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In Bangkok

It is late afternoon in the Wiang Lo Wildlife Sanctuary in northern Thailand, and a protected forest like this should be alive with bird-song at this time of the day.

But no birds sing. Somewhere in the distance, a single barbet calls, but the rest is silence except for the rasp of cicadas. The hills are picturesque and the forest is verdant, but it is not trackless. Local hunters penetrating deep inside the hills, for generations and even after the place was officially protected, have emptied out the forest, killing birds and other animals.

For the birds that survive, and would usually thrive in the tenuous overlap between forest and field shared with humans, today even the crop fields that edge into the forest fringes don't offer them much. Previously largely planted with rice or fruit and vegetables, these are now rubber and cassava plantations, drenched in herbicides and pesticide, with almost no natural vegetation, offering little to grain- and insect-eating birds.

Where there are rice and corn fields, a few mynahs, munias and egrets manage to get by. But even these fields are now often cropped all year, with no fallow periods left as respite from the chemicals that kill off the insects that birds feed on. With the bottom knocked out of the food chain, there are no more black drongos, no more black shouldered kites, and no more shrikes.

This is typical of most of South-east Asia and especially Thailand and Laos where hunting has been a tradition for generations. The carnivorous black-necked stork, up to 1.5m tall and with a 2.1m wing span, has long vanished from Thailand. So has the stately Sarus crane, at 1.7m the world's tallest flying bird.

Around the world, bird populations are falling, in some cases dramatically. Globally, 15 per cent of all bird species are critically endangered, according to Birdlife International and the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). In Asia, 59 per cent of water bird species are seeing declining numbers.

"Thailand has very good coverage in terms of protected areas, around 20 per cent of the country's land area, but most of it is upland," says Dr Philip Round, country representative of The Wetlands Trust and associate professor of Mahidol University's biology department.

# The silence of the birds

Hunting, pesticide use, development – human activities are leading to a fall in bird populations

"The lowlands have been trashed. And they are being trashed throughout South-east Asia. Rubber and palm oil are a cancer for biodiversity," he says.

Of a list of the world's 10 most endangered birds compiled this year by scientists, five are in Asia. Some number just in the couple of hundreds, and some are in dispersed groups with little or no success at breeding. Some like the Bengal florican and the imposing great Indian bustard may be extinct very soon, possibly in less than three to five years.

Most of the declines can be attributed to human activity. Birds are a barometer, sending us signals about our environment and what we are doing to it.

Birds regularly crash into tall buildings in Singapore's business district, from their perspective a mid-air maze of concrete, glass and steel, with strange and disorienting reflections.

And even in rural India, the birds are not spared from the vagaries of development.

In the once-vast grasslands of western India where the great Indian bustard has for generations roamed unhindered, the low-flying birds now occasionally collide fatally with high-tension electricity cables. On the ground, their grassland habitat is being ploughed under or turned into industrial land; in what remains, they run the gauntlet of roving packs of semi-feral dogs.

In the late 1990s, it was found that Egyptian vultures in India were dying en masse, poisoned by diclofenac, a drug – since banned – used to treat cattle, that found its way through the food chain to the livers of the scavenging birds.

There have also been episodes of mass deaths of birds from pesticide poisoning.

In Britain and the European Union – where intensive mechanised farming brought a drastic plunge in farmland bird numbers – the status of certain bird species as an indicator of environmental quality has in recent years been recognised by governments at the policy and administrative levels. In Britain, this is partially in response to a vocal and powerful lobby for birds; "backyard birds" have been discussed in Britain's Parliament as an indicator



The low-flying great Indian bustard, which once roamed unhindered in the once-vast grasslands of western India, now occasionally collide, fatally, with high-tension electricity cables. The species is on the most endangered list.

**Avian link to human well-being**  
"Governments in Asia do not yet regard birds as indicators of human well-being... Bird declines seem to be taken seriously in Asia only if aggressively lobbied, but even then only if there is a clear and perhaps relatively easy solution readily offered."

DR K.S. GOPI SUNDAR, director of the US-based International Crane Foundation's Sarus crane research and conservation efforts.

of quality of life. European wild bird indicators are officially adopted by the EU as indicators of biodiversity.

But there is no such recognition in Asia. Perhaps tropical Asia, rich in biodiversity, has taken it for granted. In the Manila-based Asean Centre for Biodiversity's 2013 report, much of the focus is on the marine environment. This is understandable in the Asean context, where many member states have extensive marine territories – but

birds get only a passing mention.

"Governments in Asia do not yet regard birds as indicators of human well-being," says Dr K. S. Gopi Sundar, director of the US-based International Crane Foundation's Sarus crane research and conservation efforts.

"Bird declines seem to be taken seriously in Asia only if aggressively lobbied, but even then only if there is a clear and perhaps relatively easy solution readily offered," the India-based scientist wrote in an

e-mail.

Can the birds make a comeback? Dr Sundar's work in the plains of north India and southern Nepal offers a clue to what has been lost – and also what could be saved.

In some cases, some birds do better with people than without them, he noticed. The Sarus crane, for instance, is celebrated in folk tales and tolerated by farmers, in the same way they tolerate the spectacular peafowl and an array of other birds that share the land with them. Religion helps; in Hinduism, the peacock is associated with the goddess Saraswati.

In his surveys, Dr Sundar also found that the black-necked stork, a species thought to need undisturbed, large wetlands with interspersed trees, seemed to be doing fine in land planted with rice and wheat. The bird is still rare, but in India, it is not as rare as once thought.

Wildlife scientist Umesh Srivastava, who has studied plantations and logged forests in southern and north-east India – in situations similar to South-east Asia's – has found some bird species doing well in forest that has been logged.

"Huge tracts of logged forest in the tropics have significant conservation value for tropical birds, especially in South and South-east Asia," he wrote in an e-mail.

But he cautioned that logged forests are being rapidly put to other uses such as oil palm planting, which have "next to zero value for tropical biodiversity".

In Thailand, however, recent trends offer some hope, says Dr Round. "There is generally less hunting now; kids now play computer games instead of wandering around with guns. Some large birds like the painted stork and the spot-billed pelican are coming back."

The lowlands of Cambodia and Laos are increasingly being used for large-scale commercial agriculture, just as in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia. But at Tonle Sap, Cambodia's largest lake, locals have now begun earning tourism dollars in return for protecting breeding birds, some of which, like painted storks, are re-colonising parts of the region, he said.

And while the overall situation is dismal, Thailand deserves some credit for protecting the endangered green peafowl, which, breeding deep inside the Western Forest Complex that straddles the western border with Myanmar, is slowly coming back.

In Wiang Lo, as evening set in, I saw two green peacocks tentatively wandering in a cassava field. When they saw me, they immediately ran and took flight with cackling squawks of alarm and vanished into the trees at the edge of the forest.

The contrast with peacocks in India, where they are usually not so nervous in the presence of people, was stark. Here in Thailand, where they are now protected but may still be hunted, the green peacocks still distrust humans.

Birds signal the state of the environment, shining a light on our own impact on it. At a very basic level, when they run or take flight at the sight of humans, it probably means they have been hunted by people.

On a larger scale, when one by one they disappear from forest and field, it means people have killed too many for too long, or poisoned the food chain, or changed the environment so much that they cannot survive.

It is up to us, for our own sake, to read the signs.

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## ON THE EDGE OF EXISTENCE

The following is a list of Asia's 10 most endangered birds, with some of them considered to be in terminal decline.

Every ornithologist could compile his own list, and every such list may be correct because occasionally new populations of endangered birds are discovered, or birds once thought common are found to be endangered as better data is received from the field. This compilation is based on the Zoological Society of London "Edge of Existence" list published last year.

### Giant ibis

Small and declining population of this wetland bird in Cambodia.

### Bengal florican

A grassland bird, it exists in small, rapidly declining populations across eastern India and Bangladesh.

### Great Indian bustard

The heaviest flying bird in the



PHOTOS: JAMES EATON/BIRDTOUR ASIA, DEVESH GADHVI  
The small population of giant ibis (above) is declining in Cambodia, and there are fewer than 250 of the great Indian bustards (right).

world. Fewer than 250 left, in remaining grasslands of two western Indian states – Rajasthan and Gujarat.

An emergency captive breeding project is being started.

### Sumatran ground cuckoo

Endemic to Sumatra; very rare, and status unknown.

### Philippine eagle

Fewer than 1,000 birds



Philippine eagles (top, right) are fewer than 1,000, and only a tiny population of the Asian crested ibis (right) remains.



remaining in dispersed populations.

### Forest owl

Once considered extinct from its habitat in central India, a small population was discovered in 1997.

It remains critically endangered.

### White-shouldered ibis

Remnant population estimated at only around 650 adults, mostly in Cambodia.

### Sulu hornbill

The world's rarest hornbill; an estimated fewer than 30 left.

### Asian crested ibis

One tiny population left in China.

### Lesser florican

Another grassland bird, restricted to western India in a small and rapidly declining population.

## S. Korea students delay graduation amid job crunch

**Seoul** – It has been a year since media and communications student Lee Woong Hee finished his studies, but the 26-year-old plans to skip his class graduation ceremony next month because he thinks retaining his student status will help him finally land a job.

He is not alone. Youth unemployment hit a 14-year high in South Korea last year, and with hiring sluggish amid a weak economy, especially for "good" jobs with permanent status, thousands of students due to graduate early this year are expected to instead remain on campus.

"Job hunting gets harder every year. It was difficult this year and I fear it will get worse next year," said Mr Lee, who should have graduated last February.

In South Korea, many universities let students remain enrolled and use college facilities, even if they are not taking any classes. At others, students deliberately remain one or two credits short of a degree till they find a job.

"I heard from others that employers do not like graduates. They ask at interviews what you did after graduation," Mr Lee said.

Two-thirds of South Koreans aged 25-34 have a college degree, the highest proportion in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), a developed nations' club in which the average is just below 40 per cent.

Government efforts in recent years to encourage young people to

pursue careers that do not necessarily require a university degree have had limited success in a country obsessed with education.

The high rate of graduates means that many ambitious young people feel overqualified for the jobs available to them, and figure it is better to have no job than one below their expectations.

South Korea's labour market is divided between permanent jobs with a high degree of security and temporary positions that end after two years, a split that makes it harder for young people to get on a career track.

Mr Kim Jong Jin, a research fellow at the Korea Labour and Society Institute, said that many educated young people were unwilling to take temporary jobs.

"People in their mid-20s are supposed to be active in the labour market, but the market cannot exploit them as they keep on studying and preparing themselves for more stable jobs."

A government survey of 33 universities last year found the number of students delaying graduation more than doubled in three years, to more than 15,000.

The unemployment rate for new graduates in March last year tied 2013's record of 32.2 per cent, according to Korea Labour Institute data.

Later entry into the job market accelerates the greying of the workforce in the world's fastest-ageing country. Last year, the number of South Korean workers in their 50s

outnumbered those in their 20s for the first time, which will add pressure to the country's underfunded pension system when those older workers retire.

With young South Korean men required to serve two years in the military, more time on campus means even fewer working years in a country where the retirement age is 60.

A later career start often means starting families later, exacerbating a low birth rate.

"With a retirement age, if the youth enter the labour market later, it decreases their entire economic output whereas the education investment increases," said Dr Kim Gwang Suk of the Hyundai Research Centre.

Reuters



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