

Critically endangered songbird finds stronghold in S'pore

573 straw-headed bulbuls here possibly make up more than half of global wild population

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A songbird poached to the brink of extinction has found a stronghold in Singapore, with likely more than half of its global wild population making their home here, a new study has found. Conservation experts said the encouraging finding shows that conservation efforts in Singapore are paying off.

Published online earlier this month, the research found that there are about 573 straw-headed bulbuls on mainland Singapore and offshore Pulau Ubin.

These make up between 22.9 per cent and 57.3 per cent of the global wild population, said the researchers in the paper published in the journal *Bird Conservation International*.

The researchers used the existing estimates for the global straw-headed bulbul population – in the range of 1,000 to 2,499 – published by global conservation groups BirdLife International and the International Union for Conservation of Nature.

National University of Singapore Associate Professor Frank Rheindt, who supervised the study, said: “For Singapore to be holding a quarter to half of the wild world population is extraordinary.”

Threats faced by the species are multifold, he said.

Deforestation is often the initial driver of population decimation for species like the straw-headed bulbul, said Prof Rheindt, with habitat loss reducing their numbers from the millions to the thousands.

“Once weakened, the species is driven to the brink of extinction by poaching. Poaching ensures that no bird persists even in what little forest remains,” he said.

For poachers, the allure of the straw-headed bulbul lies not in its golden straw-like plumage near its crown, but its song.

Once commonly found all across its range – which spans the regions of Borneo, Indonesia’s Java and Sumatra, as well as the Thai-Malay Peninsula – it is hardly found in the wild now. In fact, the bird is considered extirpated – locally extinct – in places such as Thailand and Indonesia’s Java island.

But earlier studies had indicated that the species might be doing comparatively better in Singapore, said the study’s lead author, Mr Chiok Wen Xuan, a wildlife researcher at the Nanyang Technological University.

“Species that are imperilled by both habitat loss and wildlife are particularly interesting to me, and I thought it would be of high conservation value, which is why I decided to embark on this research project,” he said.

For instance, an updated population estimate of the species in Singapore would be of great conservation importance, said Mr Chiok, as it provides updated population

numbers for conservation planning. “It also shows how the protection of Singapore’s population is crucial in relation to its regional extirpations,” he added.

Mr Chiok said the 573 figure may well be an underestimate, as his surveys had excluded military areas like the forests in the western catchment.

His paper follows an earlier study on the straw-headed bulbul population in Singapore led by conservation scientist Yong Ding Li of BirdLife International.

In 2017, the researchers had estimated its population here to be around 202. Dr Yong said the latest study showed the conservation efforts in Singapore are paying off.

“Over time, we do expect the population of the birds to increase, so the latest numbers are encouraging,” he said, adding that the find-



The straw-headed bulbul – once commonly found in Borneo, Indonesia’s Java and Sumatra, as well as the Thai-Malay Peninsula – faces threats such as deforestation and poaching. PHOTO: COURTESY OF LIU XIAODONG

ings were timely for a straw-headed bulbul conservation plan being formulated by the Nature Society (Singapore).

Dr Adrian Loo, group director for wildlife management at the National Parks Board (NParks), said there have been no cases of confiscation or seizure of straw-headed bulbuls in the last three years.

The agency takes a zero-toler-

ance stance on keeping of wildlife, and the illegal sale and trade of wildlife and their parts and derivatives, he added.

The straw-headed bulbul has also been identified for species recovery efforts. Dr Loo said NParks is currently conducting a two-year survey of its population to get a better understanding of their abundance and distribution locally.

He added that efforts to make Singapore a City in Nature has also helped the straw-headed bulbuls to thrive here. “The establishment of nature park networks enhances Singapore’s natural capital as they safeguard and extend protection for core habitats of biodiversity,” he said.

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