The Babbler

BirdLife International *in Indochina*

December, 2005
Number 16

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This issue of *The Babbler* covers the last quarter of 2005. The year ended with the international media focused on the spread of Avian Influenza. BirdLife International is working hard to provide balanced and scientifically accurate and up-to-date information, especially on the possible role of wild birds as vectors, to inform this debate. In this issue we have included an article by Richard Thomas which first appeared in the December issue of *World Birdwatch*. Here in Vietnam we are at the centre of the epidemic. I am reminded every morning of the potential threat we face by the numerous roosters calling from the gardens of my neighbors here in Hanoi. Clearly these folk don't feel that by keeping these birds in such close proximity, they expose all of us, including their own families to any increased risk. Perhaps they haven't heard the news? Recently city authorities here in Vietnam began extermination programmes of Feral Pigeons in city centres (a welcome contribution to improved public health), yet right in the heart of Hanoi people are still permitted or at least do still keep poultry. Confusion and misunderstanding caused by misleading media reports, especially in the international media are not helping the debate.

During this last quarter I was hoping to report good news to you following our latest expedition to search for the Pink-headed Duck. Despite the best efforts of the survey team we weren't able to find it. The true historical status of this bird in Myanmar continues to be shrouded in doubt. The provenance of the two specimens collected in Myanmar seem beyond doubt but was it ever a resident species? Perhaps it was only ever a winter visitor? Why, given that apparently suitable habitat remains are we not finding it? One thing is certain, we are not giving up!

As I write this at the end of January it remains now for me to thank all our supports, collaborators, sponsors and friends and wish you all a happy and prosperous New Year.

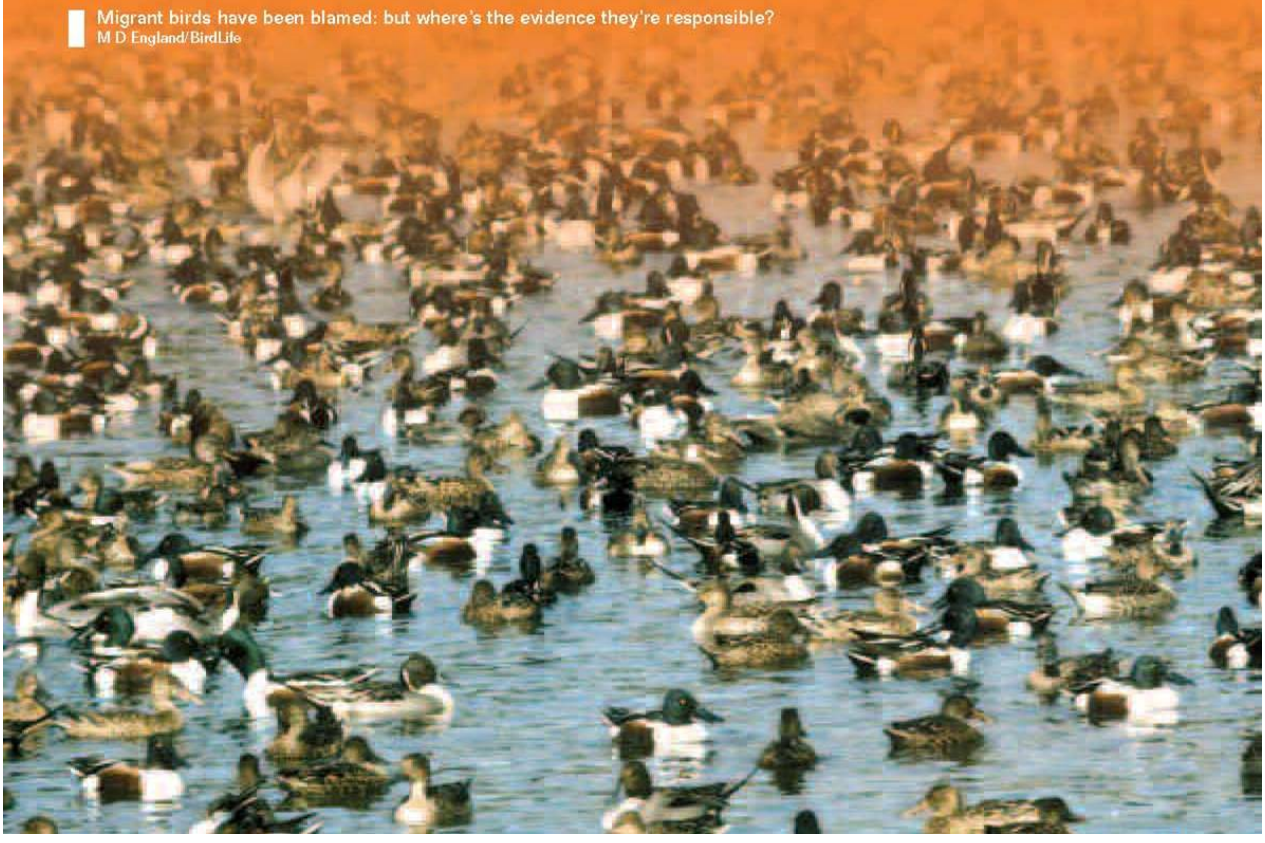
Jonathan C. Eames
Programme Manager
BirdLife International *in Indochina*

Features

SPECIAL REPORT ON AVIAN 'FLU

Migrant birds: carriers of disease or convenient scapegoats?

In recent months, the worldwide media has carried scare stories about avian influenza—better known as "avian 'flu", or "bird 'flu"– and the possible catastrophe on the horizon if the disease becomes established and readily transmitted between people. Even international agencies like the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have pointed the finger at migrant birds for spreading avian 'flu. Richard Thomas finds that while wild birds are a possible vector, the evidence to date strongly points to avian 'flu being spread through the movement of domestic poultry and the pet bird trade.



Migrant birds have been blamed: but where's the evidence they're responsible?
M D England/BirdLife

In July 2004 Thailand's Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra blamed Asian Openbills *Anastomus oscitans* for spreading H5N1, a particularly virulent form of avian 'flu (see side box) to domestic chicken farms north of Bangkok, and recommended the birds be culled (see *World Birdwatch 26(3): 4*). However, good sense prevailed and the birds were spared. After all, there was no evidence to suggest wild birds were spreading the disease. Despite many media reports to the contrary, the case against migrant birds remains flimsy.

In May 2005, an outbreak of HPAI H5N1 amongst waterbirds in Qinghai Lake, China, claimed around 6,000, Bar-headed Geese *Anser indicus*, somewhere between 5% and 10% of the world population. Genetically the strain of H5N1 was closely related to that earlier found in domestic birds in southern China, an area Bar-headed Geese do not migrate through, although some of the other birds found dead, including ducks and gulls, could have visited. No healthy wild waterbirds carrying HPAI H5N1 were found, and the rapid death of infected birds suggests they were unlikely to have migrated carrying the disease. Later outbreaks to the north-west of Qinghai, in Russia, Kazakhstan and Mongolia, were not on the path of any migration flyway for the birds, neither did they coincide with migration time; in fact the outbreaks occurred when wild birds would have been moulting and barely moving at all. All of these outbreaks were, however, close to the major east-west rail and road networks in southern Siberia, which have links to southern and eastern China. Despite this, the media was awash with reports of the death and destruction that avian 'flu would bring as wild migrant birds transported the virus southwards during autumn migration. By the end of October 2005, there were many more reported cases of HPAI H5N1, with outbreaks in Russia (including one to the west of the Urals), Romania, Croatia, Greece, Turkey and also in South-East Asia. More than 150 million poultry had died during the crisis, leading to the failure of businesses, food shortage, and loss of international trade. Consequently there has almost certainly been some under-reporting of outbreaks, particularly in China.

"The outbreak in Kovsgol Province, Mongolia, was at first thought to be the only one where there was no obvious link with wild birds catching the virus from domestic poultry," says Professor Chris Feare, an expert in avian diseases. "Migrant birds were possibly the source of this infection, but subsequent information has revealed that Mongolia imports most of its poultry from Russia and China, so the hand of man cannot be ruled out even in this outbreak. The disease quickly burned itself out: wild birds appear to have either caught the disease and died, or didn't catch it and survived, and there have been no subsequent persistent outbreaks in that region. Around 100 out of 6,500 waterfowl at the lake died, and tests on 139 live birds at this and a nearby site proved negative for the virus. Avian 'flu currently seems to be quickly self-limiting in wild populations."

> "Avian 'flu currently seems to be quickly self-limiting in wild populations."

Even by late October 2005, not a single wild bird capable of migrating (i.e. individuals that were not sick, dying or already dead) had been found with HPAI H5N1, nor had the virus been detected in Australia, South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines or New Zealand; all destinations for countless thousands of migrant birds from parts of Asia. The case against

migrant birds remained circumstantial.

But if migrants birds weren't spreading avian 'flu, what was? Perhaps the most significant factor will prove to be the unregulated or illegal movement of poultry and poultry products. Very little is known about the extent of this, but it involves the local and international transportation of chickens, the movement of fighting cocks, and even the trading of birds on a commercial scale. On 18 October, Italian customs seized 3,000 chickens, 36,000 duck eggs and 260 frozen ducks that had been illegally imported from China to Italy. The container carrying them had been left all day in the sun in "dreadful" hygienic conditions. "One consignment of poultry products can't explain the spread of avian 'flu into Europe, but there's little doubt the authorities will only be intercepting a tiny percentage of the goods being illegally trafficked. Incidents like this could contribute to the disease's pattern of spread rather than the media's accusations that migrant birds are to blame," says Feare.

Movement of birds for the caged bird trade could be another factor. In October 2004, two Mountain Hawk-eagles *Spizaetus nipalensis* illegally smuggled in hand luggage on a flight from Thailand to Belgium were found to be carrying HPAI H5N1. A Blue-headed Parrot *Pionus menstruus* imported from Suriname died in quarantine in the UK in October 2005. At first it was thought to have contracted HPAI H5N1 after being housed close to birds from Taiwan, yet Taiwan was disease-free. It is still not clear which bird species from Taiwan were involved; media reports described them as "mesias". These would presumably be Silver-eared Mesias *Leiothrix argentauris*, a species that does not occur in Taiwan, but does in mainland Asia. If so, the birds may have been sent via Taiwan because of its disease-free status before onward export to the UK. The European Union (EU) reacted following the parrot's death and imposed a ban on the import of all live wild-caught

Martin Williams

The link between domestic duck and poultry faeces used as fish food and fertiliser in aquaculture may prove highly significant in explaining the disease's spread

Marco Lambertini/BirdLife

Poor hygiene and transport of poultry are linked to the spread of avian influenza

birds into the EU. Many conservation groups are now calling for this ban to be made permanent.

"The EU is responsible for importing a significant proportion of the world's wild-caught birds," says Leon Bennun, Director of Science, Policy and Information at BirdLife. "The temporary ban on wild-caught birds is a vital step to halt HPAI H5N1's spread, and many are calling for the ban to be made permanent. However, there is a danger that banning the trade might drive it underground, actually increasing the risk of introducing serious diseases. We will be watching closely how things develop with the current EU ban in place, to see if it leads to an increase in smuggling."

A perhaps unexpected side effect of the avian 'flu scare has been on hunting. Although some countries initially floated the idea of culling wild birds to try and stop the disease's spread, the World Heath Organization (WHO), The Office International des Epizooties (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) issued strong statements, agreeing that "the control of avian influenza infection in wild bird populations is not feasible and should not be attempted." Nations generally heeded this advice, and many introduced hunting bans. "Restricting hunting is a sensible approach," says Feare. "Shooting at birds merely causes them to disperse, so if they were carrying a disease, it would just hasten its spread.

"The most efficient control techniques to stop the spread of HPAI H5N1 involve improved biosecurity, primarily of the poultry industry, to reduce the likelihood of contact between domestic stock and wild birds or infected water sources. This needs to be coupled with swift and complete culls of infected poultry flocks in the event of an outbreak. Further measures that should be considered include strengthening surveillance for the disease, stricter controls on wild bird markets and movements of domestic poultry and poultry products. Such measures should be introduced worldwide. Countries currently free of the disease should consider a ban on imports of domestic poultry, poultry products, wild birds for the pet trade and untreated bird products (feathers, fresh meat, eggs etc.) from affected regions. Preventing public access to infected sites is also clearly a sensible precaution. These measures will have a significant impact on local economies forced into culls of domestic flocks and this highlights the need for the limited resources available to be focused on the places and activities where people, livestock and wildlife come into close contact. By being ever watchful for signs of poultry 'flu, we can avoid catastrophe."

Professor Chris Feare was commissioned by the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) to undertake a review of avian 'flu in August 2005. The report has now been published; Feare, C. (2005). *Conservation implications of avian influenza.* RSPB Research Report 14. RSPB, Sandy. ISBN 1 901930 63 7.

Avian 'flu—an overview

There are many strains of avian 'flu that occur naturally at low levels in wild bird populations, especially waterfowl, and cause little or mild illness. However, strains of genetic subtypes H5 and H7 can occasionally become highly pathogenic (i.e. have high disease causing ability) to poultry, following mutation: the so-called HPAI (High Pathogenicity Avian Influenza) viruses. This seems to be extremely unusual in wild birds. However, once low pathogenicity viruses are passed from wild birds to domestic ones, particularly those living in crowded and unsanitary conditions, they can continue circulating as they mutate and there is a significant risk that HPAI will arise.

In 1996, a particularly virulent strain of H5N1 avian 'flu, appeared in domestic ducks in China. Subsequently, HPAI H5N1 has been passed from poultry to wild birds on several occasions, and as the disease spreads, these instances are likely to become more frequent. Transmission is promoted through husbandry methods like those in parts of South-East Asia, where domestic flocks may mix freely with wild birds, especially waterfowl, making the transmission to migratory waterbirds easier. Since 1997 the virus has undergone many mutations and is now excreted in nasal and salivary fluids in addition to faeces. Domestic ducks are now capable of carrying the disease asymptomatically, yet it has remained highly pathenogenic to wild ducks and geese.

Most worryingly, the disease has developed the ability to spread directly from poultry to people, with 121 human cases reported to the World Health Organization in South-East Asia by late October 2005, 62 of them fatal. Victims have almost invariably been workers in the poultry industry, at risk because of their close contact with infected domestic birds. The nightmare scenario is that the virus will evolve into a form that can be transmitted rapidly from person to person, causing widespread human mortality. Currently one possible case of human to human transmission is known. This could happen if the avian influenza virus meets and mingles its genetic material with a human influenza virus—in a sick person, or possibly a pig.

Provided sensible precautions are taken, the risk of a human contracting the disease from a wild bird is remote, unless there is particularly close contact with infected birds and their excreta. So far there have been no recorded instances of transmission of the disease between wild birds and humans.

Source: World Birdwatch December 2005

Local Groups scoring Goals

Human wellbeing and the health of the world's ecosystems are intimately linked. As the UN meets to discuss progress on the Millennium Development Goals, Nick Langley explains why BirdLife's work to conserve Important Bird Areas is also reducing poverty and political exclusion.

"In the past, the environment was viewed as something of a luxury," Klaus Toepfer, Executive Director of UNEP, told a gathering of the world's environment ministers in February 2005. "The philosophy was that economies must first grow before countries clean up the land, the air and the waterways."

Today this "one-dimensional view" is being rapidly replaced by the awareness that without a healthy and stable environment, long-lasting economic and social development and the eradication of poverty and hunger will not be possible. "This is particularly clear in developing countries, where so many people are reliant on nature for everything from food and medicines to energy and water supplies," Mr Toepfer said.

The conservation community has in the past been guilty of its own form of tunnel vision, most shamefully exemplified in the displacement and exclusion of indigenous people from protected areas. "Past approaches to biodiversity conservation have required rural people to give up access to resources that they must, in fact, continue to use to survive," said Dr Souleymane Zeba of Naturama (BirdLife in Burkina Faso). Dr Zeba says that in Africa—as elsewhere in the developing world—biodiversity conservation must focus on continuing and sustainable use of resources, so that present and future generations can reap tangible benefits from nature.

The growing recognition that ecosystem health and human wellbeing are inseparably related underpins the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which aim to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, reduce child and maternal mortality, promote gender equality, reverse the spread of HIV/Aids, malaria and other diseases, and halve the number of people without access to safe drinking water. In a report on progress towards the MDGs, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan has written, "Our efforts to defeat poverty and pursue sustainable development will be in vain if environmental degradation and natural resource depletion continue unabated."

The realisation that "conservation depends on sustainable livelihoods—and vice versa," as David Thomas, Head of BirdLife's Site Action Unit puts it, underpins BirdLife's work with local communities in the developing world. This work is extensively—though not exclusively—based on IBA Local Conservation Groups ("Local Groups" or "LGs" for short), autonomous organisations of volunteers involved with the conservation of Important Bird Areas (IBAs). These take various forms in different parts of the world, appropriate to local circumstances, including Site Support Groups (SSGs) in Africa and parts of Asia, Caretakers in Europe and IBA Communities in Action groups in Canada.

"The diversity of this approach is important, since it responds to the diversity of cultures, societies, geography, beliefs, power relations, economies, laws and so on in different localities," says David Thomas. "That's the power of the LG approach: it isn't one size fits all, but supports local people to respond to locally specific realities."

He says in the past, BirdLife's work with local communities was seen as a means to a conservation end—a "tool"—but increasingly in developing countries, it is focused on the rights, livelihoods and welfare of the communities the volunteers are drawn from.

By providing some initial financial and organisational support, environmental education, and training in sustainable livelihoods like bee-keeping and agro-forestry, BirdLife works to establish a common interest in the conservation of the site and its biodiversity. Through membership of LGs and help from BirdLife and partner NGOs and agencies, marginalised and excluded communities can find a democratic voice, and the insecure and landless can be given tenure over the land they depend on.

"Poverty is not just a matter of income or nutrition," David Thomas explains. "In its broadest sense poverty involves lack of access to decision-makers, lack of information and lack of rights to access and manage natural resources."

The LG approach builds local capacity that continues to function after external assistance ends. LGs also strengthen links within and between communities, and create new ways of working together, as BirdLife International Chairman Peter Schei has pointed out. "After the Boxing Day Tsunami, SSGs in Malaysia and Thailand were able to get rescue and reconstruction work underway quickly because they were already organised and trained."

Where it succeeds in securing present and future access to natural resources, and providing cash-poor communities with alternatives to desperate short-term measures

Opposite: At Sourou, Burkina Faso, and elsewhere, Local Groups have been trained to make fuel-saving "ecostoves" for local use and sale, thus reducing pressure on forests (BirdLife)

like selling the timber rights to their forests, or converting wetlands and grasslands to crop-growing, the LG approach supports the Millennium Goal of eradicating extreme poverty and hunger.

For example, the Berga Floodplain SSG in Ethiopia, formed to conserve the most important breeding site of the globally threatened White-winged Flufftail *Sarothrura ayresi*, has enabled landless people and others to grow vegetables for their own needs and for sale, and to gain income from work in tree nurseries. The work at Berga, which includes training in better farming practices, was originally donor-funded with support from the Ethiopian Wildlife and Natural History Society (BirdLife in Ethiopia), but the SSG is becoming self-sufficient through its revenue-generating activities.

In Boeung Prek Lapouv, Cambodia, a wetland IBA with important populations of fish-eating waterbirds, the local support group banned the use of fine-mesh nets. As more small fish escape to reach maturity, local fisherman have seen their average nightly catch increase from 2 kg to 5 kg. The group is drawn from local communes with support from Cambodia's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries. MAFF staff are seconded to the project, which helps build conservation capacity in the Cambodian government.

The Serra das Lontras Atlantic Forest IBA, Bahia, Brazil, is home to several endemic threatened species and at least nine globally threatened birds, including Alagoas Foliage-gleaner *Philydor novaesi*. The motivation of the SSG, made up of marginalised small cacao farmers, is primarily improved livelihoods and income from organic cacao production, although farmers understand the conservation purpose of the project, and the need to incorporate conservation values into their livelihoods. Impacts on the watershed at Serra das Lontras have been reduced, contributing to the Millennium Goal of providing safe water supplies. SAVEBrasil (BirdLife in Brazil), working with other local NGOs, has provided staff, funding and training in organic cacao cultivation. "We've found that it's best to work with existing local organisations and co-operatives," says SAVEBrasil's Jaqueline Goerck. "It's important to incorporate and give value to local knowledge."

Throughout the developing world, many LGs have become involved in ecotourism projects, set up with the participation of local communities so that the revenues raised remain in the area. The SSG in Oviedo Municipality, where some of the Dominican Republic's poorest people live, promotes ecotourism at the Oviedo Dry Forest, which has created work for local people and also attracted government investment in infrastructure such as road links, water and sanitation. The project was set up by the local NGO Grupo Jaragua. At Al Shouf Cedars Reserve in Lebanon, local people offer bed-and-breakfast accommodation to visitors, providing income which is helping to stem migration out of the area, and giving the community a strong interest in the conservation of their natural heritage. The Society for the Protection of Nature in Lebanon (BirdLife in Lebanon) took care to focus its support on households in most need.

The LG approach is also contributing to the Millennium Goal of universal primary education. At some sites, like the Berga Floodplain, donor funding or local income generation has enabled schools to be built. Income from SSG activities can enable children from remote areas to go to school for the first time. At Gezaulole near the Dar es Salaam coast IBA, Tanzania, a site of major importance for migratory waders from northern Eurasia, the SSG has set up a women's group who take turns providing lunches to tourists. "We found they only had to provide one fish-and-rice meal per month to pay a child's bus fares to school," said Elias Mungaya of the Wildlife Conservation Society of Tanzania (BirdLife in Tanzania).

Top: Many Local Groups are involved in small-scale income generating activities, such as bee-keeping for honey production in Cameroon (BirdLife)

Bottom: In Cameroon, forest protection measures implemented by the Bagyeli and Bakola Local Groups benefits Guinea-Congo forest biome bird species, like the Blue Cuckooshrike *Coracina azurea* (Tasso Levenits/BirdLife)

SSG activities which improve local access to wood and water contribute to the goals of empowerment and equality of women and the education of girls. "In developing countries it is women and girls who often bear the burden of finding water and fuel for their families," Klaus Toepfer explained. "Cleaner and more plentiful supplies of water and sustainable forms of energy cannot but boost the chances of girls achieving a regular attendance at school. So even here, the environment has some part to play, as it does in areas of child mortality, maternal health and reversing the spread of disease."

The Peninsula Action Group on the Environment (PAGE) is an SSG including members of ten communities adjacent to the

Western Area Peninsular Forest (WAPF). The only remaining patch of tropical rainforest in western Sierra Leone, WAPF is home to the White-necked Picathartes *Picathartes gymnocephalus* and four other globally threatened birds. PAGE is now registered as a legal entity with the Ministry of Social Welfare, Gender and Children's affairs, and has a Memorandum of Understanding which formalises its collaboration with the Conservation Society of Sierra Leone (BirdLife in Sierra Leone). Woodlots are being planted with fast-growing *Acacia* to provide fuel, and here as in some other SSGs, a number of people have been trained to make fuel-saving "ecostoves", for local use and sale in Freetown and the surrounding area. This raises income, and reduces pressure on the forest.

When women have financial and social independence and access to education, maternal and child mortality falls. At the Lake Sourou IBA, which holds possibly the largest concentration of waterbirds in Burkina Faso, the income from a project to improve fish-smoking techniques has increased the number of woman who can afford to attend neonatal classes from 10 to 70%. Burkina Faso has around 1,000 maternal deaths per 100,000. This project is just one of a number of sustainable livelihood initiatives at the site, co-ordinated by Naturama (BirdLife in Burking Faso) in co-operation with government and other agencies.

Many African and Asian SSGs build on traditional systems of managing natural resources. "Prior to the introduction of modern scientific management strategies, local communities are known to have instituted effective by-laws covering fishing in ponds and lakes, management of water catchment areas and harvesting of wild palm fruits and bush yams," says Dr Zeba.

However, these traditions may be under threat because of the lack of secure land tenure or democratic representation. David Thomas says helping communities organise so they are empowered to make themselves heard by those in authority, providing them with information and improving their rights, are important contributors to the alleviation of poverty.

BirdLife is working through SSGs with forest-dependent communities in Africa and Indonesia to secure their rights to use natural resources, and protect their land from encroachment and exploitation by people with no stake in the future of the forest. In Sierra Leone, PAGE has the right to take legal action when forest-related laws are broken, and can secure funding directly from any potential funding agency.

The Bagyeli and Bakola communities who live in Cameroon's Ngovayang Massif Forest, an IBA with 156 of Cameroon's 215 Guinea-Congo forest biome bird species, are marginalised groups of hunter-gatherers. The Cameroon Biodiversity Conservation Society (CBCS; BirdLife in Cameroon) organised workshops to explain forest law and land tenure systems, and the importance of meeting citizenship requirements to participate in decision making and ensure that their rights and interests are taken into account. Around 110 members of the Bagyeli and Bakola communities now have national identity cards.

In the Indonesian island of Sumba, BirdLife Indonesia has helped set up village-based Community Forest Protection Groups, which manage the harvesting of forest products sustainably, and develop other farming activities to take the pressure off the forest. CFPGs also monitor and prevent illegal logging. The communities are now recognised as legal owners of their land, and consulted by the government in matters relating to natural resource management.

By providing communities with sustainable livelihoods and a democratic voice, BirdLife's LG approach empowers them to work towards the Millennium Development Goals on their own behalf, and with their own resources.

BirdLife Chairman Peter Schei warns there are sometimes trade-offs between development and conservation. Where development loses out, local people should be compensated for opportunity loss. "It's not all win-win. But the problems of nature management often stem from the lack of involvement of local people."

Top: Impacts on the watershed at Serra das Lontras, Brazil, have been reduced, thanks to a Local Group of organic cacao producers (Jaqueline Goerck/SAVEBrasil)

Bottom: At Al Shouf Cedars Reserve, Lebanon, local people offer accommodation to visitors, providing income and helping stem migration from the area (David Thomas/BirdLife)

Source: World Birdwatch September 2005

Regional news

Myanmar's Missing Timber Millions: Destination China

A new report, launched on October 18, 2005 by Global Witness at the Foreign Correspondents' Club in Bangkok , "A Choice for China – Ending the destruction of Myanmar's northern frontier forests" , details shocking new evidence of the massive illicit plunder of Myanmar's forests by Chinese logging companies. Much of the logging takes place in forests that form part of an area said to be "very possibly the most biodiverse, rich, temperate area on earth."

In 2004, more than one million cubic meters of timber, about 95% of Myanmar's total timber exports to China were illegally exported from northern Myanmar to Yunnan Province. This trade, amounting to a $250 million loss for the people of Myanmar, every year, takes place with the full knowledge of the Myanmar Government, the Government in Beijing and the rest of the international community. Chinese companies, local Chinese authorities, regional Burmese Army and ethnic ceasefire groups are all directly involved.

"On average, one log truck, carrying about 15 tonnes of timber, logged illegally in Myanmar, crosses an official Chinese checkpoint every seven minutes, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year; yet they do nothing." Said Jon Buckrell of Global Witness.

In September 2001 the Government of the People's Republic of China made a commitment to strengthen bilateral collaboration to address violations of forest law and forest crime, including illegal logging and associated illegal trade. However, since then, illegal imports of timber across the Myanmar-China border have actually increased by 60%.

"A few Chinese businessmen, backed by the authorities in Yunnan Province, are completely undermining Chinese Government initiatives to combat illegal logging. Not only are the activities of these loggers jeopardising the prospect of sustainable development in northern Myanmar they are also breaking Chinese law." Said Buckrell.

In September 2004 EU member states called for the European Commission to produce "…specific proposals to address the issue of Burmese illegal logging…" Later, in October, the European Council expressed support for the development of programmes to address, "the problem of non-sustainable, excessive logging" that resulted in deforestation in Myanmar. To date, the EU has done next to nothing.

"Like China, the EU has so far failed the Myanmar people. How many more livelihoods will be destroyed before the Commission and EU member states get their act together?" Asked Buckrell.

It is essential that the Chinese Government stops timber imports across the Myanmar-China border, with immediate effect, and until such time sufficient safeguards are in place that can guarantee legality of the timber supply. The Chinese authorities should also take action against companies and officials involved in the illegal trade.

Global Witness is calling for the establishment of a working group to facilitate measures to combat illegal logging, to ensure equitable, transparent and sustainable forest management, and to promote long-term development in northern Myanmar.

"It is vitally important that all stakeholders work together to end the rampant destruction of Myanmar's forests and to ensure that the necessary aid and long-term investment reach this impoverished region." Said Jon Buckrell.

Source: Global Witness, October 18, 2005

British Embassy grant awarded to BANCA for further Site Support Group (SSG) work around Natmataung National Park, Myanmar

The view from Mount Victoria, Natmataung National Park. Photo: J C Eames

BirdLife and the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA) are currently implementing a British Embassy-funded project entitled "Strengthening livelihoods and promoting environmental stewardship at Namataung National Park (NP), Chin State". The National Park has been identified by BirdLife International as an Important Bird Area (IBA), one of an Asian-wide network of 2293 sites in Asia and 55 IBAs in Myanmar that BirdLife believes are critical for the conservation of global biodiversity. Namataung National Park is located in Kanpetlet and Mindat townships in the southern part of the Chin State.

BANCA and BirdLife have already established four Site-support Groups (SSGs) in the buffer-zone of the Namataung National Park with the assistance of the Darwin Initiative. Now BANCA has secured funding directly from the British Embassy in Yangon to continue activities at a further two villages. As part of this new funding initiative, BANCA will establish two new SSGs at Yalaung Pan and Makyauk-Ar villages. The project will provide water storage tanks for the villagers and perennial tree-crop nurseries to support income generation. Also it will provide basic educational materials to four villages (Okpo Hilaung, Yalaung Pan and Makyauk-Ar), such as blackboards, desks, benches and cabinets. The project will provide the anti-poaching patrol units with basic field equipment.

Text by Hazel Thwin, BANCA

The project helps built water storage tanks for villagers and nurseries in the area. Photo: U Uga

New bird species discovered in Myanmar

The National Zoo's John Rappole, along with scientists Swen Renner from the University of Goettingen, Germany, Nay Myo Shwe from the Myanmar Wildlife Division and Paul Sweet from the American Museum of Natural History, discovered a new species of scimitar-babbler (Family Timaliidae) during an expedition to Myanmar.

Sponsored by the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History, Bird Division (Alexander Wetmore Fund), the Smithsonian Research Opportunities Fund, and the Myanmar Wildlife Division, members of the expedition trekked into the remote and roadless area along the Myanmar border with Tibet to the village of Naung Mung, where they established a base camp for inventorying the poorly-known bird species of the region during February of 2004.

The first specimen of the new species, a female, was captured in a mist net in temperate rainforest habitat on 6 February 2004. Two additional specimens, also females, were captured on 6 and 8 February, respectively. A description of the species appears in the

Naung Mung Scimitar-Babbler *Jabouilleia naungmungensis*. Credit: *The Auk.*

October 2005 issue of *The Auk, Journal of the America Ornithologists' Union*, where the new bird is designated as the Naung Mung Scimitar-Babbler *Jabouilleia naungmungensis* after the locality where it was captured. The only known relative of this new species is the Short-tailed Scimitar-Babbler *Jabouilleia danjoui* from Vietnam and Laos.

This discovery further documents the region's remarkable biodiversity, and has powerful implications for the conservation value of the area, which is presently unprotected. "Within the past decade, scientists have discovered a new species of deer, a new monkey, and several new species of plants, amphibians, and reptiles in this region" says Rappole. "No other part of the world of which I am aware presents this combination of extraordinary richness and relative lack of scientific knowledge."

Source: Spotlight on Science at the Smithsonian
Bi-weekly Newsletter Vol. 3 No. 21, December 19, 2005

New National Biodiversity Action Plan for Vietnam 2005-2010

During the last ten years, Vietnam's Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) has been used to guide Government, donors and NGOs in their investments and actions to conserve Vietnam's biodiversity. The Government of Vietnam has now decided to prepare a new BAP for the period 2005-2010 and to provide orientation to 2020. The preparation process lead by the Vietnam Environment Protection Agency (VEPA) of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (MoNRE), began in 2005.

The conservation objectives set in this new version of BAP include the continuation of terrestrial biodiversity conservation, strengthening wetlands and marine conservation, agricultural biodiversity conservation, and sustainable uses of biological resources. To achieve these, various priorities measures are proposed, including the control of illegal forest exploitation, promoting involvement of community in biodiversity conservation, improving policy, legislation, and institutional frameworks, and enhancing support for implementation of BAP.

After a consultation process with Government agencies, research institutions, NGOs and the general public, the final draft of the revised BAP has now been finalized and submitted to MoNRE for final review before submission to the Government for approval. BirdLife is concerned that both the consultation process and extent to which international NGOs have been involved in the process, including the drafting has been inadequate.

Text by Nguyen Duc Tu – BirdLife International Vietnam Programme
and Nguyen Cong Minh – The World Conservation Union in Vietnam

Second Ramsar Site for Vietnam

In August 2005, the Bau Sau wetlands in Dong Nai province were nominated by the Government as Vietnam's second Ramsar Site. Ramsar Sites are wetlands of international importance, especially as waterfowl habitat. The Bau Sau or "Crocodile Lake" wetlands certainly qualify as internationally important, as they support many species of rare and threatened wildlife species, including Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus* and a population of re-introduced Siamese Crocodiles *Crocodylus siamensis*. With a total area of 13,759 ha, the wetlands lie within southern Vietnam's most important remaining lowland tropical rainforest - Cat Tien National Park. Through the work of the national park staff, the wetlands are well protected, with little human impact other than the totally inappropriate sighting of a tourist lodge.

"*The nomination of the Bau Sau wetlands as Vietnam's second Ramsar Site is a positive step for wetland conservation in Vietnam*", said Mr. Nguyen Duc Tu, Project Officer of BirdLife International Vietnam Programme. "*It demonstrates the Government's strong determination to deliver under the commitment it made when it signed the Ramsar Convention[2] in 1989 to include wetland conservation considerations within its national land-use planning and promote the wise-use of wetlands within its territory*".

Representatives of the Government of Vietnam attended the 9th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Ramsar Convention, which was held in Kampala, Uganda, from 8 to 15 November 2005. The key message of this meeting was "*Wetlands and water: supporting life, sustaining livelihoods*". At the meeting, Ramsar member countries met to assess progress of the Convention and wetland conservation to date, share knowledge and experience on technical issues, and plan future wetland conservation work, including the nomination of new Ramsar Sites.

According to a new report by BirdLife International, launched at this conference, almost 1,000 internationally important wetlands in Asia have not yet been nominated under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. "*The Ramsar Convention on Wetlands provides an excellent opportunity to strengthen the protection and management of Asia's wetlands. We urge governments in the region to consider the designation of additional Ramsar Sites in their countries, for the benefit of biodiversity and human livelihoods*." said Simba Chan, Senior Conservation Officer with BirdLife's Asia Division.

According the new report published by BirdLife, 27 wetlands in Vietnam meet the criteria for nomination as Ramsar Sites based upon their importance for bird species. To date, only two of these have been nominated by the Government: Xuan Thuy in the Red River Delta; and Bau Sau at Cat Tien National Park. "*BirdLife hopes that, in the near future the Government will nominate more and more Ramsar Sites*" said Mr. Tu, "*particularly in wetland ecosystems and regions that are not currently represented, such as the Mekong Delta*."

Text by Dang Nguyen Hong Hanh, BirdLife International Vietnam Programme

New populations of wild Siamese Crocodile *Crocodylus siamensis* discovered in Vietnam

A fresh Siamese crocodile track found on a bank of Ha Lam Lake. Photo by Nguyen Xuan Vinh

Sponsored by the IUCN - Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP) and implemented by the Institute of Tropical Biology (ITB) in co-operation with FFI Cambodia and local government authorities, surveys on the status of the Siamese Crocodile *Crocodylus siamensis* were undertaken in Song Hinh district, Phu Yen province in Vietnam in June 2005 after a socio-economic study in December 2004 uncovered information regarding wild crocodiles from the Song Hinh hydro-power reservoir.

The mission conducted daylight searches for signs and direct sightings of crocodiles, nocturnal spotlight searches for crocodile 'eye-shine', and interviews with local people. Survey effort was focused in two localities in Song Hinh District; Ha Lam Lake and Song Hinh Reservoir, and extended to the surrounding areas, including nearby reaches of the Krong Hnang and Ba Rivers.

Surveys confirmed the presence of at least two wild Siamese Crocodiles in Ha Lam Lake. One fresh track of a large individual was found on a steep lake bank during a daytime search, while a direct observation of another adult individual was made during a spotlight survey. Research findings suggest there is probably a small group of wild crocodiles inhibiting this lake, which is found within the Krong Trai Nature Reserve. Previous hunting and land clearing for agriculture have reduced the crocodile population in this lake. The remaining habitat is still suitable however, and, when coupled with an increased protection from local Forestry officers and an increased awareness campaign amongst local people, could provide a basis for recovery. The habitat and survival of these crocodiles however, is really at stake, because the construction of Lower Ba River Hydropower Dam will submerge the area within the next year. At present, there are no conservation plans for these crocodiles or protected habitats set aside for wildlife conservation in any man-made hydropower reservoirs.

Spotlight surveys covering 182 km of the reservoir shoreline failed to find any sign or sightings of crocodiles, however several local reports indicate that 1-2 crocodiles have been seen infrequently over the past year. Reports also indicate 3 crocodiles were caught or killed by fishermen from the reservoir between July and December 2004. The crocodiles reported from the reservoir over the past several years were probably resident in the Hinh River or nearby tributaries before the river was dammed. These crocodiles were then displaced by the rising water levels but continue to reside in the reservoir.

The reservoir is presently unsuitable for wild crocodiles to survive, particularly in the dry season, due to hunting, intensive fishing and unsuitable habitat. The high annual water level fluctuations in the reservoir and human-induced disturbances, like farming and cattle grazing, result in an environment that is unsuitable for crocodile habitation. Illegal electro-fishing is rampant in the reservoir and crocodiles are actively hunted by some fishermen.

Siamese crocodiles are considered effectively extinct in Vietnam, so the discovery of a small number in Ha Lam Lake is highly significant for crocodile conservation in Vietnam, and for the species. Follow-up priority conservation actions are urgently needed to save the last wild crocodiles of Song Hinh District (and most likely in Vietnam). There is a suite of actions which need to be conducted at all levels, which will include an awareness raising campaign, an assessment of possible solutions for Ha Lam Lake crocodiles, capacity building among wildlife officers and further surveys in potential crocodile sites. These actions are urgent and time-bound since the Ha Lam Lake is scheduled to be submerged by the end of 2006 with the proposed Lower Ba River Hydro-power Project.

Source: Technical Report "Status of the Siamese Crocodile *Crocodylus siamensis* in Song Hinh district, Phu Yen province, Vietnam*" by Nguyen Xuan Vinh, Vu Ngoc Long, Boyd K. Simpson, Ngo Van Tri, Lai Tung Quan, Huynh Xuan Quang and Vo Van Dung. August 2005.*

Important Bird Areas news

Hatinh Langur discovered in Quang Tri province (VN041)

During a recent biodiversity survey to prepare an Investment Plan for the establishment of Bac Huong Hoa Nature Reserve in Quang Tri province, BirdLife International and Quang Tri Provincial Department of Forest Protection discovered a population of 12 Hatinh Langurs *Trachypithecus laotum hatinhensis* living on a limestone cliff in the survey area. The actual number of this species in the area is surely higher than this recorded figure because shortage of time and bad weather stopped the team from exploring the whole area. The local Van Kieu minority people call this species "Con Cung" (Black monkey with a long tail, living on limestone cliffs). This is the first time that Hatinh Langur has been discovered in Quang Tri province. Prior to this record, this species was only known from two locations: Phong Nha – Ke Bang and Kim Lu limestone forest in Quang Binh province. Despite its name, the species has never been confirmed to occur in Ha Tinh province. Hatinh Langur is a rare species, endemic to Vietnam. It qualifies as Globally Threatened according to the IUCN Red List.

Hatinh Langurs *Trachypithecus laotum hatinhensis*
Photo: Tilo Nadler - Frankfurt Zoological Society

The proposed Bac Huong Hoa Nature Reserve covers 35,000 ha, in which the limestone forest where these Langurs are living has an area of 1,500 ha. Besides Hatinh Langur, a lot of other species of international importance can be found in the area, including Saola *Pseudoryx nghetinhensis*, Gaur *Bos gaurus*, Red-shanked Douc Langur *Pygathrix nemaeus*, White-cheeked Crested Gibbon *Nomascus leucogenys*, Annamite Striped Rabbit *Nesolagus temminsi* Edwards's Pheasant *Lophura edwardsi*, Crested Argus *Rheinardia ocellata*, Great Hornbill *Buceros bicornis* and Brown Hornbill *Anorrhinus tickelli*.

Text by Dang Nguyen Hong Hanh, BirdLife International Vietnam Programme

Biodiversity conservation in the Central Annamites, Vietnam

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development has ordered relevant offices to implement a project of USD 250,000 aimed at building a strategic environmental framework for the Central Annamites to serve for Biodiversity Conservation Strategy of this eco-region in the period of 2005-2010.

This project will support relevant offices at local and national levels in making decision, planning and integrating conservation priorities into socio-economic development programme, solving conflicts between regional planning and conservation activities. It will analyse infrastructure development plan at prioritised areas, assess the environmental impacts in the plan, zone conservation and development areas, and attract wide participation of decision makes in this process.

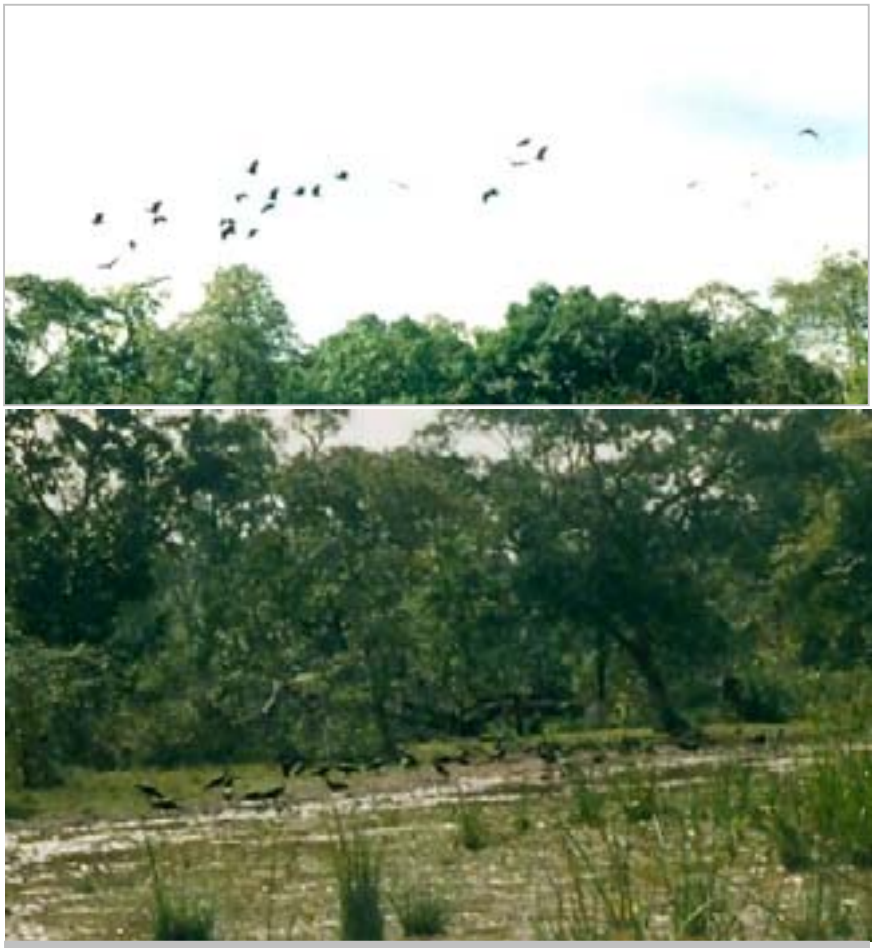
The Central Annamites includes Danang city and six provinces namely Quang Tri, Thua Thien Hue, Quang Nam, Kon Tum, Gia Lai, Binh Dinh, covering over 2.38 million ha forests, among which natural forests account for 2.2 ha. As planned, the project will be finished by the end of 2006.

Source: Vietnam News Agency on December 22, 2005

Biggest flock of White-shouldered Ibis in Western Sing Pang IBA (KH08), Cambodia

In November 2005, BirdLife International Cambodia project staff recorded up to 70 White-shouldered Ibis *Pseudibis davisoni* at local wetlands in Western Siem Pang IBA. As many as 40 were sighted at the same location in December 2005.

BirdLife International's Cambodia Programme Office has been working in north east Cambodia since 2003 to undertake a range of community-based conservation activities. A priority area within this north-east landscape is Western Siem Pang Important Bird Area (IBA). The area is bordered by two protected areas; to the east is the Sekong River (itself an IBA) and a small portion of Virachey National Park (IBA) and to the west and north it meets parts of Xe Piane National Protected Area (IBA) in Laos.



White-shouldered Ibis *Pseudibis davisoni* at local wetlands in Western Siem Pang IBA. Photos: Kry Masphal

Western Siem Pang, a mosaic of open deciduous forest and small seasonal wetlands (trapeangs), together with semi-evergreen and mixed deciduous riverine forest along the Sekong river and semi-evergreen forest on hills near the international border with Laos, is arguably the most important site in Cambodia for the conservation of globally threatened bird species.

This site supports the only known potentially viable population of the critically endangered White-shouldered Ibis in mainland South-East Asia, as well as populations of three other critically endangered birds: Giant Ibis *Thaumatibis gigantea*, White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* and Slender-billed Vulture *Gyps tenuirostris*.

Coordinated out of the field project office in Siem Pang district capital, project staff are working to protect biodiversity and increase capacity of local communities and local government to undertake conservation and natural resource management activities. Project activities consist, among other things, of monitoring biodiversity and human use at local wetlands and water ponds (locally referred to as trapaengs).

In November 2005, project staff recorded as many as 70 White-shouldered Ibis at a trapaeng in Western Siem Pang IBA. In December 2005, as many as 40 were sighted at the same location. This extraordinary November count represents a significant increase in the numbers of White-shouldered Ibis recorded. Previously the highest counts were 23 in January 2003 and 33 in November 2004. These population counts are highly significant as the White-shouldered Ibis is considered to have a global population of as few as 50 - 250 mature individuals.

The White-shouldered Ibis is a large ibis (75-85 cm), which inhabits lakes, pools, marshes and slow-flowing watercourses in open, level, lowland dipterocarp forest, often subject to seasonal flooding. It also occurs in sparsely wooded, dry or wet grasslands and wide rivers with sand and gravel bars. Populations have declined as a result of habitat loss, through logging of lowland forest and drainage of wetlands for agriculture (most of the Mekong floodplain in southern Laos has been converted to rice-paddy), livestock-grazing, grass harvesting, and development. Habitat loss has been compounded by hunting for food and disturbance, leading to the loss of secure feeding, roosting and nesting areas. Disturbance and persecution are probably now the greatest threats.

The Cambodia Programme is working with relevant government departments to promote Western Siem Pang as a protected area thereby greatly increasing the viability of these small critical White-shouldered Ibis populations. On-going work in partnership with local communities aims to educate about the status of these bird populations, ensure their protection from persecution, and establish activities to mitigate further population declines.

Map of Western Siem Pang IBA in Cambodia
Produced by BirdLife Cambodia Programme Office

Text by Sean Austin, BirdLife International Cambodia Programme Manager

Rarest of the rare

CR – Slender-billed vulture *Gyps tenuirostris*

2005 IUCN Red List Category (as evaluated by BirdLife International - the official Red List Authority for birds (IUCN): **Critically Endangered**

Justification This recently recognised species is classified as Critically Endangered because it has suffered an extremely rapid population decline, particularly across the Indian subcontinent, probably as a result of feeding on carcasses of animals treated with the veterinary drug diclofenac, perhaps in combination with other causes.

Family / Sub-family ACCIPITRIDAE

Species name author Gray, 1844

Taxonomic sources Rasmussen and Parry (2001)

Taxonomic note *Gyps indicus* (Sibley and Monroe, 1990, 1993) has been split into *G. indicus* and *G. tenuirostris* following Rasmussen and Parry (2001).

Identification 80-95 cm. Thin, rather attenuated vulture. Perched adults have dark bill with pale culmen; black cere; a near-total lack of feathering on the black head and neck. Cold brown overall colouration and scruffy, ill-kempt appearance. Juveniles are very similar but have black head and necks with a hint of white down on the nape and upper neck. Underparts are pale streaked. In flight the white downy thigh patches are distinctive. **Similar spp.** Jizz is remarkably different from other *Gyps* vultures due to slender snake-like neck, thin elongated bill, angular crown and scrufft appearance. Eye ring is dark and does not contrast with facial skin. Head and neck skin is bare and thickly creased and wrinkled.

Photo: Jonathan C. Eames

Population estimate	Population trend	Range estimate (breeding/resident)	Country endemic?
2,500-9,999	Decreasing	1,693,800 km^2	No

Range and population *Gyps tenuirostris* is found in **India** north of, and including, the Gangetic plain, west to at least Himachal Pradesh and Haryana, south to southern West Bengal (and possibly northern Orissa), east through the plains of Assam, and through southern **Nepal**, north and central **Bangladesh**, and **Myanmar**. It once occurred in South-East Asia, but it is now thought to be extinct in Thailand and Malaysia, and the only recent records are from **Cambodia** and southern **Laos**. Considerable confusion over the taxonomy and identification of *Gyps* vultures has occurred, making it difficult to be sure of claims for this species. However, it appears to be allopatric or parapatric with Indian Vulture *G. indicus* where their ranges abut (or potentially do so) in northern India. It was once common, but in South-East Asia populations declined through the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, and are now probably very small and restricted in distribution. Small numbers were recorded during a recent survey in Shan State (Myanmar). In India and Nepal, the species was common until very recently, with very sharp population declines noted in the last few years.

Ecology It inhabits dry open country in the vicinity of human habitation, but also breeding in open country far from villages. In South-East Asia it was found in open and partly wooded country, generally in the lowlands. This species feeds

almost entirely on carrion, scavenging at rubbish dumps and slaughterhouses. It has only been recorded nesting in trees, usually large ones (often *Ficus*), usually at a height of 7-14 m, often near villages.

Threats By mid-2000, *Gyps* vultures were being found dead and dying in Nepal and India, and major declines and local extirpations were being reported. Early evidence suggested that a viral disease may have been the causal agent, but there is now strong evidence that *Gyps* vultures are fatally susceptible to veterinary painkillers containing Diclofenac. Further research is required. Other suggested factors are changes in human consumption and processing of dead livestock, and massive poison and pesticide use, but these are only likely to be of minor significance. East of India, the near-total disappearance of the species pre-dated the present crisis, and probably results from the rarity there of large wild mammals and human consumption of deceased livestock.

Conservation measures proposed Identify the location and number of remaining individuals and identify action required to prevent extinction. Measure the frequency of diclofenac treated carcasses available to vultures. Establish a study group to coordinate collection and analysis of data and compile an action plan for Asian vultures. Gain government commitment to control veterinary use of diclofenac, and support species management or restoration, as needed. Initiate public awareness and public support programmes.

Project updates

Bengal Florican Conservation around Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia

The IBAs around the Tonle Sap Lake are comprised of semi-natural grasslands that are seasonally inundated. During the wet season (May - October), local farmers produce deepwater rice in most parts of these IBAs whereas during the dry season these areas generate a mosaic of tall and short grasses mixed with patchy and dense scrub. A number of these seasonally inundated grasslands hold some of the highest global populations of breeding Bengal Floricans *Houbaropsis bengalensis*. Moreover, these IBAs provide feeding areas for a number of other large waterbird breeding colonies, including Painted Storks *Mycteria leucocephala*, Black-headed Ibises *Threskiornis melanocephalus*, Lesser Adjutants *Leptoptilos javanicus*, Greater Adjutants *Leptoptilos dubius*, Spot-billed Pelicans *Pelecanus philippensis*, and Asian Openbills *Anastomus oscitans*. Sarus Cranes *Grus antigone* are also present in these areas in small scattered flocks during the dry season.

Project staff from the BirdLife Cambodia Programme are currently undertaking a broad range of conservation activities in one inundated grassland IBA north of Tonle Sap Lake. In November 2005 eleven Site Support Group (SSG) members were selected in collaboration with the Forestry Administration. These SSGs work with programme staff to carry out site

management activities such as biodiversity monitoring, conservation awareness raising, illegal activity prevention, and environmental education (especially to school children).

BirdLife and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) - Cambodia are also concurrently undertaking conservation activities for Bengal Florican in key areas and provinces around the Tonle Sap Lake. Activities are focusing on surveys to determine important breeding and non-breeding areas, working with provincial authorities to develop land-use plans, and working with local communities to safeguard these critical Bengal Florican populations and protect their habitats.

Through this programme of work, a variety of wildlife conservation education and awareness raising activities, emphasizing Bengal Florican, have been conducted in the relevant communities mostly with school children. The activities have also been incorporated into other community meetings such as those emphasizing communal development, health, food, security, and in festivals and site the patrols.

Bird surveys have been conducted by SSG members every month in Stung Chikreng IBA north of Tonle Sap Lake to record and monitor all birds observed in the field. Maximum Bengal Florican counts in 2005 are provided in Table 1.

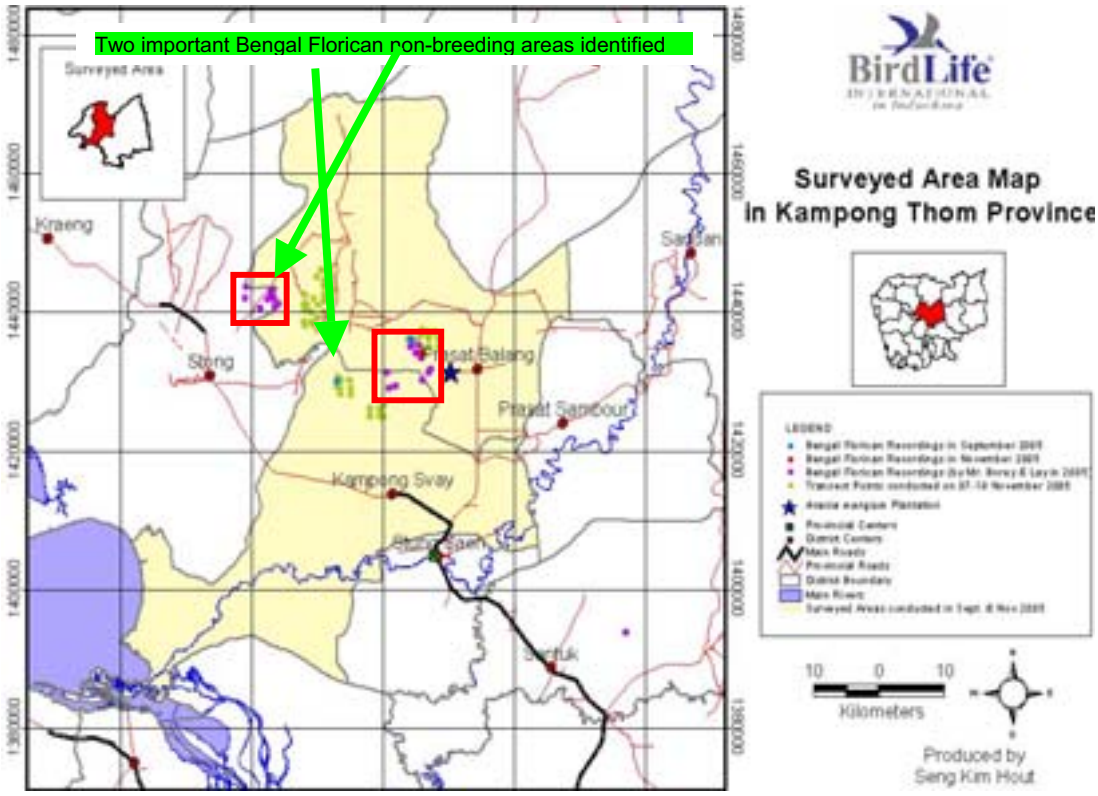
Table 1: Bengal Florican recordings in Stung / Chikreng / Kampong Svay IBA (KH016)

Common Name	Scientific Name	2005										
		Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov
Bengal Florican	*Houbaropsis bengalensis*	4	12	8	11	6	4	3	2	2	2	1

In addition to bird surveys, monitoring patrols have been conducted every month by SSG members to prevent illegal and environmentally harmful activities of the IBA such as hunting, wildlife trapping, spotlight use to catch birds at night, egg collection and use of illegal fishing gear.

Two collaborative surveys were conducted (September 2005 and November 2005) by the staff of BirdLife and WCS to search for Bengal Florican refuges. During the wet season, surveys were focused on non-breeding sites in deciduous forests north of the Tonle Sap Lake inundation zone whereas during the upcoming dry season (November - April), surveys will focus on flooded breeding areas closer to the Lake.

Twenty-five transects were randomly selected for the two surveys in three separate areas thought to have suitable non-breeding deciduous forest habitat. Data from the two surveys looking at presence, distribution, and threats to the species, together with additional surveys conducted by WCS staff, were used to identify two critical non-breeding sites for Bengal Florican in deciduous forest.



Map 1: Wet season surveys for Bengal Floricans in dry dipterocarp forest, Cambodia.

Interviewing and surveying activities conducted in non-breeding areas in deciduous forest in September and November 2005, Kampong Thom province. Photo (left): Tan Thara, photo (right): Seng Kim Hout

One male Bengal Florican was sighted in flight in Chikreng District in May 2005. Photo: Seng Kim Hout

Bengal Florican egg found in Stung District in May 2005. Photo: Seng Kim Hout

Wildlife hunting, trapping, and night spotlighting activities occur regularly in florican non-breeding areas. Unfortunately, Bengal Floricans are easily hunted at night using spotlights and bows and arrows and slingshots. According to survey interviews, hunters can catch as many as four floricans per night. The birds roost in the vicinity of small hills covered by grass and vegetation. A villager indicated that hunters would go to the field during the evening and wait to see where Bengal Floricans fly to roost. Then they come at the night to trap or hunt.

However, the most significant future threat to wildlife in these areas, particularly Bengal Floricans, is the loss of suitable habitat, both in deciduous forest (non-breeding areas) and seasonally inundated grassland in inundation zone of the Tonle Sap Lake (breeding areas) through forest clearance activities, land encroachment, and grassland conversion to rice paddies, in particular, dry season rice fields and granting of land concessions.

During the course of surveys, forest clearing for rice paddies, cashew nuts, and acacia tree plantations were observed. Moreover, local people try to claim the forest land since land tenure is still vague and they believe (correctly) that land value will continue to increase due to the presence of development interests.

In the seasonally inundated grasslands nearer the lake, local communities have started changing their practices from planting deepwater rice to dry season rice. Deepwater rice planting, while harmful from plowing, does not cause as serous an overall threat to the species as it creates more suitable habitat. In contrast, to produce dry season rice, farmers need to build reservoirs, dams and canals to stock and get water from other sources. Seasonally inundated grassland are more rapidly lost through these activities.

WCS in collaboration with the Forestry Administration (Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries) has recently prepared a draft Ministerial Decree to bring under greater agricultural management the proposed Stung-Chikreng grassland areas that lie in Siem Reap and Kompong Thom Provinces, and other critical Bengal Florican habitats in

Kompong Chnang Province. The draft decree has received initial support from the central government paving the way for the next stage which is to carry out consultations with local stakeholders (i.e., local communities, government, and NGOs). The decree will provide stronger legal protection and allow for more effective management and conservation of the seasonally inundated grasslands and inundated forests around the Tonle Sap Lake.

Concurrently, BirdLife and WCS will continue to undertake survey and monitoring activities to learn further the ecological requirements of this endangered species and work directly with government counterparts and local communities to mitigate threats.

Report by Sean Austin, Seng Kim Hout and Tan Thara – BirdLife International Cambodia Programme

Site Support Group outcomes in Vietnam

Ms. Phuong, BirdLife's Project Officer joined the Truong SSG members in a patrol. Photo: Le Trong Trai

With funding from the MacArthur Foundation, BirdLife International has been implementing a three-year (2003-2006) project entitled; *Conservation of Important Bird Areas in Indochina: strengthening site support groups to conserve critical biodiversity*. In Vietnam the project purpose is to establish a network of well-managed and protected Important Bird Areas (IBAs) termed Site Support Groups (SSGs), thereby enabling the long-term conservation of the unique biological attributes of the Annamese Lowlands.

To date, the project has established a network of nine SSGs in four selected sites namely Khe Net and Truong Son IBAs in Quang Binh province, and Dakrong and Huong Hoa IBAs in Quang Tri province, and has provided SSG members with training and key items of field equipment. Each SSG implements two main activities: (i) conducting monthly patrols inside IBAs to monitor key bird and mammal populations and collect information about illegal activities from human; and (ii) raising environmental awareness through village meetings, traditional festivals and school-based activities.

With the support of the project, the communication group of each SSG has conducted a series of conservation awareness campaigns. These campaigns have usually been integrated into community festivals or village meetings, in order to maximise attendance and impact. Most communication groups have also initiated programmes of visits to local schools, to raise conservation awareness among children. After series of conservation campaign hosted in local area, the awareness of community is raised and their behavior is changed positively. Most of them have agreed to sign the non-hunting and non-logging agreements which have been conducted in November 2005 at Bac Huong Hoa, Truong Son and Dakrong IBAs and Khe Net IBA in December 2005.

The initial results of the patrolling activities of SSGs have been impressive. The accuracy and level of detail of the monitoring data have been high, and most SSGs have been able to identify the major threats to biodiversity at their sites, as well as the groups (and, in some cases, individuals) responsible. Moreover, the response of the FPD units to the monitoring data has often been rapid and effective. The FPD units recognise the value of the SSG approach for providing useful data to guide their operations and for generating support for conservation among local communities.

Another positive development has been use of societal pressure to address unsustainable forest product use by local community members. As their leaders typically include village leaders and other respected community members, the SSGs are able to use village meetings as a way to reprimand community members found to be engaged in illegal or unsustainable activities by the patrol teams. This approach has been supported by the work of the communication group, to raise awareness of the need for sustainable natural resource use, and to generate support for the work of the SSGs and FPD units.

To provide an alternative source of income for local households engaged in unsustainable forms of forest product use, BirdLife leveraged co-financing from the Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs (DGIS) for a series of livelihood activities at the project sites. These activities are currently being implemented by two SSGs at Dakrong IBA, in partnership with other local partners, such as the commune women's union. The livelihood activities being piloted with support from

DGIS comprise cultivation of rattan to reduce pressure on over-exploited rattan populations within the IBA, and manufacture of handicrafts from NTFPs sustainably harvested within the IBA, such as *dot*, which is used to make brooms, and *la non*, which is used to make conical hats. As well as reducing local people's dependence on forest resources within the IBA, these activities are also intended to enhance the financial sustainability of the SSGs, by contributing to the costs of their activities.

Based on the finding of a recent review mission, the project is already making a positive contribution to biodiversity conservation in the Annamese Lowlands. Moreover, there exists great potential to refine and extend the SSG approach, and enhance its sustainability. One positive development in this regard is the recent commitment by Quang Tri Provincial FPD to contribute to the operating costs of the SSGs, through allocating funds from a national forestry programme. This is a clear commitment of the strong support among key stakeholders for the approach promoted by the project.

Text by Dang Nguyen Hong Hanh, BirdLife International Vietnam Programme

Latest search fails to locate Pink-headed Duck

Once again, and for the fourth time, a BirdLife/BANCA survey team spent from 11 October to 1 November searching wetlands and grasslands in northern Kachin State for the enigmatic and feared-extinct Pink-headed Duck *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea* . This survey focused on the ox-bow lakes and floodplain grasslands of the Nat Kaung River north of Kamaing and south of Shadusup. This was an area BirdLife and BANCA researchers had long wished to explore, but only distant views of the area were obtained in 2003 and in 2004 the water level was too low and no boats could be hired at the time of the visit. This time, at the very end of the rainy season provided perfect conditions. Based at a series of camps along the river the team used elephants and smaller boats to search the grasslands and ox-bow lakes in the area. This year, in advance of the survey the team prepared a large full-colour poster which was widely distributed in restaurants, tea houses and government offices across northern Kachin State, and offered a substantial reward for anyone leading the team to a living Pink-headed Duck. All reports received of Pink-headed Ducks during the survey on further investigation always proved to be White-winged Ducks *Cairina scutulata*. Despite the best efforts of the team in the extensive grasslands which were discovered during the survey, there was no confirmed sighting of a Pink-headed Duck. However, significant numbers of other Globally Threatened bird species were recorded including Green Peafowl *Pavo muticus*, White-winged Duck, Masked Finfoot *Heliopais personata*, White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis*, Slender-billed Vulture *Gyps teniurostris*, White-bellied Heron *Ardea insignis* and Lesser Adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus*.

Survey team members Karin Eberhardt and J C Eames with the two elephants used in the survey. Photo: J C Eames

Tim Appleton and Kopan scan the grasslands. Photo: J C Eames

A feeding White-bellied Heron *Ardea insignis* was an unexpected bonus during the survey. This individual was feeding only a short way downstream from two large gold dredgers that were operating on the river. Photo: J C Eames

Having now covered large areas with apparently suitable habitat in Kachin State, there are now more questions than answers regarding the status of the Pink-headed Duck in Myanmar: Was the species ever a resident in Myanmar or only a winter visitor? Why if it is resident are we not finding it? Perhaps it really is extinct? Never ones to give-up easily, options for further survey in 2006 include searching further south in Myanmar including the Mandalay areas and Arakan from where the species was

recorded historically, are being considered. This activity was carried-out as part of the Darwin Initiative project entitled *Building Constituencies for site-based conservation in Myanmar*.

Text by Jonathan C. Eames,
BirdLife Indochina Programme Manager

Vulture Restaurant in Kachin State, Myanmar

A juvenile White-rumped Vulture *Gyps bengalensis* was the first vulture at the restaurant. Photo: J C Eames

Fighting adult White-rumped Vultures *Gyps bengalensis*. Photo: J C Eames

The first ever vulture restaurant in Kachin State was held on a sandbank along the Nat Kaung River north of Kamaing on 25 and 26 October 2005. An immature domestic buffalo was used as bait and the team of observers watched from a blind located some 25 m away at the grassland edge. A maximum count of 41 White-rumped Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* including five juveniles and ten sub-adults, and 12 Slender-billed Vultures *Gyps teniurostris*, including one sub-adult were recorded. During 2003, 2004 and 2005 BirdLife and BANCA survey teams have recorded numerous vultures in the Kamain area but this is the first time that an attempt has been made to gain some indication of the numbers of vultures occurring locally. The presence of juvenile and sub adult birds indicate that successful breeding is occurring. In 2006 BirdLife and BANCA hope to initiate a new vulture survey project which will focus on the Kachin and Shan States. This activity was carried-out as part of the Darwin Initiative project entitled Building Constituencies for site-based conservation in Myanmar.

Text by Jonathan C. Eames, BirdLife Indochina Programme Manager

BANCA becomes a BirdLife Affiliate for Myanmar

The Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA) is one of the most active biodiversity conservation NGOs in Myanmar. With a small but expanding membership of nearly 100, BANCA only became an officially registered NGO in 2004 but was active for three years prior to this date. BANCA has 10 executive committee members, all with extensive experience of biodiversity conservation, forestry and/or working with local communities.

BANCA began working with BirdLife International in 2002. Since then, the two organisations have successfully implemented the first two years of a three-year Darwin Initiative project to build constituencies for site-based conservation. The two organisations have also secured funding for a second Darwin Initiative project, which will be implemented in partnership with the Bird Conservation Society of Thailand (BCST) and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), the BirdLife Partner in the UK. In addition, BANCA and BirdLife have recently secured funding for a major initiative to conserve the Sundaic lowland forests of Tanintharyi from the Britsh Birdwtching Fair.

The BirdLife Global Council in its 26th Meeting in 2005 approved BANCA's nomination as BirdLife Affiliate in Myanmar. With this new status, BANCA will surely have more opportunities to strengthen its capacity and give more support to conservation work in Myanmar. BirdLife International *in Indochina* would like to take this opportunity to welcome BANCA to the global BirdLife Partnership.

Spotlight organization

Myanmar Bird and Nature Society

Myanmar Bird and Nature Society (MBNS) is a non-profit organization dedicated to protection, research and education related to bird and nature for future generations. It was formed on 1 January 2000 and has since been officially registered with the charity number 1867. As of April 2005, MNBS had 470 members.

The objectives of MNBS are to:

- Support the conservation aims of Myanmar;
- Support the conservation of birds and their habitats;
- Develop an interest in and love for birds and nature among the younger generation;
- Cooperate internationally in the field of birds and nature;
- Educate people about the conservation of birds and nature;
- Conduct research on Myanmar's birds;
- Build closer relationships among bird lovers;
- Maintain Myanmar's heritage and improve Myanmar's development for the younger generation;
- Improve birdwatching and ecotourism business.

Recent achievements of MBNS include the following:

- Conducting an educational programme in 971 schools throughout the country, since 2002, with the cooperation of teachers and staff of the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Forestry and other ministries.
- Coordinating Wetlands International's Asian Waterbird Census in Myanmar since 2001, and conducting avifauna surveys in many states and divisions.
- Holding birdwatching activities to sites in Myanmar, since October 2004, as part of MBNS's public education activities.
- Holding basic birdwatching courses (theoretical and practical) twice in a year since 2004.
- Publishing educational handouts on birds, turtles, butterflies, flowers, wetlands and coral reefs.
- Cooperating with the Department of Zoology of Yangon University to give a talk on " Knowledgeable Tips on Avifauna" in July 2000.
- Inviting Mr Anthony Sebastian of Aonyx Environmental, Malaysia, to give a talk on "Using Barn Owls as a Biological Control Agent to Control Rat Damage in Rice Fields" at the Plant Protection Division, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, in November 2001.
- Inviting Dr Daniel Henning, former Professor Emeritus at Montana State University, to give a talk on "New Environmental Education" at the People's Park, Yangon, in December 2003.
- Participating with the Nature and Wildlife Conservation Division for the "First Myanmar Bird Show" at the Forest Department in March 2002.
- Organising a booth on "Correlation between Birds and Environment" using computer technology at the opening ceremony of the University of Maubin, in July 2003.
- Organising a booth on " Bird and Nature Conservation" at the Myanmar Floriculturist Association's 10th Anniversary at the People's Park, Yangon, in December 2003.
- Organising a booth on "Bird and Nature Conservation" at Education Fairs of the Ministry of Education in December 2003 and December 2004.
- Organising an exhibition at the Diplomatic School in Yangon in March 2005.
- Publishing regular newsletters since October 2002.

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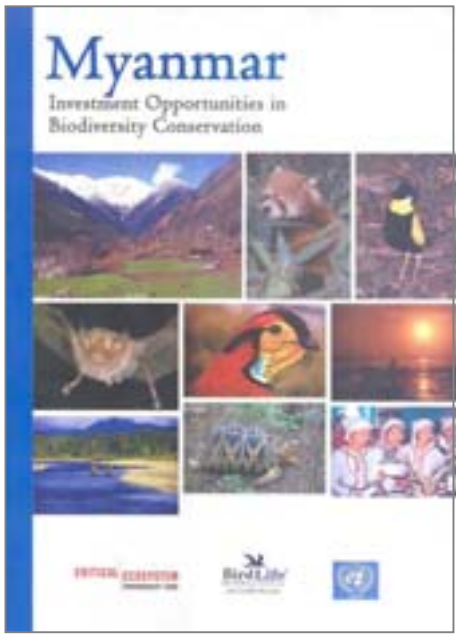
Publications

Myanmar: Investment Opportunities in Biodiversity Conservation *by Andrew W. Tordoff, Jonathan C. Eames, Karin Eberhardt, Michael C. Baltzer, Peter Davidson, Peter Leimgruber, U Uga, U Aung Than, BirdLife International (2005) 124 pp*



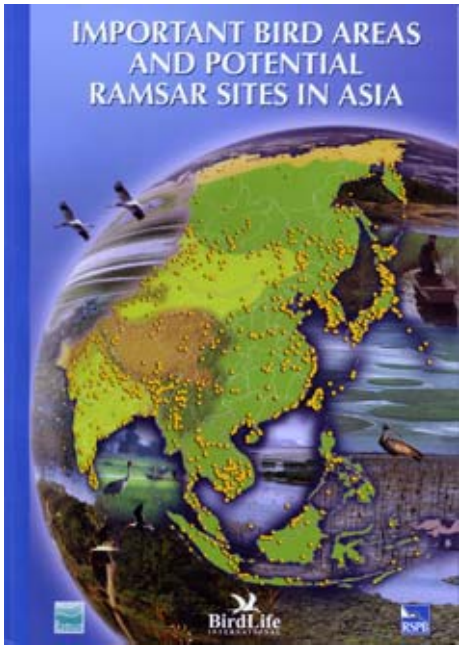
This document identifies opportunities for investing in biodiversity conservation in Myanmar, via NGOs and academic institutions, to address immediate conservation needs and build a solid foundation for future efforts.

It is based upon the results of two stakeholder workshops held in Yangon on 4-5 August 2003 and 9 July 2004. With the participation of over 30 stakeholders from NGOs, academic institutions, government institutions and donor agencies, these workshops were the first attempt to reach multi-stakeholder consensus on geographic, taxonomic and thematic priorities for biodiversity conservation in Myanmar.

This document is also vital for the conservation of threatened species, critical sites and habitats, and wider biodiversity throughout the country, and may serve as a foundation for a future conservation agenda in Myanmar. It proposes high priority actions that could be taken by donors, government, NGOs and academic institutions over the next five years to conserve globally important biodiversity. It gives due consideration and priority to the areas that are nationally important, regionally significant and globally outstanding. Importantly, the document highlights 48 Priority Species, 37 Priority Sites and eight Priority Corridors (landscapes) for conservation investment over the next five years. Strategic Directions and Investment Priorities for Myanmar recommended by this document should be strictly followed and well implemented. Publication of this document was made possible by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund and the United Nations Development Programme.

U Uga, Chairman of Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA), Myanmar

Important Bird Areas and Potential Ramsar Sites in Asia BirdLife International (2005), Cambridge, U.K.
ISBN 0 946888 57 4. 108 pp



Important Bird Areas and potential Ramsar sites in Asia identifies 1,111 Important Bird Areas (IBAs) which contain wetland areas that qualify as Ramsar Sites. Asian governments have so far designated a total of 144 Ramsar Sites, which protect all or part of 120 IBAs. This means that 991 or 89% of the potential sites identified in the BirdLife International report have not yet been afforded protection under the Ramsar Convention.

BirdLife data shows that wetlands in many part of Asia are under great pressure from agricultural intensification and expansion, industrialisation and urbanisation, and over-exploitation of natural resources (including unsustainable hunting and fishing). As a consequence, 91 wetland-dependent bird species in the Asia region are listed as globally threatened in the IUCN Red List.

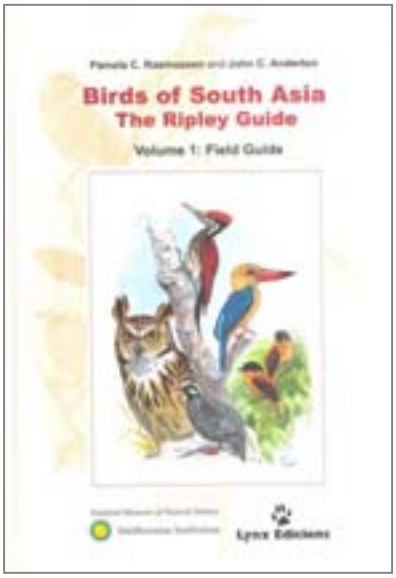
There are already encouraging signs. Japan has recently announced (10 November 2005) the designation of 20 new Ramsar Sites, nine of which are IBAs. This shows how useful IBAs are in helping to identify Ramsar Sites, and highlights the importance of *Important Bird Areas and potential Ramsar Sites in Asia* as a conservation tool.

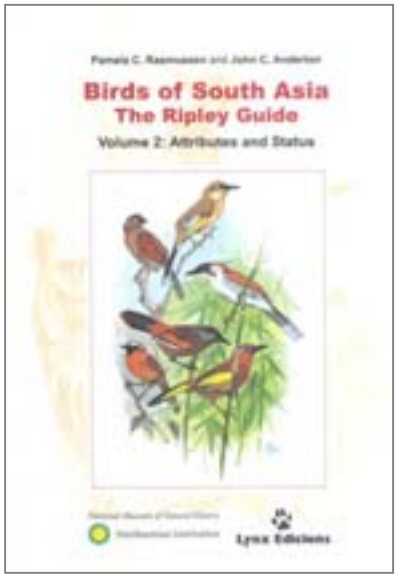
Ed Parnell, Communications Officer, BirdLife International, UK

Book reviews

Birds of South Asia: The Ripley Guide

by Pamela C. Rasmussen and John C. Anderton. Lynx Edicions 2005. ISBN: 8487334679. 2 volumes. 1061 pp. 180 colour plates.





This eagerly-awaited two volume work is the most complete and up-to-date guide to the birds of South Asia, covering the spectacularly diverse Indian Subcontinent with the addition of Afghanistan, western Myanmar and the Chagos Archipelago.

The slimmer of the two volumes, Volume 1, is a Field Guide containing more than 3,400 illustrations spread over 180 colour plates. The plates, the majority of which are painted by the book's co-author John Anderton, are excellent and of a consistently high standard. On the opposite page to the plates are brief descriptions and distribution maps. The text font and maps are perhaps a little on the small size but used in combination with the plates all the information necessary for successful identification is there. The endpapers contain a very useful illustrated plate key that saves a lot of frantic thumbing through pages in the field.

The second volume, subtitled Attributes and Status, presents a wealth of new data including over 25 recent splits and two species new to science. Detailed texts on identification, distribution, status, habits and vocalizations are provided for each species, the vocalizations backed up by over 1,000 sonagrams. Appendices include lists of hypothetical species, rejected species and taxonomic changes as well as a useful summary of the major birding localities and brief ornithological histories for the region covered.

Published by Lynx Edicions, publisher of the monumental *Handbook of the Birds of the World* series, the Ripley Guide is a must for anyone with an interest in the avifauna of South Asia.

Richard Craik, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam

Overview of Wetland Status in Vietnam following 15 years of Ramsar Convention Implementation

by Vietnam Environment Protection Agency (2005) 72 pp

Vietnam signed the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands fifteen years ago, and recently designated only a second wetland site to the List of Wetlands of International Importance according to Ramsar criteria. Disappointingly slow progress for a country with so many globally important and threatened wetlands. This new report is intended to serve as a benchmark for progress and trends in wetlands management and protection in the last fifteen years, highlighting recommendations for the future.

The report also serves as a comprehensive, up-to-date source of information on wetlands for policy makers and researchers alike, thus facilitating future policies, research and strategies.

It is the product of a collaborative effort of the Vietnam Environment Protection Agency (VEPA), the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Vietnam, and the Mekong Wetlands Biodiversity Conservation and Sustainable Use Programme (MWBP).

Tonle Sap: The Heart of Cambodia's Natural Heritage

by Colin Poole 2005. ISBN: 974 9863 15 1. 172 pp

The Tonle Sap, Cambodia's Great Lake and its yearly flood is one of South-East Asia's natural wonders. In the dry season measuring "only" 150 by 20 kilometers, by the peak of the wet season it has expanded to some 250 kilometers long and in places more than 100 kilometers wide, increasing in depth from one to more than ten metres and in area from 2,500 to about 13,000 square kilometers. This annual phenomenon has given rise not only to the great ancient empire of Angkor, but to one of the world's most productive fisheries and the last stronghold for some of the world's most endangered large waterbirds.

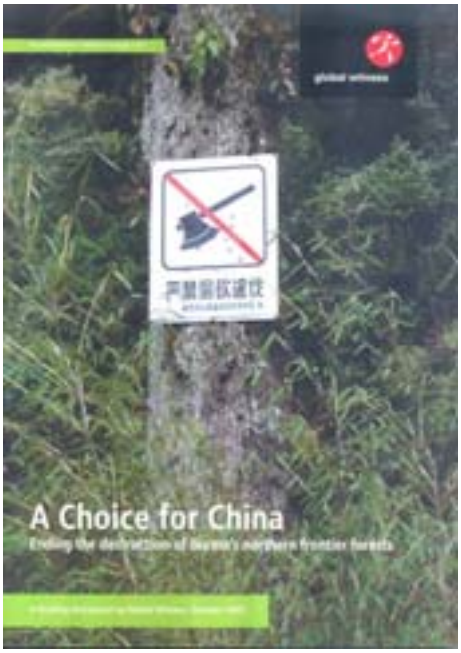
Colin Poole, Director of the Asia Program for the Wildlife Conservation Society lived in Cambodia for eight years, while Eleanor Briggs has been photographing on the Tonle Sap for more than ten years. Through authoritative text and evocative and memorable photographs together they examine all aspects of the Tonle Sap and Cambodia's fascinating and beautiful environment, its fauna, history, culture and future.

A Choice for China: Ending the destruction of Burma's northern frontier forests

by Global Witness. October 2005. 98 pp

This report makes the case for ending the illegal logging in Myanmar's northern forests. Although the management of Myanmar's forests is primarily the responsibility of the relevant authorities in Myanmar, the vast majority of the timber cut in northern Myanmar is subsequently exported illegally to China. The Chinese authorities are, therefore, ideally placed to help the Burmese end the illicit trade. It is also in China's long-term self-interest to end destructive logging in northern Myanmar (*see 'Part One: The Case for Changes', pages 11-36*).

For these reasons this report is aimed largely at the Chinese authorities, both in Yunnan Province and in Beijing. In particular the report is aimed at the Chinese Ministry of Commerce, which is responsible for trade, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The General Administration of Customs, and the Administration of Quality Supervision Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ), also have a role to play in stopping the illegal importation of Burmese timber into China (*see '7.4 The illegal nature of the Myanmar-China timber trade (Chinese laws)', pages 23-25*). The Chinese State Forest Administration (SFA), on the other hand, has no power to halt the illicit cross-border trade - except in relation to enforcement of CITES (*see '7.4.1 Illegal importation of CITES-listed Himalayan Yew trees from Myanmar to China', page 25*) but it could advise the armed ethnic opposition groups about good forest management.



Global Witness conducted primary research along the China-Myanmar border in 2004 and 2005 and interviews people from many different backgrounds. To the best of its knowledge, this report reflects the reality of timber trade in these border areas.

Not all of the information contained in this report was witnessed at first hand by Global Witness. Global Witness has also relied on media reports from trusted sources and interviews with individuals familiar with logging in Myanmar. Where possible the identity of these sources has been made clear, although many of these individuals remain anonymous to maintain their

safety. It should be noted that accounts of natural resources exploitation in Myanmar might be politically biased. Global Witness has therefore treated such information with caution, and has attempted to convey this in the text. Furthermore, the opinions expressed by some of the interviewees do not necessarily reflect the opinions of Global Witness.

Where appropriate, to facilitate comparison between timber statistics, wood volume data has been converted to Round Wood Equivalent (RWE) volume. This has been done by multiplying wood volume by standard conversion factors, such as 1 for logs, 1.8 for sawn wood, and 2.3 for plywood.

Various sources of such data were consulted. The data selected for analysis are those that Global Witness regards as being from the most representative source. It should be noted however, that there appears to be little correlation between a number of these sources. In addition it is often unclear which products have or have not been included in a given dataset, or indeed which units of measures are being used. Consequently, the analysis presented in this report should be considered as indicative rather than precise.

A lack of clear, reliable and disaggregated data is another sign that Myanmar is not in a position to manage its forests sustainably. Unfortunately, the provision of incomplete, inaccurate, contradictory and confused data is a global problem.

Office news

Myanmar office

BirdLife/BANCA Darwin Project Office has been moved to the new location as follows:

A/6-2 Anawrahtar Housing, Hledan, Ward no 2, Kamayut Township, Yangon, Myanmar
Tel: + 95 1 527 175
Email: banca@yangon.net.mm

Staff news

Vietnam office

Ms. Dang Nguyen Hong Hanh has been officially working as communications officer for BirdLife Vietnam Programme since December 2005. She started to work as communications consultant for BirdLife in the middle of May 2005.

A graduate from Hanoi Foreign Trade University in early 1999, Hanh has seven-years working experience in the field of advertising, communications and public relations for private and foreign companies. Hopefully her creative ideas and energy will actively contribute to the development of BirdLife International *in Indochina* in the future.

From the Archives

This photograph taken within the inundation zone of the Ton Le Sap dramatically illustrates the differences the water level caused by the annual flood (indicated by the arrow at right) as mentioned in the review of *Tonlesap: The heart of Cambodia's natural heritage* reviewed above. This photograph is taken from *La Peche dans les eaux douches du Cambodge* by P. Chevey and F. Le Poulain. The publication date of this book is currently unknown but was certainly after 1940.