

Hong Kong Natural History Society
24 January 2016 Outing Report
Pak Tam Au to Sai Wan, Sai Kung East Country Park

The Society's January 2016 outing was a 12-km, grade 3 hike starting on Stage 2 of the MacLehose Trail at Pak Tam Au and descending to Chek Keng. Following an ascent of Tai Long Au, the trail lead down to Tai Long Wan (Big Wave Bay) at Ham Tin. The route then followed a coastal path with ascent and descent to Sai Wan. Leaving the MacLehose Trail after an ascent out of the village, the final leg involved a meandering course, skirting the north shore of High Island Reservoir, to Sai Wan Pavilion. Being set to concrete and paviour throughout most of its length, the trail presented no problems underfoot. A hire coach was used for the drop-off at Pak Tam Au and pick-up at the pavilion, necessitating permits from both the Country and Marine Parks Authority and Director of Water Supplies. The application process was not straightforward.

The hike was originally planned for 17 January, but was postponed due to rain. Had the Society traded inclement weather for something more hostile?

An inconveniently placed deep low pressure system brought strong northerly winds from the Arctic/Siberia with an accompanying rain band. Forecasting an intense cold surge, The Hong Kong Observatory had issued a Strong Monsoon Signal, a Cold Weather Warning and a Frost Warning. Members of the public were cautioned about the possible adverse health effects and were advised to keep warm. The following day the media reported that Hong Kong had experienced its coldest weather in nearly six decades.



Society hikes normally start with a comprehensive route brief from the organiser. On this occasion members alighting the coach had anticipated what was in store and immediately hit the trail. The organiser did manage to huddle the group, but quickly realised that the collective attention span was meagre; it was a very scant brief. The group set off at a cracking pace mindful of the beneficial thermal effects that would accrue. The gazelles who normally strike out ahead were left trailing at the back. The descent away from the semi-exposed high ground of Pak Tam Au brought some respite from the wind.

The route offers some excellent prospects of Chek Keng Hau and Long Harbour which would normally prompt a pause. On this occasion these were taken in on the march. However, it is difficult to pass through Chek Keng, an abandoned Hakka village, without stopping. Many of the dwellings lie in a state of collapse, but through doors and windows lying ajar one can see tools and chattels in situ offering a time portal into the life of a vibrant rural community. The outskirts of the village now provide a home to the Bradbury Hall Youth Hostel.

Chek Keng was well protected from the prevailing synoptic situation, but after the ascent of Tai Long Au members were reminded that conditions would remain challenging. The group mustered at a small cafe just short of Ham Tin to enjoy coffee, sandwiches and fruit cake. Everyone was in good spirits and the owner's dog was friendly.

At Ham Tin the group stopped for a photo op before crossing the infamous rickety-rackety bridge onto the beach. Some conjectured as to when the next formal inspection of the structure was scheduled, while others considered the possibility of a troll in residence beneath. Such was the light-hearted mood of the group. All traversed safely, the rope 'handrail' offering only a false sense of security. It later transpired that our Secretary had no knowledge of the Norwegian folk tale.



On a fine day the path travelled thus far serves as a hikers' highway to the idyllic sub-tropical beaches and crystal waters of Tai Long Wan. On this occasion members were to meet few others making the trip, although our journey proved rewarding. In the prevailing weather the beach presented a very different complexion, but no less captivating, with the cold energetic wind lifting sand and salt spray into the air. Those originating from a small island in the North Atlantic may have felt a twinge of nostalgia as they were presented with conditions somewhat reminiscent of an invigorating seaside walk on a winter's day in Blighty. Perhaps they had forgotten that the like can also occur in UK summers.

The ascent away from the Ham Tin Wan gave more exposure to the elements, but some did pause to enjoy a view of the beach from high ground. The descent to Sai Wan beach, along a tree-lined trail, was more protected. At Sai Wan members took another break and some were tempted into fried rice at one of several restaurants in the village. The local residents were also combating the weather and one villager offered the warmth of his campfire, a very hospitable gesture. The group then quietly gathered for the final push, with some returning to the beach for a last look at Tai Long Wan presenting itself in a somewhat different light. Shortly after the ascent from the village, the welcome sight of High Island Reservoir loomed into view heralding our journey's end

During our hike sightings were made of *Enkianthus quinqueflorus*, known as 'hanging bell' in Chinese. Belonging to the family *Eriaceae* and familiarly referred to as the Chinese New Year Flower, it blooms in early spring. In the past it has been used to decorate homes during Lunar New Year celebrations, a practice which led to excess gathering. In the interest of conservation it is now protected by forestry regulation.



The Norwegians say that there is no such thing as bad weather, only poor clothing. Clearly aware of this our group came suitably attired, sporting an array of eye-catching apparel and hoping to make an impression with headgear. Twelve members ventured out on the day – the number required for a just verdict. Unanimously they concluded that it had all been worthwhile. When on the trail the Society invariably fields a jolly bunch. On this occasion members also showed that they were made of sterner stuff.

Report: *Malcolm Godfrey*

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Photographs: *Judy Roe, Frank Bradley*

Gallery:

