

# FRAUDULENCE IN INDIAN LIVE BIRD TRADE

An Identification Monograph  
For Control of Illegal Trade

Dyed Blackheaded Munia



Abrar Ahmed



**TRAFFIC**  
—INDIA—



Ministry of Environment and Forests  
Government of India

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The World Wide Fund for Nature India (WWF-India) has been working to promote harmony between humankind and nature for almost three decades. Today, it is recognized as a premier conservation NGO in the country dealing with conservation and development issues.

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**Cover picture:** Captive Blackheaded Munia (*Lonchura malacca*) dyed in three different colours. Inset Dyed Blackthroated Weaver bird.

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# FRAUDULENCE IN INDIAN LIVE BIRD TRADE

AN IDENTIFICATION MONOGRAPH  
FOR CONTROL OF ILLEGAL TRADE

Abrar Ahmed

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Ministry of Environment and Forests  
Government of India



WWF

World Wide Fund for Nature - India

**TRAFFIC**  
— INDIA —

## **Foreword**

TRAFFIC -India, the wildlife trade monitoring division of WWF-India, has been studying and documenting trade in wild fauna and flora since its inception in 1992. One major work undertaken is monitoring and documentation of the live bird trade in the country, the first report of which titled " Live Bird Trade in Northern India" was published in 1997. Since then it was felt that an identification guide for the enforcement staff, which could aid differentiation between exotic birds and indigenous birds in trade, would be a valuable tool. Fortunately, the Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, readily came forward to support such an endeavour and this publication is the outcome. WWF-India is thankful to the Ministry for its support.

It is hoped that this monograph will be useful to the various enforcement agencies in the country.

15 September, 1999  
New Delhi

**Samar Singh**  
Secretary General  
WWF-India

# **Preface**

While researching and conducting field investigations for the TRAFFIC India's publication entitled "Live Bird Trade in India", I often came across instances where either a trader was found offering a potential buyer, cleverly dyed common bird as a rare and popular pet or an enforcement official misidentifying a bird in trade.

Although there are a number of books on birds available in the market, none of them are comprehensive enough to meet the requirements of the enforcement staff. To fill the need I decided to work on a publication on common fraudulent practices in live bird trade in India.

Consequent to some seizures, specially in the state of Uttar Pradesh in North India - where exotic birds alongwith indigenous birds were also seized -the traders tried to embarrass the Government in Court. The Ministry of Environment and Forests (MOEF), Government of India, contacted TRAFFIC India to prepare an identification poster and a booklet for the benefit of the enforcement staff and public at large. This booklet is a result of that assignment.

It is hoped that this booklet will be useful in its own right and read alongwith the identification poster, published earlier by MOEF and supported by TRAFFIC India, would ensure better enforcement of law.

Abrar Ahmed

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# Introduction

## Little known facts about the bird trade

**F**or centuries birds have been trapped and kept as pets and served as food and sustenance for the rich as well as the poor. Various parts of birds have been used in traditional medicines and some of these winged creatures have been used in black magic. Well-trained birds are still used as fortune tellers in rural India and in the by-lanes of the big cities. In fact birds are used in myriad ways, leading to a flourishing trade in live birds in India and abroad.

About 250 wild-caught and 70 exotic species have been recorded in the Indian live bird trade (Ahmed 1997). However, some species of birds are more popular than others and there is a specific demand for them. There is extensive trapping of these popular birds.

Since 1990-91 there is a total ban on trade in Indian birds, though there is no restriction on the domestic sale of captive-bred exotic (domesticated) species. With the spreading awareness and stricter enforcement of wildlife laws, the availability of preferred birds in the open market has decreased.

Bird trade has also been affected by the destruction and alteration of wildlife habitats and, to some extent, due to over-trapping in earlier years. Faced with a recurrent problem of shortage of wild birds and also persecution for dealing in indigenous species, traders have evolved various strategies to dupe buyers as well as enforcement authorities.

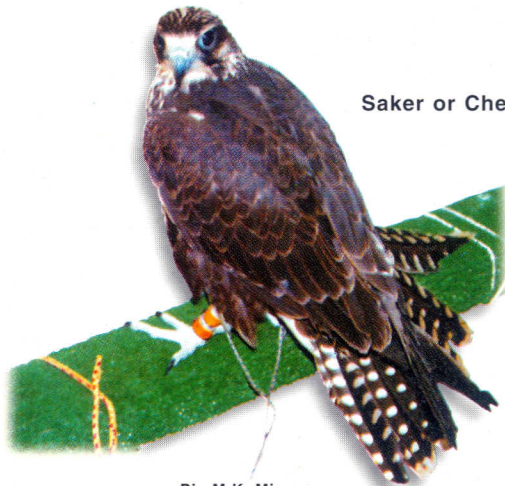
Very often the demand for a 'rare', not easily accessible species, is met by either providing a common bird, cleverly camouflaged (dyed) in the true colours of the rare counterparts or, by providing substitutes. Substitutes are also provided for preferred species, which may have legal, import or transportation restrictions. For example, the demand for Horned Owl (*Bubo* spp), used for black magic, is met by creating false 'horns' on the head of a Spotted Owlet (*Athene brama*), which is more easily available. The Hill Myna (*Gracula religiosa*) is also an extremely popular species, but it is not readily available in the domestic markets, and a



buyer is often duped into accepting Bank Mynas (*Acridotheris ginginianus*) or Common Mynas (*A. tristis*) carefully coloured to look like their hill brethren!

Protected species listed in the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 and CITES are often traded locally or exported out of India under false names or by camouflaging them with dyes. Till a few years ago, Green Munias or Avadavats (*Amandava formosa*) were exported mixed with a flock of dyed female Red Munias (*Amandava amandava*) or were declared as exotic 'Tiger Finch' (Ahmed 1998, Ahmed *et al* in press). During a survey in Eastern Uttar Pradesh, the author was offered a wild caught male Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*) with its flight feather clipped, as a captive-bred individual. However, the head injuries and the torn plumage were evidences enough of it being caught in the wild. In another survey in Bihar, a Redcrested Pochard (*Netta rufina*) was shown to the author as an exotic duck.

Described in this booklet are some of the commonly traded birds found to have been coloured or wrongly declared. An interesting example is that of common Black Kite (*Milvus migrans*) getting wrongly identified or sold as Falcons (such as Peregrine Falcon *Falco peregrinus*, Saker Falcon *F. cherrug* and Laggar Falcon *F. biamaricus*) and vice versa (Ahmed *et al* 1997).



Saker or Cherrug Falcon

Pix M.K. Misra

## Owls



Brown Fish Owl

In most parts of India the large owls *Bubo* spp. including **Brown Fish Owl** (*Ketupa zeylonensis*) are the most popular birds used for black magic and superstitions (Ali & Ripley 1983, Ahmed 1997), but they are not easily

## Owls



Brown Fish Owl

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## Owls



### IDENTIFICATION

Horned owls are quite big in size (50-60 cms) as compared to the small size of Spotted Owlets (21 cms).

Spotted Owlet

available and are quite expensive. Therefore, the trader often dyes the **Spotted Owlet** (*Athene brama*) with tea leaf water and few feathers are stuck with latex on the head of the Spotted Owlet giving it the appearance of a miniature horned owl.

Fake Horned Owl  
(Dyed Spotted Owlet)



## Parakeets

**Parakeets** : Katha (*Acacia catechu*) is used to colour the shoulders of juvenile **Roseringed Parakeets** (*Psittacula krameri*) so that they can be sold as **Alexandrine Parakeet** (*P. eupatria*) chicks, which fetch a higher price. The head of Roseringed Parakeets are coloured orange and they are sold either as exotics in Bihar and West Bengal or as **Malabar Parakeet**, *P. columboides* (New English name for Bluewinged Parakeets).

Roseringed and Alexandrine Parakeets are sometimes coloured jet black and sold as black mutations, which fetch a higher price.

### IDENTIFICATION

Fake parakeets are easy to identify. Though their colour may not come out easily, but if a feather (coloured) is plucked, the under shaft would still be white.



Dyed Roseringed Parakeet

# Parakeets

Redbreasted  
Parakeet  
(Male)

Redbreasted  
Parakeet  
(Juvenile)



The **Malabar Parakeet** and the **Redbreasted Parakeet** *P. alexandri* (also called Moustached Parakeet) are often declared as exotic birds or rare mutations of the Roseringed Parakeet.

At times buyers are duped by showing them pictures of Redbreasted Parakeets in foreign books and passing them off as exotics.

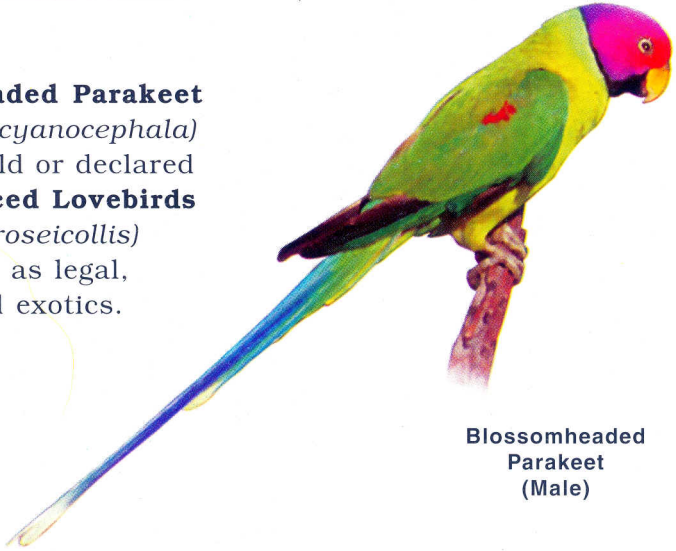


Malabar  
Parakeet  
(Male)

# Parakeets

## Blossomheaded Parakeet

(*Psittacula cyanocephala*)  
are often sold or declared  
as **Peachfaced Lovebirds**  
(*Agapornis roseicollis*)  
misdeclared as legal,  
captive bred exotics.



Blossomheaded  
Parakeet  
(Male)

## Indian Lorikeet



**Indian Lorikeet** or  
Vernal Hanging Parrot  
(*Loriculus vernalis*) is  
often sold as Abyssinian  
Lovebird (*Agapornis*  
*taranta*), a species  
uncommon in Indian  
bird markets or as a  
juvenile of other  
lovebirds such as the  
**Peachfaced** or Rosy-  
Faced **Lovebird**  
(*Agapornis roseicollis*)  
from Africa or as a  
captive-bred exotic  
species, to fetch a  
higher price.

## Peach-Faced Lovebird (Exotic)



## Munias

**Green Munia** (*Amandava formosa*) a rare bird, found only in India, was never allowed for trade by the Indian Government but has been illegally traded in many areas. Females of **Red Munia** dyed in light green and pale yellow colour are sold as Green Munia. True Green Munia were also found exported mixed with the green coloured Red

Munia females when the trade was legally allowed for Red Munia.



Green Munia

### MODUS OPERANDI

The Green Munia has a red bill and red iris and a black tail, features that it shares with the Red Munia. The dyed (female) Red Munias provided an excellent cover for smuggling of Green Munias in the (trade) name of "Tiger Finch",

when the export of Red Munia was legal. By mixing Green and Red Munias there were less chances of detection. "Tiger Finch" in local markets may fetch ten times the price of a Red Munia.

### IDENTIFICATION

The zebra stripes on the sides of the Green Munia is a major identification mark. The marking has given it the trade name - 'Tiger Finch'. The red colour on the back of the Red Munia is prominent, although sometimes the red tail feathers are plucked to make it appear like a Green Munia. However, it would still lack the zebra stripes on the sides.



Dyed Female Red Munia  
(Fake Green Munia)



# Munias

Dyed **Whitethroated Munia** or **Indian Silverbill** (*Lonchura malabarica*) in orangish-red colour (vegetable based dye)

are offered as **Red Munia** (*Amandava amandava*).

Some times Whitethroated Munia are palmed off as juvenile females of the **Zebra Finch** (*Taeniopygia guttata*) or Red Munia.



Red Munia  
(Male)



Red Munia  
(Female)

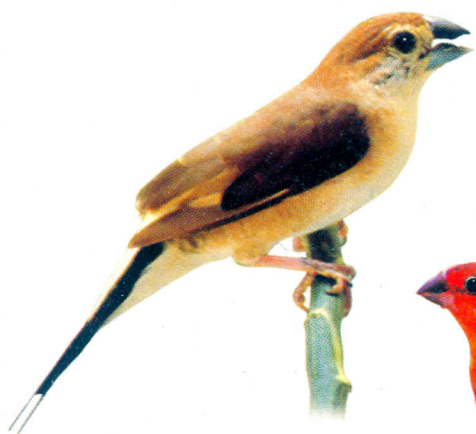


Red Munia  
(Juvenile)

# Munias

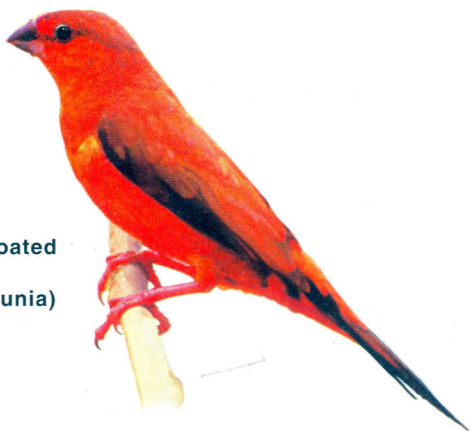
## IDENTIFICATION

Except for the Green Munia, the reddish black beak of the Red Munia is not present in other Indian Munias. It also has a small red ring in the eye. Red Munia juveniles have a black beak but the eye colour is reddish brown and they are smaller in size. The beak of juvenile Zebra Finch is pale orangish-black.



Whitethroated Munia  
or  
Indian Silverbill

Dyed Whitethroated  
Munia  
(Fake of Red Munia)



Dyed Spotted  
Munia



## MODUS OPERANDI

The majority of Munias (except the male of Red Munia in breeding plumage) are dyed in Red, Green and Yellow colours to make them look attractive and exotic to the buyer e.g. dyed **Spotted Munia** (*Lonchura punctulata*).

## Munias

**Bengalese Finch** or **Society Finch** (*Lonchura domesticus*) is a domesticated variety of Munia with various colour morphs (white, fawn etc). Wild caught **Whitebacked Munia** (*Lonchura striata*) are sometimes sold as Bengalese Finches.

Whitebacked  
Munia



Bengalese Finch  
or  
Society Finch



### MODUS OPERANDI

Since the Bengalese Finch and **Zebra Finch**, being domesticated varieties are not banned, there have been instances where juveniles of Blackheaded Munia, Spotted Munia, Red Munia and the Whitethroated Munia, caught from the wild, are sold / smuggled in the garb of the Bengalese Finch or Zebra Finch.

# Munias

## IDENTIFICATION

Bengalese Finch do not have a pure white rump and the symmetrical colouration of the Whitebacked Munia. But white patches are common on the forehead, tail and flight feathers of Bengalese Finch.



Zebra Finch  
(Juvenile)



Blackheaded  
Munia  
(Juvenile)

The chocolate colour variety of the Bengalese Finch, which is quite similar to the Whitebacked Munia, generally has a small white forehead and lacks the regular colour pattern prominent in a Whitebacked Munia.

The juvenile of the Bengalese Finch is similar in colouration to the adult bird, but is paler overall. In no way does it represent the juvenile Indian Munias, as claimed by traders.



Spotted Munia  
(Juvenile)

# Canaries



Canary

**Canaries** (*Serinus* spp) are exotic (domesticated) birds, found in many varieties in the bird markets. The lizard variety of the Canary, (closely resembling the Canary in the wild) are quite similar to the **Himalayan GreenFinch** (*Carduelis spinoides*).

## MODUS OPERANDI

In international and domestic markets, wild caught Himalayan GreenFinches or Siskin are commonly sold / declared as domesticated Canaries under the name '**Belgium Canary**', one of the most popular variety of the domestic Canary.

Himalayan  
GreenFinch  
or Siskin  
(Male)

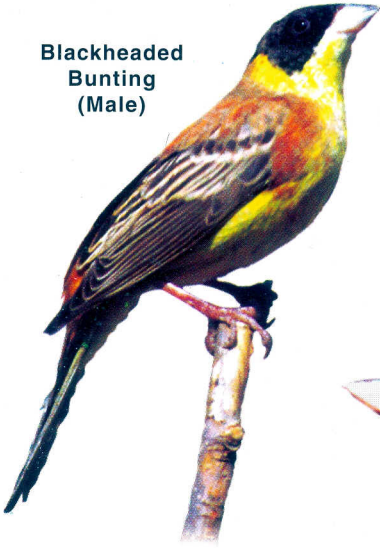


## IDENTIFICATION

The distinguishing character in domesticated Canaries is the long tail, like that of a bunting. The Himalayan Greenfinch's tail is comparatively short and forked. Domesticated Canaries are much more colourful, in single shades of yellow, white and red, while GreenFinches generally have a drab and streaked greenish-yellow plumage.

# Buntings

**Blackheaded Bunting**  
(Male)



**Blackheaded Bunting** (*Emberiza melanocephala*) and **Redheaded Bunting** (*Emberiza bruniceps*) males are sold as male and female Canaries respectively. The male of Redheaded Bunting is some times coloured orange and sold as a red variety of Canary.

**Redheaded Bunting**  
(Male)



**Dyed Redheaded Bunting**  
(Fake of Domestic Canary)



## IDENTIFICATION

The rufous colour of the crown in the dyed Redheaded Bunting remains prominent even after colouring.

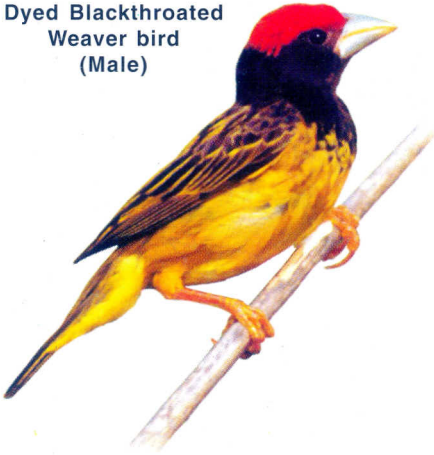
# Weaver Birds

## MODUS OPERANDI

Before the ban on live bird trade in 1991, the **Finn's baya** (*Ploceus megarhynchus*), a rare and endangered bird, was smuggled in large numbers mixed with the commonly found (often dyed) Weaver birds like **Baya Weaver** (*Ploceus philippinus*), **Blackthroated**

**Weaver** (*Ploceus manyar*) and Streaked Weaver (*P. bengalensis*). In local markets Finn's baya males in breeding plumage are also often sold as Canaries.

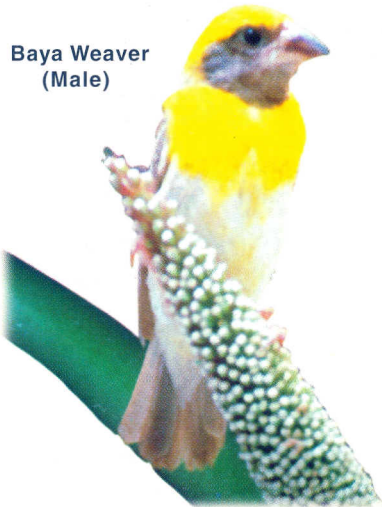
Dyed Blackthroated  
Weaver bird  
(Male)



Finn's Baya  
(Male)



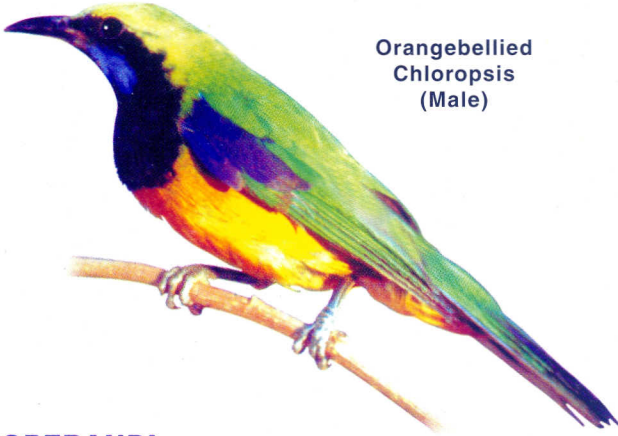
Baya Weaver  
(Male)



## IDENTIFICATION

Finn's Baya is comparatively larger than other Weaver birds. All the male Weaver birds in breeding plumage have a blackish-brown throat which is absent in the Finn's Baya.

## Softbills



Orangebellied  
Chloropsis  
(Male)

### MODUS OPERANDI

**Chloropsis** or leaf birds (*Chloropsis* spp) are often misdeclared as exotic species.

**Redwhiskered Bulbul** (a fruit eating bird) (*Pycnonotus jocosus*) is shown pecking at grain placed in a dish whenever a potential customer approaches and then sold as an exotic Finch. The **Redbilled Leothrix** (*Leiothrix lutea*), a species high in demand internationally, is also called **Pekin Robin**



Redwhiskered  
Bulbul



Redbilled Leothrix  
or  
Pekin Robin



## Softbills

Golden Oriole (Male)



White-crested Laughing Thrush



by aviculturists is sold as an exotic bird as it is also found in China. Very often softbill bird species such as **Laughing Thrushes** (*Garrulux* spp.) are also misdeclared as exotic. This is generally done by showing prospective buyers and enforcement authorities pictures of these birds in foreign pet or reference books. Similarly **Golden Orioles** (*Oriolus oriolus*) are often sold as foreign birds.

## Softbills



Green Magpie

### MODUS OPERANDI

**Green Magpie** (*Cissa chinensis*) is one of India's sought after softbills in the International bird markets. In captivity its colour changes to blue either due to inadequate diet or due to excessive sunlight (as believed by bird traders) or due to some unknown factors (Ahmed 1997). These are then sold as rare, captive-bred or wild blue mutations. They are also declared as captive bred exotics as the blue colouring is quite different from that of their wild counterparts.



### Miscellaneous Information

In the international markets **Green Magpie** are sold in the name of Hunting Chissa. The name Green Magpie is not suitable, as the bird kept in captivity does not have any green colour. The name is probably changed in the international markets because the Magpie (*Pica pica*) is otherwise considered a dowdy, common bird like the Crow. (*Corvus* spp). (Magpie has a Common Crow (*Corvus splendens*) like bird habits, and thus is not preferred as a cage-bird).

# Mynas

Hill Myna



## Hill Myna

(*Gracula religiosa*) is one of the most popular bird for keeping as a pet.

There is an extremely high demand for the Hill Myna in international and domestic markets. Most of the Indian demand is met with 'substitutes' as described below:

Lamp black and mustard oil is mixed and then used for colouring **Bank**, Common, Pied and **Jungle Mynas**(*Sturnus* spp). The feathery portion above the supercilium (eyebrow) is shaved and coloured red (Ahmed 1997). Some times a yellow balloon is cut and pasted to the naked skin to give the appearance of a Hill Myna. The tail of the Black Drongo (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) is cut, to about 2 cm. Often, the flight feathers are also clipped. The trimmed Black Drongo is then sold as 'Hill Myna' to gullible customers. **Starling** (*Sturnus vulgaris*) is also often sold as myna or as an exotic bird.



Fake Hill Myna  
(Dyed  
Bank Myna)

# Mynas

## MODUS OPERANDI

When the seller sees a customer, he starts sprinkling water on the dyed myna pretending that the bird is being given a bath. A slightly suspicious customer would think it is a genuine Hill Myna because if it had been a dyed bird than the colour would have run while it was being bathed. Sudden bathing activity also saves the seller from being asked the inconvenient question, "Why are the myna feathers so sticky?" (due to the oil based colour). Hill Mynas were also earlier exported mixed with Common, Bank and Pied Mynas (assorted).



Jungle Myna

## IDENTIFICATION

The yellow skin patch on the head, the bigger size and the glossy black colour are the typical features of a Hill Myna.



Starling

## Miscellaneous

GoldFinch



**Indian GoldFinches** (*Carduelis carduelis*) are declared and sold as exotic Eurasian GoldFinches, (a closely related species).

**House Sparrow** (*Passer domesticus*) : Female House Sparrows and Yellowthroated Sparrows (*Petronia xanthocolis*) are marked with lamp black or soot on the throat and sold as male House Sparrows as only the male House Sparrow are used for medicinal purposes.

Chicks of **Indian Peafowl** (*Pavo cristatus*) are reported to be sold / transported mixed with chicks of domestic fowl. Sometimes the developing crest is cut off to make them look like domestic fowl chicks.



Peafowl Chicks with Domestic Hen

## Miscellaneous

Wild caught **Quails** (*Coturnix* & *Turnix* spp) are sometimes declared as captive-bred **Japanese Quail** and vice versa.



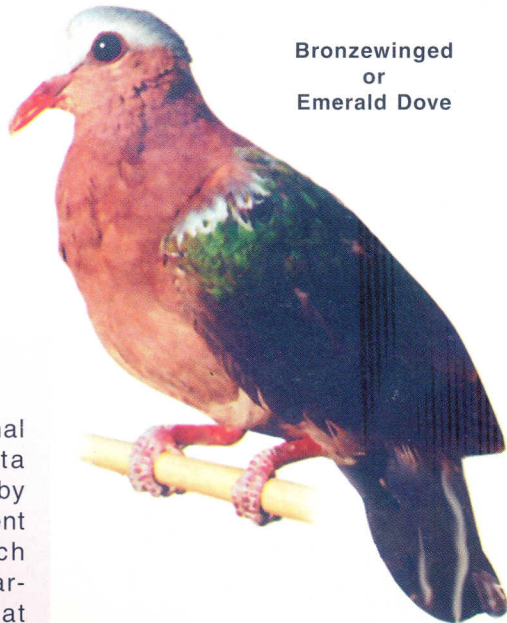
Common Bustard Quail



Japanese Quail (Female)

Demand for a **Jungle Crow** (*Corvus macrorhynchus*) for Black magic, release and medicinal use is sometimes met by colouring a House Crow (*Corvus splendens*).

Wild caught **Bronzewinged** or the **Emerald Dove** (*Chalcophaps indica*) also found in South-East Asia is sold as exotic captive-bred dove in India.



Bronzewinged  
or  
Emerald Dove

### Miscellaneous Information

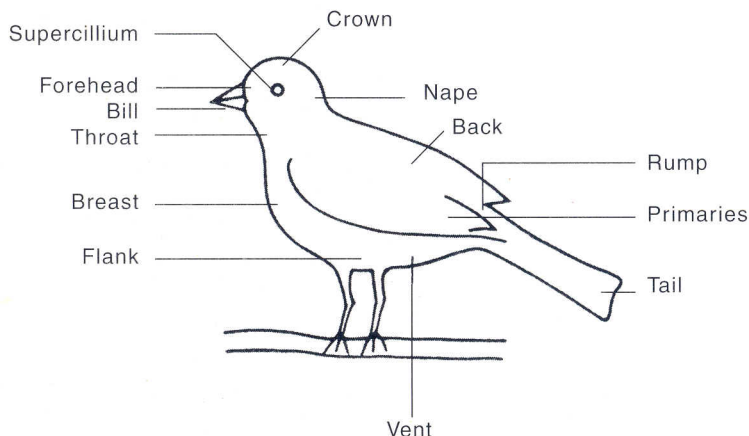
Some private professional taxidermists in Calcutta make stuffed specimens by joining parts from different birds, thus giving such specimens a new appearance and selling them at exorbitant prices to collectors as rare bird trophies.

## Conclusion

With such a rich variety of birds in this country, the bird trade in India cannot be fully stopped irrespective of the warning sounded by this booklet. The knowledge of fraudulent practices described here may, however, facilitate better enforcement of ban and ease the pressure on protected species. The large number of pictorial illustrations would help differentiate the true from the disguised look-alikes. The book could also be a handy tool for enforcement officials who need to upgrade their own knowledge about bird trade in general, and the difference between true indigenous wild species and captive-bred, (domesticated) or wild caught exotic species, in trade.

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### TOPOGRAPHY OF A BIRD

## How the Species are Traded

Species (Indigenous)	Name (Misdeclared)	Trade Name
Dyed Spotted Owllet with or without a false horn (p - 5)	Horned Owl	Horned Owl
Dyed Roseringed Parakeet (p - 6)	Exotic Parakeet	Malabar or Exotic Parakeet
Blossomheaded Parakeet (p - 8)	Exotic Parakeet	Lovebird
Indian Lorikeet (p - 8)	Lovebirds Abyssinian Lovebirds	Juvenile Peachfaced or
Dyed Red Munia Female (p - 9)	Green Munia	Tiger Finch
Dyed Whitethroated Munia (p - 11)	Exotic Finch / Red Munia	Exotic Finch
Dyed Munia (except Red Munia male in breeding plumage) (p - 11)	Exotic Finch	Exotic Finch
Whitebacked Munia (p - 12)	Bengalese Finch	Domesticated Bengalese Finch
Juvenile Munia (p - 13)	Juveniles of Zebra Finch or Bengalese Finch	
Himalayan Green Finch (p - 14)	Lizard Canary	Belgium Canary
Dyed Redheaded Bunting Male (p - 15)	Canary	Red variety of Canary
Finn's Baya (p - 16)	Canary	Yellow Canary
Softbill Birds (p - 17-19)	Exotic Birds	
Dyed Jungle, Bank, Pied & Common Mynas (p - 20, 21)	Hill Myna	Hill Myna
Starling (p - 21)	Myna	Myna



## About TRAFFIC

(TRADE RECORDS ANALYSIS OF FLORA  
AND FAUNA IN COMMERCE)

The TRAFFIC Network is the world's largest wildlife trade monitoring programme with offices covering most parts of the world. TRAFFIC is a joint programme of WWF (World Wide Fund for Nature) and IUCN (The World Conservation Union) to monitor trade in wild plants and animals. It works in close co-operation with the CITES, (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of wild fauna and flora) secretariat.

TRAFFIC-India is a programme division of World Wide Fund for Nature-India (WWF-India) and forms part of the worldwide TRAFFIC Network.

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Wild Blackheaded Munia *Lonchura malacca*  
(white and brown bellied form) feeding on paddy.