

## CONSERVATION ALERT

# A note on illegal trade of the endemic Rinjani Scops-owl *Otus jolandae* in Indonesia

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## Introduction

Named after Gn (Mount) Rinjani on the Indonesian island of Lombok, Rinjani Scops-owl *Otus jolandae* was described as a new species by Sangster *et al.* (2013). It represents the only endemic bird species currently known from Lombok and is the island's only species of scops-owl. The species is found in both undisturbed and degraded forests, as well as secondary forest, suggesting it is somewhat tolerant of habitat disturbance (Suana *et al.* 2016). However, with very little lowland forest remaining on Lombok due to extensive forest destruction and cultivation (Sangster *et al.* 2013), Rinjani Scops-owl is nevertheless considered to be threatened by habitat loss and, as a result, is currently assessed as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (hereafter the Red List) (BirdLife International 2017). The Red List states that a slow decrease in the population of this species is suspected, but it is uncertain whether a continuing decline can reasonably be inferred. Recent field research in the Gn Rinjani area identified the species as being a high conservation priority, based on endemism, population status, presence of conservation threats and the level of species management (Hadiprayitno *et al.* 2016). Trade is not mentioned as a threat to Rinjani Scops-owl in the Red List assessment (BirdLife International 2017). Here we report on several instances in which the species was observed in trade, suggesting that trapping for trade should be considered a potential additional threat.

## Observations

In June 2016 a scops-owl was observed in the Narmada bird market near Lombok's capital city, Mataram. At the time it was identified as a Wallace's Scops-owl *O. silvicola* (Syaputra 2016), native to the islands of Sumbawa and Flores to the east of Lombok. In hindsight we now consider this likely to have been a Rinjani Scops-owl, given that it is the only scops-owl on Lombok and it is unlikely that a single scops-owl was brought to the island for sale, although that scenario cannot be completely ruled out. No scops-owls were observed at two other markets (Sindu and Kediri) that were surveyed at the same time. A few months later, in December, Asrori (2017) recorded four chicks for

sale at one of the seven bird markets he visited in or near Mataram. No further details are known. During a survey carried out in June 2019, nine Rinjani Scops-owls were observed openly for sale in the Chakranegara and Sindu bird markets (Plate 1). To our knowledge, our observations represent the first (published) records of Rinjani Scops-owl in trade (Table 1).

While Rinjani Scops-owl is similar in appearance to Moluccan Scops-owl *O. magicus* (Lesser Sunda Islands of Sumbawa, Komodo, Flores and Lembata, and the Moluccas) and Wallace's Scops-owl, all traders in 2019 confirmed that the birds on offer were caught on Lombok, ruling out other possible species. Several traders indicated that they themselves had taken the birds from the wild, stating that the species is relatively common and easy to capture, especially during the breeding season when it nests in and around plantations.

**Plate 1.** Rinjani Scops-owl *Otus jolandae* for sale at Pasar Chakranegara in Mataram, Lombok, Indonesia, June 2019.



**Table 1.** Rinjani Scops-owls *Otus jolandae* observed during surveys on Lombok in 2016 and 2019.

Year	Date	Market	No. of individuals	No. of shops
2016*	June	Narmada	1	1
2016**	December	Not specified	4	1
2019	3 June	Chakranegara	8	4
2019	3 June	Sindu	1	1
<b>TOTAL</b>			<b>14</b>	<b>7</b>

\*Identification not confirmed. \*\*Recorded by Muhammad Mirzan Asrori.

While turnover rates remain unclear, it is fair to assume that, based on the traders' statements, individuals of the species pass through the markets on a regular basis. The only price obtained during the 2019 survey was IDR 1,500,000 (= c. US\$100 on 5 October 2020) for a single individual in Pasar Chakranegara. This equals roughly 75% of the provincial (West Nusa Tenggara) minimum wage for 2019 (IDR 2,012,610) as set out by the Indonesian Government. During the 2019 surveys, an additional pet Rinjani Scops-owl was seen in a coffee shop near one of the markets. This individual was said to have been captured by the shop-owner's son, further underscoring the apparent ease with which this species can be taken from the wild.

## Discussion

Prior to 2018, Rinjani Scops-owl was not included on Indonesia's protected species list. Given that there was no harvest quota in place for the species, it could not be commercially traded. In 2018, the Indonesian government revised its list of protected species, ultimately resulting in the *Regulation of the Minister of Environment and Forestry No. P.106/2018*, which now does include Rinjani Scops-owl as a protected species. This effectively prohibits the trade and harvest of wild-caught individuals unless it involves permitted second generation captive-bred birds. Violation of the law stipulates a five-year prison sentence and a fine of IDR 100 million (= US\$7,000). At a provincial level, the enforcing authority of this law is the Natural Resources Conservation Agency (BKSDA).

The illegal wildlife trade in Indonesia is a primary threat to a growing number of bird species, and despite laws and regulations being in place to prevent illegal and unsustainable trade, these are largely ignored and illegal trade continues to push species towards extinction (Eaton *et al.* 2015). While songbirds (passerines) are frequently traded across the archipelago to supply the demand from singing competitions and hobbyists, this does not appear to be the case for novelty pets such as owls, diurnal raptors, herons, kingfishers and other non-passerines. Non-songbirds are generally captured and sold locally, with low survival rates in captivity

(Shepherd *et al.* 2004). The trade in owls as novelty pets in Indonesia has also been documented in other parts of the country, with scops-owls being the most numerous (Shepherd 2012, Chng *et al.* 2015, Nijman & Nekaris 2017). The popularity of keeping owls appears to have been amplified due to the presence of owls in cages in the Harry Potter films (Nijman & Nekaris 2017), although whether the influence of these movies has any bearing on the trade in owls on the island of Lombok is not known. Regardless, Rinjani Scops-owl is being traded illegally and efforts should be made to further assess the level of threat that this trade may have on the species. The fact that this is the only confirmed Lombok endemic bird species makes such research all the more important. Furthermore, the local BKSDA office should take action immediately, prosecuting any individuals found trapping, trading, buying or keeping Rinjani Scops-owl. Finally, the Red List assessment should be revised to include illegal trade as a potential threat to this little-known species.

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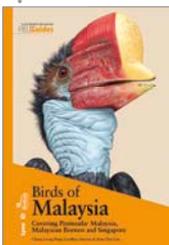
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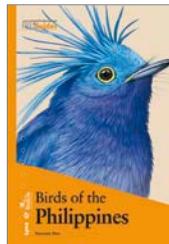
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