

Safeguarding Asian Songbirds:

Inaugural meeting of the IUCN Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group

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Never has the issue of songbird keeping as a conservation risk to many species been more prominent than it is today. The volume of birds trapped for this widespread trade throughout South-east Asia and beyond has reached unsustainable levels in many instances. Work by TRAFFIC and others in recent years has raised the profile of this issue, highlighting the need for urgent and critical action before more species extinctions occur at localised or national levels. TRAFFIC's surveys in key bird markets in Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore and Viet Nam alone have recorded more than 86,000 birds for sale, from no fewer than 230 South-east Asian species (Fig. 1). These figures, recorded during snapshot surveys at notable markets in these countries between 2014 and 2018, reflect but a fraction of the trade (TRAFFIC, 2019).



RAGHUNATH THIRUMALAISAMY / CC0/IGLICENSSEBY/NC/2/D/

▲ **Top: Sumatran Laughingthrush *Garrulax bicolor*, one of the priority species identified by the ASTSG for conservation action.** ▲ **Common Tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*.**

Over a 26-day period from November to December 2018, more than 12,000 birds were confiscated by Indonesia's authorities from pinch points between Sumatra and Java (TRAFFIC, 2019). This cross-over point between the provinces of Lampung in Sumatra and Banten in Java is a hotspot for the movement of people and commodities between the two Indonesian islands, commonly also used to transport animals. A vast majority of the birds seized here—reportedly destined for Javanese bird markets—were tailorbirds *Orthotomus* spp. and prinias *Prinia* spp., a group of birds not conventionally targeted in huge volumes to feed the songbird trade, but in recent times more popular in bird singing competitions, with their own competition class (Om Kicau, 2012). This is indicative of a constantly evolving trade, one that is increasingly involving a wider range of species that may be put at risk as a result.

In response to this concern, experts from around the world formed the IUCN Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group (ASTSG) in 2017, a unique specialist group of the IUCN Species Survival Commission (IUCN/SSC) dedicated to tackle conservation challenges stemming from illegal and unsustainable trade. The ASTSG is a product of the first-ever Asian Songbird Trade Crisis Summit that was organised jointly by the Wildlife Reserves Singapore, TRAFFIC and Chikananga Wildlife Centre in 2015 (see *TRAFFIC Bulletin* 27(2):47).

Four years on, over 50 experts from around the world gathered at the Jurong Bird Park in Singapore from 30 March to 1 April 2019 to assess what progress has been made and what more needs to be done. Specifically, experts took stock and charted a clear path in line with the *Conservation Strategy for the Southeast Asian Songbirds in Trade*, to pursue a co-ordinated approach to tackling this issue which is inherently linked to social, cultural and economic aspects. Four main themes were initially identified in the Strategy to reduce threats and safeguard Asian songbird populations in the wild (Lee *et al.*, 2016). These have since developed into five thematic sub-groups, covering 1) field research; 2) genetic research; 3) trade, legislation and enforcement; 4) conservation, breeding and reintroductions; and 5) community engagement, communication and education. While discussions were organised around these themes, the Group (in reference to the ASTSG) discussed ongoing initiatives and action points that cut across multiple topics and appointed more focused task forces to take these forward.

In 2016, 28 Asian bird species were identified as priorities for action to reverse their decline in the wild. These included the Greater Green Leafbird *Chloropsis sonnerati* and the White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus*, both categorised as Least Concern by the IUCN Red List, and trapped and traded in the thousands

(Chng *et al.*, 2017; Leupen *et al.*, in press). Just three years later, the status of at least another 16 species of birds was deliberated on as a rise in trapping to feed a relentless market has placed them at risk. They included the Bar-winged Prinia *Prinia familiaria*, one of several prinia species popularly used in singing competitions (Om Kicau, 2012). The recent meeting also recognised that while the songbird trade is particularly prevalent in Indonesia, trade targeting Asian species in other markets—both inside and outside Asia—also deserves attention. In response to a document submitted by the USA and Sri Lanka on “songbird trade and conservation management” ahead of the 18th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora) (CITES, 2019), discussions on the international commercial trade in songbirds also took place at the meeting.

TRAFFIC continues to play a strong role in the ASTSG, building a more comprehensive programme to reinforce and expand efforts to protect songbirds, using evidence from its market surveys to influence legal, policy and regulatory improvements to curtail illegal and unsustainable trade. Such work has also contributed to recent IUCN Red List updates, including the uplisting of the Straw-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus zeylanicus* to Critically Endangered to reflect its perilous position following evidence of extirpations throughout much of the species’s range (BirdLife, 2018). TRAFFIC’s investigations into the songbird trade will also look at the involvement of other countries in South-east Asia and at transactions taking place on online platforms, as well as the links between cross-border trade within the region.

TRAFFIC has also started looking into the role of consumer markets and demand, largely based on its research in Viet Nam in 2016, which found that the vast majority of the 8,047 birds recorded for sale in Ho Chi Minh City and Ha Noi were of species not covered by

legislation (Eaton *et al.*, 2017). This means that trapping and trade was taking place without any checks in place, and could already be at unsustainable levels, with dire consequences particularly as many of the species recorded are already threatened by trade and observed in other South-east Asian markets. With this in mind, TRAFFIC initiated a consumer research exercise to understand the profile and motivations behind songbird keepers and their behaviour. This pioneering effort in Viet Nam will be used to inform conservation actions involving social behaviour change for songbird trade, based on a more accurate determination of motivations and species targeted for trade.

The task ahead is challenging. Evidence is mounting that many species are being pushed to the brink of extinction from illegal and unsustainable trade. It is critical that governments in the region step up efforts to shut down illegal trade or markets and raise awareness to prevent species extinctions via behaviour change communications to reduce consumer demand. Key sites from which thousands of birds are being illegally trapped need to be better protected, and knowledge improved on the status of populations in the wild, with assurance colonies secured to ensure species are not lost forever. The ASTSG hopes to bring together more partners, including a more diverse donor base, that will stimulate efforts to find solutions to reverse the decline of songbird populations and stop our forests falling silent forever.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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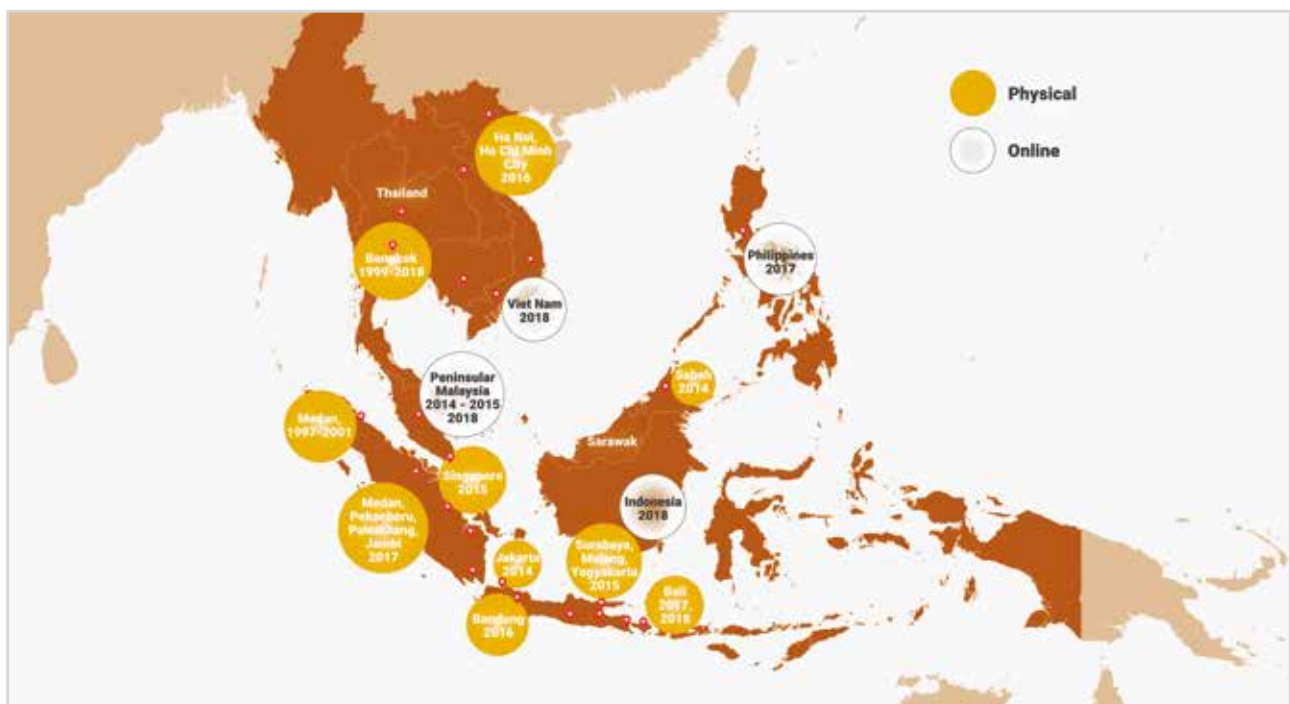


Fig. 1. TRAFFIC’s South-east Asian live bird trade surveys from 1997–2018.

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CORRECTION

In the article *In the Market for Extinction: birds for sale at selected outlets in Sumatra*, that featured in *TRAFFIC Bulletin* 30(1):15–22, all bird species with allocated harvest quotas for 2016 were permitted to be exported (although authorities at a quota meeting in 2017 agreed verbally that the harvest quota should only be for domestic trade (Irham, M. *in litt.* December 2017)).



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UPDATES FROM SHARM EL-SHEIKH:

CBD CoP14 and 2nd CPW Wildlife Forum

Report by Roland Melisch, Taye Teferi, Sarah Ferguson and Salwa Elhalawani

For those interested in policy matters related to the use of and trade in wild flora and fauna, two important meetings took place in November 2018 in Sharm El-Sheikh, Egypt:

14th Convention on Biological Diversity Conference of the Parties (CBD CoP14)

Attended by approximately 3,800 participants, the “UN Biodiversity Conference” comprising the 14th Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Conference of the Parties (CoP)—the Convention’s governing body—and several other concurrent meetings, were held during 13–29 November 2018 in Sharm El-Sheikh.

In relation to wildlife trade, the most relevant new development stemming from the CoP can be found in **Decision 14/7** on “**Sustainable Wildlife Management**”. The Decision welcomes the voluntary guidance for a sustainable wild meat sector, recognising that it does not necessarily apply to all Parties, with the aim of promoting the sustainability of supply at the source, managing demand along the entire value chain, and creating the enabling conditions for legal, sustainable management of terrestrial wild meat in tropical and subtropical habitats. The Decision requests the Executive Secretary of the CBD and members of the Collaborate Partnership on Sustainable Wildlife Management (CPW), subject to the availability of resources, to:

- identify areas that may require complementary guidance to be developed and to explore ways to apply such guidance to other geographical areas, other species and other uses;
- promote and facilitate the use of monitoring tools and databases, through an exchange of best practices and lessons learned;