

AUGUST 10, 2016

work in the field

Beautiful Birds of Bali



Bali Starling Photo by Lori Rogalski

Los Angeles Zoo animal keepers regularly participate in field projects where their expertise benefits species in danger of extinction. Established in 2003 by donor and former Zoo Commission President Shelby Kaplan Sloan, the Animal Keeper Advanced Studies Fund (now underwritten by donor and former trustee Dominic Ornato) encourages these opportunities. In 2016, Animal Keeper Lori Rogalski took a break from the Zoo's Avian Conservation Center where she cares for many rare and endangered bird species to participate in a Bali starling conservation project. Her goal was to lend her skills to the project and to gain insights that might enhance the Zoo's efforts to breed its Bali starlings. Rogalski shares her insights and travel experience to shine a light on this special species.

A STUDY IN BALI STARLING CONSERVATION

After over 24 hours of traveling, I finally made it to Pejeng, Bali, the headquarters to Friends of National Parks Foundation. Gede Nyoman Bayu Wirayudha (we call him Bayu) founded the organization to help protect land for orangutans and later added the critically endangered Bali starling to his mission. The Bali starling is the only endemic vertebrate in Bali, and their numbers are so low they were once thought to be extinct in the wild. Bayu knew this beautiful bird was worth saving and is working hard to breed and release them back into the wild. And I couldn't agree more. The L.A. Zoo has one pair of Bali starlings that we would love to see produce chicks, but they have not been cooperating. All these reasons, and a few more, are why I am here. If one man can successfully breed these amazing birds, release them into the wild, and work with local people to protect them, then I want to help and learn.

My journey starts in Pejeng where he breeds the starlings as well as pied mynahs and black-winged starlings, which are even more endangered than the Bali starlings. To own a Bali starling is considered a status symbol in many countries, so they are poached for the pet trade as soon as they are released into the wild. This makes it extremely important that the locals work to help protect them.

After a traffic-filled yet interesting drive from the airport, I sit at Bayu's kitchen table outside and sip some deliciously strong Balinese coffee. I am then set up in my guest room, which I will call home for the next week. It consists of a bed covered in a mosquito net, a shower with a rock floor, and a toilet. It has a little porch with chairs and a fish tank, though the ground is always swarming with large ants. All in all, a lovely place to call home.

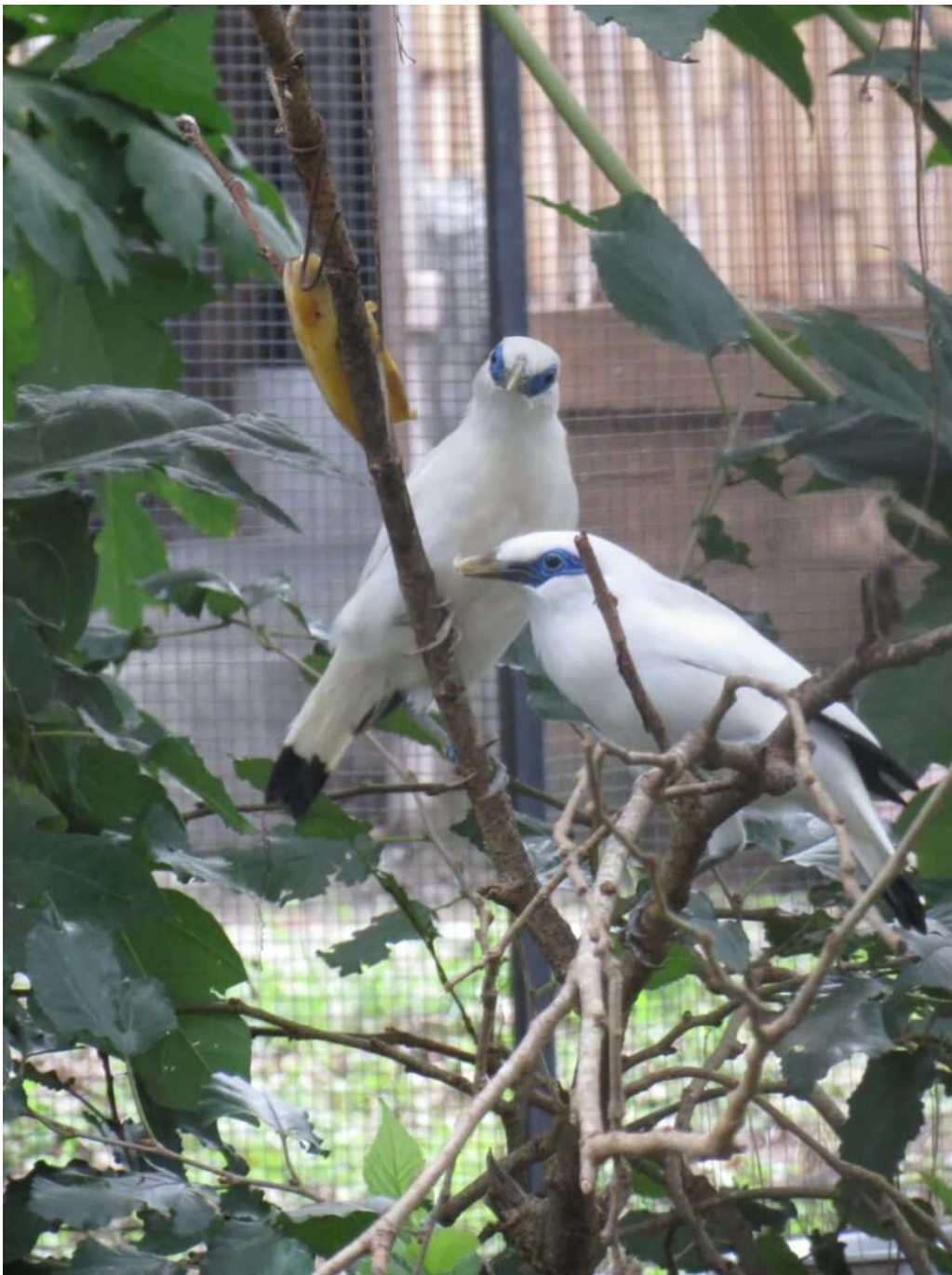


Lori Rogalski and Gede Nyoman Bayu Wirayudha (A.K.A. "Bayu")

At 6 a.m., I am awakened by kettledrums (the world's largest kettledrum is next door), chanting, dogs barking, roosters crowing, and best of all, Bali starlings singing! I hop out of bed, slather myself in mosquito repellent and sunscreen, then meet Bayu in the yard. We go straight to work, heating up "baby food" for the Bali starling chick and collecting mealworms and crickets for the Bali starling chicks and the black-winged starling chick. We listen for the chicks as the parents are in the nest boxes feeding them and sneak a peak inside when the parents are done. Unfortunately, one of the Bali starling chicks passed away overnight, but its sibling still looks healthy. The black-winged starling is looking well too. The rest of the day doesn't slow down; the chicks need to be fed every two hours, and we take a scooter to the local bird store to buy more crickets. We clean out the trays of mealworms, and I observe a beautiful pair of pied mynahs who seem to be setting on their own eggs. This pair later rewards me by flying into my head every time I feed them.

In the evening, I feed all the birds by myself in the pouring rain. It's surprisingly peaceful, despite me trying to remember whom to feed what and where all the birds are located. We waste nothing; the goats and fish get leftovers, we pick up fallen flowers to feed the crickets, and the dirt from the mealworms makes excellent fertilizer. Not a bad start for my first day! I am too exhausted from the day to be jet-lagged, so by the time the sun goes down, I am ready for bed. I can't wait to see what the rest of the week has in store for me.

As my first week comes to an end, I am more comfortable in this extremely different environment. It's always wet or raining; nothing is ever quite dry. I figured out I can hang my clean clothes in front of a fan to get them to damp instead of wet, so that is helpful. I've grown used to the unusual mixture of smells that lingers in the air—a combination of Indonesian food, incense, burning trash, and wet dog. This smell seems odd, considering I am surrounded by lush greenery. I absolutely love sitting on my porch, watching the wildlife constantly moving around me. Brightly-colored lizards wander by, toads and frogs hop past me, butterflies float around, and the sky is always filled with a variety of birds flying around catching bugs in the air.



Juvenile Bali Starlings Photo by Lori Rogalski

I continue to wake up at dawn to the sounds of starlings, crickets, and roosters. I feed the birds first thing. They recognize me now, so as I walk by their enclosures to get to the kitchen, they fly toward me, vocalizing. I smile and tell them good morning. They yell at me that they are hungry, which I take as a "good morning" back.

Unfortunately, the second Bali starling chick died too. The adults are just not good parents and fed themselves before the baby. Both were hand-raised and never learned how to properly parent. So we separate them, and each will get a new parent-raised mate in the hope that their new partners will teach them how to care for chicks.

Luckily, the black-winged starling parents are great! They even fight over who gets to feed the chick first. We are also eagerly awaiting the hatching of the Asian pied starling chick (or chicks). As I get their meals ready, I watch tiny geckos zoom around on the kitchen wall and call out to their mates. Not bad company, if you ask me.

My own lunch here is also an adventure. I take a walk up the road, dodging motorbikes as I have to step off the sidewalk to avoid large holes, but it is worth it! I find a food stall, or warung, owned by a friendly woman named Annie. She stir fries up the local favorite food of red rice, vegetables, chilies, and eggs in her wok and serves it fresh to me. This amazing dish is only \$2! She teaches me some Balinese, and I teach her some English before I am on my way back to the birds.



School sign near the Friends of National Parks Foundation office Photo by Lori Rogalski

The birds and FNPF office live rent-free at a local school, so I share the space with playing children and friendly teachers. A sign above one of the classrooms says, "Today I will cause no harm." What a great lesson to teach! I read it many times a day and keep this phrase in my mind.

I also visit the Bali Wildlife Rescue Center (BWRC), yet another project the FNPF runs. It's a beautiful rehabilitation center for Indonesian animals. When we park, I get out of the car to see a five-month-old sun bear! He was confiscated from poachers and will be raised at BWRC so he can hopefully be released back in the wild when he is old enough. The center is filled with animals I have seen only in pictures or that I have never heard of, like leaf monkeys and Pesquet's parrots. All are being rehabilitated for release unless their injuries are too severe, in which case they get to stay at this lovely facility and continue to be cared for by the friendly staff and volunteers. I regret not adding another week onto my stay to volunteer here, but maybe next time...

I have learned more than I hoped from Bayu about the unique and special birds. I can't wait to get home and share the knowledge with my coworkers and implement all the new ideas with the pair of Bali starlings waiting for me back at the L.A. Zoo. But tomorrow I will pack up and head out on yet another adventure to see Bali starlings in the wild! I can't wait to see these gorgeous birds flying free in this lush environment.

The next day, I take an hour-long car ride and a 30-minute speed boat ride to get to the island of Nusa Penida. On the beach, a smiling man greets me and takes me on another car ride to FNPF's center. We drive through the village, which is smaller and much less busy and developed than the villages on the main island of Bali. Then we drive up toward the top of the island. The unpaved "road" is very narrow. As we go up what seems to be an 80-degree angle, the van slides backwards, and the driver has to work to get the car up the rest of the way. I thought the worst was over, but then we went down. I tried not looking but couldn't look away. I held my breath and clenched my teeth, then all of a sudden, we were at our destination.

Anggie, the director of this location, greets me, shows me to my room, and points out where the kitchen is located. All the rooms are little cottages with two mosquito net-covered twin beds and a lovely wooden balcony. The toilets and showers are located outside and next door to the rooms. The view is stunning—treetops for miles.



The view from Nusa Penida Photo by Lori Rogalski

The air smells fresh and clean. Most tourists have not yet discovered this island and few people live here, so the pollution is minimal, and it is beautifully quiet. It also has some of the best snorkeling in Bali with its untouched coral reefs and manta rays who allow you to swim among them.

My volunteer task is wildlife monitoring. Each day, I wake up with the sun, douse myself in bug spray and sunscreen (that still hasn't changed), and then walk down the hill on an unpaved pathway through a thick tree forest to get to the main road. As I pass, the villagers smile and wave, their dogs run out to say hello, and pretty brown cows look up at me with tingling bells.

There are 66 wild Bali starlings, and I am trying to find them in this lush forest. Unfortunately, my dream of observing wild Bali starlings never happens. I instead have to settle for learning what Anggie knows about these elusive birds. I learn they are not long distance fliers and never travel far from their release site. FNPF hangs nest boxes in the trees, which the birds seem to prefer. But these fragile birds are easily scared out of their homes, some of which that have been taken over by swarms of bees or visiting geckos. (Keep in mind, the geckos here grow to be the size of a man's forearm.) FNPF just puts up more boxes—in fact, two new nest boxes rode over with me on the speedboat.

The community plays a large part in releasing Bali starlings back into the wild; the release site is the local temple. When birds are released there, the locals are bound to honor and protect them. It's too bad the townspeople can't guard the nest boxes from invading critters too!

Other volunteers plant trees and teach local children English. FNPF matches each volunteer with projects that match their skills and interests. The group takes a holistic approach that gives volunteers what they want, helps the villagers, and helps the local wildlife.

Even though my wish to see wild Bali starlings flitting about did not come true, I do feel enriched by my time on Nusa Penida and in Pejeng. I learned more than I imagined I would, not only about Bali starlings but also about Bali. The people are warm and friendly, the flora is lush in vivid shades of green, and the wildlife is unique and wonderful. I am happy to know that FNPF is working hard to protect Bali and all its inhabitants. I am also thankful I had the chance to immerse myself in this fascinating place. Now I look forward to my journey home to Los Angeles where I will share all my new knowledge with my coworkers at the Zoo, my friends, and anyone else who will listen.