

Bali HIGHS

The island of Bali's remote Prapat Agung peninsula is the only place in the world where you can still see the beautiful Bali starling, the region's endangered national bird, flying wild in its natural habitat

WORDS BY
MARK EVELEIGH

There are only a handful of these Bali starlings left in the wild, and West Bali National Park is the place where they can be seen

© INGO SCHULTZ/FLPA

A

herd of elegant sambar deer is grazing placidly around our campsite. A civet trots across the edge of the meadow, and in the distant trees we can see the shadowy forms of a troop of rare Balinese black monkeys. Spectacular as they are, they are just distractions to me, mere backing acts for the main event I've travelled halfway around the world to see.

I've brought my nine-year-old daughter Lucia to Bali on her first Asian safari and already West Bali National Park is surpassing expectations. The park was founded in 1941 to protect the local tigers but, by a sad twist of fate, the last Balinese tiger had probably been shot five years earlier. These days, vast tracts of jungle valleys and ridges remain uninhabited and, in many cases, unexplored. The park officially boasts three types of deer (sambar, barking and mousedeer) and two types of monkeys. Apart from great troops of macaques this is the only place in Bali where you can see ebony lutung, also known as black monkeys, or *Tachypithecus auratus*.

It had taken two days to drive across the volcanoes, from Bali's southern tourist traps to the remotest north-western coast. From the fishing jetty of Labuhan Lalang it was just a short voyage in a ramshackle fishing launch to Brumbun Bay and the Bali starling release site – the bird that we're here to find.

This is what Lucia is already calling 'the adventure of my life'. I wanted her first experience of jungle trekking to be in a relatively safe wilderness where, nevertheless, I knew she would be certain to see wildlife in the form of different types of monkeys and large deer. As she helps me tie up the jungle hammock we will share, she casts dubious glances at the jungle around us. I explain that there is no risk here but that we will tie the hammock just high ➤

© MARK EVELIGH



Clockwise from top: sambar deer on a beach in West Bali National Park; Mark and his daughter Lucia doing a spot of birdwatching; the delicate features of a sambar deer; macaques, one of two monkey species in the park; Lucia contemplating 'the adventure of my life' from her jungle hammock



Left: a sign at the Menjangan resort directs visitors to where they might view its semi-wild flock of eight birds

enough so that the big monitor lizards and the short-sighted, short-tempered wild pigs can pass unhindered below us if necessary.

We hold our breath as the first shimmer of white appears far up in the treetops. Then there's another flash of snowy plumage, and a moment later there are no fewer than six Bali starlings chattering in the branches above us. Neither of us is a dedicated twitcher, but it's hard not to feel ecstatic and privileged at the sight of an entire flock of some of the world's rarest birds. They are avian dreams in gleaming white with shocks of deep blue eyeliner around beady eyes that gaze down at us. It is this fatal curiosity that makes them such easy prey for predators and poachers alike.

"That makes six," says Made, the park ranger who is guiding us. "There should be another three....hopefully."

Brumbun Bay, on remote Prapat Agung Peninsula, is the

only place in the world where you can still see wild Bali starlings in their natural home range. They are protected by armed rangers like Made, yet 40 years after the starling was listed by CITES as an endangered species, there are still only nine wild Bali starlings here in West Bali National Park. To all intents and purposes, the wild population actually died out long ago: all the birds we are looking at have been relocated from a captive breeding programme. They began life in a heavily protected little fortress in the jungle, complete with electric fences, watch-

towers and Kalashnikov-toting guards. There's also a semi-wild flock of eight birds at a nearby resort called the Menjangan and another flock that was introduced by a successful conservation project on the island of Nusa Penida.

"The Bali starling – we call it *jalak Bali* – is the national bird of our island," Made explained. "Because they're almost extinct they can be worth up to 2,000 US dollars for a breeding pair these days." The British ornithologist Walter Rothschild, first described the birds to the world in 1912 and gave them the Latin name of *Leucopsar rothschildi*. From early on their beauty – the gleaming plumage with black trimmings, the cocky crest and especially that blue eyeliner – made them very collectible. In the 1970s, hundreds were exported to collectors in the US and Europe but few survived for long enough to breed in captivity. Starlings are very sociable birds and it is possible that, far

A bird in the bush

Efforts to save the Bali starling from extinction have had mixed success

In January 2013, guards at the Brumbun Bay ranger station told me that they were protecting a flock of around 80 wild Bali starlings. Three months later the number was officially given as just nine. The rangers I'd met had been rotated to a new station elsewhere and nobody was able to explain whether there had been a disastrous miscount or whether 70 birds had simply disappeared. I was told by a ranger that the logbook in which sightings were recorded had been sent to headquarters.

There is still a chance for the survival of the Bali starling in the wild beyond the boundaries of West Bali National Park. In 1999, the Bali Starling Conservation Project – part of Begawan Foundation, which aims to help local people conserve their natural environment – bought two breeding pairs of starlings from a collector in London. Within seven years the project had successfully

released 65 birds into what was effectively virgin territory for the starlings on Nusa Penida Island, off the southeast coast of Bali.

"The birds have spread far and wide around the island," says Tasya Karissa, the administrator of Begawan Foundation, "and there have even been sightings across the water on Nusa Lembongan. Breeding this species is not the challenge for us right now, but finding safe areas where we can release them into the wild isn't an easy task."



The project has now moved its breeding centre to a village just south of Ubud, Bali, where it's trying to establish a new wild population from its stock of 23 adults collected from aviaries in Germany and Singapore. "They adapted very quickly to their new habitat and within three months they'd started breeding," says

Karissa. "Adaptation is the key to their survival. We hope that through a lot of dedication, hard work and generous support, the Bali starling might be coming home to stay." www.begawanfoundation.org; Tel: +62 361 900 1325

Suddenly, in the branch over our heads there was a flash of white and I was dimly aware of piercing eyes, ringed in blue, gazing curiously down at us



from their tropical island territory, they simply died of broken hearts. In 1991, the Bali starling was recognised as the mascot of Bali province and an image of the bird was stamped on the face of the Indonesian 200 rupiah coin. Thus, the bird was elevated to the position of status symbol in the minds of some of Indonesia's financial elite and became even more collectible. Less than a century after Rothschild first identified them, there were officially only five Bali starlings left in the wild.

When Lucia and I woke in our hammock the next morning we lay for a while, watching the sunlight playing among the silvery leaves of the acacia. Suddenly, in the branch over our heads there was a flash of white and I was dimly aware of piercing eyes ringed in blue gazing curiously down at us. As we gazed back I wondered what the chances are that there might still be starlings fluttering in these woods when Lucia returns one day with her own children.

West Bali National Park is surely one of the most understated national parks in South East Asia. It is almost inconceivable that 190 sq km of virtually unexplored jungle could lie just a three-hour drive from the resort town of Kuta... and even more surprising that it would harbour some of the most prolific wildlife in South East Asia.

I first visited the park several years ago and was immediately astounded by the sheer abundance of wildlife. I've since returned several times to explore on foot, by four-wheel drive, by boat and even on horseback, and am

constantly struck by just how visible the wildlife is, despite the fact that there is a human presence. Even in the remotest corners of the 'island of the gods' you find temples, but it seems that generations of peaceful worshippers have left the wildlife alone, so it has no natural fear of people. Ominously, on recent expeditions into the rainforested hills at the centre of the park, I've seen the ramshackle bivouacs and vicious snares of poachers.

In 1912 adventurer Gregor Krause wrote breathlessly about the 'many tigers that still attract many hunters to Bali, the herds of wild Banteng or buffalo, the packs of ravenous dogs and wild pigs, the numerous snakes, the poisonous insects such as scorpions and centipedes...' And as late as 1942 naturalist Charles Barrett described 'numerous tigers in the highlands at the western end of Bali, a region covered in dense tropical forest and uninhabited; much of it still unexplored'.

The most voracious predators these days are probably the large monitor lizards and the cunning little civets. We saw both of these in the course of a short trek up the hillsides of Prapat Agung, through a landscape that looked more like African bushveld than Indonesian jungle. It was easy to imagine that somebody could establish a Hemingway-style bush-camp here, offering gentle walking safaris far from the realms of predators. The only real fear for Lucia was the spikey wait-awhile thorns through which I carried her, raised ➤

Clockwise from above: a fishing boat sets sail at dawn along the shoreline of West Bali National Park; with its crest down the shape of the starling more closely resembles that of its commoner cousins; monitor lizards are also found in the park; Made Wirawan, one of the adventure tour guides in the National Park



© MARKEVELEIGH, ALAMY



high on my shoulder like some Victorian princess explorer. Agile black monkeys bounded into the trees and regal sambar stags, known locally as menjangan, leapt gracefully into cover at our approach. Throughout the day we saw that same semi-tame little flock of hypnotically beautiful starlings so frequently we almost ceased to notice them.

Nevertheless, it was the starlings we had come to see and another occasion offered itself when we swapped our jungle encampment for a more luxurious stay at the Menjangan resort before our journey back to the UK.

It was less than an hour after sunrise and Putu, a bird watching guide at the resort, had been leading us past the moist, swampy forests of mangroves that line Prapat Agung Peninsula. Lucia was still bleary-eyed and tousle-haired from sleep and was clearly wondering why this walk couldn't take place after breakfast. Numerous sightings of green jungle fowl had left her unimpressed, but the huddled forms of two tiny scops owls in their roosting spot had captured her imagination with their cuddly cuteness.

We were on our way to see what Putu had told us was a population of eight semi-wild Bali starlings. "The Bali starling is almost extinct because it is so stupid!" said Putu. "They don't even make proper nests. They just use holes in trees, so it's easy for predators to get at the eggs."

He found the birds within a couple of hours, counted them carefully and realised that there were now nine. Sometime in the previous couple of weeks another hatchling had been born. Through our binoculars we could see it perched between its parents, squawking, wide-mouthed, in the way that offspring do.

At the end of our quest to find wild Bali starlings it was a small thing, but even that one extra squawking ball of feathers represented wonderful potential for some of the world's rarest birds.

Above: a Bali starling bathing in a pool of water.

Below: Lucia on her way home, aboard a fishing launch in Brumbun Bay



TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★★☆☆☆

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR: Unless you're well-equipped for camping, your best plan is to book a tour through one of the hotels close to the park. The Menjangan (www.themenjangan.com) is the only resort within the boundaries of West Bali National Park and offers bird-watching tours that include sightings of its own semi-wild flock of Bali starlings. Prices for a package that includes economy flights, transfers and seven nights bed and breakfast at the Menjangan resort start from £989 per person at the very beginning of the dry season. Rates at the hotel start at £101 for a deluxe room and £187 for a spacious and well-appointed beach villa (breakfast included).

GETTING THERE: Return flights from London to Denpasar Airport in Bali cost around £800. Flight time from UK to Bali is typically about 17 hours. Indonesia Trip Advisors (www.indonesiatripadvisors.com / tel: +62 812 8373 487) can book domestic flights from mainland Indonesia, accommodation and even arrange transport to Brumbun Bay. At the mainland jetty of Labuhan Lalang you will need to buy camping permits and boat transfers to the Bali starling release site.

VISA REQUIREMENTS FROM THE UK: You can apply in advance for a two-month visa, but most people opt for the 30-day visa that is issued on arrival for £20.

TIPS & WARNINGS: If you intend to visit the wild starlings at Teluk Brumbun under your own steam allow plenty of time. There is no regular transport to the ranger station and you can only agree a rate for camping and boat hire on the spot at Labuhan Lalang (often with a spot of hard haggling). It can be easier to arrange the trip via knowledgeable hotel staff or park guides on the mainland. There is a simple shelter on the beach, but take everything you need for camping. The rangers are typically friendly Indonesians who will almost certainly invite you to eat with them but you should be prepared to leave a tip for their hospitality.

WHEN TO GO: As with most 'safari' destinations, dry season is best time to visit. In April the dry season comes into full swing, bringing with it pleasantly cool breezes.

TOUR OPERATORS

WESTERN & ORIENTAL

Tel: 020 3588 0399

www.wandotravel.com

TROPICAL SKY

Tel: 0843 7706 555

www.tropicalsky.co.uk