

## FIELD STUDY

# Observations at a nest of Malayan Whistling Thrush *Myophonus robinsoni* in the Cameron Highlands, Malaysia

ALLAN TEO &amp; Y. C. WEE

## Introduction

The Malayan Whistling Thrush *Myophonus robinsoni* has a very limited range, being confined to Peninsular Malaysia's Main Range from the Cameron Highlands south to the Genting Highlands, and has the IUCN status Vulnerable (BirdLife International 2001, Collar 2005). It inhabits the understorey and floor of lower and upper montane forests, foraging alone or in pairs in leaf-litter and around streams, emerging briefly in the open, usually at dawn and dusk (Salgado 2006, Wells 2007). Little is known about this bird, especially nesting and other ecological information. A few nests have been found, described as massive cup-shaped structures constructed of vegetative materials attached to lianas and saplings. The eggs are described in Wells (2007), but details of incubation, brooding, foods and fledging are so far unknown.

On 22 March 2008, AT stumbled on a pair of Malayan Whistling Thrush nesting inside a factory warehouse in the Cameron Highlands, Malaysia. Apparently the pair has been nesting in the same warehouse around the same month for the last few years. The nest was about 5 m from the ground. The night temperature inside the warehouse was 16–17°C.

**Plate 1.** Two Malayan Whistling Thrush chicks in the nest waiting to be fed.



ALL PLATES: ALLAN TEO

An internet protocol camera with infrared capability and internet connections was hurriedly installed two days later to monitor activities on a 24-hour basis. Infrared lighting was used at night and during low light conditions during the day so as not to stress the birds unnecessarily. The position of the camera was adjusted for optimal view. The camera was connected to the internet via an ADSL modem and this allowed viewing from any computer inside as well as outside the country. Malaysia's internet has reliability problems and a special software was developed to keep the line available so that there was no need to keep phoning the warehouse personnel to reset the modem. By 23h20 on 24 March the camera was in working order and an adult was already seen at the nest preparing the chicks for the night.

Observations were done in Singapore and monitored by both of us. Where necessary, images of nesting behaviour were obtained via screen grabs.

## The nest

The nest was a massive half-cup structure made up of dried plant material such as narrow strips of leaves and thin stems. Estimated to be about

**Plate 2.** Adult Malayan Whistling Thrush feeding mountain reed snake *Macrocalamus lateralis* to chick.



20 × 12 cm, it sat on the T-joint of two narrow wooden beams, one running along the side of a wall and the other across to the opposite wall. The side of the nest was attached to the wall surface, probably with the help of mud, as this could be discerned on the nest rim and inner surface. There were two nestlings, probably about two weeks old as their eyes were open, juvenile feathers were mostly in place and they were active all the time. They were also relatively large, the two nearly filling the nest.

### Brooding

The two sexes of the Malayan Whistling Thrush can only be separated by size, the female being slightly smaller than the male. As such, it was not possible to ascertain whether it was the male or the female that was at the nest that night, or any night or day for that matter.

At night, the brooding adult sat in the nest, with the chicks under its wing. Most times the chicks were restless, forcing the adult to leave the nest a few times, to perch on the supporting beam. Only when the chicks became less active did the adult enter the nest. Even then they still moved around the nest, with the adult accommodating such movements by moving around the nest itself.

By c.05h20 the adult usually left the nest to perch on the supporting beam to preen. The chicks preened inside the nest. The adult might re-enter the nest a few times before flying off, to return ten minutes to half an hour later with food. There would normally be up to four foraging trips before the chicks were satisfied.

Both adults were involved in feeding the chicks. This was verified when one adult arrived before the other left the nest. There was an occasion when

an adult arrived and passed food to the other in the nest to feed the chicks. Throughout the day one or other adult visited the nest with food. Feeding intervals varied from 10 to 30 minutes or longer. The food brought by the adults included small snakes, most probably mountain reed snake *Macrocalamus lateralis*, a common species in the highlands, and moths. The moment an adult approached the nest, the chicks became visibly excited, calling loudly and gaping widely. Sometimes the adult remained in the nest for few minutes before flying off.

### Pre-fledging

By 27 March the chicks appeared to have grown substantially. Their wing feathers and muscles appeared fully developed and they had been flapping and stretching their wings all the time. The adults appeared to be preparing the chicks for fledging. They were arriving less frequently with food. At times one chick was fed while the other had to wait ten minutes or more for its turn. Other times it seemed they were teasing the chicks, not feeding them, just approaching and then flying off.

The chicks responded to the decreased feeding and noisy encouragements of the adults to fledge by standing along the nest edge and looking at the adults flying around and calling. To encourage the chicks further, an adult regularly joined them in the nest, either after feeding or arriving without feeding. It huddled over one or the other, with the chick looking downwards. This coaxing went on for the next few days at a heightened intensity. By then the chicks had grown bigger and their wings were more powerful. But by 31 March, after five days of continuous encouragement, the chicks still

**Plate 3.** Malayan Whistling Thrush with a moth in its bill.



**Plate 4.** Adult Malayan Whistling Thrush with two hungry chicks in the nest.



remained in the nest. They perched along the nest edge, sometimes with one leg outside, but they would not fledge.

In one instance, an adult appeared with its bill stuffed with small snakes. It offered them to a chick but then immediately withdrew. It could not be established whether it had fed the chick or eaten the food itself. The adult then moved into the nest and huddled with the two chicks. The other adult arrived, perching some distance away on the beam. The chicks immediately started begging and the arriving adult fed the chicks with the other still in the nest. The second adult stayed for a few seconds before leaving. It appeared again a few seconds later to again feed the chicks. The first adult remained in the nest all this time. That night, while the chicks slept in the nest, the adult slept most of the time on the beam, there being no space inside the nest.

### Fledging

The two chicks fledged later that morning, 1 April 2008. At 07h01 an adult approached the nest, landing on the wooden beam. The two chicks were highly excited, chirping and flapping their wings, their bills agape. As the adult walked nearer to the nest, the chicks responded by moving towards it, also flapping their wings. The adult offered food to one of the chicks but apparently not delivering, instead flying downwards to be followed immediately by the two chicks. It was too fast for the video to catch the flight.

The nest remained empty for a few minutes before an adult appeared with food. This adult was presumably the mate of the earlier bird, as it was obviously unaware of what had happened. It

**Plate 5.** Adult Malayan Whistling Thrush brooding its chicks.



perched on the beam, looked around, then entered the nest before flying off. There was another appearance of an adult about fifteen minutes later, this time without food. It perched on the beam supporting the nest, entered the nest to examine it and returned to the beam. In all, it remained more than 20 minutes, preening and stretching its wings before flying off. The nest was not visited again.

We were later informed that when the two chicks left the nest in the morning, they landed on the ground below, hopping about and still needing to master flight. The two adults were around to keep an eye on them and, no doubt, encourage them to fly. To keep the fledglings safe from the many wandering dogs around, the warehouse personnel put them in a cardboard box outside the warehouse. The adults kept on feeding them until they all flew off soon after.

On 4 April, three days after fledging, the two young were seen flying around, still dependent on the adults for food. They were not seen thereafter.

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Allan Teo,  
Bird Ecology Study Group,  
Nature Society (Singapore)  
Email: eagleeye@singaporerc.com

Y. C. Wee,  
Bird Ecology Study Group,  
Nature Society (Singapore)  
Email: wee37@starhub.net.sg