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SARAWAKIAN BIRDS LISTED IN THE RED DATA BOOK - PART 1

Slim Sreedharan

ABSTRACT

In 1994, the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources released a Red List of Threatened Animals Database entitled "Birds to Watch 2". It included a list of 84 Malaysian bird species that were considered likely to face extinction. Since then, in large part due to the availability of more detailed and current information, these Red Data Book lists have been refined to more accurately reflect the true status of many Malaysian birds. This, the first of a two-part paper, examines the evolution of the current Malaysian list which identifies the species considered to be most under threat. The second part will take a closer look at the individual species on those lists and evaluate their current distribution and status within Sarawak.

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INTRODUCTION

Since life on Earth began, around 500 million years ago, there have been five mass extinctions of species, all brought about by biological or physical changes at a global level. The last one, about 65 million years ago, wiped out all the dinosaurs.

We currently appear to be on the brink of a sixth mass extinction. Unlike previous ones, however, this one is almost entirely due to the activities of just one species. Man. The most successful living species on Earth also happens to be the most destructive and, ironically, self-destructive. Current extinction rates, according to

some estimates, appear to be almost equal to that which led to the dinosaur extinction. Over the last two hundred years, extinctions have been occurring 50 times faster than the natural rate.

In *Threatened Birds of the World*, published in 2000, as many as 1,186 (12.2%) of the 9,702 known bird species in the world were listed as being threatened worldwide, with 182 species listed as Critically Endangered. It also listed 128 species that had become extinct since A.D. 1500. Of the 2,700 birds found in Asia, 324 species were found to be at risk - in 1981, only 52 were listed.

Equally worrying is that 902 of these 1,186 species are forest birds, that 82% of these live in our own tropical forests.

Assuming that no action is taken to safeguard these species, making no allowance for new species entering the lists and using what they term a “responsible pessimism” scenario, the global extinction rate of bird species was seen to be as follows:

- 100 bird species would die out within the next 5 to 10 years,
- about 200 would die out within the next 20 years, and
- over 400 bird species were likely to die out within the next 100 years.

Currently, the extinction rate for birds is predicted to rise to 500 times greater than the natural rate over the next 100 years. In the six years, between 1994 and 2000 itself, a hundred new species have entered the two highest threat category lists.

Significantly, human activity is seen as the main contributing factor, the risks faced by 99% of these threatened species being due to unsustainable logging, forest clearance for agriculture and exotic timber plantations, wetland destruction, intensive agriculture, the indiscriminate slaughter of seabirds by longline fishing vessels, and trapping for the pet trade.