

## Endangered green peafowl are finding new hope in east Cambodian dry forest

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On 20 May 2016 Shaun Hurrell wrote a post on the Birdlife website entitled "Huge protected forest jigsaw completed" mentioning the successful establishment of the protected area of Prey Siem Pang Lech Wildlife Sanctuary, just over 1,320 km<sup>2</sup>, in the deciduous forest of Western Siem Pang in northern Cambodia ([www.birdlife.org/asia/news/huge-protected-forest-jigsaw-completed](http://www.birdlife.org/asia/news/huge-protected-forest-jigsaw-completed)).

Why is this important? The new protected area is the latest addition in an extended network of protected areas, covering an area of approximately 7,000 km<sup>2</sup>, in the dry forest found in the eastern plains of Cambodia, Southern Laos and South-central Vietnam, forming what it is known as the Lower Mekong Dry Forest Ecoregion ([http://wwf.panda.org/what\\_we\\_do/where\\_we\\_work/greatermekong/discovering\\_the\\_greater\\_mekong/landscapes/dry\\_forests.cfm](http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/where_we_work/greatermekong/discovering_the_greater_mekong/landscapes/dry_forests.cfm)). This protected patch, among the largest in mainland Southeast Asia, is mostly covered by tall dry hardwood forest interspersed with open grassy savanna and riverine forest.

This is excellent news for the many threatened dry forest species found in the region (the post mentions at least five critically endangered birds). But what attracted our attention is the importance this area will play in the conservation of the endangered green peafowl (*Pavo muticus*). Overall it is fair to consider this one of the largest, if not the largest, area of continuous peafowl habitat remaining, implying great importance for the populations surviving there. The Green Peafowl has been considered one of the few Galliformes in the region that has declined to very low densities over the past decades (Brickle et al. 2008), so this is great news.

However, as reported by the original action plan for the ecoregion, compiled by World Wildlife Fund (WWF) ([http://wwf.panda.org/what\\_we\\_do/endangered\\_species/clouded\\_leopard/?uProjectID=KH0009](http://wwf.panda.org/what_we_do/endangered_species/clouded_leopard/?uProjectID=KH0009)), the area is still prone to various threats. In the far eastern part of the protected area complex, Yok Don National Park in Southcentral Vietnam, the resident green peafowl population has declined significantly over the past decade (Sukumal et al. 2015), mostly due to hunting, but there is also habitat disturbance by fire and cattle grazing. However, in areas where such disturbances were reduced over time the species appears to recover quite rapidly (Sukumal et al. 2015; Sukumal et al. in review). The hope is that such a large area could provide pockets for healthy sub-populations to function as sources for the natural re-population of other areas, where the species has been reduced or gone completely.

Interestingly, over recent years, the green peafowl has been quite well monitored in this region, with quantitative data on their status collected in Seima Protected Area by Nuttall et al. (online), Siem Pang Protected Forest by Birdlife International, Mondulkiri Protected Forest by a MSc student from the Center for Biodiversity Conservation (Royal University of Phnom Penh), and Yok Don National park by Brickle (2002) and Sukumal et al. (2015). The amount of information available for Green Peafowl here puts it in a unique position as a Galliformes species in SE Asia, providing a good basis on which to monitor the effectiveness of future conservation efforts.

But in the end, the management of such a large complex of protected areas can only be achieved, as suggested in the WWF action plan, through the close cooperation of

numerous stakeholder groups involved: government agencies, universities, national and international NGOs (Birdlife International, Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) (<http://cambodia.wcs.org/saving-wild-places/seima-forest.aspx>), WWF ([http://cambodia.panda.org/where we work/dry forests/mondulkiri protected forest/](http://cambodia.panda.org/where_we_work/dry_forests/mondulkiri_protected_forest/)) and Conservation International (CI) (<http://www.conservation.org/projects/Pages/ecotourism-benefits-people-and-nature-in-cambodias-veun-sai-forest.aspx>).

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