

Special Reports

The Malaysian Songbird Crisis

Calls Grow to Protect Magpie-Robins as Trade Soars

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The story was produced as part of the Macaranga Mentorship on Covering Wildlife Trade and Crime, supported by Internews Earth Journalism Network (EJN). It was also supported by and is co-published with Dialogue Earth.

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 Oriental Magpie-Robin. The report is available from the Macaranga website at this link: <https://www.macaranga.org/calls-grow-to-protect-magpie-robins-as-trade-soars/>. It is also available on the Dialogue Earth website at this link: <https://dialogue.earth/en/nature/malaysias-booming-songbird-competition-scene-could-silence-its-forests/>. A BFM Radio Podcast on the songbird crisis with interview of Macaranga and the Malaysian Bird Report is available from this link: <https://www.bfm.my/content/podcast/malaysias-songbird-craze-and-crisis>

The Oriental Magpie-Robin's melodious song, once a staple of Malaysia's forests, is being silenced by the weight of a booming songbird trade. Demand is both domestic and from Indonesia, and enabled by gaps in Malaysian laws.

Known in Bahasa Malaysia as Murai Kampung, the Oriental Magpie-Robin *Copsychus saularis* is listed as being of Least Concern in terms of its conservation status. But thousands have been seized by authorities in Malaysia since 2020, due in part to missing documentation required for exports, and to curb the spread of disease, among other things.

Still, the bird remains a popular pet in Peninsular Malaysia as no laws prevent harvesting from the wild, ownership, breeding and sale. G. Kai Hung, an Oriental Magpie-Robin owner and enthusiast from Penang, reflects this demand. In a Pantai Dalam park in Kuala Lumpur, his bird is competing in a songbird contest that he paid RM40 to enter. Originally bought for thousands of ringgit, the bird's value has soared after a string of wins, demonstrating the economic allure of songbirds. "After the bird wins, more people want it. Then you can sell it for a higher price," he says.



Plate 1: The Oriental Magpie-Robin is currently classified as a species of Least Concern by the IUCN Red List

The Oriental Magpie-Robin, with its distinctive black and white plumage stretching from shoulder to wingtip, and a white belly, is a favourite among bird enthusiasts, easily recognised by its flicking tail and melodic song (Plate 1).

Everyone wants to own a Murai Kampung but are there enough wild birds to feed this demand? Growing songbird ownership, enabled by weak laws, is pushing Oriental Magpie-Robins into cages – with growing concern over wild populations.

Kai Hung is not alone in his passion for Oriental Magpie-Robins. Weekly contests draw hundreds of hobbyists across Malaysia, many unaware or unconcerned that their passion may be driving the species' decline. Interest in songbirds has risen sharply in recent years, according to Jasni Jaafar, president of the Persatuan Peminat Unggas Malaysia (Malaysia Bird Enthusiast Association), with more events organised across the country. Competitors vie for trophies by showcasing birds judged on sound, endurance and appearance, he explains (Plate 2).



Plate 2: Owners whistle to their birds during a competition in a public park in Kuala Lumpur.

With sales growing as a result of such contests, increasing in frequency in Malaysia and Indonesia in recent years, conservationists warn of declining wild populations. According to internal research by global wildlife watchdog TRAFFIC– and shared with Macaranga – 18,648 Oriental Magpie-Robins were seized in 79 trafficking cases, many destined for Indonesia.

The trade is also thriving online, with songbirds found for sale on platforms like Facebook and Mudah.my, according to the [Malaysian Bird Report 2024](#), published by ornithologists. Dr Amar-Singh HSS, the report's editor, notes that online sales – including those conducted on peer-to-peer social media groups, such as WhatsApp and Telegram – are harder to track than those in pet shops due to struggles with enforcement.

What's more, the Oriental Magpie-Robin can be traded internationally as it is not listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna (CITES). According to the [Songbirds in Trade database](#), international trade is a driver of the species' decline alongside pressure from domestic markets. TRAFFIC adds that high demand from Indonesia is a particularly serious threat. Oriental Magpie-Robins were previously common in



Java, but are now considered urgently impacted by trade in East Java and neighbouring Bali, according to the Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group. It warns that the species' "*extinction may be imminent*" in those regions without immediate action. The Oriental Magpie-Robin offers a snapshot of what can happen when demand grows unchecked and protections lag behind. Conservationists say it sits at one end of a trade-regulatory spectrum: still unprotected at the national level, yet highly sought after.

In contrast, the [White-rumped Shama](#) *Copsychus malabaricus*, once also heavily trafficked, is now regulated in Peninsular Malaysia under the Wildlife Conservation Act, requiring a slew of licenses and permits for everything from ownership to trading. Its international trade is also regulated.



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Plate 3: Global trade in the White-rumped Shama is now regulated under CITES.

The Oriental Magpie-Robin was actually [once listed](#) as a protected species under the Wildlife Conservation Act 2010, but was quietly [removed in a 2012 amendment](#) without public explanation. As early as April 2011, the Department of Wildlife and National Parks (Perhilitan) had indicated this was coming. In response to a Facebook post, the department confirmed the bird was still protected at the time, but added that it was "*working to remove the species from the list*". Conservationists believe the bird's popularity among hobbyists and cultural groups likely played a role in that decision. "*Keeping birds is popular and it's a very old tradition*," said one conservationist, who spoke to Macaranga on condition of anonymity. "*Putting any songbird on a protected list means dealing with thousands of complaints, objections from community groups, associations, politicians and state governments*," the conservationist added.

In an email to Macaranga, the director of Perhilitan Kelantan confirmed that the Oriental Magpie-Robin was removed from the list "*because of objections from NGOs, and the consideration [for the removal] was for the purposes of local community culture and hobbies*". Asked if the bird would be re-listed, he said that would require "*thorough research in Kelantan and the whole of Peninsular Malaysia*". Detailed discussions would also be needed, he added (Plate 4).

This regulatory void fuels an unchecked trade. Since 2020, unpublished data from TRAFFIC shared with Macaranga, showed 79 seizures of songbirds in Malaysia, yet convictions remain rare, underscoring enforcement woes. The species is also not listed under [Sarawak's Wild Life Protection Ordinance 1998](#). Sabah is the only state that lists the bird as a protected species, with hunting, collection and possession allowed only with a permit under its [Wildlife Conservation Enactment 1997](#). Its permit-based approach hints at a solution, but scaling it is likely to face resistance.



Plate 4: The trophies at the songbird competition in Kuala Lumpur. Each win raises the monetary value of birds.



Plate 5: 'Daniel' breeds and trains Oriental Magpie-Robins in his farm in Kuala Krai, Kelantan.

Daniel (a pseudonym) helps his family manage a small bird farm in Kuala Krai, Kelantan, where they breed, trap and sell songbirds, including Oriental Magpie-Robins (Plate 5). Wild-caught Oriental Magpie-Robins, he explains, take up to 2 years to tame. *"At first, they can't sit still in the cage. They're constantly flapping their wings and jumping around,"* he says. *"After 2 years, they're tamed, but they can lose their fighting spirit."* To retain that competitive edge, Daniel prefers training them as young birds. He believes this helps preserve their fierceness for songbird competitions.

Daniel observes where wild mother birds build their nests – often in short trees – and waits until the chicks hatch. *"The mothers usually lay 3 to 4 eggs,"* he says. *"About a week after hatching, I'll take all the chicks home to feed."* Do the mothers notice their babies are missing? Daniel shrugs. *"They're very relaxed. As long as the nest isn't damaged, they'll come back and lay eggs again."* Once mature and trained for competition, an Oriental Magpie-Robin's price can rise by 6 times, according to Daniel.

With most birds destined for cages and competition arenas, conservationists fear not enough will remain in the wild to replenish the population.



Plate 6: Oriental Magpie-Robins can fight each other when put together as they are territorial.

To address the growing threat, wildlife experts say the species must be protected, following the example of Sabah. *"No action against trafficking, regulation of capture, commercial trade or commercial breeding can be carried out without this,"* says TRAFFIC programme manager Serene Chng.

Sabah also offers lessons in how birdwatching tourism can support conservation. The state's Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Environment has been working with the local birdwatching association to position Sabah as a leading global birdwatching destination. Amar says the model demonstrates that economic incentives can help shift communities away from poaching. *"Birdwatching tourism offers real income,"* he notes. *"Bird guides can earn good money – it's far more sustainable than poaching."*

Between 2020 and 2024, Oriental Magpie-Robins accounted for more than half (18,648) of the over 36,000 songbirds seized across Malaysia. Of the 79 seizures already mentioned, where details are available, 10 involved birds bound for nearby countries – most often Indonesia. Johor and Sarawak have emerged as key transit hubs, frequently linked to cross-border trade due to their proximity to Sumatra and Kalimantan, according to internal research shared by TRAFFIC. It added that the seizure number reflects the enforcement efforts in the area.

Internal TRAFFIC data revealed that Johor, in particular, has emerged as the epicentre: with nearly 28,000 birds confiscated between 2020 to 2024. A separate 2021 report highlighted smuggling routes via sea across the Singapore Strait from southeastern Johor to Indonesia's Riau Islands, and overland in Borneo, from Sarawak to Kalimantan. Seizures often involve large numbers of birds. In January 2020, Malaysian police seized 1,780 Oriental Magpie-Robins and 100 White-rumped Shamans near Johor's southeastern coast. This is the largest single seizure recorded during the 4-year period, TRAFFIC data confirmed. A local man in his 40s was arrested.

TRAFFIC has called on wildlife authorities in Peninsular Malaysia and Sarawak to expedite listing the species as protected under their respective laws. *"Protection does not mean a ban,"* says Chng. *"It allows trade to be regulated and monitored through licences."*

Chng also urges decision-makers to learn from the case of the Straw-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus zeylanicus*. Once abundant across the Greater Sunda Islands of Indonesia and Malaysia, lax enforcement of laws and soaring demand has [decimated its wild populations](#) in a matter of years. It is listed as Critically Endangered globally.

Ecologically, the stakes of losing the Oriental Magpie-Robin are high, she notes: *"As an insectivore, the Oriental Magpie-Robin helps regulate insect populations. They are also prey and therefore a food source for larger predators."* The consequences extend far beyond a single species. *"Losing bird species can impact pollination, seed dispersal, pest control and other key ecosystem services,"* she adds.



Plate 7: The Straw-headed Bulbul is now classified

as Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List.

"It also means a silent forest [as birds have been removed], and long-term impacts on birdwatching tourism and local livelihoods."

She continues: *"Removing too many [Oriental Magpie-Robins] from the forest could put them at risk of extinction. The faster the government acts, the better – Malaysia still has a chance to stop this."*

Citation: Choon-Chyuan Low. Calls Grow to Protect Magpie-Robins as Trade Soars. *Malaysian Bird Report*. Volume 2/2025, June 2025: pg. 70-76.

Appendix

The eBird data trends for the Oriental Magpie-Robin for the years 2015-2022 shows a marked decline (-6.7%, 95% CI -2.2 to -12.9) in Malaysia.

