

NUTHATCHES

Family SITTIDÆ

THE position of this family in the general system is somewhat obscure, but it seems best to regard the nuthatches as allied to the tits, as suggested by Stuart Baker, rather than place them near the bulbuls and king-crows as had been proposed by Oates in the first edition of the *Fauna of British India*. They are certainly allied both in habits and structure to the *Certhiidae* (or tree-creepers), a family that have no representatives in the Malay region.

The salient characters of the family are the long and pointed wing, reaching to the end of the tail, which is short and rounded. The bill is straight and pointed (in the Asiatic forms), at most, very slightly notched. Feet, very strong, the hind toe and claw exceptionally well developed. Bristles at the gape present, but very short and inconspicuous—especially in the Malayan forms. The sexes are alike, or only slightly different, and the members of the family are not very brilliantly coloured, the Malayan species being amongst the brightest.

The nests are made in holes in trees. The entrance is frequently partially blocked with clay, and the eggs are not plain white, as is usual in such situations, but much blotched. Three to five is the usual clutch in the tropical forms.

The family is not a large one, comprising about forty species. They are widely distributed over the world, South America, tropical Africa, New Zealand and Oceania, alone excepted. Three forms occur in Malaya, of which one is confined to the higher mountains; the others are here described.

Dendrophila frontalis saturator

The Malay Velvet-fronted Nuthatch

Sitta frontalis saturator, Hartert, *Nov. Zool.*, ix., 1902, p. 573 (Gunong, Tahan).

Dendrophila saturator, Ogilvie Grant, *Fascic. Malay., Zool.*, iii., 1906, p. 76 (Patani).

Malay Name.—Unknown.

Description.—*Adult male.*—Whole upper surface, purplish violet, with a

lilac gloss. Primaries, blackish brown, edged towards the tip with the colour of the back; the secondaries with most of the outer webs the same; inner aspect of the wing, with the extreme bases of the primaries, pure white. Tail feathers with the centre pair as the back; the remainder, black, edged and broadly tipped with blue; the blue tip notched on its inner web with greyish white. Forehead and lores with a band of short, stiff, velvety plumes, and a narrow black stripe along the sides of the crown for some distance beyond the eye; ear coverts, purplish lilac. Below, chin whitish; remainder, uniform purplish lilac, rather darker on the flanks and under tail coverts and thighs.

Adult female.—Lacks the narrow black stripe behind the eye.

Immature.—Duller and less glossy than the adults.

Soft Parts.—Iris, lemon-yellow; orbital skin, greenish; bill, vermilion, black at the tip; tarsi, dark brown. Young birds have the iris brown.

Dimensions.—Total length, 5 to 5.2 in.; wing, 2.9 in.; tail, 1.8 in.; tarsus, 0.65 in.; bill from gape, 0.7 in.

Range in the Malay Peninsula.—As far as is known, this richly coloured form is confined to the southern two-thirds of the Peninsula, in the northern third it grades into the typical race.

Extralimital Range.—The typical race is found in Java and Sumatra, the greater part of India, the Indo-Chinese countries, and Ceylon; that inhabiting the Himalayas, *D. f. corallina* (Hodgs.), is again slightly different.

Nidification.—Not known. The allied northern race makes a nest of moss thickly lined with fur or feathers in the deserted hole of a barbet or woodpecker. The eggs are from three to six in number, long ovals, the ground-colour white, densely and uniformly covered with reddish and purple patches. The average dimensions are 0.68 by 0.55 in. (Baker).

Habits.—This beautiful little nuthatch is fairly common in the more southern portions of the Malay Peninsula. In the Patani States it is found both in orchards near the villages and also on the hills, attaining an altitude of about 3000 ft. In the states under British protection it is more of a submontane species, not often met with in the flat coastal plains or in swamp jungle, but fairly numerous on the foothills, up to about 3000 ft. as a maximum. It is found usually in pairs, but occasionally in parties of five or six, generally on the smaller trees, and not in very deep or dark jungle. It is very quick and active in dodging round the tree trunks, and distinctly shy and suspicious. Its food is probably almost entirely insectivorous.