BIRDS & PEOPLE

Fruit orchards, farmers and birds: protecting the Vernal Hanging Parrots *Loriculus vernalis* of Kaeng Krachan National Park, Thailand

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In November 2008 Zongpitak Youngpeung (ZY), a farmer with a fruit orchard bordering Kaeng Krachan National Park (KKNP) in western Thailand, contacted KB. Each year from mid-November to February he had a problem: almost every day, many birds would fly in from KKNP to eat the fruit of the lamud *Manilkara zapota* trees in his orchard. He had heard about KB’s forest waterhole project (Bouranasompop & DeCandido 2010) and was curious to find out if he and his family could earn some money from birders and photographers interested in seeing birds at close quarters. Otherwise, to protect his fruit crop, he would continue to trap the birds in his orchard and sell them to middlemen for re-sale in the bird markets of Bangkok, Petchaburi and elsewhere.

On investigation, KB found that many birds of different species came to eat the fruit. Most notable were groups of Vernal Hanging Parrots *Loriculus vernalis*. On a good day it was possible to see 30 or so parrots only 6–8 m away without the use of a hide. This was particularly significant as KB had in the past only seen these parrots high up in the forest canopy at KKNP, where they were impossible to photograph. Here they were at eye-level and ZY had previously used several mist-nets to surround his small orchard and catch the parrots as they flew in low to feed in the 5 m tall trees.

They immediately devised a simple plan—if ZY would set up a feeding station with some of the lamud fruit, along with papaya and water, KB would do his best to encourage people to come to watch and photograph the birds in the orchard.

Besides the Vernal Hanging Parrots, other birds seen regularly in the orchard include two species of laughingthrush—Lesser Necklaced *Garrulax monileger* and Greater Necklaced *G. pectoralis*, plus Golden-fronted Leafbird *Chloropsis aurifrons*, Crimson Sunbird *Aethopyga siparaja*, Orange-bellied *Dicaeum trigonostigma*, Scarlet-backed *D. cruentatum* and Thick-billed Flowerpeckers *D. agile*, Little Spiderhunter *Arachnothera longirostra*, and a number of bulbul species including Black-crested *Pycnonotus melanicterus*, Stripe-throated *P. finlaysoni* and Stripe-eared *P. blanfordi*. In previous
Plate 3. Female Vernal Hanging Parrot *Loriculus vernalis* at feeding station, 18 November 2010.

Plate 4. Two Greater Necklaced Laughingthrushes *Garrulax pectoralis* at feeding station, 19 November 2010.
years ZY was able to trap these birds by putting a male of the target species in a cage near the fruit. Rival males (and curious females) would then fly in and land close by. To catch flowerpeckers, he coated nearby perches around the cage with glue, whilst for leafbirds he had constructed a trap that would snap shut if the bird landed on a ‘trick’ perch.

The Vernal Hanging Parrots and other birds are attracted to the orchard because the fruit is deliciously sweet. The lamud tree is a native of Mexico and central America where it is called sapodilla. The Spanish brought the fruit to the Philippines during colonial times and from there it spread throughout tropical Asia. It is called chikoo in India and Pakistan, sawo in Indonesia, hÓng xiêm in Vietnam, lamoot in Cambodia and Laos and sapote in the Philippines. In Asia the fruit is sometimes made into a drink mixed with sweet
Plate 10. Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum cruentatum* at feeding station, 22 November 2009.


Plate 11. Lamud fruit, 18 November 2010.


Plate 10. Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum cruentatum* at feeding station, 22 November 2009.

Plate 12. Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile* at feeding station, 29 November 2010.

Plate 11. Lamud fruit, 18 November 2010.

Plate 12. Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile* at feeding station, 29 November 2010.
condensed milk and ice. Thai people hold it in higher esteem than pineapple, although not as highly as apple, orange, banana or mangosteen, and in the local markets lamud sells for 20–30 baht per kilo. The fruit is picked just before it is fully ripe and allowed to mature in dark storage. The birds visiting the feeding station are provided with fully ripe fruit—searching the trees for sweet ones is time-consuming, and unripe fruits are quite astringent.

For a season’s lamud crop, ZY might expect to earn up to 4,000 baht (about $125). He could also get about 50 baht ($1.75) per Vernal Hanging Parrot that would then be sold for up to 200 baht ($7.50) in the bird market. He was able to trap 30–50 parrots per season in his orchard. Others birds such as flowerpeckers also brought 50 baht each, while male leafbirds brought the best price (up to 200 baht each) but these were rare in his orchard.

When the feeding station conservation project began in November 2009, we had great hopes that ZY might earn more money from bird tourism than from harvesting birds, with the added benefit that he could do less work—and help protect the birds of the area. We are happy to report that after just one season (November 2009 to February 2010) the farmer earned more than 5,000 baht from Thai birders and others interested in seeing and photographing the birds. And by setting up the
feeding station, he could still harvest and sell half of his lamud crop. We are confident that the trapping of Vernal Hanging Parrots has ceased locally because there are only a few lamud orchards in the area and none of the others is as close to KKNP.

We are now hoping to attract visitors from around the world to this feeding station. It is only 100 baht/person ($3.25) to stay and photograph for as long as you wish (and eat some lamud fruit too!). All the money goes to Zongpitak as an incentive for him to keep protecting the birds in his orchard. Mornings from around 08h00 between mid-November and mid-February are the best time to visit since the light is soft and the birds feed voraciously. There is no need to sit in a hide because the birds are not shy as long as the observer remains still at a distance of 6–8 m in the shade of banana and lamud trees. For photography, a 500–600mm lens on a tripod with a full-frame sensor camera is best, though a 400–500mm lens with a crop factor camera works just as well. No flash is necessary because the light is good enough for 400 ASA exposures at f5.6 and 1/200 second shutter speed. We wear shorts and a t-shirt, and use a small amount of insect repellant on our ankles and legs to keep the few small insects away. For more information about availability and to book a front row seat at the feeding station, contact KB at his email address below, or visit the Baan Maka web site (www.BaanMaka.com). As an added bonus, in the afternoon, you can go to one of the local waterholes to watch and photograph forest birds and mammals.

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