

Ongoing slaughter of Eyebrowed Thrush Turdus obscurus in Sumatra: another species heading for oblivion?

By Arum Setiawan

CONSERVATION ALERT

Ongoing slaughter of Eyebrowed Thrush *Turdus obscurus* in Sumatra: another species heading for oblivion?

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Iqbal *et al.* (2014) reported the hunting of large numbers of Eyebrowed Thrush *Turdus obscurus* by local villagers in South Sumatra province, Sumatra, Indonesia, in January 2013. It was estimated that about 50% of a large roosting flock estimated at about 1,000 birds was slaughtered by hunters with airguns in a single night. Subsequently, following up reports on Facebook, we investigated accounts of further hunting for food of Eyebrowed Thrushes during 2017 and 2018 by villagers in Riau province, Sumatra. Some postings on Facebook accounts explained that hunting of Eyebrowed Thrushes has been a local tradition for a long time; a testament to this is that an old trap of the type used to snare the species is displayed in a local museum in Riau province.

Our concern was aroused when a group of Indonesian birdwatchers discussed the significance of the hunting of Eyebrowed Thrushes on Facebook in late December 2018. Their discussion was a result of a posting by Husni Andreas Pertama, who lives in Bangkinang, Riau province. He posted an image of a large number of dead Eyebrowed Thrushes that he had shot using an airgun; we estimate that there are between 500 and 1,000 corpses in the image (Plate 1). Another image on Facebook showed that he also sold Eyebrowed Thrushes in the local market (Plate 2). The birds were identified as Eyebrowed Thrush by the following characters: medium size passerine, lower bill and legs yellow, prominent white eyebrow, plumage olive-brown above, orange breast and

Plate 1. A large number of Eyebrowed Thrush *Turdus obscurus* slaughtered using an airgun, Bangkinang, Riau province, Sumatra, Indonesia, 25 December 2018.



ALL IMAGES ARE SCREENSHOTS TAKEN FROM FACEBOOK ACCOUNTS BY MUHAMMAD IQBAL



Plate 2. Eyebrowed Thrush for sale in a traditional market, Bangkinang, 25 December 2018.

flanks. These features fit well with descriptions of Eyebrowed Thrush in Robson (2008), Eaton *et al.* (2016) and Collar (2019).

We investigated further postings on Facebook accounts during 2017 and 2018 which referred to Eyebrowed Thrush in Sumatra. Our findings are summarised here; the majority of these relate to Riau province, and we list these in date order:

Facebook postings about Eyebrowed Thrush from Riau province

- 1) Apri Sahwal posted that he had obtained a small number of dead Eyebrowed Thrushes as a result of his hunting expedition in Bangkinang, Kampar district, on 11 January 2012.
- 2) Atika Novita posted that she had roasted a small number of Eyebrowed Thrushes in Teluk village, Pelalawan district, on 4 April 2017.
- 3) Bayu Irawan posted that he had eaten Eyebrowed Thrush at his neighbour's traditional party in Pekanbaru on 21 May 2017.
- 4) Apriati Evriliana posted that she had cooked a large number of Eyebrowed Thrushes in Rumbio, Kampar district, on 7 November 2017.
- 5) Nela Oktaviani posted that she had cooked a small number of birds in Bangkinang on 30 November 2017.
- 6) Ocu Dadang posted that he had cooked a large number of Eyebrowed Thrushes in a garden in Siak on 5 December 2017.
- 7) Weni Junianti posted that four dead birds could be purchased from a local hunter in Bangkinang on 8 December 2017.
- 8) Amat Jais posted an image that showed how he trapped small numbers of Eyebrowed Thrushes in Kampar district on 18 December 2017.
- 9) Nora Suftri posted that she had cooked a small number of Eyebrowed Thrushes at an unspecified location in Riau province on 24 December 2017.
- 10) Bustari Dilbend posted that he had hunted 20 birds in Bangkinang on 29 December 2017.
- 11) Lina Marlina Mugiarto posted that she had cooked a small number of Eyebrowed Thrushes in Bangkinang on 13 January 2018.
- 12) Rizal Rara posted that he was offering Eyebrowed Thrush for sale online in Bangkinang on 22 January 2018.
- 13) Ulul Azmi, living in Jakarta, Java, posted that he had received cooked birds from his family in Kampar district, showing an image of at least 20 birds from his family's hunting expeditions on 24 January 2018.
- 14) Rosmita Arientina posted that she had cooked a small number of Eyebrowed Thrushes in Pekanbaru on 28 January 2018.
- 15) Emi Darwati posted that she had cooked small numbers of birds after a bird-seller came to her house in Bangkinang on 29 January 2018.
- 16) Evi Herlainastri posted that she had cooked a small number of birds in Pekanbaru on 29 January 2018.
- 17) Dema Asri posted that she had cooked a small number of birds in Pekanbaru on 2 December 2018.
- 18) Ari Arlans posted an image of nine dead birds that he had hunted in Bangkinang on 3 December 2018.
- 19) Suhaimi Imi posted that small numbers of dead Eyebrowed Thrushes could be bought from hunters in Pekanbaru on 3 December 2018.
- 20) Haris Fadilah posted an image of at least 30 dead birds in Pekanbaru on 5 December 2018. It appeared that they had been bought from a local hunter or market.
- 21) Ocu Dadang posted an image of five birds ready for cooking in Siak on 5 December 2018. These birds could have been bought from a local market or hunters.
- 22) Anonim posted that four birds had been fried in Ujung Batu, Rokan Hulu district, on 8 December 2018.
- 23) Zulkifli Zul posted an image of a seller who had more than 100 Eyebrowed Thrushes for

sale in Rumbio, Kampar district (Plate 3), on 10 December 2018. He had birds for sale at least until 16 December, indicating that hunting was ongoing.

- 24) Delawati Rich posted an image of probably more than 80 birds ready to cook at an unspecified location in Riau province (Plate 4) on 21 December 2018.
- 25) Elsha Dhez Fenriho posted an image showing at least 40 dead birds offered for sale in Cerenti, Kuantan Singingi district, on 23 December 2018; one bird was priced at Rp 5,000 (US\$ 0.3).
- 26) Muhammad Guntur posted an image of two birds trapped in a mist-net in Siak on 25 December 2018 (Plate 5); it is probable that more were caught here in this manner.
- 27) Endah Sr posted that Eyebrowed Thrushes were for sale in Kampar Hulu, Kampar district, on 25 December 2018; four birds were offered at Rp 10,000 (US\$ 0.7).
- 28) Robi'a Medha posted that at least 10 birds were cooked in Kampar Hilir, Kampar district, on 26 December 2018.
- 29) Roudhatul Jannah posted that at least eight birds were roasted in Bengkolan Salak, Rokan Hulu district, on 26 December 2018.
- 30) Boy Siboy posted that he killed at least 60 birds when hunting at unspecified locations in Riau province on 31 December 2018. They were for his own consumption.



Plate 4. At least 80 birds ready to cook at an unspecified location, Riau province, 21 December 2018.

Plate 3. Another seller who advertised Eyebrowed Thrush online with more than 100 birds for sale, Rumbio, Kampar district, 10 December 2018.





Plate 5. The hunters show birds captured in a mist-net, Siak, 25 December 2018.

- 31) Nopen Doank posted that hunters killed at least five (but probably more) Eyebrowed Thrushes in Bangkinang on 3 January 2019.
- 32) Yanie Ajja posted that a few dead birds were for sale in Inuman, Kuantan Singingi district, on 3 January 2019.

33) Rizal Rara (see also 12, above) made a series of postings advertising Eyebrowed Thrush for sale from 8 December 2018 to 7 January 2019 (Plate 6) in Bangkinang; one bird was offered for Rp 10,000 (US\$ 0.7). The numbers involved must have been large.

Facebook posting from South Sumatra province

Dovie Kardia Dila posted that he killed up to 80 birds when hunting in Prabumulih, South Sumatra province, on 27 December 2017.

Facebook posting from North Sumatra province

Siahaan Jin posted that Eyebrowed Thrushes were hunted around Sitapung (west of Lake Toba), Parlilitan, North Sumatra province, on 2 April 2018. He also recounted a legend known to local residents of this area which may explain its culinary popularity. This states that the Eyebrowed Thrush, which is regarded as a special delicacy, was sent by King Sibuyakbuyak, one of the sons of Lord King Hoda, to his sister Sionon Hudon—he had six younger sisters—and the birds were sent by Sionon Hudon to the other sisters as a token of her affection. Hundreds of thousands of *Pamal* (the local name for the Eyebrowed Thrush in Sitapung) fly in from the north to the Sitapung region in mid-

Plate 6. Images from a Facebook post advertising the availability of Eyebrowed Thrush for sale online between 8 December 2018 and 7 January 2019 in Bangkinang.



October each year, staying there until they return north in mid-April. The birds are of the same size and appearance and, because they do not lay eggs, it is impossible to say which are male and which female. They roost in the forest around Sitapung but fly off to feed in West Sumatra and the local population catch the birds by day.

MI has heard of a similar story told by local people in Riau province. They say that *Burung Kuaran* (the local name there for Eyebrowed Thrush) is a very special bird because male and female are indistinguishable, and no nest or egg has ever been found. The arrival of large numbers of this bird in their area is a delivery from their god as a gift for them to eat. Some hunters use special spells (magical incantations) to ask the god for help to hunt as many birds as possible.

Discussion

The Eyebrowed Thrush is not one of the avian species on the updated Indonesian protected list issued on 1 August 2018 (Ministry of Forestry and Environment 2018). Indeed, the species is listed as Least Concern by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (BirdLife International 2016). Here, with the evidence of extensive hunting in Sumatra, we propose that this species should be urgently listed as a protected species in Indonesia. Until now there seemed to be no reason to regard the Eyebrowed Thrush as a threatened species, but increased annual harvesting levels of this magnitude, driven by social media, could quickly reduce regional populations to the point of local extinction. Protection of the species from massive hunting in Indonesia will help arrest a rapid decline of its populations at local and global scales. Airguns, both homemade and commercial, are readily available in Indonesia. Their use goes unremarked and is uncontrolled to the extent that

we believe that the scale of hunting and slaughter of Eyebrowed Thrush and other species using these weapons is largely unknown and goes uncounted.

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