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# Are the hornbills becoming a rare sight?

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**Sightings of hornbills in the forest are no longer as common as before.**

IN what might deceptively seem like an encouraging indicator to the casual bird watcher, hornbills have been spotted flying in clusters over certain areas in Malaysia.

But don't be fooled. Those familiar with the behavioural tendencies of this enigmatic bird know that the unusual sightings may be a sign of disturbances in the forest ecosystem.

“Hornbills typically fly for miles and miles foraging for food, but now that large tracts of forests have been removed, you see more clusters of them concentrated in specific areas,” explains avid birdwatcher Mohd Rafi Abdul Kudus.



A male wreathed hornbill regurgitates a fruit to feed its female partner and their chick, both holed up in the nest in this tree beside Temenggor lake. Hornbills nest in mature trees in undisturbed forest. – Photo by LIM SWEE YIAN

“This is not a good sign. It suggests that hornbills have been robbed of their food source and large trees that they need for nesting.”

Rafi spends his weekends exploring various well-known birding spots in Malaysia, which include Lake Kenyir, Pulau Pangkor, Langkawi, Genting Highlands, Taman Negara and the peat swamps of Lanjut in Pahang.

“I’ve noticed the number of hornbills dwindling in all these places. It’s not easy to see them anymore,” he laments.

Malaysia is home to 10 of 54 known species of hornbills worldwide, eight or nine of which are found in most parts of the country. Only the plain-pouched hornbill is exclusively seen in Perak’s Belum-Temenggor forest, where all 10 species can be found and five are known to nest.

According to the IUCN-World Conservation Union Red List, the world’s main authority on globally threatened biodiversity, six of the 10 species found in Malaysia are classified as “near-threatened”, while the more elusive plain-pouched is currently considered to be “vulnerable”.

“An experienced boatman told me that you could count up to 15,000 plain-pouched hornbills flying in Belum-Temenggor five years ago during the peak season for mass migration. Now the numbers have been reduced to 2,000 or 3,000,” says Rafi.

### **Fewer birds**

If current trends are anything to go by, the globally threatened birds face a challenging predicament due to Malaysia’s rapidly evolving landscape.

Similar thoughts are echoed by Allen Jeyarajasingam, co-author of the essential Field Guide to the Birds of West Malaysia and Singapore.

“We definitely have lower numbers now, especially in Selangor. You could see more hornbills in the 70s, but that was a different time,” he says regretfully.

Volunteers with the Malaysian Nature Society’s (MNS) Hornbill Conservation Project, a team comprising Lim Kim Chye, Yeap Chin Aik and Ravinder Kaur, concur based on their personal experiences in Belum-Temenggor, where most of their work is centred. That forest is reputed to be one of few remaining frontiers that can support sizable populations of large birds such as the hornbill.

“From my many trips to Temenggor, I have seen significant changes to the landscape. The non-sustainable logging of old-growth forests and increased construction of access roads has opened up more land,” says Lim.

“Orang asli villagers are also clearing the forests to plant rubber,” he said, reiterating that the sheer size of a hornbill demands large trees with existing hollows or crevices to nest in.

Lim reveals that the highest count recorded by MNS in Belum-Temenggor was 2,400 plain-pouched hornbills in 1993, but now they count roughly 1,500.

“It looks like there has been a reduction in numbers but we have to continue surveying the area for a few more years before we can conclusively state that there is a decline,” he explains.

### **More studies**

MNS conservation officer Ravinder highlights the need to better understand hornbills.

“We are currently collecting information about the nesting spots in Belum-Temenggor through the ongoing survey, which was initiated in 2004,” she says.

She admits that research efforts so far have barely scratched the surface of all there is to know about the birds.

“Our main obstacle is funding but we will soon employ radio-tagging methods for a more comprehensive study on the numbers and distribution of hornbills.”

Lim says once they have the necessary data, they could inform the state Forestry Department so they logging is prevented in the outlined areas.

“It would also be wise to replant fruit trees and not just timber trees as the hornbills have lost an important food source due to the clearing of forests.”

Both could not stress more on the importance of extending gazettement of the Royal Belum State Park to include Temenggor forest reserve.

“We recently sent a delegation to speak with the Chief Minister of Perak about this and response so far has been very encouraging,” says Ravinder, offering hope for our feathered friends up north.

But who's taking care of hornbill habitats located outside of Belum-Temenggor?

Rafi, who has been actively birding for four years now, spoke of the largely decimated peat swamp forests in Malaysia that have been lost to development and commercial activities such as agriculture and aquaculture.

"All we have left are pockets of peat swamps and sub-coastal swamps in south-east and mid-west Malaysia, where the population of wrinkled hornbills is now concentrated," he said.

Rafi cites the work of Dr David Wells, an acclaimed ornithologist from Universiti Malaya who has written several articles on hornbills. "He reckons that the status of the wrinkled hornbill should be moved up from 'near-threatened' to 'vulnerable'."

MNS senior conservation officer Yeap Chin Aik expresses his own words of caution: "Already one can only find hornbills in well-forested areas. If our forest cover continues to decline, the current 'near-threatened' species will become 'vulnerable', a very unenviable promotion."