

Hong Kong Natural History Society
20 March 2016 Outing Report
Lantau Island: Hike from Tai O to Tung Chung



Drying fish maw (we think!)



Puffer fish

Starting from my favourite Hong Kong place, Tai O, the NHS March 2016 walk was hard to resist: pleasantly cool weather, charming location, and 21 keen walkers gathered in Tai O main square for an 11.30am set-off, once delays with bus queues and fog-shrouded ferries were overcome. Tour buses



were already dropping off crowds so leader Frank distributed our route map and led us out through the stilt village, over Kat Hing bridge and onto the coastal path.



Heading East with views over the sea and the new Zhuhai/Macau bridge construction just offshore, we passed through fragrant flowering shrubs with Hong Kong Hawthorn (*Raphiolepis indica*) at its best (*below*), enjoyed by several butterfly species as the sun slowly emerged.



On the hillside outside Tai O stands the North Lantau Obelisk, built in 1902 by the British Army: a reminder of a 'wilder' Lantau; the deserted beach on our left looked enticing with its pretty pink rocks, and the hillside above still bore traces of previous fire outbreaks but some hardy shrubs, ferns and grasses were regrowing and tiny wild violets (*Viola diffusa*) blossomed in shady spots.

We took a short tea break at San Chau (famous for its sea grasses, and vital breeding site for the Red Lacewing and other rare butterflies), then proceeded to Sham Wat and were enticed into the beachfront snack shops for sustenance (and Easter eggs from Glenda). Rows of neatly chopped firewood lined one side of the path and, on the other, kumquat fruit were

being 'processed' in some 20 large, circular containers: starting with the golden orange ripe fruit to the drying, soaking in salt solution, redrying and finally finished product: a preserved fruit said to help ease sore throats. This was the last village connected by public road on our route: the villages further along rely on cycle or sea transport. A spectacular Firecracker vine (*Pyrostegia ignea*) fence led us into San Shek Wan ("Pebble Bay"), past lonely houses and school, and down through abandoned banana plantations. Dragonflies of all sizes began



to fill the skies as we quickened our pace for fear of rain. The pier at Sha Lo Wan ("Sand Snail Bay") seemed largely forgotten but, in former times, it was an active point for ferberite and magnetite mining. It has an impressive Pa Kong Ancient temple (*door detail on right*) and bay, now overlooked by the imposing new bridge construction and Chek Lap Kok airport runways. This dynamic scene contrasted alarmingly with a backward look up the formerly peaceful hillside over the *feng shui* woodlands amongst which is, reputedly, Hong Kong's largest Camphor tree (*Cinnamomum camphora*). Windy conditions drove us onwards. Several Chinese pond herons were fishing along the Tung Chung river and, early in the walk, a shrike was seen, perched on a telephone wire. The squashed remains of a young snake were seen on the outskirts of Tai O and a very-much-alive changeable lizard (probably female, as males develop a red/black neck pouch in spring), ran across our path at one point, willingly posing, well disguised amongst the brown leaves.



Destination in sight, we regrouped at the flyover and took welcome refreshments at a small cafe near the Tung Chung Qing Dynasty fort (*left*), before proceeding to the Handi Indian restaurant around the corner for a much-deserved dinner. Thanks must go to Frank for his superb planning/reconnaissance/fact sheet and crowd control skills throughout the day, overcoming all challenges with a smile.

*Report by Chris Bailey
Photos by Chris, Rose Godfrey and Dave Clarke*