

Combating Illegal Bird Trading: The First Project for the Conservation of Alexandrine Parakeets *Psittacula eupatria* (Linnaeus, 1766) in Odisha, India

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Received: May 12, 2024; Revised: May 30, 2024; Accepted: June 2, 2024

Abstract: Illegal wildlife trade critically threatens biodiversity and ecosystem balance, with species like the Alexandrine Parakeet (*Psittacula eupatria*) being particularly at risk. This paper analyzes the global and Indian illegal bird trade, focusing on the Alexandrine Parakeet in Odisha, India. It examines the trade's drivers and ecological impacts on wild populations using a multidisciplinary approach. The study investigates the modus operandi of illegal traders, trafficking routes, and market demand.

Highlighting the conservation status of Alexandrine Parakeets, this work underscores the urgent need for robust conservation efforts. The paper outlines the first comprehensive conservation project designed specifically for this species, which included integrating community engagement, education, habitat protection, and law enforcement to safeguard habitats and curb illegal trade. Through extensive fieldwork, capacity-building programs, and social-awareness campaigns for the youth and local communities, it provides actionable insights and recommendations for policymakers, conservationists, and law enforcement. The study ultimately aims to enhance the understanding of the challenges posed by illegal wildlife trade and propose effective conservation strategies for protecting the Alexandrine Parakeet and its ecosystem, mainly through fostering awareness among the local communities.

Keywords: Illegal wildlife trade, Avian species, social awareness campaigns, law enforcement, Youth involvement,

Stakeholder engagement, Ecosystem balance, Conservation Initiatives

Introduction

Wildlife has been essential for human survival, especially in biodiversity-rich countries (Ojasti and Dallmeier, 2000). The exploitation of wild species has driven the trade in animal products (Broad, 2001). Despite strong regulatory laws, illegal wildlife trade is the third-largest global trade, following drugs and arms trafficking (Barber-Meyer, 2010). Variations in trade drivers, resource use, governance, and enforcement affect management effectiveness (Chan *et al.*, 2015). This trade impacts one-third of all bird species and many reptiles, amphibians, mammals, and fish (Rosen *et al.*, 2010). In India, the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 and CITES regulate this trade. India has 1330 bird species, with one-hundred species being globally threatened (IUCN Red List, 2019). Overexploitation affects a third of these species (BirdLife International 2008).

Odisha, in eastern India, is rich in biodiversity but is severely impacted by illegal wildlife trade, especially in songbirds. The Utkaliya tradition in Puri's Chariot festival, featuring parakeet figures, highlights the cultural significance of these birds. Pet trade is a major driver, influenced by socio-ecological factors (Auliya *et al.*, 2016). Consumers from higher socio-economic backgrounds sustain this trade (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2019). Human population growth predicts future illegal trade, and enforcement remains critical. Expanding trade networks incorporate new regions (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2019).

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Alexandrine Parakeets are popular in India for their mimicking ability and low cost compared to exotic species. Odisha hosts three parakeet species and the Vernal Hanging parrot. Parrots are considered sacred and are valued for their voice-mimicking ability. Illegal poaching and trade, driven by demand from young buyers, threaten these species. Alexandrine Parakeets, which are listed as “Near Threatened” on the IUCN Red List and protected under CITES and Indian law, face rapid decline due to habitat loss and poaching. They inhabit forests, woodlands, and urban areas (Juniper and Parr, 1998; Khera *et al.*, 2009).

Illegal trade disrupts ecosystems, causes habitat loss, and undermines conservation efforts. Community engagement and awareness are vital for conservation. Odisha’s project, supported by the World Parrot Trust & NECF, is aimed at training forest staff, curbing trade, and protecting habitats. Alexandrine Parakeets are popular cage birds, with significant trade in Asia, Europe, and the US. Their rapid population growth in Europe has raised concerns about their impact on agriculture and native species (Weiserbs, 2009; van Kleunen *et al.*, 2010; Roy *et al.*, 2015).

Study Area

The study was conducted in Orissa state (20.940 N 84.803 E), Odisha is situated in the eastern coastal belt of India within Southeast Asia. Odisha has thirty unique districts that have been divided into three distinct revenue divisions to streamline governance. By area, Mayurbhanj is the largest district, while Jagatsinghpur is the smallest. The Central, Northern, and Southern Divisions have headquarters at Cuttack (Central Division), Sambalpur (Northern Division), and Berhampur (Southern Division), respectively. The study was carried out across four circles viz., Rourkela, Angul, Sambalpur, Baripada, respectively and six divisions.

Methodology

This project started in January 2023 after receiving funding from the World Parrot Trust for the entire duration of one year. During the Project tenure, the researchers conducted several frontline forest staff-training sessions covering biodiversity conservation, habitat protection, wildlife management, and law enforcement against the illegal trading of Alexandrine Parakeets and other bird species. Hands-on workshops, simulations, and skill-building collaborative exercises have been created to enhance the attendees’ ability of handling diverse situations in the field effectively.

The researchers have organized capacity-building programs by holding workshops focused on sustainable resource management, alternative livelihoods, and conservation techniques. The capacity-building programs also entailed holding leadership-development sessions, providing tools for effective community engagement and fostering a sense of ownership among participants. To break the chain of demand and supply, youths and communities were involved in different village-level programs as well as classroom-oriented programs to address the protection associated with the alexandrine parakeet and other native birds. The researchers have also highlighted the role of birds in the ecosystem and the severity of population declination and extinction to reduce the demand. Organizing the first “World Parrot Day” in Odisha, has also been a major achievement, during which the researchers addressed over seventy students from nineteen universities and sensitized them to this issue through quiz competitions, awards, movies and field trip.

Socio-awareness campaigns in various community centers were designed and executed using multimedia presentations, interactive sessions, and informative workshops. The study has engaged local communities in discussions on the importance of bird diversity, wildlife conservation, and the impact of illegal capture and trade on avian diversity while also emphasizing the

significance of the Alexandrine Parakeet species.

Also, environmental education sessions and talks have been held in schools to raise the awareness of students and sensitize them to the status of Alexandrine Parakeets and the issue of illegal trade of the species for various purposes. These talks were focused on elaborating the high impact of the demand and supply chain in the market and the implications associated with it for the conservation of the species. Educating young minds about the detrimental effects of confining species like Alexandrine parakeets in cages at home is crucial for nurturing a sense of empathy and responsibility toward wildlife. By explaining the profound implications of keeping these birds captive, the researchers aimed to instill a deeper understanding of their natural needs and the larger conservation context. They have emphasized the disruption caused to their natural habitats, the adverse impacts on their physical and psychological health due to confinement, and the ethical considerations of restricting their freedom. Encouraging children to explore alternative ways of appreciating and supporting wildlife conservation empowers them to become advocates for these species' well-being in their natural environments. This can foster a generation with a profound respect for the importance of preserving the natural world and its inhabitants. Furthermore, eco-club activities and competitions were organized to help instill a sense of responsibility and to encourage students to stand against all forms of illegal trade in their area. This project facilitated community meetings, participatory planning exercises, and collaborative conservation initiatives involving local stakeholders and the frontline forest staff. These actions have been an integral part of the study's comprehensive strategy, contributing significantly to the researchers' overarching goal of fostering a culture of conservation and enforcement to curb the rapidly rising chain of trade in specific species viz. Alexandrine Parakeet.

Results

The Alexandrine parakeet is revered for its mimicking capability, vibrant green hue, and its perceived association with prosperity, and this increases the demand for it as pets and ornaments. This escalating demand fuels the illegal trade, posing a grave threat to the survival of parakeet populations, risking their imminent local extinction if unchecked. The parakeet trade typically starts from late November and continues until mid-March, as depicted in Figure 1. Poachers identify trees with tall canopies where parakeet nests are located. Once the eggs hatch, and the fledglings reach four to five days old, poachers climb the trees and steal the entire nests of parakeets. Subsequently, poachers nourish these fledglings with "Horse-gram Dal" to ensure their survival until they are ready for smuggling. Afterwards, illegal traders distribute the parakeets in quantities of ten, totaling 100 parakeets, to multiple buyers (ten fledglings each to ten buyers).

1. Sensitization and Capacity-building Programs for Frontline Forest Staff

The researchers conducted capacity-building and sensitization programs for the frontline forest staff and tried to gather information through semi-structured questionnaire interviews about the local ground situation within different divisions for the sake of identifying the potential hotspots of nest raiding and illegal trade centers. This helped assess the reserve forest areas accommodating the nests of parakeets and secure them against parakeet nest robbing by poachers (Table 1). Such engagement highlights the challenges encountered by frontline forest personnel in their daily responsibilities. These issues have been forwarded to the State Wildlife Headquarters for necessary steps to support and aid frontline forest staff in their duties.

2. Training of Frontline Forest Staff

The Odisha Forest department, operating through eight Forest Circles overseen by the

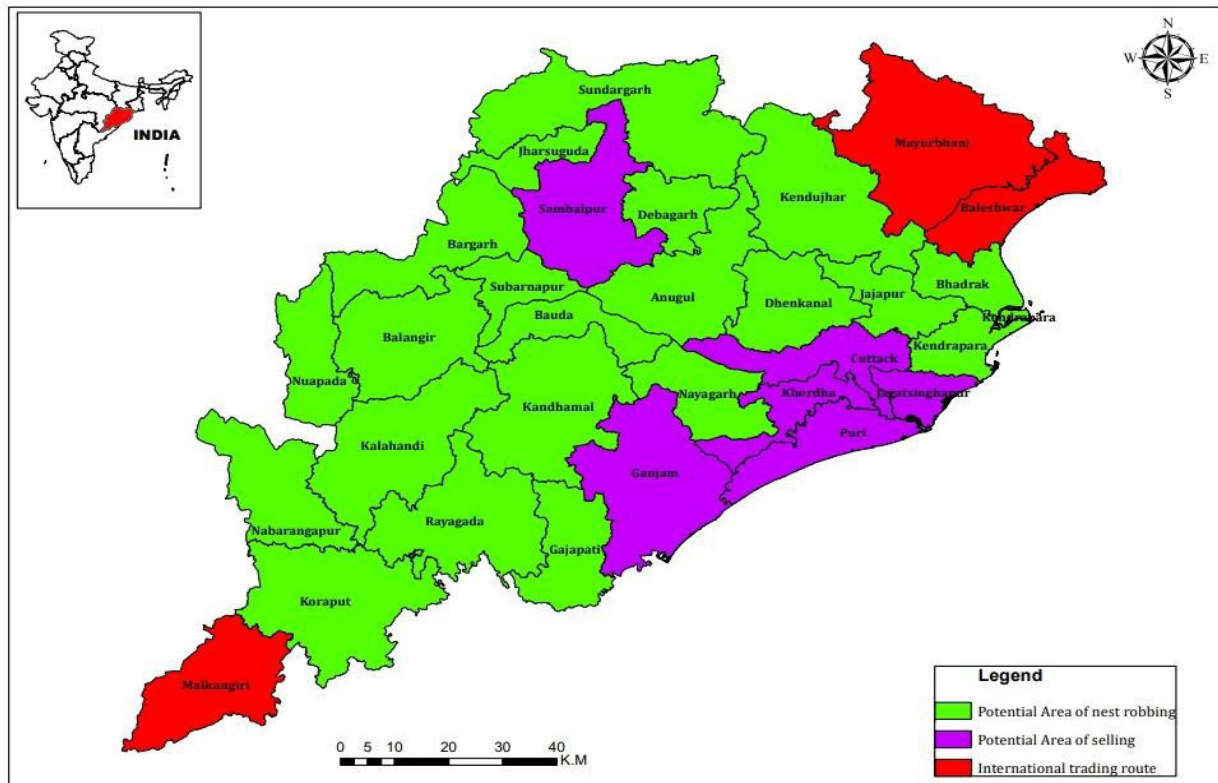


Figure 1. Trading Routes of Parakeets in Odisha

Table 1. Potential areas of Parakeet nests and Population.

Rourkela Circle	
Division Name	Locations
Bonai Wildlife Division	Sole Forest Range, Bonai Forest Division, Ulsura RF, Jarda Range, Ramhinala Section, Lunga RF, Siripada RF, Budhapahar RF, Tamara, Koira
Sundargarh Division (T)	Panchore RF, Hemgir Range, Kanika Section, Ujalpur Range, Rupabahal DPF, Gajpan Range
Keonjhar (T)	Kalapat RF, Borabanka RF, Atei RF
Rourkela	Matkujharan, Saranda, Jharkeda RF, Panposh
Angul Circle	
Division Name	Locations
Athamallik Division	Northern RF
Athagarh Division	Athagarh RF
Dhenkanal Division	Kapilas Range
Satkosia WL Division	Raiguda Range, Pampasar Range, Tikarpada, Purunakote
Angul (T) Division	Angul, Bantala
Cuttack Division	Nuapada Bazar, Jagatsinghpur, Dartary DPF
Mahanadi (WL) Division	Padamtola RF, Arakhapada RF, Mahanadi RF, Baisipalli RF
Sambalpur Circle	
Division Name	Locations
Bamra WL Division	Bandhabar RF, Resalbahal, Jarabaga, Badrama RF
Jharsuguda (T) Division	Raipur, Belpahar, Bagdihi
Hirakud WL Division	Mahultalu, Rengadahala (Jhugdabehera Section)
Sambalpur (T) Division	Dhama Range, Town range, Adar range
Bargarh Division	Gandhamardan PRF, Dechuen RF

Rairakhol (T) Division	Landimal RF, Landakote RF, Kholegarh RF, Sagmalia RF, Raheer RF
Baripada Circle	
Division Name	Locations
Similipal (South) Division	Jenabil, UBK
Similipal (North) Division	Barheipani (N), Nawana Range, Kendumundi
Rairangpur (T) Division	Bisoi Range, Bankamundi RF, Babalda, Jari RF
Baripada (T) Division	Podadiha, Balidiha, Nedam, Similipal RF
Balasore WL Division	Kuldiha Sanctuary
Keonjhar (WL) Division	Rebana RF, adampahar RF, Budhipet DPF
Karanjia Division	Karanjia range, Boring RF, Satkosia RF

Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, spans thirty districts. Targeting areas most susceptible to parakeet trafficking, the training sessions were conducted in five circles: Rourkela, Angul, Bhawanipatna, Sambalpur, and Baripada. Each session, attended by thirty frontline staff members from respective divisions (Figure 2), included illustration-based education about parakeet trade issues and the distribution of informative materials. Upon completion, participants also received certificates. Following each successful training program, acknowledgment letters were issued by the Circle RCCFs to recognize the organization of such initiatives. The RCCFs have implemented significant measures within their circular divisions to combat the illegal trade effectively.

3. Enforcement and Seizure

Effective seizures were carried out (Figure 3) (Table 2) following a field survey and information has been gathered from local sources, with the assistance of the Odisha Forest Department. Precautionary measures were meticulously observed throughout the planning and execution stages to ensure that the raids were conducted optimally. Following the seizure of caged Parakeets that are still alive, the researchers closely monitored their health by assessing various factors including the wings, diet, feeding habits, and any injuries. Based on their observed conditions, the Parakeets were gradually released in groups to enhance their chances of survival in the wild, considering

their natural habitat as high canopy birds with social behavioral patterns.

4. Provision for Bird Rescue Cages

As part of the efforts to tackle the issue of illegal bird trade, the researchers adopted the 4E Strategy, which stands for Educate, Empower, Equip, and Enforce. Through the frontline forest perception studies, the researchers have identified a significant deficiency in the basic rescue cages among the staff, which are particularly crucial for post-rescue care until they can be transferred to aviary enclosures. Presently, every interior division requires rescue cages, especially as most parakeet seizures occur during the fledgling stage. Therefore, to address the critical need for a proper care and management of the rescued birds, ten cages (Figure 4) were made available for distribution among the divisions where ongoing seizures are prevalent,

5. Parakeet rescue from agricultural by-catch

Odisha, primarily an agrarian state, relies heavily on farming for livelihood. The Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology focuses on agricultural development and innovation in the region. During the investigation, the researchers have found that parakeets were often accidentally caught in nets set up to protect corn crops from crows, a key income source for Odisha farmers (Tables 3 and 4).



Figure 2. Training of Frontline Forest Staff from a) Rourkela circle b) Angul circle c) Bhawanipatna circle d) Sambalpur circle e) Baripada circle in Odisha, India



Figure 3. Seizure and Rescue of Alexandrine Parakeets and Rose-ringed Parakeet in Odisha, India

Table 2. Parakeets raid post training programs.

Sl No.	Circle	Division	Date	Species	Numbers
1.	Rourkela	Rourkela	12.02.23	Alexandrine Parakeet	12
2.	Angul	Jagatsinghpur	04.03.23	Alexandrine Parakeet and Ring neck Parakeet	1A: 1R
3.	Angul	Cuttack	14.02.23	Ring-neck Parakeet	10
4.	Sambalpur	Bamra	27.02.23	Alexandrine Parakeet	30
5.	Baripada	Karanjia	30.03.23	Alexandrine Parakeet	23
6.	Rourkela	Rourkela	23.01.24	Alexandrine Parakeet	82
7.	Rourkela	Rourkela	01.02.24	Alexandrine Parakeet	40

**Figure 4.** Provision for Bird Rescue cages.**Table 3.** Corn Farming schedules in Odisha (Occurring throughout the year in Odisha)

Month of Plantation	Season	Flowering(In days)	Netting (In days)	Harvest(In days)	Total Days(In days)
June to July	Zaid (Monsoon)	50 to 60	60 th day onwards	Post 40	100
November to December	Rabi (Winter)	70 to 75	75 th day onwards	Post 50	125
February to March	Zaid (Summer)	40 to 45	45 th day onwards	Post 20	65

Table 4: Parakeets and other birds rescued from by-catch.

Sl. No.	Date	Species	Nos. of Rescue	Flight	Wings	Diet	Date of Relocation
1.	18.02.23	Ring Neck Parakeet F: Adult	1	OK	OK	OK	19.02.23
2.	17.03.23	Jungle Babbler Un: Adult	2	OK	OK	OK	17.03.23
3.	29.05.23	Red vented Bulbul M: Adult	1	OK	OK	OK	29.05.23
4.	17.09.23	Ring Neck Parakeet M: Adult	3	OK	OK	OK	18.09.23
5.	18.09.23	Ring Neck Parakeet F: Sub Adult	2	OK	OK	OK	07.10.23
6.	02.10.23	Ring Neck Parakeet F (2): Adult	3	OK	OK	OK	07.10.23
7.	04.10.23	Ring Neck Parakeet F (2): Adult	3	OK	OK	OK	07.10.23

These trapped parakeets frequently became prey for feral dogs or were sold to illegal traders by farmers seeking extra income. To help solve this issue, the researchers collaborated with the University and farmers, offering small compensation in exchange for each rescued parakeet. Farmers were encouraged to notify the researchers promptly about any trapped parakeets, enabling timely rescues and future monitoring. After a year, this strategy significantly reduced parakeet by-catch incidents, demonstrating the effectiveness of such collaborative approach. The table below shows the netting periods from the beginning of the season until harvest.



Figure 5. Action Plan team for the rescue and effective seizures and post-rescue monitoring of birds.

6. Building a Quick response team

A rapid response team has been created by the researchers for the rescue of parakeets, gaining the trust of farmer communities and securing permissions from universities and support from local forest divisions. To incentivize cooperation, farmers were compensated with small rewards, certificates, and T-shirts for any nets damaged during the rescue operations (Figure 5). Raising the community's awareness and enlisting the help of farmers and communities have facilitated the safe relocation of rescued birds back into the wild and promoted harmony between two coexisting species in the same landscape.

7. Motivating pet owners to Surrender

Parakeets, known for their intelligence, are often considered part of the family, especially when raised by their owners from a young age, even if obtained from illegal traders. This bond can hinder efforts to release them into the wild. Additionally, a diet provided by the owner can lead to dependency and a lack of natural instincts. However, with proper rehabilitation, some parakeets can successfully be reintroduced to the wild after convincing the owner of their potential for survival. The researchers have succeeded in raising awareness and motivating local pet owners in this aspect.

8. Institutional Sensitization Programs

During the surveys, data have been gathered

from informants, revealing that unemployed youths are involved in both the consumption and the illegal trade of parakeets. Poachers initially sell these birds at low prices, but by the time they reach buyers, the cost increases drastically. To combat this, the researchers collaborated with universities to raise awareness among students aged between eighteen and twenty-three about Wildlife Protection Acts related to parakeets. Surprisingly, many students were found to be unaware of these laws. Through year-long campaigns, 533 students from twenty colleges were educated. Through the enforcement efforts, the researchers have found that most culprits were youths utilizing social media platforms, mostly YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram Reels for illegal bird sales. To meet the demand for Alexandrine Parakeets, illegal traders, and poachers trade

Ring-necked Parakeets, using the Catechu *Senegalia catechu* extracts to dye their wings to resemble Alexandrine Parakeets. This deception sustains the trade, as it is difficult for people to distinguish between the *P.eupatria* and *P.krameri* species.

9. Organizing the “World Parrot Day”

In 2023, Odisha marked the “Year of Parakeets” with the inaugural “World Parrot Day” at the Nandankanan Zoological Park. Attended by seventy students from nineteen universities across six states in India, the event featured field observations (Figure 6), quiz competitions, and film screenings which highlighted the parakeet conservation efforts in Odisha supported by the World Parrot Trust, UK, and the Natural Encounter Conservation Fund. Praise was received from the State Forest Department and Nandankanan Zoological Park, with the deputy director issuing a letter of support for the Earth Crusaders Organization and World Parrot Trust.



Figure 6. Trail walks Organized on World Parrot Day.

11. Building a network of volunteers and Intelligence

Networking has played a crucial role in this project's success, as the researchers established connections with individuals closely associated with pet shop owners to combat smuggling. For security reasons, the informers' data will not be disclosed. The researchers collaborated with local informers and volunteers to gather evidence from social media platforms including YouTube,

10 Engagement of Local community and Community Sensitization activities

Community engagement is crucial for parakeet conservation. In this work, community involvement was ensured through raising awareness, reducing the demand in the market, and collaborating with the forest department to combat wildlife trade. The sensitization program aimed to achieve four main goals: educating the community about the legal issues of keeping parakeets as pets, highlighting the threat to ecosystems due to the declining parakeet populations, breaking the demand chain in the market, and encouraging community participation in reporting wildlife crimes. The researchers conducted these programs which involved more than 300 community members across eight high-risk districts in Odisha, focusing primarily on tribal and marginalized communities living near parakeet habitats (Figure 7).



Instagram, Facebook, and Reels, to create enforcement actions through the forest department. Additionally, the researchers have obtained sensitive information on native bird trading, including the discovery of Red-breasted Parakeets *Psittacula alexandri* (Linnaeus, 1758) a species not previously reported in Odisha. This finding suggests the presence of a population of Red-breasted Parakeets in Odisha, an area less studied by researchers but documented by birders through photography.



Figure 7. Group Photo from the Tribal Community sensitisation in Odisha.

Discussions

Addressing the illegal trade in Alexandrine parakeets demands comprehensive and concerted efforts. Strengthening law enforcement, enhancing international cooperation, and fortifying monitoring and patrolling of habitats are crucial steps. Disrupting smuggling networks and imposing stricter penalties on wildlife traffickers are imperative to curb this illicit trade. In conclusion, combating the illegal trade of Alexandrine parakeets requires a multifaceted approach that integrates law enforcement, international collaboration, habitat protection, and community engagement. Only through a concerted global effort can we hope to preserve these stunning birds and safeguard the delicate balance of their ecosystems.

Acknowledgement

The researchers are grateful to the entire team of World Parrot Trust, who continually work to help and support parrots and parakeets globally. The researchers are equally grateful to the Nature Encounters

Conservation Fund (NECF) for their support in this project. Thanks are also extended to the Principal Chief Conservator of Forest, Odisha for his moral support and to Dr. Manoj V. Nair, Chief Conservator of Forest for helping us obtain necessary permissions. The researchers are also thankful to the Regional Chief Conservator of Forest of Rourkela, Angul, Sambalpur, Bhawanipatna and the Baripada circle for helping and coordinating with the Divisional Forest Officers of respective circles to make the training programs a success.

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