

Hornbills Make a Comeback in Singapore

By Heather Clark

One hot afternoon not so long ago, I was startled by a loud screeching that split the air like a machete through durian. (The children were still at school, so another explanation was needed.) When I looked outside I was amazed to see a hornbill – two, three! – in a tall tree next door. A brochure from the National Museum of Singapore's collection of natural history drawings confirmed that the spectacular black and white bird was an Oriental Pied Hornbill. I'd seen hornbills in Pulau Ubin, but I didn't think there were any of these beaky giants in the middle of Singapore.

In fact, there used to be three species of hornbill here until they became vanishingly rare, if not locally extinct, in the mid-19th century owing to hunting and deforestation. Although they're not endangered worldwide, Oriental Pied Hornbills were not seen in Singapore for many years until a pair was spotted on Pulau Ubin in 1994. Since then they have staged a remarkable comeback, with nearly 100 now found throughout the mainland and outlying islands.

The return of the big birds was made possible by the Singapore Hornbill Project, a research and conservation collaboration of the Jurong Bird Park, the National Parks Board, Nanyang Technological University and independent researchers Marc Cremades and Ng Soon Chye. In the wild, hornbills nest in tree cavities, but in Singapore suitable hollows are in short supply. The group has installed dozens of artificial nest boxes equipped with sensors, scales and cameras in Pulau Ubin and mainland Singapore to study and provide breeding sites for hornbills – both released captive-bred birds and their wild relations.

Hornbills mate for life. At the start of the breeding season, females seal themselves into a nest box or tree cavity using mud, vegetation and droppings. They stay there for three months to incubate their eggs and raise the chicks while the diligent males bring food through a narrow slit in the seal. The Singapore Hornbill Project has provided invaluable insights into the birds' breeding behaviour and earlier this year the Jurong Bird Park successfully incubated three eggs found abandoned in Pulau Ubin – a world first for the species.



Adult hornbill

In addition to their unique breeding behaviour, many species of hornbills are remarkable for their curving casques – the hollow keratin structures running along the upper bill. Besides giving the birds a magnificent profile, casques serve as resonating chambers that allow the calls of some species to be heard from several kilometres away.

It is not surprising that these striking birds have attracted the attention of local peoples who have given the birds pride of place in their traditional mythology. For the Iban, the largest Dayak tribe in Sarawak, the Rhinoceros Hornbill is the chief of birds – a divine emissary that conveys messages to the heavens (and in former days attacked the spirit of the tribe's enemies). In the Ibans' hornbill festival (*Gawai Kenyalang*), an intricately carved wooden hornbill (*kenyalang*) is raised on a long pole to bring it closer to the gods in order to deliver messages to the upper world. In former times this ceremony was a precursor to headhunting raids, but now is more likely to celebrate the rice harvest. There is a fine example of a 20th century *kenyalang* in the Asian Civilisations Museum – well worth a look, especially if real hornbills elude you.

When I first spotted the hornbills, I thought it was a chance in a million. But since then I have been delighted to see them many times. We have even come to an understanding of sorts, the hornbills and I. When in the neighbourhood, they announce their arrival with some raucous squawking; I drop everything and run for a camera. They fly away... I take another blurry shot of empty treetops.



Hornbill chick

Heather Clark lived in Singapore for three years and during that time worked with the PASSAGE editorial team and also trained as a docent with ACM. She recently moved to Geneva.

Hornbill sketches by the author