

SPECIAL REPORT

Orange-headed Thrush *Zosterops citrina* and the avian X-factor

PAUL JEPSON

In 2005 an Orange-headed Thrush *Zosterops citrina* called Valium scored a hat-trick by winning all three of the top classes at an Indonesian national songbird contest. The bird's owner received an offer of Rp 250 million (€18,000) but declined to sell. He didn't need the money: what he valued was the pride and prestige accrued from owning a champion songbird, which five years ago was hatched in a forest on Java. This is the world of *kicau-mania*, a way of enjoying birds quite different from the western focus on bird finding and identification, scarcity and counting. The Indonesian passion for songbirds is centred on the aesthetic of song, form and posture, and the song contests are where tastes are developed and judged, where reputations are made, and where men let off a bit of steam.

The Orange-headed Thrush is the star species but nine others have official song contest classes. In order of popularity and prestige these are: Long-tailed Shrike *Lantus schach*, White-rumped Shama

Plate 1. Is Orange-headed Thrush the best songster in Asia? Indonesians certainly think so!



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Copsychus malabaricus, Oriental Magpie Robin *C. saularis*, Chestnut-capped Thrush *Z. interpres*, Straw-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus zeylanicus*, Canary *Serinus canarius*, Lovebird *Agapornis* spp., Greater Green Leafbird *Chloropsis sonnerati*, Blue-winged Leafbird *C. cochinchinensis* and Hill Blue Flycatcher *Cyornis banyumas*. Canaries, lovebirds, Straw-headed Bulbuls and the majority of Chestnut-capped Thrushes are now captive-bred on Java, but the remainder are caught from the wild.

Competing Zebra Doves *Geopelia striata* is a traditional Javanese pastime but it is only in the last 30 years that competing songbirds has become popular. The hobby was started during the 1970s by a group of bird enthusiasts among the Jakarta elite who waged fabulous prizes on the outcome of the song contests. Initially imported Chinese laughingthrushes (Hwamei *Garulax canorus* and Black-chinned Laughingthrush *G. chinensis*) and Red-billed Leiothrix *Leiothrix lutea* were the focus of interest. But as the hobby's popularity spread, native species were included and came to replace the Chinese species when their import into Indonesia was banned in 2000 as a precaution against bird flu.

As a competitive songbird, Orange-headed Thrush has it all; it is beautifully coloured and exquisitely proportioned, with a powerful and varied voice, and it postures when it sings. When a separate class for Orange-headed Thrush was introduced in 1994 the judges initially penalised posturing whilst singing. But the aesthetic of the thrush's "drunken trance" was impossible to ignore and in 1996 they reversed their position. Today the bird's performance style is a key part of the competition. However as Achun Owen, hobbyist of the year 2006, noted, "song volume and repertoire are the main criteria—they are a must and performance is optional. However, judges are always seeking innovation and if they see a new posture they will be drawn to the bird and then listen to it more intently."

A typical class at a songbird contest comprises 30–40 birds in cages hung on a metal frame set a metre apart. The six accredited judges narrow down a class using small flags to indicate their assessment of each bird's song continuity, volume and repertoire. After 20–30 minutes the judges will confer and each will select his top three birds with flags worth 100, 50 and 25 points respectively. The



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Plate 2. Two Balinese entrepreneurs and members of the Jalak Bali Bird Club proudly display their winning thrush at a songbird contest in Jakarta.



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Plate 3. Long-tailed Shrikes are second only to Orange-headed Thrushes in popularity at songbird competitions.

bird with the highest score wins prize money of between Rp 5–40 million (€360–2,880) depending on the status of class and the contest. The birds sing and are judged amidst a perimeter of owners and supporters encouraging their birds with whistles and waves, exhorting the judges to listen longer to their bird and shouting remonstrations when they fail to do so. Security, hired from the local police or army command, ensures that perimeter fences are not breached!

There are probably between 5,000 and 7,000 "hardcore" hobbyists who regularly travel to songbird contests in other cities and provinces in Java, and maybe 55,000 to 75,000 more who compete in local contests. Within this fraternity, the names of past champions and their owners are famous and written about in national and local tabloid newspapers dedicated to the hobby. Between 1999 and 2000 three thrushes dominated—a bird named Wallet who spread his tail while singing, another named Dashat who sang with crest erect, and lastly Zemorana who "shook like an earthquake" (and whose owner did sell him for €18,000!). In 2001 and 2002, the talked-about champion, and another named after a European



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Plate 4. A judge focuses on the bird song amidst a cacophony of whistles and exhortations from owners and supporters.



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Plate 5. The smaller cage requirements of Orange-headed Thrushes mean it is easily transported on motorbikes.

footballer, was Owen. This bird possessed extraordinary vocal power and stamina, and achieved the feat of winning five consecutive classes on one day! Recent champions Kudalumping and Badi swing their head wide and turn it behind as they let forth with song.

Demand for Orange-headed Thrushes is believed to have caused "rolling" local extinctions across west and east Java during the late 1990s. When agents looked for new sources of birds on Bali, village authorities quickly passed customary laws that make it an offence for outsiders to trap birds on farmers' land. Responding to obtaining this security of ownership, farmers harvest chicks and leave the parent stock. My preliminary assessment of this practice suggests that about 20,000 Orange-headed Thrush chicks are harvested from 5,700 farms during each breeding season lasting from November through to May. Each day local agents make a two-to-three-hour circuit by motorbike to buy chicks from farmers. The agent sells on the chicks to agents in east Java cities when they are 17 or 18 days old, but before he does so he selects out chicks that are definitely male and possess a set of six characteristics that mark them out as good prospects for song



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Plate 6. The wife of an Orange-headed Thrush agent feeds chicks collected from farmers. The small box in the foreground contains chicks specially selected for training as competition birds.

contests. These are ringed and sold at a premium to specialist trainers who rear the birds through their first two moults (at 9 and 14 months) when they develop their song.

Serious hobbyists buy from these trainers and will pay between €150 and €350 depending on their assessment of the bird's potential. They train the thrush on and start entering it in song contests. The wealthier hobbyists employ a personal bird trainer (known as a *jokt*) who nurtures the bird into peak condition through careful feeding, bathing and light regimes and training with other birds. The owner and trainer together plan the bird's career. If it shows promise by consistently coming in the top three at contests in different cities it value quickly enters the €3,000–4,500 bracket. This is because top prospects are sought after by "testers" who scout and assess birds for the seriously wealthy leaders of top bird clubs.

This popular pastime of keeping, training and competing native songbirds is a positive cultural and economic force in the cities of Java, Bali and East Kalimantan. It contributes at least €85 million to the economies of the six largest cities on Java and Bali, provides spaces where people of different social classes and ethnicities come together in a shared interest, and gives birds a prominent place in contemporary urban culture. In addition, it is a fascinating and sophisticated mode of appreciating birds which could enrich and inform other bird-loving cultures. The downside, of course, is that it creates a demand for wild-caught birds. A group of individuals within and outside the hobby are leading an effort to switch the supply to captive-bred birds through the introduction of a bird certification system and promoting the prestige of "ring classes" (classes of birds that are captive-bred and hence ringed) at song contests. The songbird fraternity is receptive to concerns about the impact of their hobby on wild bird populations



MICHAEL

Plate 7. The manufacture of cages creates huge numbers of jobs for young craftsmen.



FABRIL AMANDA

Plate 8. Traditionally conservation organisations have trained students in techniques to census wild birds, but building their capacity to understand how their peers value birds and the environment is just as important for successful conservation action.

and my hope is that the rich dialogue that has opened might lead to an Indonesian bird conservation ethos that blends western concerns about scarcity with an Asian focus on aesthetics.

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Sri Lanka



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