

“FANTASTIC BIRDS IN HONG KONG”

HKNHs DINNER TALK, 6TH JUNE 2019

Nineteen eager NHS members gathered at Café 8 to usher in the long weekend with a talk about Hong Kong’s fantastic birds. The guest speaker, Mr Yu Yat Tung, the research manager of the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society, said that he wanted to share the joy of watching birds – and he certainly did this! After giving a brief history of the HKBWS and explaining the society’s four areas of interest – research, education, conservation and habitat management - Mr Yu reminded us about the reason why Hong Kong is such a great place for bird-watching: its location. Sitting in the middle of the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, Hong Kong is the perfect stopover place for birds travelling from the Northern Hemisphere to the Southern Hemisphere, and for birds travelling in the opposite direction. Its climate caters for all types of birds. Hong Kong is also endowed with a wide variety of habitats – mangroves, mudflats, fishponds, grasslands, farmland, streams, woodlands, urban areas and the marine environment. These factors help explain why, of the 552 species of birds that have been recorded in Hong Kong, only twenty per cent are residents. The rest are migratory birds, seasonal visitors and occasional visitors.

With so many different habitats for birds, where are the best places for bird-watching? It turns out that the hotspots for birds are also many of NHS’s favourite places, too – Mai Po/Deep Bay, Long Valley, Lai Chi Wo, Wu Kau Tang, Lam Tsuen, Tai Po Kau, Tai Mo Shan, Shing Mun, Lantau Peak, Po Toi, Tung Ping Chau and, surprisingly, Ho Man Tin.

Mr Yu then talked about the different species of birds to be found in the different habitats. Some are quite common, some are listed as vulnerable to extinction, some are endangered and some are critically endangered.

More than four hundred species have been reported in the coastal wetlands of Mai Po and Deep Bay. These include the vulnerable Chinese egret (the logo of the HKBWS), which has a blue face in spring; the endangered black-faced spoonbill, whose breeding plumage includes a yellow crest and yellow breast feathers; and the Dalmatian pelican, the largest species seen in Hong Kong, with a wing span of over two metres. In April of this year, the regional population of this bird in East Asia was about 150, and sadly not one has been seen in Hong Kong in the last ten years. One of the main reasons for the declining population is the fact that in the breeding grounds of Mongolia, the pelican’s pouch is much prized for cleaning horses. Other Mai Po visitors include the near-threatened Nordmann’s greenshank, the pheasant-tailed jacana, the pied avocet and the black-winged stilt. Spring is the best time to see the critically endangered spoonbilled sandpiper, which numbered in the thousands in the 1980s, but now only numbers about five hundred.

Bird-watching in the forested parts of Hong Kong is challenging, and Mr Yu's advice is to wait. One has to be lucky to see the birds that are in the small fung shui woods and secondary forests of Tai Po Kau and around Kadoorie Farm. The crested serpent eagle, the black baza (which is the size of a pigeon), the bay woodpecker, the brown wood owl and the speckled piculet (whose numbers are increasing) are occasional visitors, while the grey-chinned minivet is more common.

At the beginning of his talk, Mr Yu had said that he wanted to share the joy of bird-watching, and his passion for his subject was such that, by the time dinner was ready at eight o'clock, he had only talked about the birds in two habitats! Fifteen minutes later, we had had a very brief introduction to some of the birds that can be found near abandoned farmlands, on the grasslands and in the marine environment. Unfortunately, there wasn't time to find out about the birdlife of Ho Man Tin. Nor was there time for questions.

During the course of this truly fascinating and enthralling talk, Mr Yu mentioned and showed us photos of at least sixty different birds. That's how many names were recorded in my notes and on my phone after I ran out of paper, but I was not fast enough on the phone to get details of all the birds he mentioned in the last quarter of an hour.

Except that we were hungry and it was night time, I suspect many of us would have been inspired to go bird-watching immediately the talk finished. Mr Yu is to be congratulated on such an interesting and passionate sharing of the joy of bird-watching in Hong Kong.

Report by Julie Moffat