

Breaking the silence

DESPITE THE GRAVE SITUATION THAT CREATED ITS FORMATION, OPTIMISM PREVAILED AT THE FIRST MEETING OF THE IUCN SSC ASIAN SONGBIRD TRADE SPECIALIST GROUP

David Jeggo, Cologne Zoo

In March this year 50 experts in songbird conservation gathered at the Jurong Bird Park in Singapore for the first meeting of the IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group (ASTSG), a partner in EAZA's Silent Forest Campaign.

On two previous occasions, in September 2015 and February 2017, experts had gathered there for Asian Songbird Crisis Summits. These were hosted by Wildlife Reserves Singapore amid growing concerns that the capture of songbirds from the wild was imperilling the survival of a growing number of species, causing once common species, such as Black-winged Myna (*Acridotheres melanopterus*), to be brought close to extinction in the wild. In view of the gravity of the situation, one of the recommendations that came out of the first Summit was that an IUCN Specialist Group should be formed to help tackle the problem. As a result the Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group came into being and gained official approval in May 2017. The meeting this year was to report on progress and to plan the Specialist Group's activities for the coming years.

On the first day, each of ASTSG's five sub-groups (Field Research, Genetics, Trade and Legislation, Conservation Breeding and Reintroduction, and Education and Community Engagement) gave a series of presentations illustrating their activities to date. A number featured work supported by EAZA's Silent Forest Campaign, and its Javan Green Magpie (*Cissa thalassina*) logo featured prominently. On day two the participants broke into their sub-groups and planned and prioritised activities for the coming year and beyond. The final day was devoted to the sub-groups reporting back and then drawing the priority actions into a single plan.

SPECIES OF CONCERN

The first Songbird Crisis Summit produced a list of 28 species that it considered were most at risk from the

trade in Asian songbirds, 12 of which were prioritised as being of greatest conservation concern. By this year the list of species to consider had grown to over 40, albeit in part due to some taxonomic rearrangement that split some new species. In the intervening years many had also had their Red List categorisation elevated, a process that is ongoing, with ASTSG in discussion with BirdLife International (who advise IUCN on all bird Red Listings) regarding the up-listing of several more. This illustrates the worsening situation; there is a pattern whereby markets are suddenly flooded with large numbers of a species seldom previously seen in them. As trends and fashions change, and different species are targeted, new ones are coming under threat.

ASTSG has a core group of 10 which acts as a steering committee, comprising the chair, the vice-chairs of the five sub-groups and the two co-ordinators. Prior to the main meeting they had evaluated and refined the expanded list of species of concern. The problem being faced is that there

is a growing number of species on the verge of extinction in the wild; the meeting addressed what urgent actions are required if their extermination is to be avoided. However, if the root causes are not addressed also, the list of species at risk will continue to grow. For those most threatened, as the prospect of conserving them in the wild is currently most uncertain, conservation population management programmes are being recommended as a precaution. This in itself is not a failsafe measure and these programmes will take considerable effort and resources, particularly when for species like the White-eyes and Leafbirds, the husbandry requirements to form sustainable *ex situ* populations are far from perfect. Therefore for a number of the species concerned, where conservation breeding was considered by the sub-group responsible to be a wise precaution, they advocated husbandry research as a high priority.

The meeting highlighted the concern that exists for the shamas (*Kittacincla [malabarica] melanura*) from the Barusan Islands, which lie



SCENES FROM THE ASIAN SONGBIRD SUMMIT © DAVID JEGGO



SIMON BRUSLUND

off the coast of Sumatra; due to the deep seas that separate them, they have long been isolated from the mainland. As a result, these islands are sites of unique biodiversity. An example of this can be found in the shamas that inhabit them and the case that is being made that these are distinctive enough morphologically and genetically to be regarded as full species. Perhaps because of their difference from the White-rumped shama (*Copsychus malabaricus*), of which they are currently considered a sub-species, these island shamas are particularly targeted by trappers, to the extent that they have now been almost completely extirpated. This has given rise to the 'Barusan emergency'; unless conservation population management programmes are established in the immediate future, these taxa will be lost completely. The trappers sell the birds on, and those that go on to breeders are mixed with other forms of shama, so the resulting populations quickly become of mixed origin.

This is further complicated as the Shamas from the various islands also differ and can be divided into three or four different forms. The meeting held several sessions devoted to this topic, discussing the need for action now and how best to set up the conservation population management programmes. It also reflected on the need for further fieldwork to seek out any remaining

birds in the wild. Also looking ahead, community engagement and potential pride campaigns could be set up to sensitise the local populations and to assist with the protection of birds in the wild if, in the future, the stage is reached where birds can be returned to their natural habitat.

These islands are also the home of several distinctive Hill Mynas including the Nias Hill Myna (*Gracula robusta*) the largest of all the Hill Mynas and one of the campaign's focal species. In view of their conservation needs, it is no surprise that two of the Silent Forest preselected projects are focused on activities in these islands.

TACKLING THE SUPPLY CHAIN

On the last day of the meeting a session was devoted to the topic of demand reduction, as this clearly has a role to play in finding a solution to tackling the supply end of the chain. A greater understanding of what drives the keeping of songbirds is fundamental to targeting actions that will reduce its impact and remove some of the threat it poses to species' survival. A number of research projects have been and are being conducted to find which positive measures might make a real difference to reducing this threat. Along with protecting the birds in the wild, this is clearly where the Education and Community Engagement sub-group have an important role to play.

While much of the trade is internal, particularly within Indonesia, international trade in certain species is of sufficient volume to be of conservation concern, and the Trade and Legislation sub-group recommended that greater regard to listing some of these on one or other of the CITES appendices would be helpful. No species are currently being proposed for listing, but to draw attention to the issue, it is proposed that ASTSG should hold a side event at the CITES Conference of Parties this year and it has now been agreed that this will be organised jointly with the governments of Sri Lanka and the US as a single event that would be sponsored by BirdLife, the Wildlife Conservation Society, Wildlife Reserves Singapore and TRAFFIC. This is relevant to our region, as threatened species such as Sumatran (*Garrulax bicolor*) and Collared (*Trochalopteron yersini*) Laughingthrushes are arriving in Europe, and once they are here, little can be done to control this. This is where EAZA Member institutions must act responsibly and not acquire these recent imports, for how can we encourage better protection of threatened species if our own house is not in order?

In spite of the grave and worsening situation for songbirds, the meeting was very positive and optimistic with an excellent collaborative spirit. It was good to see how prominently the Silent Forest Campaign featured and to see the strong representation from EAZA. Much needs to be done, but many actions were proposed, all of which will require funding, manpower, energy and commitment. EAZA's campaign is already assisting with the implementation of a number of these actions, and the funds pledged will enable the support of more. The Passeriformes TAG's RCP for Asian species, recently approved, is in tune with the requirements of the population management programmes and will play a vital role in these. It is important that EAZA institutions continue (and if possible increase) the support they give to in-country population management centres, fieldwork and other conservation activities for these birds. In this way Silent Forest will have the lasting legacy we hope for.