

## EDITORIAL

In the editorial to the previous issue (*Kukila* 7 No. 2) I referred to the demise of open-country birds-of-prey in Java, presumably in response to farm chemicals (p. 88 para. 1). The sorry status of the Brahminy Kite *Haliastur indus* in Java is now quite well established (van Balen *et al.* 1993), although the causes are not confirmed, but the editorial also hinted that the other two common open-country species may also be declining, the Black-winged Kite *Elanus caeruleus* and Spotted Kestrel *Falco moluccensis*.

During 18 days in January-February 1996 I was assigned to make a survey of smallholder tea plantations in West Java, between Pelabuhan Ratu in the west and Tasikmalaya in the east. The areas of interest mostly lie at 500-1500m elevation on the south side of the island, but I crossed a range of elevations and agricultural crop models during the course of the survey. It is distressing to report that throughout this area, I observed just one Spotted Kestrel and not one single Black-winged Kite. I have no doubt that populations of these two species in Java have crashed; however, without monitoring systems in place, this can be only a subjective opinion, and we have no means to estimate the severity of the decline. In his review of Sundaic and Wallacean birds-of-prey, van Balen (1994) made no reference to any decline for the Spotted Kestrel, but stated that numbers of the Black-winged Kite in Java 'appear to have decreased, since only few recent records are available as compared with its former commonness'.

My records indicate that all three named species were still encountered on Java with reasonable frequency in the 1970s, but numbers were certainly declining during the 1980s, I have records of the Black-winged Kite in the Jakarta hinterland during the 1980s, but the last record was May 1990, Spotted Kestrels were definitely common in the 1970s, but I was surprised on checking my notes to find that I had no observations during a survey in southern Garut in October 1991.

We do not know also whether this is a phenomenon specific to Java, but we should not be optimistic. Whatever causative factors are operating on Java may well be occurring on the other islands, I was surprised to see neither the Black-winged Kite nor the Spotted Kestrel in the Palu valley and Wuasa basin of Central Sulawesi in July 1995. although the Brahminy Kite was still widespread. Likewise during April 1996 I toured widely through East, Central and South Kalimantan, and saw no Black-winged Kites except on the last day in grasslands in the far south of South Kalimantan.

On present knowledge, we can only speculate on causes, but I do not hold with the common view that air guns and catapults are major culprits. It seems most likely that pesticides will be a predominant cause, with loss of breeding trees and hunting as secondary factors. The Indonesian government has adopted rather enlightened policies on pesticides, with many brands banned and with the FAO and World Bank supporting an Integrated Pest Management programme for ricefields that seems to be making headway. Nevertheless we know very little about pesticide use in Indonesia, and this seems to be an extremely urgent subject for study.

It is useful to comment here on a second bird group that I have realized may be a cause for concern, the hornbills. Only quite recently I was rather sanguine about the status of hornbills in Indonesia, and indeed hornbills remained common generally in all the forested regions of the country during the 1970s and 1980s. However, again on my Central Sulawesi visit in July 1995, I did not find a single bird. A tour leader I met there by chance encounter expressed the view that hunting had decimated hornbill populations, although hornbill researchers in Tangkoko-Batuangus national park in North Sulawesi were surprised at this pessimism. It may well be that populations move around according to food supplies, and that I had merely struck a negative season.

In Kalimantan, however, it is remarkable that during a six-day visit to Central Kalimantan in January 1992, travelling upriver from the capital, Palangkaraya, to the interior at Tewah, a distance of some 200 km, I did not encounter a single hornbill except for two Pied Hornbills *Anthracoceros albirostris* in the swamp forests near Palangkaraya. Admittedly the riverine zone in the up-riber regions has been cleared of forest for decades, indeed perhaps for one or two centuries, thanks to early gold panning operations, but nevertheless there is forest in the hinterland. Likewise, in a paper submitted by van Balen and Prentice on the birds of the swamps of South Kalimantan, the total absence of hornbills is striking, except for just one or two Pied Hornbills in riverine forest. I have little doubt that hunting is the major cause for the demise of hornbills where this has occurred in Kalimantan, and it may not be a recent phenomenon.

Possibly we are focussing on rather extreme cases, and hopefully the decline of hornbills is localized, but both these examples are illustrative of disturbing trends. The urgent need for the establishment of a population monitoring study is indicated on the one side, and of research into the causes of decline on the other. Of course, there is simply not the skilled manpower available to undertake anything approaching the kind of in-depth monitoring that is now routine in some countries (such as the British Trust for Ornithology's Common Bird Census, which relies almost entirely on volunteers), but a start must be made somewhere.

At a recent review of the programme of BirdLife International's Indonesia programme, a strong recommendation was made for 'network building', or in more simple language, the encouragement of local bird-watchers' groups. Such groups need a *raison d'être*, and population monitoring is just the type of study which might provide this. The first surveys would need to be very simple, choosing locations readily accessible to the local towns (but not subject to urban development plans), and focusing as much on the development of identification skills as on census work. Gradually they would expand into more comprehensive surveys, although it is realized that except in a few favoured towns where core groups exist already, the process will be a long one. In the Jakarta region, annual breeding censuses of the waterbirds of Pulau Dua and Pulau Rambut would be an obvious beginning point, although this is by no means as easy as it may sound (see, for example, Milton & Marhadi 1985, and Lambert & Erftemijer 1989). There would be suitable colonies near other large towns in Java, and the need for monitoring cannot be too strongly emphasized, in view of the surge in urban development around the Javan cities, and consequent loss of feeding habitat.

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A second approach must focus on pesticide use, and here a much higher level of professional skills and of costs is indicated. It is my personal view that there has been an enormous increase in the use of pesticides over the past two to three decades, and that this is the primary cause of population declines in open-country birds generally, especially on Java but the decline will certainly spread to other islands unless quickly arrested. (Declines in a few species obviously result from the bird trade, and it is surprising what species are now appearing on the local bird markets, as the favoured species become harder to obtain.) The problem of pesticide use is now being addressed by Government, but we actually know very little about the varieties used and their secondary affects, and it will be some time before we see any impact from reduced use.

### References

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### GUEST FEATURE

#### WETLANDS INTERNATIONAL - INDONESIA PROGRAMME TEN YEARS OF WETLAND CONSERVATION IN INDONESIA

By

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On 1 January 1996, Asian Wetland Bureau - Indonesia (AWB-I) was incorporated into a new global framework - Wetlands International, thereby strengthening and helping give international status to AWB-I's cooperative programme on wetland conservation being carried out with the Ministry of Forestry, Directorate General of Forest Protection and Nature Conservation (PHPA), This paper briefly describes the history of Wetlands International in Indonesia and its strategic plan for the future.