



Fly, Little Wings!

A CONSERVATION PROJECT PROTECTING BALI STARLINGS, THE MASCOT OF THE ISLAND OF GODS, AND OTHER INDIGENOUS INDONESIAN BIRDS...

is an official breeding facility in Bali Barat's National Park as poachers keep on stealing these birds both in the wild and from the center. But those who care will never give up preserving this bird species, especially because the Bali Starling is the mascot of Bali – and so its existence is important to this island. Founded in 1999 by Bradley and Debbie Gardner, the Begawan Foundation is striving to help the government to protect these endangered birds through its first initiative, the Bali Starling Conservation Project.

LITTLE BIRD'S NESTS

The Begawan Foundation has a breeding sanctuary called the Sibang Breeding and Release Center, nestled within the Green School complex in the Sibangkaja Village. This is where the Bali Starlings are taken care of by the staff who prepare their food, clean their cages, feed the youngsters and monitor their health and numbers at all times, even when these birds are already flying free in the nearby forest.

The foundation started by having only two pairs of Bali Starlings

White feathers so pure with black tips on its

wings and tail, and blue skin around its eyes – Bali Starlings have such beautiful characteristics. Also known as Bali Mynah, Jalak Bali and *Leucopsar Rothschildi*, Bali Starlings are also gentle and have a trusting nature that eventually worked

against them, as they became one of the most-wanted birds in the world. Poachers become their biggest enemies just as much as the deforestation that takes away their natural habitat. In the late 1970s to early 1980s, the population of Bali Starlings was estimated to be less than 200, and by 2002 the number decreased to only 16 in the wild.

The threat to Bali Starlings is real, despite the fact that there

in 1999, purchased from a knowledgeable breeder near London in England. Ever since being first acknowledged by Erwin Stresemann in 1912, Bali Starlings went popular worldwide and were exported to Europe and USA in 1960s. As soon as the Begawan Foundation brought these pairs of birds back to their homeland, the foundation adopted a professional approach to breeding and conserving this species. In November 2005, the population of Bali Starlings reached 97 birds, and all of them were transferred to a sanctuary in Nusa Penida where they were meant to fly free.

However, according to Amy Dunstone, one of the volunteers at the Sibang Breeding and Release Center, Nusa Penida is not as friendly as it used to be for these little fellows. "When we released them there we kind of expected that not all of them would survive as some might be preyed upon by cats or snakes," Amy explained to our team during our visit to the foundation. "But the real problem is that their number keeps on decreasing due to poachers."

Since Nusa Penida is not safe anymore, the Begawan Foundation decided to move all the birds and their enclosures to central Bali in 2010, adjacent to the Green School. "The government and local people here care about these birds so they know how important it is to keep these birds alive in the wild," Amy continued. "The Bali Starlings in

this area are also monitored by the volunteers at the foundation and the students of the Green School."

Today the Sibang Breeding and Release Center is home to more or less 60 Bali Starlings as well as a number of other indigenous Indonesian birds such as the Rangkong Julang Emas (*Rhyticeros Plicatus*) from Papua, Mitchell's Lorikeets, and Forsten's Lorikeets. The foundation also takes care of a number of parrots like an African Grey named Tatty and a pair of Eclectus Parrots.



Students meet the Bali Starlings and other birds up close.

YOUNG AMBASSADORS

The foundation realizes that the young generation is the best asset available in preserving these endangered birds. To gain more awareness, the Sibang Breeding and Release Center is open for guest visits, especially children visitors, to create young ambassadors. Last April for instance, a total of 150 students from the Yayasan Pendidikan Jayawijaya (YPJ) National School in Papua visited the breeding center in a series of eight field trips. On April 27, the Begawan Foundation welcomed the last 18 fifth grade students from YPJ.

It was 9 a.m. in the morning when the students arrived at the center. The study tour started with them watching a video titled "The Bali Starling: The Icon" that consists of the Begawan



Foundation's vision and missions and an introduction to the sanctuary, aiming to increase the children's awareness about protecting this endangered species. The students were then divided into small groups to join in the following four activities, escorted by a volunteer.

Guided by Amy and Andres, also volunteers, the students toured the sanctuary to meet the Bali Starlings up close. They learned how to change the water for the birds to bathe in and the importance of clean water for the environment. They were taught to identify the difference between the male and female birds just by looking at the crests – the males have a longer crest to attract the females. During this tour they also got to meet Tatty the African Grey, the Rangkong Julang Emas, the lorikeets and the parrots.

On the second activity Ngurah, one of the bird keepers, accompanied the students and showed them how to prepare the food for the birds. In the kitchen, the students helped prepare

papayas, bananas, peas, sprouts and carrots in small portions and put them in a bowl, mixed with insects like crickets and worms for protein. Of course some of the children were disgusted by the insects, but the foundation has provided gloves so they can mix all the ingredients safely. Once the food was ready the children were led to a large enclosure where the birds were socializing, to feed them and watch them eat.

Afterwards, the students learned to identify different bird species by examining the feathers under a microscope in the laboratory with Deva, the foundation's veterinarian. Finally the students were taken on a tour around the Green School with Mehd Halaouate, the manager of the Sibang Breeding and Release Center, and shown the Bali Starlings that were flying freely in the wild.

Based on Mehd's discussion with the students at the end of the study tour, these students became aware that birds, especially parrots, shouldn't be kept as pets anymore.

"When I asked if any of them have pet birds back at home, their answers pleased me," said Mehd. "They said they used to have birds, some mentioned a few parrot species and one even said they had a Cassowary! But now they don't anymore because they know wild birds are not to be kept in cages."

Mehd continued, "Their answers made me wonder how could the law in Papua be so strict but not in other parts of Indonesia? Especially knowing that most of the parrot species kept in Java and Bali are originally from Papua." We sure hope that these students become young ambassadors for preserving endangered species not just in Papua but also in all Indonesia and the rest of the world. ■

By Risty Nurraisa

A tour of the Sibang Breeding and Release Center is available at US\$15/adult and US\$12/student, and all of the income is donated to the Begawan Foundation.

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