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THE HONG KONG BIRD WATCHING SOCIETY

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雀影集 *Photographing Birds V:*  
「食婪」的大白鷺  
*Great Egret*

葉島 Feiniu

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## *Hong Kong Bird Watching Society Committee Members*

Chairman	C.Y. Lam	Recorder	Geoff Carey
Vice-Chairman	H.F. Cheung	Chinese Bulletin	Henry Lui
Secretary	Ada Chow	English Bulletin	Mike Kilburn
Treasurer	Julian Webster	Website	Carrie Ma
WWF Liaison	Lew Young	Membership	T.P. Luk
Conservation	Ng Cho Nam	English Birdline	(24 hours)
Bird Report	Tai Sheung Lai	Chinese Birdline	(24 hours)

## Society News

### Cabinet Reshuffle

Following years of service to the committee WWF Director David Melville is standing down as WWF Liaison. During these years HKBWS and WWF have enjoyed a very close working relationship through events such as the Bird Race. David's massive store of knowledge and experience will be greatly missed. Lew Young, manager of Mai Po is stepping into this position.

Also stepping aside is Jemi Wong, the Society Secretary since 1995. This role fits into the "thankless, behind the scenes" pigeonhole and requires a great deal of time and commitment. The Society has more members and events than ever before, serving as a fine testament to Jemi's dedicated hard work on behalf of the Society. In Jemi's place we welcome Ada Wong.

Last but not least, the editor of the Chinese Bulletin, Chan Ming Ming is giving way to Henry Lui Tak Hang, again after many years' service to the Society. The fact that the Chinese Bulletin now has to be cut back in size to meet budget requirements shows how the Chinese Bulletin has grown in his care!

### Big Bird Race 1999

The financial troubles racking Hong Kong have reached their tentacles into the birding world and more importantly have affected sponsorship for this year's Big Bird Race.

This year there are two categories of teams - Corporate Sponsored Teams and Non-corporate Sponsored Teams. In past years every team has required a headline sponsor to enter the race, but the loss of potential individual sponsors from well-established teams whose sponsors have withdrawn has brought about a most pragmatic change in the rules. Please dig deep this year - every dollar will count!

### Society Email Addresses

HKBWS: [hkbws@hkbws.org.hk](mailto:hkbws@hkbws.org.hk)  
Chairman: [chairman@hkbws.org.hk](mailto:chairman@hkbws.org.hk)  
Secretary: [secretary@hkbws.org.hk](mailto:secretary@hkbws.org.hk)  
Recorder: [recorder@hkbws.org.hk](mailto:recorder@hkbws.org.hk)  
Membership: [member@hkbws.org.hk](mailto:member@hkbws.org.hk)

### Etiquette in Hides

During a weekend in February two members conducting the monthly waterfowl survey in the HKBWS hide at the Boardwalk were prevented from fully completing their counts due to the arrival of a large group of Bird Watching Society members into the hide. The hide became so crowded and the lack of experience of some members meant that considerable disturbance was caused both to the counters and to the birds close to the hide. The waterfowl survey is the most important element in collecting data on the number of birds using the Deep Bay Ramsar site. As such it is one of the key responsibilities of the Society. It is the responsibility of all members to be aware of the interests of all other users of the hides and to cause as little

disturbance to the birds as possible. New members in particular are encouraged to note the following points on hide etiquette. Group leaders are requested to explain hide etiquette before going onto the boardwalk.

1) The well-being of the birds is paramount, and any disturbance should be avoided. Therefore, hide users should try to minimise any noise, particularly when birds are close to the hide.

2) If you need to talk, please keep it quiet. Birders lucky enough to be in a hide on their own, almost always have the privilege of really close views, while the noise from full hides keeps birds further away. Keeping quiet is not only considerate - its worthwhile for purely selfish reasons too - you'll see the birds better yourself!

2) Avoid arriving at or leaving the boardwalk hides when the birds are gathered close to the hide and are often rather nervous. Check tide tables and plan to arrive well before a high tide, or when the mud is still fully submerged before the tide drops (see note on tides & tables). Few things are as irritating as seeing a superb show of waders fly out from in front of the boardwalk hides as the door slams shut behind a "just in time" arriver.

3) Put bags on the floor rather than on benches - thanks to gravity its hard for anything to fall up off the floor, but easy for things to crash onto the ground.

4) Bring "quiet food" into the hide. For example, opening a canned drink makes

much more noise than pushing the straw into a carton of juice or unscrewing a bottle cap.

5) Share the space. When you arrive and set up in the hide, be aware that other people are almost certain to come into the hide after you (especially if you take guideline 2 seriously). This point is especially important when large groups visit the hide. Likewise latecomers should be careful not to disturb those already in the hide when they arrive.

### **HKBWS/Conservancy Association Cooperation**

HKBWS has been working closely with the Conservancy Association to create an introduction to bird watching in the format of a guidebook called Bird Watching - Start from Deep Bay. This book contains photographs of 40 commonly found birds. 6,000 copies of the book have been printed, of which AFD has bought 3,500 for distribution to schools. In addition the same project team has created a poster of 12 of Hong Kong's commonest birds which is now on sale at the Mai Po Panda Shop

### **Kingfisher Tours Summer Breaks**

This summer Kingfisher Tours is offering two short group tours into China. Last year's "Book as a pair" discount to HKBWS members still applies.

"Forest Birds of South East China" to Ba Bao Shan and Chebaling runs from 1- 8 May at US\$880

"Birds of Central China" to the Crested Ibis site at Yangxian, a new Brown Eared Pheasant Site, and the Qinling mountains runs from 29 May - 5 June, at US\$1858

In addition there are a couple of longer tours for this year and next year:

"Birds of Chinese Turkestan" to the Tian Shan and Taklamakan Desert of Xinjiang, 5 - 19 June 1999 (with an extension to the Altai Shan, 19th - 26th)

And looking ahead to the millennium:

Birds of the Tibetan Plateau (Qinghai & Tibet tour), June 2000.

For further details call 2665 8506, or visit the Kingfisher website at: <http://www.kthk.com.hk>.

## Conservation News

### Continuing Disturbance from "Fishermen"

Fishermen from both the mainland and Hong Kong are now well entrenched in Deep Bay and the Police continue to show a disturbing lassitude in dealing with illegal entrants to the Ramsar site. Structures remain in the mangroves and mudskipper collectors continue to work freely on the mudflats, and there have been several reports of locally caught waterbirds being sold illegally in Yuen Long - hardly surprising when

members have reported several sightings of several kilometres of nets intended to catch birds strung out across the bay. Is it merely coincidence that the Dalmatian Pelicans (a Red Data Book species) left earlier than ever this year, or that Saunders' Gull numbers have dropped to a bare handful of birds earlier than usual? Data from the midwinter waterfowl count shows yet another drop in numbers of waterfowl recorded in the bay, a trend which is becoming increasingly worrying. Disturbance to the mudflats on a regular basis must be a significant factor.

On Saturday 20th March mudskipper collectors were again on the mud untroubled by Police. The next day a boat was rowed slowly from Yuen Long Creek towards the Shenzhen River across the front of the boardwalk hides by two men, in plain view of the Police watchtowers along the Fence. Nothing happened, with the exception that several thousand birds were disturbed, but this is clearly too small a matter for Marine Police to launch a boat and apprehend clear law breakers. The sad conclusion is that the SAR government is not willing to honour the Ramsar agreement, or even uphold the Wildlife Protection Ordinance (cap170) of the Basic Law.

It is suspected that the men in the boat were mainland "fishermen". And one must assume that the Police allow free passage in the other direction to the structures in the Hong Kong SAR portion of the Frontier Closed Area which have been built in the mangroves. In addition to disturbance of birds there is no knowing what these boat trips are being used for. A disturbing trend of escalating illegal

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activity is a result of lack of effective enforcement when the problems first emerged.

Members are urged to continue to maintain pressure to find a solution by reporting sightings of illegal fishermen and mudskipper collectors to AFD, the Commissioner of Police and the Security Bureau. If you have a mobile phone calling 999 and reporting the incident is also possible - all calls are logged by law. You can also contact the Border Police Lok Ma Chau Duty Officer at 24828200 or their Operations Room at 26792600.

However, should you see mudskipper collectors or fishing boats in the Inner Deep Bay area it should be noted that Border Police rarely act in concert with Marine Police and will not go out on the mud. They will send a squad down to the boardwalk hides and probably further disturb the birds, but will probably be powerless to do anything.

The imminent arrival of AFD's hovercraft will NOT lead to immediate active policing because training and procedures understandably must be clarified first. Even with the hovercraft in operation it will take a major change in attitude by government to actually make it an effective tool for protecting the Ramsar site. The inactivity and buck-passing over who has responsibility for removing illegal structures (apparently the responsibility of Squatter Control!) in the mangroves is a sad reminder of government apathy towards its environmental responsibilities. The tools are certainly in place to carry out this work, but nothing continues to happen.

The intention of this strongly worded article is not simply to criticise the Police and Security Bureau. It is intended to convey the growing concern of many members of the Society with the deteriorating situation in Deep Bay. Sadly, past experience (particularly the shooting incident filmed by TVB Pearl a couple of winters ago) suggests that the only way to get action is to express frustration and cause embarrassment to the relevant Government authorities. They have a clear responsibility to protect the birds and integrity of the Ramsar site, regardless of the political uncertainties about whether mainlanders are allowed free access to the Frontier Closed Area. Is the next step to raise a formal complaint to the Ramsar Commission and BirdLife International and publicise the issue more widely in the local and global press? It is hoped not: Hong Kong has had enough recent bad publicity since the Handover to last a decade. The Editor would gladly honour the right to reply from anyone in the Police or Government, or interested parties wishing to express their views on this topic.

### **Tin Shui Wai International Wetland Park**

Construction is well under way over much of the former rough grassland areas of Tin Shui Wai Reclamation. However, 64 hectares have been set aside for the Tin Shui Wai Constructed Wetland and Conservation area. This is intended to replace habitat lost under the Tin Shui Wai Reserve Zone Development. In addition to this, it was reported in issue 169 that the Hong Kong

Tourist Association is conducting a feasibility study into the construction of an International Wetland Park, with a sophisticated visitor centre with an expected capacity of 400,000 people per annum. The conservation committee of the Society has been working closely with HKTA, AFD and their consultants to ensure that the value of the site for birds and wildlife is not compromised, but can instead be maximised. It looks like being an exciting project.

Part of this scheme involves using reedbeds as a biological filter to clean storm water runoff from the Tin Shui Wai development, while other plans are in preparation to turn areas of non-native tree plantations into more biologically diverse wetlands. Hong Kong has lots of woodland, while all of its lowland wetland areas are under intense developmental pressure.

A freshwater marsh (complete with Water Buffalo!) designed specially to attract Painted Snipe has already been proposed by the consultants Binnie, Black & Veatch (engineer/environmental scientists) and Urbis (landscape architect). Further suggestions include the construction of a floating vegetation freshwater wetland which has the potential to attract birds such as Pheasant-tailed Jacana, Watercock, and Cinnamon Bittern to return as breeding species (All of these formerly bred in the Tin Shui Wai / Yuen Long Area).

In other areas of the site non-native trees will be replaced gradually with native species and small ponds will be created to attract amphibians. An additional area will be

turned into active wetland cultivation of the type that is so attractive for birds at Long Valley. This will help to preserve not only the habitat, but also a dying part of Hong Kong's cultural heritage.

It is intended to control access to much of the site, possibly by permits, and it is expected that the majority of visitors will only utilise the visitor centre and a carefully managed area specially set apart for education. Two two-storey hides will be constructed, overlooking different areas of the reserve and beyond the reserve along Yuen Long Creek and out towards Inner Deep Bay.

It is very encouraging for the Society's views to be so closely listened to on such projects.

## **Shuen Wan Marsh**

Illegal filling by villagers is threatening Shuen Wan Marsh at the foot of the Pat Sin Leng - a formerly pristine mixture of freshwater and brackish marshland, in an area which has recorded over 200 species of birds, including several endangered species, such as Oriental White Stork. Other wildlife includes Wild Pig and Leopard Cat and a species of mangrove that is rare in Hong Kong.

The illegal dumping has been encouraged by villagers from Shuen Wan. In the last four months they have gone beyond taking land alongside the road and arranged for dumping of soil from a nearby building site, filling in the marsh, which is privately owned by



developers Wheelock, and is zoned as a Conservation Area. Part of the dumping has occurred on government land and according to Mr WS Lau of the Central Enforcement and Prosecution Section of the Planning Department, one prosecution is currently in progress. Mr Lau and his team are continuing to monitor the site, but note that it is the responsibility of the landowner - Wheelock - to maintain the status of the site.

Intending to protect its site from further damage, Wheelock hired a security company to control access. However the guards were threatened and intimidated by the villagers and one was almost run down by a truck which he tried to prevent from entering the site. As a result, the security company removed its staff from the site out of fear for their safety. Other visitors to the site have been threatened by the villagers.

In an attempt to remove the soil from the marsh, the developer contacted Heng Kei which had dumped the soil and persuaded them to remove it at no charge rather than face a lawsuit for trespassing. The villagers who had encouraged the contractor to dump the soil refused to allow access to the site, barring the road with a gate and vehicles. When the developer's representatives visited the site to attempt to negotiate access, they were surrounded by villagers and threatened. The developers have now applied for a writ to compel the villagers to allow free access to their land. This was heard at the end of March.

Government is also conducting prosecutions against the villagers for illegal dumping violations.

To curry public opinion the villagers have arranged for trees and grass to be planted on the illegally dumped soil, and have erected crude signs labelling the land as a Green Zone hoping to confuse the conservation issue. However the value of the site is clearly in the wetland - planting common local trees is not an ecologically credible alternative to restoring the marsh. In addition, the villagers have laid a road from the gate they have erected across the filled land to the village of Ha Tei Ha.

Unusually, the developer is not the villain on this occasion, but intends to set aside the marsh as a reserve while building a development on Green Belt land immediately adjacent to the site. This type of development is already under way by Cheung Kong at Nam Sang Wai inside the Deep Bay Ramsar site, where Lut Chau was set aside as a reserve in partial mitigation for the project.

It seems likely that unless the government upholds Wheelock's right to access its land the marsh will be lost as the remainder is filled in piecemeal by the villagers.

The problems at this site suggest that it is perhaps time that Lands policy be reviewed, so that protection of land with conservation value should be made an element of tenancy conditions in the leasing of government land.

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*Stop press: In a Ming Pao article Government has stated that due to fears of the surrounding area flooding as the rainy summer months approach it will move directly ahead with removing the soil from the marsh and later make a decision about who should be fined to recover the cost. Congratulations are due to the officers concerned on acting swiftly to resolve the most immediate part of this issue.*

### **Long Valley**

KCRC have announced a feasibility study is under way for a spur line from Sheung Shui to Lok Ma Chau. This will cut right across Long Valley, further partitioning the site following the river retraining discussed in earlier issues. HKBWS has written to the Environmental Protection Department. This highlights the need for the HKBWS survey of Long Valley.

### **Kam Tin**

The West Rail project has produced a Habitat Creation and Management Plan for the Kam Tin Area. Work on mitigation for Painted Snipe and other birds of well vegetated wetlands will shortly be completed. The Painted Snipe radio tracking work has produced encouraging and valuable results. The areas of land set aside for conservation will not be used as direct compensation for the loss of open country farmland as they will be too close to the Railway line to attract many of the open country birds which formerly utilised the habitat at Kam Tin.

### **Tai Po Kau Fishpond**

The Planning, Environment and Lands Bureau has responded to HKBWS enquiry and established that the District Planning Officer (Sha Tin, Tai Po and North) of Planning Department is responsible for monitoring the development to ensure that it will comply with the "approval conditions". Reports of suspected deviations should be reported to Mr Lam Wing-yuen of the relevant Planning Office at 2684 1701.

The unfortunate thing is that the "approval conditions" refer to the implementation of environmental mitigation measures as identified in the "submitted environmental impact assessment". However, HKBWS has been refused a copy of the EIA. The approval conditions have thus become a secret deal between the Town Planning Board and the developer, which is clearly wrong in this age of transparency in public administration. This may be an issue which HKBWS can pursue in the longer term at policy level.

### **Black-faced Spoonbills Tracked on Migration**

*By Simba Chan*

One of the juvenile Black-faced Spoonbills ringed and fitted with a satellite tracking transmitter at Mai Po this winter (bearing ring number A18) has twice been noted on its migration up the eastern coast of China. Most recently it was recorded on 31 March from the eastern end of Chongming Island, which lies in the estuary of the Yangtze, just to the

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north of Shanghai. The same bird was also recorded at Wenzhou, in Zhejiang Province, more than 400km to the south on 23rd March.

Another Black-faced Spoonbill, ( number T16) which was trapped in Taiwan crossed the Straits of Taiwan and proceeded through Fujian and Zhejiang provinces before being located at Yancheng on 19th March [this reserve is better known as a key wintering ground for Red-crowned Cranes - ed.].

On 31 March it was again located, this time much further north at 37deg40min N 126deg02min E, which, more simply put, refers to some offshore islands very close to the border and Demilitarized Zone between North and South Korea. It is very probably on U-do of Kyonggi Province. There were confirmed breeding records of Black-faced Spoonbills from here in 1995.

Sadly it is not yet clear exactly clear how T16 arrived here from Yancheng. My guess is it flew from Shandong to Korea, possibly via Liaoning. I tend to think it did not and flew directly from the eastern tip of Shandong - near the city of Rongcheng - to Korea. But please note that this is only my guess.

It might have flown from northern Shandong to the tip of Liaodong Peninsula, then travelled along the western coast of Korea to U-do. Some Black-faced Spoonbills might travel along this route as there are records from the Changshan Islands between Shandong and Liaoning. However, if this is a regular route, there should be more sightings at Dalian (a well watched site).

So far as I know there were no records of migrating Black-faced Spoonbills observed at the Yellow River Delta (further west in Shandong) nor Beidaihe, Hebei. It is unlikely it travelled around the Gulf of Bohai.

## **Chebaling National Nature Reserve Under Threat**

*By Mike Leven*

*This article first appeared in Porcupine! No.18 (December 1998)*

The reserve management of Chebaling National Nature Reserve in north Guangdong Province have been promoting ecotourism. Sadly, a visit during November 1998 suggested that the Chinese face of Ecotourism is not the environmentally friendly approach to sustainable management that might be hoped for.

Around the reserve headquarters an area of farmland with trees alongside the river has been cleared for horse riding and horse stables and a house or perhaps a restaurant were under construction. A weir was being placed across the river in order to produce an area for canoeing and a concrete pagoda was under construction on the river bank. A further promised attraction was camping, though it was not clear what form this was to take. All these developments appeared to be down to the initiative of a new reserve management team primarily interested in bringing more money into the reserve.

Whilst all these changes were rather distasteful to one who remembered when the

horse riding area had wild Common Pheasants feeding in the early morning, they might be seen as a necessary trade-off in ensuring adequate resources for the rest of the reserve. Sadly, however it is apparent that nature conservation is very low on the list of management priorities.

Most damaging is the construction of a hydro-electric scheme in the heart of the reserve which will result in the permanent diversion of around 3km of the tributary river to the south of Sin Yau Ting Village. This has led to the construction of a new access road and the destruction of forest along one side of the valley, as well as the partial blocking of the tributary by debris (though they will disappear in the long term in any case). The destroyed section of forest was one of the areas in the reserve where woodpeckers were most frequently seen, suggesting that it contained some of the older trees in the Reserve. Whilst this forest might partially recover, the diversion of the river will result in the permanent loss of one or two Blyth's Kingfisher territories. Together with the likely loss of a further territory around the headquarters, approximately 25-40% of the river formerly used by Blyth's Kingfishers will now be unsuitable.

Evidence of lack of interest in nature conservation was abundantly evident elsewhere: the human pressure on the reserve had increased considerably compared to that reported by Ades *et al* in Porcupine! 15 and there as much evidence of the collection of forest products; with at least 50 people collecting in the supposedly restricted-access

'kernel' area alone. A White's Thrush was found in a snare that had probably been set for pheasants.

## **Mai Po/Deep Bay Update**

*by Lew Young*

### **FCA Permits**

Each year around February/March, the WWF office at Mai Po will automatically renew the FCA permits for all FCA permit holders. These are now ready and can be collected from the Mai Po Panda Shop. However, as everyone who uses the facilities inside Mai Po, e.g. floating boardwalk, hides etc. needs to be a member of WWF HK, please bring along your WWF HK membership card as proof of your membership. For those whose membership has expired, they can join up again at the Panda Shop.

In addition, please bring along \$100 as this is the charge for the FCA Permit and the money will go towards the maintenance of the HKBWS's floating hide. If you prefer, you can also collect your permit from the WWF HK office in Central, but please first telephone Silvia Yeung at Mai Po (Tel: 2471-6306, 2471-9722), so that we can arrange for your permit to be delivered to Central.

If you are thinking about applying for your first FCA Permit, these permits take about four weeks to process. So after you have faxed all your papers to Silvia Yeung, please telephone her again after four weeks to check if your permit is ready.

### **Illegal Fishermen in Deep Bay**

AFD will receive the delivery of their 4-man hovercraft for patrolling the mudflats against illegal fishermen, bird nets etc., and will be housed by the helicopter pad at the southern end of Mai Po. AFD, as far as possible, have tried to select a hovercraft that will cause the minimum amount of disturbance (e.g. in terms of noise) to the birds on the mudflat.

However, there will probably be some effect and AFD have asked that HKBWS members try to understand that this will be less than the disturbance from the illegal fishermen on the mudflat.

For further information, members can contact AFD by e-mail: afdcon@hkstar.com, fax 2314-2802 or tel 2733-2368.

### **Bird Books for Sale in the Mai Po Panda Shop**

The following publications are for sale at the Mai Po Panda Shop. Please contact the Panda Shop Assistant on 2471-8272 for more information.

#### ***HKBWS Annual Reports:***

<i>Year</i>	<i>Price</i>
70-71, 72, 73, 74, 79	\$ 5 / report
80, 81-82	\$ 15
83	\$ 35
92	\$ 90
93	\$120
95, 96	\$150

### ***Other Volumes***

- Ali & Ripley. \$1,035  
***Compact Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan***
- Chalmers. 1986. \$40  
***Annotated Checklist of the Birds of Hong Kong***
- Diskin. 1997. \$160  
***Birding Hong Kong - a site guide***
- Holmes & Nash. 1990. \$115  
***Birds of Sumatra & Kalimantan***
- MacKinnon. 1988. \$145  
***Birds of Java & Bali***
- Roberts. 1991. \$750/vol  
***Birds of Pakistan Vol. I and II***
- Strange. 1998. \$199  
***Birds of South-east Asia***
- Viney, Phillipps & Lam. 1994. \$164  
***Birds of Hong Kong and South China***
- Woodward & Carey. 1996. \$140  
***Where to watch birds and other wildlife in Hong Kong and Guangdong***
- Zhang. 1997. \$250  
***Birds of Yunnan***

**Photographing Birds V:  
Great Egret**

*by Feiniu*

As this Great Egret takes a large fish, the Little Egret can only stand aside, dejectedly looking on. However the Great Egret is now faced with a challenge - how to swallow the big fish it is now holding in its bill. Eventually it is able to find a solution and the fish is swallowed.

To capture action, especially a progression of events, you may need to shoot several frames to tell the whole story. For rapidly-occurring events an automatic winder or motor drive may be used. However still photography usually requires the photographer to have the ability to select, compose and conceptualise what he sees and shoots. This means that an autowinder or motor drive is a wasted tool unless the photographer has the ability to make clear decisions about shot making - a good photographer uses his brain to create good pictures, not his eyes and equipment. These "tools" then act together to realise the concept the photographer has developed in his mind.

If you are set on capturing birds in action, it may be that using a video camera is more suitable. The newest high-end digital video cameras come equipped with a powerful set of features and capabilities. This includes the ability to record both moving footage, and still pictures of a colour quality and

resolution to be acceptable for general purposes. The differences between using traditional 35mm SLR cameras and digital videos for taking stills will be discussed in the next issue.

**Take a Closer Look  
Eastern Grass Owl, Barn Owl, and  
Short-eared Owl**

*by Cheung Ho Fai and YY Lee*

One very distinctive feature of owls is the odd-looking facial disc. In Hong Kong, no other Owl has a more distinct facial disc that of the Eastern Grass Owl and Barn Owl. Eastern Grass Owl has occurred naturally and remains a much sought-after rarity, whereas Barn Owl has never been recorded in the wild state.

To separate the two, the principal feature is the colour of the back. The back of Eastern Grass Owl is mainly dark brown, whereas the back of Barn Owl is mainly buffy with some dirty grey and orange patches. Overall, the Barn Owl's back appears much paler. If the face can be seen clearly, a dirty orange-buff facial disc points to Eastern Grass Owl while a totally white facial disc points to Barn Owl. In Britain, its white appearance and its habit of roosting in abandoned buildings has given rise to many legends of ghosts.

On the upperwing, Eastern Grass Owl is better marked, with clear brown bars across the primaries and secondaries. The upperwing of the Barn Owl also has similar bars but those are thinner and not so conspicuous in flight.



The underwings of both species are primarily white. Both species have small dark spots on the underwing coverts but Eastern Grass Owl has brown wingtips.



Short-eared Owl is also superficially similar to Eastern Grass Owl, but has a much streakier wings, back and head. It has almost the same upperparts and underparts. If a good view of the face can be obtained, it is simple to separate the two by noting the piercing yellow-eyed stare of Short-Eared Owl - Grass Owl and Barn Owl have

completely dark eyes. If the underwing is seen well, a strong possibility on this day-flying, but very rare, owl, (it is regularly recorded at Beidaihe and at Poyang Lake in China), then a clear dark patch on the elbow of both the upper and lower wing points to Short-eared Owl. The ears are usually invisible in the field.

### **Recent Reports: December 1998 - February 1999**

*by Richard Lewthwaite*

Please note that these are unchecked reports and not accepted records. Members are strongly encouraged to submit records of all species on the Excel spreadsheet, or rarity card, which can be downloaded from the Society website. If you have no access to the website, please submit hard copy reports to the Recorder at the HKBWS postal address.

#### ***December 1998***

In a generally good month when thrushes were widespread in small numbers, highlights were the Ferruginous Ducks (only the 2nd record for Hong Kong) at Mai Po and high-quality passerines at Ng Tung Chai. There was also evidence of an irruption of Chestnut Bulbuls.

On 1st, a Crested Kingfisher was found at Lai Chi Wo. The circuit from Wu Kau Tang to Lai Chi Wo and back also produced over a dozen encounters with parties of Chestnut Bulbuls, some in good quality woodland in the Kop Tong area and others, surprisingly, in very narrow strips of woodland lining

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streambeds that descend grass- and scrub-covered slopes. There were also reports of this species being widespread in the Yung Shue O - Lai Chi Chung area.

A male Chestnut-flanked White-eye, the first of the winter, was at Tai Po Kau on 4th. There were subsequently two other reports of this species - at KGV, Kowloon on 21st and in Tai Po Kau on 21st.

The weekend of 5th-6th was excellent - on 5th, two Ferruginous Ducks were identified on Pond 20 at Mai Po, a Water Rail was at Long Valley and 20 Striated Yuhinas were at the Kowloon Hills Catchwater, while visits to Ng Tung Chai produced a female Fujian Niltava and no less than three Japanese Robins on 5th and two Siberian Thrushes and 20 Striated Yuhinas on 6th.

On 12th, a male Fujian Niltava was found at Ng Tung Chai, there were two Water Rails, a Ruddy Crake, three Woodcocks and a Dusky Thrush at Long Valley, while the number of Ferruginous Ducks reported at Mai Po increased to four.

The Ferruginous Ducks were reported until February, mostly on the four well-vegetated freshwater ponds collectively known as Pond 20. Excavated during the previous winter and then allowed to fill with summer rainwater, they attracted large numbers of waterbirds throughout the winter, especially in late afternoon when dabbling ducks would fly in from the bay to wash. Among the rarer duck found on these ponds in December were a Baikal

Teal (male on 13th, female on 14th) and a Baer's Pochard (eclipse male on 22nd).

On 13th, a Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher was at Ng Tung Chai, now a regular site over the last few winters, and there were 2000 Silky Starlings at Tsim Bei Tsui, while a Himalayan Swiftlet was reported at Mai Po on 14th.

Highlights during the period of the monthly waterbird count, which was held a little later in the month than usual, were two Red-breasted Mergansers at Starling Inlet on 15th, three Dalmatian Pelicans (the first of the winter), two Greater Scaups and 786 Tufted Ducks (a new high) on 20th and 152 Black-faced Spoonbills (a new high and representing 20-25% of the known world population) in the Inner Deep Bay area on 22nd.

On 27th, a female Bull-headed Shrike, perhaps the bird of the previous winter returning, was found in the orchard at Tai Po Kau and on 30th a Dusky Thrush was at Mai Po.

### *January 1999*

Though none may make it to Category A of the Hong Kong list, five potential first records were claimed during the month of January. These were a White-browed Shortwing from Tai Po Kau on 2nd, a Mountain Bulbul was first recorded at Ng Tung Chai on 9th, a Eurasian Collared Dove found at Tsim Bei Tsui on 16th, an Ultramarine Flycatcher at Kadoorie Farm & Botanical Garden from 18th and a Small Niltava at Ho Chung on 23rd.



On 2nd, the Water Rail and Ruddy Crake were again showing at Long Valley, while Chestnut Bulbuls reached Hong Kong Island and were noted at Aberdeen Country Park and Harlech Road.

On 9th, a Slaty-backed Forktail and a Sulphur-breasted Warbler were at Ng Tung Chai and a Dusky Thrush at Happy Valley. The next day an Asian Barred Owllet was at Mai Po, whilst a Verditer Flycatcher was at Fo Tan during 11th-14th and a Brown Shrike at Penfold Park on the latter date.

In an interesting mid-month period, there was a Golden-spectacled Warbler at Ho Chung, a male and a female Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush at Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Garden from 16th and two Crested Kingfishers at Lai Chi Wo on the latter date. The following day saw eight Grey-headed Lapwings, the highest count reported during the winter, and two Dusky Thrushes at Kam Tin.

Thrushes were fairly widespread at this time, especially Pale Thrushes, twelve at Mui Wo on 15th being the highest of the winter. On the same day, a Slaty-backed Forktail was again seen at Tai Po Kau.

The over-wintering Bull-headed Shrike was rather elusive, but was reported in the orchard here until the end of the month.

On 23rd, there were 21 Dalmatian Pelicans in Deep Bay, though none were juveniles. Finally, a Chestnut-crowned Warbler and Golden-spectacled Warbler were found in Tai Po Kau on 29th.

## *February*

As a result of the English-language Birdline service being suspended for part of the month due to office renovations, fewer reports than usual were received.

On 2nd, a Chestnut-flanked White-eye was at Tai Po Kau. On 9th, a Chestnut-crowned Warbler and Golden-spectacled Warbler were again seen there.

Up to three Baer's Pochards were in Deep Bay during 20th-22nd, a Long-billed Dowitcher was on the Mai Po scrape on 21st and there were 1140 Tufted Duck, a new high, at Tsim Bei Tsui on the same day.

On 27th, there was a Slaty-backed Forktail and three Mountain Bulbuls at Ng Tung Chai, and a Ruddy Crake, Water Rail and mystery owl at Long Valley, which when seen again the next day proved to be a Barn Owl. This is a sedentary species. Its closest known population to Hong Kong is fully 600 km away.

## Features

### Cover Story: Unlimited Free Meal

#### *Bad Egg #1*

From end-1998 to early-1999, the cormorants, egrets and herons loitered at the seaward end of Mai Po gei wai #4 at 10:00 a.m. every Monday, Wednesday and Friday... Then people would pour the fresh fishes into the gei wai and let the birds have their "free meal".

Why? you may ask. Because the birds, especially the cormorants, have a bad

reputation for feeding in private fish ponds, eating some of the pond-owner's commercially valuable fish. The pond owners have complained frequently. In order to provide some compensation for the pond owners, AFD introduced a policy of buying the unwanted and commercially valueless Tilapia from the pond owners and releasing them into gei wai #4 at Mai Po Marshes Nature Reserve. It was hoped the cormorants would leave the fishponds and feed instead on the much greater concentrations of fish in the gei wai. In addition to the clear benefit of easier feeding for the herons and cormorants, the other major beneficiary was the well- positioned photographer with the freedom to come to Mai Po during the week!



I had hidden in a hide to take the photographs of the feeding birds and found that you could get really close to the birds however bad your hide was. This was because there were huge amounts of food that made the birds willing to tolerate people in close proximity.

On some days the fish released were simply too large, and the birds couldn't eat them. But on days when the fishes were smaller, the situation was really amazing; large amount of egrets and herons showed off their wonderful "flying catch" abilities.

How great a benefit have I had from watching this feeding frenzy? Having taken great numbers of "close-up" and "standard" photos of Great Egret, Intermediate Egret, Little Egret, Chinese Pond Heron and Grey Heron, I am no longer interested in pressing the shutter when I see these species again. This saves me the film and developing fees!!

## Birth and Death under the Lens

### by *Bad Egg #1*

In usual birding times, it's not common to see dead birds. However, I have visited a place full of dead bodies for photographing.

Last summer I was lucky enough to have a chance to help a research student, Captain Wong in conducting field sampling in the A Chau Egretty in Starling Inlet. We met at Fanling KCR station and took a mini-bus to the coast opposite A Chau. Captain Wong had already contacted a boatman to take us across to A Chau. I was wearing

some old clothes and got ready to be very dirty.



The sampling itself was a very entertaining process. When the chicks saw someone approaching, they would take fright and promptly regurgitate their last meal in alarm. Our task was to collect their regurgitated stomach contents! Once at the edge of a nest we could reach, we needed to hit the chicks gently to force them vomit! In order to minimize the disturbance to the colony, who of course were alarmed by human intruders, we needed to finish the task within one hour.



When I stepped onto A Chau, I found that the island was very smelly. I thought that this was because of the large amount of egrets and herons that lived there, with their

guano covering the island. Day after day, the island seemed to become increasingly smelly.

There were many nests on the island. Some of them were empty, suggesting that the chicks had probably fledged and left. However, there were many nests which still held chicks. I thought they were probably Night Herons. Seeing the newborn chicks, not something you get the chance to see on an ordinary day's birding was a wonderful experience.



However, there were also many dead bodies of birds on the ground and the bodies attracted many flies. The contrast of birth and death was everywhere you looked on the island! I of course used my camera to record such shocking scenes.

I also needed to collect the regurgitated stomach contents. These combined with the roughness and dirt covering almost every surface of the island made it very troublesome for me to take photos.

It was not easy to take good photos of the chicks. The chicks were mostly under the



shadow of the canopy. Even when there was a sunny day, the chicks above eye level would be backlit, while those below eye level would be patchily lit. Although using flashlight could solve the problem, it would also make the pictures stiff and unnatural. Using high speed film would have lowered the quality of the final picture, and using a tripod in the egretty was simply not practical -seriously annoying!!

However, it was a really valuable opportunity to observe the birth and death of birds. I could also get close to wildlife and take photos without the need for a telephoto lens.



## Tides and Tables

The tides at Mai Po are notoriously fickle, and trying to predict them accurately is almost impossible due to the variable factors which can affect them. These include the stage of the moon, the direction of winds in Deep Bay, air pressure, the outflow from the Pearl River Delta, whether there has been recent heavy rainfall, and the level of silt deposited in Deep Bay.

For most birders the most important thing to know is if and when the mud in front of the boardwalk hides is going to be covered as the tide rises, or when it will emerge from the water as the tide recedes. This adds another variable - how fast or slow the tide is rising or falling. Even then the birds may show best on only one side of the high tide, or not at all if a hunting Peregrine is patrolling the area - but lets stick to how the water is likely to behave at the moment.

The primary guide to tide times in Hong Kong is the Tide Tables for Hong Kong, prepared by the Hong Kong Observatory, and available for \$10 from the Government Publications Office next to the Ground Floor Entrance of Pacific Place. Hong Kong normally experiences two high tides and two low tides per day. The Observatory also provides more accurate hour-by-hour information for each day on its website at [www.info.gov.hk/hko/astron/astron.htm](http://www.info.gov.hk/hko/astron/astron.htm).

Current wisdom amongst the most regular users of the boardwalk hides is that the mud is first fully covered by the tide when it reaches the 2.0 metre mark. This mark has

risen over the last few years - in 1993 a 1.8m tide was considered high enough to cover the mud. Now, tides lower than 2.0m are unlikely to bring birds very close to the hides.

The gradient of the mudflats is extremely shallow, so a change of just a few centimetres can suddenly cover or expose extensive areas of mud, with similar effects on the number of birds which can be seen well.

The most productive tides are those that rise and fall slowly. These tides restrict the available feeding area in front of the hides for the longest time, keeping waders most closely in view.

On rising tides the birds congregate closer and closer to the hides as the water level rises and covers the mud out in the bay. As the water becomes too deep for the birds to stand without wetting their bellies, they finally fly onto roost sites around the bay (hopefully inside the reserve or on an easily accessible fishpond at Tsim Bei Tsui or Lin Barn Tsuen).

On a falling tide the opposite occurs, with birds gradually moving away from the hide as more and more of the mudflats are uncovered and the birds select their favourite feeding areas.

On particularly high tides (called spring tides) waders become eager to return to feed on the mud flats and long before the mud is visible again, flocks of sometimes hundreds of birds will fly in front of the hide, calling and turning in tight formation - a truly dramatic sight!

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The last waders to leave and the first to return are usually the longer-legged Godwits, Curlews, Avocets and tringa sandpipers, although the Avocets are good swimmers and often remain in front of the hide throughout the high tide.

In past years the falling tide has been much more productive for large gulls, which loiter offshore as the tide comes up, but fly in to preen, giving good close range views of their bewildering array of plumages. As the tide drops a little further and more and more mud is uncovered, the "small" - stints, and shorter-legged waders appear from their high-water roost and begin feeding.

The remaining variables can be split into water, wind and pressure influences. The most important of these, and the hardest to allow for, is the wind. Generally, northerly winds push water towards Mai Po driving the tide more quickly over the mudflats, keeping it up for longer and slowing the rate at which it falls. Winds from other directions produce correspondingly lower tides. The wind is probably the biggest factor in "getting the tide wrong", as the tides moves faster or slower than expected, so that birders following a perfectly accurate tide table find the birds are already gone to roost or are feeding far out in the bay and too distant for identification.

Water influences are the outflow from the Pearl River and heavy rains, which can both cause tides to rise higher than expected when either is extremely high. These produce smaller variations. Anyone with any insight into these matters is most welcome to share

their knowledge with the Society through the bulletin or the website bulletin board.

Similarly, the influence of high and low pressure is difficult to measure. It appears that low pressure results in higher tides than high pressure, which forces water off the mud faster and restricts the rate at which it rises.

Getting the tide right is really more of an art than a science, but once in while you get several thousand birds pushed all the way into the boardwalk bay by the tide, which then stops, so the birds have no need to fly inland to roost. Days like these are unforgettable, and represent the finest spectacle in Hong Kong birding.

## Overseas Reports

### **The Qinling Shan, Shaanxi May 1998**

*by Mike Kilburn*

We flew from Shenzhen to Xian, overnighted and left this heavily polluted city as quickly as possible, heading south for the Qinling Shan. The drive across the plains to the mountains was flat, dull and birdless until we entered the gorge at Zhou Zhi which took us immediately out of the dirt-choked air and into the foothills of the Qinling Shan. As on my previous trip here in October 97 the road was beautiful, clinging precariously to the side of the gorge before sliding down to run alongside the rock-strewn river in its bed.

We stopped to collect Asian House Martins and found the usual White-capped Redstart, Brown Dippers, Plumbeous Redstarts and Crested Kingfisher along the river before arriving at Foping to unpack. We then headed for the village of Shi Yin Gou for a couple of hours birding late in the afternoon. As we got out of the car a Ruddy Sparrow hopped out from the stairwell of a village house and a Swinhoe's Minivet, one of our key target birds appeared on an overhead wire. A walk through farmland revealed Daurian Redstart, Grey-cheeked Fulvetta, Black-throated Tit, Rufous-faced Warbler, Collared Finchbill and Brown-breasted Bulbul. A dead Little Grebe caught between overhead wires appeared to be a somewhat dismal first record for Foping County.

Next morning we drove up into the hills which fringe the Foping reserve. On the way we stopped to pick up our guide, and while we waited, enjoyed a superb Yellow-rumped Flycatcher and another Swinhoe's Minivet in trees above the village public toilet-cum-pigsty. Yes its an all in one unit - you figure it out. After driving first along the main road, then down a track past a couple of small villages we picked up several Grey Bushchats in the cultivated land before reaching our target zone, where the vegetation thickened and we stopped to begin birding in earnest at around 1900m. We found a host of breeding birds, including Speckled Wood Pigeon, Great Spotted Woodpecker, White-bellied Redstart, lustily singing Brown, Yellow-Bellied and Mountain Bush Warblers, and as we got into the best areas of woodland habitat, good numbers of Golden Spectacled, Blyth's Leaf,

Chinese Leaf, Hume's Leaf and Large-billed Leaf Warblers. However, elements in the group professed themselves less than totally enthralled by the conundra presented by this challenging family and we paid them less and less attention as the trip went on.

There was plenty else to look at - Yellow-bellied and Green-backed Tits, Elliot's Laughingthrush, White-collared Yuhina and Streak-throated Fulvettas were old friends from Sichuan, as was our best bird of the day - the Slaty Buntings. First of all we found odd birds in the woods below the pass and then, at the highest point of the trail, we found a male catching large numbers of caterpillars and remaining loyal to a small patch by the path.

This area holds Golden Pheasants, and we could hear birds calling all round us but failed to find any, despite all the usual Pheasant hunting tactics of creeping slowly along, standing still and waiting and trying to look through impenetrable foliage. Taking time to try to pick out a bird calling across a small stream, I sat on a grassy bank, half-hidden behind a friendly tree. Despite twenty minutes of diligent searching for a persistently calling bird I saw nothing. Luckily gorgeous males of any species have a deep-seated need to show off. On our walk out at the end of the day a full-blown red and gold, full-tailed gem of a male strolled casually across the path in front of us.

Frustration honours went to a chat which seemed to call with deliberate provocation from every bamboo-choked stream bed. Despite working hard, lots of pishing and

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taping and eventually exhausted patience, we failed to winkle one out. Compensation manifested itself in the form of a distant Crested Honey Buzzard and several calling Spotted Nutcrackers.

Next day, having seen and heard an Asian Barred Owlet in the hotel carpark, we went to Sha Wo, an area of much-cut forest, but we still scored well, adding Ferruginous Flycatcher, two White-backed Woodpeckers and a calling, but coy, Lesser Cuckoo. Sooty topped the list of Tits, which also included Grey-crested, Rufous-vented, Green-backed, Coal, Great, and Yellow-bellied.

After a struggle up a heavily felled slope, following the spoor of a couple of Takin, the wild mountain ox of Central and western China, we emerged onto a ridge which is reputed to hold Blood Pheasant. It didn't that day, but we did get extremely close views of David's Bush Warbler and Brown Bush Warbler at our lunch stop. The highest point we reached (2,400m) delivered a number of surprises, including breeding Siberian Stonechats, Rosy Pipits and Alpine Accentors.

We were told that the timber felling was being carried out by a local co-operative and had been banned recently. However, we did see several people living in tents close to felled logs in the valley and passed several men climbing the slope towards an area where the timber had already been cut - it appears that enforcement of legislation is a problem that won't go away in China anytime soon.

We stopped halfway down the slope for a breather, timing our break perfectly to select a

spot where a pair of Koklass Pheasants had gone to ground. They burst out from behind us and swooped down the hill, showing little colour, and only allowing identification by the broad, fan-shaped tail of the male. The same slope also offered our only sighting of Chestnut Thrush.

The next morning we returned to the Liang Fen Ya pass at Foping for a final shot at the Pheasants and the chat, which confirmed our suspicions by grudgingly revealing itself as an Indian Blue Robin for the briefest of flash views.

However the Slaty Buntings behaved rather better. Taking a break from not seeing pheasants I saw first a male (which bears an uncanny resemblance to Slate-coloured Junco - at least in illustrations- I've never actually seen one) then an orange female hopping about on some branches a little way down the slope, clearly curious about me, but not agitated. Both birds were holding food and performing a bizarre wing flicking display which displayed white axillaries. Eventually the male disappeared into a tuft of grass at the foot of a spindly shrub and re-emerged minus the caterpillars. Throughout the time we watched, they continued to bring food to the nest and we obtained some wonderful video footage of both birds performing the wing flicking display and disappearing into the nest.

We then left and headed for Changqing reserve several hours to the south and west, and were delighted to arrive to find the reserve accommodation was in a block with a balcony, and that the rooms each contained



a welcoming basket of fruit. As the sun went down we enjoyed the Ruddy Sparrows blobbing about on the roof and the Red-rumped Swallows wheeling above the roofs of the town.

The next day we turned down the opportunity to go into the forest to try to see a staked out Giant Panda. Instead, we spent the next day climbing the highest peak in the reserve, initially driving up a winding hill road, and then having reached the highest navigable point on the road at about 2,300m we began walking up an old logging track.

Within ten minutes we came across a herd of 15 Takin moving slowly up the forested, near vertical slope above the path. They stayed in view for a couple of minutes, allowing us to see animals of all sizes and colours - from the pair of pure white calves to big golden-brown males with a full head of horns. We learned that they should be treated with caution as they are responsible for a number of deaths every year - apparently they are aggressive and butt local farmers off the edge of cliffs! A little further up a Goral (a species of mountain goat) had a good long look at us before sliding quietly around a bluff on a scree slope.

The highlight of our climb was running into a mixed group of Elliot's Laughingthrushes, four splendid Great Parrotbills, a couple of Three-toed Parrotbills, and best of all, a Fulvous Parrotbill showing a straw-yellow crown and blue-grey supercilium. This last one showed such an extraordinary combination of colours on the head that I never really believed it existed until it popped out to look at us!

Other birds seen well from the logging track included several splendid Golden Bush Robins, a Riverchat (it's a much more evocative name than White-capped Redstart), plenty of Large-billed, Chinese Leaf and Greenish Warblers, three Lemon-rumped Warblers, lots of Golden Speccies and a couple of Collared Yuhinas. Indian Blue Robin called from deep cover, but refused to sit up and be counted.

We stopped for lunch at the end of the logging road and headed up a slope of moss-covered scree interspersed with stands of bamboo and large (probably primary) trees. Although climbing through this area was pretty tough going, we saw a couple more Golden Bush Robins, a Eurasian Treecreeper, and found a cracking male Rufous-gorgetted Flycatcher.

Scrambling amongst the bamboos overhanging what nominally passed for a path, we found a number of Giant Panda droppings - the size of an oval tennis ball and consisting entirely of once-digested bamboo shoots and twigs - and entirely odorless. We continued to see them on the higher parts of the hill, suggesting a healthy population was present and confirming Mr Fu's assertion that this is probably the best Panda reserve in China.

On reaching the reserve's highest point at 3071m we stopped for rest and to admire the fabulous views of Tai Bai Shan to the north and sit amongst the rhododendrons and rocks. Mr Fu found a Blood Pheasant and we added a couple of Red-flanked Bluetails, a Common Buzzard and several Spotted Nutcrackers.

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Our descent was a distinctly hairy experience. We climbed down a precipitous slope through an area which had been logged but not cleared of brush and branches, and was still thick with bamboo clumps. Halfway down, the path gave out and we had to force our way through the brush and cross a stream running over a cliff before finding the path again and eventually reaching the safety of the logging road.

Once we did get onto the road we had an easy walk back to the minibus, and stopped to collect another White-capped Redstart and a party of Spectacled Parrotbills, which came in to my pishing from a bamboo-covered hillside. This area of the reserve had clearly already been cut and was growing back - all logging has supposedly been suspended in Changqing now.

The next day we had only a morning in the lower reaches of the reserve. We were looking for Reeves' Pheasant, which we were told is easy to see in winter. Despite hearing a number of Pheasants call we saw none, but found compensation in the form of several Gould's Sunbirds, Golden-breasted Fulvetta, Green Shrike Babbler, Eurasian Jay, a couple more Spectacled Parrotbills, and from closer to home, several Red-billed Leiothrix, Rufous-capped Babbler and Hwameis.

The drive to Yangxian turned out much better than expected as we had fleeting views of Chinese Bamboo Partridge, and possibly the northernmost ever record of Black Baza, close to Changqing.

A random stop in a village produced a wonderful overflow of breeding birds - beginning with a Chinese Blackbird and a

Daurian Redstart, we also found a couple of Ashy Drongos, four Swinhoe's Minivets, a Grey-headed Woodpecker and both dark and white phase Asian Paradise Flycatchers, a Black-naped Oriole, overhead Red-rumped Swallows and a couple of Forest Wagtails.

Somewhat stunned we continued on our way, stopping in a rather dry gully to collect Common Cuckoo, Little Owl, Long-tailed Shrike and a distant, but prominently perched, Manchurian Bush Warbler, filling the valley with its powerful song.

We arrived in Yangxian in time to go out to the evening roost site for Crested Ibis, which excruciatingly had decided they would use another roost site for the night and we dipped, taking little solace from a couple of Watercock which flew around calling before dusk. The next morning we had to leave early to catch our flights on to Xinjiang and Qinghai, the birds had not yet come down to the Han River to begin feeding. A major disappointment and a sad end to an otherwise exciting trip. We logged 137 species.

We have since established there are at least three roost sites used by non-breeding Ibis near Yangxian and successfully saw the birds at two of these during a short visit in October. In May the majority of Crested Ibises are breeding in the mountains at some distance from Yangxian and require an major effort to go in to see. It is possible, but requires more than the day that remained.

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## Southwest Yunnan 12 January 1999

by *Tadd & Debbie*

When we heard that Cheung Ho Fai would be offering a birdwatching trip to Yunnan, my wife, Debbie, and I excitedly expressed our interest. We have joined many HKBS outings here in HK, but we have never joined members in a birding excursion into the mainland. Of course, we had visited various places in China on regular tours. Although these were not birding trips, we had brought along binoculars and managed to see a few species not found in Hong Kong. However, this new opportunity offered us our first dedicated birding trip across the border and our first look at rainforest habitats in southwestern China.

At the HK airport we were pleased to see the group would be small in number, only 7, which is good for birding. We were not surprised to note that our luggage was the largest in the group, because both of us have trouble eating hot, spicy food, so we had packed some milder, freeze-dried meals.

We flew to Kunming and were greeted by an enthusiastic government forestry official, who joined us for the domestic flight further south within Yunnan province to Simao county. At the airport we were met by a driver in a 24-passenger bus, one of the few luxuries of the trip. The large bus was almost a necessity since the highways and secondary roads were universally uneven, rough, and traveling during the following two weeks of travel among many nature reserves and other birding sites.

We two were in some respects less experienced than the other birders in the group, so regardless of sites and weather we learned much by the examples of others on the trip. Much of the habitat was forest, so the challenges were similar to Tai Po Kau. Cheung Ho Fai said all his previous trips to the area had been dry, but we received 3 days of rain and much fog and drizzle during this visit. Consequently we slogged through mud in some locales and had to cope with leeches. Temperatures were mild and winds slight or absent, so birding was comfortable and rewarding. Early morning ventures were sometimes thwarted by fog, poor visibility, and damp optics.

When the fog lifted, Debbie and I got to view several key species that are possible in Hong Kong but had eluded us. Among these were Slaty-backed Forktail and Asian Barred Owllet. Other memorable birds probably would not be expected in Hong Kong, such as Pied Falconet, Speckled Piculet, Bronzed Drongo, White-crowned Forktail, Little Spiderhunter, Streaked Spiderhunter, Lesser and Greater Yellow-naped Woodpeckers, Sultan Tit, and Green Magpie. I have not thoroughly verified our personal lists, but Debbie and I estimate we saw over 170 species on this trip, of which over 85 were new to us. Since much of the forest birding was done as individuals or in tiny groups of 2 or 3, the collective group total was much larger than any one member saw. The estimate for the group exceeded 240 species.

Each member of the team selected a "bird of the trip." I think Cheung Ho Fai chose either Pied Falconet or Sultan Tit. Debbie chose

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the Blue-bearded Bee-eater, partly because of the quality of the sighting: we watched 3 individuals for 10 minutes while they rested, groomed, and fed, and partly because of the novelty of seeing a true beard on a bird. We could see extended blue feathers rotate with the heads as the birds moved their chins [I recently heard that one of the feeding methods of Bearded Bee-eaters is to sit still and attract insects to the beard which is mistaken for a flower! - ed.]

I chose the Greater Green-billed Malkoha because we got good views of the long tails and red bare skin around the eyes of six individuals as they hopped among the top branches of trees and flew to neighbouring trees. The luckiest sighting for Lo Wai Yan and myself was a glimpsed but unmistakable view of a Silver Pheasant as it noisily flew right over Cheung Ho Fai's head and shot through the mid-story of the forest too quickly for Debbie to shift her attention from her footing on the trail. She missed it, and Cheung Ho Fai only teasingly heard it fly by.

The specialist bird of the trip was undoubtedly Limestone Wren- Babbler, which we spotted a few hours earlier than expected. We intended to visit a specific limestone site one evening. Before this, however, we passed the afternoon in a neighbouring forest that also had limestone outcrops. Bird calls and slight movements among the shadowy rocks alerted us to six elusive individuals in two groups on neighbouring slopes. These rarities were found in a tree reserve, tolerating a blaring music sound system being tested nearby for

use in a Karaoke celebration scheduled for that evening as part of a celebration of the new year.

Debbie and I squeezed a bit of sight-seeing into the intense birding schedule and thus took away additional memories of temples, villages, farming practices, varieties of native clothing, and architectural details. We recommend such a visit to anyone interested in rainforests, birds, cultural diversity, or Chinese regional differences. One need only tolerate the expected spicy food, rough roads, occasional cold shower, dust, and squat toilets to be in the proper mindset for a truly rewarding adventure.

We especially thank Cheung Ho Fai for coordinating the trip but also thank all the other participants for their good companionship and exemplary birding skills.

## Future Meetings

Please contact the leader several days before the meeting to confirm attendance, otherwise you may miss out on changes in timing. The X ratings convey the degree of difficulty in each outing in terms of seeing the birds; it can be very frustrating for beginners to start with a forest outing to Tai Po Kau, where birds are hard to find and can be very shy. However, all members are of course more than welcome to attend any Society event.

DATE	LEADER	VENUE	TIME/RATING
10 April Saturday	Captain Wong	Tai Po Kau Breeding Bird Survey (Volunteers needed) Tai Po Kau Carpark	0800 XXX
11 April Sunday	Wong Chap Cheong	Tai Po Kau, forest birds Tai Po Kau Carpark	0800 XX
14 April Wednesday	Cheung Ho Fai	Indoor Meeting: Terns Hong Kong Observatory	18:45 X
18 April Sunday	Geoff Carey	Waterfowl Count (Volunteers needed)	--- XXX
18 April Sunday	Cheung Ho Fai	Mai Po: Waders * Coach at Kowloon Tong KCR 0800/ Mai Po carpark 0900	0800 XX
1-2 May Saturday -Sunday	Dickson Wong	Mai Po overnight: morning passage Sheung Shui KCR (Taxi station exit)	1600 XX
9 May Sunday	Captain Wong	Tai Po Kau Breeding Bird Survey (Volunteers needed) Tai Po Kau Carpark	0800 XXX
16 May Sunday	Geoff Carey	Waterfowl Count (Volunteers needed)	--- XXX
19 May Wednesday	Captain Wong	Indoor Meeting: Breeding birds of HK Hong Kong Observatory	18:45 X
6 June Sunday	Captain Wong	Tai Po Kau Breeding Bird Survey (Volunteers needed) Tai Po Kau Carpark	0800 XXX
13 June Sunday	Geoff Carey	Waterfowl Count (Volunteers needed)	--- XXX
13 June Sunday	Yam Wing Yiu	Fei Ngo Shan: Upland bird species Choi Hung MTR Station	0800 XX
30 June Wednesday	Yu Yat Tung	Indoor Meeting: Research on Black-faced Spoonbill Hong Kong Observatory	18:45 X

4 July Sunday	Captain Wong	Tai Po Kau Breeding Bird Survey (Volunteers needed) Tai Po Kau Carpark	0800 XXX
11 July Sunday	Geoff Carey	Waterfowl Count (Volunteers needed)	--- XXX
14 July Wednesday	to be confirmed	Indoor Meeting: Seabirds in typhoons Hong Kong Observatory	18:45 X
8 August Sunday	Cheung Ho Fai	Tap Mun: TernsMa Liu Shui Ferry Pier (near University KCR station)	0815 XX
8 August Sunday	Captain Wong	Tai Po Kau Breeding Bird Survey (Volunteers needed) Tai Po Kau Carpark	0800 XXX
15 August Sunday	Geoff Carey	Waterfowl Count (Volunteers needed)	--- XXX
18 August Wednesday	Wong Tin Wa	Indoor Meeting: Bird photography outside HK Hong Kong Observatory	18:45 X

**\*\*IMPORTANT\*\*** Please send return slip with payment. Call leader five days ahead to confirm departure time, or in case of bad weather.

\* Members using the coach must confirm attendance by returning the booking slip with payment. Those using own transport please notify Cheung Ho Fai - the maximum number for a Mai Po meeting is 50, as set by the AFD permit. Failure may result in being refused access to the reserve. Bus cost is HK\$40 for members and HK\$60 for non-members.

# Minibus HK\$100 deposit. Exact cost to be shared by all participants


Payment to the society may be made in two ways:

- By cheque in English made out to the "Hong Kong Bird Watching Society"
- Payment can also be made by Electronic Transfer to Account No 004-500-208152-838 Hong Kong & Shanghai Bank in favour of "The Hong Kong Bird Watching Society", but please send the attendance slip in as well to confirm your payment and attendance.

On all outdoor meetings please bring drink and food, appropriate clothing for the location, and sun cream and mosquito lotion if needed! Leaders are requested to find a substitute and contact Cheung Ho Fai if they are unable to attend.

Latest tide table for Tsim Bei Tsui is available at the Hong Kong Observatory website  
<http://www.info.gov.hk/hko/astron/tidetbtc.htm>

Telephone numbers: Geoff Carey ; Cheung Ho Fai ; Carrie Ma  
; Captain Wong ; Wong Chap Cheong ; Dickson Wong  
; Yam Wing Yiu (Contact Cheung Ho Fai); Yu Yat Tung or  
phone a Committee Member.



紅角鴞 (九龍坑山)  
孔思義

Oriental Scops Owl  
(Cloudy Hill)

*John Holmes*



林夜鷹 (天水圍)  
Savanna Nightjar (Tin Shui Wai)

*Martin Hale*



灰背燕尾 (車八嶺)  
Slaty-backed Forktail (Che Ba Ling)

盧嘉孟  
Lo Kar Man



紅尾水鴉 (車八嶺)  
Plumbeous Redstart (Che Ba Ling)

盧嘉孟  
Lo Kar Man