

## Hunting of a very large aggregation of Eyebrowed Thrushes *Turdus obscurus* in Sumatra

MUHAMMAD IQBAL<sup>1</sup>, AJIMAN<sup>2</sup>, RICHARD A. NOSKE<sup>3</sup>, AND DONI SETIAWAN<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>KPB-SOS, Jalan Tanjung api-api km 9 Komplek P & K Blok E 1 Palembang 30152. Email : [kpbsos26@yahoo.com](mailto:kpbsos26@yahoo.com). <sup>2</sup>Dept. Biology FMIPA Sriwijaya University. Jalan Palembang-Indralaya km 32 Palembang. <sup>3</sup>Environmental Futures Research Institute, Griffith University, Nathan, Qld., Australia, 4111.

**Ringkasan.** Anis kuning *Turdus obscurus* umumnya tercatat dalam jumlah kecil atau sedang (>100 burung) di daerah perbukitan atau pegunungan di Sumatera. Keberadaan sekitar 1.000 burung yang teramati pada tanggal 12 Januari 2013 di perkebunan kelapa sawit Desa Perjito, Kecamatan Gunung Megang, Kabupaten Muara Enim (Propinsi Sumatera Selatan); dan informasi masyarakat mengenai jumlah besar burung ini di Pulau Belitung (Propinsi Bangka-Belitung) pada 15 Februari 2014 menunjukkan bukti bahwa burung ini bermigrasi di dataran rendah Sumatera. Jumlah 1.000 burung yang teramati dan informasi mengenai kehadiran dalam jumlah besar burung ini tidak pernah dilaporkan sebelumnya di Sumatera dan bahkan di Sunda Besar. Perburuan burung ini dalam jumlah besar di dua lokasi ini perlu mendapat perhatian untuk menghindari terjadi kepunahan lokal pada masa datang.

### Introduction

The migratory Eyebrowed Thrush *Turdus obscurus* breeds in Central and East Siberia, south to northern Mongolia and Amurland, and winters from northeast India, east to Taiwan and the Phillipines, and south to the Greater Sundas (Collar 2005). The species is a fairly common visitor to Southeast Asia (Robson 2008). In the Greater Sundas, it is regarded as a regular passage migrant and winter visitor to hill and mountain forest of Sumatra and its satellite islands (Marle & Voous 1988; MacKinnon *et al.* 1998), and to north and northwest Borneo (Mann 2008; Myers 2009; Phillipps & Phillipps 2009), but is less common south to Java and Bali (MacKinnon *et al.* 1998). Although it is widely distributed across mainland Sumatra, most records are of individuals or small groups. However, a flock of 35 birds was recorded at Berastagi in the highlands of North Sumatra on 13 December 1993, and more than 100 birds were counted on Gunung Kerinci on 14 February 1994 (Holmes 1996). Here we describe a very large aggregation of Eyebrowed Thrushes in South Sumatra, and their exploitation by local villagers.

### Information from local villagers and observations

On 12 January 2013, the second author visited the village of Perjito (8°27'S, 103°54'E; c. 35 m asl), Muara Enim district, South Sumatra, where several local informants reported large numbers of migratory birds being hunted. At around 18:00 hrs, the hunters were followed to an oil palm plantation, where at least 1,000 birds were seen roosting in mature oil palms. With the aid of torches, the hunters shot the birds with airguns over the next three hours. As six of the hunters each shot between 50 and 100 birds, and there were at least ten hunters, we estimated that over 500 birds were killed that night. The birds were identified as Eyebrowed Thrushes

*Turdus obscurus* by their thrush-like appearance, grey hood with white eyebrow, tawny orange flanks, lack of scaly patterning on the underparts, and yellow lower mandible (Plates 1, 2).

The hunters reported that during the day, the birds visited mature oil palm plantations or adjacent habitats (rubber plantations, crops or degraded forest), where they typically foraged on the ground. As the birds were thought to be foraging for worms, the hunters named the species “burung cacing” (worm bird). Informants reported that these birds visited the area each year, but for one or two weeks only, and that at least 20 hunters, some from adjacent villages, were involved in the hunt over that period. The hunters spread out to locate roost sites, as the birds did not use the same site every night. Informants stated that the birds were mainly killed for food. The carcasses were cooked in various ways, such as fried or mixed in soup (locally known as ‘pindang’). Informants also claimed that wild birds were only hunted and eaten during the brief period when the thrushes visited. When the hunt was very successful, excess carcasses were donated to relatives and neighbours, while live birds were sold at the local market.



**Plates 1 and 2.** Eyebrowed Thrush caught by local hunters on 12 January 2013 near Perjito village, South Sumatra.

During a visit in February 2014, the first author received reports of a large number of Eyebrowed Thrush on the island of Belitung, off the east coast of Sumatra. The site was around Bukit Keliling, near the village of Jangkar Asam (3°0'38"S, 108°2'39"E), Gantung sub-district, Belitung Timur district. As in Perjito, locals were found hunting the birds for food. These observations coincided with the period when ‘Pelangas’ (*Aporosa* spp; Euphorbiaceae) was producing fruit, which the birds apparently ate.

## Discussion

While most early records of Eyebrowed Thrush in mainland Sumatra are from hill or mountain forests (Marle & Voous 1988; Holmes 1996), there are increasing reports of this species in the lowlands, where the landscape is now dominated by

plantations. Previous Sumatran lowland records are of birds foraging in roadside trees and groups of 14, 25 and over 60 birds flying in a westerly direction over Bangko (c. 500 m asl), Jambi province, from 7 to 12 January 1996 (S. van Balen *in litt*); ten birds at an Acacia plantation owned by PT Musi Hutan Persada, South Sumatra, in December 2007 (Fujita *et al.* 2010); and one bird at the PT Asiatic Persada palm oil plantation, Jambi, on 14 March 2010 (Iqbal 2010). Other lowland records, with no details, are from Way Kambas National Park, Lampung province (Parrot & Andrew 1996) and Giam Siak Kecil-Bukit Batu Biosphere Reserve, Riau province (Fujita *et al.* 2012).

In Peninsular Malaysia, most Eye-browed Thrushes arrive in mid-November and December when they may be found in diverse habitats, including plantations, gardens and lowland forests, while in January and February birds are more reliably found in montane forests, where they feed on dependable fruits (Wells 1989, 2007). In cold northern climates many plants produce fruit in autumn, coinciding with movements of migrant thrushes, which eat the fruit and disperse the seeds, and a similar relationship has been hypothesised for migrating Eyebrowed Thrush and montane forest trees in Borneo (Phillipps & Phillipps 2009). The species is said to arrive in Borneo during October (Mann 2008; Myers 2009; Phillipps & Phillipps 2009), but in the Kelabit highlands, Sarawak, “great hordes” arrive in November (Smythies 1999).

Our count of c. 1,000 birds in South Sumatra appears to be the largest known aggregation of Eye-browed Thrush in Indonesia. Yet according to local informants, the maximum number of birds here could be several thousand. In Peninsular Malaysia, up to 1,200 birds were counted passing a single observation point over a day (Wells 2007), but these birds were migrating through the site, rather than foraging or resting at one site, as in the flock described here. The month of our observation (January) in the South Sumatran lowlands is consistent with observations of many birds in the lowlands of Jambi during January 1996 (S. van Balen *in litt*), though in Peninsular Malaysia, birds are evidently commoner in mountains in that month (Wells 2007). Based on local information, however, the flock visits the Perjito area for only a brief period each year, suggesting these birds were either still on passage, or were moving around locally, exploiting temporary food resources. Perjito is only 360 km from the western tip of Java, and although the species is considered an uncommon visitor to Java (MacKinnon *et al.* 1998), Bartels (1915-1931) mentioned occasional very large flocks in the hills along West Java’s south coast. Few records exist for islands east of Java (Coates & Bishop 2000).

It is highly significant, and of considerable concern, that a very large proportion (c. 50%) of this exceptionally large aggregation was harvested by local hunters within a single day. While the Eyebrowed Thrush is not a threatened species, harvesting levels of this magnitude could reduce regional populations, especially if repeated annually. Reduced regional populations of thrushes due to trapping in Indonesia has been demonstrated in the case of the Orange-headed Thrush *Zoothera citrina* in Java. Demand for the latter species for song contests is believed to have caused “rolling” local extinctions across Java during the late 1990s (Jepson 2008). We hope that the Eyebrowed Thrushes visiting Perjito can be monitored in future years, and that the proportion being harvested can be determined. We implore

birdwatchers, both local and international, to look for aggregations of this species at other localities in Sumatra and Java, especially during January and February, and to publish their findings.

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