

Local People's Perspective for Milky Stork: A Case from South Sumatra, Indonesia

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Indonesia supports five species of storks. The South Sumatra Province holds the core population of four of the five Indonesian storks. One of them is Milky Stork (*Mycteria cinerea*). The Milky stork has a small, declining population owing to loss of coastal habitat, hunting and trade. These factors are predicted to cause rapid declines in the near future. It therefore qualifies as Vulnerable (Birdlife International 2001 and Birdlife International 2004). Given that most of the population occurs in Sumatra, it is the trend that largely determined the species status. In particular, could the population have declined by >50% over the last three generations (24 years, extrapolating from *Ciconia* spp.), as this would qualify the species for Endangered status.



The long term conservation prospects for the Milky Stork in South Sumatra will depend upon maintenance of forest blocks which are large enough to support viable breeding populations. However, without involvement of local people, it looks like impossible to conserve this species. For this reason, a survey to review local people perspective for this stork was conducted in South Sumatra Province on March 2008. This survey is a part of Milky Stork monitoring and population assessment in South Sumatra supported by Wildlife Conservation Society Research Fellowship Programme, Rufford Small Grants for Nature Conservation and equipment grant from Idea Wild.

Interviews with local people and forestry officials were conducted between 6-17 March 2008. Interviews were principle source of information on Milky Stork. Interviews were conducted whenever possible. A standard set of questions was asked and answers were recorded on interview form. Preliminary questions were asked to every interviewee. Not all questions were asked in every interviewee, depending on how much the interviewee appeared to know. Complete interview was only conducted with people with obvious knowledge on the species. Questions covered: distribution (current, historical), abundance (changes in number and size structure overtime), taxonomy (different color form), nesting biology, local custom and beliefs, hunting and trading (past and present).

Information on current and historical distribution was gathered from interviews with animal traders and hunters, forestry and nature conservation department records (Provincial and District), discussion with staff of forestry and nature conservation department who regular patrols fields, and information gained from local people. The village head was met whenever possible, and the survey aims were discussed.

All information from interviews with local people can confirm for further searching of population and potential breeding areas of Milky Stork in the field. Terrestrial surveys were conducted both on foot and by using boats. Trip routes were planned on roads and tracks that cross as many river and tributaries as possible.

Density of Milky Stork was assessed by survey in a mega transect line. A major transect line along the east coastal of South Sumatra Province from the coastal line Ogan Komering Ilir District (in the South) to along Banyuasin Peninsular/rivers (in the north) was regularly visited. It was more than 150 km (up to 200 km) transect line.

Additional transect lines were applied depending on condition in the field and information from local people. The transect line and sighting localities were recorded with help of GPS. The birds were generally searched with help of binoculars and monoculars.

Interviews with local people in the east coast of South Sumatra Province were conducted for exploring local knowledge about Milky Stork. There was difference languages for calling Milky Stork among local people. Local people from Pasir river to Batang river (Pasir river, Jeruju river, Lumpur river, Pedado river, Kualo Duo Belas river, Janun river, Kong river and Pulau bay) called this species as “Rerake” or “Rake putih”. Local people in Sugihan Bay called this species as “Sindang Lawe” and “Bangau” for local people in Sungsang and around Sembilang National Park (Banyuasin Peninsular, Sembilang river, Terusan Dalam and Benu river). They knew well about Milky stork and able to distinguish this species with other large waterbirds e.g. stork (e.g. Lesser Adjutant), egrets and herons. Local people can easily distinguish this species with other large waterbird from large and whitish of body and with black wing covert (compare with egret and Lesser adjutant).

Local people reported that they saw Milky Stork every time. Most of sightings are in mangrove forest among coastline or mudflat. Sometime they saw Milky Stork in the fish pond (locally called Tambak) when water level fish pond recede. Local people only reported hundreds of Milky stork, and most of them answered that population size was stable from 2, 5, 10 and 15 years ago (we assumed between 200-300).

Information about breeding areas of Milky Stork was reported by local people in Pasir river to Batang river, but not in northern part of survey areas (from Kuala Sugihan River to Terusan-Benu River). Local people from Pasir river answered “hundreds” of nest and chicks of Milky Stork, not up to thousands. There were up to 200-300 nest in the breeding areas. In Pasir river, the breeding sites were reported up to 10 km to the upper belt of river. The nests were close with paddy field area (near a transmigration areas). The Milky Stork bred in mangrove vegetation. The egg laid on the nest was approximately one meter from the ground. Other information came from Batang river people. Their report was not really different from Pasir river. They answered “hundreds” of nest and chicks of Milky Stork, not up to thousands. There were up to 200-300 nest (or up to 500) in the breeding areas. In Batang river, the breeding sites were reported from upper of Kumpai River, a small river near Kuala Sugihan. The Milky Stork were also reported breeding in mangrove vegetation and the egg laid on the nest was approximately one metre from the ground. In addition, local people also reported two additional localities of breeding sites - first near Teluk Pulau (PT SBA wood concession area) and second in Janun river.

Monitor Lizard (*Varanus salvator*) was reported by local people in Batang river, which sometimes used to eating egg and young Milky Stork. Some young Milky Storks which were collected by local people in Batang river were sometimes eaten by Crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*). Local people who collected young Milky Stork reported that they usually found some fishes in the nest of Milky Stork. The fishes sometimes they found were: Milkfish (*Chanos chanos*, locally called Bandeng), Elangote Mudskipper (*Pseudapocryptes elongatus*, locally called Janjan), Giant Mudskipper (*Periaphtholomodon schlosserii*, locally called Seluncat), Mullet (*Moolgarda sp. / Chelon sp.*, locally called Belanak). From the fishes mention above, Elangote Mudskipper was the common one.

Milky Stork was became a common caught bird by local people and they took care the bird as a cage bird. When the young bird grew up and flew, most of birds returned again to the people who took care them. Local people used to collect young bird from the nest where the bird breeds. If they caught the bird, sometime they sold the young bird or took care the bird as bird cage. The Milky Stork as not sold as fresh meat or cooked meat, but people sold the bird in live condition. The price of young bird ranged between Rp 25.000-30.000 (± \$2,5-3).

Based on information from local people, there is still hope to rediscover substantial numbers of breeding colonies of Milky Stork in Sumatra that were not recorded since last 15 years. Many nesting sites reported were located outside protected areas. As recommended by Birdlife International 2001, further survey work is required as continued monitoring of all subpopulations at key sites. In this case, information from local people will be very valuable sources to determine sites for searching potential breeding areas for Milky Stork in South Sumatra Province.