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A POTENTIAL STEP BACKWARDS FOR CONSERVATION: THE PROPOSED REMOVAL OF THE RED-WHISKERED BULBUL (*PYCNONOTUS JOCOSUS*) FROM THE LIST OF PROTECTED SPECIES IN THAILAND IS A MAJOR CAUSE FOR CONCERN

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing debate over the legal status of the Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*) in Thailand highlights the conflict between its cultural value as a much-loved cagebird and its conservation status in the wild. The species' popularity in the pet trade has driven population decline and local extinctions, despite its protected status under the Wildlife Preservation and Protection Act. This law, which permits captive breeding while prohibiting wild capture. Difficulties are faced by breeders seeking legal permits. Legal and bureaucratic reforms are the most effective way to address the issue while safeguarding the species from further endangerment.

Keywords: bird conservation, bird keepers, legal protection, protected species, Red-whiskered Bulbul

INTRODUCTION

"Some birds are not meant to be caged, that's all. Their feathers are too bright, their songs too sweet and wild. So you let them go, or when you open the cage to feed them they somehow fly out past you. And the part of you that knows it was wrong to imprison them in the first place rejoices, but still, the place where you live is that much more drab and empty for their departure."

Stephen King (1982: 94), Rita Hayworth and Shawshank redemption

The practice of caging birds poses a threat to wild populations and changes our perception of birds worldwide (Harris *et al.*, 2017; Ribeiro *et al.*, 2019). What may seem a harmless hobby—keeping or breeding birds—can fuel demand for wild-caught birds whilst encouraging views of birds as decorative possessions rather than free-living organisms, further diminishing recognition of birds' ecological roles and weakening their intrinsic conservation values (Marshall *et al.*, 2021). In Thailand, the long-standing and

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controversial debate over the legal status of the Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*) highlights the complex intersection of conservation, cultural practice, and political pressure. The issue has pitted conservationists against a vocal community of breeders and cagebird fanciers, and at its core lies a critical question: should we remove legal protections for a species which, albeit still locally common, has suffered a huge reduction in population?

THE SPECIES UNDER THREAT

The Red-whiskered Bulbul (Fig. 1) is one of the most frequently occurring bird species in the pet trade across Southeast Asia—e.g., Indonesia (SHEPHERD *ET AL.*, 2004; albeit outside native range), Malaysia (HSS *ET AL.*, 2024), Singapore (EATON *ET AL.*, 2017), Thailand (LEUPEN *ET AL.*, 2023), Vietnam (LEUPEN *ET AL.*, 2022), etc. The popularity of the Red-whiskered Bulbul as a cagebird has led to heavy poaching (illegal live capture) throughout Thailand (Fig. 2), causing populations of this formerly common open-country species to decline hugely and become locally extinct in some areas (TECHACHOOCHERT & ROUND, 2013). Citizen science data from eBird illustrates the scale of the decline, showing that recent sightings in Thailand within the last 10 years are now mostly from the north, while the species is now rare or absent elsewhere throughout the country (EBIRD, 2025). Even in the north, however, a long-term monitoring campaign led by the Lanna Bird Conservation Club revealed that the species' population in Chiang Mai—the largest city in Northern Thailand—had declined by around 90% over the past 20 years, notwithstanding existing legal protections in place (KANJANAVANIT, 2020). Because of this decline, the national threat status of Red-whiskered Bulbul was uplisted from "Near Threatened" to "Vulnerable" in 2020 (ONEP, 2020), and has been maintained ever since, despite its global status of "Least Concern" (BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL, 2024).

In Thailand, the subspecies *P. j. pattani* once occurred in well-watered open country throughout most of Thailand (DEIGNAN, 1948, 1963; LEKAGUL & ROUND 1991). Ironically, wild populations of this subspecies have been extirpated from its type locality, and indeed, elsewhere throughout the length and breadth of Thailand's peninsular provinces due to unregulated and illegal trapping for the cagebird trade (KANJANAVANIT, 2020). A second subspecies, *P. j. emeria*, found in the southwestern provinces is apparently distinguished by its more complex vocal bouts. Individuals from that population, known as "Pa La-U birds," were so highly valued by aviculturists for their superior singing abilities that they are also now probably extinct due to heavy poaching, with no observation being formally reported for over 70 years (GBIF SECRETARIAT, 2023). The few recent sightings of occasional groups (>20 individuals) of Red-whiskered Bulbuls in Southern Thailand, in urban areas (e.g., Trang; SURACHAT, 2023, and Phangnga; LAWTON, 2024) are almost certainly escapees from captivity. These escaped or released captives may pose an additional threat to the genetic integrity of wild populations, given the widespread practice of hybridising and crossbreeding Red-whiskered Bulbuls in captivity with Yellow-vented Bulbuls *P. goiavier*, and perhaps other bulbul species in order to "improve" their singing ability (TECHACHOOCHERT & ROUND, 2013).

Figure 1. Red-whiskered Bulbul (*Pycnonotus jocosus*)—the species under threat. Photograph taken on 13 January 2025 in Samut Prakan, central Thailand, by Ronayuth Sribanyaranond.

Figure 2. A bird trap, using a captive Red-whiskered Bulbul as a decoy and ripe mangoes as bait, hung in a suburban area of Nakhon Sri Thammarat, southern Thailand. The trap's placement adjacent to extensive reedbeds highlights the encroachment of illegal trapping practices on natural and semi-natural habitats. Photograph by Wichyanan Limparungpatthanakij.

THE LEGAL PROTECTION AND THE DELISTING CONCERN

Under Thailand's Wildlife Preservation and Protection Act (1992), the Red-whiskered Bulbul holds a somewhat ambiguous status. It has been a nationally protected species since 1975 (Thailand. Ministerial Regulations, 1975), together with over 95% of Thai avifauna: capture from the wild is illegal. At the same time, the law permits captive breeding and trade under license from the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Plant Conservation (DNP). While licensing was intended to provide a legal framework, in reality there is a significant gap between the number of birds in captivity (over 603,000 individuals according to a 2023 breeders' report) and those which are legally registered (only 134,325 individuals; BANGKOK TRIBUNE, 2023).

The frustration of breeders with the cumbersome and bureaucratic permit process which has led to demands for the bird to be removed from the protected species list (PAKKAWAN & WIPATAYOTIN, 2023) is only part of the story. The major pre-occupation of a substantial proportion of cagebird fanciers is to source low-priced wild-caught birds rather than more expensive, legally registered captive-bred birds (PDR, personal observation; THAI PBS, 2025). Additionally, even some government officials have suggested removing Red-whiskered Bulbul from the list of protected species, notwithstanding its nationally threatened status, presumably in order to lessen their workload of burdensome registration (CHIDKLUAR, 2010).

Although law enforcement, particularly concerning the protection of natural resources and the environment, remains weak (SRIVITHAYA, 2024), legal protection of the Red-whiskered Bulbul still provides a baseline safeguard: any level of active intervention that targets wild capture, transport or trade in the species will contribute to slowing any future decline. It also provides impetus for improving enforcement of existing species protection laws across a wider range of wild birds in the future. Abolishing the protected status of the Red-whiskered Bulbul would dismantle the only legal safeguard currently in place for the species, and may well lead to the extirpation of wild populations in the only areas where these still remain.

The Bird Conservation Society of Thailand (BCST), the Thailand Partner organization of BirdLife International, has proposed a constructive path forward that addresses the concerns of keepers without sacrificing conservation. They recommend that authorities allow a grace period for owners to register Red-whiskered Bulbuls that can be proven to come from legally permitted parent stock which were never formally registered. This would bring many unregistered birds into compliance and reduce the legal ambiguity that burdens both keepers and regulators. Simultaneously, for birds without a traceable legal origin and those that remain unregistered, authorities must strictly enforce the law through seizure and prosecution.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Whilst the debate over the Red-whiskered Bulbul may seem specific to Thailand, it reflects a broader global challenge in wildlife conservation. Decisions about a species' protected status must be based on a scientific evidence, not political pressure or commercial demand. The real solution lies in creating a licensing system that is faster, more transparent, and less bureaucratic, whilst maintaining the legal safeguards necessary to protect a species

already under severe pressure from the illegal trade. The core principle should be clear. Native wild birds are not available for capture for commercial reasons.

The agreement, in principle, by the National Wildlife Preservation and Protection Committee, on 2 July 2025, to remove the bird from the protected species list is an enormous mis-step. This decision contravenes the committee's primary duty of protecting native wildlife. Conservationists rightly understand this as a political move to appease bird breeders and keepers, and those others who want to completely dismantle the burdensome registration system (Wipatayotin, 2025a). This move would not only allow for unchecked trade and wild capture of Red-whiskered Bulbuls but would also set a dangerous precedent, as this case could then be used as a standard for removing protection from other commercially valuable native wild species, leaving them vulnerable to the same, or even worse, pressures that have endangered the Red-whiskered Bubul.

A working group was established to assess the current population status of Red-whiskered Bulbul and propose measures for improved law enforcement, and safeguards against genetic contamination (Wipatayotin, 2025b). It would be wise to extend the remit of the working group to consider how to establish a much-strengthened licensing and registration system that is clearly needed to regulate the cagebird lobby: even to the consideration of levying a permit fee for licensing captive breeders of native birds. The integrity of this process, and the future of the Red-whiskered Bulbul, now depend on this working group's ability to base its recommendations on robust, scientific data and to ensure that appropriate, enforceable safeguards remain in place to ensure the recovery of wild populations.

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