

A visit to the bird market of Kabul (Ka Farushi), 27 August 2006

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Introduction

On 27 August I visited the bird market of Kabul, locally known as Ka Farushi, with Mr Ali Madad Rajabi and Mr Hafizullah Ziauddin, two graduated students of the college of veterinary science in Kabul seasonally employed by the WCS Wildlife Ecosystem Health Project. The market is an assemblage of small shops lined along a narrow pedestrian alley (Plate 1). We recorded the number of shops, identified native bird species for sale, estimated their numbers and health status, and questioned 12 shopkeepers about the price, origin and destination of their birds.

Bird species and numbers

There are 48 shops selling birds. We identified 15 species of wild-born birds (Table 1) belonging to 7 taxonomic orders: Falconiformes (2 species), Strigiformes (1 species), Galliformes (3 species), Coraciiformes (1 species), Columbiformes (1 species), and Passeriformes (7 species). We also recorded non-identified fringilles and four captive-bred species.



Plate 1 – The lively bird market of Kabul, locally known as Ka Farushi.

Table 1 – Birds recorded at Ka Farushi on 27 August 2006.

Common name	Scientific name	Order	Origin	Number
Kestrel	<i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	Falconiformes	CW	3
Steppe buzzard	<i>Buteo buteo vulpinus</i>	Falconiformes	CW	1
Eagle owl	<i>Bubo bubo ascalaphus</i>	Strigiformes	CW	1
Black francolin	<i>Francolinus francolinus</i>	Galliformes	CW	2
Chukar partridge	<i>Alectoris chukar</i>	Galliformes	CW	50–70
Quail	<i>Coturnix coturnix</i>	Galliformes	CW	200–250
Jackdaw	<i>Corvus monedula</i>	Coraciiformes	CW	1
Collared dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Columbiformes	CW	2
Calandra lark	<i>Melanocorypha calandra</i>	Passeriformes	CW	270
Domestic sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	Passeriformes	CW	9
Eastern rock nuthatch	<i>Sitta tephronata</i>	Passeriformes	CW	3
Goldfinch	<i>Carduelis carduelis paropanisi</i>	Passeriformes	CW	400–430
Greenfinch	<i>Carduelis chloris</i>	Passeriformes	CW	4
Hoopoe	<i>Upupa epops</i>	Passeriformes	CW	3
Red-fronted serin	<i>Serinus pusillus</i>	Passeriformes	CW	55
Non-identified fringilles	–	Passeriformes	CW	10–15
Canari	<i>Serinus</i> sp.	Passeriformes	CB	35–50
Pheasant	<i>Phasianus</i> sp.	Galliformes	CB	1
Pigeon	<i>Columba</i> sp.	Columbiformes	CB	500–700
Ring-necked parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	Psittaciformes	CB	15–20

CW=captured in the wild, CB=captive-bred

Origin of the birds

The majority of the birds sold at the market seemed to originate from the wild and to have been captured throughout the country. This was for example certainly the case for the goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*), the most common songbird sold at the market at this time of year: all displayed adult individuals belonged to the *paropanisi* subspecies known to breed in Afghanistan and eastern Iran (Plate 2). There were also locally captive-bred bird species such as pigeons, and some that were probably imported from foreign countries. Canaries for example are either captive-bred in Afghanistan or imported from Iran, Germany, or Poland.

Destination of birds

It appears that birds are sold in Ka Farushi mostly as pet birds, racing birds, songbirds or fighting birds.



Plate 2 – The goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*) was the most common songbird species in Ka Farushi. All adult goldfinch specimens belonged to *paropanisi* subspecies, suggesting that harvested populations most probably originated from Afghanistan.



Plate 3 – A hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) caged in Ka Farushi. This display species was sold for less than a dollar.

Display / Pet birds — The trade in display birds is fuelled by the long-lasting and popular Afghan tradition of keeping birds in captivity. Local people thoroughly enjoy having pet birds at home. We recorded several birds sold for display and apparently captured in Afghanistan: three hoopoes (*Upupa epops*) (Plate 3), a dozen domestic sparrows (*Passer domesticus*), two collared doves (*Streptopelia decaocto*), and a couple of black francolin (*Francolinus francolinus*). However, the majority of birds sold for display in Ka Farushi is either locally captive-bred (pigeons) or imported from foreign countries. Given their relatively high prices exotic pet birds are usually sold to wealthy buyers or to passionate aviculturists. Display is the primary use of pigeons, which are overall the most common birds in Ka Farushi. Various breeds are sold.



Plate 4 – The calandra lark (*Melanocorypha calandra*) was the second most common species of songbird present in Ka Farushi. The insert shows the typical underwing pattern that distinguishes calandra lark (ie blackish color with conspicuous white trailing edge) from bimaculated lark (*Melanocorypha bimaculata*) (ie dull grey-brown underwing without clear white trailing edge).



Plate 5 – An eastern rock nuthatch (*Sitta tephronata*) in Ka Farushi, a species very appreciated for its singing prowess.

Racing birds — Apparently pigeon racing is practiced by a handful of local pigeon fanciers and that a small number of pigeons is sold for that purpose.

Songbirds — Songbirds were very common in Ka Farushi, the bulk of them (roughly 90%) originating from the wild and belonging to three species: the goldfinch, the calandra lark (*Melanocorypha calandra*), and the red-fronted serin (*Serinus pusillus*), three common breeders in Afghanistan. We had the occasion to examine several specimens of larks and could confirm their identification (Plate 4). Calandra larks can indeed easily be mistaken, when caged, with bimaculated larks (*Melanocorypha bimaculata*), a species which also occurs in Afghanistan. We also recorded four greenfinches (*Carduelis chloris*), three eastern rock nuthatches (*Sitta tephronata*) (Plate 5) and a dozen of non-identified fringilles (probably belonging to *Emberiza* spp.) that were also sold as songbirds. One dealer had a talking jackdaw (*Corvus monedula*) that supposedly originated from the north-west of Afghanistan. Domestic canaries were sold in only six shops.

Fighting birds — Chukar partridges (*Alectoris chukar*) and quails (*Coturnix coturnix*) were the only two species sold as fighting birds. Male chukars are kept in individual cages and according to their performances can cost as much as 200 US\$, the equivalent of three months of the average salary of an Afghan government official. Quails are usually kept in mass cages, in groups of 5–50 birds.

Miscellaneous — Eventually, one dealer only had ‘atypical’ wild species that he was selling for display: one eagle owl (*Bubo bubo ascalaphus*) (Plate 6), two adult and one juvenile kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*), one male pheasant (*Phasianus* sp.) and one adult steppe buzzard (*Buteo buteo vulpinus*) (Plate 7).

Health status

In general birds for sell were in medium to poor body condition. We could examine six calandra larks, five goldfinches, one kestrel and the steppe buzzard. They were emaciated with amyotrophic pectoral muscles. In addition, pica, overgrooming disorders, poor feet conditions (Plate 8), self-inflicted mutilations and various injuries were common in overcrowded cages of quails, calandra larks (Plate 9), goldfinches and red-fronted serins. We observed in many instances traumatic injuries of legs, head, and beak, both in song and fighting birds. The plumage of captured birds was usually in poor condition and primary and secondary wing feathers were often clipped on one side. Although it is not possible to evaluate with certainty the turnover rate for the birds sold in Ka Faruchi without marking a number of them, the disorders recorded in the examined birds plead for a minimum of two weeks of captivity.



Plate 6 – The eagle owl (*Bubo bubo ascalaphus*) is occasionally sold in Ka Farushi.

We did not observe clinical symptoms of infectious diseases, in those nevertheless stressed and probably immuno-depressed birds. However, morbidity is impossible to appreciate since shopkeepers are reluctant to share any information concerning the occurrence of diseases, and since sick animals are usually not marketed or quickly eliminated. Implementation of regular sanitary visits would highlight this important epidemiological feature. Recently it seems that Afghan sanitary authorities have decided to regularly check the market for the occurrence of avian influenza. This is an important first step towards the implementation of a regular sanitary control associated to prophylactic interventions.



Plate 7 – An adult steppe buzzard (*Buteo buteo vulpinus*) in Ka Farushi. The shopkeeper mentioned that this individual was captured in Afghanistan during summer 2006, suggesting that this subspecies may breed in the country.

Prices

We provide a price list for a selection of wild birds species marketed in Ka Farushi in August 2006 (Table 2). These prices are only indicative, and can greatly vary according to the species, individual performances (singing, fighting) or to the subjective appreciation of the dealer. A proven singing bird is usually kept in an individual cage and is always relatively expensive, whereas ‘unproven’ singers, often immature males, females or newly captured adult males, are kept in flocks and are cheap buys. Prices were collected by Mr Ali Madad Rajabi and Mr Hafizullah Ziauddin from 12 shopkeepers.



Plate 8 – Many passerines in Ka Farushi are kept in overcrowded cages where their feet conditions may quickly deteriorate due to poor hygiene and inappropriate floor substrates. This picture shows the damaged feet of a calandra lark (*Melanocorypha calandra*).



Plate 9 – Two mass cages housing approximately 30 calandra larks (*Melanocorypha calandra*) each, in Ka Farushi. In such conditions of promiscuity, stress and poor hygiene, the risk of disease outbreak is increased.

Table 2 – List of prices recorded at Ka Farushi for a selection of bird species, August 2006

Common name	Price/bird	
	(Afghanis)	(US\$)
Goldfinch	120–1,500	2.4–30
Red-fronted serin	70–400	1.4–8
Eastern rock nuthatch	2,000	40
Chukar partridge	250–10,000	5–200
Calandra lark	250–1,500	5–30
Eagle owl	500–2,000	10–40
Common mynah	2,000	40
Ring-necked parakeet	300–1,500	6–30
Pigeon	30–1,500	0.6–30
Domestic sparrow	50	1
Quail	50–150	1–3
Hoopoe	25	0.5

Conservation aspect

All wild bird species recorded in Ka Farushi in August 2006 belonged to the ¹Least Concern category of the IUCN (www.iucnredlist.org downloaded on 29 August 2006). However, their status in the region is largely unknown. Although the relatively small number of wild birds displayed at Ka Farushi seemed unlikely to have a significant impact on local populations, one should remember that our counts probably largely underestimate the actual numbers of captured birds since many of them die after capture. Because Ka Farushi displays birds from all over the country and throughout the year, it can provide an overview of most commonly trapped bird species and of seasonal trends in trapping pressures.

Future work

We recommend implementing regular visits to Kabul bird market in order to:

1. document seasonal trends in bird species and numbers, and price fluctuations
2. detect the occurrence of specimens belonging to threatened taxa
3. inform shopkeepers of the risk of disease transmission
4. detect the presence of infectious diseases
5. learn about trapping methods used in the country.

¹ Least Concern (LC)- A taxon is Least Concern when it has been evaluated against the criteria and does not qualify for Critically Endangered, Endangered, Vulnerable or Near Threatened. Widespread and abundant taxa are included in this category.