

Great-Billed Parrots (and other Tanygnathus species) in the Wild: Increasing Cause for Concern

by Stewart Metz, M.D.

When the Indonesian undercover investigative team KSBK (now called ProFauna Indonesia) looked at major bird-selling markets in Jakarta, Indonesia, they found that Great-billed Parrot was the least common parrots seen. Concomitantly it was the most expensive, even more so than cockatoos (Ref. #1). How can this be true, when Juniper and Parr state that “the world population is estimated at more than 100,000 birds” (#2)?

First, let me give a background on this relatively little known, but spectacular, parrot. In Indonesia, the Great-Billed Parrot (*T.megalorhynchos*) is called “Betet-kelapa Paruh-besar” (literally: coconut parakeet with the large bill). It is widespread, found throughout much of Nusa Tenggara, the central islands of Indonesia, West Papua and some islands outside Sulawesi. (Great-Billed parrots may also have been introduced to the Philippines.) Each general location, however, seems to be represented by a separate race or subspecies, of which there are eight (for example, *T.m. megalorhynchos* in West Papua; *T.m.affinis* in Seram; and *T.m. sumbensis*, on Sumba; #2). It has been stated (#3) that *Tanygnathus* sp. belong to a wider subfamily (the Psittaculinae) which also includes *Eclectus*, ring-neck parakeets, King parrots, hanging parrots, blue-rumped parrots and lovebirds.

The first photograph shows Waldo, a young Great-bill parrot raised in captivity (courtesy of The Tanygnathus Society, with permission). The second photograph (courtesy of K. Tindige) is a wild Great-bill parrot in Talaud (Indonesia) after capture, on his way to market.

This widespread distribution may in part be explained by the fact that Great-Bills are known to fly between small islands (#2). Like cockatoos, they are shy during feeding but unlike cockatoos, often fly out over the sea and then return to land. In fact, according to trappers on Gam Island, the parrots only roost after flying from Gam to a nearby “Stone Island.” According to Arndt (#4), Great-Billed parrots live in coastal area forest, secondary vegetation, and open and partially cleared areas below 1200 m.; occasionally, they visit cultivated areas and coconut plantations (which may contribute to their local name).

I had the opportunity to interview (#5) several of the younger (?ex-)trappers in West Papua and Sumba about several types of parrot, including the Great-Billed parrots. When it came to the latter, they admitted that they knew very little and that the birds had become “rare”, a fact supported by the findings of BirdLife Indonesia’s census on Sumba (see below).

The trapper-guides said that Great-Bills eat the fruit of the kedongdong tree (but not those of the katapong, unlike the palm cockatoo). They also eat banana, corn, and coconuts. Coates and Bishop add (# 6) that Great-Bills eat the fruits of *Sonneratia alba* and *Canarium vulgare* trees as well as casuarinas. In fact, the Greenbergs state (#7) that their captive Great-bills love *Molucca* nuts (which are fruits of the Kenari or *Canarium* tree). Thomas Arndt (# 4) and Dale Thomson (#3) add breadfruit, flowers of the Flame tree (a species of *Erythrina* which is also eaten by the Citron-crested cockatoo; (ref. #5), nuts and berries to this list. Several breeder have claimed that , at least in captivity, Great-bills prefer a fibrous diet, and may eschew the inner fruit in favor of the outer pulp (#3, #8). However, this claim has not been substantiated by other experienced breeders, who observe them to cast off the rind of fruit, as is typical of psittacines. At any event, it would be hazardous to extrapolate dietary information from captivity to needs in the wild; rather, studies in the wild need to be carried out and these, hopefully, could be extrapolated to captive *Tanygnathus*.

The trappers said that the predators of these parrots were raptors and perhaps monitor lizards.

When Barbara Bailey and I visited Seram in the Moluccas in 2001, we did see a few Great-Bills. However, when I returned to Indonesia in 2002, I did not see a single Great-Bill either in West Papua or Sumba. This might be partially explained by a severe drought of six months in both places. However, expeditions by others to Sulawesi and Halmahera also saw only rare Great-Bills. Since Great-Bills are quite noisy, it seems unlikely that they were simply overlooked . Wara Hapsi, of BirdLife Indonesia, commented (Personal Communication) that the species is “not common” and that, in their 2002 survey, the population density of Great-Bills on Sumba was about 8 individuals per 1000 hectares—ie, a population of about 2400 in remaining forest outside of national parkland. The only optimistic report has been a recent unconfirmed report (K. Tindige, Personal Communication) that a villager has seen Great-Billed Parrots almost every day on North Waigeo in West Papua. He felt certain that they were not *Eclectus* . Project Bird Watch/ The Indonesian Parrot Project plans to fund a trip to the area in the near future when weather conditions are more favorable.

Another concern is the status of other members of the *Tanygnathus* species (see ref. # 7 for an additional overview). One is *T. lucionensis* (Blue-naped parrot); it is found throughout the Philippines and on the Talaud Islands of Indonesia. *T. sumatranus* (Blue-backed or Muller’s parrot) is found throughout Sulawesi and much of the Philippines, plus the Talaud and Sangir Islands between the two . Photograph 3 is of a captive male Muller’s Parrot (courtesy of the *Tanygnathus* Society). *T. gramineus* (Black-lored parrot) is found only on Buru Island, west of Seram) . Although the Great-billed and Blue-backed parrots are not considered endangered, the Blue-naped parrot once was (#2), although it recently has been downlisted (#9) despite a poorly delineated range and population estimate. Pictures of several of these beautiful birds can be seen on the website of the *Tanygnathus* Society at www.thetanygnathussociety.org; additional photographs supplied to us by the *Tanygnathus* Society can be viewed at www.indonesian-parrot-project.org

It is therefore clear that insufficient knowledge is available concerning Tanygnathos species in the wild. Claims that it is not endangered or even vulnerable seem to be based on limited “hard” data (at least, that I am aware of). Since the distribution of these parrots is so wide, one might speculate that even if more than 100,000 Great-Bills exist in the wild, their density at any one location might be very low. This might lead to problems associated with an aging population and/or an inadequate female- to- male ratio. That latter issue might be especially important for Tanygnathus sp, given the claims of shyness in the males, the unusual behavioral dominance of the hens, and the low male:female ratio even among wild-caught birds in captivity (#3).

Thus, this parrot might be more vulnerable than usually stated. Additionally, one cannot exclude extinction in localized domains, since they are represented on a large number of small islands. This was true of *C. moluccensis* (Salmon-crested cockatoos) on Haruku and Saparua (two islands just southwest of Seram); such phenomena might also threaten other parrots such as some subpopulations of Palm cockatoos or the southeast subpopulations of the Australian Red-tailed Black Cockatoo. Should we wait until we definitely know that they are at risk of extinction? Hopefully, that is only a rhetorical question.

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