

# Red-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus* Pennant (1769): A Rare Sight Record from Buttala, Monaragala District

M. Sandun J. Perera <sup>1,2</sup>

## සංක්ෂිප්තය

වනරතු මල්කොහා 1781 වසරේදී විස්තර කරන ලද ශ්‍රී ලංකාවට ආවේණික ලෙස පිළිගත් අලංකාර උර්ලන පක්ෂි විශේෂයකි. තර්ජනයට ලක් වූ සතුන්ගේ ජාතික ලැයිස්තුව (1999) මගින් තර්ජනයට ලක්වූ පක්ෂි විශේෂයක් ලෙස වර්ග කරන ලද මෙම පක්ෂියා මේ වන විට තෙත් කලාපීය නොඉඳුල් වනාන්තර හා වියළි කලාපීය ගංගාශ්‍රිත වනාන්තර කිහිපකට පමණක් සීමා වී ඇත. නමුත් ශ්‍රී ලංකාවේ අතරමැදි කලාපයට අයත් බුත්තල ප්‍රදේශයෙන් මෙම පක්ෂියා වාර්තා වන බව මෙමගින් විස්තර කෙරේ. 2001 - 11 - 07 දින පෙරවර 10.10ට පමණ රහතන්ගල හා අන්දම්පහුරකන්ද නම් වූ කුඩා කඳු වැටි දෙක අතර පිහිටි ජනාවාස බවට පත් වූ පහත් බිමක මෙම නිරීක්ෂණය සිදුකරන ලදී. මෙම පක්ෂියා අතරමැදි කලාපීය අර්ධ සදාහරිත වනාන්තර වලින් වැසුණු කුඩා කඳුමුදුන්වල හෝ මැණික් ගඟ ආශ්‍රිත වනාන්තර වල වාසය කරන කුඩා කණ්ඩායමක සාමාජිකයෙකු වියහැකි අතර බුත්තල ප්‍රදේශයෙන් වාර්තා වූ පළමු අවස්ථාවද මෙය වේ.

## Introduction

Red-faced Malkoha is one of the earliest known Ceylon birds, as Forster described it in his *Indische Zoologie* as far back as 1781 (Legge, 1880). With its finely bristled crimson-red face, strong pale-green bill, white under parts with black breast, and long, graduated, white-tipped tail, this handsome bird cannot be mistaken for any other species in the Sri Lankan list.

The Red-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus* Pennant (1769) belongs to the Family Cuculidae of the order Cuculiformes (Sibley and Monroe, 1990) and is known in Sinhalese as “watha-rathu malkoha” (Kotagama and Perera, 1983), “mal kaendetta” or “warrelliya” (Legge, 1880).

According to Kotagama and Fernando (1994) it is a rare breeding resident found in all zones and endemic to Sri Lanka. At present it is confined to undisturbed forest areas in the wet zone and riverine forests of the dry zone. Grimmett *et al.* (1998) states it as a globally threatened bird, restricted to protected areas in Sri Lanka. In the 1999 National List of Threatened Species the Red-faced Malkoha has been categorised as a threatened species (I.U.C.N, 2000).

This malkoha is fond of tall or shady forests in which there is a considerable amount of undergrowth or small jungle, into which it often descends (Legge, 1880). It is a shy, restless tree-canopy dweller and lives either solitarily, in pairs, or in small flocks. Red-faced Malkoha is regularly seen at Sinharaja and a few other remaining rainforests, frequently associating with feeding waves (mixed-species feeding flocks) (Henry, 1998).

There are two old records of this species from South India, i.e. J. Stewart in the last century and B.H. Biddulph in 1931, which have cast some doubt on the status of the bird as a Sri Lankan endemic. However, in the absence of any further evidence and of a specimen, we continue to treat the Red-faced Malkoha as peculiar to Sri Lanka, in agreement with noted ornithologists (Henry, 1998).

## Observation

The present observation was made by the author at Buttala, in the Monaragala District, within the Uva Province of Sri Lanka (6° 46' 27" N and 81° 15' 45" E). It was inside the premises of the Faculty of Applied Sciences of Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka, about 1.5 km away from the Buttala junction, on the left side of the Colombo-Pothuvil main road (A4). The site is within the intermediate zone and belongs to the floristic region of Eastern Intermediate Lowlands (Gunatilleke & Gunatilleke 1990). It is situated on a valley between Rahanthangala mountain ridge along the north-east direction and ‘Andampahura Kanda’ mountain to the north. The area can be described as a semi-developed area including human habitations, well-wooded home gardens, grasslands (dry/Uva patana type), scrublands and a few moist semi-evergreen forest patches (intermediate zone forests) (Pers. Obs.).

A single bird was observed only once, flying across the valley where the University is situated, on 07/11/2001 at 10:10 in the morning. It was a sunny hot day with a clear sky, and the bird was flying at a height of about 15 to 20 ft, and suddenly flew into the canopy of a woodland with several mango (*Mangifera indica*), margosa (*Azadirachta indica*) and satinwood

<sup>1</sup> IUCN - The World Conservation Union, 53, Hortain Place, Colombo 07.  
<sup>2</sup> Young Zoologists' Association of Sri Lanka, National Zoological Gardens, Dehiwala.  
e-mail: sandunjayalal@yahoo.com

(*Chloroxylon swietenia*) trees (Ashton *et al.*, 1997) and disappeared thereafter. This is the first record of a Red-faced Malkoha from the present location.

The bird was first observed in a typical cuculid flight. But, it was larger than the Blue-faced Malkoha which is more commoner in the area, and the tail was more longer and white tail tips were much prominent at the first sight. These differences led the author to observe it more carefully. When it approached the woodland (on a darker background), its red facial patch and white feathers bordering the patch were clearly observed, confirming the bird as the Red-faced Malkoha.

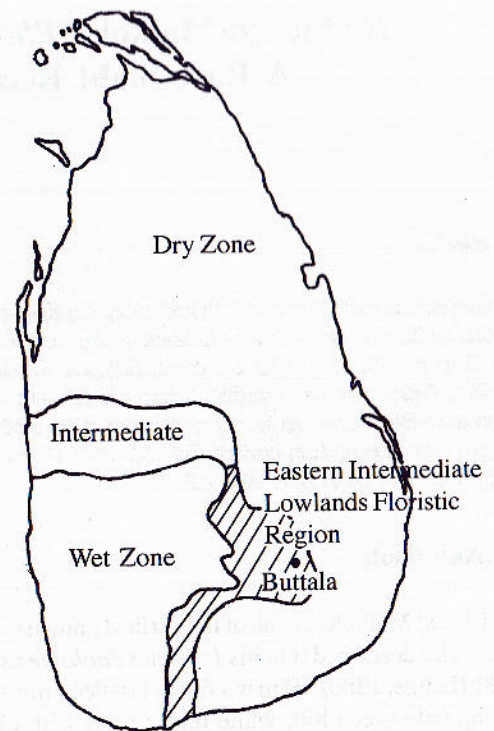
Mountain ridges on both sides of the valley are covered with relatively undisturbed moist semi- evergreen forests, which are relatively tall. The bird was observed flying across the valley from the Rahathangala mountain range to the Andampahura mountain. Hence, they might occur in these forests on hilltops in very small numbers. Otherwise this bird could be a member of the few scattered colonies occurring in riverine habitats of the Menik Ganga and Kumbukkan Oya. The location of the present observation was only about 2.5 km away from the Menik Ganga.

## Discussion

This beautiful endemic has not been a scarce bird even in 1880s. Legge (1880) describes that it was then to be found in most of the damp forests of the Western province, particularly in the hills stretching from the neighborhood of Avissawella to Kurunegala. It occurred throughout the jungles of the great northern forest-tract extending from the Western Province to the Vanni, the most northern sighting being the forests on the road from Trincomalee to Anuradhapura. In the Eastern Province it was far more numerous, and he had met flocks of ten or a dozen in the jungles near Bibile beneath the Madulsima range. Bligh had observed it at a considerable altitude in the Lemastota hills, into which according to Legge (1980) it doubtlessly ascended from the forests in Wellawaya.

In Legge's time it occurred as high as Haputale, but there is no doubt that, owing to the extension of cultivation, and through shooting, its numbers seriously declined throughout its former haunts, and it must now be considered definitely a scarce bird (Henry, 1998). A single pair of Red-faced Malkohas has been observed in 1998 at Dambagahapitiya (Nikapotha, Baddulla District) within the Haputale forest range (Rodrigo, 1998).

According to Henry(1998) it is nowadays found mainly in the few remaining forests of the wet zone and the adjoining hills. But a few scattered colonies exist in the dry zone forests as well. They are found in riverine habitats in the dry zone, such as Lahugala, Wasgomuwa, the Menik Ganga and Kumbukkan Oya.



**Figure 01.** Map of Sri Lanka showing the locality of present Observation

As stated by Henry (1998), due to the alarming rate of population decline, this magnificent endemic will face extinction in near future, unless it is protected by provisioning of extensive network of protected areas, education of people, and the enforcement of proper legislation.

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