

Rubber plantations are erasing Thailand's lowland forest

In July 2010, the *Bangkok Post* reported on the Thai government's support of a project to turn 1,280 square km of lowland forest into rubber plantations. A total budget of 3.97 billion Thai Baht (about US\$ 124 million) was promised towards the project. However, there was no clear explanation as to why it was necessary to commit these public funds to support the growth and expansion of what is already a highly lucrative crop, closely linked with forest destruction and degradation. Even without taking further loss of biodiversity into account, the news report concluded that the project itself was badly conceived and that the budget allocated to support the (already prosperous) rubber growers was totally unjustified. In addition to this, the government has recently declared its support of the expansion of rubber and oil-palm enterprises to drier regions of the country that were traditionally regarded as less suitable for these crops. Bird Conservation Society of Thailand (BCST - BirdLife Thailand) has expressed its deep concern about these proposals, highlighting the widespread illegal encroachment and degradation of national reserve forest and public land that has already been caused by the expansion of crop plantations. This includes an area of lowland forest in the Krabi Province, where the globally threatened Gurney's Pitta (*Pitta gurneyi*) population has dwindled to just a few pairs. Assistant Professor Philip D. Round, a member of BCST's Bird Records and Conservation Committees gave his opinion on the recent proposals: "This is highly damaging. Even so-called 'degraded' forests and croplands in north, west and eastern Thailand continue to support a moderately rich bird community in those scattered trees that remain. Populations of scarce birds like Rufous-winged Buzzard, Blossom-headed and Red-breasted Parakeets, Fulvous-breasted Woodpeckers and Burmese Shrikes are higher in present day farmland and 'degraded' forest than they are in Thailand's (mainly) mountainous protected areas which are largely unsuitable for these lowland, open woodland species." Round, an ornithologist who is a recognised world authority on Thai birds and who teaches at Mahidol University, Bangkok went on to say: "Rubber plantations are like a creeping cancer for biodiversity—a sterile green blanket that holds almost no food for either insectivorous or fruit-eating birds. Expansion of rubber plantations will further exacerbate the ongoing decline in wild bird populations." Gawin Chutima, BCST Chairman added his wisdom and views on the recent proposals: "Hardly any of our lowlands are protected in nature reserves—a major flaw in what passes for nature conservation policy in Thailand. This threatens to push populations of those lowland birds that remain to near vanishing point. In addition to notifying the government of our scientifically-based concern over this potential further loss of biodiversity, BCST will alert the public about the impending losses, and the mostly unrecognised values of degraded forests and open woodland. We hope to use the

publicity around the International Year of Biodiversity to give these messages greater strength and widespread appreciation?. Photo credit: Red-breasted Parakeet, Smith Sutibut