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## Join The Chorus!

By: **Susan Lappan**, Nadine Ruppert, Nurul Iza Adrina Mohd Rameli, Adilah Suhailin Kamaruzaman, Pang Yi Heng, Shahrul Anuar Mohd Sah, Daniel Quilter, and Thad Q. Bartlett

### Abstract

As a group of primatologists work towards protecting Malaysia's small apes, here's how MNS members and the public can help. (*Malaysian Naturalist*).

**Lappan, S.**, Ruppert, N., *et al.* (2018). Join the chorus! *Malaysian Naturalist*. 2018;71(3):31-35. Publisher version of record available at: <https://4naturelah.weebly.com/malaysian-naturalist/april-23rd-2018>

# Join The Chorus!

23/4/2018

**MALAYSIAN NATURALIST, DECEMBER 2017**

As a group of primatologists work towards protecting Malaysia's small apes, here's how MNS members and the public can help.

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**EARLY-MORNING** visitors to Malaysian forests are immersed in a cacophony of animal sounds as the forest transitions from night to day. The insistent chirps, hisses, clicks and buzzes of insects are punctuated by bird songs and mammal calls as the animals start their morning activities. For millions of years, small apes, or gibbons, in Malaysia have played a starring role in these forest symphonies.

Gibbons sing long, loud and intricate songs, with males and females usually weaving together their distinctive songs into elaborate and beautiful vocal duets that announce the pair's mated status and ownership of a territory.

These songs, which typically last 10 to 20 minutes, can sometimes be heard from more than a kilometre away, and in healthy forests with large gibbon populations, may inspire vocal responses by neighbouring groups, making the forest come alive with song.

Unfortunately, this auditory spectacle, which is accompanied by dramatic displays of acrobatic movement, is becoming increasingly rare, as forests are converted for other land uses, and hunting and habitat degradation empty forests of gibbons.

Three gibbon species are found in Peninsular Malaysia. The siamang (*Symphalangus syndactylus*), the largest of the gibbons, can be found in parts of Perak, Kelantan, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Pahang, and Terengganu; the agile or dark-handed gibbon (*Hylobates agilis*; *ungka tangan hitam* in Malay) in Perak and Kedah; and the lar or white-handed gibbon (*Hylobates lar*; *ungka tangan putih*) in most of Peninsular Malaysia, except in the narrow band where agile gibbons occur.

Because they usually travel by swinging under branches (a specialised form of locomotion called brachiation) and prefer to eat ripe fruits and flowers, gibbons are dependent on closed-canopy forest. Although gibbons sometimes can survive in human-altered landscapes, they are believed to generally fare poorly in deforested areas and heavily fragmented habitats.

In Malaysia, forest loss has dramatically reduced the the area of potential gibbon habitats, especially in the lower-elevation landscapes that probably formerly supported the largest gibbon populations. In addition, hunting for the illegal wildlife trade poses a grave danger to gibbons, even those in healthy forests. For each animal reaching the market alive to be sold as a pet, several more animals, including breeding females and infants, are lost to the wild population. Therefore, in the absence of effective conservation management, gibbons in Peninsular Malaysia are at risk of extinction. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) lists all gibbon species in Malaysia as Endangered.

As a first step toward developing an Action Plan for Malaysian gibbon conservation, we, a team of Malaysian and international primatologists, have initiated a research project with the following goals:

- To assess the conservation status of siamang, agile gibbon and white-handed gibbon populations inside and outside of protected areas in Peninsular Malaysia;
- To determine what Malaysian habitat types support the largest gibbon populations; and
- To identify critical gibbon populations for conservation management.

Concurrently, we are working to raise awareness about gibbons and their conservation, to promote the protection of important gibbon habitat in Peninsular Malaysia, and to oppose the illegal trade in Malaysian gibbons.

### Help!

Gibbons travel high in the forest canopy and often either hide or flee when they detect humans, which makes many of the standard methods for vertebrate surveys ineffective for gibbons. To estimate gibbon densities in different landscapes across the peninsula, we will establish sets of “listening posts” and record the occurrence of gibbon songs as a proxy for visual detection of gibbons.

This method is effective, but requires several days of research effort by a research team to assess even a small area, making it impossible to survey every inch of forest in Malaysia. That is where you come in! Many professional and amateur naturalists in Malaysia have intimate knowledge of the local landscapes that they frequently visit, yet much of this knowledge is not effectively employed by the scientific community. We are seeking to remedy that situation by creating a database of gibbon sightings across Peninsular Malaysia.

Reports from skilled and enthusiastic visitors to Malaysian forests can offer critical supplementary data to guide our research efforts. We have started using reports of gibbon sightings on social media to identify populations at risk, and are now seeking additional assistance from naturalists, hikers and nature enthusiasts in Malaysia, as well as anyone with an interest in protecting threatened wildlife in Malaysia. Together we can make a difference!

### Report!

Gibbons are totally protected under the 2010 Wildlife Conservation Act, but hunting still poses a serious threat, with social media sites regularly advertising gibbons for sale.

Gibbon females have a maximum of one surviving offspring every 2-4 years, and mothers are usually killed to feed the infant pet trade. Meanwhile, many infants die of injury, stress or illness before even reaching the market, so each infant offered for sale has already chalked up a catastrophic loss for the species.

With their specialised physical, dietary and social needs, most pet owners are unable to provide the necessary care for gibbons, while their adult behaviour – aggression, sharp canines and possibility of harbouring infectious diseases that may be lethal to humans – means that they do not make great pets.

Further, surrendered gibbons are not able to be released into the wild, owing to lack of survival skills as well as health and behavioural issues, while rehabilitation is costly – think years of rehab, vet care and post-release monitoring – with no guarantee of success. Therefore, the future of Malaysia’s gibbons depends on effective protection of wild gibbons and their habitats.

### What can you do?

Report illegal activity related to the hunting or trade in gibbons or other protected wildlife.

Do not buy gibbons or support the keeping of wildlife as pets. If someone you know is thinking about acquiring a pet gibbon, educate them about the damage that the illegal pet trade does to Malaysian wildlife.

Do not “like” or support social media sites that depict the keeping of gibbons or other wild primates as pets. Instead, you can choose to engage with them on the negative consequences of their hobby, or

report the sites to the Hotline.

Educate your friends, family members, and acquaintances about the damage that the illegal pet trade does to Malaysian gibbons and other wild animals.

**Wildlife Crime Hotline**

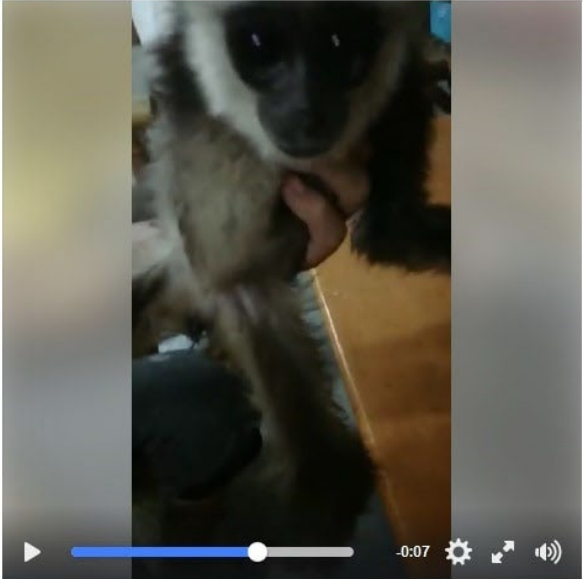
**019 356 4194**

- wildlife-based traditional medicines
- meat of wild animals
- animal parts as souvenirs
- exotic wildlife traded as pets including on social media

November 26, 2017 · 🌐

Ungka jantan jinak. Nak jual rm2500 sahaja termasuk pos. Umur dalam lingkungan 3-4 bulan. Berminat boleh inbox.

Instagram- [redacted]



-0:07

April 24, 2017 · 🌐

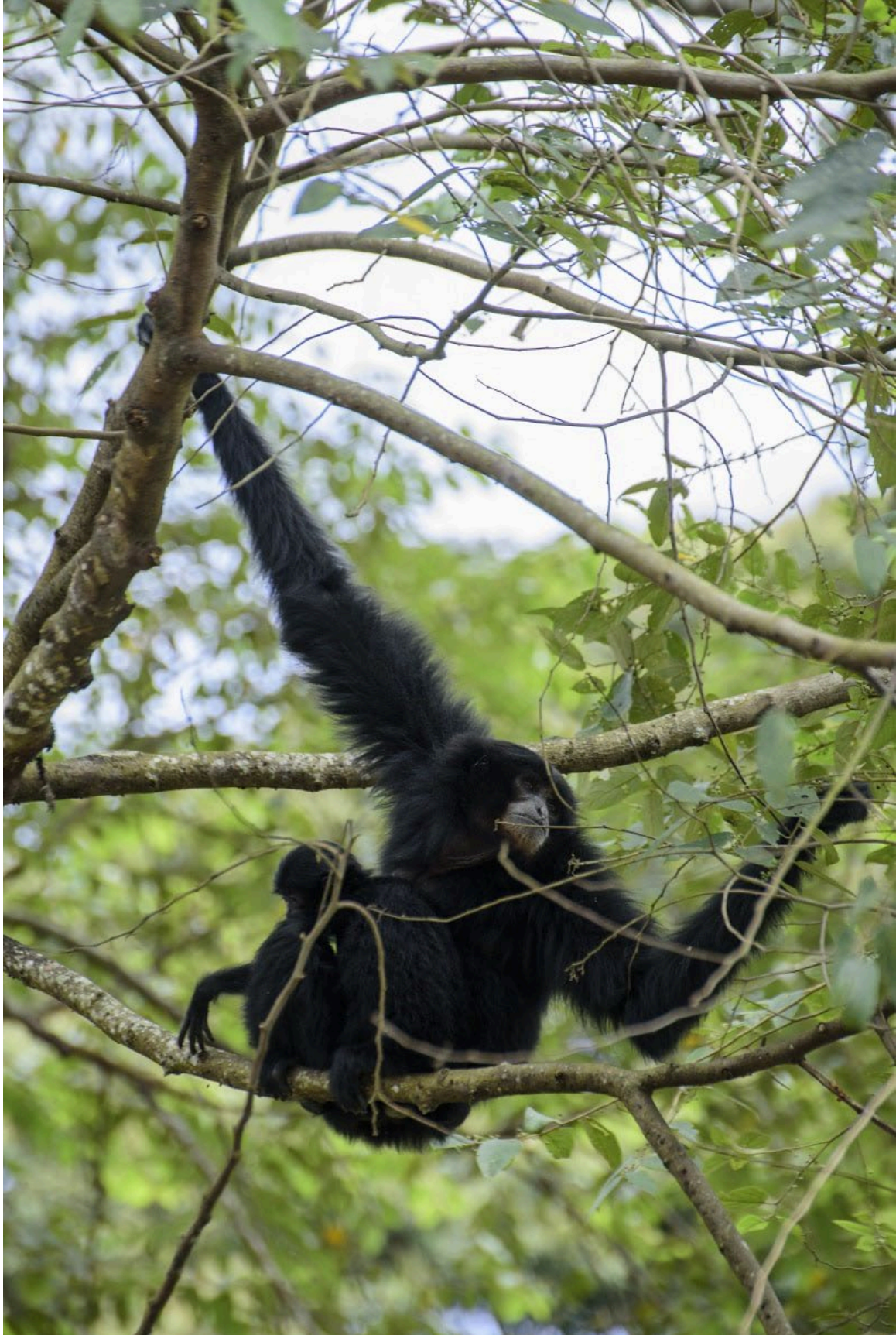
Gibbon/ungka nak jual.  
Jinakk.  
Umur 1 bulan.  
Nak jual rm2500.  
Harga termasuk pos.  
Berminat pm/wasap [redacted] 9067..





The best time of day to see or hear gibbons is in the early mornings, when they are most active and most likely to duet, so birders, fishing enthusiasts, and hikers are particularly well-positioned to observe gibbons while pursuing their hobbies. Scientists conducting research on other problems or taxa and people living or working near forested areas may encounter gibbons during their normal activities. We encourage all MNS members to make a habit of recording gibbons whenever you encounter them and sending us your reports!

Useful information would include location, date and time of sighting, species identification, group size and composition and activity. We also exhort citizen scientists to report directly to us or post your observations at [iNaturalist](#), which hides precise location data from the public, instead of posting detailed information on social media, to prevent the locations being leaked to poachers. Email: [malaysiangibbons@gmail.com](mailto:malaysiangibbons@gmail.com) [www.facebook.com/GibbonsOfMalaysia](https://www.facebook.com/GibbonsOfMalaysia)





Siamang mother and infant (left); agile gibbon (above). Images by Steven Wong; Anna Holtzer

