

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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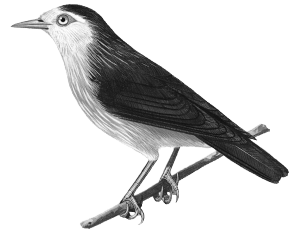
WHITE-FACED STARLING

Sturnus albofrontatus

Critical —

Endangered —

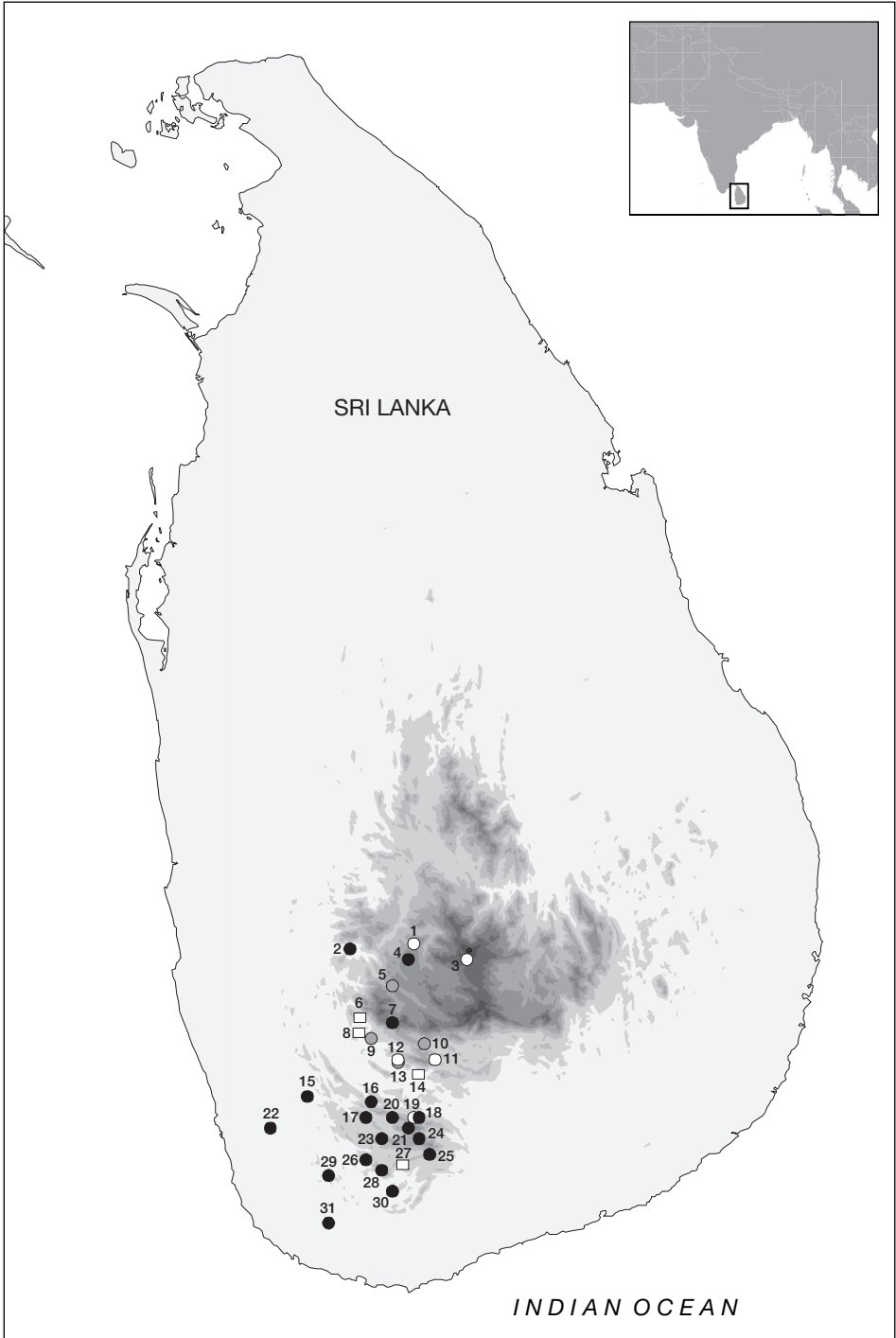
Vulnerable **B1+2a,b,c,d,e; C1**



This species has a small, declining population and range, which is also severely fragmented as a result of degradation and clearance of humid forest. These factors qualify it as Vulnerable.

DISTRIBUTION The White-faced Starling or White-headed Starling (once known as *Sturnus senex*: see Mees 1997) is found in the lowland rainforests of the wet zone in south-west Sri Lanka, and adjacent lower montane forests of the hill zone up to at least 1,200 m. Its forest habitat is now fragmented within its small range (see Threats). From the evidence below, it appears that the species was recorded from 19 and probably 20 localities in the 1990s. Records (arranged approximately from north to south) are as follows:

■ **SRI LANKA** **Kotmale**, collected in 1872 (Legge 1880); **Kitulgala** forest, Bandarakele, undated (Henry 1955), nesting in a dead tree, August 1980 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* August 1980), September 1980 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1980), February 1981 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* February 1981), January 1995 (R. Skeen *in litt.* 1999); **Nuwara Eliya**, c.1876 (Legge 1880, specimen in AMNH), one probable sighting, March 1986 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* March 1986); **Nahati Mukalana**, two, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Hapugastenna**, March 1909 (Ripley 1946, male in USNM), May 1976 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* May 1976); **Carney**, undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* January 1981); **Peak Wilderness Sanctuary**, one, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997), undated (Wijeyeratne *et al.* 1997, *Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997), May–October 1995 (Ranawana and Bambaradeniya 1998); **Gilimale**, “very abundant”, 360–800 m, undated (Legge 1880), including “Maskeliya Pass above Gilimale forest”, 400 m, August 1876 (two specimens in BMNH and MCZ), undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); **Galboda** forest, six, January/February 1977 (R. L. Fleming Jr. 1977); **Rassagala**, two, January/February 1977 (R. L. Fleming Jr. 1977); **Balangoda**, undated (Lewis 1898); Bamberabolowa, presumably in what is now **Bambarabotuwa Forest Reserve**, undated (Lewis 1898); **Kuttapitiya** (Kuttapitiza), Pelmadulla, 750 m, August 1952 (male in YPM); **Opanake** (Opanayake), undated (Henry 1955); **Morapitiya**, undated (Legge 1880), May 1984, December 1985 and December 1987 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* May 1984, December 1985, December 1987); **Delwala** forest, four, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997), 200–750 m, “rare”, only 11 sightings, July–September 1997 (Jones *et al.* 1998), several records, 1997–2000 (K. Weerakoon *in litt.* 2000); **Kudumiriya** forest, 350–750 m, “uncommon”, seven sightings, July–September 1997 (Jones *et al.* 1998), several records, 1997–2000 (K. Weerakoon *in litt.* 2000); Kabaragala, c.5 km from **Rakwana**, 915 m, pair, September 1989 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1989); **Rangwelltenne** (“Rangawelletenne”) estate, January 1866 (three specimens in AMNH, BMNH); **Walankanda Forest Reserve**, two, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997), 400–1,100 m, “rare”, only four sightings, July–September 1997 (Jones *et al.* 1998); **Handapan Ella**, one, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997), undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); **Yagirala**, one, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Sinharaja Forest Reserve**, 1872 (specimen in BMNH), 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997), many records until 2000 (many observers *in litt.*); **Morningside** (Sooriyakanda), March 2000 (K. Weerakoon *in litt.* 2000); **Panilkanda**, four, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Dellawa** three, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Deniyaya**, undated (Henry 1955); **Diyadawa**, four, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Kanneliya**, six, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Paragala**, two, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC



1997); **Nakiyadeniya**, one, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); Rilagala (untraced), undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); Eratne (untraced), undated (Lewis 1898); Messana (untraced), one, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); Powanala (untraced), Pilgrim's path to "Chiatiion/Cluatim" peak, 900 m, August 1876 (female in AMNH); Asantanakanda (untraced), two, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); Aninkanda (untraced), three, 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997).

POPULATION There is little information on the population of this species, which has been recorded (usually) in small numbers at many sites (see Distribution). Legge (1880) remarked that it was "very scarce in collections and has always been looked on as one of our rarest birds", but he considered that this was partly because of the remoteness of its habitat, and noted that "in primeval solitudes it is numerous". Since then it has presumably declined significantly because of the reduction and fragmentation of its wet zone forest habitat (see Threats), and it has recently been described as "rare" (Henry 1998, Kotagama and Fernando 1994) or "scarce" (Banks and Banks 1980). It seems to have disappeared from some areas where it was formerly found, e.g. Kitulgala forest (Hoffmann 1997), and D. Warakagoda (*in litt.* 1999) considers it to be the rarest and most threatened of Sri Lanka's endemic birds. However, it should be noted that it is a canopy bird and usually rather silent (Henry 1955), so it may be under-recorded in forests little visited by birdwatchers (D. Warakagoda *in litt.* 2001). During a major survey of over 200 forest sites in Sri Lanka in 1991–1996, it was found in 16 forests (IUCN/WCMC 1997). Given its small range and the reduction in the area of its forest habitat, it is unlikely that it currently numbers more than a few thousand individuals.

ECOLOGY Habitat This species is strictly confined to forest (Lewis 1898), mainly the lowland rainforests of the wet zone (Kotagama and Fernando 1994). It appears to be found at intermediate altitudes in the foothills, from 460 to 1,070 m (Phillips 1978), or up to 1,220 m (Henry 1955, Hoffmann 1984). It prefers undisturbed forest (Hoffmann 1989b, Jones *et al.* 1998), inhabiting "wild hill forests" (Legge 1880) and "tall virgin forests" (Phillips 1978). However, there are records of the species "searching about Jack-trees near some of the forest hamlets for insects" and visiting the garden of a colonial bungalow (Legge 1880). It is strictly arboreal (Legge 1880, Banks and Banks 1980) spending most of its time in the upper canopy of tall trees, and so is most easily seen at the edges of such forest (Hoffmann 1989b).

Food It has been reported to be "passionately fond" of wild cinnamon and of the fruit of the "Kanda-etta" tree, and was also found feeding on the berries of the small tree *Macaranga tomentosa* which grows in mountain gorges, searching "jack-trees" near forest hamlets for insects, and feeding on mulberries growing in a garden (Legge 1880). It also eats several species of fig *Ficus*, the nectar of the "red cotton tree" and "doubtless" also insects (Henry 1955). A nesting pair were observed taking a "green caterpillar or cricket" to feed their young (Kularatne in *Ceylon Bird Club News* 1980). The species is most commonly seen amongst large mixed-species flocks, usually a pair, occasionally up to four birds (Legge 1880, Lewis 1898, R. L. Fleming Jr. 1977, Kazmierczak 1990a, Ranawana and Bambaradeniya 1998, D. Warakagoda *in litt.* 2001). In such a flock, birds forage in the top of the canopy

The distribution of White-faced Starling *Sturnus albofrontatus* (map opposite): (1) Kotmale; (2) Kitulgala; (3) Nuwara Eliya; (4) Nahiti Mukalana; (5) Hapugastenna; (6) Carney; (7) Peak Wilderness Sanctuary; (8) Gilimale; (9) Galboda; (10) Rassagala; (11) Balangoda; (12) Bambarabotuwa Forest Reserve; (13) Kuttapitiya; (14) Opanake; (15) Morapitiya; (16) Delwala; (17) Kudumiriya; (18) Rakwana; (19) Rangwelltenne; (20) Walankanda Forest Reserve; (21) Handapan Ella; (22) Yagirala; (23) Sinharaja Forest Reserve; (24) Morningside; (25) Panilkanda; (26) Dellawa; (27) Deniyaya; (28) Diyadawa; (29) Kanneliya; (30) Paragala; (31) Nakiyadeniya.

○ Historical (pre-1950) ● Fairly recent (1950–1979) ● Recent (1980–present) □ Undated

(R. L. Fleming Jr. 1977), apparently taking small fruits and insects (Jones *et al.* 1998) by picking, gleaning and “sucking” (Ranawana and Bambaradeniya 1998).

Breeding The nesting of this species is very poorly known. A nest containing two eggs was found in a tall forest tree, in a rotten cavity of the stem and lined with dry leaves of a monocotyledonous plant (Lewis 1898). This nest was reported to have been found in April (Henry 1998), although Lewis (1898) gave no date. A second nest was found in a dead tree, and the adults appeared to be feeding young in August (Kularatne in *Ceylon Bird Club News* 1980).

Migration This species is not known to undertake any seasonal movements, but individuals are thought to move quite long distances between roosting and feeding areas (S. Kotagama verbally 1997 in Jones *et al.* 1998).

THREATS The White-faced Starling is one of (now) seven threatened members of the suite of 23 bird species that are entirely restricted to the “Sri Lanka Endemic Bird Area”, threats and conservation measures in which are profiled by Stattersfield *et al.* (1998).

Habitat loss The main threat to this species is the clearance and degradation of its wet zone forest habitat (Hoffmann 1984). It primarily utilises the top canopy of tall forest, and the loss of this stratum of the forest through selective logging may seriously affect it (K. Weerakoon *in litt.* 1997). It also has a particularly restricted range in the foothills on the south-western slopes of the central mountains of Sri Lanka, and its total area of occupancy may be less than 500 km² (D. Warakagoda *in litt.* 1999). A general survey of forest loss in Sri Lanka is made in the equivalent section under Red-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus*.

MEASURES TAKEN **Legislation, habitat protection, research** A brief review is made in the equivalent section under Red-faced Malkoha.

Protected areas This species occurs in several national parks and forest reserves, most notably Sinharaja National Heritage Wilderness Area (one of the strongholds of this species: D. Warakagoda *in litt.* 1999), a World Heritage Site which is actively protected under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department (IUCN/WCMC 1997).

MEASURES PROPOSED **Habitat protection, protected areas** A brief review is made in the equivalent section under Red-faced Malkoha.

Research Surveys are required to improve information on the distribution and status of this species, and ecological studies are needed to improve understanding of its movements between forest patches and hence its dispersal ability (Jones *et al.* 1998); moreover, its seasonal utilisation of and dependence on fruit should be investigated through a programme of research on forest phenology, as a means of determining any constraints on the population exerted by food supply. Despite the wealth of data generated by the National Conservation Review in 1991–1996, much more detailed and wide-ranging surveys will be required to plan and monitor the management of individual conservation forests once they are established (IUCN/WCMC 1997).