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A visit to the bird market of Kabul (Ka Farushi), 20 December 2006

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Introduction

On 20 December 2006 I visited the bird market of Kabul, Afghanistan, locally known as Ka Farushi, with Dr Ali Madad Rajabi and Dr Hafizullah Ziauddin, two graduated students from the college of veterinary science in Kabul employed by the WCS Wildlife Ecosystem Health Project. The visit was part of a study started in summer 2006 that intends to document the seasonal variations of bird species and numbers at the market. As during our previous survey carried out on 27 August 2006 (Ostrowski, 2006) we recorded the number of open shops, identified native bird species for sale, estimated their numbers and health status. We also questioned 6 shopkeepers about the origin, destination and price of their birds.

Bird species and numbers

On the day of our visit, there were 38 shops selling birds. Ten other shops were closed either because of poor weather — it was snowing — or because of the late timing of the visit, at 15:30, less than two hours from closing time. We identified 24 species of wildborn birds (Table 1) belonging to 7 taxonomic orders: Falconiformes (1 species), Strigiformes (1 species), Galliformes (6 species), Columbiformes (2 species), and Passeriformes (14 species). We also recorded non-identified fringilles and six captive-bred species.

Origin of the birds

Most of the birds sold at the market seemed to originate from the wild and to have been captured throughout Afghanistan, especially passerines. Compared with our summer visit, we noticed an influx of probable winter visitors to Afghanistan such as bramblings (*Fringilla montifringilla*), or goldfinches (*Carduelis carduelis*) not belonging to the local *parapanisi* subspecies. We also noticed the presence of birds belonging to three new species: red-collared dove (*Streptopelia tranquebarica*), grey francolin (*Francolinus pondicerianus*), and white-eared bulbul (*Pycnonotus leucotus*). According to shopkeepers, they had been captured in Pakistan or India, suggesting that birdlife trade is still active between those countries and Afghanistan. The origin of Eurasian siskins (*Carduelis spinus*), chaffinches (*Fringilla coelebs*), the reed bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) and greenfinches (*Carduelis chloris*) (Plate 1) is unclear.

Table 1 — Birds recorded at Ka Farushi on 20 December 2006.

Common name	Scientific name	Order	Origin	Number
Sparrowhawk	<i>Accipiter nisus</i>	Falconiformes	CW (AF)	1
Eagle owl	<i>Bubo bubo ascalaphus</i>	Strigiformes	CW (AF)	1
Black francolin	<i>Francolinus francolinus</i>	Galliformes	CW (AF/PK)	2
Grey francolin	<i>Francolinus pondicerianus</i>	Galliformes	CW (PK/IN)	2
See-see partridge	<i>Ammoperdix griseogularis</i>	Galliformes	CW (AF)	3
Chukar partridge	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	Galliformes	CW (AF)	83
Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	Galliformes	CW (AF)	42
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus colchicus</i>	Galliformes	CW (AF)	1
Red-collared dove	<i>Streptopelia tranquebarica</i>	Columbiformes	CW (IN)	4
Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Columbiformes	CW (AF)	2
Calandra lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	600-650
Eastern rock nuthatch	<i>Sitta tephronata</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	2
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	234
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	12-15
Red-fronted serin	<i>Serinus pusillus</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	325
White-eared bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus leucotus</i>	Passeriformes	CW (PK/IN)	3
Chaffinch	<i>Fringilla coelebs</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	2
Brambling	<i>Fringilla montifringilla</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	15-20
Eurasian siskin	<i>Carduelis spinus</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	25-30
Eurasian linnet	<i>Carduelis cannabina</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	15-20
Twite	<i>Carduelis flavirostris</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	2
Desert finch	<i>Rhodospiza obsoleta</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	15-20
Reed bunting	<i>Emberiza schoeniclus</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	1
Magpie	<i>Pica pica</i>	Passeriformes	CW (AF)	1
Non-identified fringilles	—	Passeriformes	CW	20-30
Canari	<i>Serinus</i> sp.	Passeriformes	CB	30-40
Java sparrow	<i>Padda oryzivora</i>	Passeriformes	CB	NC
Pigeon	<i>Columba</i> sp.	Columbiformes	CB	500-700
Diamond dove	<i>Geopelia cuneata</i>	Columbiformes	CB	10-14
Budgerigar	<i>Melopsittacus undulatus</i>	Psittaciformes	CB	NC
Ring-necked parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	Psittaciformes	CB	15-20

CW=captured in the wild, CB=captive-bred, AF=Afghanistan, PK=Pakistan, IN=India, NC=not counted

To our knowledge these species are not commonly recorded in the country. The closest known populations occur in northern Iran to the southeastern shores of the Caspian Sea, and sporadically in Tajikistan for the greenfinch (Clement et al., 1993; Byers et al., 1997), which we had already recorded, in lower numbers, in Ka Farushi in August. Nevertheless it seems the cost price would not be very attractive for bird dealers, should they import such relatively cheap birds from Iran (purchase price is usually less than 5 US\$/bird in Kabul) and we believe that these species have probably been captured in the country as winter visitors. There were also locally captive-bred bird species such as pigeons or budgerigars (*Melopsittacus undulatus*), and some that were probably imported from foreign countries. According to shopkeepers, canaries for example were either captive-bred in Afghanistan or imported from Iran, Germany, or Poland.

Number of birds

Compared to our summer survey we noticed a significantly increased number of displayed calandra larks (*Melanocorypha calandra*) ($\times 2.5$) (Plate 2) and red-fronted serins (*Serinus pusillus*) ($\times 7$). Goldfinches were fewer ($\div 2$) and most specimens did not belong to the local *parapanisi* subspecies as in summer, testifying of a significant turnover in the captive population displayed at the market. Similarly the number of quails (*Coturnix coturnix*), which are typical summer visitors to Afghanistan, dropped significantly ($\div 6$). Overall enlarged bird numbers certainly reflected an increase of the trapping pressure during winter. In the Ghazni Province for example, songbird capture is a typical winter pastime when there is less work to be done in farms (Ali Madad, pers. comm.). This would explain the much larger number of red-fronted serins displayed in winter. On the other hand, the smaller number of native goldfinches and quails despite the supposedly increased trapping pressure suggest that fewer birds of these species were present in the country in autumn/winter. Those observations match broadly what we know of the seasonal status of the concerned bird species in Afghanistan. The presence of a variety of passerines suggests that the trapping methods employed are poorly selective within granivorous species.

Destination of birds

Birds are sold in Ka Farushi mostly as pet birds, racing birds, songbirds or fighting birds.

Display / Ornamental / Pet birds — The trade in display birds is fuelled by the popular Afghan tradition of keeping pet birds. We recorded several birds either captured in Afghanistan or in Pakistan/India: one magpie (*Pica pica*), two collared doves (*Streptopelia decaocto*), four red-collared doves (*Streptopelia tranquebarica*), two grey francolins, and a couple of black francolin (*Francolinus francolinus*) (Plate 3). However, the majority of birds sold for display in Ka Farushi is either locally captive-bred (pigeons) or imported from foreign countries. Given their relatively high prices exotic pet birds are usually sold to wealthy buyers or to passionate aviculturists. Display is the primary use of pigeons, which are overall the most common birds in Ka Farushi. Various breeds are sold. Chukar

partridges (*Alectoris chukar*) are sometimes kept as pet birds although they are primarily used as fighting birds.

Racing birds — Apparently pigeon racing is practiced by a handful of local pigeon fanciers and a small number of pigeons is sold for that purpose.

Songbirds — Songbirds were very common in Ka Farushi, the bulk of them (roughly 90%) originated from the wild and belonged to three species: the calandra lark, the red-fronted serin, and the goldfinch. We had the occasion to examine several specimens of larks and could confirm their identification. Calandra larks can indeed easily be mistaken, when caged, with bimaculated larks (*Melanocorypha bimaculata*), a species which also occurs in Afghanistan. We also recorded greenfinches, bramblings, chaffinches, Eurasian siskins, twites, desert finches (*Rhodospiza obsoleta*), Eurasian linnets (*Carduelis cannabina*), eastern rock nuthatches (*Sitta tephronata*), and a reed bunting (*Emberiza schoeniclus*) which was sold for 300 Afgs (6 US\$) the next day. Domestic canaries were sold in only seven shops.

Fighting birds — Chukar partridges and quails (*Coturnix coturnix*) were the two species sold as fighting birds. Male chukars are kept in individual cages and according to their performances can cost as much as 200 US\$, the equivalent of three months of the average salary of an Afghan government official (Plate 4). Quails are usually kept in mass cages, in groups of 5–50 birds sometimes mixed with other gallinacean such as see-see partridges (*Ammoperdix griseogularis*) (Plate 5).

Miscellaneous — Eventually, one dealer only sold ‘atypical’ wild species for display: one eagle owl (*Bubo bubo ascalaphus*), one male pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) of ‘green glossed’ form, a couple of black francolins and one sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) (Plate 6). All but the sparrowhawk were already displayed by this dealer in August 2006.

Health status

In general birds were in medium to poor body condition. We could examine three calandra larks, one goldfinch, the rustic bunting and the sparrowhawk. They were all emaciated with amyotrophic pectoral muscles. Pica, overgrooming disorders, poor feet conditions, self-inflicted mutilations and other injuries were common in overcrowded cages of calandra larks, red-fronted serins and goldfinches. As in summer we observed many traumas of legs, head, and beak, especially in songbirds. Plumage of passerines was usually in poor condition. Primary and secondary wing feathers were often clipped on one side. Several pigeons showed twisting of head and neck, circling, and walking backward behaviors. Such symptoms suggest a paramyxovirus meningoencephalitis, possibly Newcastle Disease (Plate 7). Morbidity however is difficult to appreciate in Ka Farushi: shopkeepers are reluctant to share information on diseases and sick animals are usually not marketed or quickly eliminated. Recently Afghan sanitary authorities have decided to regularly check the market for the occurrence of avian influenza. This is a first step towards implementing a regular sanitary control associated to prophylactic interventions. WCS has been committed to help training governmental staff in bird identification, handling and sampling.



All pictures were taken at Ka Farushi during our visit on 20 December 2006.

From top left, clockwise: Plate 1 — Greenfinches (*Carduelis chloris*) sold at the market are of unclear origin since the species is not known to occur in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, we believe that these birds were probably captured in the country. Plate 2 — The calandra lark (*Melanocorypha calandra*) was the most common passerine species displayed at Ka Farushi market during our visit. This species is kept in flocks sometimes exceeding 50 birds in 1.5 x 0.80 x 0.25 m mass cages that limit their flight possibilities and avoid traumatic injuries. Plate 3 — A male black francolin (*Francolinus francolinus*) is sold as an ornamental bird. Plate 4 — Male chukar partridges (*Alectoris chikar*) are priced as fighting birds, and are kept separated from each others in individual wooden cages where they receive the attentive care of their owners. Some specimens are also appreciated for their singing prowess. Plate 5 — A see-see partridge (*Ammoperdix griseogularis*) is kept within a flock of quails (*Coturnix coturnix*). The destination of this species is unknown. Plate 6 — A sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*) is displayed in Ka Farushi. The shopkeeper mentioned that this individual was captured in Afghanistan in late November 2006. Plate 7 — A racing pigeon shows twisting of neck in Ka Farushi, a symptom suggestive of meningoencephalitis commonly encountered in birds affected by paramyxoviruses such as the agent of Newcastle Disease.

Prices

Prices were similar to those recorded in summer 2006 (Ostrowski, 2006).

Conservation aspect

All wild bird species recorded in Ka Farushi in December 2006 belonged to the ¹Least Concern category of the IUCN (www.iucnredlist.org downloaded on 15 January 2007). However, their status in the region is largely unknown. Although the relatively small number of wild birds displayed at Ka Farushi seemed unlikely to have a significant impact on local populations, one should remember that our counts probably largely underestimate the actual numbers of captured birds since many of them may die shortly after capture, and since nothing is known about the survival rate of displayed birds. Indeed, during our visit we recorded two calandra larks about to die in an overcrowded cage and two dead larks on the ground, near a shop, obviously thrown away from a cage the same day. For each displayed individual several were probably captured. For the calandra lark and perhaps also for the red-fronted serin the real impact of Ka Farushi marketing on sampled populations probably adds up to thousands of individuals in autumn/winter.

Future work

We recommend carrying out regular visits to Kabul bird market in order to:

1. document seasonal trends in bird species, numbers, and price fluctuations
2. identify specimens belonging to threatened taxa
3. inform shopkeepers of the risk of disease transmission
4. detect the presence of infectious diseases
5. train governmental technical staff at bird identification, and possibly handling and sampling methods.

Literature cited

Byers C., Curzon J., and U. Olsson. (1997). Sparrows and buntings. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York. 334 pp.

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¹ Least Concern (LC) — A taxon is Least Concern when it has been evaluated against the criteria and does not qualify for Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable or Near Threatened. Widespread and abundant taxa are included in this category.