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Red List update for birds: two iconic species saved from extinction by conservation action

BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK Targeted conservation action continues to yield positive results, with two of the world's rarest and most threatened bird species, Northern Bald Ibis and Pink Pigeon, the latest to recover from the brink of extinction thanks to direct intervention.

The finding forms part of BirdLife International's latest assessment of the extinction risk of the world's birds, which is updated annually in BirdLife's role as the official Red List Authority for birds for The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™.

Prior to this year's assessment, **Northern Bald Ibis** was among 222 bird species worldwide classed as Critically Endangered – the highest possible threat category, indicating that a species is highly likely to go extinct in our lifetimes. However, the ibis has recovered to such an extent that it has now been downlisted to a lower threat category, increasing the total number of Critically Endangered bird species downlisted as a result of direct conservation action since 2000 to 26.

The **Pink Pigeon** is even further along the journey to safety – having been downlisted from Critically Endangered to Endangered in 2000, its threat status has now improved to Vulnerable.

Against the backdrop of the ongoing biodiversity crisis, these results show that highly threatened species are not necessarily doomed to extinction, but can be saved with effective conservation action. However, the update also warns us that conservation challenges are continuing, with illegal trade, large-scale habitat loss and climate change at the forefront of these concerns.

As a result of these pressures, mainland bird extinctions are now on course to outpace island bird extinctions for the first time, meaning that targeted, species-specific interventions alone will not be enough. To effectively combat these threats, large-scale international collaboration between NGOs, governments, businesses and local communities is required, along with robust policies to protect the world's most important sites for nature.

Conservation successes

Northern Bald Ibis population has reached a modern record and expanded to new breeding sites (Morocco)

The Northern Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* was once widespread and idolised across North Africa, the Middle East and southern Europe, and was even used as an ancient Egyptian hieroglyph. However, by 1998, habitat loss, pesticides and hunting had driven the population to an all-time low of 59 pairs, most of them confined to one breeding colony in the Souss-Massa National Park, Morocco, rendering it Critically Endangered. BirdLife, working with the Moroccan government and organisations including Groupe de Recherche pour la Protection des Oiseaux au Maroc ([GREPOM](#), BirdLife's Moroccan Partner), employed local fishermen as wardens to protect the breeding colony from human disturbance and predators. Thanks to this and further conservation measures, numbers have now risen to a modern day record of 147 breeding pairs, which in 2017 spread to two small new breeding sites. Following the likely extinction of the tiny Syrian population, the Moroccan birds constitute the only truly wild population. As its numbers remain very low, the bird is still categorised as Endangered, and much work remains to be done to secure its long-term future. But semi-wild populations in Turkey and high-profile captive release projects in southern Europe raise hopes for further recovery across its former range.

Pink Pigeon no longer Endangered thanks to invasive species control on Dodo's former home island (Mauritius, Indian Ocean)

The Pink Pigeon *Nesoenas mayeri* has been downlisted from Endangered to Vulnerable following decades of invasive species control and habitat restoration on Mauritius, the island where the Dodo *Raphus cucullatus* met its demise. In 1990, the Pink Pigeon's population had been reduced to only 10 wild individuals by habitat loss and introduced mammalian predators such as the Black Rat, Crab-eating Macaque and Small Indian Mongoose. In response, conservationists combined a captive breeding programme with intensive conservation in the field. By 2000, efforts by the Mauritian Wildlife Foundation (BirdLife Partner in Mauritius) and associates had helped numbers to reach an estimated 300 individuals, and the Pink Pigeon was downlisted from Critically Endangered to Endangered. This year, the species' wild population of 400 individuals was deemed stable enough to downlist it a further step to Vulnerable.

Red-headed Woodpecker and Henslow's Sparrow are recovering thanks to habitat restoration (North America)

Formerly declining populations of **Red-headed Woodpecker** *Melanerpes erythrocephalus* and **Henslow's Sparrow** *Passerculus henslowii*, both native to North America, have stabilised thanks to habitat management. Henslow's Sparrow in particular has benefited from the USA's Conservation Reserves Program, whereby farmers are paid to remove environmentally sensitive land from cultivation and instead plant species that will improve environmental health and quality. This year, both species have been downlisted from Near Threatened to Least Concern, ideally how we would wish all life on earth to be categorised.

Emerging threats and challenges

Seven Hornbill species under severe threat from deforestation and hunting (Southeast Asia)

In Southeast Asia, seven Hornbill species have been uplisted to higher threat categories, primarily due to deforestation. Most of these species are concentrated in the Sundaic lowlands of Southeast Asia, where rates of deforestation are highest. Hornbills nest in the largest, oldest trees, which are often the first to be felled. And in a vicious circle, forest loss is also making it easier for hunters to access these birds. Larger species such as the **Great Hornbill** *Buceros bicornis* and **Rhinoceros Hornbill** *Buceros rhinoceros* are often shot because they are mistaken for the Helmeted Hornbill *Rhinoplax vigil* (already Critically Endangered since 2015), whose unique solid “casque” is highly desirable on the black market as a fertility charm or status symbol. To combat this threat, BirdLife International has united with conservation organisations across the globe to implement an ambitious ten-year [Helmeted Hornbill Action Plan](#), centred around sharing information and analysing data to stem the illegal trade of hornbill ornaments at its source.

Straw-headed Bulbul and Java Sparrow are being trapped to extinction for the songbird trade (Southeast Asia)

The Straw-headed Bulbul *Pycnonotus zeylanicus*, also native to Southeast Asia, has been uplisted from Endangered to Critically Endangered as one of many species decimated by Asia’s songbird trade due to the popularity of birdsong competitions, which offer large monetary prizes. The Straw-headed Bulbul is considered one of the very best singers, and in recent years trapping has been made easier by the loss of wilderness across its habitat – as logging roads spread through the forest, the distance between access points is getting smaller, making it easier for trappers to reach the birds and leaving no safe refuges. Similarly, the **Java Sparrow** *Lonchura oryzivora* can be purchased from almost any pet store in Southeast Asia and has been introduced to places as disparate as Hawaii and Puerto Rico. However, owing to decades of trapping (which reached its peak in the 1960s and 1970s), its wild population, found only on Java and Bali, is now so small it has been uplisted from Vulnerable to Endangered. BirdLife, in particular our Partner Burung Indonesia, are tackling the Asian songbird crisis by identifying the last refuges of several songbirds in the montane rainforests of West Java and working with the Indonesian authorities and local communities to improve and extend their protection.

Eastern Whip-poor-will and Rufous Hummingbird: well-known birds sliding to extinction in plain sight (North America)

In North America, two familiar and widespread species– the **Eastern Whip-poor-will** *Antrostomus vociferus* and **Rufous Hummingbird** *Selasphorus rufus* – have been uplisted to Near Threatened. There had been little previous research into the health of their populations because of their image as “common” birds. The **Eastern Whip-poor-will**, a highly-camouflaged nightjar, is an intrinsic part of local culture and features in much American folklore. But long-term monitoring by citizen scientist birdwatchers has revealed that its population fell by over 60% between 1970 and 2014. Dependent on flying insects

throughout the year, this species is particularly sensitive to pesticides, intensified agriculture and other factors that reduce insect availability, and is also a victim of habitat loss. Initiatives such as the aforementioned Conservation Reserves Program are a crucial starting point in reversing this trend.

The Rufous Hummingbird, although it famously feeds on nectar, also relies on insects during the breeding season, and as such, could be impacted by lack of insects in its forest habitat. Additionally, the species may soon become a victim of climate change: flowers are already blooming as many as two weeks earlier in some locations, meaning many hummingbirds arrive from migration too late to take advantage of this vital food source.

QUOTES

Dr Roger Safford, Senior Programme Manager (Preventing Extinctions), BirdLife International:

The successes shown by the improved status of the Northern Bald Ibis and Pink Pigeon are a reminder that well-planned species conservation can deliver inspiring results. Both of these species have become icons for the spectacular and unique places they inhabit, with benefits to many other animals and plants. But even these two remain threatened, so we cannot be complacent and our efforts must continue – as they must also for too many other species that continue to decline.

Dr Stuart Butchart, Chief Scientist, BirdLife International:

In two years' time, governments will meet to review whether the targets they adopted in 2010 to tackle the loss of nature have been met, including the goal to prevent further extinctions and improve the status of the threatened species most in decline. Targeted action can help species to recover, but the overall trends are negative, showing that much greater efforts are needed to replicate such successes more widely.

Melanie Heath, Director of Science, Policy and Information, BirdLife International:

This year's list shows that given sufficient resources and political will, species can recover and habitats can be restored. However, still more concerted effort is required to reverse the downward trends of our planet's most threatened bird species. Governments have a particular responsibility to implement policies that scale up existing successes and achieve environmentally sustainable development to end the biodiversity crisis – the focus of this month's gathering of the world's governments, NGOs and the business community at the 2018 UN Biodiversity Conference.

NOTES TO EDITORS

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BirdLife International is the world's largest nature conservation Partnership. Together we are 117 BirdLife Partners worldwide – one per country – and growing, with almost 11 million supporters, 7,000 local conservation groups and 7,400 staff. As the official authority for birds for the IUCN Red List, BirdLife coordinates the process of evaluating all of the world's bird species against the Red List categories and criteria, in order to assess their extinction risk. Find out more at: www.birdlife.org and visit www.birdlife.org/datazone for the bird-specific Red List.

The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species™ (or The IUCN Red List) is an invaluable resource to guide conservation action and policy decisions. It is a health check for our planet – a Barometer of Life. It is the world's most comprehensive information source on the global conservation status of plant, animal and fungi species. It is based on an objective system for assessing the risk of extinction of a species should no conservation action be taken.

Species are assigned to one of eight categories of threat based on whether they meet criteria linked to population trend, population size and structure and geographic range. Species listed as Critically Endangered, Endangered or Vulnerable are collectively described as 'Threatened'.

The IUCN Red List is not just a register of names and associated threat categories. It is a rich compendium of information on the threats to the species, their ecological requirements, where they live, and information on conservation actions that can be used to reduce or prevent extinctions. The IUCN Red List is a joint effort between IUCN and its Species Survival Commission, working with its IUCN Red List Partners – Arizona State University; BirdLife International; Botanic Gardens Conservation International; Conservation International; NatureServe; Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; Sapienza University of Rome; Texas A&M University; and Zoological Society of London. www.iucnredlist.org

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