

Birds in Oil Palm Plantations in Malaysia

Bird life in oil palm plantations can be characterized broadly by the different micro habitats found within and beyond their boundaries. By recognizing these bird species and their habitats, plantation managers could better manage biodiversity in their areas. DAVE BAKEWELL provides the 101 on the birds in Malaysian plantations.

Oil palm fields

A monoculture crop of any kind is low in plant diversity, which in turn affects the variety of fauna that can adapt to life there. Bird diversity is higher at the edges of such habitat, where it is close to other, more floristically diverse habitat, than it is at the core. Typical species found in core oil palm fields include: Oriental Magpie Robin, White-throated Kingfisher, Yellow-vented Bulbul, Spotted Dove, Zebra Dove, Red Junglefowl, mynas and tailorbirds (West Malaysia). During the northern non-breeding season, Brown Shrikes appear in large numbers. Barn Owls and Spotted Wood-owls are common nocturnal predators in areas where they are encouraged to breed (West Malaysia only).



Open areas

Areas of grassland and uncultivated areas around settlements have a similar bird fauna to oil palm fields, but in addition may host typical open area species such as Greater and Lesser Coucal, White-breasted Waterhen, Asian Glossy Starling and Olive-backed Sunbird. Prinias and munias are two groups of small birds which inhabit grassy areas, but they are often absent from apparently suitable habitat where pesticide spraying is frequent. Areas being prepared for replanting can provide suitable (temporary) habitat for arid open country species such as Paddyfield Pipits, Red-wattled Lapwings and Savanna Nightjars. Raptors such as Brahminy Kite and Black-winged Kites (resident) and Black Baza (migrant, West Malaysia) often use open areas to hunt for prey.

Rivers and wetlands

These can be some of more biodiverse areas within a plantation, provided that water quality is well safeguarded. Riparian buffer zones - where natural vegetation remains or is allowed to regenerate - provide benefits not only in terms of water quality and erosion control but also for biodiversity. In addition to bird species already mentioned, riverine habitat can provide a home for forest edge bulbuls, babblers and barbets, flycatchers and even some species of hornbill, as well as several migrant species from North Asia. Wetlands themselves can be valuable refuelling sites for migratory waterbirds, such as egrets, whistling-ducks and shorebirds at certain times of year.



Forest habitats

Forest habitats found within plantations are often small forest fragments on steep sloping land. Contrary to expectation, they are often poor in diversity of birdlife, because they are too small and too isolated from larger areas of forest to sustain viable populations. However, where forest fragments within plantations are connected to larger areas of forest beyond the boundaries, they can be valuable feeding and nesting areas for many forest edge species, including leafbirds, Asian Fairy Bluebirds, some woodpecker species, minivets and others. They can also be valuable wintering areas for small birds such as migratory warblers and flycatchers. Raptors, woodpeckers, barbets and Hill Mynas will often make use of larger mature trees where these remain, even after the trunk has died.

Some ways to encourage bird diversity on oil palm plantations:

- Plant native flowering and fruit-bearing trees in river buffer areas and around settlements
- Allow unplanted areas to remain in or revert to a natural state
- Improve water quality in waterways and wetlands
- Moderate/reduce pesticide use
- Allow mature dead trees to remain standing
- Seek to reconnect forest fragments to larger forested areas through establishment of 'natural corridors'
- Control illegal hunting activities in and around the estate



Keep a look-out of these birds in your plantations! Watch the video here:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z99b50LeirA&feature=player_embedded

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Biodiversity for Busy Managers is an initiative by the Malaysian Palm Oil Council and Wild Asia to develop useful and practical resources for those on the front line of land development. The idea is to inform managers and planners about the key biodiversity issues that apply to oil palm plantation development, and provide practical know-how to mitigate negative impacts on biodiversity in plantations. For more information, visit: www.wildasia.org