Pasini et al, 1994). It was of course obvious that they were not the nominate subspecies from India and Myanmar. Quite aside from the fact that nothing gets commercially imported from that subspecies' range, head coloration clearly identifies that these are Chinese birds. They have gloriously blue crowns and napes, whereas *G. g. galbanus*' nape and crown are described by Long et al (1994) as "olive green."

The identification of the imported living birds as *G. galbanus simaoensis* by Long et al (1994) and Passini et al (1994) appears to be based entirely on the color of the underbelly. Of the two known specimens of *G. galbanus courtoisi*, one is too dishevelled for a diagnostic comparison. The other, however is "grey (colour near to no. 209 of Séguy's universal colour chart) from the upper breast to the vent" according to Dr. Chr. Jouanin at the Paris Museum of Natural History, where both specimens repose (Pastini et al, 1994, Long et al, 1994).

The captive specimens are pale yellow from the lower margin of the chest to the white vent. The yellow is of a distinctively paler shade than the beautiful rich yellow throat. This golden yellow throat, combined with the blue crown and nape, and black mask and beak, make this bird reminiscent of a Mountain Tanager, a reason, along with its rather non-aggressive behavior, that it drew the interest of zoo people even before its rarity was understood.

Between the yellow throat and underparts is a brownish-gray chest. Whether or not this detail corresponds to the "yellowish-grey broad band," by which Doctors Cheng and

Table I.

Yellow-bellied Laughing Thrushes (*Garrulax galbanus*) hatched in American Zoos, 1959-1995. (Compiled from the International Zoo Yearbook (1959-93) and ISIS (1994-95)).

Institutions	Years hatched	Number hatched (Juvenile deaths)
San Diego Zoo	1990-92 & 1995	39(13 + unspecified)
San Diego Wild Animal Park	1990-92	8(5)
Chicago (Lincoln Park)	1991-95	43(21 + unspecified)
National Aviary at Pittsburgh	1991 & 1994	4(1 + unspecified)
Fort Worth	1993 & 1995	5(2)

Table II.

Yellow-bellied Laughing Thrushes (*Garrulax galbanus*) hatched in European and Asian Zoos. (Compiled from the International Zoo Yearbook (1959-93) and ISIS (1994-95)).

Institutions	Years hatched	Number hatched (Juvenile deaths)
Duisburg	1990	2(1)
Ocean Park (Hong Kong)	1992	2
Rotterdam	1992-94	8(5 + unspecified)
Tierpark Berlin	1994	2(1)

Tang distinguished *G. g. simaoensis* from *G. g. courtoisi* (Long et al, 1994), is a matter of contention. Dr. Cheng Tso-Hsin, himself, after examining photographs of two birds purchased in Italy in 1988 by the Milanese aviculturist Alberto Pasini, replied thusly to Pasini, in 1993, "The pretty photos you enclosed... are, indeed, of much interest to all of us, and the yellow-bellied babbler is surely to be *Garrulax galbanus simaoensis*, as so proposed in my paper..." On the other hand, Dr. He Fen-qi, also of the Academia Sinica, and the rediscoverer of *G. a. courtoisi*, wrote, in a letter to Roland Wirth, also in 1993, that photos he had been sent of birds in Tierpark Berlin appeared to represent *G. g. courtoisi* "as they have no obvious necklet on their breast."

Perhaps this is more a matter of semantics. At any rate, the fact that the imported living specimens all have the yellow on the throat separated from that of the underparts by a grayish chest led Long et al (1994) and Pasini et al (1994) to clearly identify them as *G. s. simaoensis*.

Comparison between observations I have made of San Diego- and Lincoln Park-bred specimens at the Fort Worth Zoo, and the key to the three *G. galbanus* subspecies prepared by Long et al (1994), has led me to question as to whether *G. g. simaoensis* is truly the subspecies these birds correspond to.

According to Table I. in Long et al, the central tail feathers of *G. g. simaoensis* are "ash-brown, with a broad terminal band of dark chestnut, tipped paler," while those of *G. g. courtoisi* are "dark grey, their distal halves black with pale tips."

When at rest, the central tail feathers of these birds almost completely cover the other feathers, which, with sharply contrasting dark and white patterns, are a startling sight as the bird flies away. The central tail feathers of the captive birds are gray at the base, with a clearly defined blackish area toward the tips, which are whitish. I interpret "dark chestnut" to be some shade of reddish brown, which certainly does not describe the very dark color of the distal halves of the zoo bird's feathers, perhaps aptly described as "slaty."

Another very noticable feature that appears to be at odds with the descrip-

tion of *G. g. simaoensis* in Table I. of Long et al (1994) is the very narrow, but clearly defined halfmoon, of a beautiful shade of bluish-white, between the eyes of the zoo birds, creating a boundry between the blue crown and the plushy black feathers above the beak, which form part of the black mask. The Table I. description of *G. g. simaoensis* describes the crown as "deep bluish," with "no supercillum." I am under the impression a "supercillum" is an eyebrow like marking, over the eye. However, the term is not defined in Long et al.'s (1994) table. Instead, the crown of *G. g. courtoisi* is described as being distinguished by "a broad bluish white band grading back into azure blue." If, as I infer, a "supercillum" equals a "broad bluish white band," I suppose a narrow, sharply defined band could be one too.

These interesting discrepancies may well be due to semantics. It is a pity that the photograph, published in Long et al (1994), provided by Roland Wirth, of the Academia Sinica *G. g.*

*simaoensis* specimen, shows the *underside* of the tail. It would be helpful to understand precisely what was meant by "dark Chestnut." (I have eaten many chestnuts whose shells were almost black.)

Again, this situation certainly supports the view that large series of preserved museum specimens are essential to really understand what is going on with a given species.

An intriguing possibility is that the birds exported to Europe and America may represent an otherwise unknown population of *Garrulax galbanus*. In a 1993 letter to Roland Wirth, He Fen-qi suggests the, "possible existence of the bird in certain regions in Northern Guangxi, Southern Hunan, and elsewhere, as actually it seems almost impossible for a Laughing-thrush bird with its subspecies segregated in such a long distance with each other [sic]."

As earlier noted, Dr. He, with the assistance of Roland Wirth and the Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations, rediscovered *G. galbanus courtoisi*. This expedition cost



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less than \$2,000. Naturally, Dr. He would very much like to attempt a similar rediscovery of *G. g. simaoensis*, as well as an exploration of the above-noted localities. No one appears to know from where the commercial Chinese trappers obtained the exported specimens. It is disturbing that none appear to have left China since 1990, despite the fact that Chinese bird shipments (especially from Yunan) continue to arrive in this country.

As long ago as 1993, Roland Wirth expressed the concern that the entire population may have been trapped out. One may instead hope that the collection locality was a particularly out-of-the-way place where no one goes anymore. At any rate, finding that habitat is imperative. The American zoo community is showing some interest in supporting field research. If any individuals are interested in assisting future projects of Dr. He, through Roland Wirth and his Zoological Society, they may contact me through the Fort Worth Zoological Park (Bird Department), 1989 Colonial Parkway, Fort Worth, TX 76110.

In the meantime, there is the captive population to conserve. In addition to the 56 specimens in 11 American zoos, the 30 June, 1996 ISIS Bird Abstract lists 20 in six zoos in the United Kingdom, Holland, Germany, and France, and indicates that reproduction occurred in the last year at Chester and Mulhouse. These hatchings (two at Chester, and four at Mulhouse) took place in 1996, as the 31 December 1995 abstract lists no European breedings for 1995. This list of European collections is not complete. In addition, there are specimens maintained by private aviculturists as well (although I am aware of none in American private collections).

While there have been fewer documented hatchings of this species in European and Asian public zoos, in comparison to U.S. ones, the Continental European and British populations are presently more closely managed. The British studbook is maintained by the famed avicultural historian David Coles, Curator at Beale Park, Lower Basildon, Reading, while the one for the Continent is kept by Teo Pagel, Curator of Birds at the

Cologne Zoo.

An American Studbook keeper has yet to be designated, but is certainly one of the recommendations of the Passerine Taxon Advisory Group, which provisionally designated this species as one of the four members of the genus *Garrulax* to be maintained as an established population in North American Zoos. At the time of the TAG's working meeting in Seattle, in September 1995, the question as to whether two subspecies were present in the U.S. was a major concern. I hope I have satisfactorily addressed this in these pages.

One recommendation I strongly urge is discontinuing the use, in ISIS, of "Austen's Laughing Thrush" as a common name. While it is true that H.H. Godwin-Austen did describe the nominant Indian subspecies in 1874, having collected the type specimens the year before, it happens that the Brown-capped Laughing Thrush, of Assam and Myanmar, was described as *Garrulax austeni*. This species has never appeared in aviculture but I think it is best to avoid any potential confusion.

Rarely has zoo aviculture found itself in such a situation. To have acquired a fairly large and genetically diverse number of founders of a bird subsequently discovered to be almost unknown to science is not a usual occurrence. The fact that this species has proved fairly prolific, and that numbers in American zoos have thus far grown steadily, gives one reason for optimism. It is certainly to be hoped that attentive management (including the eventual distribution of specimens to private aviculturists) will result in a firmly established, self-sustaining population of this beautiful and enigmatic Laughing Thrush.

### Postscript

I received the following comments from Roland Wirth on 17 December 1996: "It has been suggested... that the two Chinese forms of '*galbanus*' are perhaps a separate species. In my view, that makes perfect sense, considering that the two described subspecies are very similar despite their widely separate ranges, whereas *simaoensis* does NOT approach [the

geographically close] nominate *galbanus* in any morphological characters. This fact, that the two Chinese subspecies may represent a species of their own, makes conservation action and proper captive management only so much more urgent."

### Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to Roland Wirth, Chairman of the Zoological Society for the Conservation of Species and Populations, for providing, over several years, a great deal of information on *Garrulax galbanus*. I am also indebted to Marvin Jones, Registrar Emeritus of the Zoological Society of San Diego, Joanne Earnhardt, Registrar at the Lincoln Park Zoo, Chicago, and Rebecca Dillinger, Registrar at the Fort Worth Zoological Park, for furnishing their respective institution's records for this species. I likewise wish to thank Christopher Brown and Lis Hudson, respectively Curator and Assistant Curator of Birds at the Fort Worth Zoological Park, Robert Webster, Supervising Keeper of Birds at the San Antonio Zoo, and Dr. Roger Wilkinson, Curator of Birds at the Chester Zoo, for generous provision of information and materials.

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