

THE BIRDS OF THE MALAY PENINSULA

FINFOOTS

Family HELIORNITHIDÆ

THIS family is included in the *Order* Ralliformes (coots, rails, crakes, etc.) which has already been dealt with in detail in our third volume. The somewhat aberrant finfoots are not unlike the rails externally, but they have thick, soft, close-set plumage, adapted to diving habits, therein approaching the grebes. The tail is longer than in the rails with the shafts of the feathers thicker. Toes with broad, scalloped, membranous lobes like those of a coot.

The family is not large, consisting of five species arranged in three genera inhabiting tropical America, Africa and Southern Asia. Only one species occurs in Malaya.

The finfoots are usually shy birds, inhabitants of inland waterways and swamps. They are expert swimmers and divers.

Heliopais personata

The Masked Finfoot

Podica personata G. R. Gray, *Proc. Zool. Soc.*, 1848, p. 90, pl. Aves 4 (Malacca); Oates, *Birds of Burma*, ii., 1883, p. 353.

Heliopais personata, Sharpe, *Cat. Birds Brit. Mus.*, xxiii., 1894, p. 232; Blanford, *Faun. Brit. Ind., Birds*, iv., 1898, p. 182; Williamson, *Journ. Nat. Hist. Soc. Siam*, iii., 1918, p. 32; Robinson and Kloss, *op. cit.*, v., 1921, p. 39; Hopwood, *Journ. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc.*, xxvii., 1921, p. 634 (nidification); Stuart Baker, *Faun. Brit. Ind., Birds* (2nd ed.), vi., 1929, p. 37; Stuart Baker, *Nid. Birds Ind. Emp.*, iv., 1935, p. 316.

Malay Name.—Itek ayer; burong pëndandang?

Description.—Bill, heavy, very slightly longer than the tarsus, the culmen slightly curved. Tail, considerably rounded, about half the length of the wing, of eighteen feathers, stiff and rather broad.

Adult male.—Fore part of crown and a line extending backwards on each side, chin, face and throat, glossy black; a small spot at base of bill and a narrow line encircling the black of the throat, white; occiput and nape, greyish flushed with green, greyer on the occiput; mantle, oily brown tinged

with green; **rest of upper surface**, including outer aspect of wings, brown; rump and **upper tail coverts**, paler; inner aspect of quills, dark brown; under wing **coverts and axillaries**, blackish brown; tail feathers, brown, very narrowly **tipped with dirty white**. Sides of neck and breast immediately below the **black throat**, greyish brown, tinged with green. Upper breast, **buffy white**; lower breast and middle of belly, white; flanks and under tail **coverts**, pale earthy brown indistinctly barred with white; thighs, pale sooty brown.

Adult female.—Closely resembles the male, but chin and middle of throat **white** surrounded by a broad black stripe coming to a point on the lower throat. The black of the forehead is reduced in extent.

Immature.—Like the female, but the white spot at the base of the bill larger, the black stripe round the throat more irregular and mottled with white; the crown brownish with hardly any traces of black. The greenish grey on the occiput and nape less pronounced.

Soft Parts.—*Male*: iris, chrome; bill, bright yellow; feet, pale apple-green. *Female*: iris, dark hazel; feet, apple-green, edges of lobes and soles yellowish, lobes black beneath. Bill, chrome-yellow, yellowish green on culmen, basal-culminal process chrome-yellow. "Iris ochreous yellow, eyelids pea-green, bill dull yellow, shaded about the middle with brown, feet pale green, the lobes only faintly tinged with yellow, claws and soles dark horny green" (*Davison*).

Dimensions.—Total length, about 19.75 to 21 in.; wing, 9.75 to 10 in.; tail, 4.75 to 5.4 in.; tarsus, 1.9 to 2.2 in.; middle toe and claw, 2.9 in.; bill from gape, 1.8 to 2.2 in.; exposed culmen, 2 to 2.25 in. *Females* are rather smaller in all dimensions, but the difference in size between the sexes is inconsiderable.

Range in the Malay Peninsula.—Sporadic throughout the Peninsula, south to Malacca. The island of Koh Pennan, in the Bandon Bight.

Extralimital Range.—North through Tenasserim to Assam. East to Cambodia. Sumatra.

Nidification.—Nothing is known of the nesting habits in the Malay Peninsula. Mr Cyril Hopwood describes the bird as breeding in the flooded jungle of the lower Irrawaddy, dark places under thick creepers being favoured. In the district visited the birds were breeding in some numbers at the end of July and August. The nests were built of twigs and lined with dead leaves: they were pads nearly a foot deep, roughly circular in shape and about fifteen inches in diameter, the egg cavity being a shallow cup about eight inches in diameter. The clutches were up to seven in number. The eggs are described as spheroidal, sometimes nearly spherical, moderately to highly glossy, of coarse texture and very hard-shelled. Ground-colour creamy, sometimes very pale, in others with a strong greenish tinge, but of the same colour in any one clutch. Markings, secondary and primary, the latter being rusty or chestnut, and the former inky purple. Shape and distribution of markings apparently very variable, but the eggs, in general, are described as very ralline in character, being matched exactly in colour pattern by many eggs of the

blue-breasted banded rail (*Hypotaenidia striata*). The average dimensions of twenty-seven eggs are given as 1.98 by 1.7 in.

Habits.—The masked finfoot is fairly widely distributed throughout the Malay Peninsula, though it cannot anywhere be called a common bird. It occurs both in clear-water streams, near the foot of the mountains, and in brackish swamps, near the sea-coast. It is very shy, but when disturbed does not readily take to flight, which, though rapid and powerful, is never long sustained. In the water it is very active, sometimes using its wings as paddles and swimming with the body rather deep in the water and with the neck bent back, like a darter (*Anhinga melanogaster*). In up-country streams it is often found under the shelter of high overhanging banks, where, as Davison says, it presumably feeds on molluscs and insects as well as vegetable matter. I know nothing of its voice.

Writing of Selangor in the first volume of this series, Robinson said: "Behind the mangrove zone on the coast there is, in many parts of the state, a belt of fresh-water swamp, overgrown with thorny palms and many other plants peculiar to the zone, which is also the habitat of many birds that are rare in other types of country, as, for instance, the finfoot, one or two of the bulbuls, and certain of the babblers."

A peculiar character in the adult male is the presence of a knife-like ridge in the middle line of the basal portion of the culmen, ending in a sharp point directed backwards, but not very perceptible in skins. Mr Stuart Baker contends that this horn is characteristic of the breeding season and that it disappears in winter, but I am not certain that this is so.