



# THE SILENCING

## OF THE SONGBIRDS

The 2016 Red List reveals that Indonesia's love of songbirds is a tainted love; unsustainable trapping is driving many endemic species towards extinction

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**IN 2015 A SURVEY  
COUNTED 19,000  
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THREE DAYS**

← Yogyakarta, Java, Indonesia.  
Photo Peter Nijenhuis/Flickr

**P**ramuka market assaults the senses. Crushed into the Indonesian capital of Jakarta, it is dimly lit, sweltering and oppressively claustrophobic. The stifling air resounds with chaotic song and the acrid stench of ammonia brings tears to the eyes. But at least we humans walk freely here. The same cannot be said for thousands of birds incarcerated in tiny bamboo cages stacked three metres high and extending for dozens of metres. Illegally snatched from the wild, they now face life sentences as objects of trade, household pets or participants in songbird competitions. “Welcome” to the tainted love that is Java’s bird trade, which has wreaked havoc on Indonesia’s avifauna and is arguably the most disconcerting story emanating from the 2016 update of the global IUCN Red List for birds.

**THE IMPACT OF  
JAVA’S BIRD TRADE  
IS THE MOST  
DISCONCERTING  
STORY FROM  
THE 2016 RED LIST**

This year, some 19 Indonesian bird species affected by trade have been uplisted. All but one are songbirds; most occur in no other country; six species are now considered Critically Endangered. All this within the context of Indonesia holding more globally threatened birds than anywhere except Brazil, including Critically Endangered species long known to be imperiled by trade such as Bali Myna *Leucopsar rothschildi* and Helmeted Hornbill *Rhinoplax vigil*.

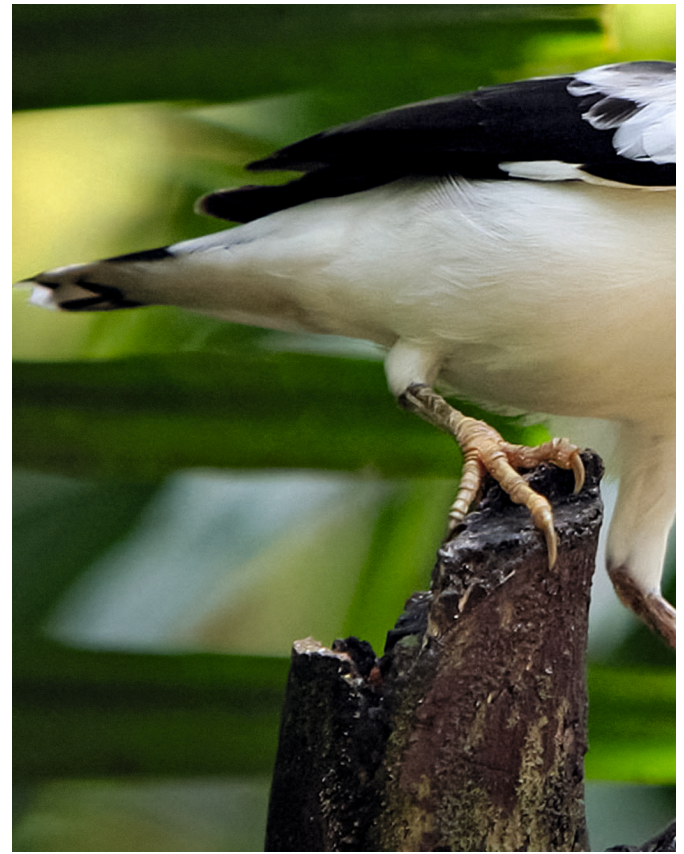
“Indonesia’s long established bird trade is now causing population-level implications for a rapidly widening group of species, mainly from the Greater Sundas [Java, Sumatra and Borneo]”, says Rob Martin, BirdLife International Red List Research Assistant. Although birds may be traded across Asia, available data suggest Java to be the epicentre.

“80-100 bird markets now exist across Java”, says Ria Saryanthi, Head of Communication and Institutional Development at Burung Indonesia (BirdLife Partner). “Each *kabupaten* [district] usually has one. Then there are bird stalls, pet shops, breeders, internet shops and street traders.” Meanwhile, Anuj Jain, BirdLife International’s Programme Officer, is particularly concerned about online wildlife trade, declaring it “a new and largely invisible mechanism that is now of serious concern”.

A 2015 survey of Jakarta’s three main bird markets by the organisation TRAFFIC counted 19,000 birds of 206 species being traded over just three days. Some 98% were both native to Indonesia and illegally traded; one fifth of these were endemic to the country. Serene Chang, TRAFFIC Programme Officer in Southeast Asia, described the findings as “catastrophic news for Indonesian birds”.

Conservationists including BirdLife International’s Research Fellow, Dr Nigel Collar, urgently convened to discuss these and other revelations at the inaugural Asian Songbird Crisis Summit in September 2015. Astonished as much as anything by the breadth of species being traded, delegates identified those of greatest conservation concern, which BirdLife then prioritised for assessment during the 2016 Red List process. The outcomes of BirdLife’s analysis are shocking.

Greater Green Leafbird *Chloropsis sonnerati*, for example, was uplisted from Least Concern to Vulnerable. “Until recently”, says James Eaton of Birdtour Asia, “it was common in Greater Sundan forests. Trapping wasn’t even a concern.” Now, says Eaton, who has been closely involved in investigating the trade, things have changed. “We draw a blank most days when searching for it in the field, yet encounter huge numbers for sale in Jakarta. Trappers in Sumatra are suddenly targeting this species above all others.” It is



the huge increase in numbers being traded that rings alarm bells. From none in Medan's market in 1997, 842 Greater Green Leafbirds were recorded there per month in 2012. Now an estimated 5,000 leafbirds are illegally transported each month across a single border crossing from Malaysian Sarawak into Indonesian Borneo.

**Other changes are similarly terrifying.** Rufous-fronted Laughingthrush *Garrulax rufifrons* has rocketed from Near Threatened to Critically Endangered in frightening time. "The imbalance between supply and demand has caused this species' market price to rocket tenfold from 2000 to 2012 – since when it has almost entirely disappeared from trade", says Andy Symes, BirdLife International's Global Species Officer. Javan Myna *Acridotheres javanicus* has leapt from Least Concern to Vulnerable in 2016; it has largely disappeared from west Java, says Eaton, yet TRAFFIC found more than 2,000 for sale in the island's top three bird markets. But why this need? And why Java? The problem is cultural. Here, songbirds have long been the favourite family pet. Indeed, one fifth of households in Indonesia's five largest cities own cagebirds. "Everyone can buy birds at a market, regardless of their social level", says Saryanthi. Bird ownership is a celebrated custom. In order to be 'a complete man', a Javanese must possess a *kukilo* (bird).

↑ Greater Green Leafbird  
*Chloropsis sonnerati*.  
Photo Doug Janson/  
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↗ Black-winged Myna  
*Acridotheres melanopterus*.  
Photo Doug Janson/  
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**THE PROBLEM IS CULTURAL: BIRD OWNERSHIP IS A CELEBRATED CUSTOM**

But the problem goes deeper. "It's not simply about pets", says Martin. "Songbird competitions are culturally important and financially lucrative. Hundreds of people watch events in big warehouses. Champion birds winning a national competition can earn their owner US\$20,000." In a country where the median monthly income equates to US\$750, this makes songbirds a prized asset. Little wonder that organised criminals are suspected of involvement.

**And why now?** Why has trade affecting hundreds of previously common species burgeoned so dramatically and taken conservationists by surprise? Martin fingers a "perfect storm", with several factors emerging near simultaneously to devastate populations across a wide suite of species. Indonesia's ban on bird imports following the avian flu outbreak focused bird trader attention on local (typically restricted-range) substitutes for widespread species that had become unobtainable. "With no White-crested Laughingthrushes *Garrulax leucolophus* available," says Rob Martin, "traders redoubled harvesting the already heavily traded Black-and-white Laughingthrush *Garrulax bicolor*. We have uplisted this Sumatran endemic to Endangered". So Java's appetite for songbirds continues to be met – but by species whose smaller ranges place populations at higher potential risk.



Rapid forest loss and degradation, meanwhile, have helped trappers reach formerly remote refuges for sought-after species. "In 2000, Sumatra's intact forests were typically at least one week's walk from the nearest road", Martin explains. "But now they are just three days away." Next up, BirdLife's taxonomic reassessment – the second part of which was integrated into the 2016 Red List – revealed a series of overlooked, restricted-range species that were severely impacted by trade. Finally, there is the ever increasing popularity of Java's songbird competitions, where songsters capable of mimicry, such as Greater Green Leafbird, hold sway.

**Addressing such a complex**, spiralling problem will never be straightforward. An outright ban on keeping birds, for example, would be an affront to Javanese identity. "It would be as outrageous as the UK banning dog ownership", says Martin. Fortunately, Indonesia already has legislation in place that prohibits capture and trade in native species unless a quota has been set. Accordingly, attention is increasingly turning to enforcement of these laws. "The Indonesian Government, supported by Burung Indonesia (BirdLife Partner), now takes a very hard line on enforcement, carrying out more frequent, more prominent confiscations of wild-caught birds, particularly at Java's ports of entry", says Martin. This should be complemented, recommends Chris Shepherd, TRAF-

↑ Scarlet-breasted Lorikeet  
*Trichoglossus forsteri*.  
Photo Iggino Van Bael

FIC Regional Director in Southeast Asia, by greater enforcement at bird markets where traders still openly sell protected, illicitly sourced birds. "As long as markets exist in their current form, illegal trade will continue to undermine bird conservation in Indonesia", says Shepherd. In addition to targeting physical bird markets, innovative means of enforcement are needed if we are to succeed in halting the new threat of online bird trade.

**Enforcement activity might now prioritise** species identified as being threatened by the Red List and the Asian Songbird Crisis Summit. The Summit next convenes in February 2017, when it will discuss a conservation strategy – prepared by TRAFFIC and Wildlife Reserves Singapore with support from BirdLife and Burung Indonesia – for 28 traded songbirds. Another idea being mooted, although one not without considerable problems, is a licensing system for law-abiding traders. Finally, Burung Indonesia envisages raising demand-side awareness. It is a sentiment echoed by the tourism industry. "Education is needed as most buyers have no clue of the devastating effects their collective actions have on wild bird populations", says Eaton.

These words strike home. How ironic, how tragic that Java's fervent love for songbirds – embodied in the hectic, cacophonous avian citadel of Pramuka – is driving them towards extinction. A tainted love, indeed. ■

**A BAN IS IMPOSSIBLE: IT WOULD BE LIKE BANNING DOG OWNERSHIP IN THE UK**