

Seizures of birds-of-paradise (Paradisaeidae)—recent examples of illegal bird trade from Indonesia to India

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Recent wildlife seizures indicate an emerging illegal trade in birds-of-paradise (Paradisaeidae) from Indonesia to India. We document eight seizures made at airports between June and December 2024, involving at least 38 birds-of-paradise representing 10 species, with five shipments originating in Indonesia and three in Thailand. Three seizures occurred in Jakarta, three in Mumbai, one in Bengaluru and another in Kochi. Six seizures also contained other protected wildlife, including eight additional bird species and four mammal species. Among these were 25 Critically Endangered Maleo *Macrocephalon maleo*, representing the first known record of this species being trafficked to India. All birds-of-paradise are protected under Indonesian law and listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), rendering international commercial trade illegal without the required permits. These seizures provide evidence of a previously undocumented trafficking route and demonstrate continuing and possibly increasing demand for live birds-of-paradise in India. They also highlight the role of airports in the illegal wildlife trade and the need for effective law enforcement. Improved monitoring, intelligence sharing and cooperation between Indonesia and India are needed to better understand and disrupt this emerging trade.

INTRODUCTION

Between June and December 2024, eight seizures occurred involving birds-of-paradise (Paradisaeidae) being trafficked to India (Table 1). Five of these originated from Indonesia while the other three came from Thailand. While Indonesia is a recognised source of birds entering the global illegal wildlife trade (Soehartono & Mardiasuti 2002, Eaton *et al.* 2015, Abdullah *et al.* 2024), the trafficking of birds-of-paradise from Indonesia to India remains a largely unknown issue.

Both Indonesia and India are Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Given that all species of the family Paradisaeidae, native to eastern Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and eastern Australia, have been listed in Appendix II of CITES since 1975 (UNEP-WCMC 2021), any trade involving these species must comply with CITES regulations, and is only permitted if it is legal in the countries involved. As per current legislation, all species of birds-of-paradise native to Indonesia are fully protected by law under the Act of the Republic of Indonesia No. 5 of 1990 Concerning Conservation of Living Resources and their Ecosystems and Government Regulation No. 7 1999 Concerning the Preservation of Flora and Fauna, which generally prohibits commercial use of protected species including catching, hunting, injuring, killing, keeping, possessing, transporting or trading, whether alive or dead. However, the laws protecting birds in Indonesia are frequently ignored and often poorly enforced (Chng *et al.* 2015, Lee *et al.* 2016). In India, the illegal trade in any species of Paradisaeidae is also punishable under the Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972 following amendments to this Act in 2022.

RESULTS

All eight seizures took place at airports either in Indonesia or in India, with five of these shipments originating in Indonesia. Indonesia has been recognised as a major hub of illegal wildlife

trade, with a massive and largely illegal trade in birds to supply both domestic and international demand (Nash 1993, Chng *et al.* 2015, 2018). The illegal trade in passerines in Indonesia is also well known and an issue that has been reported on many times in the past (e.g. Nash 1993, Shepherd *et al.* 2004, Chng *et al.* 2018). In terms of seizures involving wildlife, India ranks among the top 10 for wildlife trafficking through air transport (Badola & Gautam 2022). Between 2011 and 2020, Indian authorities seized over 70,000 animals (including body parts) representing 146 species at 18 airports across the country (Badola & Gautam 2022).

At least 38 birds-of-paradise were seized in these eight cases, representing the 10 species in the following list. Details of the individual seizures are given in Table 1.

1. Lesser Bird-of-paradise *Paradisaea minor* (13 individuals)
2. Magnificent Bird-of-paradise *Cicinnurus magnificus* (at least 6 individuals)
3. Magnificent Riflebird *Ptiloris magnificus* (at least 4 individuals)
4. Wilson's Bird-of-paradise *Cicinnurus respublica* (2 individuals)
5. Twelve-wired Bird-of-paradise *Seleucidis melanoleucus* (at least 6 individuals)
6. Western Superb Bird-of-paradise *Lophorina superba* (1 individual)
7. Pale-billed Sicklebill *Drepanornis bruijnii* (unknown number)
8. Red Bird-of-paradise *Paradisaea rubra* (unknown number)
9. Raggiana Bird-of-paradise *Paradisaea raggiana* (2 individuals)
10. King Bird-of-paradise *Cicinnurus regius* (2 individuals)

In two cases, the seizures involved only birds-of-paradise, while the other six seizures included other species of birds and mammals (Table 1). Three of the seizures were made in India's Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj International Airport in Mumbai, three in Jakarta's Soekarno-Hatta International Airport, one at

Kempegowda International Airport, Bengaluru, India, and one at Cochin International Airport, India.

In addition to the birds-of-paradise, 12 other species were seized (eight bird species and four mammal species), as follows:

Birds

1. Maleo *Macrocephalon maleo* (25 individuals)
2. Black Sunbird *Leptocoma aspasia* (7 individuals)
3. Brown-throated Sunbird *Anthreptes malacensis*

- (2 individuals)
4. Sulawesi Myna *Basilornis celebensis* (11 individuals)
5. Variable Goshawk *Accipiter biogaster* (1 individual)
6. Blue-crowned Hanging-parrot *Loriculus galgulus* (5 individuals)
7. Red-whiskered Bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus* (12 individuals)
8. Visayan Hornbill *Penelopides panini* (2 individuals)

Table 1. Seizure date, location, species involved and total number of animals seized in eight cases that involved birds-of-paradise.

	Date	City (airport) and country	Species seized	Numbers seized
1.	24 June 2024	Mumbai, India	1. Magnificent Riflebird 2. Maleo 3. Proboscis Monkey 4. Pale-billed Sicklebill 5. Unidentified bird	15 birds 1 primate
2.	2 July 2024	Mumbai, India	1. Magnificent Riflebird 2. Lesser Bird-of-paradise 3. Wilson's Bird-of-paradise	7 birds-of-paradise
3.	4 July 2024	Jakarta, Indonesia	1. Wilson's Bird-of-paradise 2. Lesser Bird-of-paradise 3. Asian Small-clawed Otter	2 birds-of-paradise, 1 carnivore
4.	29 July 2024	Jakarta, Indonesia	1. Maleo 2. Twelve-wired Bird-of-paradise 3. Magnificent Bird-of-paradise 4. Black Sunbird 5. Brown-throated Sunbird	29 birds including 12 Maleo
5.	1 August 2024	Jakarta, Indonesia	1. Lesser Bird-of-paradise 2. Twelve-wired Bird-of-paradise 3. Western Superb Bird-of-paradise 4. Sulawesi Myna 5. Variable Goshawk 6. Tarsier sp. 7. Cuscus sp.	20 birds and 6 mammals
6.	7 August 2024	Mumbai, India	1. Twelve-wired Bird-of-paradise 2. Magnificent Bird-of-paradise 3. Red Bird-of-paradise	7 birds-of-paradise
7.	22 November 2024	Bengaluru, India	1. Raggiana Bird-of-paradise 2. Lesser Bird-of-paradise 3. Magnificent Riflebird 4. Blue-crowned Hanging-parrot 5. Red-whiskered Bulbul 6. Sulawesi Myna	30 birds including 6 birds-of-paradise
8	1 December 2024	Kochi, India	1. King Bird-of-paradise 2. Magnificent Bird-of-paradise 3. Visayan hornbill 4. Maleo	14 birds including 4 birds-of-paradise and 8 Maleo

Mammals

1. Proboscis Monkey *Nasalis larvatus* (1 individual)
2. Small-clawed Otter *Aonyx cinereus* (1 individual)
3. Tarsiers *Tarsius* sp. (8 individuals)
4. Cuscus *Phalanger* sp. (1 individual)

We know of at least one additional seizure in India in the past that involved birds-of-paradise: in 2018, a shipment of wildlife seized at the Kolkata international airport included a pair of birds-of-paradise along with other birds and mammal species. According to media reports the seizure originated in Thailand and travelled to Kolkata overland across the border with Myanmar at Mizoram, where it was destined to fly to Pune (east of Mumbai), from Kolkata (Times of India 2018).



Figure 1. A male Lesser Bird-of-paradise *Paradisaea minor* seized in India.

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Figure 2. A total of 25 Maleo *Macrocephalon maleo* were seized. This is likely the first time this species has been seized in India.

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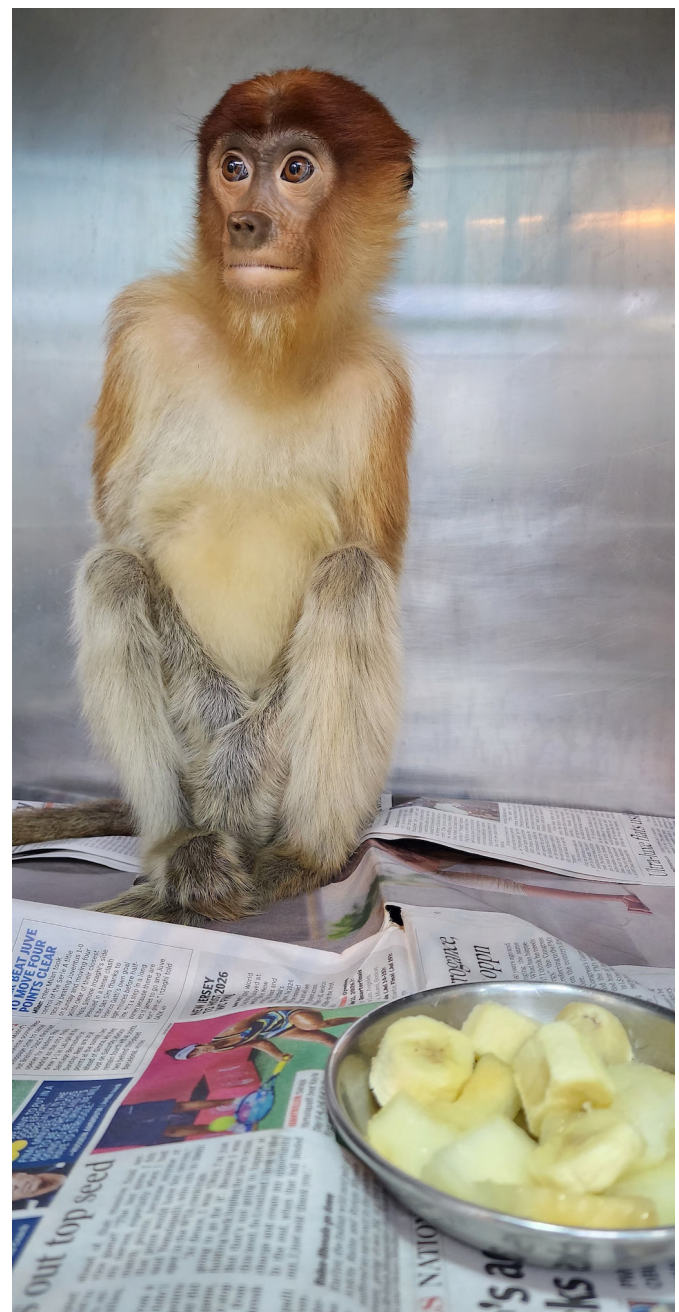


DISCUSSION

All species of the birds-of-paradise (family Paradisaeidae) are protected by national laws in all range states and have been listed in Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) since 1975 (see: <http://checklist.cites.org>). Birds-of-paradise species have been recorded in trade in local bird markets in the past (e.g. Shepherd *et al.* 2004). International trade in birds-of-paradise has also been reported, including trade reported in the CITES Trade Database (Stengel & Foley 2011). Although hunting and trade in all birds-of-paradise species in Indonesia is illegal, poaching, especially for the trade in feathers and stuffed specimens, continues (Mardiastuti & Mulyani 2024). Capture of live birds-of-paradise continues as well, but possibly to a lesser extent than for the trade in feathers and stuffed birds, and may be at least partially carried

Figure 3. In addition to birds, a number of mammals originating from Indonesia, including this Proboscis Monkey *Nasalis larvatus*, were seized in India.

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out when there is an order to supply live birds (Mardiastuti & Mulyani 2024). These recent seizures of birds-of-paradise in India, and in Jakarta en route to India, clearly indicate that illegal trade continues from Indonesia in these protected species, and that there is demand in India. India has seen a rising demand for exotic pets (Pragatheesh *et al.* 2021, Kalra *et al.* 2024), as has been evident from social media posts, and seizures along its porous borders in the north-east and through major airports.

In addition to the birds-of-paradise, three of the seizures also included a total of 25 juvenile Maleo. Maleo are endemic to the islands of Sulawesi and Buton Islands in Indonesia and are assessed as being Critically Endangered by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN Red List) (BirdLife International 2021). While collection of eggs for consumption, and hunting of adults for sport and consumption are listed as threats to Maleo in the IUCN Red List assessment, international trade in live birds is not documented in the assessment. To our knowledge, this is the first record of Maleo being trafficked to India from Indonesia, and a source of great concern for this Critically Endangered bird.

Given that many of these species would be difficult to maintain in captivity due to specific dietary and husbandry needs, and the illegal nature of buying and keeping such species, these animals will likely command hefty prices. If they were going to be sold to novice hobbyists without the husbandry knowledge of keeping such birds in captivity, these birds would perish within a short time and instigate additional wild captures. It seems far more likely that these animals were to be sold to experienced collectors with significant disposable income who feel that they have resources and access to the care needed to keep such species in captivity.

We recognise the challenges involved in countering transnational wildlife trafficking and we commend the authorities involved (the Indian and Indonesian Customs and Excise Office, the Wildlife Crime Control Bureau of India, and State Forest Departments) in the cases outlined here for their actions. Given the frequency of such seizures in India originating from Indonesia, we strongly recommend that the process of repatriation of seized wildlife from India to Indonesia be streamlined to ensure that the animals are safely returned to their country of origin, and do not end up in the hands of those orchestrating the trafficking. We also encourage the relevant authorities in Indonesia and India to increase vigilance and to punish offenders found poaching or trading these birds to the full extent of the law.

The IUCN SSC Asian Songbird Trade Specialist Group was established to tackle the illegal and unsustainable trade in Asia's passerine species (Shepherd & Cassey 2017) and, while birds-of-paradise species are not listed in the Group's list of top priority species, trade in this unique group of species should be monitored and action should be taken when and where illegal trade is detected. Seizures and records of trade in birds-of-paradise should be reported to the Songbirds in Trade Database (<https://www.sitdb.org/>), which was developed to aid in monitoring trends in passerine trade to support enforcement efforts, inform policy interventions and to guide conservation actions.

Given this recent spate of attempted trafficking of birds-of-paradise and other wildlife from Indonesia to India, we strongly recommend the following:

- The relevant government agencies in India, Indonesia and Thailand strengthen mutual communication and coordination to tackle the trafficking in an increasingly collaborative and effective manner.
- Airlines, enforcement agencies and NGOs that are involved in caring for and repatriating these animals should develop an effective and swift plan to ensure that the animals are well cared for and repatriated, when possible, with minimum delay.

- Airlines should take proactive steps to ensure they are not unintentionally being utilised for the illegal trafficking of wildlife.
- Build capacity at airports in India, Indonesia and Thailand for the detection and care of seized wildlife.
- Indonesia should strengthen the national preventive infrastructure to curtail the trafficking of such birds and other wildlife species, and action must be taken in India and other demand countries to ensure that the demand for illegally sourced wildlife is curtailed.

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