

Threatened Birds of Asia:

The BirdLife International Red Data Book

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SRI LANKA MAGPIE

Urocissa ornata

Critical —

Endangered —

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



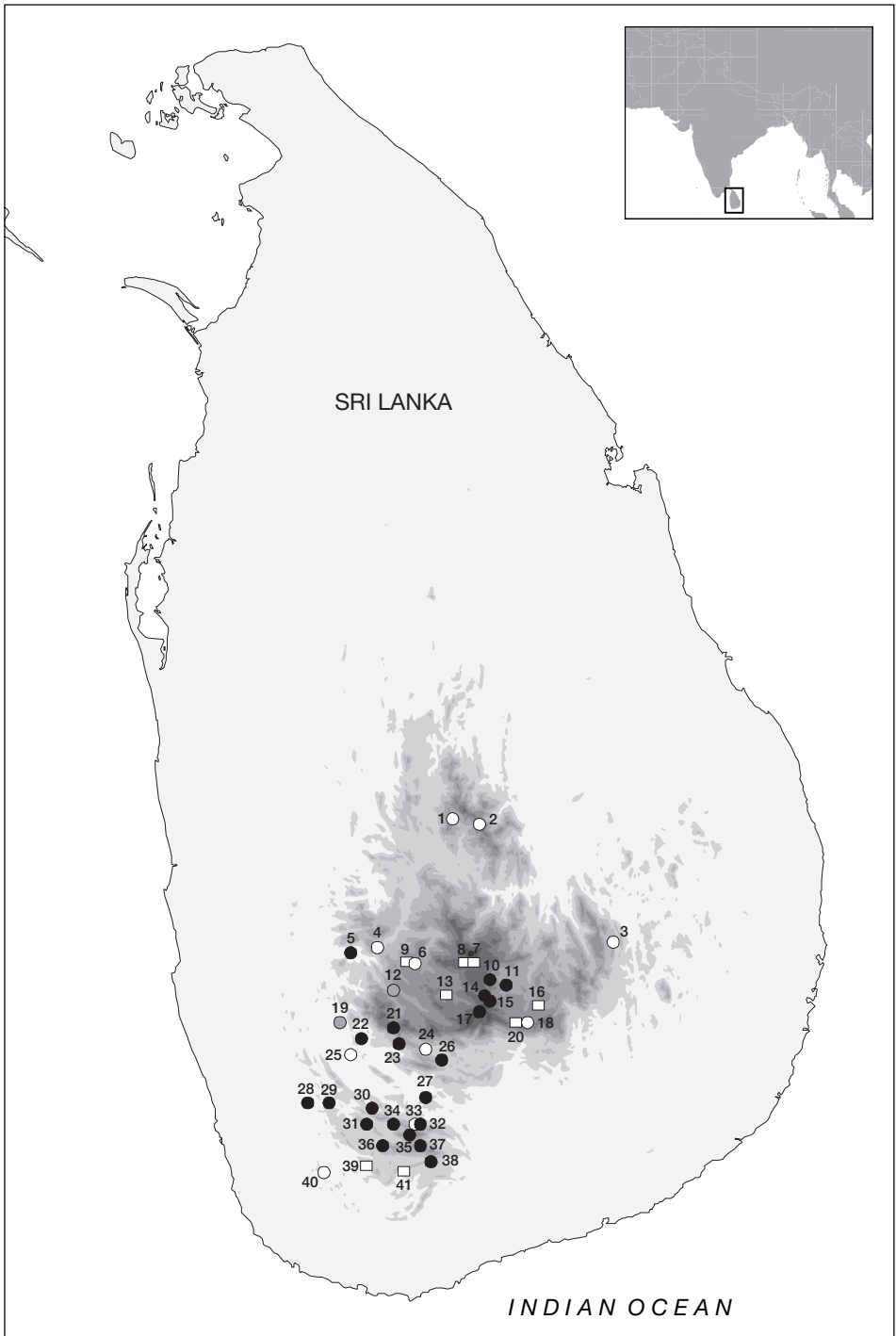
This species has a small, declining population and range, which is also severely fragmented, as a result of the degradation and clearance of humid forest. These factors qualify it as Vulnerable.

DISTRIBUTION The Sri Lanka Magpie is found in the lowland rainforests of the wet zone in south-west Sri Lanka, and adjacent montane forests of the hill zone. Its habitat is now fragmented within its small range (see Threats). Records (arranged approximately from north to south) are as follows:

■ **SRI LANKA Kalebokka** district, 1872 (immature in BMNH); **Knuckles** range, undated (Legge 1880); **Cocoawatte**, November 1894, August 1895 (two specimens in BMNH), November 1894 (male in SMF); **Ambagamuwa** (Ambegamo), undated (Legge 1880); **Kitulgala**, 1979 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* February 1979), many records to date (Rooke 1994, *Ceylon Bird Club News passim*, D. Warakagoda *in litt.* 2001); **Dimbula** (Dimbulla), undated (specimen in AMNH); **Galways Land Sanctuary**, undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* August 1984); **Nuwara Eliya**, undated (Legge 1880), April 1910 (clutches of four eggs in BMNH), August 1918 (female in NMGC); **Nahiti Mukalana**, undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); **Hakgala**, July 1912 (two specimens in NMGC), July 1912 (female in USNM), February 1936 (male in NMGC), regularly recorded between 1974 and 1981 (*Ceylon Bird Club News passim*) and down to the present (D. Warakagoda *in litt.* 2001); **Welimada**, Uva Ben Head Estate, between Ambawela Railway Station and Horton Plains, one, January 1989, in tall wattle forest (*Ceylon Bird Club News* January 1989); **Hapugastenna**, c.1975 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* November 1975), one, January/February 1977 (R. L. Fleming Jr. 1977); **Agarapatana**, undated (specimen in NMGC); **Ambewela**, April 1975, December 1981 and February 1982 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* April 1975, December 1981, February 1982); **Pattipola-Ambawela**, one in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Bandarawela**, undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* July 1973); **Horton Plains**, at Nagarak, September 1928 (male in BMNH), at World's End, March 1972, September 1973 and December 1974 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* March 1972, September 1973, December 1974) and down to the present (D. Warakagoda *in litt.* 2001); **Haputale** hills, undated (Legge 1880); **Kuruwita**, January 1951 (two females in NMGC); **Tangamalai Sanctuary**, Haputale, undated (Ranasinghe 1982, *Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); **Peak Wilderness Sanctuary**, undated (Legge 1880), 1,200 m, pair probably nesting, March 1988 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* March 1988), two in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997), May–October 1995 (Ranawana and Bambaradeniya 1998);

The distribution of Sri Lanka Magpie *Urocissa ornata* (map opposite): (1) Kalebokka; (2) Knuckles; (3) Cocoawatte; (4) Ambagamuwa; (5) Kitulgala; (6) Dimbula; (7) Galways Land Sanctuary; (8) Nuwara Eliya; (9) Nahiti Mukalana; (10) Hakgala; (11) Welimada; (12) Hapugastenna; (13) Agarapatana; (14) Ambewela; (15) Pattipola-Ambawela; (16) Bandarawela; (17) Horton Plains; (18) Haputale; (19) Kuruwita; (20) Tangamalai Sanctuary; (21) Peak Wilderness Sanctuary; (22) Gilimale-Eratne; (23) Bambarabotuwa; (24) Rassagala; (25) Ratnapura; (26) Morahela; (27) Wewelkandura; (28) Morapitiya; (29) Waratalgoda; (30) Delwala; (31) Kudumiriya; (32) Rakwana; (33) Rangwelltenne; (34) Walankanda Forest Reserve; (35) Handapan Ella; (36) Sinharaja Forest Reserve; (37) Morningside; (38) Panilkanda; (39) Dellawa; (40) Hiniduma; (41) Deniyaya.

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



Gilimale-Eratne, two in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Bambarabotuwa**, one in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC/FAO 1997); **Rassagala**, Balangoda, Ratnapura, 1920 (specimen in BMNH), 900 m, November 1921 (female in MNHN); **Ratnapura**, March 1908 and March 1910 (three clutches of 1–3 eggs in BMNH); **Morahela**, three in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Wewelkandura**, two in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Morapitiya**, undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* May 1984, December 1985), at “Morapitiya-Runakanda”, three in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Waratalgoda**, one in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); **Delwala** forest, one in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997), 450 m, 10 sightings, July–September 1997 (Jones *et al.* 1998); **Kudumiriya** forest, one in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997), 350–750 m, 28 sightings, July–September 1997 (Jones *et al.* 1998); **Rakwana**, undated (Legge 1880), before 1997 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); **Rangwelltenne** (“Ranqwellepura”) January 1866 (male in BMNH); **Walankanda Forest Reserve**, 400–1,100 m, 29 sightings, July–September 1997 (Jones *et al.* 1998); **Handapan Ella**, two in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997), undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); **Sinharaja Forest Reserve**, many records between 1880 (Legge 1880) and 1997 (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997) and down to the present (D. Warakagoda verbally 2000); **Morningside** (Sooriyakanda), 11 birds, March 2000 (K. Weerakoon *in litt.* 2000); **Panilkanda** forest reserve, one in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997), undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); **Dellawa**, undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); **Hiniduma**, April 1939 (female in NMGC); **Deniyaya**, undated (*Ceylon Bird Club News* September 1997); Walawe Basin (untraced), one in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); Kaudeyr (untraced), before 1880 (male in BMNH); Raubadde (untraced), February 1881 (specimen in BMNH); Kurulagala (untraced), one in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); Kabarakalapatana (untraced), one in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); Alutwelawisahena (untraced), in the period 1991–1996 (IUCN/WCMC 1997); Diyaluma (not mapped), recently (*Ceylon Bird Club News* July 1999).

POPULATION In the late nineteenth century, Legge (1880) was concerned that, owing to habitat loss, this species had “decreased very much in numbers below 1,220 m”. Less fretfully, Henry (1955) considered it “scarce and usually shy, but locally common and bolder”, and Phillips (1978) stated that “small parties are frequent, but nowhere plentiful”. However, it is certainly likely to have declined significantly during this century because of the reduction and fragmentation of the wet-zone forests (see Threats), and it has recently been described as “rare” (Kotagama and Fernando 1994). In a recent survey of three wet-zone forests, it was found to be “uncommon” at Delwala and Walankanda, but “fairly common” at Kudumiriya (Jones *et al.* 1998). During a major survey of over 200 forest sites in Sri Lanka in 1991–1996, it was recorded in 17 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 The Sri Lanka Magpie is found in “tall virgin forests” in the hills and adjoining wet-zone lowland forests from above 2,135 m to below 150 m (Phillips 1978). In the nineteenth century it was considered to be mainly a bird of the hills, found most abundantly at c.1,520 m and upwards, but “at certain seasons” descending as low as 460 m (Holdsworth 1872). During a recent study in Delwala Forest Reserve, it was seldom found below c.450 m, with most observations made at 500–800 m (Jones *et al.* 1998). It prefers undisturbed forest (Henry 1955, Hoffmann 1984, Kotagama 1994), and was very seldom observed in selectively logged forest during recent surveys, although there were some sightings in quite disturbed areas, close to small hamlets and in abandoned “chena” cultivation (Jones *et al.* 1998). It generally stays in the branches of tall trees, but sometimes occurs in dense, low undergrowth (Holdsworth 1872, Legge 1880). Groups of about half a dozen are usual (Holdsworth 1872,

Legge 1880, Henry 1955), but pairs or solitary individuals are also seen (Henry 1955, Jones *et al.* 1998).

Food It feeds mainly on small animals, including hairy caterpillars, green tree-cricket, various chafers, tree-frogs and lizards, but it has also been observed taking the fruits of the climbing screw-pine *Freycinetia* (Henry 1955), and Legge (1880) noted it feeding on “fruit of many kinds” as well as lizards (such as the green lizard *Calotes*) and large beetles. Three individuals in a commotion close to a Spot-winged Thrush *Zoothera spiloptera* nest were assumed to be attempting to predate the nest (Jones *et al.* 1998).

Breeding The species usually breeds from January to the end of March (Whistler 1944, Henry 1955, De Zylva 1984, E. Lott and C. Lott verbally 1997), although a nest with eggs has been found in December (Lewis 1898). Nests have been found in a fork of the top branch of a tall sapling, about 15 m in height (Legge 1880), on a *Garcinia echinocarpa* tree, 4.5 m from the ground (De Zylva 1984), and at the top of a small forest tree (Henry 1955). The nest has been described as resembled a small crow’s but lined with “old man’s beard” lichen and very well concealed among small twigs and foliage (Henry 1955); and as a large, roughly built structure, made of small sticks and twigs, with a fairly large depression in the middle but little or no lining (Lewis 1898); 3–5 eggs are laid (Lewis 1898, Henry 1955).

Migration This species may undertake some movements to lower elevations during the coldest months, as its abundance appears to vary at certain sites between seasons (Holdsworth 1872, Legge 1880, Fleming 1977), but there is no definite evidence for this.

THREATS The Sri Lanka Magpie 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 the Sri Lanka Magpie, which is confined to primary forest, is the clearance and degradation of its habitat (Hoffmann 1984); a general survey of forest loss on Sri Lanka is given in Threats under Red-faced Malkoha *Phaenicophaeus pyrrhocephalus*. Another concern is that forest die-back in the submontane and montane region is affecting the habitat of this species (Kotagama 1994), of which only some 719 km² were estimated to survive in the early 1990s (Legg and Jewell 1995); preliminary and sporadic studies indicate that air pollution, causing acid clouds, rain and mist, mainly during the south-west monsoon, could be responsible (Hoffmann 1997).

Hunting In the late nineteenth century it was noted that the “beauty of the Jay’s plumage has caused it to be recklessly shot for the sake of its feathers” (Legge 1880). However, hunting is unlikely to be a real threat to the species today because of the high cost of ammunition, the strict control of guns wrought by the security situation, and cultural and religious taboos (G. de Silva Wijeyeratne *in litt.* 1999).

Increased competition Pairs of this species which attempted to nest in cleared areas at the edge of Sinharaja forest seemed unable to survive in this environment because of high rates of parasitism (90% of the nests) by the Asian Koel *Eudynamis scolopacea* (P. B. Karunaratne in Erdelen 1988), providing evidence that endemic species require undisturbed areas in the interior of the forest (Erdelen 1988). The Asian Koel is common wherever there is human habitation and this may be an important factor in restricting the Sri Lanka Magpie to primary habitat (Kotagama 1994).

Pesticides It has been suggested that in the hill country biocides may be playing a role in the decline of this species (Kotagama 1994).

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, a World Heritage Site which is actively

protected under the jurisdiction of the Forest Department (IUCN/WCMC 1997), and in the Horton Plains National Park, Peak Wilderness Sanctuary, Morapitiya Forest Reserve and Tangamalai Sanctuary areas (see Distribution).

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

Research It needs to be determined whether a high rate of parasitism of nests by the Asian Koel is a serious threat to this species in disturbed and forest-edge habitats, as suggested in Erdelen (1988), so as to improve understanding of the effects of forest fragmentation and degradation on its population status. An investigation is also needed into whether this species undertakes seasonal altitudinal movements (see Migration above), which may also have been disrupted by forest fragmentation. 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).