

Possible Red-whiskered Bulbul x Yellow-vented Bulbul Interspecific Hybridisation

Yoke-Mooi Liew

Hybridisation among bulbuls is rarely documented in the wild in Peninsular Malaysia. I report a possible hybridisation between a Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus* and a Yellow-vented Bulbul *P. goiavier*.

On 26 April 2026 at approximately 1358 hrs, I observed an odd-looking bulbul in Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia. I visited a nearby field to monitor a pair of Red-wattled Lapwings *Vanellus indicus*, as one bird appeared to be brooding when I last saw them at the end of March. The lapwings were still present but nothing of interest was noted with one lapwing sitting on the ground, seemingly still brooding.

After a while, I noticed a flock of perhaps at least ten Yellow-vented Bulbuls *P. goiavier* feeding at a *Macaranga tanarius* tree. The Yellow-vented Bulbul is one of the most common urban garden birds in Peninsular Malaysia. The Yellow-vented Bulbuls were very active during that hot midday afternoon, with their signature bubbly song.

Shortly thereafter, I noticed an unusual bulbul associating with the Yellow-vented Bulbuls and feeding with them. The first impression I had of the strange bird was a Red-whiskered Bulbul *P. jocosus*, but it had a shorter crest, a yellow vent and was missing the distinct red ear coverts (Plate 1). While the Red-whiskered Bulbul is naturally distributed in northern Peninsular Malaysia (Perlis, Kedah, Kelantan), it is a common species in the Asian cagebird trade (Wells 2007). Hence, where the Red-whiskered Bulbul is observed south of northern Peninsular Malaysia, these are likely escapees, with small feral populations established in Perak. The odd bulbul also reminded me of the Sooty-headed Bulbul *P. aurigaster* and the White-eared Bulbul *P. leucotis*, both non-native to Malaysia, but again this bird was not of those species.



Plate 1: Red-whiskered Bulbul x Yellow-vented Bulbul Hybrid. Ipoh, Perak, Malaysia 26 April 2026

This odd bulbul was of similar size to the Yellow-vented Bulbul. It exhibited a mix of traits - it had a crest of intermediate height, a thick black line between the bill and the eye (blackish

loral stripe like Yellow-vented Bulbul), white cheeks demarcated with a black malar stripe (like Red-whiskered Bulbul), white throat, black bill and legs, a bright yellow vent (like Yellow-vented Bulbul), brown upperparts and whitish underparts. No vocalisation was heard.

I did not know what to make of it. I decided to consult some friends, one of whom suggested it could be a hybrid and shared an interesting article with me (Techachoochert & Round 2013). In the article Techachoochert & Round (2013) describe the apparent widespread practice of cross-breeding Red-whiskered Bulbuls with Yellow-vented Bulbuls in Thailand. After comparing the bulbul to pictures of hybrids in the article, it seemed likely that this unusual bird was a cross between the common Yellow-vented Bulbul and the Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus* x *P. goiavier*. I tried looking for it again on three other occasions but could not find it. Plate 2 shows a comparison of this hybrid bulbul with a Red-whiskered Bulbul and a Yellow-vented Bulbul.

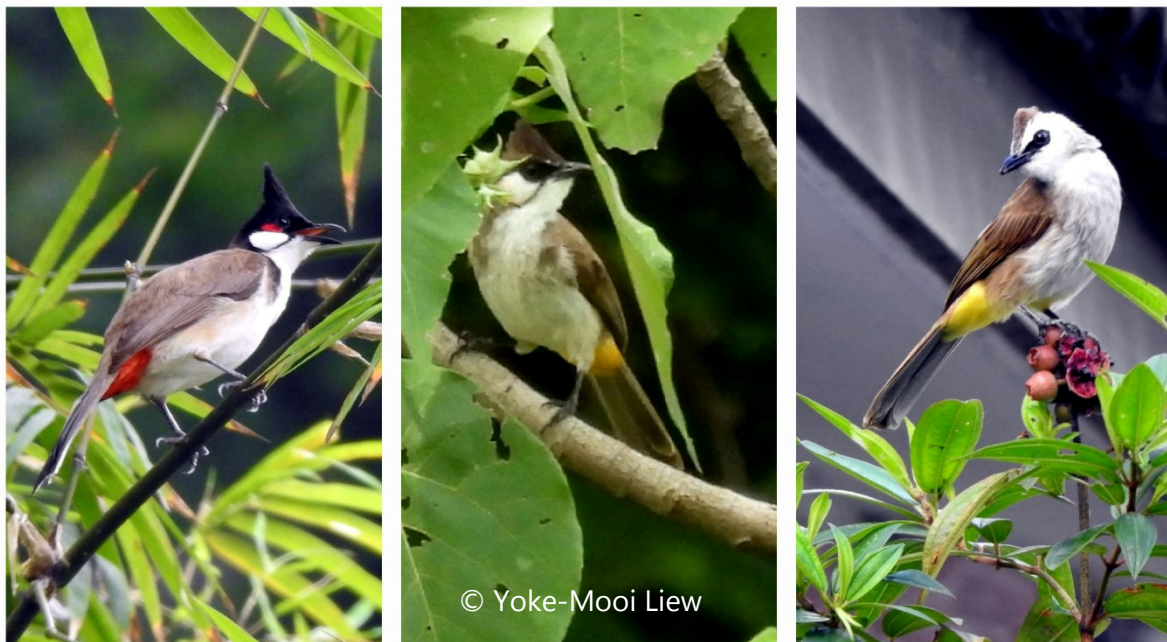


Plate 2: Comparison of the hybrid bulbul (centre) with a Red-whiskered Bulbul (left) and a Yellow-vented Bulbul (right).

One concern in identifying hybrids is that juvenile Red-whiskered Bulbuls may also exhibit a yellow-orange vent. Islam and Williams (2020) state that "*Juveniles are like adults, but with a shorter and browner crest, they lack crimson ear-patch, much weaker breast band, and their undertail coverts are pink to orange rufous*". Observations of juvenile Red-whiskered Bulbuls in Perak have often shown yellow-orange vents (Amar-Singh HSS, pers. comm.). David Wells (pers. comm.) suggests that rather than emphasising lower tail-covert colour, it might be wiser to concentrate on other characters like: the shape and relative size of the white cheek patch, and shape and size of the crest. Plate 3 shows a comparison of the possibly hybrid bulbul with a juvenile Red-whiskered Bulbul. Note that the hybrid bulbul has a shorter crest and the white cheek patch goes up to the rear contour of the eye, giving it a different shape and larger size. Note also that the interrupted breast band is less well developed in the hybrid.

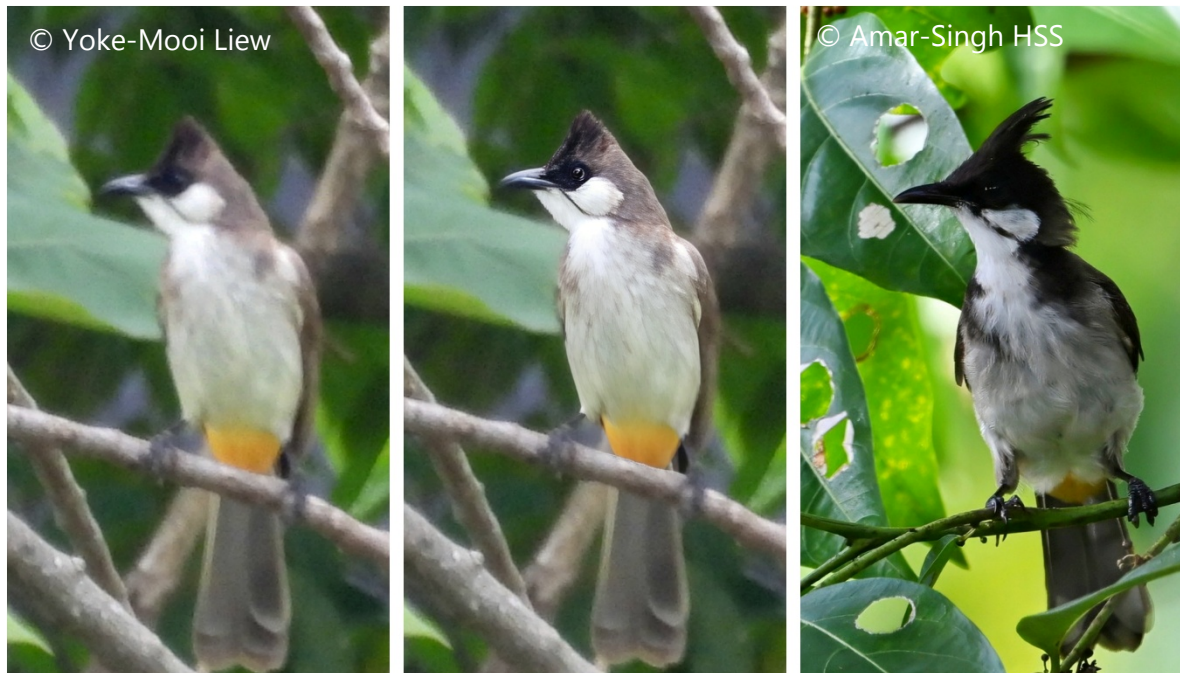


Plate 3: Comparison of the hybrid bulbul (left & centre) with a juvenile Red-whiskered Bulbul (right). The image in the middle is a digitally enhanced image to bring the bird into focus.

While hybridisation between these two species does happen (possibly due to their shared genus), it is probably largely driven by unregulated aviculture and escapees from the local songbird trade (Amar-Singh HSS et al. 2024). Hybrids have been reported between the Red-whiskered Bulbul and the Himalayan Bulbul *P. leucogenys*, White-eared Bulbul *P. leucotis*, Black-crested Bulbul *R. flaviventris*, White-spectacled Bulbul *P. xanthopygos*, Red-vented Bulbul *P. cafer*, and Brown-breasted Bulbul *P. xanthorrhous* (McCarthy 2006; Islam & Williams 2020).

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References

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