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Rob Report

Back into the Wild

Bali Starling Conservation Project is local success story

by Rob Parsons

write the author

March 20, 2008

The 13,000 islands that comprise the Republic of Indonesia are home to more than 235 million people, making it the fourth most populous nation in the world, after China, India and the United States. The sheer number of people continue to extend their reach to once remote regions, decimating bio-diverse rainforest habitats for profit. Teak and other hardwoods are logged, even in protected regions such as national parks, while the local government does little to stop the cutting.



Bali Starling

Many areas, especially in Riau, Sumatra, and Kalimantan, Borneo, are slashed and burned, clearing areas for palm oil plantation expansion. The persistent burning, along with draining of carbon-rich peat bog areas, has earned Indonesia the dubious distinction of being the world's third largest carbon emitting nation, while topping the ignominious list of the fastest rate of deforestation on the planet. The island of Sumatra has seen 80 percent of its original rainforest area disappear over the past few decades.

The loss of habitat has many majestic creatures fighting for survival. While the orangutan has been somewhat of a poster child for environmental groups spreading awareness about Indonesia and Malaysia's rapid forest loss, other threatened and endangered species include the Sumatran rhinoceros, Borneo pygmy elephant, Sumatran tiger, clouded leopard and many species of forest

birds.

The conservation efforts to restore populations of the revered Bali Starling provide a glimmer of hope in the otherwise grim picture. Recognized as endangered since 1970, its numbers continued to dwindle, bringing it virtually to the brink of extinction. Since 1999, however, the Bali Starling Conservation Project, under the auspices of Begawan Giri Foundation, has conducted a successful captive breeding program, and has returned many birds back into the wild.

The Bali Starling, also known as the Bali Mynah, is striking in appearance-shrouded in white feathers, with black wing tips and tail, and bright blue feathers around its eyes. Locally called "Jalak Bali," it is celebrated in the artwork of Bali's world-renowned painters. However, few of the local artists may have ever seen a live Jalak Bali.

Jennifer Croes is an emissary from Australia working to promote the Bali Starling Conservation Project. Though of Dutch-Indonesia ethnic roots, her lilting Aussie accent marks her clearly from "Down Under"—her home is in Melbourne. She is in charge of PR and Marketing for one year, as part of the VIDA program—Volunteers for International Development from Australia.

I met Jen at her booth at the four-day Bali Spirit Festival—a potpourri of ethnic and cultural music, dance, yoga, food, crafts, and much more—at the amazing

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outdoor center for the arts at Puranati, Gianyar, Bali. She was one of a few non-profit organizations sharing information about their endeavors, along with the Sumatran Orangutan Society, and the Bumi Sehat Birthing Center.

The festival itself was a feast for the senses. Headline musical acts included Tina Malia, Australia's Murray Kyle, Traditional North Indian Sufi style singers Fannah Fi Allah, Balinese grunge-metal rockers Navicula, and Balawan Fusion, a product of the local village, but with an international Sony recording contract. Their amazing blending of Balinese gamelan with jazz wowed the crowd, especially the blazing fast the lead guitar player, who used synth programs to make his guitar mimic the electric organ, trumpet, drums, and even human voice.

Festival program presenters included Mauians Lily Diamond teaching Jivamukti yoga, African dancer/drummer Baba Kauna, and my wife Heather Neeraja, leading *kirtan* sessions of *bhajan* singing.

Against this diverse creative and cultural backdrop, Jen explained the saga of the Bali Starling, or *Leucospa rothschildi* (named for the British ornithologist, Lord Rothschild, who first described the bird in 1912.) Despite having been identified with endangered species status, the population of the endemic "Jalak Bali" had dwindled to one breeding pair in captivity.

In 1999, the Begawan Giri Foundation arranged to bring home two pairs of Bali Starlings from private collectors in England to commence the breeding and conservation efforts. A collaboration began with Bali's leading avian veterinarian, Dr. Bayu Wirayudha.

Besides his work as Director of Begawan Giri, Dr. Wirayudha is also active with the Friends of the National Park, and with reforestation efforts in conjunction with the Borneo Orangutan Society. Speaking to me on the final day of the festival, he noted that the amount the Bali Starling commanded on the black market helped spell their demise. An individual bird would fetch as much as 15-20 million rupiah—or as much as \$16,500 to \$22,000 in U.S. dollars.

Bayu said this was too great a temptation for some to resist in a country where wages are typically very low. He called it more of a "gray market," remarking, "People knew the bird was endangered, but they bought and sold it anyway. It even brought more money than the Bird-of-Paradise."

Though begun under much scrutiny and with skepticism, the Bali Starling Conservation Project has successfully bred 93 birds over the past decade. Releases back into the wild began in 2006, on the nearby island of Nusa Penida.

In 2005, the facilities and birds were moved from Bali to Nusa Penida, the island located 16 kilometers to the south. From Pedangbai Harbor, Nusa Penida looms on the horizon looking very reminiscent of Kaho`olawe viewed from the south coast of Maui.

Dr. Wirayudha set up the Nusa Penida Bird Sanctuary, working together with traditional councils consisting of 35 villages. All agreed to apply traditional law, referred to as "Awig-Awig," to regulate and sanction protection of the birds. If Awig-Awig should be breached, the offender would face a stiff fine, and would be ostracized from the community.

Birds selected for release are placed in socialization enclosures, and are trained to find their own food and water and to be predator savvy. The first release of 25 birds took place in July, 2006 in a ceremony involving the local temples and villages. The event was attended by provincial and local government officials.

The birds, which mate for life, soon paired up and found suitable nesting sites. The first eggs hatched in September 2006, resulting in the first wild-reared Bali Starlings flying free. In December 2006, another 12 birds were released, and to date, 57 birds have taken wing on Nusa Penida. Another release is planned for July 2008.

The Bali Starling Conservation Project's vision is to rehabilitate the wild population numbers of the national mascot, the "Jalak Bali," and to conserve its natural habitat through community education and involvement. The wild population must reach a viable level to ensure that it doesn't go the way of the Dodo—an image Jen uses to bring attention to the plight of the Bali Starling and scores of other birds teetering on the brink of extinction.

The Dodo, a flightless bird of New Zealand hunted to extinction well over two

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The Dodo, a flightless bird of New Zealand hunted to extinction well over two hundred years ago, recalls the mao-nalos, a flightless goose of Hawai`i which according to archaeological data found in lava tubes met a similar fate with the influx of Pacific Islanders over a millennium ago.

Most of Hawai`i's endangered birds, however, suffer from habitat loss, not human predation. Sandalwood forest were decimated in the early 1800's, followed by clearing for grazing animals, and for vegetable growing to ship to California during the Gold Rush. More habitat was lost with the conversion of thousands of acres to sugar cane and pineapple plantations. More recently, feral goats, deer, and pigs continue to impact native forest areas.

The result is that Hawai`i's endemic birds, most notably the large family of honeycreepers, have been forced to retreat to non-ideal habitats, in much wetter forest regions. More rainfall means more mosquitoes, which are carriers of avian malaria.

Loss of biodiverse rainforest habitats is causing untold pressure to countless species of birds, mammals, insects, plants and reptiles. Scientists can barely keep up with identifying new species found in such regions. A few days ago, the *Jakarta Post* announced a new species of bird had been identified on one of the remote islands of Sulawesi.

Successful conservation efforts are absolutely deserving of both celebration and our continuing support. Yet, they are also indicative of the overwhelming impacts of our own species on thousands of others with which we share the planet. The success of our species, and myriads of other majestic creatures, will depend on our ability to halt the widespread destruction for profit of our remaining wild regions of the Earth. *MTW*

For more information see: <http://www.begawangirifoundation.org>

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Rob Report Back into the Wild Bali Starling Conservation Projec
March 25, 2008 | 06:22 AM

Dear Rob

Just want to make clear some points as below

I am not only active with FNPF but the founder and Director of FNPF in the last 11 years, Nusa Penida Bird Sanctuary accomplishment was done through FNPF ONLY by financial support from the gibbon foundation. FNPF approached 35 villages to make traditional regulation that known as awig - awig started april 2004. It took over than two years to convince the local community to do this. We did a lot of meeting, conservation education, reforestation and other support program in order to make the local understand about the program and to show that we are not only asking thing but also willing to give. My work with orangutan and its habitat in borneo is FNPF work not in conjunction with Borneo Orangutan Society.

Would be very much appreciated if you reconfirm the article before you publish it.

Thank you for your concern

Best wishes,

Bayu

Drh I Gede Nyoman Bayu Wirayudha

Bali Starling
March 25, 2008 | 03:35 PM

Nice to see the article on the Bali Starling. Thought you might like to know that it was a Hawaii resident that first bred the first Starling in Bali. I live on the Big Island and was asked to come to Bali in 1993 to set up breeding programs for endangered Birds in Indonesia. Bayu who I remain friends with worked for me at that time. The first birds were brought to me from local sources and were thought to be two females. After one look I knew we had a pair. Having been a bird breeder for 25 years it didn't take much to convince the pair to go to nest. And they did it on public display. 3 Babies were born within a few months. Actually I believe the picture in your article is the father of the first chicks. I left Bali three years later and Bayu carried on the work with the help of a hotel owner. They managed to get a couple more pairs to increase the blood lines and 15 years later this is what has come of it. I changed professions and now make Hawaiian jewelry that can be seen at places like the Dolphin Galleries, Honolulu Academy of Arts,