

## FAIRY BLUEBIRDS

### Family IRENIDÆ

It seems quite reasonable to place this group of birds in a distinct family, and Baker is probably as correct as anyone else in his view that they should be placed near the orioles, though the fact that they have long hairs springing from the nape suggests an alliance with the bulbuls from which they are separated by the fact that the very young birds are streaked.

The fairy bluebirds are about the size of a thrush; the bill stout, curved and slightly notched; nostrils concealed by plumes; rictal bristles well developed. Tarsi, short and stout; feet, fairly strong. Wing, rounded; tail, square, shorter than the wing.

The family consists of two genera, one *Irenella*, with the sexes alike and with the feathers of the back normal, confined to the Philippines, and the other, *Irena*, with the sexes different and the feathers of the upper surface in the male, enamelled. This genus, *Irena*, is found throughout the Oriental region, except in the Philippines, and all the races very closely resemble each other.

Two forms are Malayan.

#### *Irena puella cyanea*

#### The Malayan Fairy Bluebird

*Irena malayensis*, Kelham, *Ibis*, 1881, p. 514.

*Irena cyanea*, Sharpe, *Cat. Birds, Brit. Mus.*, vi., 1881, p. 179.

*Glauconympha cyanea cyanea*, Oberholser, *Journ. Washington Acad. Sci.*, vii., 1917, p. 541.

*Irena puella cyanea* (Begbie), Stuart Baker, *Faun. Brit. Ind., Birds* (2nd ed.), iii., 1926, p. 3.

**Malay Name.**—Murai gajah.

**Description.**—*Adult male.*—Upper and under tail coverts reaching within half-an-inch of the tip of the tail. Forehead, frontal plumes, sides of the head, wing, tail, above and below, greater and median wing coverts, glossy velvety black. Crown and mantle, black; rump, scapulars, lesser wing coverts, upper and under wing coverts and tips of the inner, greater upper wing coverts, brilliant turquoise-blue, more silvery on the fore part of the crown, the feathers with an enamelled surface.

*Adult female*.—Dull verditer-green; the lores, blackish brown. Primaries and secondaries, brownish, paler on the inner webs, the latter edged with green on the outer web. Middle pair of tail feathers as the back, but rather more bluish; rest of the feathers, blackish, edged with bluish green. Feathers of the head with dark centres, giving a scaly appearance.

Some sexed females, possibly very old birds, are decidedly bluer, with a slight metallic gloss all over, especially on the rump and under surface.

*Immature*.—Young males are at first just like the females, and appear to change into the adult dress by moult, but in part, at least, by a direct colour change in the feathers, though how this is effected is hard to understand. Very young birds in the allied form, *I. puella puella*, are heavily streaked with black.

**Soft Parts**.—Iris, carmine to orange-red (reddish brown in young birds); bill and feet, black.

**Dimensions**.—Total length, about 10 to 10.5 in.; wing, 4.8 to 5.3 in.; tail, 4 to 4.3 in.; tarsus, 0.75 in.; bill from gape, 1.2 in.

**Range in the Malay Peninsula**.—From about lat. 7° N. to the southern extremity. The Langkawi group, Penang, and possibly Singapore.

**Extralimital Range**.—This race is confined to the Malay Peninsula, but the forms inhabiting continental India, Indo-China, Borneo, Sumatra and Java are extremely closely allied, differing only in the length of the upper and lower tail coverts, and the tint of the enamelled blue plumage.

**Nidification**.—Nests and eggs of this (the southern) form are not on record. Davison found *I. p. puella* nesting at Kussoum on the mainland near Junk Zeylon at the end of May. The nest was in thin jungle, on the fork of a sapling some twelve feet from the ground. It was composed of dry twigs, carelessly and irregularly put together. The egg cavity was shallow, not more than 1.5 in. at its deepest part, and was lined with finer twigs, fern roots and some yellowish fibre.

The eggs are always two in number. Those obtained by Mr Davison are elongated ovals, pointed at one end, with the shell very fine and glossy. The ground-colour is greenish white, the blunt end with a very heavy zone of dark brownish red, with more isolated splotches of the same colour, and smaller, paler flecking towards the smaller end, which is almost unmarked. Eggs collected by Bingham on the Thoungyeen and Meplay rivers in North Tenasserim in March and April have the markings, which are smaller, so thickly and evenly distributed as almost to obscure the ground-colour. Stuart Baker gives the average dimensions of forty eggs as 1.13 by 0.8 in.

**Habits**.—Fairly common, but rather local, generally in heavy forest, ranging up the hills to a height of about 4000 ft. Occasionally, however, especially when certain fig-trees are in fruit, it is found on the banks of the larger rivers and in secondary jungle, but never far from old forest; when in the fruit trees it is found in small parties up to seven or eight, but at other times and places is usually alone. It keeps to trees and bushes and is never seen on the ground, but is not particularly shy, so far as my experience goes—at any rate when feeding. Flight is fairly strong. I am not acquainted with the note.

*Note*.—North of about lat. 8° N. the Indian bird (*Irena puella puella*) is

found, which is rather larger and with shorter tail coverts, not coming within an inch of the tip of the tail. In Perlis, the southern part of Peninsular Siam, and in the Langkawi Islands the characters are variable, and specimens assignable to either race may be found in one and the same locality.

For technical reasons the scientific name of this bird will shortly be changed, but for the present I have retained the existing nomenclature.