

Out in the field

COLLECTING DATA FROM A REMOTE MOUNTAIN SITE INVOLVES DIFFICULT TERRAIN AND CHALLENGING WEATHER – BUT THE RESULTS CAN BE INVALUABLE

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Conservation in the field is often viewed as a romantic occupation; however, as rewarding as fieldwork sometimes is, it is also very hard work. These notes from the Silent Forest Campaign Preselected Project 'Searching the Birds' clearly show that, here, both things are true. From Regional Collection Planning to setting priorities about which sites to protect or which species to include in conservation relevant legislation, decisions depend on data from the field. Without passion and some extra dedication, we would probably not be able to access those viable pieces for the puzzle on which our conservation planning decisions depend. In this case, information is urgently needed and the mountains in Java are the last home for several near-extinct songbirds in rapid decline; it is, therefore, vital and urgent that we understand the situation on the ground.

Simon Bruslund, Silent Forest Campaign

NOTES FROM MOUNT SLAMET

We often talk about the lack of basic ecological data required for conservation decisions; for example, prioritising species for conservation action, or areas for protection, or managing a species' recovery. These basic data often take the form of species distributions, abundances and survival rates, at least initially, before they can be transformed to other quantities, such as trends over time and probabilities of extinction. What are the reasons behind this lack of data? Should we be surprised that we often don't know how many individuals of a particular species (even common ones) exist, or how much uncertainty we have about some of these basic measurements? One fundamental reason for this lack of data is the difficulty in obtaining it. When working with species of high conservation interest, we are often in

regions of high biodiversity, which tend to be in the tropics and in countries towards the bottom of the global table in earnings per person. Add to this some political uncertainty and a lack of local capacity to do science, and these factors can inflate the difficulty of doing fieldwork.

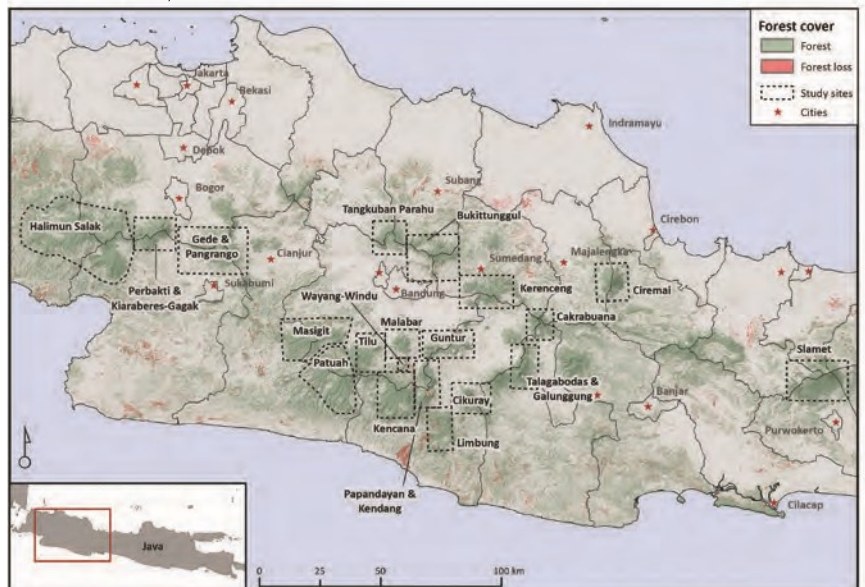
The EAZA Silent Forest campaign aims to improve the situation of Asian songbirds in their natural habitat and to develop an increased knowledge and understanding of the threats to these birds. Improving the situation of birds at risk – for example, by identifying sites for protection, or prioritising reintroduction sites – requires knowledge of the presence of key species within their natural habitats. This information is currently being sought as part of a project to establish two new protected areas in Java. The project is led by the Bird Conservation NGO, Burung Indonesia, with Manchester Metropolitan University leading the biodiversity component, including fieldwork and data analysis. The main project, funded by Rainforest Trust and the EAZA Silent Forest campaign, aims to survey some 20 mountains, many of which are volcanos, across the west of Java over the next two years. Funding for surveys on Mt Slamet also came

from Chester Zoo.

The field sites are generally over 1000m in altitude amid the rainforest; their inaccessibility to loggers and farmers also means they are difficult for us to reach, and our fieldwork usually starts with a significant trek uphill just to get the personnel and equipment to the project site. We are using camera traps and audio recorders to record wildlife, and although there is the advantage of capturing data over 24-hour periods and analysing images or recordings in the comfort of an office, the recorders still have to be put in place and taken down. The 10-person team consists of professional Indonesian ecologists, local guides and ecology students from local universities gaining valuable experience. The ecologists, helped by the students, set up the equipment and carry out bird, amphibian and vegetation surveys at the sites, supported by occasional visits from the UK-based scientists. All of these people need to be fed and watered, which also means carrying food up the mountains and including cooks amongst the guides. A one-week field trip can easily eat its way through a sack of rice and an amazing amount of chillies.

Achmad Ridha, leading the field team from Burung Indonesia, has ample

BIODIVERSITY HOTSPOTS, SPECIES RICHNESS AND GLOBAL EARNINGS



SETTING UP MONITORING EQUIPMENT SUCH AS THESE SOUND RECORDING DEVICES IS OFTEN DONE IN TORRENTIAL RAIN OR NEAR DARKNESS.



fieldwork experience, but even for him, surveying these mountains represented a challenge. ‘The hardest part to avoid while working in a tropical country is the extreme weather,’ he says. ‘Strong winds and sudden hard rain can make the trails very slippery.’ Then with characteristic calm he adds, ‘The worst parts are the falling trees and landslides.’ Indeed, a tree crashed down in the night on Patuha mountain not far from the camp. Luckily it was far enough away from the camp to just shock the team without causing any damage.

A typical day involves getting up well before 6am, having a quick breakfast of coffee and noodles or energising oat-based drink and then hitting the trails. Tasks include setting up camera traps or audio recorders and performing vegetation surveys at each of these locations. Measuring the diameter of a huge tree is often a job for two people. Once the equipment is set up – typically taking at least a day – transect surveys for birds are carried out during the following mornings and afternoons, and then amphibian searches go on into the night. After three days of surveys, another day is needed to collect up the equipment again. Rains can come frequently and hard, usually in the afternoon, but also at any time of the day, making every job more difficult or even impossible. However, there are moments that can’t be beaten by any office work. Ridha reflects on his favourite part of the job: ‘Birdwatching is the most enjoyable part of doing fieldwork, it’s like meditation where you can find yourself connected with the nature.’

The team will walk tens of kilometres and ascend and descend hundreds of metres over the week. The forest slopes are generally steep and rugged, with many small streams cutting

their way down the mountain sides. This means that the trails descend to cross streams multiple times on the way up a mountain, making the total ascent much more than the final elevation reached. Trails are rocky, muddy, traversed by large tree roots, or intersected by branches. Trails are used both by hikers, ecologists and

the mammals that they search for. On Slamet, Javan leopards (*Panthera pardus melas*) were photographed just hours after the field team had passed the cameras. Although the data analysis stage is still largely to come, early results already have shown presence of important birds and mammals on most of the sites visited.

Once the fieldwork has finished, the data analysis will start to look at where the most suitable sites are for extending or creating new protected areas, and also, at a later stage, where possible reintroductions of species such as green magpie (*Cissa thalassina*), might take place. However, this will require other contextual factors to change, such as those that drive the trade in wild birds. As Ridha remarked, ‘In terms of doing the conservation effort, changing perspectives from a profit mindset into a sustainable mindset is the key.’

SIGN UP TO OUR CONSERVATION CAMPAIGN

It only takes three minutes to pledge your support, so join the cause today by signing up. Financial support is not mandatory, and our Silent Forest campaign needs you! Simon Bruslund, Marlow Bird Park

The current number of sign-ups to the Silent Forest Campaign on the website www.silentforest.eu already exceeds our target of 175 EAZA Member participants. Therefore we should be content, but for some reason it doesn’t sit right.

The reason for our concern is not the total amount, but rather the distribution; a surprising number of those zoos who we would have expected to sign up did not. Even some bird parks have, surprisingly, simply chosen to ignore the campaign.

We did, of course, analyse the sign-ups to understand and document the impact of the campaign. Our initial thoughts were that perhaps we were not communicating effectively with regions where the use of English is not strong; however, the poor responses throughout Scandinavia demonstrate that this cannot be the main cause. The main hosting countries for this campaign, Czech Republic and Germany, have by far the highest rate of sign-ups, which suggests some impact from personal relations – but also perhaps national pride.

The pledges for financial support and the amazing amounts that the campaign have already helped to fundraise for conservation activities on the ground in Asia are carried by a little less than a third of the signed-up EAZA Members. This represents less than 20 per cent of all EAZA Members. It is frustrating to know that we could achieve so much more if more zoos would chip in, even if only a little bit.

The accounts of the Silent Forest Campaign are open for your contributions and projects are ongoing, so if you have dedicated funds for songbird conservation, don’t hesitate to transfer money to the campaign. It is sorely needed and extremely helpful, even if it is only the first part of bigger pledge.

EAZA MEMBER SIGN-UPS TO THE SILENT FOREST CAMPAIGN

