



REPORT ON MAI PO NIGHT SAFARI, 27 AUGUST 2011

This outing was quite well supported, in fact we almost reached the quota allowed by Mai Po, with 18 participants. WWF have been running this (and another) night time activity for about three years now in the summer months, in an attempt to attract visitors in what is obviously their 'low season' with the absence of the wintering birds. It is an excellent idea to attempt to extend interest beyond birds to the other wildlife that is also present in the four different habitats that make up the Reserve, especially at night time, thus creating a little "adventure".

After what is now a familiar (for those of us who have been before) introduction to Mai Po at the map board at the Visitor Centre, our two guides led us past the fish ponds and into the restricted area. Even the modern aerators in the ponds could not keep algal growth at bay in the unrelenting heat of this summer, as evidenced by a strange green colour and a number of floating dead fish. As we headed for the Education Centre, passing a Chinese pond heron on the right bank, the black cloud that had been threatening did indeed give us some rain so we had to shelter in the first bird hide. This was not too much of a hardship, especially for first-time visitors, as there was a huge flock of egrets to be seen taking their supper in the shallow waters, plus a pair of black-winged stilts. An orangey red sun also hung low in the grey sky but still managed to cast its reflection in the water, before sinking out of sight.



Emerging after about half an hour, we thankfully had no more rain that evening. Outside the Education Centre, the vote was for eating al fresco [how come those benches and tables were not at all wet??] and picnics both frugal and fancy were seen to be enjoyed. By this time it was 7.15pm and the guides were keen to start the second half of the 'tour'. Before moving inside, they set up a lamp trap with a white backcloth to attract insects for us to look at later.

Inside the Centre we enjoyed the air-conditioning and the slide show presentation of what we were told were regular night-time visitors to Mai Po (not the human ones like us). The main birds were owls and the nightjar, two types of bats (not birds of course!), frogs, spiders, several insects including grasshoppers, and a few other things I've forgotten. Sightings of otters were very rare, although it raised hopes somewhat to learn that one had been seen that very morning! and of leopard cats and civet cats, even rarer. Our female guide had worked there for 4 years and has not yet been lucky enough to see one.

So finally (it seemed to me, having my organiser's eye on the time) we were given torches and about 8.15pm we set off on our 'safari'. This allowed us a walk of about one hour. Now I have to say at this point that the opinions of the writer that follow are known *not* to be fully shared by several of the group. However, I also know that they *are* shared, at least to some extent, by some of the group, so I will try and present a balance. Frankly, I was disappointed with what we saw (ie not much!) Whilst one understands it is a wild dream to see a leopard cat and that guarantees can never be given for such activities, could one not reasonably hope to see (or at least hear) an owl or a nightjar? Hadn't we just been shown a slide show of wildlife said to be *common* to Mai Po at night time? Perhaps the tour could have been better organised in some ways too, eg the staff could use and supply more of their superior quality night torches to better locate wildlife, focusing on areas where it is regularly seen. If need be, WWF should perhaps limit the group size to as few as 10, as little attempt was made to keep the level of the sound created by our group

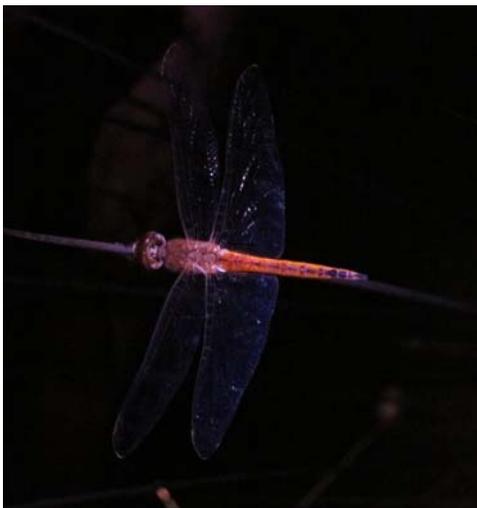


to a minimum, and yes Rose, the staff *should* know that the civet cat is not really a member of the feline family, but is more closely related to the weasel (see our logo which makes this obvious). Finally, I question the wisdom of telling a group of visitors on 27 August that May and June are the best times to come!

Having got those grumbles off my chest, it has to be remembered that a first time visit to Mai Po is always interesting, so I was glad that the newer members were satisfied with their initial foray. It was also gratifying to learn that the Australians among the group were happy to have seen the odd firefly or two as, apparently (and amazingly), there are none to be found anywhere across that huge continent. Others found the different types of spider and web interesting, and they were certainly very attractive in the moonlight [well, torchlight]. Several Japanese Pipistrelle bats were sighted flitting about over our heads, and although they were rather difficult to make out visually through the greyness and clouds, members enjoyed tuning into the bat song with the bat "radios" loaned us by the guides. On one tree trunk, the guide pointed out a preying mantis pupa, and a slug or two were seen on the trail. The increased frog activity that often follows a downpour of rain did not materialize, sadly, and only a couple of frogs were seen in the small pond back at the Education Centre. These cute little Brown Tree Frogs therefore found themselves renamed Blue Railing Frogs, and it's probably best not to say what their large egg sacs were likened to.

Back at the lamp trap, we had netted a few beetles, grasshoppers and crickets. Perhaps some of these would later become a meal for the goodly sized gecko in the ladies toilet.

My thanks to all participants for making the most of this different outing and getting something out of it for themselves. Perhaps down the road, in May or June 2013, if anyone requests it, we could try again to see the elusive civet cat / weasel.....



Report by Jan Campbell, with many thanks to Susana and Alan Goldstein for the photographs.