



The Bali Children's Project

"Escaping poverty through education"



End of the Road for the Bali Starling?

A Conservation Catastrophe (written in 1999)

The Bali Starling (*Leucopsar rothschildi*) is one of the world's most endangered species, with less than a dozen individual birds still remaining in the wild. First described as new to science in 1912, the Bali Starling was discovered by an expedition funded by the distinguished, if eccentric, English ornithologist Walter, 2nd Lord Rothschild. Also known as the Bali or Rothschild's Mynah, this beautiful bird has brilliant white plumage, except for black tips to the wings and tail feathers, and a light blue wattle surrounding the eye.



Once common in its restricted home range on the island of Bali, the wild population has declined precipitously over the past forty years. Two factors have contributed to this tragic situation. The first is loss of suitable habitat through human encroachment, a situation chronically exacerbated by the corrupt and discredited government of former dictator Suharto, which cynically established a camp for migrant workers in the West Bali National Park, within the special high-security enclave allegedly set up to safeguard the remaining wild Bali Starlings.

Ironically, the second major factor contributing to the decline of the Bali Starling is its own scarcity. As the Bali Starling becomes rarer and rarer, so its black market value grows, making poaching an increasingly profitable occupation. To their great discredit, the rich and powerful in Indonesian society – Governors, Cabinet Ministers, Military Commanders and the like – consider possession of one or more Bali Starlings to be a status symbol and badge of honor. Poachers have no difficulty in selling their stolen birds to Indonesian high society for many thousands of dollars apiece. Thus those charged with the public trust of protecting the bird have become the principle agents in its demise.

In recent years there has been a huge, last-ditch effort to save the Bali Starling from extinction – largely (but not exclusively) initiated and funded by individuals and organizations outside Indonesia. Adopted as the "National Bird" and symbol of Indonesian wildlife conservation, the Suharto government grudgingly agreed to cooperate in helping to save the species from extinction but contributed too little and too late. With Indonesia's increasing financial problems, government support has all but evaporated.



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The principle strategy adopted to save the Bali Starling was the establishment of a substantial breeding facility of captive birds whose offspring could gradually be introduced back into the wild to swell the natural population. Not as simple as it sounds, the scheme not only required well-managed, hygienic enclosures where healthy birds could mate and raise young, but a carefully monitored second release location where captive-bred birds could be taught to fend for themselves in a half-way-house situation before being set free in the wild.

For the scheme to be successful the released birds must possess the greatest possible genetic diversity. To this end appeals were made to owners of captive Bali Starlings to cooperate with the rescue project by making their birds available for breeding. To their credit several individuals, both in Indonesia and abroad, made their stock available, but many others refused to participate. Most notable among the latter was no less a personage than I. B. Oka, former Governor of Bali, who would not permit any of his numerous Bali Starlings to take part in the rescue program

The Captive Breeding Center was established at Sumber Kalempok, near Labuhan Lalang in the National Park. Because of earlier break-ins and thefts this facility became a heavily fortified encampment, under constant video surveillance and protected by military patrols armed with machine-guns. Even so, occasional attempts were still made under cover of darkness to steal birds, but usually without success.

Likewise the chosen release site, remote and accessible virtually only by water, was under constant guard. Its location was supposedly a close-kept secret, with access permitted only by special permit - rarely granted - to minimize stress and disturbance to the birds. It came, therefore, as a considerable surprise to the conservation bodies funding the project to discover last year (1998) that certain tour companies were regularly taking parties of high-paying tourists to the release site. While none of this money ever reached the Bali Starling project, there is no doubt that certain individuals in the administration profited considerably.

The cost of this massive conservation effort was heavily subsidized by outside donations. The American Zoological Society, The American Zoo & Aquarium Society, The Brehm Fund in Germany, as well as the Bali Starling Foundation and Bali Bird Park in Indonesia, together with numerous individuals, provided equipment and large sums of money to the project over several years.

Up until the end of 1999 it appeared that this devotion and effort had been successful and that the Bali Starling might yet be saved at the very brink of extinction. However, tragic events occurring at that year's end now make this all but a vain hope. Today there remains little chance that this beautiful bird will ever again fly free in its native haunts.

It has been reported that in November 1999 the Bali Starling breeding facility at Sumber Kalempok was visited by a delegation of army officers claiming to be interested in birds and wildlife conservation. They received red-carpet treatment, and were given a full tour of the site. This included being shown all the breeding pairs and their offspring. Can it be pure coincidence that the following night the facility was raided with military precision by a heavily armed gang who easily overcame and disarmed the army personnel standing guard - and without a single shot being fired? Can it also be a coincidence that all the Bali Starlings stolen were exclusively young birds?

At least 39 birds were stolen, and it seems highly unlikely that the captive breeding population will be able to recover from an assault of this magnitude. Since then there have been two further armed intrusions, and the staff have been withdrawn from the facility as no birds remain to be 'protected'.

Most conservationists associated with the rescue efforts are deeply discouraged by the attacks and question whether it is even worth carrying on, but others view it as a setback that can eventually be overcome, and are continuing their work with renewed vigor and dedication. There remains one privately run operation at a secret location in another part of Bali, dedicated to breeding and releasing captive-bred Bali Starlings. One can only hope that they will prove successful over time, but the chances are slim.

Meanwhile, it is reliably reported that some of the stolen birds are already appearing on the black market at hugely inflated prices, but that no attempt is being made by the authorities to apprehend those responsible. As most, if not all, the birds are supposed to carry implanted electronic identity chips this should not be a difficult task.

Could this, one must ask, be an inside job? Certainly the ease, with which entry was gained, together with the curiously coincidental timing, serves to arouse suspicion. In addition, is it not strange that Iken Muttaqin, the individual in charge of administering the project on behalf of the Indonesian government, should suddenly drop from sight and move to Java- just when many tens of thousands of dollars had been donated to the Bali Starling rescue effort? No sign of the money remains.

How should this catastrophe be viewed? There are many in Indonesia who will perceive it not only as yet another flagrant expression of personal greed, but also as a more ominous overt political act. Those who benefited most from the corrupt Suharto regime - particularly the military - are determined to discredit the new democratic government of Megawati Sukarnoputri by any means possible in the hope that by fomenting social unrest they may precipitate a return to the old *status quo*. One can only hope that the people of Indonesia have the wisdom and will-power to prevent this happening.

Postscript, 2005

A last-ditch initiative by Drh Bayu Wirayudha, a dedicated Balinese veterinarian, working through his 'Friends of the National Parks' foundation is attempting to establish a breeding population of Bali Starlings on the small island of Nusa Penida. These birds come from a private colony of captive-bred individuals, and may yet prove successful in saving the species in the wild.

For more information check:

The Bali Children's Project is a tax-exempt non-profit charitable foundation registered in the state of California and in Indonesia (EIN 26-0021623)

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