

SPECIAL REPORT

Trade in the Black-and-white Laughingthrush *Garrulax bicolor* and White-crested Laughingthrush *G. leucolophus* in Indonesia

CHRIS R. SHEPHERD

Introduction

The White-crested Laughingthrush *Garrulax leucolophus* is found from the north and north-eastern Indian subcontinent, south-eastern Tibet and south-western China, Myanmar, Thailand and Sumatra (Indonesia), but is absent from central and southern Thailand, Malaysia and Singapore. However, it has become a common introduced bird in Singapore (Sodhi & Sharp 2006). Recently this species has been split, with the Sumatran race being elevated to species level, the Black-and-white or Sumatran Laughingthrush *G. bicolor* (Collar 2006).

While the Black-and-white Laughingthrush has only recently been treated as a species, bird dealers in Sumatra have always regarded it as such. The local name used for the White-crested Laughingthrush in Medan, North Sumatra, is *Poksai Hong Kong* and that for the Black-and-white

Laughingthrush is *Poksai Lokal* (Indonesian word for “local”). In Jakarta both species are known as *Poksai Jambul Putih*, although bird dealers state that the Black-and-white Laughingthrush was from Sumatra and that the White-crested Laughingthrush was from Hong Kong.

The Black-and-white Laughingthrush, endemic to the island of Sumatra, is found in mountainous regions (van Marle & Voous 1988, MacKinnon & Phillipps 1993). Its conservation status in Sumatra is largely unknown, although it is reportedly becoming increasingly scarce (BirdLife International 2006, Shepherd 2006). The decline in this species is due to a combination of habitat loss and, perhaps of more urgent concern, capture for commercial trade.

The keeping and trading of birds is a very large and widespread hobby and business in Indonesia

Plate 1. Black-and-white or Sumatran Laughingthrush *Garrulax bicolor*, adult in Waddesdon Manor Aviary, Buckinghamshire, UK, March 2007.





Plate 2. Black-and-white or Sumatran Laughingthrush *Garrulax bicolor* fledgling. First ever reared in captivity. Waddesdon Manor Aviary, Buckinghamshire, UK, July 2005.



Plate 3. Black-and-white or Sumatran Laughingthrush *Garrulax bicolor*: three nestlings being hand-reared. Waddesdon Manor Aviary, Buckinghamshire, UK, March 2007.

(Shepherd *et al.* 2004, Jepson & Ladle 2005). Virtually all towns and cities in Indonesia have bird markets, with hundreds of species available from throughout the country and international points of origin. Many of the birds in these markets are not traded in accordance with the laws in Indonesia (Shepherd *et al.* 2004, Shepherd 2006). While laws and regulations in Indonesia are sufficient to regulate the trade and protection of wildlife, the implementation and enforcement of these laws are far from effective. Many species that are legally protected, or without a harvest quota (see Legislation section below), continue to be openly traded in the bird markets. Illegal and unsustainable trade, both domestic and international, is a direct threat to the conservation of many species in Indonesia (Shepherd *et al.* 2004). One such species suspected to be in serious decline is the Black-and-white Laughingthrush.

Between January 1997 and December 2001, monthly surveys were carried out in the bird markets of Medan, capital city of North Sumatra, Indonesia (Shepherd 2004). All birds observed were recorded. During this time, 3,392 White-crested Laughingthrushes were counted, making it the most numerous *Garrulax* species observed. However, at that time Black-and-white Laughingthrush was recorded as White-crested Laughingthrush, so there are no separate figures indicating how many of the now two species were observed. This note focuses on current trade in the Black-and-white Laughingthrush.

Legislation

Permits are required for capturing, transporting and selling birds within Indonesia as well as for importing and exporting birds. Only species that have an allotted harvest quota can be taken from the wild for local sale or export, and only from designated areas. The Decree of the Ministry of

Forestry No. 447/Kpts-11/2003 (revised from Decree of the Ministry of Forestry No. 62/Kpts-II/1998) requires any harvest or capture and distribution of wild plant and animal specimens to be done under licence. Sending or transporting wildlife from one location to another within Indonesia must be covered by legal documents, according to Article 42, Chapter X of the Regulations of the Government of the Republic of Indonesia Number 8 (1999), whether the species is protected by law or not. Collectors, middlemen and suppliers must be registered with regional offices of the Natural Resources Conservation Agency (BKSDA) at a provincial level (Siswomartono 1998).

Although the Black-and-white Laughingthrush is not listed as a protected species in Indonesia, there is a zero harvest quota imposed, meaning that this species may not be removed from the wild. This essentially is the same as if this species were totally protected. However, neither the White-crested nor the Black-and-white Laughingthrush is listed in the Appendices of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), and therefore international trade of this species is not regulated or recorded (unless a country does so voluntarily). There are no records of export of this species from Indonesia, although dealers in Medan claim that small numbers have been smuggled to Malaysia in the past (there are also a few birds in captivity in the UK: N. J. Collar *in litt.* 2007).

Methods

Recent surveys were carried out in two large markets in Indonesia, including the Barito bird market in Jakarta, Java, and the Jalan Bintang bird market in Medan, on 1 February 2007 and 27 February 2007, respectively, and one smaller bird market in Jambi on 26 April 2007, and all Black-and-white and White-crested Laughingthrushes

were recorded. Information was gathered through semi-structured interactions with all dealers selling these species in both markets, all of whom were co-operative and willing to discuss the origins of the birds and other relevant information regarding the trade. All prices are reported in Indonesian rupiah (IDR) and converted to US dollars (USD) (1 USD = 10,000 IDR).

Information was also obtained for this report from both published and unpublished literature, although relatively little work has been done on the status of the Black-and-white Laughingthrush.

Observations

All the bird shops in the Barito bird market (n = 21) were surveyed. Five shops were found selling White-crested Laughingthrushes, including two shops which also had Black-and-white Laughingthrushes. A total of two Black-and-white Laughingthrushes were observed and four White-crested. The price of each Black-and-white was IDR 50,000 (USD 5.00), compared to IDR 90,000 (USD 9.00) for a White-crested Laughingthrush.

All shops selling birds in the Jalan Bintang bird market, Medan (n = 20), were surveyed. The market is far smaller than in previous years, when approximately 32 shops were in business. There were also far fewer birds in the shops and even less exotic (not native to Indonesia) species. According to all the dealers, the decline in the number of shops and birds is due to public fear of avian influenza. Dealers are stocking fewer birds, generally of lower value, as people are currently buying far fewer birds. Since 2005, Indonesia has not permitted international trade in birds owing to the risk of avian influenza (Shepherd 2006).

Of the shops that remain operational in Jalan Bintang, four were found selling Black-and-white Laughingthrush, with a total of 25 birds. One shop had 19 of these birds. Only two White-crested Laughingthrush were observed during this survey, as dealers stated that, due to the avian influenza scare, it was becoming non-viable to import birds, so more birds were being captured in Sumatra to meet the demand and fill the void caused by the threat of avian influenza.

Prices between these two species varied greatly, with the Black-and-white costing IDR 80,000–150,000 (USD 8–15.00), and the White-crested IDR 850,000 (USD 85.00). Compared with other *Garrulax* species available in Medan, the Black-and-white is by far the least expensive, with Black-throated Laughingthrushes *G. chinensis* costing IDR 750,000 (USD 75.00) and Hwamei *G. canorus* costing IDR 1,500,000 (USD 150.00). Only a few of these were available, with two Black-throated and three Hwamei observed. The Black-and-white

Laughingthrush was the only *Garrulax* species native to Indonesia observed in Medan in this survey. Dealers stated that imported *Garrulax* species cost more, owing to the expenses of shipping and moving through multiple hands along the trade chain, while native species are cheap as costs are minimal.

In the past, all of the *Garrulax* species native to Indonesia have been observed in trade in Medan, including the Sunda Laughingthrush *G. palliatus*, Rufous-fronted Laughingthrush *G. rufifrons*, Black Laughingthrush *G. lugubris* and Chestnut-capped Laughingthrush *G. mitratus*, but the Black-and-white Laughingthrush was by far the most numerous in the markets. Non-native *Garrulax* species observed during surveys carried out in 1997–2001 included the White-crested Laughingthrush, Black-throated Laughingthrush, Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush *G. erythrocephalus*, Red-winged Laughingthrush *G. formosus* and Hwamei. The White-crested Laughingthrush, which then included the Black-and-white Laughingthrush, was the most numerous (Shepherd *et al.* 2004), although the majority was made up of the locally captured Black-and-white Laughingthrush.

All shops in the bird market in Jambi (n = 5) were surveyed and no Black-and-white

Plate 4. Black-and-white or Sumatran Laughingthrush *Garrulax bicolor*, Medan Bird Market, Sumatra, Indonesia, April 2004.



Laughingthrush was observed. One dealer stated that he had one at his home and was willing to sell it, but a price was not given. He stated that the bird was captured in nearby Kerinci. D. Martyr (*in litt.* 2007) reports that this species has become extremely rare in the wild in Jambi, Kerinci and other areas in southern Sumatra, and that it used to be frequently observed in the Jambi bird market but now trappers send them all to the bird markets in Jakarta to meet the rising demand there. The Chestnut Laughingthrush was the only *Garrulax* species observed in the Jambi bird market during this survey, totalling two individuals.

Dealers in the Medan and Jakarta markets reported that the Black-and-white Laughingthrush is less valuable than the White-crested Laughingthrush, as it costs less to acquire and its song is considered to be inferior. They consistently stated that all Black-and-white Laughingthrushes are captured from the wild (i.e. there is no captive breeding of this species in Indonesia). Dealers in the Barito bird market stated that this species was purchased from dealers in the Jalan Bintang bird market in Medan. Jalan Bintang dealers disclosed that their birds are captured mostly in the locations of Padang Sidempuan and Sidikalang, in North Sumatra, as well as in Aceh, Sumatra's northernmost province. Dealers in all markets stated that this species was becoming increasingly difficult to obtain as it was becoming rare in the wild.

It is not clear why the prices for the Black-and-white Laughingthrush are higher in Medan than in Jakarta, as Medan is closer to the source of collection from the wild. However, it is likely that the prices of birds in Medan are higher as they now have far fewer birds and are struggling to make a profit. It may also be that the species is more popular in Medan than it is in Jakarta, where there is far greater variety of birds for buyers to choose from.

Conclusions

Despite being illegal, trade in the Black-and-white Laughingthrush continues. While the scale of the trade is relatively low compared to other native species, dealers in all three locations surveyed claim that this species is becoming increasingly difficult to capture, owing to over-harvest. Habitat destruction has undoubtedly also had a negative impact on this species, but it is very likely that illegal capture and trade have caused a serious decline in the wild. The Black-and-white

Laughingthrush is captured largely for local consumption and commands a very low price compared to other *Garrulax* species. Dealers carry out the illegal trade of this species openly in the bird markets, indicating that there is little or no threat of reprimand from the authorities.

There is clearly an urgent need for research to determine the range and status of the Black-and-white Laughingthrush in the wild, as well as to assess its habitat needs and priority actions for conservation. The authorities in Indonesia should be made aware of the significance of this endemic species and the urgent need to protect it. Bird markets should be closely monitored and any illegal trade in the Black-and-white Laughingthrush should be suppressed immediately. There is also a need to increase awareness of the conservation needs of this endemic species among the public, government and conservation bodies in Indonesia.

References

- Collar, N. J. (2006) A partial revision of the Asian babblers (Timaliidae). *Forktail* 22: 85–112.
- BirdLife International (2006) Sumatran Laughingthrush (*Garrulax bicolor*): newly split and threatened? Downloaded from: <http://www.birdlifeforums.org>
- Jepson, P. & Ladle, R. J. (2005) Bird-keeping in Indonesia: conservation impacts and the potential for substitution-based conservation responses. *Oryx* 39:4.
- MacKinnon, J. & Phillipps, K. (1993) *A field guide to the birds of Borneo, Sumatra, Java and Bali*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- van Marle, J. G. & Voous, K. H. (1988) *The birds of Sumatra: an annotated check-list*. London: British Ornithologists' Union (Check-list 10).
- Robson, C. (2000). *A field guide to the birds of South-East Asia*. London: New Holland.
- Siswomartono, W. (1998) Review of the policy and activities of wildlife utilization in Indonesia. Pp.37–44 in W. Erdelen, ed. *Conservation, trade and sustainable use of lizards and snakes in Indonesia*. Rheinbach, Germany: *Mertensiella* 7.
- Shepherd, C. R. (2006) The bird trade in Medan, North Sumatra: an overview. *BirdingASIA* 5: 16–24.
- Shepherd, C. R., Sukumaran, J. & Wich, S. A. (2004) *Open season: an analysis of the pet trade in Medan, Sumatra 1997–2001*. Selangor, Malaysia: TRAFFIC Southeast Asia.
- Sodhi, N. S. & Sharp, I. (2006) *Winged invaders: pest birds of the Asian Pacific*. Singapore.

Chris R. Shepherd,
TRAFFIC Southeast Asia, Unit 9-3A, 3rd Floor,
Jalan SS23/11, Taman SEA, 47400 Petaling Jaya,
Selangor, Malaysia
Email: ctsea@po.jaring.my