

JAVAN PIED STARLING (*GRACUPICA JALLA*) IS NOW EXTINCT IN THE WILD, AND NOT BECAUSE OF HABITAT LOSS. IN A FUTURE WHERE WILD POPULATIONS ARE PROPERLY APPRECIATED, THEY COULD ONCE AGAIN BECOME A COMMON SIGHT IN THE RICE FIELDS OF JAVA AS THEY WERE JUST 25 YEARS AGO

SAVING OUR SONGBIRDS

HOW THE SILENT FOREST CAMPAIGN SET OUT TO IMPROVE THE PROSPECTS OF SONGBIRDS AROUND THE WORLD

Simon Bruslund, Curator, Heidelberg Zoo, Germany

Back in 2016 the following goals were set for the EAZA conservation campaign 2017–2019; ‘Silent Forest – Asian Songbird Crisis’.

- Improve the situation of Asian songbirds in their natural habitat and cultivate increased knowledge and understanding of the threats to these birds and how zoos can contribute to save them.
- Cooperate with partner organisations and work with government agencies in the affected regions.
- Establish and support awareness campaigns in-region and promote birdwatching as an alternative pastime.



- Improve awareness within EAZA through the Passerine TAG and its population management programmes and through EAZA media (newsletters, presentations, magazines, websites). Publish information to improve husbandry and exhibits with Best Practice Guidelines and fact-sheets.
 - Establish functioning *ex situ* safety populations of all key species and motivate more EAZA institutions to continue keeping relevant taxa of songbirds after the campaign.
- Of course these ‘soft’ goals were complemented by ‘smart goals’, which are measurable over the short duration

of the campaign, including such things as number of zoos signing up, fund-raising targets and so on. But the one desire shared by everyone involved in the campaign’s core group is for Silent Forest to have long-term effects beyond the two years of campaigning. This will be achieved by inspiring not just zoo visitors, but also our fellow zoo professionals around the world to have a lasting appreciation of songbirds.

Songbirds are numerous both in species and individuals. In their relatively short lifespans, they have a large reproduction potential, but their abundance is no reason to take them for granted. Their many amazing feats

SILENT FOREST CAMPAIGN
 LOGO CREATED BY MICHAEL
 PETERSEN, STAFF GRAPHIC
 DESIGNER IN COPENHAGEN ZOO



include some of the longest migrations on earth, achieved thanks to cunning navigation skills. They shape their and our environment by the consumption of insects and distribution of plants. Their songs and colours have long been a source of inspiration for those who care to take a second look. Songbird swarm movements provide clues for pioneering robotics and artificial intelligence programming. Some songbirds are even thought to be among the most sentient of animals, with solution-finding skills that rival those of primates, and their complex social and communication skills, which we are just beginning to understand, may be even more impressive yet.

There really are plenty of reasons *not* to take songbirds for granted, but unfortunately these passerines do not receive the recognition they deserve. As small animals they are easily overlooked and fail to attract the attention that is given to larger birds or mammals.

The general public often fails to make an emotional connection with a particular species unless it is guided in the process. But in order to facilitate a newfound appreciation of these precious birds, the zoo communities themselves first have to forge their own connections with the songbirds of the world. The seed for this has been planted with the Silent Forest campaign, which opens a window on to the plight of the world's songbirds.

The Passerine TAG is responsible for maintaining a strong connection between the EAZA Member institutions and passerines. Frequent publications and active TAG assistance of Members in husbandry

issues will lead to more space for passerines in zoos, including urgently needed behind-the-scenes breeding facilities. Creative new solutions for population management and innovative programmes

interacting with *in situ* and non-EAZA populations will help to ensure the long-term sustainability of songbird populations and diversity of species exhibited in zoos.

Unfortunately not all passerines have the luxury of time to benefit from this new level of appreciation. In fact a few species are now on the verge of extinction, driven by the fact that they are traded as rare status symbols (e.g. Javan Green Magpie *Cissa thalassina* or Nias Hill Myna *Gracula robusta*) or due to large-scale distribution and exploitation for songbird competitions (e.g. subspecies of white-rumped shama *Kittacincla malabarica ssp.* or Javan pied starling *Gracupica jalla*). Some of these were considered common just 25 years ago, but will surely not survive beyond the next 25 years at the current rate.

As it is not likely that the practice of keeping caged songbirds will be completely regulated or abandoned in the next 25 years, as it is so deeply rooted in cultures around the world, we must develop alternatives. Conservation activities for the coming decades must include advances in the following four fields. These activities will be coordinated and monitored by the newly formed IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group (ASTSG), which has close ties to the EAZA Passerine Taxon Advisory Group.

EX SITU MANAGEMENT

For a number of species, the last resort of *ex situ* management is already relevant. During the 2015 Songbird Crisis Summit in Singapore, 12 species were identified as having needs that were sufficiently acute to initiate *ex situ* management programmes. A relative demographically safe population size for smaller passerines is around 200 individuals, which raises the obvious and urgent need for 1200 breeding units just for Sunda region songbirds. Not only is this not achievable in European zoos alone, but also the exportation and transport of the birds would not be feasible, nor would it appreciate the need to involve in-country expertise.

A network of Songbird Arks will be created in Southeast Asia with the support of EAZA zoos and their knowhow. Initiated and run by government organisations or NGOs, these 'Songbird Arks' will work with several species, constantly adjusting their priorities to cater for the most affected populations and working together to improve their management skills. Eventually each species should be managed globally according to a One Plan approach, with some perhaps kept extremely locally but benefiting from global support and shared knowledge.

These Songbird Arks will provide space for *ex situ* populations, which, depending on individual species needs, are either short-term until safe release sites are identified, or long-term, potentially spanning multiple generations demanding advanced population management. European zoos will join and support

ONCE NAMED THE 'WORST ZOO IN THE WORLD' BANDUNG ZOO IS NOW MAKING GREAT PROGRESS AS IT EMBRACES EXTERNAL ADVICE. MEANWHILE, LOCAL PRESS OUTLETS ARE TAKING A KEEN INTEREST IN BANDUNG'S RELEASE OF JAVAN MYNAS (*ACRIDOTHERES JAVANICUS*) IN THE SURROUNDING AREA



THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE PRIGEN SONGBIRD ARK WAS MADE POSSIBLE ONLY BECAUSE OF INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT. HOWEVER, THE LION'S SHARE IS BACKED BY THE KASI FOUNDATION, AN INDONESIAN ZOO-BASED CONSERVATION NGO

the Songbird Arks in these emergency measures by allocating more resources for songbirds in terms of providing space, funding, development of Best Practice Guidelines and sending staff to facilitate knowledge exchange on husbandry and population management within the affected regions.

AWARENESS

Awareness programmes and involvement in community-based conservation efforts are essential to give a purpose to the *ex situ* efforts mentioned above. Without the support and involvement of local communities, future release projects will not stand a chance. Also, awareness programmes are more likely to have a lasting effect in reducing the pressure on remaining bird populations. They sometimes have truly amazing effects, and although an entire industry depends on the songbird trade, in local areas the income from bird-trapping is negligible, and is mostly done simply because it is convenient, or because landowners allow external trappers on their land out of ignorance. Once an understanding is reached that a bird in 'their' forest may not exist anywhere else, a sense of pride and responsibility is often achieved.

Zoos can also play a role in involving local communities in decisions and efforts, guiding them towards appreciating songbirds in a more sustainable fashion. In areas of trapping this includes suggesting alternative livelihoods and helping to initiate pride campaigns, which help to establish safer areas for songbirds. Zoos can provide funding and knowledge of communications, and in some cases can function as an initiator.

In the case of the main consumers, i.e. the bird owners, it is a question of helping them to appreciate songbirds in a more sustainable



manner. This could include providing information on *ex situ* breeding as an alternative to trapping wild birds. It could also include providing ideas that help to increase longevity, or developing ranging schemes that in turn also reduce the pressure on wild populations.

Less targeted but more general awareness work on the songbird trade will be done in in-region zoos. Therefore intensified efforts to improve substandard zoos in the region is inevitable and EAZA zoos will play a valuable role in achieving this.

LEGISLATION

As we see in the wild bird trade in Europe in 2018, even the best legislation is not effective when not properly enforced. In Europe, loopholes in the legislation and outright criminal smuggling are bringing thousands of wild Asian songbirds into Europe every year. These are sold openly in markets and on the internet without any repercussions. Perceived to be legal, these birds are often purchased by aviculturists and zoos that should know better.

Some of these birds are locally protected in their countries of origin and yet in some cases are literally stolen right out of Vietnamese National Parks, such as is likely in

the case of the endangered collared laughingthrush (*Trochalopteron yersini*). Other individuals arrive within a day and without any quarantine from some of the dirtiest markets imaginable in Bangkok or Jakarta and are offered for sale in public markets in the heart of Europe.

EAZA zoos will provide lawmakers as well as the enforcing organs with expertise on species status and will help to develop functional proposals for entries in international (e.g. CITES) or local legislation.

RESEARCH

Fieldwork and taxonomic and genetics research, which is accumulating data intended and needed for adjusting species and locality priorities, can only be done in an evidence-based manner. More and more EAZA zoos will financially support students' work and even *in situ* science positions working day-to-day to achieve the institutional conservation targets from outside the zoo. One example is the Bali Myna (*Leucopsar rothschildi*), where it is hoped that a partnership of foreign and Indonesian students working on the same project will have the added benefit of providing security for reintroduced birds simply as a result of the ongoing presence of researchers in the field.