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Premium

Dangerous journeys: Hunting pushes migratory birds to the brink



Lesser sand plovers, which are arctic migratory shorebirds, are among species that have made Singapore's Sungei Buloh a globally important wetland on the East Asian-Australasian Flyway migratory corridor. PHOTO: NATIONAL PARKS BOARD

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Hunting is a nearer-term threat to migratory birds than climate change, habitat loss: Researchers

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When these birds of a feather flock together, they make up one of the greatest animal migrations of the world, flying almost from pole to pole to escape the winter chill.

But migratory birds face a multitude of threats.

Climate change and habitat loss to human development, for example, are reducing the areas where they can stop to refuel along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, a migration corridor that spans the Arctic through Singapore to Australia and New Zealand.

But a new study by an international team of scientists - including those from Singapore - has found that these birds face a nearer-term threat: They are also being hunted by people for food.

Hunting has always been known to occur, but its scale and significance were not known before this study, said the authors.

The study, which has been accepted by the scientific journal Biological Conservation for publication, found that three-quarters of some 61 migratory shorebird species have been hunted in the region since the 1970s.

These include species at high risk of extinction in the region such as the critically endangered spoon-billed sandpiper, of which fewer than 500 remain.

Other species like the red-necked stint, common greenshank and oriental pratincole are also known to stop over, or spend the winter months, here in Singapore.

Singapore ornithologist Yong Ding Li, who was involved in the study, told The Straits Times that many wild bird species are now in decline due to a combination of factors, including habitat loss.

For instance, the expansion of coastal infrastructure around the Yellow Sea region of China and the Korean peninsula, where many birds stop to rest and feed on their migrations, is driving habitat loss.

But Dr Yong, who is from conservation group BirdLife International, said: "Hunting is a massive threat to wildlife in South-east Asia, and has more immediate effects than habitat loss as animals are taken out faster than forests are cleared."

Hunting pushes migratory birds to the brink

Migratory birds face a multitude of threats, including climate change and habitat loss. But a new study has shown that high levels of hunting in South-east Asia are also pushing these birds to the brink. And because the animals are taken out faster than forests are cleared, hunting poses a massive threat to wildlife.

THE EAST ASIAN-AUSTRALASIAN FLYWAY

1 of 8 established routes that migratory birds take to escape the winter chill. This flyway is the longest, spanning the Arctic to the southern limits of Australia and New Zealand.

Over 50 million **September to April**

migratory waterbirds use the route annually, according to estimates by conservation group BirdLife International.

The months when many of these birds are often spotted in Singapore, as they stop to refuel during their journeys from hemisphere to hemisphere. Many species also spend the winter months in Singapore.

A few migratory species found in Singapore are affected by hunting in the region. They include (clockwise from bottom left) **marsh sandpiper, red-necked stint, Asian dowitcher and lesser sand plover.**



CAUGHT AND SOLD AS FOOD

Left: Barn swallows being sold for food in Indochina last year. This species is commonly seen in Singapore.



Above: Thrushes, barbets and doves found in a market in Indochina this year.
Left: A common green magpie, emerald dove and Eurasian woodcock.

Source: BIRDLIFE INTERNATIONAL. PHOTOS: YONG DING LI, TOBY TRUNG. STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS: LIM YONG

MASSIVE THREAT

Hunting is a massive threat to wildlife in South-east Asia, and has more immediate effects than habitat loss as animals are taken out faster than forests are cleared.

SINGAPORE ORNITHOLOGIST YONG DING LI, on some of the threats faced by wildlife in South-east Asia.

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Moreover, earlier work on bird hunting had focused on poaching for the pet bird trade.

"Hunting of birds for food and the food trade is anecdotally known, but has been going on for a long time in the background, with very little work to look into it," Dr Yong said.

But a steady decline in the numbers of many migratory bird species, especially shorebirds, has prompted greater research into what other risks these feathered travellers face.

Dr Yong said: "We know that habitat loss is one big issue, but we understand that the underlying problems are more complex than just habitat loss alone."

The study's authors, who hail from 13 institutions in nine countries, spent four years combing through existing literature, including academic papers and media articles, on hunting.

And under a parallel study, BirdLife also sent teams across South-east Asia to carry out fieldwork and interview people to understand how bird populations may be impacted by hunting.

The results showed the large scale of the issue, with hunting records from 14 countries involving 46 species, said the study's lead author, University of Queensland researcher Eduardo Gallo-Cajiao.

The researchers also used a mathematical method to quantify how much of a threat hunting posed to migratory shorebirds, based on thresholds for sustainable harvest.

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Dr Yong said different communities hunt for different reasons.

Many hunt to supplement incomes from fishing or aquaculture, while others do so accidentally, with birds winding up dead in nets strung up to prevent them from pecking at crops. Birds found in such nets are also eaten.

The researchers also found that there are indigenous communities who hunt birds for food because they are considered a local tradition, or because there are willing buyers of wild meat.

Hunting is a threat to all wildlife, not just birds.

But across Indochina, the practice has already driven many species to local extinction.

"These include the large species, and, as the larger mammals are now gone, locals proceed to target smaller animals, including wild birds," said Dr Yong.

Singapore-based researcher Anuj Jain, bird trade coordinator from BirdLife International who was also involved in the study, said a combination of approaches was needed to tackle the hunting issue in the region.

Coastal wetlands could be better protected through better enforcement of biodiversity protection laws and with new policies to regulate the use of mist nets, which are used to trap birds.

Dr Anuj said: "These should be paralleled by work to engage local communities to create new incentives for their livelihoods so that they have economic alternatives, especially if they are poor communities."

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This could include work opportunity in sustainable fisheries and ecotourism.

"In many cases, the hunters already have existing occupations and stable incomes - in such cases, they need to be better engaged by conservationists so that they see the value of wildlife more clearly," said Dr Anuj.

Mr Movin Nyanasengeran, 28, earlier this year went on a birding trip in Thailand to the salt pans of Pak Thale, about two hours' drive from Bangkok, for a glimpse of the spoon-billed sandpiper and spotted greenshank - two species threatened by hunting in the region.

Calling the latest findings sobering, the ecologist, who was not involved in the study, said: "We've always known about the threat of habitat loss. Hunting at the subsistence level used to be thought of as a more minor threat. But now that the scale has been quantified, it could help explain how shorebird numbers have shrunk so drastically in recent years."



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