

First Asian Songbird Trade Crisis Summit

Asian songbirds are in dire trouble. Recent monitoring of bird markets and wild bird populations in the Greater Sundas has revealed a growing list of bird species and subspecies in serious decline. Some taxa, such as the Javan Pied Starling *Sturnus contra jalla*, are already believed to have disappeared from the wild, while only a handful of individuals of others remain, including the Black-winged Myna *Acridotheres melanopterus*, the Javan Green Magpie *Cissa thalassina*, the Rufous-fronted Laughingthrush *Garrulax rufifrons* and the Nias Hill Myna *Gracula religiosa robusta*, to name just a few.

Excessive trapping for the cage-bird trade is a critical threat for many of the species in decline. Recognizing the insufficiency of current efforts to combat the wild bird trade and prevent further extinctions, TRAFFIC, Wildlife Reserves Singapore (WRS), and Cikananga Wildlife Center organized Asia's first Songbird Trade Crisis Summit to identify the most threatened Greater Sunda songbirds and formulate actions to address the threat.

Thirty-five experts gathered at Singapore's Jurong Bird Park in September 2015 and identified 27 Greater Sundaic passerine species most at risk from trade, and assessed 12 as "highest-priority" based on current information on wild populations, population trends and levels of threat. Only three of these high-priority birds are currently categorized as Critically Endangered on the *IUCN Red List of Threatened Species* (Javan Green



PAUL BARRUEL / WWF

BALI MYNA *Leucopsar rothschildi*

Magpie, Black-winged Myna and Bali Myna *Leucopsar rothschildi*), suggesting an urgent need to reassess the status of many of the species.

The majority of the summit was dedicated to establishing detailed Action Plans for these high-priority species. Led by the appropriate experts, the following actions will be jointly undertaken by academics, NGOs and zoological institutions, all represented at the summit:

- Conducting research on the taxonomy and wild populations of the birds;
- Monitoring trade, especially in bird markets;
- Lobbying for enhanced protection and effective enforcement;
- Establishing and expanding ex situ assurance and breeding colonies;
- Strengthening education and community outreach.

This meeting has kick-started a long-term collaboration that summit members hope to develop into a specialist group under IUCN. Backed by research proposed at the summit, the group will lobby for markets trading illegally in birds to be closed down or cleaned up.

Just prior to the summit, TRAFFIC launched *In the Market for Extinction: An inventory of Jakarta's bird markets* to amplify the push towards the ultimate goal of averting bird extinctions and shutting down the illegal and unsustainable trade.

The report focuses on Indonesia, home to the highest number of threatened bird species in Asia (131) and, correspondingly, a live bird trade of remarkable scale and volume. Of the more than 19 000 birds found in TRAFFIC's three-day survey of Jakarta's three biggest bird markets, 98% (18 641 birds of 184 species) were harvested outside of the national harvest quota system or in direct violation of the *Conservation Act (No. 5) of 1990* (a law that currently protects only 22 of these illegally-traded species). Lax law enforcement enables this massive and unsustainable trade to flourish openly.

Although most of the birds seen in the markets were considered to be wild caught, a few were bred in captivity. However, pressure on wild populations remains so strong that commercial captive breeding can only play a role if accompanied by significantly enhanced legal protection and reduced demand.

Conservation breeding in ex situ assurance colonies may now be the only hope for some species, while urgent research and protection efforts may save others. However, as long as these markets exist in their present form, illegal trade will continue, undermining bird conservation in the Greater Sundas and robbing the world of its unique songbirds.

Study of the live bird trade is part of TRAFFIC's ongoing global programme of work monitoring the trade in wild animals used for pets and fashion.

Jill Capotosto, Communications Officer, TRAFFIC in Viet Nam; E-mail: jill.capotosto@traffic.org

Chris R. Shepherd, Regional Director of TRAFFIC in Southeast Asia; E-mail: chris.shepherd@traffic.org