

Biodiversity Record: First breeding record of mangrove whistler on Singapore Island in over 70 years

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Recommended citation. Niessen RAH, Narayanswamy R & Sin YCK (2024) Biodiversity Record: First breeding record of mangrove whistler on Singapore Island in over 70 years. Nature in Singapore, 17: e2024060. DOI: 10.26107/NIS-2024-0060

Subjects: Mangrove whistler, *Pachycephala cinerea* (Aves: Passeriformes: Pachycephalidae).

Subjects identified by: Rogier A. H. Niessen.

Location, date and time: Singapore Island, Changi Bay Point, Park Connector Network; 14 April 2024; around 1230 hrs.

Habitat: Coastal degraded forest and shrub (Fig. 1), next to the park connector.

Observer: Rogier A. H. Niessen.

Observations: An adult mangrove whistler was observed hunting for insects (Fig. 2). The bird was tracked, in full view, for about 10 minutes while it moved from branch to branch a few metres off the ground. The bird was not heard vocalising and it did not seem disturbed by the presence of the observer. After some time, the bird confined its hunting behaviour very closely to a particular spot near the upturned stump of a fallen tree. This stump was partially covered with undergrowth consisting mostly of bare intertwined twigs and stems. The bird started to call softly while navigating slowly around the overgrown stump. Then, a conspecific fledgling (Fig. 3) was observed perched about one metre from the ground within the undergrowth. The fledgling did not move or call. The adult bird approached the fledgling and started feeding it. This behaviour was observed multiple times for the next 10 minutes or so. Visual sighting of the fledgling was lost as the birds moved deeper into the vegetation. Shortly after, a second adult mangrove whistler, possibly the second parent, was spotted in a similar habitat around 200 metres from the spot where the first adult and fledgling were observed.



Fig. 1. Habitat where mangrove whistler was observed (Photograph by: Rogier A. H. Niessen).

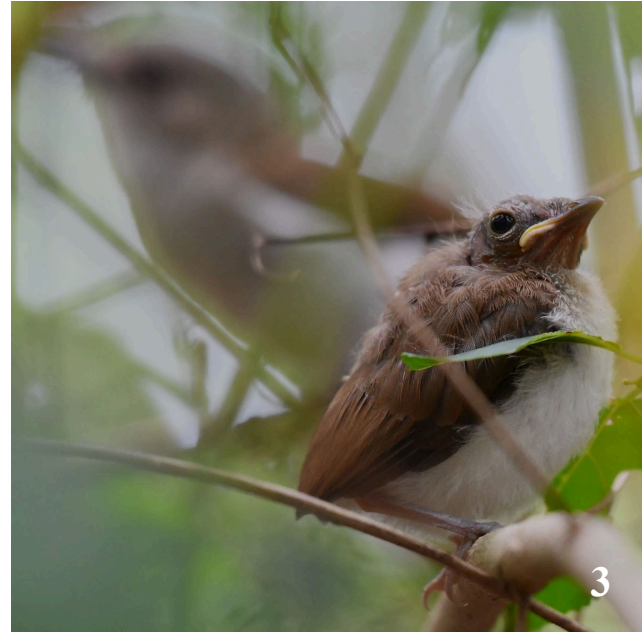


Fig. 2. Fronto-lateral view of the adult mangrove whistler that was accompanying the juvenile. Fig. 3. Lateral view of the fledgling bird, with its parent in the background. The fleshy gape, largely bare head, and lack of tail feathers indicate the bird is very young (Photographs by: Rogier A. H. Niessen).

Remarks: The mangrove whistler was formerly considered to be a fairly common resident in Singapore (Gibson-Hill, 1949), with sightings concentrated in the mangrove patches even on Singapore Island. However, since the late 20th century, sightings in Singapore declined and the only reliable sites for the species in the nation have been largely restricted to the islands south of Singapore Island (eBird, 2024; Bird Society of Singapore, 2024). Juvenile birds have also been reported from these sites. Given the presence of a breeding record in 1997 (Wang & Hails, 2007) and a relatively large extent of suitable habitat, the species is believed to have a population in Pulau Tekong, while sightings on Pulau Ubin are scarce (Bird Society of Singapore, 2024). Several sporadic records of brief-staying birds across the main island have been detected in recent years, but it was only in October 2021 that an adult individual remained at the same site for several months, at Berlayer Creek Boardwalk. In October 2022, an immature bird was reported occasionally associating with an adult at the same site, raising the possibility of local breeding; however, the bird was not young enough to conclude that it hatched on Singapore Island. At Changi Bay Point, this species was first recorded in April 2022, with occasional records of up to two individuals at various points since then (Bird Society of Singapore, 2024). With the last nesting record on Singapore Island described by Gibson-Hill (1950), this is only the second confirmed breeding record of the mangrove whistler on Singapore Island, and the first there in over 70 years. Given the paucity of records this century, the successful breeding described here is a significant development in the status of this species in Singapore.

Despite its name, the mangrove whistler is not entirely reliant on the mangrove habitat. While it is mainly found in mangroves on the continental landmass within its range, the species is also a small island specialist, with many such islands present across its distribution (Eaton et al., 2021). This species can be found widely in the multitude of Indonesian islands just south of Singapore such as Bintan, Batam and their satellite islands, and their great dispersal ability surely allows them to reach Singapore easily. With the recent increase of sightings on the main island of Singapore, it is likely that the preservation of Singapore's mangroves and coastal forests will benefit this species locally.

Pachycephala cinerea is referred to as *Pachycephala cinerea butaloides* by Gibson-Hill (1949, 1950) and *Pachycephala grisola vandepolli* by Wang & Hails (2007). The species epithet *cinerea* is now preferred over *grisola* (see Walters, 2003; Gill et al., 2024). The subspecies *butaloides* and *vandepolli* are regarded as synonyms of the nominate race *cinerea* (see Gill et al., 2024).

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