

Conservation news.

Asian songbird crisis also affects unprotected species

Vincent Nijman, K.A.I. Nekaris, Muhammad Ali Imron

With the demand for live songbirds in South-east Asia so high and negatively affecting so many species, conservationists have dubbed it the Asian songbird crisis. Nowhere is this crisis felt more than on the Indonesian island of Java, where tens of thousands of wild-caught birds are openly offered for sale in bird markets every day. In July 2018 Indonesia published its long-awaited new protected species list. Unfortunately few of the heavily traded songbirds that were not already on the 1979 list were included. One of these omissions is the Asian fairy-bluebird *Irena puella*, a bird as attractive as its name suggests. Males have an iridescent blue and black plumage and a loud liquid two-note call, making them highly desirable in the Indonesian songbird trade. Partially because of its large South-east Asian range, the species is categorized as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List, although it is noted that its populations are declining. Some of the various subspecies, in particular that on Java (*Irena puella turcosa*), are recorded in the wild less and less frequently. We believe that, at least on Java, part of this rarity is due to excessive trapping for the domestic songbird trade.

Between August 2016 and August 2018 we recorded 443 Asian fairy-bluebirds during 109 surveys in twenty bird markets on Java, Bali and Lombok. Although in many bird markets only single individuals were on offer, several bird markets had relatively large numbers for sale per survey: Pramuka (mean of 16.8), Jatinegara (4.4) and Barito (4.3) in Jakarta; Plered (5.2) in Cirebon; Sukahaji (4.1) in Bandung; and Depok (4.0) in Surakarta. In August 2018 we found 71 Asian fairy-bluebirds offered for sale on two online classified ad webpages (OLX.co.id and inkuiri.com) and a specialist Facebook group (komunitas burung cucuk biru), mainly by sellers from western Java (46 advertisements) and central Java (12). We also found the species on offer in two bird markets on Bali and one on Lombok, and online in Bali and Sulawesi—three islands east of their natural range— demonstrating they are traded over long distances. Prices varied from USD \$22.00 for a newly captured bird to USD \$220.00 for an accomplished singer. The mean asking price based on 50 first quotes was USD \$63.00, thus making it affordable for a large proportion of Javanese society (the 2018 government recommended minimum monthly wage for Jakarta is USD \$262.00). We expect that most of the Asian fairy-bluebirds were sourced in Java, augmented with imports from Sumatra and Borneo. There was a strong correlation between the size of the market and the number of Asian fairy bluebirds on display (< 20 shops, mean of 1.0 birds; 20-49 shops, 3.2 birds; > 50 shops, 5.9 birds), and with at least 54 bird markets on Java, Bali and Lombok we estimate that on any given day 150 Asian fairy-bluebirds are offered for sale. If we assume that a quarter of the birds are sold within 2 weeks, and half within 4 weeks (anything less makes the trade probably no longer economically viable), then > 2,000 birds may pass through these markets annually. Quantifying the number of birds on offer in the virtual marketplace was not possible, but it probably adds substantially to the estimate for the bird markets.

Despite still not being legally protected in Indonesia, commercial trade in Asian fairy-bluebirds is strictly regulated and only limited numbers are allowed to be captured and sold as pets. The 2018 harvest quota indicates that no more than 100 Asian fairy blue birds can be captured in the province of Jambi (Sumatra) and 100 in Central Kalimantan (Borneo) but none from Java. Perhaps the opportunity to add Asian fairy-bluebirds to Indonesia's protected species list has passed, but we

urge the Indonesian authorities, and especially the regional branches of the Natural Resources Conservation Agency, to be more vigilant in checking actual and virtual bird markets, and ensuring that no additional birds are traded outside the approved harvest quotas.