

Saving Asia's songbirds

EAZA'S NEW SILENT FOREST CAMPAIGN IS ADDRESSING THE URGENT NEED TO PROTECT THE THREATENED SONGBIRDS OF SOUTHEAST ASIA

JAVAN GREEN MAGPIE (*CISSA THALASSINA*)

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The new EAZA Conservation campaign 'Silent Forest, Asian Songbird Crisis' was officially launched at the EAZA Annual Conference in Emmen in September 2017. The Silent Forest Campaign will run for two years and will focus on raising awareness and collecting funding for conservation projects in the range countries.

EAZA colleagues, working under the umbrella of the Passeriformes TAG and alongside a number of important partners such as TRAFFIC, BirdLife International and the recently established IUCN Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group, have been working on the topic of Asian songbirds over the last couple of years. However, as the plight of the songbirds of Southeast Asia became more acute, Liberec Zoo and Heidelberg Zoo took on the challenge of leading this campaign.

CULTURAL PRESSURES

Passerine birds in Southeast Asia have been the subject of an excessive but culturally deep-rooted consumption for many reasons, including trade, singing competitions, pets, status symbols, export and import and traditional medicine and food. The demand for

live songbirds in Southeast Asia is extremely high, affecting hundreds of species and involving millions of individual birds annually. The trade is often illegal and evidently unsustainable; thus it has been recognised as a primary threat for many species in Southeast Asia, particularly the Greater Sunda region. Comprising Brunei, western Indonesia (Bali, Java, Kalimantan and Sumatra), Singapore, Malaysia, southern Myanmar and southern Thailand, the Greater Sundas are an ecologically diverse region, home to more than 850 bird species, and globally recognised as a biodiversity hotspot with high levels of endemism. Currently, Indonesia has one of the highest numbers of bird species assessed by IUCN as threatened with global extinction worldwide, and the highest in Asia.

The problem is that there is too much appreciation for songbirds. In Southeast Asia, and particularly in western Indonesia, caged songbirds have long been favourite family pets. Bird ownership is a celebrated custom



and everyone can buy some kind of bird in the market, regardless of their social status. However, it is not simply about pets. Songbird competitions are also economically important and may provide income if the entrants are successful. While the tradition

may have evolved and altered over time, the culture of keeping songbirds has endured and become a pastime, spawning a massive industry that includes all sub-suppliers for cages, food and supplements. There are countless numbers of bird clubs, and songbird competitions have become major 'sporting' events, making the business surrounding them even more lucrative. Although there are legitimate captive breeders in Indonesia, there are still an alarming number of trappers, wholesalers and shops illegally trading in wild-caught birds. This is mainly because there is too little enforcement of the laws that protect the native songbirds and other wildlife; but it is also because some people believe that birds caught in the wild are stronger and better singers than those bred in an

aviary. Moreover, it is often much easier to catch rather than breed a songbird. Sadly, many wild-caught birds do not survive the first few days in captivity.

CAMPAIGN FOCUS

The Silent Forest campaign will focus on the following activities within the EAZA region:

- increasing awareness amongst the general public and particularly within the zoo and conservation communities;
- fundraising for conservation efforts to prevent extinctions;
- providing ideas and information to enable environmental education in zoos; and
- providing expertise, mentorship and manpower to support conservation breeding programmes and related *ex situ* research activities.

The campaign team selected six representative flagship species, namely: Bali myna (*Leucopsar rothschildi*), Nias Hill myna (*Gracula robusta*), Javan green magpie (*Cissa thalassina*), Sumatran laughingthrush (*Garrulax bicolor*), straw-headed bulbul (*Pycnonotus zeylanicus*) and white-rumped shama (*Copsychus malabaricus*). These species illustrate the threats and challenges but also the opportunities to support threatened songbirds. Campaign projects that will help these six species were selected by the campaign team with advice from the Passerine TAG. The campaign projects vary from such things as building a breeding centre in the range country and setting up a back-up population to conducting field surveys, searching for remaining populations in the wild in order to assess potential future release sites for their security and feasibility.

Take, for example, the Javan green magpie, the symbol of this campaign. This Javan endemic with special habitat requirements was only recently recognised to be a separate species. It is consequently not yet formally protected under Indonesian law. It is now near extinction in the wild due to habitat loss and excessive trapping, with no confirmed records since 2007. The ever smaller numbers found for sale and in



the markets demonstrates its demise, as it is not the demand that is dropping. Field surveys are urgently required to ascertain the presence of any remnant wild populations and to facilitate their protection. Additional birds to supplement existing captive breeding programmes could be acquired through confiscated birds from trade if the species are given legal protected status.

The campaign project ‘Searching for the birds’ aims to conduct just such field surveys in an attempt to locate two of Java’s rarest songbirds, the Javan green magpie and the Rufous-fronted laughingthrush, in line with the conservation actions proposed for these species. Several suitable forests have not been surveyed thoroughly in the past half-century, although recent analysis of satellite images at Manchester Metropolitan University shows that forests still exist (in varying degrees of condition). Further analysis also shows other forest sites that need to be surveyed. There are many other threatened species in West Java’s forests, including three primates, which will also benefit from this important mission.

Within the range countries the campaign will also focus on:

- increasing regional awareness and implementing environmental education strategies in cooperation with local and international stakeholders;
- developing regionally relevant husbandry guidelines for all focus species, and supporting their legal and

scientifically managed breeding in-region;

- building awareness and capacity for law enforcement within the region;
- initiating, developing and supporting in-region conservation breeding centres where deemed necessary; and
- supporting research initiatives designed to improve the scientific basis of reintroduction programmes and identifying key partners and stakeholders within the regions.

JOIN THE CAMPAIGN

You can find more information about the songbird crisis, flagship species and campaign partners and projects on the campaign website (www.silentforest.eu). We would like to encourage you and your institution to sign up for the Silent Forest campaign and get actively involved. There are many ways to help make this campaign successful, including educating the public, collecting binoculars, organising fundraising activities, and pledging money for the campaign projects or the general grants scheme. All the resources for the campaign will be available as soon as you officially sign up at www.silentforest.eu. We also encourage all zoos to review their institutional collection plan and include some Asian Songbird Crisis priority species in their collection or add them to their future strategic collection planning. The Passerine TAG will be happy to help if you have any questions. Please contact Mirko Marseille at mirko.marseille@eaza.net



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