

## ILLEGAL BIRD TRADE

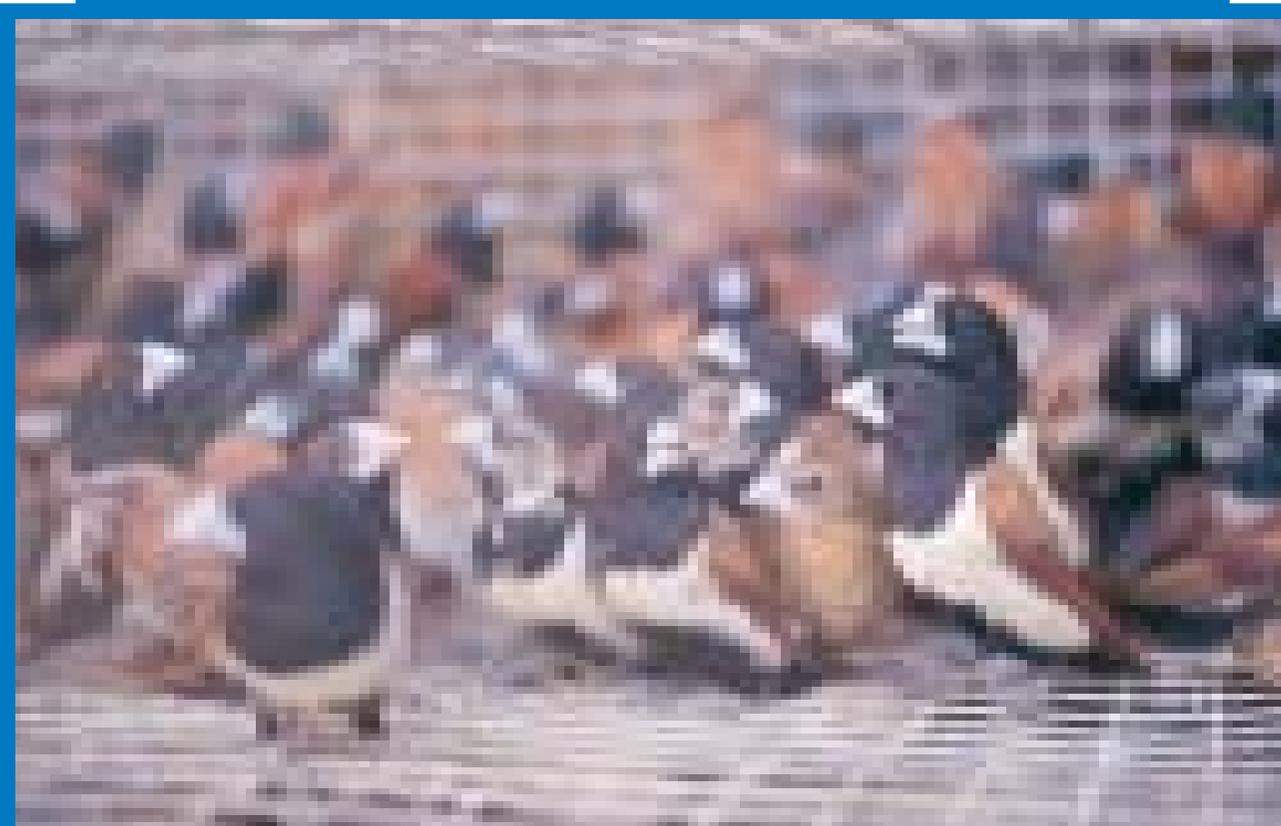


Photo: M. Zafar-ul-Islam

India was one of the largest bird exporters till about 15 years ago.

By Abrar Ahmed

Among the several wildlife species and their derivatives in commerce, trade in birds is the most extensive in terms of its widespread nature, species diversity, numbers traded and value. The Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 (as amended in 1991 and 2002) completely bans the export and domestic trade in Indian birds since 1990-91. Despite this law, the bird business is still prevalent in many Indian cities, small towns and villages.

### Species in trade

Over 450 species of the approximately 1300 Indian species have been documented in international and domestic bird trade (Ahmed 2002). Studies conducted at the Heathrow airport from 1970 - 1974 (Inskipp 1975, 1983) report a total of 289 species exported from India to UK or in transit to US, European and other countries. Recent studies on the Indian bird trade by TRAFFIC India / WWF India show that over 370 Indian species are still caught for bird-trade (Ahmed 2002).

The top ten traded species in terms of numbers are the Rose-ringed Parakeet *Psittacula krameri*, Plum-headed Parakeet *P. cyanocephala* and Alexandrine Parakeet *P. eupatria* followed by passerines namely the Black-headed Munia *Lonchura malacca*, Red Munia *Amandava amandava*, White-throated Munia *Lonchura malabarica*, Baya Weaver *Ploceus philippinus*, Spotted Munia *Lonchura punctulata*, Red-headed Bunting *Emberiza bruniceps* and the Blue Rock Pigeon *Columba livia*. These ten species contribute to nearly 75% of the indigenous bird trade. The rest of trade comprises of waders, ducks, larks, pipits and mynas.

Species in very high trade demand are the Hill Myna *Gracula religiosa*, Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*, Red-breasted Parakeet *Psittacula alexandri*, Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*, Spotted Owlet *Athene brama*, Red-billed Leiothrix or Pekin Robin *Leiothrix lutea*, Oriental White-eye *Zosterops palpebrosa*, Himalayan Greenfinch *Carduelis spinoides*, Grey Francolin *Francolinus pondicerianus* and Shikra *Accipiter badius*. Also the Bank Myna *Acridotheres ginginianus*, Common Myna *A. tristis*, Asian Pied Myna or Starling *Sturnus contra*, Brahminy Starling *S. pagodarum*, House Sparrow *Passer domesticus*, and Large Grey Babbler *Turdoides striatus* are some commonly traded species.

The continuous demand for these species does have an impact on wild population. Trapping in the breeding seasons, mass capture, release of captive birds in a wrong habitat, combined with habitat loss are major threats. A classical example of impact of bird trade is the population explosion of the Black-headed Munia in several Red Munia habitats largely because of the release bird trade. Competition of

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this species with local Red Munia population, invasion of roost and breeding sites are result of cage bird trafficking. Extinction of local population of owls and species such as Alexandrine Parakeet due to over-exploitation, combined with felling of old trees is becoming increasingly common.

The species in trade vary from season to season and also substantially from place to place. Some species are present in trade for not more than a four-week period or are brought only on a specific demand by a customer. Study suggests that species such as waders, snipes, larks, ducks were mainly trapped for food, and the sales are quick and very localised, hence trade in such species remains largely undocumented. Of the total 48 species strictly endemic to India, 10 are reported in international trade, for instance the Malabar Parakeet *Psittacula columboides*. Even species such as the endemic White-headed or Andaman Starling *Sturnus erythropygius* despite its relative inaccessibility to trade has remained a popular aviculture subject due to its attractive appearance. Among the endemic birds of the Indian subcontinent, 16 have been reported in trade since 1970, but only three in good numbers: the Blossom-headed Parakeet *Psittacula roseata*, the Ashy-crowned Finch-lark *Eremopterix grisea* and the Black-throated Weaverbird *Ploceus benghalensis*.

### Composition of total Bird Trade in Indian Bird Markets

Group of birds	No of species	Minimum no. observed in trade	Percentage composition	Protection Status
Wild caught Indian birds	372	368, 582	77.80 %	Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972
Exotic birds – from captive bred, domesticated and wild caught imported	110	75, 079	15.85 %	Exim Policy and CITES only at port of entry.
Domesticated species of Poultry origin / domesticated pigeons	8	30,062	6.35 %	Prevention of Cruelty Act
Total	490	473,723		

Most of the internal bird trade is intended for human consumption.



Photo: Anwaruddin Choudhury

#### Rare birds in trade

Fourteen threatened species have been recorded at least once in the trade, and four of these, namely Green Munia or Avadavat, Finn's Baya or Yellow Weaver, Swamp Francolin and Sarus Crane have been recorded in trade on various occasions.

The Green Munia is a globally threatened endemic species found very locally and unevenly in Central India. Despite the ban on both trade as well as export of the species from India, the Green Munia is still reported in international bird markets (Ahmed 1998). Although little is known about the bird's habits in the wild, the species is rather delicate, and difficult to acclimatize in captivity, especially in temperate countries. Since it is also difficult to breed in captivity, its continued presence in international markets suggests that wild-caught birds are smuggled out of India (Ahmed 1998). In addition to habitat destruction, trade seems to be the major threat to the Green Munia population. Recent studies suggest that about 2,000 individuals of this species are caught

each year and a majority of them are smuggled out of India for the pet-trade under the name of 'Tiger finch'. Often coloured females of Red Munia are mixed and fraudulently sold as Green Munia. The species is regularly sold in important trade centres of Patna, Lucknow, Kolkatta and Delhi.

The Swamp Francolin *Francolinus gularis* has been regularly recorded in the Indian bird trade (Ahmed 1997) and is regularly trapped outside protected areas, notably the Indo-Nepal border. In some areas, field surveys suggest that the adult Swamp francolin may be seldom targeted but ends up being trapped as by-catches of Black francolin and Crow pheasants trappings. However, in places where the species is found in good numbers, it may attract targeted trapping. For instance, dealers in this species suggested that in Nepalganj, Lakhimpur-Kheri and Pilibhit districts, the species is often caught for food. Some trapped birds find their way to two main trade centres in Lucknow and Kanpur. It is estimated that 30 to 50 birds are trapped annually.

The Finn's Baya or Yellow Weaver *Ploceus megarhynchus* is another globally threatened bird with a very local distribution in Kumaon *terai* and some parts of Assam. Previously reported to be an endemic resident of north India (Ali and Ripley 1987), it has been recently reported from Nepal (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). It has been exported over a period of many years - as early as 1901 with several birds handled at the Heathrow airport (Inskipp 1979) and reportedly sold in Indian bird markets from time to time (Abdulali 1952). The combination of habitat destruction and possibility of uncontrolled accidental trapping with other weaverbirds and munias and occasional targeted trapping is a major threat. It is estimated that 30-50 birds may still be traded annually.

The Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* is another species trapped regularly for zoos and aviculture trade and occasionally for meat. Chicks are collected to be tamed and sold as captive-bred birds. It is estimated that 15-20 birds are traded each year.

Further, nine Near Threatened species have also been recorded in the bird trade. Out of these, the Painted Stork *Mycteria leucocephala*, Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*, Black-headed Ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus* and Lesser Flamingo *Phoenicopterus minor* are traded from time to time.

Globally Threatened Species recorded in the Indian Bird Trade

S. No	Species	IUCN Status	Utilization pattern in trade
1	Dalmatian Pelican <i>Pelecanus crispus</i>	CD	Zoo trade, Meat & Aviculture
2	Spot-billed Pelican <i>Pelecanus philippinus</i>	VU	Zoo trade, Meat & Aviculture
3	Lesser Adjutant <i>Leptoptilos javanicus</i>	VU	Zoo trade & Meat
4	Greater Adjutant <i>Leptoptilos dubius</i>	EN	Zoo trade & Meat
5	Long-billed Vulture <i>Gyps indicus</i>	CR	Zoo trade
6	Oriental White-backed Vulture <i>Gyps bengalensis</i>	CR	Zoo trade
7	Swamp Francolin <i>Francolinus gularis</i>	VU	Zoo trade, Meat & Aviculture
8	Cheer Pheasant <i>Catreus wallichii</i>	VU	Zoo trade, Meat & Aviculture
9	Spoon-billed Sandpiper <i>Eurynorhynchus pygmeus</i>	VU	Meat (Accidental catch)
10	Sarus Crane <i>Grus antigone</i>	VU	Zoo trade, Aviculture & Meat
11	Pale-backed Pigeon <i>Columba eversmanni</i>	VU	Meat
12	Bristled Grass-Warbler <i>Chaetornis striatus</i>	VU	Release trade (Accidental catch)
13	Green Munia <i>Amandava formosa</i>	VU	Pet & rarely Release trade
14	Yellow Weaver <i>Ploceus megarhynchus</i>	VU	Pet & rarely Release trade

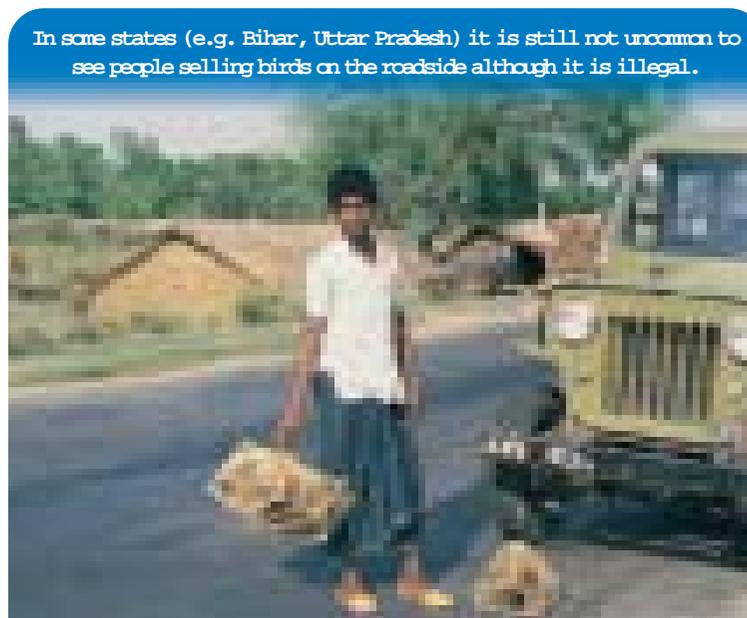
CR = Critically Endangered, EN = Endangered, VU = Vulnerable, CD = Conservation Dependent

Near Threatened birds recorded in the Indian Bird Trade

S. No	Species	Utilization pattern in trade
1.	Painted Stork <i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>	Meat, Zoo trade & Aviculture
2.	Black-necked Stork <i>Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus</i>	Meat, Zoo trade & Aviculture
3.	Black-headed Ibis <i>Threskiornis melanocephalus</i>	Meat, Zoo trade & Aviculture
4.	Lesser Flamingo <i>Phoenicopterus minor</i>	Meat, Zoo trade & Aviculture
5.	Grey-headed Fishing Eagle <i>Ichthyophaga ichthyaetus</i>	Zoo trade
6.	Cinereous Vulture <i>Aegypius monachus</i>	Zoo trade
7.	Red-headed Vulture <i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>	Zoo trade
8.	Nicobar Pigeon <i>Caloenas nicobarica</i>	Zoo trade & Aviculture
9.	Great Hornbill <i>Buceros bicornis</i>	Meat, Zoo trade & Aviculture

Utilization patterns

Eleven reasons are mainly responsible for the great variety of birds in the trade (see box below). The bulk of trade in birds is primarily for pet and food, but nevertheless specific demands are responsible for decline of several bird families. For instance, demand for owls for black magic remains a threat to local populations in trapper-dominated areas. After the blanket ban on export, the focus has shifted from mere ornamental cage bird export business to sales in domestic markets for other purposes. For example, the bird release business is fast emerging as a lucrative alternative for traders who encash on the religious sentiments of buyers. People pay to release birds in the erroneous belief that this good deed of theirs will add to their piety. They do not understand that species not caught earlier for pet or food are now retained to be sold for bird release business (Ahmed 2000). Among bird derivatives, the nests of Edible-nest Swiftlets (Genus *Collocalia*) are harvested on a large scale. The nest made out of bird's saliva is considered a delicacy in South East Asia and Thailand. Trade for medicinal use of species such as the males of the House Sparrow and hornbills are prevalent even in metropolises. Several species of falcons are smuggled to the Middle-East countries for falconry.



In some states (e.g. Bihar, Uttar Pradesh) it is still not uncommon to see people selling birds on the roadside although it is illegal.

Photo: Asad R. Rahmani

## Important Bird Areas in India - Illegal Bird Trade

Utilisation pattern	Families or species utilised	State or part of India where such practice takes place	Approximate numbers of species traded for a particular reason
1) Pet trade, ornamental cage bird trade, aviculture	Parakeets, munias, finches, weaver-birds, buntings, Emerald dove, Softbills:- Hill Myna, Shama, chloropsis, yuhinas, minlas, thrushes, bulbuls, drongos, orioles, sunbirds, white-eyes (and exotic cage birds)	Throughout India except northeastern states of Mizoram, Nagaland and Manipur where most species are eaten rather than kept as pets.	About 150 species
2) Zoos, large aviculture collections, traveling zoos	Pelicans, storks, cranes, ducks, flamingoes, ibis, Spoonbill, cormorants, herons, egrets vultures, eagles, hawks, kites hornbills, treepie, Blue Magpie, Green Magpie, pheasants, Chukor and Peafowl.	Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Assam, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu.	About 125 species
3) Meat or table bird trade	Waders, ducks, geese, pelicans, storks, coots, jacanas, terns, gulls, egrets, lapwings, Stone Curlew, buntings, wagtails, pipits, myna (excluding Hill Myna), larks, pheasants, Large Grey and Jungle babblers, other babblers, quails, partridges, doves and pigeons	Most Indian states especially Jammu and Kashmir, eastern and north East India / Tamil Nadu	About 150 species
4) Bird release	Munias, parakeets, weaver birds, warblers, babblers, Indian Roller, White-breasted Kingfisher, lapwings, mynas (except Hill Myna), crows, sparrows and bee-eaters	Mainly Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Gujarat	About 80 species
5) Black magic and sorcery	Hoopoe, owls, wagtails, crows, nightjars and swallows.	Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh	About 20 species
6) Medicinal value	House Sparrow, egrets, quails, partridges, hornbills, Wryneck, Indian Treepie, Blue Rock Pigeons, nightjars and barbets	Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh.	About 25 species
7) Sport (bird fights and falconry)	Bulbuls, partridges, quails falcons, hawks, eagles, kites and buzzards.	Eastern Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Bihar, Bangladesh - Assam border Lucknow, Varanasi, Allahabad, Patna, Hyderabad, Bastar, Meerut and Hajo near Guwahati	About 25 species
8) Miscellaneous (Taxidermy)	Spotted Owl, parakeets, egrets, Koel, Pariah Kite, eagles, vultures, barbet, woodpeckers, White-breasted Kingfisher and weaverbirds.	Kolkata, Ambala and Ludhiana.	Minimum 30 species
9) For feather trade	Grey Junglefowl, Red Junglefowl, pheasants, egrets, domestic geese, ducks, crest of Monal Pheasant	Tamil Nadu, Bastar in MP, north-eastern states, Himachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir	About 10 species
10) For body parts	Racket-tailed drongo, eagles, owls, hornbills	Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram, Nagaland, Manipur and Tripura	About 20 species
11) For circus, traveling zoos	Exotic parrots – macaws, cockatoos, Grey Parrot and pelicans for traveling zoos	West Bengal, Bihar, Kerala	About 20 species

### Volume of trade

The overall number of birds traded each year has declined dramatically after the blanket ban on the bird trade, although a minimum of one million birds are still annually traded according to the TRAFFIC India study (Ahmed 2002). At any given day of the year, at least 1,000 trappers (conservative estimate) are active. Given that on an average, a trapper catches at least two-three birds a day, it implies a total catch per day of at least 2000- 3000 birds. Now multiply this figure with 350 trapping days and we arrive at the figure of nearly 700,000 to 1,050,000 birds being trapped each year. It must be noted that the average taken of two birds per trapper is extremely low as during peak seasons, a team of two or three trappers can easily catch up to 100 to 500 birds in a day.

### Value of trade

The primary grassroot level domestic wild bird trade is of a minimum value of Rs. 25 million per year. For instance, if a minimum of 5,000 families are still full time dependent on the bird trade, it implies that each family roughly earns Rs. 5,000 a year, which is too low a figure. This points out that the trade value is at least five times more than the one mentioned above. The indicated value of Rs. 25 million does not take into account the value of exotic birds smuggled and retailed in India and also the value of non-prohibited trade of domesticated exotic birds, also handled by professional bird dealers. This value does not take into account the profit earned through cage making, profits by hawkers and other items related to bird trade.

In northeast India, hunting birds for food is a major problem, especially for large species.



Photo: Anwaruddin Choudhury

#### People in trade

There are several tribes who are synonymous with the organised bird trade in the country. The *Mir-shikaris*, a Muslim community engaged in the meat bird trade and the other is *Bahelias*, a Hindu community mainly into ornamental cage bird trade. The *Pardis*, *Bawarias*, and *Narrikovva* are also full time into animal poaching with birds trapping being a seasonal/ side occupation. *Chirimar* (or birdkiller) is a local term commonly used to refer to the traditional bird trade people in India.

#### Exotic birds in trade

As the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act (WPA) 1972 does not cover exotic birds, domestic trade in exotic birds is not regulated. However, the export and import of any exotic species is governed by CITES and Exim policy. A minimum of 110 foreign species and eight domesticated species were also recorded on sale and in aviculture collections in India. Budgerigar *Melopsittacus undulatus*, Lovebirds *Agapornis* spp, Cockatiel *Nymphicus hollandicus*, Java Sparrow *Padda oryzivora* and Zebra Finch *Taeniopygia guttata* constitute 90% of the exotic bird trade. Recent undercover investigations reveal that continuous large consignments of exotic birds are smuggled to India through Bangladesh, Nepal via Pakistan. These includes CITES listed species such as the Sulphur-crested Cockatoo *Cacatua galerita*, Blue-and-gold Macaw *Ara ararauna*, African Grey Parrot *Psittacus erithacus*, Amazon Parrot *Amazona* spp, several species of lorries and rosellas (Anon. 1998).

#### What needs to be done?

- Stricter control on the total bird trade
- Public awareness campaign
- Rehabilitation of traditional bird trappers into alternate sustainable livelihood schemes
- Captive breeding of certain species