

Is the COVID-19 pandemic boosting the hunting of Phasianidae in western Indonesia?

By Arum Setiawan

CONSERVATION ALERT

Is the COVID-19 pandemic boosting the hunting of Phasianidae in western Indonesia?

MUHAMMAD IQBAL, AGUS PURWOKO, ZAZILI HANAFIAH, ARUM SETIAWAN, INDRA YUSTIAN & HILDA ZULKIFLI

The outbreak of the novel corona virus disease (COVID-19) was first reported in Wuhan, China, in late 2019. It then spread around China and to other countries, and by March 2020 had been declared a global pandemic (Shaw *et al.* 2020). In Indonesia, the first official announcement about the disease—the potential for an outbreak and what might be done to mitigate this—was made on 4 February 2020 by the Health Ministry. The national declaration of the specific emergency situation caused by COVID-19 was made by the head of the National Disaster Management Agency (Badan Nasional Penanggulangan Bencana) on 28 February (Djalante *et al.* 2020). The pandemic has subsequently claimed thousands of lives and caused significant socio-economic repercussions for many people in Indonesia.

The Phasianidae are the largest group of Galliformes, a diverse family of about 155 small to large terrestrial birds which share many morphological features and are found throughout the Old World (McGowan 1994). Up to 25 species, none of them migratory, occur in western Indonesia—Sumatra, Kalimantan, Java and Bali (Eaton *et al.* 2016). Whilst the Red Junglefowl *Gallus gallus* in its various domesticated forms provides food for much of the human population of the world, many of its congeners are hunted for food and sport in the wild (McGowan 1994, Bagliacca *et al.* 2008).

Plate 1. A hunter shows off a dead Bornean Crested Fireback *Lophura ignita*. Screenshot from video posted by Mata Borneo, YouTube, 17 April 2020.



To examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the hunting of Phasianidae in western Indonesia, we searched the internet and social media, particularly Facebook and YouTube, for evidence of the hunting of these species during the first three months of the pandemic, from 1 March to the end of May 2020. Due to the restricted information on the hunting locations provided by users, the specific locations were very hard to identify, although the images posted revealed that they included oil palm plantations, probably in Sumatra and Kalimantan, and coconut plantations,

Plate 2. A hunter shows a Green Junglefowl *Gallus varius* and his gun. Screenshot from video posted by Hunter Sniper Channel, YouTube, 26 April 2020.



Plate 3. A hunter displays two pairs of Green Junglefowl and his gun after a forest hunt. Screenshot from video posted by Sniper Malsel, YouTube, 8 March 2020.



probably in Java. We believe that most posts were made by people who wished to boast about how they passed the time during the pandemic; we found records of 122 incidents of hunting of Phasianidae in this period—five on Facebook and 117 on YouTube. A particularly worrying aspect was the increase in numbers during the period, with 24 postings in March, 36 in April and 62 in May. The species involved were Green Junglefowl *G. varius* (56 incidents), Red Junglefowl (63 incidents), Malay Crested Fireback *Lophura rufa* (1 record) and Bornean Crested Fireback *L. ignita* (1 record) (Plates 1–3). A single female crested fireback posted on YouTube on 14 March was not identified to species level. Two major hunting techniques were used: air rifle (69 records) and snare trap (53 records). Air rifles are used by those hunting for food, whereas snare traps are usually used to catch birds alive, frequently to keep or to sell as a pet. On Java, all hunters use rifles for hunting; no-one uses snare traps. Snare traps are mainly used on Sumatra to catch Red Junglefowl.

Due to the Indonesian government policy of large-scale social restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, many people face an economic crisis. During the pandemic people are hunting for two reasons: to ward off boredom during the isolation period, and for food to reduce its economic impact. We believe many more incidents are going unposted on social media, particularly in the case of the firebacks *Lophura* spp.—hunters are cautious about posting these species in case they are protected; in fact, all the Phasianidae species posted as being hunted during our survey are not protected under Indonesian law. If social restrictions continue in the case of a prolonged crisis, as appears likely, and no action is taken to prevent it, the incidence of hunting will increase and local extinctions of these and other taxa will quickly occur.

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Muhammad IQBAL

Biology Program, Faculty of Science
Sriwijaya University
Jalan Padang Selasa 524, Palembang
Sumatera Selatan 30129, Indonesia
Email: kpbsos26@yahoo.com

Agus PURWOKO, Zazili HANAFIAH, Arum SETIAWAN, Indra YUSTIAN & Hilda ZULKIFLI

Department of Biology, Faculty of Science
Sriwijaya University
Jalan Raya Palembang-Prabumulih km 32
Indralaya, Sumatera Selatan 30662, Indonesia

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