

# WILD JAVA

*in a cage*

The Indonesian island of Java has one of the world's highest diversities of songbirds. But the increasing popularity of a peculiar sport has some people worried about the future of Java's wild songbirds. **Jenna Blakey** reports

PHOTOGRAPHS *by* NICK HALL



**T**he sound of frantic and elaborate birdsong fills the humid air, emanating from 50 intricately carved birdcages hanging on metal frames. Hundreds of people surround two small arenas, fenced off and guarded by military police. Inside each cage is an orange-headed thrush, competitors in a *Perlombaan Burung*, or bird-singing competition.

Bird-singing competitions are a fairly recent addition to Indonesian culture, but keeping a bird as a family pet is a centuries-old pastime on the island of Java. According to a recent study, one in three households keeps a bird – similar to the ratio of Westerners who keep dogs in Europe and the USA. Conservative estimates place the number of caged birds in Indonesia’s five largest cities at 2.6 million. But recently, songbird enthusiasts have transformed bird-keeping from a common household activity to an intricate and intensive hobby estimated to be worth £42million annually.

Pac Abun is one of roughly 50,000 songbird hobbyists on Java. We talk about bird keeping as he brings his songbirds out into the garden of his home in a middle-class suburb of Jakarta to enjoy the cool morning air. ‘Songbirds are more than just pets,’ he says, ‘they represent the countryside. I think many people keep them to remind themselves of

wildlife and their place within nature.’ Indeed, listening to the birds chirp merrily to one another across the garden, it’s easy to forget how much of Java has been transformed by urban sprawl. However, Abun is the first to admit that keeping songbirds goes far beyond the simple pleasures of listening to melodies in the garden.

Male songbirds are extremely territorial and will go to great lengths to out-sing other males in their vicinity, and it’s this habit that the birdsong competitions exploit. A winning songbird must have stamina, a diverse vocal repertoire and the ability to keep singing even in the presence of a more dominant singer. Competitors must sing for up to 25 minutes non-stop if they are to stand a chance in the competition arena. These characteristics won’t necessarily be present in every bird, and successful trainers must be able to recognise potential and, more importantly, cultivate singing skills in their songbirds.

Groups of bird hobbyists regularly meet in gardens and local parks to train their birds and share techniques. Often, an older, more accomplished bird is used as the ‘teacher’. The teacher bird is hung on an awning and the younger birds are gradually introduced in order to simulate a territorial encounter. The bird owner studies the young bird carefully, looking for any subtle behavioural changes



**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Pac Susilo gazes at his white-rumped sharma, one of several birds he enters into competitions each weekend; **ABOVE LEFT:** Pac Harto feeds his chicks their 11th meal of the day. Baby chicks need constant attention during their first few weeks, including hourly feeds; **TOP RIGHT:** a songbird owner screams at a competition judge while flapping his hand at his bird in an attempt to increase its singing; **ABOVE RIGHT:** a bird trader packs birds into brown paper bags in Jakarta’s Pramuka bird market; **OPPOSITE:** a bird trainer in Bogor City prepares his songbird at a local training event, wafting his hand while whistling in order to focus his bird’s attention





while moving the cages around the awning to stimulate the birds to sing and compete. Abun explains that training a champion songbird requires fine-tuning so as to initiate singing and build confidence, but not scare the younger bird into submission.

INSIDE THE ARENA

All eyes are focused intently on 50 singing birds as I wander among throngs of bird-owners, trainers and spectators at a competition. Sweat-soaked trainers wave their hands frantically as they yell encouragement to their birds. Club teams in matching uniforms chant and wave their hands in last-ditch attempts to influence the judges.

Surrounded by all the noise and rapture of birds and humans, the seven judges demonstrate a remarkable ability to discern the individual song of each bird. The scoring system is simple: each judge has three flags, worth 100, 50 and 25 points. The judges walk purposefully between the cages, head cocked, listening for the bird with the most intricate and melodic song. If the bird is deemed deserving, the judge leaves an appropriately coloured flag and then moves on to the next cage. After the rounds have been made, the judges confer and tally the points.

Suddenly, the competition is over. Owners rush into the

arena to collect their birds, covering the cages with a towel to calm their champions. And as quickly as the din began, it's hushed as the winners are announced.

Although a champion bird may win his owner a cash prize or a new motorbike, competitive songbird keeping isn't a cheap hobby for the average Indonesian, who subsists on roughly £45 per month. A songbird trapped in the wild will sell for £25, and if the bird proves its potential at the local competitions, it can fetch up to £100. As the bird develops its repertoire and gains recognition and prizes from larger competitions, the price will continue to rise. National champion songbirds have sold for upwards of £15,000, and prices continue to rise as wealthy Chinese bird collectors invest in Java's booming songbird-competition scene.

CONSERVATION CRISIS

'Bird keeping is hugely popular in the cities of Java and Bali, and vast numbers of birds are taken from the wild each year,' says Dr Paul Jepson from Oxford University, who is looking at new, market-led ways of protecting Java's songbirds. There is significant concern that many of the species used for bird-singing competitions are close to extinction on Java – and many may already

have disappeared from the wild. According to Birdlife International, there are currently 117 threatened or endangered bird species in Indonesia, four of which are popular songbirds often seen at bird-singing competitions. As wild populations are increasingly depleted, bird trappers are travelling further into Indonesia's remaining tropical forests in search of songbirds.

According to Jepson, a key part of the solution is to increase captive-breeding programmes. Already, there are songbird-breeding programmes dotted across Java, many of which are community-based and provide additional income to rural families.

On the outskirts of Yogyakarta, bird breeders Pac and Ibu Harto raise Asian pied starlings, prized by trainers for teaching their songbirds new vocalisations. Ibu feeds her baby chicks every hour and spends most of the day and night attending her hungry, featherless dependents. An oil lamp is close at hand for the power outages that are frequent in her village – even a few degrees' drop in temperature can kill the newborn chicks.

Captive-bred birds are banded at two days old, when their bones are soft and pliable. Pac explains that as the birds age, their bones become brittle

and can't bend enough to slip a band over the toe. This allows breeders to prove that their birds have been captive-bred, as few wild chicks are captured young enough to band.

Convincing the songbird community of the value of captive-bred birds is essential to the success of songbird conservation. Jepson and his team are working with songbird-competition authorities to establish captive-bred competition categories at the national songbird contests. With incentives such as higher prizes and greater resale value for champion captive-bred birds, the aim is to eliminate wild-caught songbirds from competitions altogether.

Jepson has bright hopes for the future.

'With the right investments and tenacity, we can imagine a time ten to 15 years from now,' he says, 'when appreciation of birds remains central to Javan and Balinese cultural identities, but where catching wild birds is unthinkable.'

LEARN MORE  
For further information on Indonesian songbird conservation, visit [www.darwin.defra.gov.uk](http://www.darwin.defra.gov.uk)



**ABOVE:** a bird trader in Jakarta hangs his birds up at the end of a day's trading. While efforts are being made to increase the supply of farm-raised birds to Java's bird markets and reduce pressure on wild populations, demand still outstrips the supply of farm-raised birds; **ABOVE RIGHT:** as many as 400 breeding pairs are kept in this facility, each producing upwards of three clutches of eggs per year. Rings are placed on the young chicks to verify their authenticity as a farm-raised specimen rather than a wild-caught bird. Burung Indonesia and Oxford University are working with bird breeders and the competition authorities to establish ringed-bird categories at the national competitions, with an aim to eventually phase out wild-caught birds from competitions altogether

**ABOVE:** the bird-cage manufacturing and retail industry in Indonesia is worth around £4.5million a year and provides an important source of income for rural Javanese men. Cage making is just one of a number of industries popping up across Java to support songbird farming and keeping. Insects are farmed for food for both farmed and captive birds, while a variety of traders frequent the competition arenas to sell cages, feed, perches and prerecorded bird-song CDs for use in training; **TOP RIGHT:** a bird trader cycles the streets of Jakarta, selling birds to children and families. Many of the birds have been dyed different colours to make them more appealing to children, who take them home in brown paper bags