

# MELANOPITTA SORDIDA.

## Black-headed Pitta.

- Le Merle verd à teste noire des Moluques*, Brisson, Orn. ii. p. 319.  
*Merle des Philippines*, D'Aub. Pl. Enl. pl. 89.  
*Brève des Philippines*, Montb. Hist. Nat. Ois. iii. p. 412.  
*Turdus sordidus*, P. L. S. Müll. Hist. Nat. Anhang, p. 143 (1766).  
*Turdus brevicauda*, Bodd. Pl. Enl. de D'Aub. p. 6.  
*Corvus philippensis*, Gmel. Syst. Nat. i. p. 375 (1788).  
*Citta melanocephala*, Wagl. Syst. Av. *Corvus*, no. 14 (nec Forst.).  
*Pitta atricapilla*, Less. Traité, p. 394 (nec Müll. & Schleg.).—Temm. Pl. Col. Tabl. Méth. p. 16.—Less. Compl. Buff. 1840, p. 501.  
*Pitta macrorhyncha*, J. E. Gray, Zool. Misc. p. 3.  
*Brachyurus atricapillus*, Elliot, Monogr. Pittidæ, pl. 25.  
*Pitta sordida*, Gray, Hand-l. B. i. p. 295, no. 4359.  
*Brachyurus sordidus*, Elliot, Ibis, 1870, p. 419 (part.).—Sharpe, Trans. Linn. Soc. 2nd ser. Zool. i. p. 331.  
*Melanopitta sordida*, Wald. Trans. Zool. Soc. ix. p. 187.—Tweedd. Proc. Zool. Soc. 1878, p. 949.—Wardlaw-Ramsay, Orn. Works of Marquis of Tweeddale, pp. 352, 411, 639, 657 (1881).

THE long list of names given above shows that this species has been the recipient of many different titles; and much confusion has been the result. I think I cannot do better than quote the remarks on the subject given by the late Marquis of Tweeddale in his paper on the Birds of the Philippine Archipelago (Trans. Zool. Soc. ix. p. 188).

“The synonymy of this species is somewhat perplexing, in consequence of Brisson (*l. c.*) having given a description, applying in all its details to the Philippine bird, to an individual said by him to have been sent to l'Abbé Aubrey from the Moluccas. Montbeillard (*l. c.*) some years later described seemingly the same bird (and it was figured by D'Aubenton *l. c.*), but attributed its origin to the Philippines. The difficulty thus caused would probably have remained through all time unsolved had not Le Vaillant, by one of his gratuitous and carping criticisms, unintentionally assisted us. With the view of showing that Buffon was in the habit of describing as good species individuals that had been manufactured by dishonest dealers, Le Vaillant (Ois. de Par. vol. i. p. 106) incidentally alludes to this species. He asserts that the description given by Buffon (Montbeillard) of his '*Brève des Philippines*' was taken from a specimen of the '*Brève de Ceylan*' (= *Corvus brachyurus*, Linn.), in which the head of the common Blackbird had been substituted. This example, Le Vaillant says, formed part of the Abbé Aubrey's cabinet; and adds that he purchased it when that collection was sold, and at once discovered the imposition. This story Cuvier (R. A. 1817, p. 356, note 2) repeated on Le Vaillant's authority. Vieillot (Nouv. Dict. p. 358, and Tabl. Méthod. Orn. p. 686) did the same without mentioning his authority. It remained uncontradicted until Wagler (*l. c.*) showed that Le Vaillant was in error. And Cuvier in the second edition of the '*Règne Animal*' (p. 373, note) also corrected Le Vaillant. The statement that Montbeillard described from the specimen in Aubrey's cabinet may be accepted; for it is supported by the collateral evidence of Montbeillard (*l. c.*), who, in a footnote, remarks that it is the same bird that Brisson made his 57th '*Grive*.' As no species of *Melanopitta* is known to exist in the Moluccas, we are justified in assuming that Brisson and Montbeillard described from the same, a Philippine example, and in regarding their descriptions as having formed the common basis of all subsequent synonyms applied to this Philippine form of *Pitta*.”

With this species has very often been united the Bornean *Melanopitta muelleri*; but this is quite distinct, *M. sordida* not having the black patch on the belly which is conspicuous in *M. muelleri*. The present bird, as far as we know, is entirely confined to the Philippine group, where it is tolerably widely distributed, having been met with in the following islands—Luzon, Negros, Camiguin, Mindanao, Basilan, and Palawan. In the last two localities it was procured by Professor Steere, who writes that it is common in both. “They alight,” he observes “on the low stumps and logs in the woods, and emit a curious shrill note at intervals of about a minute. On being disturbed they fly off rapidly and disappear in the jungle, but very soon return to the same spot and commence whistling again directly the danger appears to have passed. They are said by the natives to raise a large heap of leaves and nest on the top of the mound.” The fact of the discovery of this bird by Professor Steere in Palawan is, as has been pointed out by Mr. Sharpe, of some interest, as it would not have been surprising if the *Pitta* from this locality had proved to be the Bornean *Melanopitta muelleri*, many of the birds discovered in Palawan being more nearly allied to those of Borneo than to those of the Philippine Islands.