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Published in:
Hong Kong Bird Report 2011

Published: 01/01/2013

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Lambert, J. (2013). Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus* at Heung Fan Liu: The first Hong Kong record. In *Hong Kong Bird Report 2011* (pp. 204-209). Hong Kong Bird Watching Society.

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Ashy Woodswallow *Artamus fuscus* at Heung Fan Liu

The first Hong Kong record

James Lambert

On the 23rd of April 2011 my partner Jane McGettigan and I were returning to our Tai Wai home from a stroll around the Lower Shing Mun Reservoir along the path through Heung Fan Liu village. It was about 3.30 pm on a drizzling overcast day. As we rounded a bend I noticed a swallow-like bird either alighting or readjusting its position on a single overhead electrical cable over the path about 10 metres in front of us. I immediately recognised the bird as an Ashy Woodswallow, *Artamus fuscus*, being familiar with the bird from Sri Lanka, Thailand and, most recently, India where I was able to observe a pair for a number of days consecutively in Mar 2010.

I pointed the bird out to Jane and naively said something to the effect that this was a rare bird for Hong Kong, at the time not realising that there were no previous records of this bird for the territory. Unfortunately we had neither a camera not even a mobile phone – which would have been sufficient – with us and so could not take any photos. Thankfully the bird was quite confiding and allowed us to observe it from the front at close range through binoculars for some minutes.

The overall jizz was that of a woodswallow, having a shortish body, long wings, and large blockish head with a relatively flat top. The overall dull greyish colouration, lacking any clear-cut markings or striations immediately indicated Ashy Woodswallow. The bill was blue, appearing to me quite bright for the overcast conditions, and was thick at the base and tapered to a sharp point, both top and lower mandibles similar in size and shape. The head was a dull grey colour, darker than the chest. It had dark lores of dull black. This lore stripe was as thick as the bill base and extended back just past the rear of the eye. The bird had its chest feathers fluffed up making it appear quite bulky and less streamlined than the usual woodswallow jizz one might see in a field guide diagram. The chest was off white.

From the underside the tips of wings appeared to project slightly beyond the tail. The tail was short and basically square cut, though with a slight dent in the middle. The bird was slowly but consistently pumping the tail down. This pumping was not as quick nor repetitive as the wagging of a Wagtail. That is to say, there was a pause between each pump. The legs appeared short as from my angle I could see nothing of the tarsus. I did not note the colour of the toes, which I assume were black or dark as red, yellow or pale feet would have stood out.

As we moved toward the bird, from its right, to get a closer look, it made a single brief, raspy call and took off. In flight, it had short tapering wings, from tip to tip roughly as long, or a little longer, as from bill to tail. The wings were held flat. Flight was a slow

glide. It appeared to be moving away from my approach, but not tearing off in fright. Fortunately it landed on another electrical wire over an abandoned field next to the path only a short distance away, this time affording views from the back.

The wings were concolorous with the head toward the 'shoulder', but grew darker toward the tips, though only to a very dark grey, not a deep black. The rump was pale, about the same colour as the breast. I watched the bird for another few minutes, then walked on another few metres and had one more look, still from the back but more towards its left. It continued to pump its tail. After observing the bird for a good five minutes at close range with high quality binoculars, we moved on, leaving the bird on the wire.

On returning home I checked Viney et al. (2005) and discovered that Ashy Woodswallow is resident in Hainan and Guangxi, and so reported the bird to the Birdline service run by Richard Lewthwaite. Subsequent efforts made to relocate and photograph the bird by myself and many others that afternoon and the following days were to no avail.

Later investigations, conducted by Richard Lewthwaite and myself, have found that the closest previous records of Ashy Woodswallow to Hong Kong were an unspecified number of specimens collected at Macau by W. Heine, the artist of the US Perry Expedition to Japan, in his stay there some time during 6-28 April 1853 (Cassin 1856). Cassin emphasises that Heine collected all his specimens from the field and not from bird-sellers. Heine's field notes on the bird somewhat strangely describe it as a "bird of very solitary habits, occasionally met with about the little-visited rocky declivities in the vicinity of Macao" (p. 238). This description is at odds with modern authorities such as Robson (2000) who says it is a "gregarious" bird found in "open areas with scattered trees, cultivation, sometimes over forests" (p. 373), habitat similar to that at Heung Fan Liu. Heine's characterisation of the bird was soon viewed with scepticism, such as Blyth (1866) who exclaimed "I cannot understand it being termed 'a bird of solitary habits!'" (p. 370), and Swinhoe (1862) even doubted the provenance, stating "I think this species must have been labelled wrong. I question much whether it is found about Macao" (p. 306). However, the sighting at Heung Fan Liu was of a solitary bird. Furthermore, it was in April, the same month as Heine's visit to Macau. Jerdon (1862) noted that these birds only perch together "where numerous", which is not always the case, and even so behave "independently" (p. 442). Finally, and more significantly, a single skin of *A. fuscus* is held in the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC, labelled as collected by Heine in China while on the US Japan Expedition (USNM A 15880); this skin has since been checked and identified by Christopher M. Milensky in the Division of Birds at the Smithsonian NMNH (pers. comm.).

While the current evidence available suggests that perhaps Swinhoe's doubting of the original Macau record was a little hasty, he must have based his reservations on his own knowledge of the non-occurrence of *A. fuscus* in the vicinity of Macau during his extended time there, indicating that perhaps the species range only extends so far north rarely and/or under certain unknown conditions.

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