

Editorial

Threatened Bird Species in Malaysia

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Malaysia's complex ecosystem of tropical lowland rainforests, montane zones, and coastal mangrove fringes hosts over 700 native avian species (Puan et al 2020; MNS Bird Conservation Council 2021). However, anthropogenic pressures, such as rapid land conversion, selective logging, and the rampant regional illegal cage-bird trade, have significantly compromised this avian diversity (Symes et al 2018).

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) categorises the extinction risk of bird species based on five quantitative criteria: population size reduction, geographic range size, small and declining population size, very small or restricted population and quantitative analysis. The IUCN Extinction Risk categories are:

- Extinct (EX): The last individual has died
- Extinct in the wild (EW): Survive only in captivity or as naturalised population outside its past range
- Critically Endangered (CR): Facing extremely high risk of extinction in the wild
- Endangered (EN): Facing a very high risk of extinction in the wild
- Vulnerable (VU): Facing a high risk of extinction in the wild
- Near Threatened (NT): Likely to qualify for a threatened category in the near future
- Least Concern (LC): Evaluated and found to have low risk of extinction
- Data Deficient (DD): Inadequate information for assessment of its extinction risk
- Not Evaluated (NE): Not assessed yet against the criteria

To support local biodiversity mapping, corporate social responsibility frameworks, and regulatory legal structures, this report highlights Malaysia's endangered bird species as categorized by the globally recognized IUCN Red List of Threatened Species and BirdLife International Data Zone metrics.

List of Critically Endangered and Endangered bird species in Malaysia.

Critically Endangered (CR) Bird Species

Common & Scientific Name	Status & Distribution in Malaysia	Primary Conservation Threats
Malay Crestless Fireback <i>Lophura erythrophthalma</i>	Rare Peninsula resident in extreme lowland forest.	Habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation due to extensive forest clearance for oil palm and logging.
Silvery Pigeon <i>Columba argentina</i>	Uncertain status on off shore Sarawak islands.	Habitat loss due to settlement and deforestation, disturbance, hunting and introduction of mammalian predators.

Helmeted Hornbill <i>Rhinoplax vigil</i>	Uncommon resident in mostly primary lowland forest.	Severe poaching for its solid keratin 'ivory' casque used in ornamental carvings, compounded by lowland forest logging.
Straw-headed Bulbul <i>Pycnonotus zeylanicus</i>	Rare resident in riverine habitats in lowland forest.	Relentless trapping to supply the Southeast Asian commercial cage-bird and songbird trade, leading to range-wide population collapses.
Chinese Crested Tern <i>Thalasseus bernsteini</i>	Rare winter visitor to Borneo coastal areas.	Population suffering from egg collection and development-driven coastal reclamation.
Spoon-billed Sandpiper <i>Calidris pygmaea</i>	Rare winter visitor to Peninsula coastal sandy tidal mudflats.	Habitat loss due to coastal reclamation in its migratory and winter ranges that has reduced its feeding and roosting sites.
Masked Finfoot <i>Heliopais personatus</i>	Rare visitor to mangroves, flooded forests, rivers and dams.	Population declining due to river siltation, hunting, and wetland clearance.
Yellow-breasted Bunting <i>Emberiza aureola</i>	Rare winter visitor to cultivation, ricefields and grasslands.	Main threat is trapping of flocks that feed and roost in its wintering sites.



Plate 1: Some Critically Endangered (CR) bird species. Clockwise from top right: Helmeted Hornbill, Straw-headed Bulbul, Masked Finfoot, Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Used with kind permission.

Endangered (EN) bird species

Common & Scientific Name	Status & Distribution in Malaysia	Primary Conservation Threats
Malayan Peacock-Pheasant <i>Polyplectron malacense</i>	Uncommon resident in extreme lowland forest. Peninsula	Habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation due to opening of plantations, mainly for oil palm and to a lesser extent rubber, timber and fruit.
Bornean Peacock-Pheasant <i>Polyplectron schleiermacheri</i>	Rare Borneo endemic in mostly lowland forest.	Forest specialist experiencing rapid population declines due to lowland forest loss and logging fire risks.
Bornean Crestless Fireback <i>Lophura pyronota</i>	Scarce Borneo resident in peat swamp and riverine forest.	Population thought to be declining rapidly due to habitat loss, compounded by habitat fragmentation and hunting.
Milky Stork <i>Mycteria cinerea</i>	Status uncertain in Peninsula (but has introduced population in Perak).	Coastal mangrove conversion for aquaculture, coastal developments, and human disturbance at its remaining Peninsula strongholds.
Storm's Stork <i>Ciconia stormi</i>	Scarce resident in lowland forest freshwater habitats	Population severely affected by mainly loss of habitat resulting from large scale agricultural conversions of forest to oil palm plantations.
Siberian Sand Plover <i>Charadrius mongolus</i>	Migrant and winter visitor in small numbers to coastal areas in Borneo.	Multiple threats, especially during passage and in wintering areas, including coastal land reclamation, loss and degradation of feeding areas due to tidal action and disturbance by fishermen.
Nordmann's Greenshank <i>Tringa guttifer</i>	Winter visitor in small numbers to mudflats, estuaries and lowland swamps.	Multiple threats in its breeding, passage and wintering areas where conversion of coastal areas for agriculture has resulted in loss and degradation of its wetlands habitat
Great Knot <i>Calidris tenuirostris</i>	Winter visitor and migrant in moderate numbers along coastal habitats.	Population threatened by habitat loss and degradation on its staging grounds such as the regional reclamation of Yellow Sea mudflats.
Far Eastern Curlew <i>Numenius madagascariensis</i>	Rare winter visitor and migrant to Peninsula; moderate in numbers to Borneo coastal areas.	Main threats occur along its migration route where coastal reclamation has resulted in habitat loss and degradation and where trapping also occurs.
Steppe Eagle <i>Aquila nipalensis</i>	Rare winter visitor in Peninsula paddylands.	Habitat loss from conversion of steppes to agricultural lands, collision with power lines, direct persecution and pesticide poisoning.



White-crowned Hornbill <i>Berenicornis comatus</i>	Uncommon resident in mainly lowland forest.	Population suspected to be declining due to habitat loss and degradation caused by agricultural expansion, logging and hunting.
Wrinkled Hornbill <i>Rhabdotorrhinus corrugatus</i>	Uncommon resident in lowland forest.	Strict lowland primary forest dependent, highly sensitive to logging and widespread commercial agriculture conversion.
Chestnut-capped Thrush <i>Geokichla interpres</i>	Rare resident in mainly primary lowland forest.	Main threats are habitat loss and illegal trapping for the cage-bird trade.
Rufous-headed Robin <i>Larvivora ruficeps</i>	Very rare winter visitor to upper montane areas in Peninsula.	One of the world's least known songbird, consisting of a very small population in a restricted range.
Greater Green Leafbird <i>Chloropsis sonnerati</i>	Uncommon resident mainly in lowland forest.	Main threats are illegal trapping for the cage-bird trade and deforestation which leads to increased access for trappers.

Conclusion

The species accounts compiled here, eight Critically Endangered and fifteen Endangered birds recorded in Malaysia, illustrate a consistent pattern across taxa and habitats: lowland primary forest specialists (hornbills, pheasants, the Straw-headed Bulbul) are being squeezed out by logging and agricultural conversion, while coastal and wetland species (storks, shorebirds, the Masked Finfoot) face parallel pressure from reclamation and habitat fragmentation along the East Asian–Australasian Flyway. Several species, like the Helmeted Hornbill, Straw-headed Bulbul and Masked Finfoot, additionally face the compounding threat of targeted trapping and trade, a driver that IUCN assessments increasingly treat as inseparable from habitat loss (Symes et al 2018). Sustaining Malaysia's status as a stronghold for regional avifauna will depend on continued habitat protection in remaining lowland and coastal strongholds, stronger enforcement against illegal trapping, and sustained monitoring, including citizen-science records such as the 2025 Chinese Crested Tern sighting, to keep national threat assessments current as IUCN categories are revised.

Useful Data Sources with Official Links

Data extraction and taxonomic structures were verified via the following conservation data repositories:

1. IUCN Red List of Threatened Species: <https://www.iucnredlist.org> (version 2026-1 accessed 19 Aug 2026)
2. BirdLife International Data Zone (Avian Taxonomy & Status Authority): <https://datazone.birdlife.org> (accessed 19 Aug 2026)
3. MNS-BCC Records Committee: <https://sites.google.com/site/mnsbccrecordscommittee/>

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References

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2. MNS Bird Conservation Council. 2021. *A Checklist of the Birds of Malaysia*. 2020 Edition. Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Nature Society. (MNS Conservation Publication No. 22).
3. Symes WS, Edwards DP, Miettinen J, Rheindt FE & Carrasco LR. (2018). Combined impacts of deforestation and wildlife trade on tropical biodiversity are severely underestimated. *Nature Communications*, 9(1), 4052. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-06579-2>

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