SPECIAL REPORT

## Red-whiskered Bulbul: are trapping and unregulated avicultural practices pushing this species towards extinction in Thailand?

SUPATCHAYA TECHACHOOCHERT & PHILIP D. ROUND

The Red-whiskered Bulbul Pycnonotus jocosus is a relatively common bird of well-watered open country from South to South-East Asia and southern China. It is naturalised elsewhere, in Mauritius, Australia and North America (Robson 2008) and its conservation status is Least Concern (BirdLife International 2013). In Thailand the species is much in demand due to its sweet, chuckling song, and it is possibly the most widely kept native cage-bird species in the country, but it has nearly vanished from most of its Thai range due to the illegal trapping of wild birds for sale. The only recent national assessment (Tantipisanuh & Gale 2013) in which the Red-whiskered Bulbul was considered 'nationally Near Threatened' is already too conservative given its precipitous and rapid decline. Thailand's Wild Animal Reservation and Protection Act 1992 permits possession and captive breeding of Red-whiskered Bulbuls only under supposedly stringent safeguards, but this is widely flouted (Laong 2009). Most Thai provinces now have their own Red-whiskered Bulbul clubs, with over 100 clubs nationwide (K. Dumnoen pers. comm. July 2013). One of these clubs claims more than 50,000 members, each of whom was estimated by the club's director to own at least 5-10 birds, with some having 30 or more birds. The Thai captive population of Red-whiskered Bulbuls therefore now probably numbers in the millions. Some Thai government authorities have inadvertently encouraged the illegal sale and capture of Red-whiskered Bulbuls through, for example, the active promotion of Red-whiskered Bulbul singing contests.

Due partly to the active hostility of the huge bulbul fancier lobby, the suppression of trade and wild capture by the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plants Conservation (DNP), the government authority charged with biodiversity conservation and law enforcement, has been inadequate, haphazard and inconsistent. Additionally the major burden of caring for confiscated wildlife—28,139 Red-whiskered Bulbuls were confiscated from illegal bird-traders between 2007–2010 alone—has even led some DNP officials to suggest that the protected status of Red-whiskered Bulbul should be revoked (Chidkluar 2010).

In addition to the reduction or loss of the wild population, the apparently widespread practice of cross-breeding Red-whiskered Bulbuls with Yellowvented Bulbuls P. goaivier presents a possible additional threat. The breeders believe that the hybrids are more aggressive, and sing more vigorously than Red-whiskered Bulbuls, giving them an advantage in bird-singing competitions. The hybrids concerned are usually backcrosses with Red-whiskered Bulbuls from which they are almost indistinguishable. Prize-winning Redwhiskered Bulbuls in national competitions are usually valued at a minimum of Baht 200,000 (about £3,800) and the highest price so far recorded is Baht 1.6 million (£31,000) (K. Dumnoen pers. comm. July 2013). There are also published records of Red-whiskered Bulbuls hybridising in captivity with Red-vented Bulbul P. cafer, White-eared Bulbul *P. leucotis*, White-spectacled Bulbul *P.* xanthopygos, Black-crested Bulbul P. melanicterus (McCarthy 2006) and Himalayan Bulbul P. leucogenys (Law 1921). Red-whiskered Bulbuls are also sometimes cross-bred with Stripe-throated Bulbuls P. finlaysoni and with Black-crested Bulbuls for ornamental purposes (anonymous breeder interview).

Seven hybrid bulbuls observed with the cooperation of breeders in September 2010 comprised five Red-whiskered Bulbul × Yellow-vented Bulbuls of different generations, a first-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul × Stripe-throated Bulbul and a first-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul × Black-crested Bulbul hybrid. Multiple digital photographs of each bird were taken for detailed evaluation of morphological characteristics while information on behaviour and lineage were obtained from the owners.

First-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul × Yellow-vented Bulbul hybrids and second-generation (backcross with Red-whiskered Bulbul) showed intermediate characteristics: short crest, lack of red cheek-patch and yellowish vent, with no black spur on the side of the breast. The breast and belly, sullied brownish in the first generation, were whiter in the second (Plates 1 & 2). A third-generation backcross (Plate 3) was similar to Red-whiskered Bulbul with a more erect crest, small reddish cheek-



**Plate 1.** A first-generation hybrid between Red-whiskered Bulbul and Yellow-vented Bulbul, 12 September 2010.

patch, white belly and weak black spur on the side of the breast. The vent was pale orange.

A fourth-generation hybrid (Plate 4) could not be readily distinguished from a pure-bred Redwhiskered Bulbul. It had a tall crest, black spur on the side of the breast, red cheek-patch, pure white underparts and a red vent. A white-tipped tail was present in hybrids of all generations (Table 1). Our sample size was small, however, due to the reticence

**Plate 2.** A second-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul backcross, 3 October 2010.





**Plate 3.** A third-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul backcross, 12 September 2010.



**Plate 4.** A fourth-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul backcross, 12 September 2010.

of the breeders we contacted. The precise characteristics of hybrids may well be more variable than we have indicated, depending perhaps upon differing combinations of maternal and paternal species.

A first-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul × Stripe-throated Bulbul hybrid (Plate 5) also showed intermediate characteristics: a short crest, small reddish cheek-patch, a duller belly, yellow vent and a white-tipped tail.

A first-generation Red-whiskered Bulbul × Black-crested Bulbul hybrid (Plate 6) showed Black-crested Bulbul characteristics of a tall black crest and a grey iris. It also showed a yellow vent, a small black stripe instead of a black spur on the side of the

BirdingASIA 20 (2013) 51



**Plate 5**. A first-generation hybrid between Red-whiskered Bulbul and Stripe-throated Bulbul, 12 September 2010.

breast, a clean white throat and white underparts, combined with brown upperparts and white-tipped tail recalling Red-whiskered Bulbul. Hybrids are offered for sale, e.g. a hybrid Red-whiskered Bulbul × Sooty-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus aurigaster* was advertised online (accessed 20 June 2013), as was a hybrid of three species: Red-whiskered Bulbul, Sooty-headed Bulbul, and Yellow-vented Bulbul (accessed on 26 June 2013).

The habit of keeping cage-birds in general, and Red-whiskered Bulbuls in particular, appears to have originated in southern Thailand. There, capture for the avicultural trade, in combination with lowland forest loss, had long since led to the extirpation, or near-extirpation, of the globally Vulnerable Strawheaded Bulbul *Pycnonotus zeylanicus* (BirdLife International 2013, Shepherd *et al.* 2013) and southern populations of Red-whiskered Bulbuls had also largely vanished as long ago as 1990 (PDR pers. obs.). Red-whiskered Bulbuls are captured both by netting at communal roosts and by using decoy birds to lure others into spring-traps (Laong 2009). The habit of catching and keeping Red-whiskered

Bulbuls has now spread nationwide and populations in rural areas, including those in national parks such as Khao Yai, have crashed. The species is now nationally rare. Ironically the largest remaining populations are present in and around major towns such as Chiang Mai in northern Thailand, where either capture by professional bird-trappers is less likely, or populations have been augmented by escaped or released cage-birds.

It might be argued that populations of this resilient and ecologically very tolerant species would rapidly bounce back if wild capture was discontinued. However, its open country, grassland and scrub-dominated habitat in the south of the country (and now increasingly in other regions) is now greatly diminished and fragmented due to the spread of plantation agriculture for rubber and oilpalm, making recolonisation inherently less likely even if the threat from trapping were removed. In the meantime increased demand for bulbuls seems certain to lead to large-scale commercial exploitation elsewhere, in neighbouring countries such as Laos, where the Red-whiskered Bulbul, though still widespread and common, has been trapped for the Thai market since at least 2008 (J. W. Duckworth in litt.). That all four Indochinese parakeets Psittacula spp.(eupatria, finschii, roseata and alexandri) have recently been uplifted by BirdLife International to Near Threatened is a salutary indicator of the scale of the possible future threat to the global population of Red-whiskered Bulbul. The decline in all these species has been driven primarily by cage-bird trapping. Additionally, either accidental or deliberate release of hybrid bulbuls by breeders could have deleterious impacts on the few remaining wild Red-whiskered Bulbul populations. Casa et al. (2012) have demonstrated that introgression of Chukar *Alectoris chukar* genes from released captive partridges is now widespread among native populations of the Red-legged Partridge A. rufa in the Iberian peninsula, and that hybrids have reduced survival compared to pure-bred A. rufa.

Existing wildlife protection legislation and levels of enforcement have proved utterly inadequate to

**Table 1**. Characteristic of hybrid bulbuls. RWB=Red-whiskered Bulbul, YVB=Yellow-vented Bulbul, STB=Strip-throated Bulbul, BCB=Black-crested Bulbul. F1, F2, F3 and F4 = number of hybrid generations.

	RWB×YVB				RWB×STB	RWB×BCB
Characteristic	F1 (Plate 1)	F2 (Plate 2)	F3 (Plate 3)	F4 (Plate 4)	F1 (Plate 5)	F1 (Plate 6)
Number examined	2	1	1	1	1	1
Crest height	short	mid-short	mid-length	tall	short	high
Cheek size	lacking	small	middle-sized	full-sized	very small	none
Shoulder spur	none	none	weak	complete	none	small black stripe
Belly colour	sullied	sullied	white	white	sullied	white
Vent colour	yellow	pale-yellowish	pale-orange	red	yellow	yellowish
White-tail tip	present	present	present	present	present	present



Plate 6. A first-generation hybrid between Red-whiskered Bulbul and Black-crested Bulbul, 12 September 2010.

stem the decline in wild populations of the Redwhiskered Bulbul in Thailand. A new approach to Red-whiskered Bulbul conservation urgently needs to be devised in order to remove or at least seriously reduce the capture of wild birds by, and for, the burgeoning and influential aviculture lobby.

## Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Wichian Kongthong, the anonymous breeders who owned the birds pictured in this paper, and Kit Dumnoen, head of Redwhiskered Bulbul Club dot com, Will Duckworth and Jonathan Murray for helpful comments on this manuscript. The work was carried out by ST as a part of an undergraduate special problem in biology, Department of Biology, Faculty of Science, Mahidol University. Philip Round is supported by The Wetland Trust (UK).

## References

BirdLife International (2013) Species factsheet: *Pycnonotus jocosus*. Downloaded from http://www.birdlife.org on 27/06/2013.

BirdLife International (2013) Species factsheet: *Pycnonotus zeylanicus*. Downloaded from http://www.birdlife.org on 03/09/2013.

Casas, F., Mougeot, F., Sánchez-Barbudo, I., Dávila, J. A. & Viñuela, J. (2012) Fitness consequences of anthropogenic hybridization in wild redlegged partridge (*Alectoris rufa*, Phasianidae) population. *Biol. Invasions* 14: 259–305. Chidkluar, P. (2010) Breeding of Red-whiskered Bulbul. Bangkok: Department of National Park, Wildlife and Plant Conservation. (In Thai.)

Laong, S. (2009) Breeding of Red-whiskered Bulbul by the private sector.
Pp.1–14 in Wildlife yearbook, 11. Bangkok: Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plants Conservation. (In Thai.)

Law, S. C. (1921) An albinoid Otocompsaemeria. J. Bombay Nat. Hist. Soc. 28 (1): 281–282.

Lekagul, B. & Round, P. D. (1991). A guide to the birds of Thailand. Bangkok: Saha Karn Bhaet Co.

McCarthy, E. M. (2006) Handbook of avian hybrids of the world. New York: Oxford University Press.

Robson, C. (2008) A field guide to the birds of South-East Asia. London: New Holland.

Shepherd, C. R., Shepherd, L. A. & Foley, K.-E. (2013) Straw-headed Bulbul Pycnonotus zeylanicus: legal protection and enforcement action in Malaysia. BirdingASIA 19: 92–94.

Tantipisanuh, N. & Gale, G. A. (2013) Representation of threatened vertebrates by a protected area system in Southeast Asia: the importance of non-forest habitats. *Raffles Bull. Zool.* 61: 359–395.

Supatchaya TECHACHOOCHERT & Philip D. ROUND Department of Biology, Faculty of Science, Mahidol University, Rama 6 Road Bangkok 10400,Thailand Email: t.supatchaya@gmail.com Email: philip.rou@mahidol.ac.th