

CONVENTION ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN ENDANGERED SPECIES  
OF WILD FAUNA AND FLORA



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REPRESENTATION OF SONGBIRDS (PASSERIFORMES) IN THE CITES APPENDICES  
AND THEIR PREVALENCE IN TRADE

1. This document has been prepared by a consortium of BirdLife International, TRAFFIC, IUCN, UNEP-WCMC, University of Cambridge (UK) and the Species360 Conservation Science Alliance
2. This document presents supporting information for the working document CoP19 Doc. 74 Songbird trade and conservation management (Passeriformes spp.)

**Summary**

- Songbirds feature heavily in trade; in terms of numbers of birds recovered in seizures or recorded in market and online trade surveys, songbirds are globally the single most heavily traded order of birds
- However, while songbirds make up 60% of extant bird species, they account for less than 6% of all the bird species listed in the CITES Appendices
- Only 4% of globally threatened songbird species are listed in the CITES Appendices, compared to 45% of non-songbird species
- Songbirds are greatly under-represented in the CITES Appendices relative to their prevalence in trade

**1. Introduction**

The IPBES Global Assessment recognizes the direct exploitation of organisms as the second biggest driver of global extinction risk. Trade in living or dead birds taken from the wild is a multi-billion-dollar industry that represents a major direct threat to the survival of many species. BirdLife International's data suggest that the conservation status of over a third of all bird species may be adversely affected by international trade.<sup>1</sup> There is growing evidence that songbirds (bird species in the order Passeriformes, also known as passerines) may be particularly threatened by direct exploitation and that trade in these species is increasing in volume in some parts of the world. In response to the particular threat posed by trade to songbirds in parts of Asia, the Species Survival Commission (SSC) of the IUCN has established an Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group ASTSG.<sup>2</sup> CITES is the principal international policy mechanism by which international trade in threatened species is regulated, but concerns have been raised that songbirds are under-represented in its Appendices and

<sup>1</sup> Butchart, SHM (2008) *Bird Conservation International* 18 (S1): S245-262

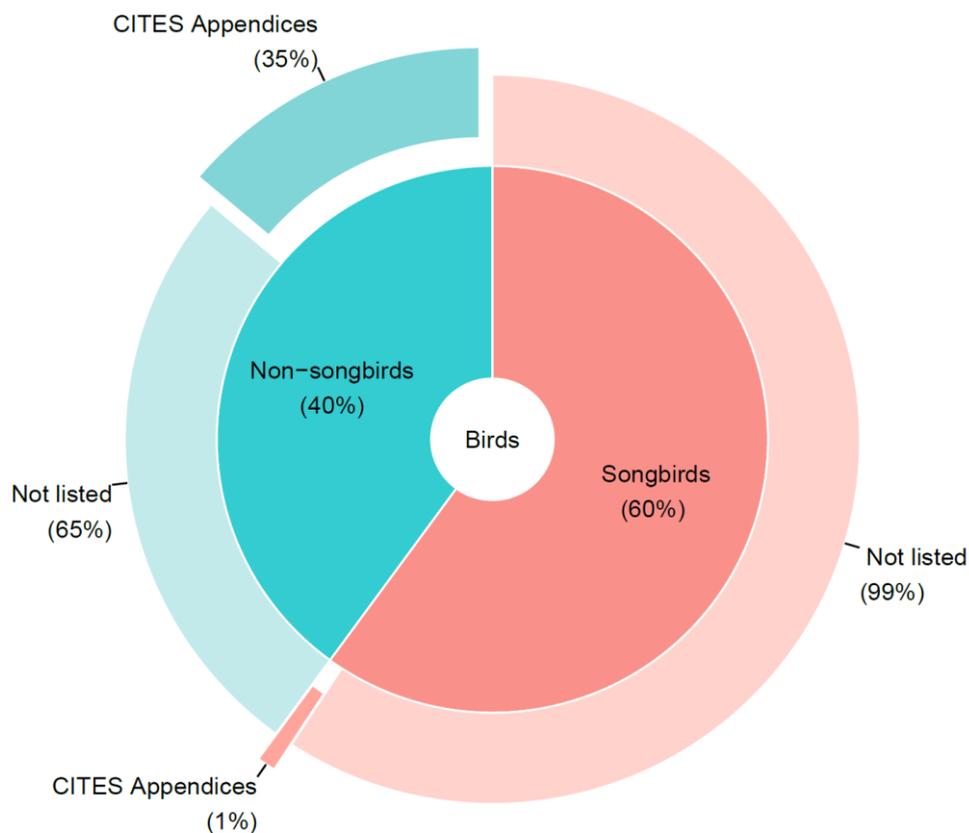
<sup>2</sup> <https://www.asiansongbirdtradesg.com/>

that some species that appear to meet CITES criteria and would benefit from such regulation are not yet listed.

This document seeks to complement the Songbird Species Knowledge Initiative (SKI) summary document *Species Knowledge Initiative to Support CITES Decisions and Recommendations for Songbirds*<sup>3</sup> by summarising the representation of songbirds in the CITES Appendices relative to that of other orders of birds, and placing this in the context of the prevalence of songbirds in trade. It presents the preliminary results of a global review of trade in wild birds led by BirdLife International in collaboration with TRAFFIC, IUCN, UNEP-WCMC, and the University of Cambridge.<sup>4</sup> This work is funded by a grant from the Cambridge Conservation Initiative (CCI) Collaborative Fund for Conservation.

## 2. Representation of songbirds in the CITES Appendices

Of the currently recognised 6,603 extant species of songbirds, only 91 (1.4%) are listed in the CITES Appendices (a further three have a single subspecies listed on Appendix II).<sup>5</sup> In contrast, 1,524 (34.7%) of the 4,396 extant non-songbird species are listed in the CITES Appendices (Figures 1&2). Thus, despite comprising 60% of all extant bird species, songbirds account for just 5.6% of the bird species listed in the CITES Appendices.

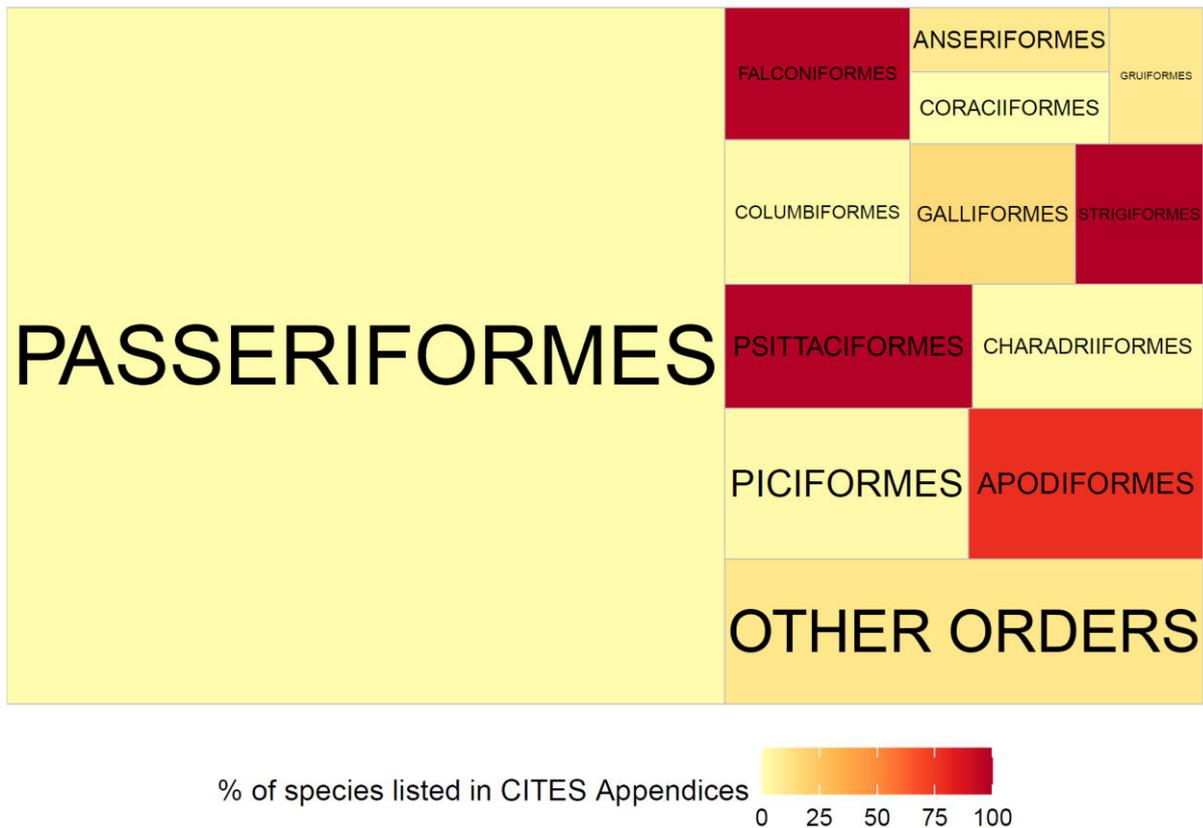


**Figure 1.** Representation of songbird (red) and non-songbird (blue) species in the CITES Appendices. The raised segments represent the species listed in CITES Appendices I-III.

<sup>3</sup> 2022: Species360 Conservation Science Alliance, Species360, Minneapolis, MN, USA & University of Southern Denmark, Denmark <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dib.2021.107093>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.cambridgeconservation.org/project/a-quantitative-global-review-of-trade-in-wild-birds/>

<sup>5</sup> Species numbers follow v.6 of the taxonomy of BirdLife International, and recognised by the IUCN Red List of Birds: <http://datazone.birdlife.org/species/taxonomy>



**Figure 2.** Treemap showing bird orders shaded by the percentage of species listed in the CITES Appendices. The size of each cell represents the number of species in the order.

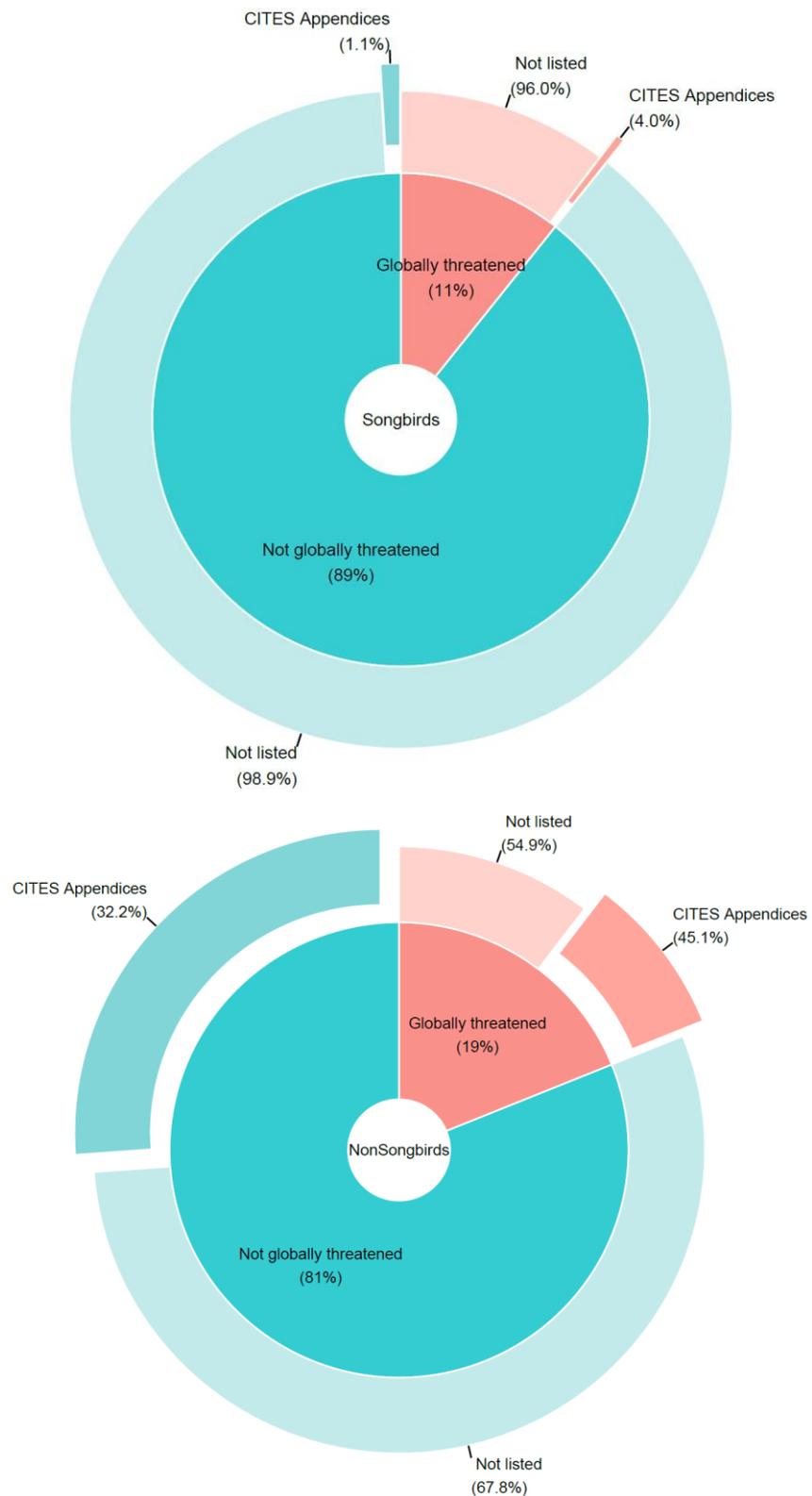
Representation is also disproportionate in the case of globally threatened species.<sup>6</sup> In the case of non-songbirds, 45% of globally threatened species are listed in the CITES Appendices, whereas the equivalent value for songbirds is just 4% (Figure 3).

Within the songbirds, species listed in the CITES Appendices fall within a small number of families; almost half of all the songbirds (47.3%) listed in the Appendices fall within a single family, the Paradisaeidae (birds of paradise).



Two commonly traded species with natural ranges confined to South and Southeast Asia. Left: Common Hill Myna *Gracula religiosa*, photo Ding Li Yong/BirdLife. Right: Oriental Magpie-robin *Copsychus saularis*, photo Tareq Uddin Ahmed/Shutterstock. Illustrations in this document are chosen to show a selection of the songbird species traded internationally, and not to signal priorities for action under CITES.

<sup>6</sup> Globally threatened species are those listed as Vulnerable, Endangered or Critically Endangered on the IUCN Red List



**Figure 3.** Representation of globally threatened bird species (red) and non-threatened species (blue) in CITES Appendices for songbirds (top figure) and non-songbirds (bottom figure). The raised segments represent species listed in CITES Appendices I-III.

### 3. Incidence of songbirds in trade relative to other orders of birds

We used two datasets to assess the prevalence of songbirds in trade relative to that of other orders of birds:

- The Wildlife in Trade Information System (WiTIS), maintained by TRAFFIC, which collects data on seizures of illegal consignments of live or dead animals or their body parts<sup>7</sup>
- A comprehensive dataset compiled by BirdLife International from nearly 100 published or unpublished surveys of bird markets and online trade surveys (henceforth referred to collectively as 'market surveys')<sup>8</sup>

Because not all seizures or market surveys were accompanied by count data, we quantified both the frequency of occurrence of each taxonomic group and the percentage of all birds recorded by numbers of individuals (where data were available).

The results are consistent between datasets in showing that **songbirds (Passeriformes) were the most prevalent order of birds recorded in both seizures and market surveys** (Figure 4). This dominance increases when the overall numbers of birds is taken into account. Parrots (Psittaciformes) and birds of prey (Falconiformes)<sup>9</sup> were the second and third most frequently represented orders recorded in both datasets; both these orders are almost comprehensively listed in CITES Appendices by virtue of order-level listings.



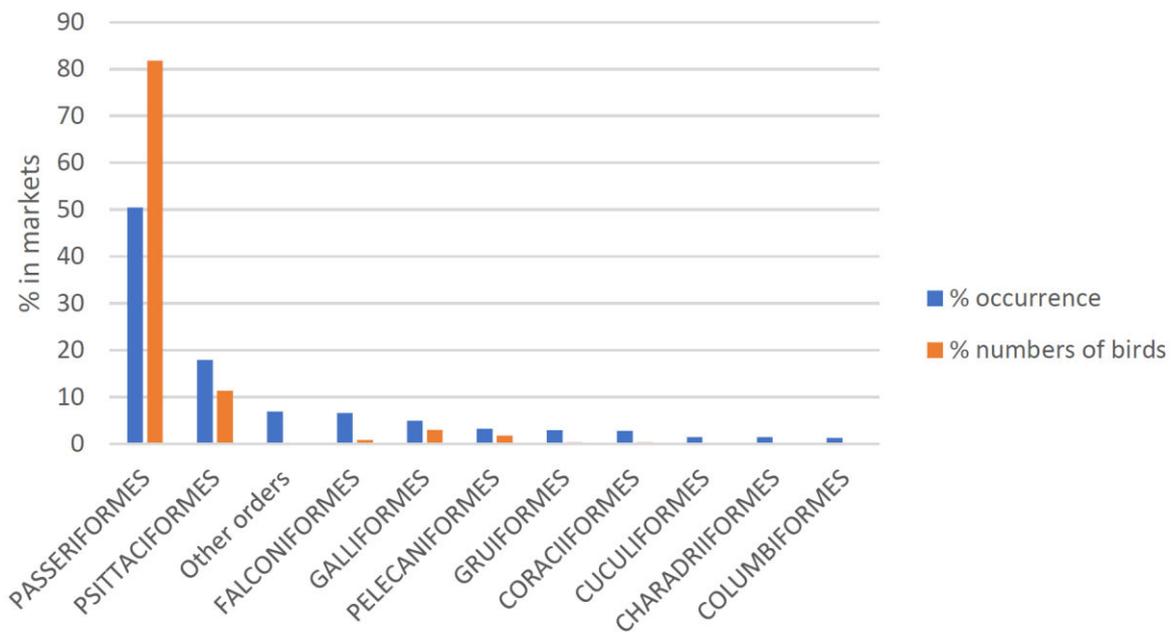
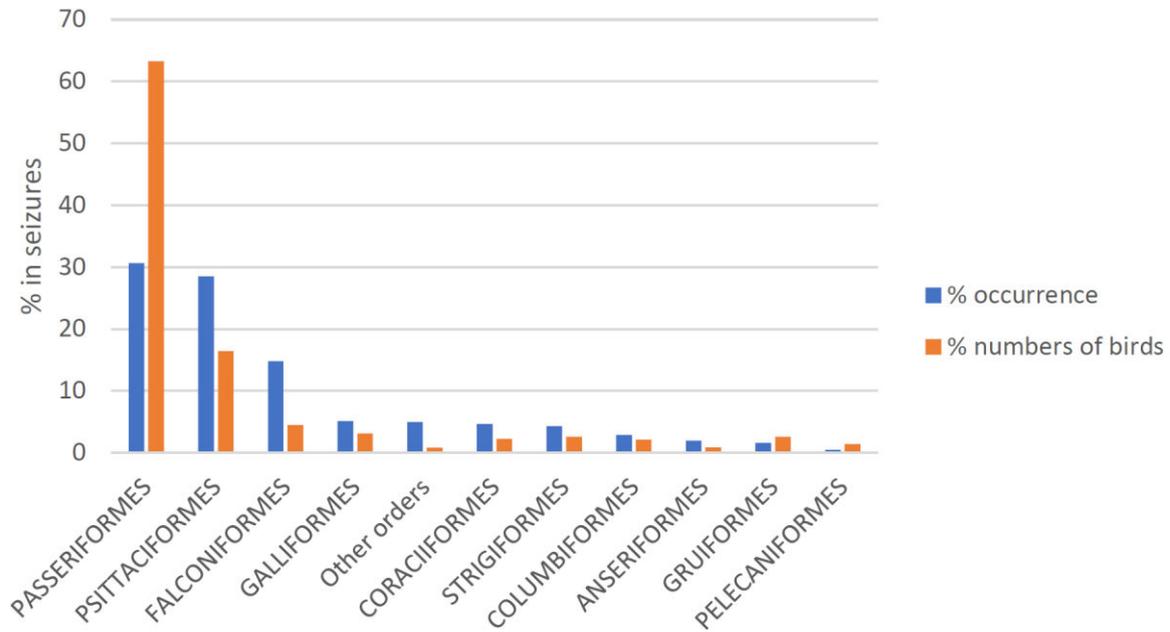
Saffron Finch *Sicalis flaveola*, widespread across South America and one of the most traded songbird species in the Americas. Photo: Arley Vargas/Flickr.

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<sup>7</sup> The data analysed related to 2,217 separate seizures recorded between 2005 and 2019, with an average of 2.2 species reported per incident (range: 1-32)

<sup>8</sup> The data analysed related to 96 market or online surveys undertaken between 2001 and 2022, with an average of 67.4 species recorded per survey

<sup>9</sup> Following the taxonomy adopted by CITES, which includes within the Falconiformes all the raptor species now more usually separated in the orders Accipitriformes and Cathartiformes



**Figure 4.** Occurrence (blue) and abundance (orange) of birds recorded in seizures (above) and market or online surveys of birds in trade (below) by order. In each graph, orders are listed in descending order of % occurrence (blue bars).

The same pattern is apparent at the level of individual species:

- The top ten species in terms of occurrence or numbers for both seizures and market surveys included between three and nine songbirds (Table 1). Oriental Magpie-robin *Copsychus saularis* occurs on all four lists shown in Table 1 and White-rumped Shama *C. malabaricus* on three of them.

- Only two of the 17 songbird species most recorded in trade (i.e. appearing at least once in Table 1) are listed in CITES Appendices (Hill Myna *Gracula religiosa* and Java Sparrow *Lonchura oryzivora*), compared to nine of the 11 non-songbirds.

**Table 1.** Top-ten listed bird species in datasets of seizures and bird markets listed in descending order of either frequency of occurrence (left column) or numbers of individual birds (right column). Songbirds are shown in **bold** text. Species listed in CITES Appendices have the Appendix number in parenthesis after the scientific name.

<b>Seizures: occurrence</b>	<b>Seizures: numbers</b>
Grey Parrot <i>Psittacus erithacus</i> (I)	<b>Oriental Magpie-robin <i>Copsychus saularis</i></b>
Yellow-crested Cockatoo <i>Cacatua sulphurea</i> (I)	<b>White-rumped Shama <i>Copsychus malabaricus</i></b>
<b>White-rumped Shama <i>Copsychus malabaricus</i></b>	<b>Tree Sparrow <i>Passer montanus</i></b>
Eclectus Parrot <i>Eclectus roratus</i> (II)	<b>Blackcap <i>Sylvia atricapilla</i></b>
<b>Hill Myna <i>Gracula religiosa</i> (II)</b>	<b>Greater Green Leafbird <i>Chloropsis sonnerati</i></b>
Helmeted Hornbill <i>Rhinoplax vigil</i> (I)	<b>Chestnut-eared Bunting <i>Emberiza fucata</i></b>
Black-capped Lory <i>Lorius lory</i> (II)	Helmeted Hornbill <i>Rhinoplax vigil</i> (I)
<b>Oriental Magpie-robin <i>Copsychus saularis</i></b>	<b>Streaked Weaver <i>Ploceus manyar</i></b>
Peregrine Falcon <i>Falco peregrinus</i> (I)	<b>Hill Myna <i>Gracula religiosa</i> (II)</b>
Brahminy Kite <i>Haliastur indus</i> (II)	Grey Parrot <i>Psittacus erithacus</i> (I)
<b>Markets: occurrence</b>	<b>Markets: numbers</b>
<b>White-rumped Shama <i>Copsychus malabaricus</i></b>	<b>Scaly-breasted Munia <i>Lonchura punctulata</i></b>
<b>Oriental Magpie-robin <i>Copsychus saularis</i></b>	<b>Barn Swallow <i>Hirundo rustica</i></b>
<b>Hill Myna <i>Gracula religiosa</i> (II)</b>	<b>Baya Weaver <i>Ploceus philippinus</i></b>
Spotted Dove <i>Spilopelia chinensis</i>	Budgerigar <i>Melopsittacus undulatus</i>
<b>Common Myna <i>Acridotheres tristis</i></b>	<b>Tree Sparrow <i>Passer montanus</i></b>
Blue-and-yellow Macaw <i>Ara ararauna</i> (II)	<b>Plain-backed Sparrow <i>Passer flaveolus</i></b>
Barn Owl <i>Tyto alba</i> (II)	<b>Javan Myna <i>Acridotheres javanicus</i></b>
<b>Java Sparrow <i>Lonchura oryzivora</i> (II)</b>	<b>Streaked Weaver <i>Ploceus manyar</i></b>
<b>Black-throated Laughingthrush <i>Garrulax chinensis</i></b>	<b>White-headed Munia <i>Lonchura maja</i></b>
Red-breasted Parakeet <i>Psittacula alexandri</i> (II)	<b>Oriental Magpie-robin <i>Copsychus saularis</i></b>

There was a substantial overlap between the species recorded in market surveys and those recorded from seizures for both songbirds and non-songbirds. However, the overlap between species recorded in one or both datasets and species listed in CITES Appendices was much higher for non-songbirds than for songbirds (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Area-proportional Venn diagrams showing for songbirds (upper) and non-songbirds (lower) the number of species recorded in seizures (red), the number recorded in market surveys (blue) and the number listed in the CITES Appendices (grey). Each circle is proportional in size to the number of species it contains.

## 4. Conclusions and Recommendations

### 4.1 Options and opportunities to address the listings gap

A significant accumulation of knowledge concerning the trade of songbirds has been amassed since CoP18, along with the recognition of songbirds in trade, pursuant to Decision 18.256-18.259. Although it is difficult or impossible from the data available to assess whether domestic or international trade poses the greater threat globally, it is clear that songbirds are heavily traded in comparison to other orders of birds, and at least some of this trade is known to be international. Urgent action is therefore needed to address concerns that songbird species that are at risk from international trade are under-represented in the CITES Appendices, to improve trade regulation.

Here we make a series of recommendations on the use of this knowledge and the further developments needed to inform and progress the protection for songbirds through the CITES process, in regard to both the upcoming discussions at CoP19 and the subsequent implementation of Decisions taken.

### 4.2 Songbirds at CoP19

At CoP18 a series of Decisions (18.256-18.259) concerning songbird trade and conservation management was adopted. The progress of these has been delayed, leading to the Animals Committee proposal for their renewal by CoP19, presented in [CoP19 Doc.74](#). CoP19 will also consider two songbird listing proposals: that of the White-rumped Shama (*Copsychus malabaricus*) to be included in Appendix II ([CoP19 Prop. 8 \(Rev. 1\)](#)), and the transfer of the Straw-headed Bulbul (*Pycnonotus zeylanicus*) from Appendix II to Appendix I ([CoP19 Prop. 9 \(Rev. 1\)](#)). Our analyses above (Table 1) show that White-rumped Shama is a very heavily traded species. It is not the intention of this review to make species-specific recommendations, but analyses and positions of some of the members of this Consortium are available on their respective web-sites.

We are supportive of the document ([CoP19 Doc.74](#)) presented for consideration on **Songbird trade and conservation management (Passeriformes)**. It remains highly relevant in its aims to comprehensively understand the scale of the international trade in songbird species, and to halt their illegal and unsustainable international trade. It is imperative that work to progress the implementation of these decisions is prioritised to ensure momentum is sustained into the next CoP cycle. A significant amount of time has elapsed since the original Working Document [CoP18 Doc. 79](#) submitted by Sri Lanka and the United States of America was adopted, yet trade in songbirds continues at high levels. Action to reduce threats related to illegal and/or unsustainable international trade is needed, and this needs to progress alongside an updated situation analysis with enhanced information on international trade to set or refine priorities for CITES.

We recommend that:

- CITES Parties, donor community and partners prioritise securing funds to deliver all of the decisions, should they be renewed at CoP19.
- The Consortium that compiled the analysis presented here be included among technical experts to advise in the delivery of decision 18.256 (Rev.CoP19 a-d)). Specifically:
  - the Consortium offers its assistance as expert consultants in the delivery of decisions taken on 18.256 (Rev. CoP19 a)) relating to the preliminary study and for the analysis presented here (and any further analysis) to be included as references to this preliminary study.
  - the Consortium is included in the technical workshop (as described in 18.256 Rev.CoP19 c)) as members of intergovernmental and non-governmental organisations.

### 4.3 Addressing knowledge gaps

It is critical to address the knowledge gaps which continue to hamper the true understanding on the scale of international songbird trade. To support making science-based informed decisions, we encourage the songbird conservation and trade community:

- To undertake further research on the prevalence of songbirds in international trade with a view to identifying supply chains that impact whole species populations and subpopulations to provide the data required to advance CITES listing proposals.
- To identify and map a network of songbird trade experts globally to establish a dedicated taskforce or working group on songbird trade world-wide, complementing and expanding the work of the IUCN Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group (several of whose members are part of the current Consortium).
- To support current efforts by the Consortium to collect data on trade in songbirds to inform future analyses and to ensure their ongoing curation, relevance and sustainability.
- Thereby to identify a list of priority species impacted by international trade for further targeted analysis, including assessment against the CITES listings criteria.



White-rumped Shama *Copsychus malabaricus*, a widespread songbird in South and Southeast Asia, and one of the most popular cagebirds in the region. Photo: Tareq Uddin Ahmed/flickr