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GLOBALLY THREATENED BIRD SPECIES ON THE ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS

Dear Ravi,

Thank you very much for your letter of 28 September, regarding the Andaman and Nicobar endemic species which were listed as globally threatened in *Birds to watch 2: the world list of threatened birds*. I was pleased to read that you agree with the classification of Nicobar Scrubfowl and Nicobar Bulbul. However, I think I need to justify further the inclusion of Narcondam Hornbill and Andaman Crane.

The Hornbill clearly qualifies as "Vulnerable" under the new IUCN criteria for threatened status, because of its tiny range and small total population. This threatened category has quite a low theoretical probability of extinction (10% in 100 years), which does not seem inappropriate for this species. Although its population size has apparently remained unchanged over a long period of time, and its habitat remains near pristine, it is clearly vulnerable to chance events in the future, such as a natural catastrophe (volcano, hurricane, etc.), the introduction of predators, competitors or disease, etc. Many bird extinctions in the past have involved such species endemic to single small islands.

I agree that a species whose habitat is largely intact (but is naturally rare or localised) is not the same as a species threatened by human acts, but the aim of threatened species classification is not to prioritise conservation action but to objectively document (on the basis of both natural characteristics and negative human activities) the risk of extinction that a species faces. The resulting documentation, particularly the information on the threats that species face, can be analyzed to determine and prioritise conservation actions. The danger of classifying species purely upon whether they are endangered by human acts is that mankind's impact on the natural world is constantly changing (and often difficult to assess or agree upon), and the resulting list would be subject to frequent major changes.

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Andaman Crake is a very difficult species to classify, because of the lack of information. We decided to list it as "Vulnerable" because (the admittedly few) recent observers to the Andamans have made very few records, suggesting that it may be more localised and potentially vulnerable than most of the other Andaman endemics. It could alternatively have been treated as "Data Deficient", to acknowledge that there may not be enough information to judge its threatened status. Please note, however, that the Asian species covered in this edition of *Birds to watch* are being presented as a candidate list for the forthcoming Asian Red Data Book. Hopefully, by the time that they come to be assessed for this book, new fieldwork will have clarified the status of this and other Andaman and Nicobar endemics.

Thank you for letting me know about the Assam Plains text which we sent to you by mistake; I will make sure that we send a copy to Gautam Narayan as you recommend. I am going to attend the Red Data Book workshop to be hosted by SACON next February and very much hope that I will have the opportunity to meet you and discuss these issues in more depth. I also look forward to hearing more about your work on the Lesser Florican.

With best wishes,

Yours sincerely,

Mike Crosby

Mike Crosby,
Research Officer (Asia Programme)