

CONSERVATION ALERT

Pittas for a pittance: observations on the little known illegal trade in Pittidae in west Indonesia

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The Indonesian cage-bird trade is a threat to a wide range of avian species, many of which are purchased for their singing abilities, some for their ability to mimic human words and phrases and others for their attractive appearance. Although some species are robust and may survive for long periods in small cages, others die soon after capture from stress, inappropriate food and other causes. Unfortunately, too little is known of the scale of the trade in Indonesia and the impact it has on wild populations, but it is likely to be a significant factor in the decline of some bird species, many of which are in serious decline in Indonesia (see Shepherd 2007, Collar *et al.* 2012). Baseline data for many species and species groups are lacking, hindering the development of effective conservation action.

The Pittidae family is at serious risk from this trade but has seldom received attention in this context. Here we report observations of pittas in bird markets on the populous island of Java, as baseline data and to raise awareness of the trade in pittas in Indonesia's cage-bird markets.

Thanks to the state of flux in taxonomy at present, the number of pitta species in Indonesia (a few of them are strictly speaking found only outside the region covered by the OBC) is debatable; but if current proposals are widely accepted by taxonomists, it could increase from the 15 recorded in Sukmantoro *et al.* (2007) to well over 20 in the near future, including more than five endemic species and several near-endemic species as well as four or so non-breeding visitors.

Currently four species are classified Vulnerable—Schneider's Pitta *Pitta schneideri* and Graceful Pitta *P. venusta*, both endemic to Sumatra; Blue-headed Pitta *P. baudi* endemic to the island of Borneo, which also probably holds a large proportion of the Fairy Pitta *P. nympha* global population in winter—and three are classified Near Threatened; Giant Pitta *P. caerulea*, Garnet Pitta *P. granatina* and Mangrove Pitta *P. megarhyncha* (BirdLife International 2015). Rheindt & Eaton (2010) examined Banded Pitta taxa, regarded as a single species by Sukmantoro *et al.* (2007), and elevated some subspecies to full species rank, thereby adding two new species to the Indonesia list: the nominate race *guajana*, endemic to Java and Bali, has been renamed Javan Banded Pitta;

whilst Malayan Banded Pitta *P. irena* and Bornean Banded Pitta *P. schwaneri*, endemic to Borneo, make up the new trio—the first two of which feature in the observations reported here.

All members of the Pittidae family are fully protected by law in Indonesia, under the *Act of the Republic of Indonesia No. 5 of 1990 concerning Conservation of Living Resources and their Ecosystems*, commonly known as Law No 5 (1990). This means that they cannot be hunted or traded. Violation can result in imprisonment for a maximum of five years or a fine of up to IDR100 million (about US\$ 8,000 at 2015 exchange rates). Many of the family are additionally protected under Act No. 7 of 1999 (Sukmantoro *et al.* 2007).

Methods

We surveyed eight bird markets in four Javanese cities in 2014 and 2015: three in Jakarta in July 2014, three in Surabaya in July 2014 and June 2015, and one each in Malang and Yogyakarta in June 2015. All pittas observed during these surveys were identified to species level. Only birds openly displayed for sale were recorded. Price information was collected opportunistically during conversations with traders, although this was not always possible as we did not want to raise suspicions. Further information on the trade in pittas was obtained from previous studies in Indonesia and other relevant literature.

Observations

We found 81 pittas from four species openly on sale in seven markets.

Only in Turi market, Surabaya, were no pittas seen on sale.

Our market visits are summarised as follows:

- **Barito market, Jakarta**, 21 July 2014, 4 Javan Banded Pitta between 3 shops
- **Jatinegara market, Jakarta**, 21 July 2014, 22 Javan Banded Pitta between 6 shops
- **Pramuka market, Jakarta**, 22 July 2014, 37 Javan Banded Pitta between 7 shops and 2 Hooded Pitta *P. sordida* in 1 shop
- **Bratang market, Surabaya**, east Java, 22 July 2014, 1 Javan Banded Pitta in 1 shop and 1 Elegant Pitta *P. elegans* in 1 shop
- **Kupang market, Surabaya**, east Java, 22 June 2015, 1 Malayan Banded in 1 shop

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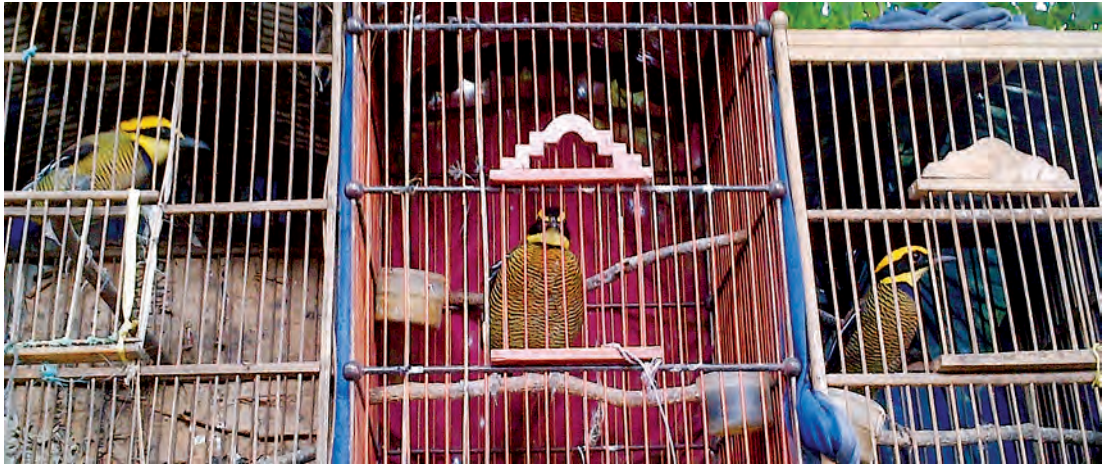


Plate 1. Caged Javan Banded Pittas *Pitta guajana*, Pramuka market, Jakarta, 22 July 2014.

Plate 2. Javan Banded Pitta, Carita Nature Reserve, Carita, Java, August 2013.

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- **Malang**, east Java, 23 June 2015, 10 Javan Banded Pitta between 4 shops and 2 Elegant Pitta in 1 shop
- **Yogyakarta**, central Java, 24 June 2015, 1 Javan Banded in 1 shop.

The Javan Banded Pitta was the most numerous species by far on sale—75 individuals were of this species, plus 3 Elegant Pitta, 2 Hooded Pitta and 1 Malayan Banded Pitta. As the Javan Banded Pitta is native and widespread on Java, and generally inhabits lowland forest which is easily accessed by bird trappers, this result came as no surprise.

It was unsurprising that the highest number of pittas were seen in Pramuka market, Jakarta,

because this was the largest bird market we visited (Chng *et al.* 2015, Chng & Eaton in prep.).

Jatinegara market, Jakarta, although having relatively few birds in total, had a high proportion of high-value species for sale (Chng *et al.* 2015), so it was also not surprising that 22 pittas (the second highest count) were found here.

The only Malayan Banded Pitta, whose range is restricted to Sumatra, Peninsular Malaysia and Thailand (Rheindt & Eaton 2010), was recorded in Kupang market, Surabaya, east Java, indicating that birds may, at least at times, be transported considerable distances—a substantial number of species originating from Sumatra were found in east Java markets (Chng & Eaton in prep.). The absence

of Malayan Banded Pitta and other pitta species found on Sumatra from the Jakarta markets was noteworthy, as significant numbers of other Sumatran species were found there (Chng *et al.* 2015).

The price of a Hooded Pitta in Jakarta was quoted at IDR1,200,000 (US\$100) and a Javan Banded Pitta in Jakarta was IDR500,000 (US\$42). These prices are relatively high, almost on par with the popular laughingthrushes which are frequently sold as songbirds (Shepherd *et al.* in prep.). No price data were obtained during the surveys in Surabaya, Yogyakarta and Malang.

Discussion

Pitta songs are simple—short, monotonous, one to three notes, powerfully delivered—of little interest to a trader or hobbyist specialising in songbirds. During our market surveys we did not hear a single captive pitta calling, in contrast to many other captive species which were vocal at some point. Clearly the appeal of pittas, with their wide array of brilliant colours and patterns, is their visual beauty rather than vocal prowess; traders frequently described them as *cantik* (pretty) to the authors and other potential buyers.

Anecdotal accounts suggest that pittas may be trapped as by-catch in mist-nets set up for other mainly ground-dwelling species such as Chestnut-capped Thrush *Zoothera interpres*. They may also sometimes be sold as food rather than as pets, as was noted during discussions with a local trapper on Flores (JAE pers. obs. 2013).

Although little attention has been paid to the trade in pittas, some have been recorded from bird markets outside Java. Malayan Banded Pitta can regularly be found for sale by the roadside around Banda Aceh, north Sumatra (Agus Nurza pers. comm. February 2014). Between 1997 and 2001, 12 Hooded Pittas and three Blue-winged Pittas *P. moluccensis*, a winter visitor from the north, were recorded in bird markets in Medan (Shepherd 2006). JAE and SCLC observed Hooded Pitta, Eared Pitta *P. phayrei* and Blue-winged Pitta for sale in the Chatuchak weekend market in Bangkok, Thailand, in May and June 2015. In 1987 and 1988, Round (1990) reported one Giant Pitta, 48 Blue-winged Pitta, one Hooded Pitta and four Eared Pitta for sale in the same market over 25 visits, as well as, famously, one of Asia's most charismatic species—Gurney's Pitta *P. gurneyi* which was traded in considerable numbers in Bangkok, and elsewhere in Thailand, from the 1950s to the 1980s (Round & Treesucon 1986).

Under protection laws in Indonesia, it is illegal to capture, keep or trade any pitta species. Evidently the law is not enforced at the present time and

there is a need to protect these birds from exploitation and illegal trade; we recommend that any errant traders selling pittas should be punished according to the law and the animals confiscated.

Many pittas in Indonesia are declining due to habitat degradation and loss—at least a third of the species are already designated either Near Threatened or Vulnerable, and if taxonomic changes continue, newly elevated species may be found to have tiny populations—in such circumstances, trapping for the cage-bird trade is likely to further exacerbate the situation. Continued monitoring of markets is needed to determine the numbers of pittas found in trade and to guide future conservation actions. Laws protecting pittas in Indonesia and throughout South-East Asia need to be strengthened and effectively enforced and at the same time strong and sustained awareness programmes are needed to teach all peoples about the damage the cage-bird trade inflicts on wild bird populations.

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