

Devastation in Philippine bird paradise

October 6 2015, by Cecil Morella



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Hundreds of foreign and local tourists venture each year into the remote region, which is also known as a sanctuary for communist rebels, but

hardly any of the trees are left and bird sightings are on the decline.

"Back in the 1990s, I'd take them to one area and they would see all the endemics in one day," said local guide Felizardo Goring, referring to species found only in the Philippines.

"Now, there's no guarantee you'll find them even if you went looking everywhere for three days," he told AFP after a failed pre-dawn sortie for the giant scops owl, a mysterious bird found only in the country's south.

The 183,000-hectare (452,000-acre) forest is a vital habitat for dozens of endangered bird species, including the electric-blue celestial monarch, according to British-based environment group Birdlife International.

But its demise started in the early 1950s when the government awarded a contract to a local logging firm, which cleared massive amounts of the forest, according to Goring, who used to work for the company.

The license, which included growing trees on cleared land for pulp and paper production, was withdrawn in 2002.

What may have appeared as a victory for the bird lovers quickly turned sour as settlers from all over the country descended on the area, hacking and burning their way in to create new farms, Goring said.

Goring, 59, used to work for the pulp and paper mill as one of more than 200 guards securing the sprawling concession.

He said there were no other jobs available in the impoverished region, more than 800 kilometres (500 miles) from Manila, and his father also worked for the timber firm.

Goring finally quit in 1994 to become a birding guide as the area became particularly popular with European birders.

Burning down paradise

His life since then has been filled with beauty, with the forest's remaining birdlife still remarkable, although it has retreated into the chunks of forests yet to be cut down by the growing number of settlers.

On a recent tour for five Philippine tourists, which AFP took part in, Goring coaxed one of the forest's signature [birds](#), a writhed hornbill with a large, deep-red casque, by copying its honk expertly with a hand cupped around his mouth.



A Philippine hawk owl, seen in a forested area in Bislig, in the southern Philippines

Noses, cameras and binoculars cocked, the birders then breathlessly followed the guide's forefinger toward a male Philippine trogon, possibly the country's most colourful bird, neighing like a horse behind the bushes.

Walking on a disused logging road and punching into the residual

thickets, the birding party ticked off blue fantails, a rufous-fronted tailorbird, brown tit babblers, and leafbirds camouflaged on the green canopy.

But the celestial monarch and two other endangered birds from the region particularly known for their beauty—the Mindanao bleeding-heart pigeon and the Mindanao broadbill—could not be found.

During four days of trekking, the forest echoed with the whir of unseen chainsaws, and freshly cut wood planks were piled on the roadside for trucking off.

The team frequently stumbled across patches of freshly burnt forests and grasslands, with new wooden huts establishing yet more settler communities.

Some of the huts were surrounded by sacks full of charcoal, apparently from burnt trees and intended to be sold as fuel for barbecue grills.

The scenes were disheartening for Filipino pensioner Jude Sanchez, making his second visit in five years to photograph the monarch, a forest standout because of its dazzling plumage and an extravagant, mohawk-style crest.

"The last time I was here, there was no burning yet. Now it's almost everywhere," he said.

At one point during the tour, a local man on a motorcycle tried to sell the visitors a trapped parrot, giving the downcast birders a first-hand confrontation with another method of killing off a species.

Goring explained the blue-naped parrot disappeared locally about 15 years ago, primarily because of the pet trade.

He said forest birds sold for as little as 500 pesos (\$10) in the markets of Bislig, the nearest city about two hours' drive away, with customers buying them for food as well as pets.



A group of Manila-based bird watchers, accompanied by local guide Felizardo Goring (R), look for birds in a remote forest in Bislig, in the southern Philippines

Asia-wide devastation

The destruction at Bislig is typical of what is happening to tropical rainforests and wetlands across Asia.

Birdlife International said in its latest State of the World's Birds report that Asian forests suffered from "unsustainable forestry practices, with

0.7 percent of the remaining natural forest lost to logging each year".

"This degree of habitat loss, degradation and fragmentation has serious consequences for birds," the report said.

Four Asian nations—the Philippines, Indonesia, China and India—are among 10 countries with the highest numbers of globally threatened birds, it said.



A juvenile, female wreathed hornbill, found only in Bislig in the southern

Philippines, seen as it perches at the top of a tropical lowland rainforest canopy

In Bislig, Goring believes all the birds will soon disappear as the last of their habitat is stripped away to accommodate the new human arrivals, which currently are estimated in the thousands.

The area is not an officially protected park, despite its importance to birds.

And while a national logging ban has been in place authorities typically can not enforce it in remote places such as Bislig because of insufficient funding and manpower.



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"In 10 years all these areas will be bald," Goring said.

"We're still seeing birds now but they will all vanish with the remaining forests."



A brown-eared Philippine brown dove rests beneath the tropical rainforest canopy in Bislig, in the southern Philippines

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