

SPECIAL REPORT

Red-whiskered Bulbul: are trapping and unregulated avicultural practices pushing this species towards extinction in Thailand?

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The Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus* is a relatively common bird of well-watered open country from South to South-East Asia and southern China. It is naturalised elsewhere, in Mauritius, Australia and North America (Robson 2008) and its conservation status is Least Concern (BirdLife International 2013). In Thailand the species is much in demand due to its sweet, chuckling song, and it is possibly the most widely kept native cage-bird species in the country, but it has nearly vanished from most of its Thai range due to the illegal trapping of wild birds for sale. The only recent national assessment (Tantipisanuh & Gale 2013) in which the Red-whiskered Bulbul was considered 'nationally Near Threatened' is already too conservative given its precipitous and rapid decline. Thailand's Wild Animal Reservation and Protection Act 1992 permits possession and captive breeding of Red-whiskered Bulbuls only under supposedly stringent safeguards, but this is widely flouted (Laong 2009). Most Thai provinces now have their own Red-whiskered Bulbul clubs, with over 100 clubs nationwide (K. Dumnoen pers. comm. July 2013). One of these clubs claims more than 50,000 members, each of whom was estimated by the club's director to own at least 5–10 birds, with some having 30 or more birds. The Thai captive population of Red-whiskered Bulbuls therefore now probably numbers in the millions. Some Thai government authorities have inadvertently encouraged the illegal sale and capture of Red-whiskered Bulbuls through, for example, the active promotion of Red-whiskered Bulbul singing contests.

Due partly to the active hostility of the huge bulbul fancier lobby, the suppression of trade and wild capture by the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plants Conservation (DNP), the government authority charged with biodiversity conservation and law enforcement, has been inadequate, haphazard and inconsistent. Additionally the major burden of caring for confiscated wildlife—28,139 Red-whiskered Bulbuls were confiscated from illegal bird-traders between 2007–2010 alone—has even led some DNP officials to suggest that the protected status of Red-whiskered Bulbul should be revoked (Chidkluar 2010).

In addition to the reduction or loss of the wild population, the apparently widespread practice of cross-breeding Red-whiskered Bulbuls with Yellow-vented Bulbuls *P. goaivier* presents a possible additional threat. The breeders believe that the hybrids are more aggressive, and sing more vigorously than Red-whiskered Bulbuls, giving them an advantage in bird-singing competitions. The hybrids concerned are usually backcrosses with Red-whiskered Bulbuls from which they are almost indistinguishable. Prize-winning Red-whiskered Bulbuls in national competitions are usually valued at a minimum of Baht 200,000 (about £3,800) and the highest price so far recorded is Baht 1.6 million (£31,000) (K. Dumnoen pers. comm. July 2013). There are also published records of Red-whiskered Bulbuls hybridising in captivity with Red-vented Bulbul *P. cafer*, White-eared Bulbul *P. leucotis*, White-spectacled Bulbul *P. xanthopygos*, Black-crested Bulbul *P. melanicterus* (McCarthy 2006) and Himalayan Bulbul *P. leucogenys* (Law 1921). Red-whiskered Bulbuls are also sometimes cross-bred with Stripe-throated Bulbuls *P. finlaysoni* and with Black-crested Bulbuls for ornamental purposes (anonymous breeder interview).

Seven hybrid bulbuls observed with the cooperation of breeders in September 2010 comprised five Red-whiskered Bulbul × Yellow-vented Bulbuls of different generations, a first-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul × Stripe-throated Bulbul and a first-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul × Black-crested Bulbul hybrid. Multiple digital photographs of each bird were taken for detailed evaluation of morphological characteristics while information on behaviour and lineage were obtained from the owners.

First-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul × Yellow-vented Bulbul hybrids and second-generation (backcross with Red-whiskered Bulbul) showed intermediate characteristics: short crest, lack of red cheek-patch and yellowish vent, with no black spur on the side of the breast. The breast and belly, sullied brownish in the first generation, were whiter in the second (Plates 1 & 2). A third-generation backcross (Plate 3) was similar to Red-whiskered Bulbul with a more erect crest, small reddish cheek-



Plate 1. A first-generation hybrid between Red-whiskered Bulbul and Yellow-vented Bulbul, 12 September 2010.

patch, white belly and weak black spur on the side of the breast. The vent was pale orange.

A fourth-generation hybrid (Plate 4) could not be readily distinguished from a pure-bred Red-whiskered Bulbul. It had a tall crest, black spur on the side of the breast, red cheek-patch, pure white underparts and a red vent. A white-tipped tail was present in hybrids of all generations (Table 1). Our sample size was small, however, due to the reticence

Plate 2. A second-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul backcross, 3 October 2010.



Plate 3. A third-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul backcross, 12 September 2010.



Plate 4. A fourth-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul backcross, 12 September 2010.

of the breeders we contacted. The precise characteristics of hybrids may well be more variable than we have indicated, depending perhaps upon differing combinations of maternal and paternal species.

A first-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul × Stripe-throated Bulbul hybrid (Plate 5) also showed intermediate characteristics: a short crest, small reddish cheek-patch, a duller belly, yellow vent and a white-tipped tail.

A first-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul × Black-crested Bulbul hybrid (Plate 6) showed Black-crested Bulbul characteristics of a tall black crest and a grey iris. It also showed a yellow vent, a small black stripe instead of a black spur on the side of the



Plate 6. A first-generation hybrid between Red-whiskered Bulbul and Black-crested Bulbul, 12 September 2010.

stem the decline in wild populations of the Red-whiskered Bulbul in Thailand. A new approach to Red-whiskered Bulbul conservation urgently needs to be devised in order to remove or at least seriously reduce the capture of wild birds by, and for, the burgeoning and influential aviculture lobby.

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