

BirdLife's History in Objects, #8: The Compass

Title

If a bird calls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it really exist?

Cebu Flowerpecker *Dicaeum quadricolor*, although Critically Endangered, is a lucky bird. It is also a great reminder for us to never give up hope for a species. For almost a century, Cebu Flowerpecker retreated into the ever-diminishing mountainous forests of Cebu Island, Philippines, whilst conservationists worldwide were oblivious to its existence. Every fallen tree heard at the edge of the forest was one less thin, high-pitched, sweet note heard towards the centre; yet no-one heard the bird's distress calls until 1992 because it was officially thought to be extinct. It was thanks to a visitor determined not to stick to the well-worn birding circuits that Cebu Flowerpecker was rediscovered at the eleventh hour, and work to conserve the species belatedly began.

The Romeo Error

Image not found

[An artist's impression of Cebu Flowerpecker, showing its four colours. No photo exists for this species yet](https://www.flickr.com/photos/60209140@N00/6858790930/)

Dr Nigel Collar, who has worked tirelessly at BirdLife for more than 30 years on endangered bird conservation, called this case *The Romeo Error on Cebu* after Shakespeare's play in which Juliet wrongly and fatally assumes that Romeo is dead due to a miscommunication. By 1992, Cebu retained barely 0.03% of its original forest cover. BirdLife recognises that birds are excellent indicators of the health of habitats, so imagine what other life-forms have been affected and could be saved. Thankfully, the remaining forest is now protected by local communities and it is hoped the Cebu Flowerpecker population will be able to significantly increase from the 85-105 individuals that currently remain, as more forest is replanted. BirdLife was thrilled to announce that the Philippines Ministry of Tourism agreed to become the BirdLife Species Champion for Cebu Flowerpecker, and all proceeds from the 21st British Birdwatching Fair went to BirdLife's Preventing Extinctions Programme in 2009, of which Cebu Flowerpecker was a great icon for the 'Lost & Found' campaign.

Image not found

[Off the beaten track. Cknara. www.flickr.com/photos/60209140@N00/6858790930/](https://www.flickr.com/photos/60209140@N00/6858790930/)

Unexplored wonders

BirdLife has a rich history of species discoveries. Through mostly student-led expeditions under its Conservation Leadership Programme, BirdLife teams have discovered or rediscovered over 200 species (e.g. Ochre-bellied Dove *Leptotila ochraceiventris* in the Tumbes forest of Ecuador; and Damar Flycatcher *Ficedula henrici* on a small island in Indonesia). Of the 197 species listed as Critically Endangered, there are 45 for which no living population is recently known, and therefore no conservation measures can be devised. BirdLife now wants people to venture further afield, into the gaps between tourist lodges and previous surveys, where some of these mysteries will surely be solved.

Let Cebu Flowerpecker be a four-coloured reminder for us to never give up hope on a species feared to have disappeared, because there is a lot of wonderful forest left to explore?

BirdLife International is determined that no more species will slip further towards extinction and officially launched a major new initiative in 2004, the Preventing Extinctions Programme, that spearheads greater conservation action, awareness and funding support for the world's most threatened birds. This article is part of a series celebrating the 90th Anniversary of BirdLife.



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