Threatened Birds of Asia: The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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Threatened birds of Asia

NICOBAR BULBUL
*Hypsipetes nicobariensis*

Critical ☐ —
Endangered ☐ —
Vulnerable ■ C1

This species has a small, declining population as a result of clearance and degradation of forests for plantation agriculture and infrastructure projects. These factors qualify it as Vulnerable.

**DISTRIBUTION** The Nicobar Bulbul (see Remarks 1) is endemic to the Nancowry group of islands (Hume 1874a, Abdulali 1965) in the Nicobar islands, India. Records, arranged from north to south, are as follows:

- **INDIA** ■ Nicobar Islands
  - **Tillanchong**, common, March 1873 (specimen in BMNH, Hume 1874a), January 1901 (four specimens in USNM), but with one record during surveys in 1992–1995 (Sankaran 1997a);
  - **Bompoka**, undated (Frauenfeld 1867), March 1873 (specimen in BMNH, Hume 1874a), 1992–1995 (Sankaran 1997a);
  - **Teressa**, January 1873 (specimen in BMNH, Hume 1874a), March 1907 (specimen in AMNH), and observed 15–20 times during surveys in 1992–1995 (Sankaran 1997a);
  - **Camorta**, January, February, March and December 1873 (six specimens in BMNH, Hume 1874a), pre-1888 (specimen in BMNH), May 1874 (specimen in MCML), March 1966 (eight

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**The distribution of Nicobar Bulbul Hypsipetes nicobariensis**: (1) Tillanchong; (2) Bompoka; (3) Teressa; (4) Camorta; (5) Trinkat; (6) Nancowry; (7) Katchall.

**Hypsipetes nicobariensis**

specimens in BNHS), and observed 4–5 times during surveys in 1992–1995 (Sankaran 1997a, 1998);

*Trinkat*, January 1873 (specimen in BMNH), recorded by Hume (1874a), February 1901 (five specimens in USNM), March 1966 (two specimens in BNHS), but not observed during surveys in 1992–1995 (Sankaran 1997a);

*Nancowry*, February 1873 (two specimens in BMNH and AMNH, Hume 1874a), December 1873 and January 1874 (three specimens in BMNH, Hume 1874), February 1901 (three specimens in USNM), two, March 1964 (Abdulali 1965), March 1966 (specimen in BNHS), and observed once during surveys in 1992–1995 (Sankaran 1997a, 1998);

*Katchall*, March 1873 (specimen in BMNH, Hume 1874a), February 1901 (specimen in USNM), March 1907 (specimen in AMNH), observed 15–20 times including a flock of more than 100 during surveys in 1992–1995 (Sankaran 1997a, 1998).

The species was not recorded on Batti Malv (Hume 1874a) or Car Nicobar in several visits (Hume 1874, Butler 1899–1900, Addulali 1964, Sakaran 1997a, 1998). Although it was apparently recorded by W. Davison (in Hume 1874a) in the Great Nicobar group on Pilo Milo (=Pilu Milu), this was perhaps an error as it has never been found elsewhere in the group (Hume 1874a, Sakaran 1998).

**POPULATION** Until the 1960s this species was locally quite common, especially on Tillanchong (Hume 1874a, Richmond 1903, Abdulali 1967b). Richmond (1903) reported W. L. Abbott and C. B. Kloss sighting flocks of 50 or more, at which times they “make a great chattering and uproar”. Although Sankaran (1995d, 1997a, 1998) sighted the species repeatedly, including one flock which numbered over 100, it must be inferred from his results under Distribution that the populations on Tillanchong, Trinkat and Nancowry (one, none and one record respectively, 1992–1995) have or may have experienced serious declines, leaving only Terressa and Katchall with strong evidence of persisting healthy numbers.

**ECOLOGY**

**Habitat** The Nicobar Bulbul is chiefly a bird of forest, but also occurs at the edge of forests and grasslands, and is also found in gardens, secondary forests, plantations of coconut and rubber, and around human habitation (Hume 1874, Abdulali 1965, L. Vijayan in litt. 1999).

**Food** There is no information.

**Breeding** Very young birds were collected in February (Hume 1874a). Birds collected in March had inactive gonads (Abdulali 1965).

**THREATS** The Nicobar Bulbul is one of (now) three threatened bird species in the suite of six (with the addition of the Nicobar Scops-owl *Otus alius*: see relevant account under Data Deficient) that are entirely restricted to the “Nicobar Islands Endemic Bird Area”, threats and conservation measures in which are profiled by Stattersfield *et al.* (1998). Habitat loss in the Nicobar Islands is perhaps the most serious long-term threat to the species. This occurs primarily through the conversion of forests into coconut plantations, the expansion of human settlements, and the development of urban infrastructure such as roads, townships, and defence establishments (see equivalent section under Nicobar Megapode *Megapodus nicobariensis*).

Of more immediate concern is the introduction by the British in the late nineteenth century of the Andaman Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus whistleri*, which has now flourished on all islands of the Nancowry group, probably owing to inter-island transfers by Nicobaris, except probably Tillanchong and Bompoka (Sankaran 1997a, 1998). The endemic Nicobar Bulbul is probably suffering from the resulting competition (Collar *et al.* 1994, Sankaran 1995d).
**MEASURES TAKEN** Tillanchong (17 km²) is uninhabited and protected as a wildlife sanctuary. All islands in the Nancowry group are tribal reserves, with the result that agriculture or large-scale development by mainlanders cannot take place; however, the indigenous tribes are at liberty to convert habitats into agriculture or settlements (L. Vijayan *in litt.* 1999).

**MEASURES PROPOSED** Expansion of the Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve to include more coastal areas and the creation of a Nancowry Biosphere Reserve would provide adequate protection to all endemic birds in the Nicobar Islands (Sankaran 1997a)—with the partial exception of Nicobar Sparrowhawk *Accipiter butleri* (see relevant account). A fuller treatment of proposed conservation action on the islands appears in the equivalent section under Nicobar Megapode. There is a need for a scientific database for the conservation and management of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, especially the endemic avifauna (Wahal 1995). The population of the introduced Red-whiskered Bulbul may have to be controlled, if the findings of future studies confirm that competition from that species is indeed a major threat to the endemic form (Sankaran 1995d).

**REMARKS** (1) Gregory (2000) has proposed a reclassification of bulbul genera, one of whose effects would be the reversion of this species to the name *Hypsipetes virescens*. For reasons of stability and continuity, such an rearrangement is not adopted here, but this should not be taken to indicate an opinion and is merely an expedient to allow time for more informed consideration of the issue.