

Connectivity and Rewilding: A Birder's Personal Perspective

Roselyn Chuah

Fragmented open green spaces whether natural or created by design cannot exist in isolation. Notwithstanding efforts to recreate enhanced habitats due to loss following ceaseless and widespread developments, a fragmented environment will inevitably affect the foraging grounds and natural activities of animals of the land, water and air such as mating and breeding.

Rantaian Urban Green Spaces (RUGS) is borne on a premise that existing fragmented green spaces could be reconnected and rehabilitated to create a network of physical and ecological pathways to restore these fractured portions of the natural habitats of animals. Named the Damansara-Pantai Arc this network comprises thirteen sites that include Bukit Lanjan, Bukit Sri Bintang, Bukit Kiara, Rimba Ilmu in Universiti Malaya, Bukit Gasing, Bukit Persekutuan, Taman Tugu and Kawasan Damansara. A floral and faunal survey was undertaken last year that endeavoured to assess the biodiversity and potential ecological linkages between these sites.

RUGS's first flora and fauna survey of this three-year project under the aegis of the Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) was conducted over a period of approximately eight weeks in July to August last year, and included a birdlife diversity assessment. Forest reserves, secondary forests, community forests, recreational parks and gardens comprise the survey sites.

Whilst mindful of the geographical and terrain make-up, birds were identified by sight and diagnostic calls and songs, and of diurnal and nocturnal birds. As it was inopportune that the bird survey period could not be extended to fully include the local bird migratory season normally observed from late August to April, past observations were duly included in the findings to reflect a more comprehensive bird presence in those sites.

The aim of the bird survey was primarily bird diversity but inevitably bird population was observed too. The survey covered number of species and families, resident status and in view that the survey period just about managed to dip into the early stage of the bird migrant season, the potential presence of migrant birds was not discounted, and indeed there were sightings of early arrivals of Barn Swallows, a Blue-Winged Pitta, a Common Sandpiper, and an Oriental Honey Buzzard, possibly a migrant over-stayer of the year before.



Greater Racket-tailed Drongo *Dicrurus paradiseus*



© Roselyn Chuah
Buffy Fish-Owl *Ketupa ketupu*

More than 110 bird species representing more than 45 families of local and migrant birds, of dry land bird species namely garden, park, open country, forest and forest edge, and water birds and wetland species were recorded. Nocturnal birds of six species representing two families were recorded, with owl numbers suggesting a healthy presence in sub-urban habitats. Records of past sightings and existing literature easily added another approximate 40 local and migrant species to the numbers recorded in this survey.

The composition of habitats was very similar for most sites namely secondary forest, overgrown rubber plantation (some flanked by orchards/dusuns), ferns, vines, palm undergrowth, interspersed open country of wild grass/lalang, sub-urban overgrown woodlands. Some of the sites were bordered by enhanced garden and park corridors of residential areas and villages/kampong. A combination of natural and man-made trails featured in some of the sites. An exception of a site was one that comprised comparatively more water bodies, marshy patches, and wet undergrowth.

Against the background of these habitats, common bird species were expected and indeed sighted. The presence and healthy numbers of Near Threatened birds like White-rumped Shamas was a pleasant observation although in view of the ecological proximity of these sites, these could be the same birds moving and foraging between sites. If so, then perhaps we can happily deduce that there already exists a connectivity between these sites, an optimistic outcome that RUGS is driving at.

Common bird species of urban areas like mynas, ioras, orioles, and open country and forest edge ones like Pin-striped Tit-Babblers, Orange-bellied Flowerpeckers, Olive-winged Bulbuls, woodpeckers, and munia species were observed across all sites, again suggesting existing connectivity by virtue of aerial proximity. However, there is always the sad possibility of depleting resources and the ability to continue to sustain these healthy populations with the current endless encroachment of concrete structures such as buildings and infrastructure into these existing open green spaces.

It was also observed that there was a healthy presence of frugivorous, granivorous, insectivorous, nectivorous, omnivorous and carnivorous birds. All seemed not lost then that these remaining green spaces and enhanced habitats, due to existing mindful initiatives to try to retain or improve what's taken by infrastructure, commercial and residential developers, have already slowly regenerated to be able to sustain the diverse avian population.

However, as the sites surveyed were mainly overgrown rubber estates and secondary forest, there was a noticeable lack of lowland forest birds like barbets and broadbills. Perhaps replanting of native trees and shrubs into mature secondary forest could in future increase further bird diversity to attract forest birds like broadbills, trogons, and frogmouths. Could these species be attracted to forage and mate in enhanced habitats that will always be adjacent to areas filled with noise, fumes and dust? Could conscious and persistent initiatives of connectivity and rewilding revive damaged habitats to create more diversity to birdlife?

Could there be tolerance of some 'disorder' in enhanced environments such as leaving fallen leaves and litter alone to foster worms and insects, allowing dead trees to stand so that birds like woodpeckers and barbets could nest easily, not demand for trees fallen that are not in any way an obstruction to remain where they are – could we allow nature to rewild naturally? Perhaps then parts of the forests and jungles that have been appropriated so unconscionably in the name of development could be returned to these rightful avian inhabitants.



Barred Buttonquail *Turnix suscitator*

In addition, bird lovers could also be mindful of overzealousness when they destroy foliage in pursuing stunning bird images. Birds nest and roost in areas where they obviously feel safe and the proximity of foraging territories means that less energy and anxiety is expended especially when they leave their nests to hunt for their young. Thoughtlessness and overzealousness could cause a bird to abandon a site within their original foraging or nesting

territory to move further away to one that would pose a threat to their nest and young as the bird could be seen as entering already claimed territory.

Bird lovers may tend to underestimate their role in rewilding and connectivity in the larger scheme of helping to foster and maintain foraging, roosting and nesting territories of birds. No doubt birds naturally face predatory threats from other animals, but as the most intelligent beings, bird lovers can mindfully play a significant role to nurture the right environment for any avian activity. It might be a birding hobby for one, but it could be a do or die habitat for another.



© Roselyn Chuah

White-bellied Sea-Eagle *Ichthyophaga leucogaster*

References and Resources

1. Ahmad, A. (2023). Difficult green task. *The Star*. [online] <https://www.thestar.com.my/metro/metro-news/2023/09/25/difficult-green-task#:~:text=Called%20Rangkaian%20Urban%20Green%20Spaces,has%20named%20Da%20mansara%20Pantai%20Arc> Accessed on 15 May 2024.
2. Louis, D. A Network for Urban Wildlife. *BirdLife Asia Newsletter* April 2024 [online] <https://www.rugs.my/a-network-for-urban-wildlife/> Accessed on 15 May 2024.
3. Rantaian Urban Green Spaces (RUGS) website <https://www.rugs.my/>
4. TwentyTwo. (2023). Green spaces in Klang Valley to get new 'RUGS'. [online] <https://twentytwo13.my/news/green-spaces-in-klang-valley-to-get-new-rugs/> Accessed on 15 May 2024.

Citation: Chuah, R. (2024). Connectivity and Rewilding: A Birder's Personal Perspective. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 2/2024, June 2024: pg. 12-15.