

Muted celebrations for Thailand's most colourful bird

The rediscovery of Gurney's Pitta 25 years ago today (June 14) brought hope for a beautiful bird feared extinct for over three decades. But the bird's future still hangs in the balance, as destruction of lowland forest has reduced the Thailand population by around 90% since 1986. Since the rediscovery in southern Thailand, further populations have been discovered in neighbouring Myanmar. The only bird endemic to the Thai peninsula, Gurney's Pitta *Pitta pitta gurneyi* has been the focus of an international conservation effort, but these efforts are not matched by adequate protection of the bird's last Thai home. Maliwan Sopha, Director of BirdLife Partner Bird Conservation Society of Thailand (BCST), said: "The quarter-century reprieve for this bird has been squandered because successive Thai governments have allowed rubber and oil-palm plantations to expand at the expense of remaining forest. This has destroyed most Gurney's Pitta habitat, causing the population to crash from an estimated 50 pairs throughout southern Thailand to as few as five pairs today, at a single site." While Thailand has an enviable record in establishing protected areas, these are all in hilly and mountainous areas. This is bad news for the large proportion of Thailand's wildlife confined to lowland forests. The Royal Forest Department responded to the rediscovery by setting up a wildlife sanctuary centred on the nearby mountain, Khao Nor Chuchi, but neglected to include an adequate area of lowland forest. 75% of the pittas were left unprotected, in Bang Khram National Reserve Forest. Since then, rubber and oil-palm growers have gradually eaten away the remaining forest. Many also hunt wildlife for food and the pet trade. Khao Nor Chuchi forest, an Important Bird Area, arguably supports the richest lowland forest bird life of any site in Thailand. The continuing decline in Gurney's Pitta has happened in spite of valiant conservation efforts by BCST in partnership with the Department of National Parks, the Royal Forest Department, the RSPB (BirdLife in the UK) and local community bodies, with the support of the UK's Darwin Initiative and the Oriental Bird Club. DNP officials have tracked the continued loss of pittas and their habitat, but have been powerless to intervene. "We find bird nets set both inside and outside the sanctuary", said one anonymous official. "Hunting, collection of forest products and illegal logging are rampant. When we survey for Gurney's Pittas, the rubber and oil-palm growers monitor our movements. They then cut down the spiny palms in which the pitta nests, reasoning that if they kill off the pittas they will more easily be able to clear the remaining forest." Despite the uphill struggle facing conservationists, there is still hope. Replanting and regeneration of forests has helped stem forest clearance, and some local villagers practice sustainable management of their plantations, with regenerated forest areas for wildlife. However, this could all be in vain if the Government doesn't seriously tackle the many land tenure issues in the area, by delineating the boundaries of the Wildlife Sanctuary and Reserve Forest, and strictly enforcing the laws relating to encroachment.