

PHOTO ESSAY: Ingrained in Culture, Songbird Competitions Reign

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The photo essay was produced as part of the Macaranga Mentorship on Covering Wildlife Trade and Crime, supported by Internews Earth Journalism Network (EJN). Text and Photos are by Mukhriz Hazim.

Editorial Note:

Macaranga is a journalism portal covering the environment and sustainability in Malaysia. It has produced reports on the songbird crisis locally. This report, published in April 2025, covers the Red-whiskered Bulbul. The photo essay is available from the Macaranga website at this link: <https://www.macaranga.org/ingrained-in-culture-songbird-competitions-reign/>

A platform for community, a pleasurable pastime, and continuity in tradition: songbird competitions in rural Kelantan prevail, even as their impact on wild birds is unclear.



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In a village just outside Pasir Mas, Kelantan, bird enthusiasts gather for a weekly event that might go unnoticed by most outsiders. It takes place beside Kedai Kopi Epo, a small Chinese coffee shop in Kampung Parit. Here, the focus isn't on coffee, but a competition involving the Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*—popularly known as *Merbah Jambul*. Crested bulbuls are called *candik* in Kelantan.



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In Kelantan, the Red-whiskered Bulbul is the top pick for songbird contests. Its name comes from the Malay word *jambul*, referring to its upright crest—something bird lovers believe shows confidence and spirit. With its red eye patches and proud stance, the bulbul isn't just known for its looks, but also for its voice. Keeping this bird for bird-singing competitions is part of local traditions, alongside *wau*, *gasing*, *wayang kulit*, and *silat*.



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At Kampung Parit, the competition is held in a small arena, or *bon*, beside the shop. This one species of bird draws a diverse crowd. Chinese, Malay, and Siamese bird-keepers gather not as rivals, but as friends brought together by a shared passion.



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Kampung Parit is home to a Peranakan Chinese community. Many families have called this place home for generations, speaking Kelantanese Malay and living side by side with their Malay neighbours.



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The *bon* is run by the same person who owns the coffee shop. His children manage registration from a desk inside, giving the event a family-run feel. Competitions happen every Friday, as part of a rotating circuit. Each day, a different village hosts. There's no stage or spotlight—just lined-up cages, a few focused judges, and continuous singing and calling from the birds.



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On game day, birds remain in covered cages. They are only uncovered during the match and quickly covered afterward so they can rest. Owners stay close to their birds. The quiet focus is occasionally interspersed with light conversation.



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A lot of care goes into training a bird, and this dedication is part of bird-keeping culture. It can take one to two years to fully tame and prepare bulbuls for the competitive circuit. They are sunned every morning and evening, fed fruits like papaya and banana, and bathed regularly. During training, some birds receive supplements, while on match days, a 'booster' is sometimes fed to the birds to sharpen their focus and encourage singing.



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Traditional bulbul competitions judge the birds on their voice and 'style'. But the results are often disputed, especially when judges are also competitors. In 2013, a new 'marathon' format was introduced specifically for Red-whiskered Bulbuls, offering a more objective way to score.



By 2015, the song-counting format dominated: judges count how many times a bird sings in 13 seconds. Those who make it through 4 rounds enter the finals. It's simple and clear, and boosted the game's appeal. Time-keeping though remains traditional: a bowl punched with a hole is placed in a water-filled bucket, sinking slowly until the 13 seconds is up. A whistle signals the end of the round.



For a time, the Red-whiskered Bulbul was a protected species, requiring a permit from the wildlife department to keep and compete. From 2005 to 2011, it topped Perhilitan's permit records, beating even the then popular White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus* or *Murai Batu*. Permit requirements ended in 2012 when the bird was delisted.



Once common in Kota Bharu, the number of wild Red-whiskered Bulbuls has dropped due to urbanisation and habitat loss, claim bird owners. Traders now import birds—often illegally—from Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam. Though globally listed as Least Concern in its conservation status, a 2013 study in Thailand reclassified it as nationally Near Threatened due to trapping. In Malaysia, the Malaysian Nature Society has flagged the species' decline worthy of monitoring.



Though it may seem like a quiet pastime, the tradition is deeply rooted in Kelantan and across southern Thailand. Some keep and compete their birds for enjoyment, others for social connection, and yet others for a side income. For local communities, bird-keeping is more than a game. It's about patience, pride, and staying connected to heritage. In this kampung, where birdcalls mix with friendly chatter, tradition lives on.

Citation: Mukhriz Hazim. Ingrained in Culture, Songbird Competitions Reign. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 2/2025, June 2025: pg. 85-87.