

NEWSLETTER OF THE IUCN SSC ASIAN SONGBIRD TRADE SPECIALIST GROUP

DAWN CHORUS

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Newsletter of the IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade
Specialist Group

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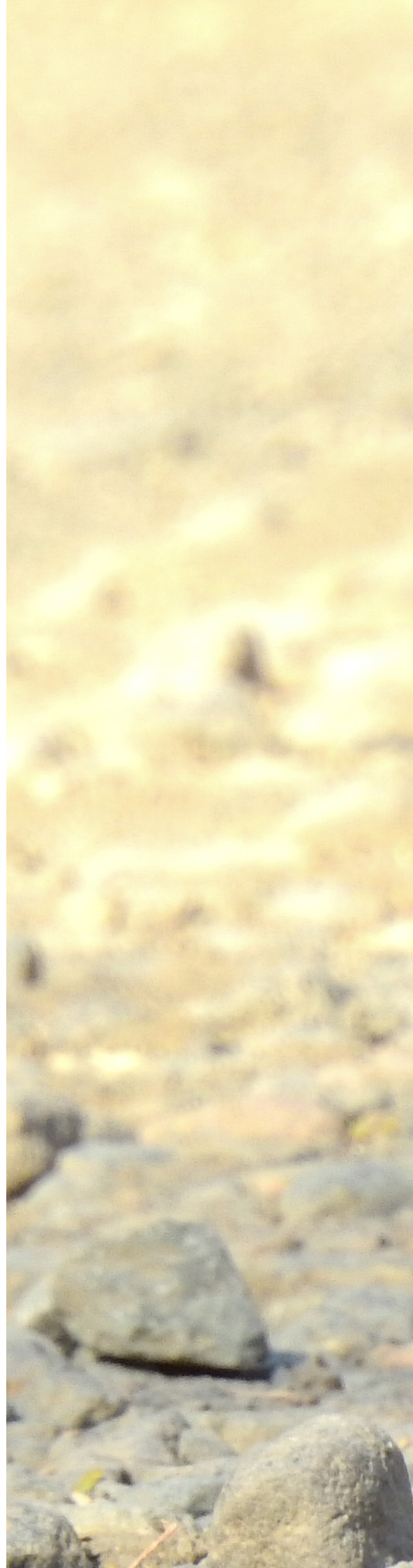




photo by Panji G. Akbar
Oriental Magpie-robin

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FOREWORD

Written by David Jeggo¹

¹ Chair of the IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group (IUCN SSC ASTSG)

I write this at the beginning of 2026 which is the start of IUCN'S next quadrennium. We can look forward to those years ahead, but it is also a good time to also reflect on past achievements. Looking at the IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group's (IUCN SSC ASTSG) achievements over the first eight years of its existence and in particular during 2025, the group has come quite a long way.

2025 saw the IUCN SSC ASTSG publish a revised version of its Priority Taxon List: a list which highlights those taxa most at risk and guides where to target the group's activities. A growing list but one where the decline of some of those listed is being halted, of particular note is the Bali Starling (*Leucopsar rothschildi*) whose recovery is showing positive signs.

Resulting from the IUCN SSC ASTSG in-person meeting held in June 2024 in Yogyakarta, its work-plan was completed and published in the beginning of 2026. This sets out its objectives for the next eight years and the activities required to work towards a better future for Asian songbirds currently threatened by unsustainable trade.

From the 30th of September to the 3rd of October a workshop, in conjunction with the IUCN SSC Indonesian Species Specialist Group (IUCN SSC IdSSG), was held in Bogor to develop an action plan for the conservation of the Javan Green Magpie (*Cissa thalassina*).

Towards the end of 2025, several members of the IUCN SSC ASTSG attended the CITES CoP20 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, where they were actively involved in a well-attended side event. The event highlighted the effect of unsustainable trade in songbirds, not only from Asia but around the world as a whole and how CITES might assist in combatting this. This by all accounts was a great success and served to put songbirds firmly on CITES' agenda, with work to do to prepare for CoP21.

From the early days of the specialist group, the dire situation for the Shama and Hill Myna taxa from the islands off the west coast of Sumatra was brought to its attention to act, as several seemed close to extinction. Ecosystem Impact Foundation in particular rose to the challenge and engaged in conservation efforts for these. Work continues and progress is being made in a last-ditch effort to save the endemic taxa.

In mid-2025 AviList was published and brought together the various bird taxonomies into one agreed list. An outcome of this was that several of the highly threatened Shama taxa from the IUCN

SSC ASTSG Priority Taxon List previously listed as subspecies are now recognised as full species. The Prigen Conservation Breeding Ark (PCBA) is working on conservation breeding programmes for several of these, successfully gathering together the last remnants that could be located in captivity. Another call to action by the IUCN SSC ASTSG was answered by the Haven near Medan in Northern Sumatra which, branching out from its orangutan speciality, has created a songbird breeding facility concentrating on priority taxa from Sumatra.

To build on these achievements it is vital to bring on the next generation of conservationists dedicated to songbirds. In this respect, we started to collaborate with the IUCN SSC Young Professionals Task Force (YPTF) to engage, support and empower our younger members. In 2025, the IUCN SSC ASTSG was delighted to bring on board its Youth Focal Point - Nikeet Pradhan.

So, as we look forward not only to the next IUCN quadrennium but also the one beyond, we can see the enormity of the tasks ahead, but considering what has been achieved to date and the strength of our membership, we can face this with some optimism.

In this issue of Dawn Chorus are contributions on some of the topics mentioned in this introduction. I hope you will enjoy reading these, while you can also learn more about IUCN SSC ASTSG through its various social media channels.

- David Jeggo



Singapore 2026



LOOKING AHEAD: THE IUCN SSC ASTSG WORKPLAN FOR THE NEXT EIGHT YEARS

Written by David Jeggo¹

¹ Chair of the IUCN SSC ASTSG

The IUCN SSC ASTSG published its workplan for 2025-2033 in early 2026. This followed much consultation with the IUCN SSC ASTSG's membership, in particular the Vice-chairs of the five subgroups. The lion's share of the compilation was carried out by the group's three stalwart coordinators who saw to completion a substantial document that is a roadmap for the group's activities for the next two IUCN quadrennia.

It is the culmination of the in-person meeting that the IUCN SSC ASTSG held in 2024, during which its mission and vision were reviewed, along with reviewing the titles and scope of the subgroups, seeking to develop objectives and identify actions to be taken over the next eight years. The process was conducted in a way to reach consensus from the various stakeholders present.

The vision arrived at for the specialist group is:

(A world where) trade no longer threatens the survival of genetically and demographically viable wild songbird populations in Asia.

The workplan is published in two forms, an internal version, which contains additional details and is only available to the IUCN SSC ASTSG's membership, and a public version free for all to read. For each of the subgroups (Field Research; Genetics; Trade, Regulation and Enforcement; Conservation Breeding and Translocation; and Community Engagement), there is an action plan. In these there are some broad objectives listed, followed by a table outlining the actions required to meet these objectives.

The objectives are aligned with the IUCN Species Strategic Plan and the actions listed are in line with the IUCN Species Conservation Cycle of: Assess, Plan, Act, Network and Communicate. There are also some cross-cutting targets as many of the issues addressed by the IUCN SSC ASTSG cannot be siloed in a single subgroup's activity, but require input from several of them.

The document is intended to be used by:

- workshop participants, as a record of the actions, initiatives and collaborations discussed;
- government agencies, to help guide and inform the development of national action plans and initiatives;
- non-governmental conservation organisations and community groups, to guide and inform their priorities and workplans;
- donor organisations, to guide priority actions for funding support;
- the IUCN SSC ASTSG, to help in tracking and supporting progress with the directions and priorities agreed.

The public version of the workplan can be found here: <https://www.asiansongbirdtradesg.com/astsg-publications>



photo by Alain Schroeder
Aviaries at Orangutan Haven

NEWS FROM SUMATRAN SONGBIRD CONSERVATION PROGRAMME — ORANGUTAN HAVEN

Written by Ian Singleton^{1,2,3}

¹ [PT Orang Utan Haven](#)

² [PanEco Foundation](#)

³ [EAZA Silent Forest Group](#)

Twenty-four specialist captive breeding aviaries were completed in 2023 at the Orangutan Haven in North Sumatra, Indonesia, following recommendations from the IUCN SSC ASTSG after the first Asian Songbird Crisis Summit held in Singapore in 2015. The goal is to breed and secure stable captive populations of endangered

Sumatran songbird species under human care, with an initial focus on the Straw-headed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus zeylanicus*), Sumatran Laughingthrush (*Garrulax bicolor*), Sumatran Mesia (*Leiothrix laurinae*), Nias Hill Myna (*Gracula robusta*) and the Barusan Shama (*Copsychus malabaricus melanurus*).



photo by PT Orang Utan Haven
External view of the aviaries

Facilities

The aviaries range from 4x2.5m to 6x3.5m in size, and are all 2.5m high. Some have wire mesh on all sides, some have two concrete walls, and some have three concrete walls. The aviaries are well planted and fitted with perching and nesting areas. Each aviary has pop-hole doors to neighboring aviaries. The aviary site also has an office, medical store, feed store and insect breeding room, as well as general storage, toilets and showers. Power is supplied by solar panels on the roof and CCTV cameras are installed.

Progress

As of the 31st of December, 2025, the aviaries currently house a total of 26 individuals of six species (see table 1). All five target species are now represented at the Haven. After five new Sumatran Laughingthrushes came over from the Cikananga Conservation Breeding Centre (CCBC) in October, there is now at least one potential breeding pair of every target

species. The sixth additional species that we have is the Silver-eared Mesia (*Leiothrix argenteauris*) which were handed over to us by the Natural Resource Conservation Agency for North Sumatra, who mistakenly thought that this was the species we were looking for.



photo by PT Orang Utan Haven
Misting system in the Nias Hill Myna aviary



photo by PT Orang Utan Haven
Quarantine aviary

No.	Aviary	Species	latin name	IUCN status	ID Studbook	ID Haven	Sex	Arrival Date
1	E3	Barusan shama	<i>Copsychus melanurus</i>	unlisted	SBS002	OHB003	M	19-Jul-23
2	E3	Barusan shama	<i>Copsychus melanurus</i>	unlisted	SBS003	OHB004	F	19-Jul-23
3	A2	Barusan shama	<i>Copsychus melanurus</i>	unlisted	SBS005	OHB033	M	03-May-25
4	E3	Barusan shama	<i>Copsychus melanurus</i>	unlisted	SBS008	OHB036	?	25-Sep-25
5	B4	Nias myna	<i>Gracula robusta</i>	CR	NM001	OHB010	F	09-Oct-23
6	B4	Nias myna	<i>Gracula robusta</i>	CR	NM002	OHB011	M	25-Nov-23
7	B1	Nias myna	<i>Gracula robusta</i>	CR	NM004	OHB015	M	23-Dec-23
8	D3	Nias myna	<i>Gracula robusta</i>	CR	NM006	OHB022	M	16-Aug-24
9	B1	Nias myna	<i>Gracula robusta</i>	CR	NM007	OHB023	M	16-Aug-24
10	D3	Nias myna	<i>Gracula robusta</i>	CR	NM008	OHB024	F	16-Aug-24
11	A5	Silver-eared Mesia	<i>Leiothrix argentea</i>	LC	SEM001	OHB006	M	25-Sep-23
12	A5	Silver-eared Mesia	<i>Leiothrix argentea</i>	LC	SEM002	OHB007	F	25-Sep-23
13	E1	Silver-eared Mesia	<i>Leiothrix argentea</i>	LC	SEM003	OHB008	M	25-Sep-23
14	E4/E5	Straw headed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus zeylanicus</i>	CR	SHB002	OHB014	F	08-Dec-23
15	E4/E5	Straw headed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus zeylanicus</i>	CR	SHB003	OHB017	M	19-Jan-24
16	C3/C4	Straw headed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus zeylanicus</i>	CR	SHB004	OHB018	F	29-Mar-24
17	C3/C4	Straw headed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus zeylanicus</i>	CR	SHB006	OHB020	M	27-Jul-24
18	A1	Straw headed bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus zeylanicus</i>	CR	SHB007	OHB021	F	27-Jul-24
19	C5	Sumatran laughing thrush	<i>Garrulax bicolor</i>	EN	SLT001	OHB001	M	14-Apr-23
20	B3	Sumatran laughing thrush	<i>Garrulax bicolor</i>	EN	SLT002	OHB037	M	12-Oct-25
21	B3	Sumatran laughing thrush	<i>Garrulax bicolor</i>	EN	SLT003	OHB038	F	12-Oct-25
22	E1	Sumatran laughing thrush	<i>Garrulax bicolor</i>	EN	SLT004	OHB039	M	12-Oct-25
23	E2	Sumatran laughing thrush	<i>Garrulax bicolor</i>	EN	SLT005	OHB040	F	12-Oct-25
24	D5	Sumatran laughing thrush	<i>Garrulax bicolor</i>	EN	SLT006	OHB041	F	12-Oct-25
25	A4	Sumatran Mesia	<i>Leiothrix laurinae</i>	EN	SM003	OHB027	M	21-Aug-24
26	A4	Sumatran Mesia	<i>Leiothrix laurinae</i>	EN	SM004	OHB028	F	21-Aug-24

Table 1: List of birds held at the Orangutan Haven aviaries as of December 31, 2025

Breeding progress

The first eggs laid at the centre were from a pair of Silver-eared Mesia. Two eggs were found on the 24th of August and hatched on the 9th of September 2024. As the nest was directly under the edge of the roof, it was destroyed in heavy rains just eight days later and both chicks perished. To address this issue, temporary roofing was installed over nests clearly vulnerable to downpours.

A pair of our Nias Hill Mynas also laid an egg in Aug 2024. However, the egg was found on the floor of the aviary and it is not known if it was laid outside or was evicted from the nest box. There was no real evidence of nest building inside the nest box.

One of the pairs of Sumatran Mesia built a nest and laid two eggs on the 20th of March 2025, but one was found broken on the ground three days later and the other one was missing.



photo by PT Orang Utan Haven
Nias Hill Myna

On the 28th of April 2025, a single egg was found in the nest box of our Barusan Shama pair. It hatched successfully on the 3rd of May and the chick exited the nest box on the 14th

of May. Another chick was found in the nest box on the 18th of June and left the nest on the 20th of June, after which we removed the first chick to another aviary. There were two more chicks from this pair in August and September. Sadly, the second and third chicks died, one being predated by a snake and the other due to unknown cause. This means that there are now two surviving chicks, the first being male and the last as yet of undetermined sex.



photo by PT Orang Utan Haven
Barusan Shama

In September one of two pairs of Straw-headed Bulbuls also made a nest and laid two eggs. Unfortunately, they were found broken on the aviary floor just over two weeks later, with downy feathers around. It was mistakenly suspected that the male has attacked the female. However, it was later discovered that the 'male' in this pair, despite a DNA sexing certificate from the previous owner, was actually another female, confirmed after new samples being retested later on.

Looking ahead

Snake-proofing of the aviaries was a top priority for the first quarter of 2026. The project has lost several birds to predation over the last three years, primarily by the Dog-toothed Cat Snake (*Boiga cynodon*). Rebuilding all external doors and door frames to eliminate gaps helped mitigate the issue, as the snakes were likely entering the aviaries through gaps that previously existed between the doors and frames.

In December, one of two pairs of Nias Hill Myna were observed taking nest materials into their nest box.

There is hope that the breeding success of the Barusan Shamas will continue into the coming year. It is also a promising sign that breeding behaviour has already been observed in several taxa, including Mynas, Bulbuls, and both species of Mesia, despite these being relatively young pairs. Breeding of Laughing-thrushes is equally promising.



photo by PT Orang Utan Haven
Sumatran Mesia

BEHIND THE PRIORITY TAXON LIST — INTERVIEW WITH SERENE CHNG*

* Coordinator of the IUCN SSC ASTSG

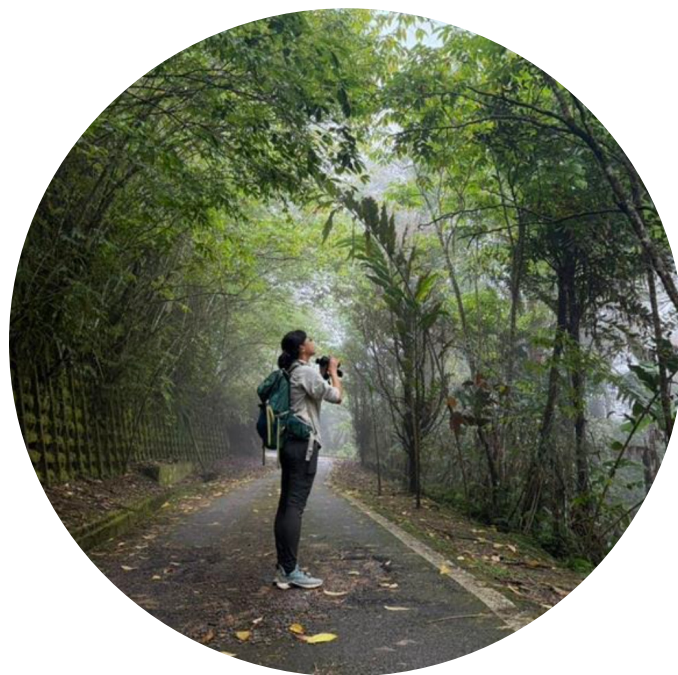
Programme Manager at [TRAFFIC International Southeast Asia](https://www.traffic.org/)

Written by Yvonne Li**

** This interview was conducted by the IUCN SSC ASTSG intern - Yvonne Li - when she was pursuing a Master's degree in Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainability at the National University of Singapore. During the interview, she aimed to capture the process behind the Priority Taxon List's latest update, and how consultations with experts and the latest trade-focused assessments shape the list and set the priorities for conservation actions.

Meet the expert

Serene Chng is a Programme Manager at TRAFFIC and one of the coordinators of the IUCN SSC ASTSG. She currently works to address Southeast Asia's unsustainable and illegal wildlife trade. Serene also leads the IUCN SSC ASTSG's work on the Priority Taxon List — a trade-focused tool that informs taxa-level conservation, policy decisions, and donor priorities across the region. The latest version of the IUCN SSC ASTSG Priority Taxon List is available on our website: <https://www.asian-songbirdtradesg.com/taxon-list>.



Serene Chng

Hundreds of songbirds' taxa are traded, but only 73 of them are included in the Priority Taxon List. What determines taxa listing?

"We really want to focus on taxa where trade is the main threat," - Serene explains. The IUCN SSC ASTSG uses three core criteria for inclusion:

1. Trade as the primary threat: Only taxa where trade is or has been the main driver of population declines are considered. Taxa mainly threatened by habitat loss, poisoning, or other factors are excluded.

2. Declining or rare populations: The taxa must be experiencing population declines, local extirpations, or already be extremely rare in the wild.

3. Not introduced or established elsewhere: Taxa that are invasive or well-established outside their native ranges are excluded, as their global extinction risk is low.

At present, the distinction between the two tiers is based on expert judgement. "Tier 1 includes the most critically affected taxa. They might go extinct if we don't take any urgent conservation actions," - Serene says. "Tier 2 are taxa where there's very clear evidence that wild populations are declining, but the impact is not as urgent, not as severe." The clearer criteria for the two tiers are a goal for the next revision cycle.

Keeping the list up-to-date

Despite being volunteer-driven, the IUCN SSC ASTSG members prioritise incorporating new evidence from research and field observations to maintain relevance in a rapidly evolving trade landscape. "Realistically, once every two years, we would formally review and update the whole list. But it's a living list, so if there's any urgent new information, we can add new taxa as needed. For example, if there is a taxon that suddenly sees a surge in trade demand which urgently threatens its survival, we can add that to the list immediately." - Serene explains.

Addressing data gaps and reliability

Serene acknowledges concerns over data limitations, especially in regions with low monitoring capacity. While the Priority Taxon List does not replicate the IUCN Red List's quantitative rigor, it compensates with a consultative, expert-driven approach. "We formed a working group consisting of IUCN SSC ASTSG members with field and trade research expertise, ensuring that this working group had broad, representative knowledge across the region. Where available, we referred to scientific publications. We also considered other valuable information sources such as unpublished data, ad hoc observations, and expert opinion, especially from those working on the ground with the taxon. This allows the

list to reflect what happens on the ground even in the absence of peer-reviewed publication." - Serene shares.

Serene emphasises the collaborative process: "After collating input from working group members into a draft list, we convened a three-and-a-half-hour virtual meeting to discuss all taxa with proposed changes to their listing, be it uplisting, downlisting, addition or removal from the list. After that, we sent the draft list and justifications to all IUCN SSC ASTSG members to review and provide further evidence or feedback."

Serene noted that the IUCN SSC ASTSG's Priority Taxon List complements rather than replicates the IUCN Red List: "We don't use quantitative criteria like the IUCN Red List does. That assesses species across their whole range, while the Priority Taxon List considers unique conservation units, which could be subspecies or genetically distinct populations. The IUCN Red List also covers all threats, while our list only focuses on trade as the primary threat." For example, while the White-rumped Shama (*Copsychus malabaricus*) is globally assessed as Least Concern by the IUCN Red List, some genetically distinct island subspecies face near extinction and are recognised in the Priority Taxon List. "Nonetheless, the Priority Taxon List takes into account information from the IUCN Red List assessments, and information from our Priority Taxon List updating process is available to Birdlife International, the Red List Authority for birds, for their assessments." - Serene explains.

Key changes in the 2025 version of the list

In the most recent revision:

- Four taxa were uplisted from Tier 2 to Tier 1, due to rising trade pressure and observed population decline:
 - Blue-masked Leafbird (*Chloropsis venusta*)
 - Brown Shrike (*Lanius cristatus superciliosus*)
 - Van Hasselt's Sunbird (*Leptocoma brasiliana brasiliana*)
 - Aceh Bulbul (*Pycnonotus snouckaerti*)
- Newly listed Tier 1 taxa include:
 - Orange-breasted Laughingthrush (*Garrulax annamensis*)
 - A distinct subspecies of the Black-throated Laughingthrush (*Garrulax chinensis*)
- Five new taxa were added to Tier 2 due to their population declines, concerning levels of trade and decreased sightings in known locations:
 - Indochinese Green Magpie (*Cissa hypoleuca (concolour and chauleti)*)
 - Simeulue Oriental Magpie-robin (*Copsychus saularis zacnecus*)
 - Black-hooded Laughingthrush (*Garrulax milleti*)
 - Long-tailed Shrike (*Lanius schach bentet*)
 - Chestnut-eared Laughingthrush (*Lanthocincla konkakinhensis*)
- Bare-throated Whistler (*Pachycephala nudigula*) was downlisted from Tier 1 to Tier 2, as the trade level has dropped dramatically in recent years and wild populations appear stable. In addition, six taxa were removed from the list due to insufficient evidence that trade is currently negatively impacting wild populations.



photo by James Eaton
Blue-masked Leafbird

Broader utility and public participation

"Governments refer to our Priority Taxon List to identify which taxa require additional legal protection or monitoring," - Serene explains. She also notes that funders and conservationists use the list to allocate resources, for example prioritizing impactful interventions, or identifying taxa in need of urgent conservation attention.

When it comes to breeders or hobbyists, she admits: "To be honest, we weren't thinking of them as a main audience for this list, but maybe we can get them to see that by buying and keeping these birds, it's driving trapping pressures and causing them to disappear in the wild."

The next update of the Priority Taxon List is expected within two years. "For those outside the IUCN SSC ASTSG who want to contribute, there is a 'Contact Us' form on the website." - Serene says.



photo by Arimawan Bayuaji
Orange-headed Thrush feeding its chicks

ORANGE-HEADED TRUSH NESTING OBSERVATIONS IN TURGO

Written by Gunawan¹, Sibas², Arimawan Bayuaji² and Zulham³

¹ [BKSDA Yogyakarta](#)

² [Turgo Wildlife](#)

³ [Yayasan Konservasi Elang Indonesia](#)

The Orange-headed Thrush (*Geokichla citrina*) is a popular species among songbird keepers in Indonesia. However, its breeding is challenging and not that many people attempt it. Currently, market demand is largely met by the individuals captured from the wild, resulting in declining wild populations.

The species was once believed to have a fairly wide distribution across the Special Region of Yogyakarta, from the coastal areas all the way to the elevation of 1600 meters above sea level. Today, only a few locations remain home

to this bird. One of these habitats is Turgo Hamlet, located at an altitude of 900 meters above sea level and approximately seven kilometres from the active summit of Merapi volcano. This area borders the Gunung Merapi National Park.

Over one and half years, Balai Konservasi Sumber Daya Alam (BKSDA) Yogyakarta and Turgo Wildlife successfully identified nine Orange-headed Thrush nests in that area, of which only three successfully produced six new individuals. Five nests were lost to poaching

and one nest was attacked by natural predators. Based on the remaining four nests, we tried to study the characteristics of the Orange-headed Thrush bird nests in the location, and found that:

1. The nests were built in the community garden area with varying slopes and only about 20 metres from the settlement;
2. The types of trees used included salak, jackfruit and bamboo with a height between two and 13 meters from the ground;
3. The nests consisted of two layers with the length of 11-16.6 centimetres, a width of 12-17 centimetres and a thickness of six-eight centimetres;
4. The nests were built using the available materials from the surrounding area, such as various types of tree roots, twigs, moss and dry grass.

Observations also showed that the Orange-headed Thrush breeding season occurs during the rainy season, with two to three eggs being laid, and an incubation period lasting approximately 14-15 days. The chicks emerge from the nest at approximately 16 days old. Some of the food items recorded during observations include worms, grasshoppers, crickets, caterpillars, and insect larvae.

Based on the conducted research, Turgo Hamlet is one of the important areas for the wild population of Orange-headed Thrush. Further research on this species is needed to better understand its biology and ecology in the wild, including the distribution and population size.



Documentation the Orange-headed Thrush nest in Turgo

FROM FOREST TO CAGE: THE TROUBLED FATE OF COMMON HILL MYNA IN NEPAL

Written by Nikeet Pradhan¹ and Santosh Bajagain²

¹ [University of Lethbridge](#)

² [Iowa State University](#)

The Common Hill Myna (*Gracula religiosa*) is a native songbird to South and Southeast Asian regions, including Nepal. They are known to be common breeding inhabitants of Nepal's central and eastern lowlands. The species is listed as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List and included in Appendix II of CITES, reflecting extensive exploitation in the global cagebird trade and ongoing threats from deforestation. The Common Hill Myna is subject to high levels of poaching, driven by strong demand in the pet trade and the species' remarkable ability to mimic the human voice.

Nepal is a source and transit for the wildlife trade, neighboring two big countries, China and India that have vast markets for illegal wildlife trade. Kathmandu represents the primary hub for illegal bird trade in Nepal, accounting for nearly half of all documented seizures of birds and their derivatives in the country. Hetauda, another rapidly growing city in central Nepal, is strategically connected to Birgunj, a major border town with India that serves as both a hub and transit point for the illegal bird trade. Considering these dynamics, the authors of this study selected Kathmandu, Hetauda, and Birgunj as a focal study area to better understand the patterns and drivers of illicit bird trade in central Nepal.

Surveys conducted between 2024 and 2025 in Kathmandu, Birgunj, and Hetauda revealed an active illegal trade of the Common Hill Myna. Pet shops and online vendors, primarily using Facebook Marketplace and TikTok, were identified as the main outlets for this trade. Despite the legal prohibition under the National Parks and Wildlife Conservation Act (NPWC), 1972, demand for native species such as parakeets and mynas remained high, driven largely by their vocal mimicry abilities. Common Hill Mynas were offered for sale at prices ranging from USD 64.64 for adults to USD 71.82 for chicks.



photo by Nikeet Pradhan

Common Hill Myna and Rose-ringed Parakeet in the same cage at Hetauda

Poaching remains the primary threat to the Common Hill Myna, with chicks and juveniles frequently harvested from nest cavities to supply the wild bird trade. Several subspecies, including the Mentawai Hill Myna (*Gracula [religiosa] batuensis*) and the Enggano Hill Myna (*Gracula [religiosa] enganensis*), have been listed in Tier 1 of Priority Taxon List by the IUCN SSC ASTSG, reflecting their heightened vulnerability to ongoing trade pressures. Likewise, *Gracula religiosa*, increasingly traded across South and South-east Asia, faces a substantial risk of extirpation in the absence of immediate conservation

action. Beyond trade, rapid deforestation and the conversion of forest habitats into urban landscapes further accelerate population declines. Despite these threats, there is a lack of comprehensive population assessments, leaving the extent of decline poorly understood. Targeted ecological research and systematic monitoring of illegal trade in Nepal are urgently required to guide conservation strategies. Parallel to these efforts, public awareness, education, and community outreach are essential to reduce consumer demand and highlight the ecological consequences of the illegal bird trade.



photo by Yvonne Li
Avian Lab at NUS

UNLOCKING THE HIDDEN STORIES OF SONGBIRDS: A CONSERVATION-GENETIC PERSPECTIVE - AVIAN EVOLUTION LAB VISIT WITH DR. FRANK E. RHEINDT*

* Vice-chair of Genetic Research sub-group, IUCN SSC ASTSG

Associate Professor, Head of the [Avian Evolution Lab at the National University of Singapore](#)

Written by Yvonne Li**

** This interview was conducted by the IUCN SSC ASTSG intern - Yvonne Li - when she was pursuing a Master's degree in Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainability at the National University of Singapore. As part of this interview, Yvonne visited Dr. Frank E. Rheindt's Avian Evolution Lab in March 2025 to gain insights into how cutting-edge genetic research is shaping songbird conservation strategies in Southeast Asia.

Meet the expert

Dr. Frank E. Rheindt is the Genetic Research Vice-Chair of the IUCN SSC ASTSG, Associate Professor and Head of the Avian Evolution Lab at the National University of Singapore (NUS). In this interview, Dr. Rheindt shared his insights on how genetic research is reshaping conservation, from identifying cryptic species to tackling the unintended consequences of the songbird trade. His firsthand experiences —

ranging from jungle expeditions to lab discoveries — paint a compelling picture of how genetics is revolutionising our understanding of biodiversity.

The power of genetics in conservation

"Conservation work considerably benefits from a molecular approach." - Dr. Rheindt shares, as we step into the Avian Evolution Lab at NUS. Traditionally, biodiversity research

has relied on physical characteristics to distinguish species, but modern genetic research has revealed a hidden world of cryptic diversity — species that look identical to the naked eye but are genetically and behaviorally distinct. “People look at two birds and say: “They’re the same.” But if you analyze their DNA and their songs, they are completely different. And the birds themselves know it! They won’t breed with each other because they themselves recognise they’re different species,” - he explains.

Genetic knowledge has major implications for conservation. For example, the Javan Jungle Flycatcher (*Cyornis banyumas*) was previously assumed to be a local variant of a widespread species, but genetic and bioacoustic research recently demonstrated that it is a distinct, highly endangered species. “Vocal and molecular data showed that the Javan population had a completely different genetic makeup and song, and is almost extinct in the wild.” - Dr. Rheindt shares.

Convincing the conservation community is not always easy. “A lot of traditional conservationists are skeptical about genetic research. It took us years to get them to recognise the Javan Jungle Flycatcher (*Cyornis banyumas*) as a separate, Critically Endangered species.” - According to Dr. Rheindt, this resistance remains a challenge in applying genetic insights to real-world conservation strategies.

Singapore’s White-rumped Shama mystery

Dr. Rheindt’s research has also rewritten the history of the White-rumped Shama (*Copsychus malabaricus*) in Singapore. Genetic analysis has revealed a surprising distinction between populations of Pulau Ubin and Singapore’s main island. “On Pulau Ubin, we found that



photo by Yvonne Li
Dr. Frank E. Rheindt

the White-rumped Shamans are genetically consistent with populations in this part of the world, likely remnants of the original population. But on the main island, many of them are actually descendants of cage birds that were released into the wild.” - he reveals. Through DNA sequencing, his team traced these introduced birds back to their likely areas of origin further north in the Thai-Malay Peninsula, suggesting they were imported into Singapore via the pet trade.

This raises a tricky conservation dilemma. “Some people argue that because these birds were introduced through the pet trade, they shouldn’t be considered of value for conservation. Others say: “They’re here now, so they should be protected.” Personally, I think we should acknowledge their origin, but also recognise their ecological value.” - Dr. Rheindt says.

The devastating impact of the songbird trade

Illegal and unsustainable trade is one of the biggest threats to Southeast Asia’s bird

populations. Dr. Rheindt outlines two major ways in which this trade damages genetic diversity:

1. Loss of genetic diversity due to over-trapping: "When populations shrink due to overharvesting, the remaining birds are forced to breed within a small gene pool, leading to genetic impoverishment and - at worst - to inbreeding. This weakens the species and reduces chances of survival."
2. Hybridisation due to improper breeding practices: "Breeders of terminally endangered species sometimes mix birds from different populations, subspecies or even different species, not realising they are genetically distinct. This creates hybrids that don't exist in nature."

Saving Singapore's songbirds: The role of genetic research

Despite these challenges, conservation genetics is guiding solutions. Some of Dr. Rheindt's current research focuses on Singapore's forest songbirds, many of which are facing fragmentation and loss of genetic diversity. "Singapore still has 50% of its original forest bird species, which is incredible for such an urbanised country. But many of these birds are now stuck in small, isolated forest patches, unable to mix among populations." - he shares.

Dr. Rheindt says that the biggest problem is the lack of genetic exchange: "Reservoirs, golf courses, and urban development have broken up the forests. Some species are reluctant to fly across open areas, so they no longer engage in gene flow. This leads to inbreeding and population decline." One solution is building ecological corridors — forest bridges and green pathways that reconnect isolated bird populations. "We already have one such

corridor along the Bukit Timah Expressway highway, linking the Central Catchment and Bukit Timah Nature Reserves. Some birds are already using it, but others will take longer until the trees grow tall enough." - he believes that expanding these corridors is key to ensuring the long-term survival of Singapore's songbirds.

Advice for aspiring young conservationists

For young researchers interested in conservation genetics, Dr. Rheindt offers his advice: "I used to be intimidated by genetics. I thought: "This is too complicated for me." But then I realised that genetics is just another tool — one that can reveal things we could never see with our eyes." He encourages students not to shy away from this field: "You don't need to be a lab scientist to make a difference. A lot of the wet lab work is becoming automated. What's really important is learning how to interpret genetic data and apply it to conservation."

For those considering careers outside academia, he emphasised the value of genetic knowledge: "Even if you don't plan to work in genetics, understanding it will make you a better conservationist. Whether you go into government, non-governmental organisations, or environmental policy, being able to interpret genetic data is a huge advantage." Dr. Rheindt adds "Genetics gives us a window into things we could never see before. And that knowledge is what will help us save species before it's too late."



photo by Jonathan Beilby
Javan Green Magpie

CONSERVATION ACTION PLAN FOR JAVAN GREEN MAGPIE

Written by David Jeggo¹ and Andrew Owen^{2,3}

¹ Chair of the IUCN SSC ASTSG

² [Chester Zoo](#)

³ Vice-chair of Conservation Breeding and Reintroduction sub-group, IUCN SSC ASTSG

Between the 30th of September and the 3rd of October 2025, some fifty delegates participated in an IUCN SSC Conservation Planning Specialist Group-facilitated workshop on the Javan Green Magpie (*Cissa thalassina*), held in the Institut Pertanian Bogor International Convention Centre in Bogor, Java, Indonesia. The participants were predominantly from Indonesia and included representatives from the government, various NGOs, those working in-situ and ex-situ with the Javan Green Magpie, and a number of other specialists with knowledge of the species or subjects relevant to its conservation. This was a joint venture by the IUCN SSC ASTSG and the IUCN SSC Indonesian Species Specialist Group. Its aim was to produce a One Plan Approach Action Plan which would set out the path to conserve and lead the recovery of this Critically Endangered Javan endemic species.

The Javan Green Magpie, previously considered conspecific with the Bornean Green Magpie (*Cissa jefferi*), was recognised as a distinct species following the case made by [Van Balen et al. \(2013\)](#). After this split and being considered rare in Java, it received a Critically Endangered assessment under the IUCN Red List, with the estimated population possibly as low as 50–250 individuals. Given this change in status, it has received more focus during the ensuing years. Field research

and trade investigation has been carried out, and, as a precaution, a conservation breeding programme has been established, mainly based within three in-country breeding centres.

Everything that has been learnt confirms one reality: this species is extremely threatened. It seems to have disappeared from much of its previous range within Java's montane forests, primarily through continued pressure from trapping. It continues to decline and is in grave danger of becoming extinct. With the species facing such an uncertain future, a workshop to identify the key actions, agreed and laid out in an action plan, aimed at avoiding its extinction seemed entirely timely and appropriate.

Over the course of the four days the participants representing many of the key stakeholders, actively engaged in the process, sharing information on the biology of the species and background information on the conservation efforts that have been developed to date. The group discussed and analysed key threats to the Javan Green Magpie and how to mitigate them as well as highlighting key knowledge gaps and other important conservation measures. A comprehensive list of priority objectives and actions was formulated during the workshop as well as the formation of several working groups to take these actions forward.

There was a great spirit of engagement and enthusiasm at all levels of the workshop, resulting in the publication of an action plan in early 2026 that sets out a road map for conserving this remarkable species. Among the topics were poaching and illegal trade, habitat loss and fragmentation, and public awareness and education. The vital role of birds held in breeding centres in safeguarding the survival of the species, and

how these individuals might be used in carefully controlled trial translocations, was also reviewed. If the energy and willingness to collaborate, along with the sense of commitment shown during the workshop, can be taken forward to implement the action plan, then there is every hope that the call of this avian jewel will once again resound throughout its forest haunts in Java's west and central mountains.



[The Conservation Action Plan for Javan Green Magpie \(Cissa thalassina\) 2026-2035](#) is available on the IUCN SSC Indonesia Species Specialist Group's website.

REDUCING MORTALITY OF CONFISCATED SONGBIRDS: THE CHALLENGES OF DISEASE MANAGEMENT

Written by Happy Ferdiansyah¹ and Abrar Ahmad¹

¹ [Wak Gatak Songbird Rescue Center](#)

Introduction

The Wak Gatak Songbird Rescue Center, or locally known as the Pusat Penyelamatan Burung Berkicau (P2B2), opened its doors to receiving birds from confiscations in June 2022. Since then, we have seen a constant stream of rescued songbirds arriving at the center from confiscations carried out by different government agencies in West Kalimantan. Most of these birds are the result of large-scale confiscations from the illegal wildlife trade. They arrive in small, overcrowded cages, a stressful situation that accelerates the spread of disease and leads to high mortality rates after confiscation. As a result, at P2B2, we face an uphill battle to stabilise the birds' condition, ensure their welfare, and prevent further disease outbreaks during the different phases of their rehabilitation.

Challenges with disease management in songbird rescue centers

Confiscated birds face severe health risks from the stressful and poor conditions during the trade. Packed into small cages, infected and healthy birds are in close contact, allowing diseases like avian pox, salmonellosis, and parasites to spread rapidly. This is particularly dangerous, as their immune systems are stress-suppressed. The mortality rates at the P2B2 center are a stark reminder of these challenges. We've seen 22% of birds die

within 24 hours and 74% within the first two weeks of arrival. In addition to stress, dehydration and diseases, this high mortality is often worsened by a lack of immediate care. Furthermore, without access to diagnostic facilities, we are often forced to rely on visual symptoms, leading to delayed treatment for cases for which diagnosis is difficult. These combined challenges create significant barriers to the successful rehabilitation of the rescued birds.



photo by Wak Gatak Songbird Rescue Center
Dead birds from a confiscation

Recommendations for improved disease management

While the challenges of managing disease for confiscated songbirds are immense, we can improve their chances of survival by using an integrated approach that focuses on the application of effective protocols and improved disease management procedures for both first responders and rescue centers.

1. Evaluation system for rescued songbirds

First responders need to be trained to conduct a physical evaluation of each bird immediately after confiscation. This evaluation should focus on categorizing birds based on the severity of their condition, helping rescue centers to prioritise care for the most critical cases. It is also vital for first responders and vets to adjust their care based on species-specific needs. For example, to reduce stress and prevent disease spread, territorial and sick birds should be kept in separate cages if possible.



photo by Wak Gatak Songbird Rescue Center
Confiscation of the smuggled birds

2. Standardised procedures for handling birds during rescue operations

To prevent mishandling and initial care that could worsen a bird's condition, first responders need to adopt a comprehensive Standard Operating Procedure for handling confiscated songbirds. At P2B2, we are currently working to support the capacity development of staff from multiple government agencies that are first responders in West Kalimantan to implement such procedures.



photo by Wak Gatak Songbird Rescue Center
Medical examination of an injured bird

3. Access to diagnostic facilities through partnerships with diagnostic Institutes

A key challenge for rescue centers in disease management is the lack of access to diagnostic facilities. Rescue centers can address this by partnering with institutions such as universities, veterinary clinics, and laboratories that have the necessary equipment to perform definitive laboratory diagnoses. This will enable rescue centers to

move beyond symptom-based treatment to provide more accurate, targeted, and effective medical care for the birds.

To combat the high post-confiscation mortality rates, an integrated approach is essential. Combining structured evaluations, standardised procedures and partnerships with diagnostic institutions will ensure effective care and significantly improve the survival rates of Indonesia's rescued songbirds.



photo by Wak Gatak Songbird Rescue Center
Wak Gatak Conservation Center quarantine block



James Eaton (on the right) birdwatching at the age of 11

VOICES FROM THE FIELD: A BIRDER'S VIEW ON THE ASIAN SONGBIRD CRISIS — INTERVIEW WITH JAMES EATON*

* Founder of [Birdtour Asia](#)

Written by Yvonne Li**

** This interview was conducted by the IUCN SSC ASTSG intern - Yvonne Li - when she was pursuing a Master's degree in Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainability at the National University of Singapore. The conversation offers a glimpse of the decades of James Eaton's experience in bird identification, fieldwork and market surveys, and a candid perspective on the challenges and possibilities in Asian songbird conservation.

Meet the Expert

James Eaton is the Founder and Director of Birdtour Asia Limited, a bird tour company specialising in Asia, and a long-standing member of the IUCN SSC ASTSG. Renowned for his expertise in Asian bird identification and market surveys, he has spent over two decades documenting songbird populations across the region and monitoring trade dynamics. In this interview, James shares personal insights into his journey, his favorite taxa, and the stark realities of the songbird trade, alongside his thoughts on conservation solutions.



James Eaton

A lifelong fascination with birds

James's passion for birds began in childhood when his grandmother gifted him a book about the birds of the UK. Encouraged by supportive parents — his father frequently taking him to nature reserves — James developed a keen interest in birdwatching, which later evolved into a professional pursuit. After his first birding trip to India at 17 years old, his fascination with Asia grew, leading him to move east and ultimately to his current base in Bangkok, Thailand.

The Laughingthrushes

When asked to name a favorite, James highlights Laughingthrushes (*Leiothrichidae*) — a group of songbirds notable for their beautiful calls and complex trade dynamics. Widely distributed across Asia, some species within this group are now severely range-restricted due to trapping, especially in Indonesia and Vietnam. “They’re among the most heavily traded birds because of their beautiful song. I’ve seen their populations collapse over the years.” - James shares. Their conspicuous

nature makes them useful indicators for studying population dynamics. Unfortunately, the decline in Laughingthrushes’ numbers is symptomatic of broader patterns driven by trade.

The grim reality: Trade and its impact

James paints a sobering picture of how the songbird trade has affected bird populations over the past 20 years. One poignant example is the Sumatran Laughingthrush (*Garrulax bicolor*). Once widespread across the Barisan Mountains of Sumatra, Indonesia, it is now confined to remote northern pockets due to overharvesting. James says: “You used to see it in village markets, now you don’t. Not because of regulations, but because there are fewer birds left.”

Vietnam also suffers from widespread poaching. James stresses that trade in Vietnam is often masked by habitat loss and road construction, which together fragment bird populations and accelerate declines.

The role of birding network and citizen science

While birdwatching communities themselves rarely engage directly in trade monitoring, James highlights their indirect contribution through platforms like [eBird](#). This citizen science database allows researchers to track sightings and population trends over time. According to James, “It’s a really useful tool — free and accessible, and responsible enough to hide data for at-risk species.” Still, he remains cautious about overestimating the conservation impact of birdwatchers alone, noting that broader structural changes are required to curb illegal trade.



photo by James Eaton
Red-tailed Laughingthrush

Ecotourism and the path forward

James sees ecotourism as a valuable yet underutilised conservation tool. He cites Sabah in East Malaysia as a model, where nature-based tourism employs thousands and supports rural economies: "It's wealth that's evenly distributed, not just going to resorts or cities but to people in the mountains, rivers, and forests." He contrasts this with Vietnam, where tourism is centered around cities and beach resorts, limiting economic incentives to preserve habitats.

Looking ahead

When asked what the public can do, James is clear: "If people didn't buy birds, there would be no trade." He encourages reporting illegal activity, especially in countries like Singapore, where there is strong enforcement. However, he is candid about the limited influence of public action in regions lacking legal capacity or political will. For governments, he calls for

stronger regulation, long-term investment, and integration of ecotourism into national planning. Influencers and public figures, he suggests, could play a more prominent role in shifting social norms and promoting bird protection.

Despite the grim trends, James finds hope in the next generation of conservationists and the increasing use of digital tools for monitoring. However, he is realistic about the challenges ahead, particularly as climate change adds new pressures to already vulnerable songbird populations: "Trade may soon be the lesser threat. Climate change is drying forests, reducing insects, and triggering mass extinctions." For James Eaton, protecting Asia's songbirds will require not just expertise and passion but collaboration across governments, local communities and conservation networks.



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