

The secret world of bird trafficking in India: unravelling the illegal wildlife trade

By Asha Poonia, Sharda Kalra, Alisa Davies and Rowan O. Martin, 24th October 2023

The trade in wildlife is a complex issue: on the one hand, it presents a major concern for biodiversity conservation, but at the same time it provides livelihoods for millions of people across the globe. Birds, coveted as pets for their beauty, song and companionship, are targeted in particular for this booming and often illegal industry. In India, the trade in birds—both legal and illegal—[has been on the rise](#). Here we delve into this fascinating but often hidden world, with our recent [study](#) shedding light on the bird trade in this vast and diverse country. Our aim was to not only understand the scale of such trade, but also identify trade routes and consider the implications for wildlife and people.

Birds, especially parrots, have long been popular in the exotic pet trade because of their colourful plumage and engaging personalities. However, soaring demand for birds has led to the overexploitation of wild populations and has contributed significantly to global biodiversity loss. Recent studies suggest that [45% of bird species are exploited for trade](#), primarily to be kept as pets, and that international trade is contributing to the extinction risk of [at least 200 globally threatened bird species](#). Moreover, the trade in birds across long distances can introduce invasive species and increase the risk of disease transmission, posing a serious threat to biodiversity conservation, agriculture and human health.



Three bird species commonly seized from the bird trade, from left to right: a rose-ringed parakeet, an African grey parrot and a hyacinth macaw. Photos: Charles J. Sharp/Wikimedia (left) and Tambako the Jaguar/Flickr (middle and right).

With its booming human population and increasing urban affluence, India has become a hotspot for both domestic and international illegal bird trade. Despite strict laws prohibiting the ownership of native species and placing restrictions on the import of exotic birds, the lure of financial gain, countered by only a small risk of being caught, encourages many to engage in this activity. Although India has reported the import of only a few [CITES-listed birds over past decades](#), there is [evidence of a thriving internal trade in exotic species](#)—suggesting that illegal trade is widespread.

Obtaining accurate data on the scale and scope of the bird trade in India is no easy task. To gain some insights into this secretive trade, we examined media reports of bird seizures that took place from 2010 to 2020. Our analysis identified 182 reports covering 109 seizure incidents, involving a staggering number of over 25,000 birds from 58 species. A diverse range of bird species were being traded, but unsurprisingly, parrots were the most sought-after: 65% of all seized birds belonged to this family.

Knowing how many and what kinds of birds were being confiscated by the authorities is useful, but it only tells part of the story. We also wanted to find out where in India the trading activity is most prolific and how illegal trade flows between different locations, so that future law enforcement efforts can be targeted specifically at these hotspot areas and routes. A useful tool to answer such questions is social network analysis. In general, a network represents a group of objects, people or places—referred to as nodes—and the relationships between them, which are called edges. In our analysis, nodes represent distinct locations and edges the trade routes between them. Applying this type of analysis to the data gleaned from media reports of bird seizures provided valuable information on the key trade hubs in India. West Bengal emerged as the major source and transit point for the exotic bird trade into India, with clear links to neighbouring Bangladesh where lax enforcement and relatively few restrictions on the import of birds provide rich opportunities for traffickers. For example, last year [an investigation by the World Parrot Trust and the BBC](#) revealed how traders in Bangladesh import threatened parrots destined for neighbouring countries. And in May this year, [inspectors at Dhaka airport intercepted](#) an otherwise legal shipment of birds that contained rare Lear's macaws within a hidden compartment.

The sheer quantity of birds being traded not only raises serious conservation concerns, especially for threatened species, but is also a welfare issue: the birds are often squeezed into cramped, confined spaces during transportation. Poor welfare and biosecurity measures also heighten the risk of disease transmission, which could have severe implications for human health and agriculture. Confronting the heart-breaking conditions in which trafficked birds are kept was the most challenging aspect of our study. But although witnessing their suffering was emotionally taxing, it reinforced our determination to uncover the patterns behind this illegal trade and bring attention to this pressing issue.



Left: lovebirds in a cage at a market, ready for shipment. Right: birds in a cage in a market in South Jakarta. Photos: David Davis/Adobe Stock (left) and Krotz/Wikimedia Commons (right).

Tackling the problems associated with the legal and illegal bird trade requires a multi-faceted approach. Strengthened law enforcement, targeted at key trade points such as airports and land borders, needs to be combined with a rethinking of the way the trade in live birds is regulated at a national and regional level. Keeping birds as pets is popular in India and, alongside improved regulation, there is a clear need for public campaigns to raise awareness about the impacts of the bird trade and the importance of responsible ownership. Current Indian laws make it difficult to prosecute owners of exotic birds unless it can be proved that the animals illegally crossed an international border. In areas where birds are captured, targeted site-based interventions need to be explored. This could be in the form of community-based conservation projects and the development of alternative livelihoods to reduce people's dependence on trapping wild birds as a source of income.

The illegal bird trade in India is a complex web involving a multitude of stakeholders, from local communities to international trafficking networks. Understanding the scale and dynamics of this trade is vital for developing effective strategies to protect avian biodiversity and ensure the welfare of these magnificent creatures. It is time for collective action driven by governments, NGOs and citizens, to safeguard India's rich birdlife and curtail the illicit wildlife trade that poses a threat to both nature and people. Our study provided valuable insights into the scale and trade routes of illegal bird trafficking in India, but there is still much to uncover. Because of the covert nature of the trade, obtaining comprehensive and real-time data remains a challenge. Further research is needed to understand the social, economic and cultural drivers behind this trade, which could aid in developing targeted conservation measures and sustainable livelihood alternatives for the communities involved.

[The article 'Insights from the media into the bird trade in India: an analysis of reported seizures' is available open access in *Oryx—The International Journal of Conservation*.](#)

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