

Community of rare gibbons found in Vietnam

July 18 2011



A Conservation International photo of northern white-cheeked crested gibbons (*Nomascus leucogenys*), including an adult female with baby (R) and adult male (L) in an undisclosed location in Vietnam.

The lively morning calls of a rare species of gibbon has led to the discovery of the only known "viable" community of the talkative primates in remote Vietnamese forests, conservationists said Monday.

A "substantial" population of 455 critically endangered northern white-cheeked crested [gibbons](#) were found living at high altitudes and far from [human settlements](#) on the border with Laos, Conservation International (CI) said.

Researchers, who had previously found sparse groups in other areas, used the animals' "loud, elaborate and prolonged" calls to locate the

creatures in Pu Mat National Park in Nghe An province, northern Vietnam.

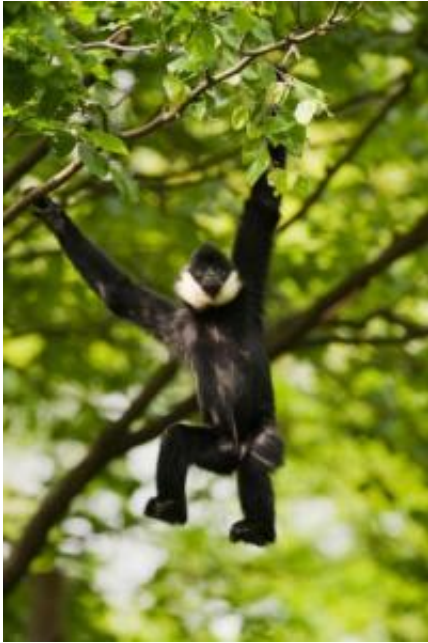
The community represents two thirds of the total number in Vietnam and the "only confirmed viable population" of the variety worldwide.

"This is an extraordinarily significant find, and underscores the immense importance of protected areas in providing the last refuges for the region's decimated wildlife," said CI president Dr Russell Mittermeier.

Gibbons, which are threatened across the world, are considered the "most romantic" of [primates](#) as they mate for life and serenade their partners with song.

Habitat loss and hunting for the pet trade and the "assumed medicinal value of primate body parts" are among the major threats to the creatures in Vietnam, the CI statement said.

White-cheeked gibbon numbers are thought to have declined by as much as 80 percent in the last 45 years, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species.



A Conservation International photo shows a northern white-cheeked crested gibbon (*Nomascus leucogenys*) in an undisclosed location in Vietnam.

Mittermeier, who also works with the IUCN, described the species as "on the brink of extinction".

They are believed to be "functionally extinct" in China and while there could be significant numbers in [Laos](#), CI said a lack of research means the situation in the country is unclear.

But CI said plans to build a road through the Pu Mat area to increase patrols on the Vietnam-Laos border pose a "serious threat" to the future of the rare primates.

"The major issue will be the hunting of these gibbons that were previously protected by the harsh terrain; so gun control will be vital," said primatologist Luu Tuong Bach, a consultant to CI who led field surveys for the research.

"Without direct protection in Pu Mat National Park, it is likely that Vietnam will lose this species in the near future."

More information: Species facts:

White-cheeked gibbons eat mostly fruit, leaves, buds and flowers, occasionally feeding on eggs, young birds and insects. These lesser apes move and feed primarily in the tropical forest canopy, rarely descending to the ground.

Gibbons, called the smaller apes, differ from the great apes, as they smaller, have low sexual dimorphism and do not make nests. They are among the 6% of primates that form monogamous pairs which mate for life. They are the most romantic primate, singing to attract a partner, and to maintain their pair bonds they also sing to each other.

Vietnam holds six species of gibbons of the crested gibbon genus *Nomascus*. They comprise some of the most highly threatened primates in the world. There may be as few as 200 groups of northern white-cheeked crested gibbon left in Vietnam. An ongoing status assessment of Vietnam's gibbons conducted by Conservation International and Fauna & Flora international shows that there have been precipitous declines in gibbon numbers across the country in the last 25 years. This has mainly been driven by land-use change, namely conversion of habitat, and hunting pressure for local consumption, the pet trade and assumed medicinal value of primate body parts.

Gibbons are highly arboreal and move by brachiation, and with their long arms and short legs, swinging from handhold to handhold under branches and vines, using their long fingers as hooks.

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