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## DEBATE FORUM

# Bird thieves in Java show that Indonesian wildlife crime knows no boundaries

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A LARGE THEFT OF ENDANGERED CAPTIVE BRED BIRDS FROM the Cikananga Wildlife Centre in West Java has seriously ruffled the feathers of the Indonesian conservation community. Burglars succeeded in stealing a total of 156 rare birds from the centre, likely to feed Indonesia's burgeoning bird trade. Enough is enough, say bird conservationists.

Indonesia's national emblem is a large mythical bird or bird-like creature, Garuda. The Garuda is a reference to both Indonesia's Hindu and Buddhist past, as well as to the cultural importance of birds in the country. The speed at which Indonesians are consuming and trading local wild bird species, however, suggests that the only birds left will soon live in cages, or are exotics like the ubiquitous tree sparrow introduced from Europe. Forest areas that used to resonate with bird calls are now silent. The Yellow-vented Bulbul, *Pycnonotus goiavier*, previously very common in Bogor and Jakarta, is now rare, because its pretty song makes it a popular cage bird. Once one of the most common birds in Indonesia's rice fields, the beautiful Java Sparrow, *Lonchura oryzivora*, was hunted extensively for keeping in cages too, but also shot and poisoned because it fed on rice. This species roamed in flocks of thousands but has almost disappeared from the wild.

Bird collectors and traders are finding ever more devious (and often illegal) ways to obtain birds that are increasingly hard to find in the wild. A recent victim of this conniving approach was the Cikananga Wildlife Centre, near Sukabumi, West Java. After five years of painstaking captive breeding efforts the centre succeeded in breeding over 500 individuals of the Black-winged Starling, *Acridotheres melanopterus*, known locally as *Jalak Putih* (Fig.1). Due to its popularity as a cage bird thousands were captured and sold, and today it has become close to extinct in the wild and

listed as "critically endangered" on the IUCN Red-list. Cikananga does not breed them for markets though, but release them back into the Javan countryside at secret



**Figure 1.** The Javan Black-winged starling, *Acridotheres melanopterus*, is listed as "Critically endangered" on the IUCN-redlist. For the past five years Cikananga Wildlife Centre, West Java, successfully bred more than 500 individuals of the species to help save it from extinction. Many pairs have been reintroduced back to its natural habitat on Java. Recently, several hundreds were stolen by professional thieves, allegedly to supply Indonesia's rampant illegal bird trade. © Roland Wirth

locations for local villagers to enjoy their splendid songs again and benefit from the starlings as biological pest controllers of insects in rice fields. In the past few months 10 attempts of theft have been recorded of which three were successful. The audacious thieves trespassed into Cikananga, avoided a range of security measures and stole 156 birds. The total loss at Cikananga amounted to: one Bali Starling (near extinction in the wild; listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN red-list), two Black-winged Starlings of the Bali subspecies, three Sumatran Laughing-Thrushes, 149 Black-winged Starlings from Java (listed as Critically Endangered on the IUCN red-list) and one Javan green magpie. This also is a big blow to the centre's staff who, supported by meagre salaries, have worked for years to breed these birds in an attempt to save them from extinction and to the benefit of all Indonesians.

These were not some local dudes out on a cash run. Locks were picked with chemicals, they brought wire cutters, knew exactly where to go, and had clearly studied security operations. Rumours suggested that all birds were sold at Jakarta's bird markets the same morning, a tell-tale sign that the birds had been pre-ordered. Although the thieves hit several times, and with the increased security measures, including extra security guards patrolling the aviaries, they always managed to escape.

Theft was also reported at the release site for Black-winged starlings. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, three chicks were stolen from a "secure" nest box after removing the padlock. Whereas the pair rearing the chicks was not caught the theft is a big setback for the Cikanganga's reintroduction programme. Of an initial 40 released individuals only seven birds remain in the area at present, and therefore each hatching is of critical value to the effort of reestablishing a wild population of the species. A few days before this theft, one juvenile approx three months old was stolen but local people forced the thief to release it. Consequently, the security at the release site will be improved with the employment of two local security guards.

The efforts in Cikananga to save endangered Indonesian birds from extinction through captive breeding and re-introduction has been funded by generous donations from many philanthropic people in Germany, Switzerland, England, the Czech Republic, Poland and the USA. Naturally, these people are frustrated about the greed of bird thieves, traders and buyers in Indonesia, and the limited success of the

Indonesian authorities in preventing such thefts from occurring and prosecute the culprits. A reward of 15,000,000 Rupiahs has been offered by one of the donors to anyone who can give information that leads to the recovery of at least some of the stolen birds and identification of the thieves. Unfortunately, the Cikananga theft is one of many indications of a growing biodiversity conservation challenge in Indonesia. To date, the Indonesian conservation authorities continue to struggle with mainstreaming conservation related policies and enforcing relevant laws. The occasional raids on bird markets constitute merely inadequate authoritative signals that usually do not have any deterring effect illegal bird poaching and other illegal wildlife trade in the country.

Does anyone care? Many Indonesians will probably never see an undisturbed forest in their life – after all, such forests are now rare on Java where most people live. Would it bother anyone if the last of Indonesia's hornbills were caught for their beaks to be used in Chinese medicine? Or that no more eagles would soar overhead? Perhaps not now, but one day in the future many will likely bemoan the loss of a whole range of incredible species that makes this country one of the most biodiversity rich in the World. By then, it is a little too late.

What is needed are major efforts by both governmental and non-government organizations to crack down hard on illegal bird trade and poaching, and provide the public with good and informative education and awareness about wild birds. Without such efforts, there is a real risk that many of Indonesia's wild birds will disappear over the next decade. If that happens, Indonesia's birds will become mythical creatures just like *Garuda* and people might ponder about the days when wild birds still roamed the countryside and bless gardens, fields and forests with intricate songs and calls.