

Approaches for Gurney's Pitta Conservation

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ABSTRACT

Thailand shares a special responsibility with Burma (Myanmar) for the conservation of Gurney's Pitta *Pitta gurneyi*, since the world range of the species is completely shared between these two countries.

Since its rediscovery in 1986 (BE 2529), near the foot of the mountain of Khao Nor Chuchi, Krabi and Trang Provinces, S. Thailand, the responsible Thai government agencies have allowed Gurney's Pitta to decline to functional extinction, from c. 20 pairs in 1992 (BE 2535) to possibly as few as three closely related individuals in 2013 (BE 2556). This catastrophic decline is due to the failure of those same agencies to protect any adequate area of its lowland semi-evergreen (or Thai-Burmese) rainforest habitat, most of which has been converted into rubber or oil-palm plantation.

Even after > 50 years of wildlife and habitat protection, Thailand has yet to develop any coherent biodiversity conservation strategy. The concentration of protected areas (national parks and wildlife sanctuaries) in hilly or mountainous areas has therefore relegated populations of many specialist lowland forest species — perhaps as much as 30% of the resident forest bird fauna (besides populations of many other animals and plants) to severe extinction or endangerment.

The suggestion to re-establish a Thai population of Gurney's Pitta through captive breeding (presumably by bilateral agreement between Thai and Burmese authorities) would have little purpose unless the Thai government is simultaneously prepared to rehabilitate a suitable area of lowland forest at the species' last former stronghold at Khao Nor Chuchi in order to receive released and captive-bred individuals. Most of this area lies outside the existing Khao Pra-Bang Khram Wildlife Sanctuary in the substantially unprotected Bang Khram National Reserve Forest. No other area presents any viable alternative site.

At the present time the most realistic future prospects for the conservation of Gurney's Pitta instead seem to lie entirely with the Burmese. Urgent efforts should be expended to ensure that the Burmese government does not repeat the mistakes already made by the Thai government, so that large and extensive lowlands within the range of Gurney's Pitta in that country can be declared as protected areas before they are cleared for plantations by investors from other ASEAN countries.