The Blue-crowned Laughingthrush – a model for collaborative conservation

By Laura Gardner, ZSL

The beautiful and rare Blue-crowned Laughingthrush was brought to the verge of extinction by trade because they were priced as a cage and aviary bird. Now its conservation is a part of a truly global programme as a GSMP. Ex-situ populations in Asia, Europe and North America is managed together with close links to in-situ work making the conservation effort for the Blue-crowned Laughingthrush a collaborative one. A great model for other passerines in peril.

Photo by Bjorn Andersen

An endemic Chinese passerine, the beautiful Blue-crowned Laughingthrush, *Garrulax courtoisi* first appeared in trade in Europe and North America in the late 1980's. At this time, nothing was known about the status of the species in the wild, until the German conservation organisation ZGAP and WWF China funded searches for the species in mainland China.

In 2000 the species was rediscovered, surviving in small fragmented breeding colonies in a single province in South East China. The colonies were found living in tall tress surrounding villages and next to streams or water courses. These breeding colonies have been monitored annually and some of the breeding sites have been given local level protection by the County Forestry Bureau. Despite these protection measures, the population in the wild is not increasing at the expected rate. Annual monitoring suggests the species is maintaining a stable population but is very vulnerable to environmental change and disturbance. Whilst we know where the colonies return each year to breed, we still do not know the wintering localities for the birds.

The BCLT is a colonial nester increasing the survival of chicks

In the late 1990's the first UK regional studbook was established in order to manage the zoo population within the UK and this was formalised into an EAZA studbook population in 2003. A similar population management programme was established in North America. A small number of European Zoos established a memorandum of Agreement with the Forestry Bureau in China to fund the continued protection of the Blue-crowned Laughingthrush breeding sites. These funds were matched by the county forestry Bureau providing continuous annual monitoring of the species and the establishment of some of the breeding locations as Small Protected Areas (SPA's).

The IUCN Red List assesses the Blue-crowned Laughingthrush as Critically Endangered and 20 years after the first breeding programme was established, the ex-situ zoo population is now managed globally bringing together the managed populations in Europe, North America and in Asia. The current wild population is estimated to consist of 320 individuals whilst the globally managed zoo population (GSMP) comprises 269 individuals, an important and significant safety net population which obviously represents a large percentage of the entire Global population.

The conservation effort for the Blue-crowned Laughingthrush has been collaborative since 2000 when the species was rediscovered in the wild. European and North American Zoos have worked with Chinese partners to assist conservation monitoring and nest site protection and in April 2017 the first multi-stakeholder meeting was held in China to assess and review conservation priorities for the Blue-crowned Laughingthrush.

Attendees at first multi-stakeholder meeting in China April 2017

Research into the phenology and socio-biology of the species were identified as priority areas required to better inform future protection and conservation action. A PhD has now been developed which will start in May 2018. The species exists in relatively large social groups in close proximity to villages and degraded agricultural habitat, making it difficult to understand why it is not more widespread in similar human-modified landscapes across southern China. Developing an improved understanding of the species' specific ecological requirements, and the factors that have driven population decline and limit population growth and recovery, is therefore a priority research activity in order to develop appropriate targeted *in situ* conservation management protocols.

Additional activities are being planned in partnership with the County Forestry Bureau, which include:

- Continue with MOA activities and formally register the project in line with new Chinese NGO

- Support Wetland reserve flooding relief work
- To offer advice and source funds if required to rebuild the Wetland Reserve Museum where the BCLT remains a focal species to raise community engagement and conservation awareness
- In order to strengthen BCLT conservation, including nest site protection and population monitoring of BCLT: we propose that a ranger training workshop is run in collaboration with FBWC in 2018/19 informed by a training needs assessment from FBWC. Develop PhD research in collaboration with FBWC and Jiangxi Agricultural University to advance knowledge of the ecological requirements of the BCLT
- To provide technical support for further annual surveys of existing and potential BCLT breeding and wintering sites. The outcomes of these surveys will be an agreed, repeatable methodology for annual monitoring. The recipients of these surveys will be the MOA partners, namely the FBWC and ZSL on behalf of the European Partners.
- Continue to provide a vital link between in-situ and ex-situ conservation activities for the BCLT across all three regions
- In collaboration with the FBWC and other stakeholders ZSL will coordinate and disseminate a 5 year Conservation Action Plan for the BCLT

The focus over the past 20 years has been to maintain a viable captive population of this amazing Chinese passerine as an insurance population. The tools developed within the zoo forum have proved invaluable in maintaining the genetic and demographic health of this ex-situ population. The focus now is to conduct research into the remnant wild population which will lead to a better understanding of the threats facing this species and inform specific conservation action in the future.