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Lenya: Myanmar's Hidden Treasure

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Deep in the interior of Tanintharyi Division in southern Myanmar are the forests of Lenya and Ngawun. These forests are one of the top global priorities for conservation, rich in endangered wildlife but currently unprotected. They are truly Myanmar's hidden treasure but time to ensure their protection is running out.

The lowland forests of southern Tanintharyi Division have been identified by Myanmar and international scientists as a global conservation priority because they support many wildlife species that are threatened with extinction or are found nowhere else on Earth. Lowland forest is one of the world's most biologically diverse yet fastest disappearing forest types. Amongst the species found in Lenya is a species of bird, the *Critically Endangered* Gurney's Pitta *Pitta pitta gurneyi*.



Male Gurney's Pitta *Pitta pitta gurneyi* Photo: Kanit Khanikul/Friends of Gurney's Pitta

When a species is listed as *Critically Endangered* it means there is a very real risk of the species becoming globally extinct in the near future. The Gurney's Pitta was first discovered in the lowland forests of southern Myanmar in the 19th Century. It is also found in much smaller numbers in neighbouring Thailand. The Gurney's Pitta has become so rare is because of the almost total destruction

and conversion of lowland forests in southern Thailand and Myanmar to oil palm and rubber estates. Once the habitat of a species has gone its extinction is assured. Fortunately, Myanmar, unlike Thailand, still retains significant areas of lowland forest and Lenya and Ngawun support the largest remaining numbers of Gurney's Pitta on Earth.

“Conserving Lenya/Ngawun is not just about saving a pretty little bird species from extinction,” says Jonathan Eames, Programme Manager for BirdLife International, “The issue is far greater than that: Gurney's Pitta is an emblem for the plight facing lowland forests in Myanmar. Protecting Lenya/Ngawun as a national park will conserve many other species for which the forests of Myanmar were once famous but have now become rare because of over-hunting and forest destruction. The forests of Lenya/Ngawun also support one of the two most important remaining Tiger populations in Myanmar as well as Elephants and Asian Tapir” added Eames.

No fully representative example of the lowland forests of southern Myanmar is currently contained within the national protected areas system. Plans do exist to establish Lenya National Park but the process of formal gazettelement for inclusion in the protected areas system of Myanmar appear stalled. However, the currently proposed park boundaries contain mostly hill forest, excluding critical lowland forest habitats. In early 2004 BirdLife International and local partner the Biodiversity and Nature Conservation Association (BANCA) identified a 50,000 ha area of lowland forest at Ngawun, adjacent to but outside the proposed Lenya National Park boundaries, and jointly believe this lowland forest should be set aside for conservation within the framework of an expanded Lenya National Park.

“The choice is not between conservation and development as many mistakenly believe,” says Eames, “but conservation for development.” He adds, *“The key to sustainable economic growth in the region is rational land-use planning. Establishing Lenya National Park will contribute to regional economic development by conserving an important watershed, vital for maintaining the water supplies to neighbouring oil palm estates. The eco-tourism potential of this area is also huge and totally untapped.”*

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

- 1) BirdLife International is a global alliance of conservation organisations working in more than 100 countries worldwide who together, are the leading authority on the status of birds, their habitats and their conservation. Further information about BirdLife's work in Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar can be found at www.birdlifeindochina.org.