

THE ASIAN CONNECTION

Rock-jumpers & rockfowl



Drakensberg Rock-jumper

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The relationships of the rock-jumpers, confined to rocky hillsides in South Africa and Lesotho, was long debated. Babblers, thrushes and chats were the prime contenders, so there was considerable scepticism when DNA–DNA hybridisation data tentatively suggested that rock-jumpers were related to *Picathartes*, the elusive rockfowl of lowland rainforest in West and Central Africa.

The two groups are quite different in appearance, behaviour and habitat, but subsequent genetic sequence data confirmed that rock-jumpers and rockfowl were indeed each other's closest relatives. They represent the earliest radiation of oscine passerines in Africa. Some authorities placed them in the same family, Picathartidae – a decision that didn't sit well with people who know the birds in the field. As a result, the seventh edition of *Roberts' Birds of Southern Africa* recognised the rock-jumpers as southern Africa's second endemic family, Chaetopidae, after the sugarbirds, Promeropidae.

Like picathartes, the Rail-babbler *Eupetes macrocerus* is an enigmatic large passerine that haunts the understorey of lowland rainforest, but it is found on the Malay Peninsula, Borneo and Sumatra. Traditionally, it has been placed with the Papuan jewel-babblers *Ptilorhoa* and Australian quail-thrushes *Cinclosoma* in the Psophodidae, although these groups occur on the other side of Wallace's Line, which divides the faunas of Asia and Oceania. Some taxonomists had pointed out similarities in morphology between the Rail-babbler and picathartes, but others argued these were purely convergent given their similar niches. There was no genetic evidence to support either argument until 2007, when Knud Jønsson and colleagues showed that rock-jumpers were the closest relatives of the Rail-babbler, with rockfowl being sister to both groups (*Biology Letters* 3: 323–326). Crude estimates based on genetic mutation rates suggest the three groups diverged more than 40 million years ago, so the IOC List Committee recommends recognising them as distinct families: Eupetidae, Chaetopidae and Picathartidae.



White-necked Rockfowl

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The simplest explanation for this sequence of relationships is that an early Australasian species, possibly an ancestor of the Australasian robins (Petroicidae) dispersed to Africa, where it evolved into diverse forms that may have formed the basis for much of the modern oscine radiation. Only a few early branches from this radiation persist, including one lineage that spread into south-east Asia. □