

BIRD-WATCHING IN HONG KONG 1947-1957

The publication of Herklots' 'Field Note Book' in November 1946 was the foundation stone of bird-watching in Hong Kong. It then became possible for the first time for anyone interested in birds to start identifying them with the aid of a book giving field descriptions. Articles and pictures in the pre-war numbers of *The Hong Kong Naturalist* (edited by G.A.C. Herklots and G.S.P. Heywood) were a help but the number of species described was very small. Even after the publication of the 'Field Note Book' there was still no way of finding other bird-watchers with whom to exchange notes and from whom to learn in the field. Herklots had unfortunately left Hong Kong soon after the publication of his book and it was not until late in 1954 that I met another bird-watcher. This was J.C.E. Britt, an experienced ornithologist, who had been in Hong Kong, unknown to me, since 1945. I finally met him through J.D. Romer who had founded the Hong Kong Biological Circle about 1950.

The next event of any note was the publication of 'Field Notes on Local Birds' by the Biological Circle in February 1953. These notes were by Dove and Goodhart who later published a much fuller version in 'Ibis'. In April of that year came the publication of Herklots' 'Hong Kong Birds' which gave more details of the best bird-watching areas.

Britt's departure for Vancouver early in 1955 was a great loss, not made good until the arrival of F.J. Walker and J.H. Sergeant whom I met in 1956 through membership of the Biological Circle. After several walks in the New Territories with them Frank Walker proposed that we should start a bird-watching society of which he would be the Secretary. It was through his enthusiasm and determination that a meeting was called in August 1957. This was held in the British Council Library in Gloucester Building and the 15 persons present decided then and there to start a society. There had, however, been a serious setback to our plans as shortly before the meeting Walker was told by the R.A.F. that he was to be posted to Singapore. J.H. Sergeant was therefore elected in his place. Soon afterwards the Army moved him, and it was not until Jim Humphreys arrived that the Society really got going.

These are the bare bones of the years before the Society was started. My own recollections of bird-watching in the field during that period may perhaps help to put some flesh on the

skeleton and will, I hope, be of some interest to members who were not in Hong Kong before 1957.

By the end of 1946, with no book to help, I had identified a total of only 22 species. I was on leave for most of 1947 but from 1948 onwards my wife and I spent nearly all our Sundays in the New Territories, and by the end of 1953 our total of species identified was up to 82, which was not very rapid progress. The list did, however, include some rarities or semi-rarities such as the Green Woodpecker, Osprey, Wren, Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker, Plumbeous Water Redstart, Peregrine, Ashy Minivet, Asiatic Cuckoo, Forest Wagtail, and Roller.

By the start of 1954 we had become a bit more expert and in the course of that year added 38 new species to our list. There were also several rather inadequate descriptions of birds we could not identify. The new birds of that exciting year included the Pied Kingfisher, Pied Harrier, a Grey Starling at Mong Tseng, and two Black-tailed Godwits on Deep Bay marshes (the first ever recorded, I think). There were also a group of eight Great Crested Grebes in Starling Inlet, a flock of about 20 Chestnut Bulbuls near Sha Lo Tung, a Bull-headed Shrike perched on a roadside wire (another first) between Fan Ling and Lok Ma Chau, and 5 or 6 female Scarlet Minivets in a wood on the south side of the entrance to the Lam Tsuen Valley. No road existed there in those days. We saw a Verditer Flycatcher by the edge of what used to be the best wood in the same valley, on the way to Tai On Shan Village, and other birds seen in or near it included the Roller and Serpent Eagle.

1955 began splendidly with a walk on the 2nd January with J.C.E. Britt during which 5 species new to me were identified. These included four Red-necked Grebes in Starling Inlet. Then I went on leave and saw exciting birds in Kashmir.

By 1956 I had met Frank Walker and went with him to the newly discovered egretty west of Yuen Long where Pond Herons, Cattle Egrets, Little Egrets, and Swinhoe's Egrets were all breeding. We suspected some of being Lesser Egrets but this was never proved. Walker also introduced me to the shallow mud pans beyond the Mai Po police post where many waders new to me were seen. In all there were 31 new species added that year.

The first five months of 1957 produced 24 more, many of which were on walks with Frank Walker. The first was a

party of Rose Finches as we were eating our lunch near the entrance to the Lam Tsuen Valley on New Year's Day—a very good start to the year. Ferruginous Flycatcher, White-headed Black Bulbul, Red Turtle Dove and White-cheeked Drongo were others seen by the end of April. May saw my introduction to eight new species of Wader, and to the Caspian and White-winged Black Tern.

To conclude, it might be of some interest to mention the birds seen from the top floor of the Albany Flats (just above the Botanical Gardens) in 1954-56, and from a house in Severn Road, 403, The Peak, in 1956-59, though some of the latter period is outside that covered by this article. The Albany Flats had a large flower-pot nursery immediately below which added variety to the habitat. 47 species seen from the verandah included the Hair-crested Drongo, Barbet, Oriole and Rose-ringed Parakeet. All of these were often seen on the mid-levels in those days. I remember an Oriole, sitting in a tree within twenty feet of a desk in the old Secretariat Building. Unusual species in this area, even for those days, included the White-breasted Kingfisher, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Pond Heron, Ashy Minivet, Sparrow-hawk, Red-throated Pipit, Grey Thrush and Chinese Starling. Two young Peregrines were seen in July 1954 doing aerobatics over the harbour.

Severn Road was a very good place for Thrushes though they were often difficult to find except by the sound of their scratching among the leaves in dark scrub woodland. The eight species seen were Blackbird, Orange-headed Ground Thrush, White's, Grey, Eye-browed, Pale, Grey-backed and Violet Whistling Thrush. The White's Thrush (formerly known as the Golden Mountain Thrush, a more exciting name) seemed to prefer well-kept lawns where one was able to watch it at close quarters and in a good light for long periods. The Orange-headed Ground Thrush was seen on four occasions between 29th November 1956 and 14th April 1957. White's was seen nearly every day from 9th January to 14th February 1960.

Warblers included the Arctic, Yellow-browed and Pale-legged. The most disturbing bird was the Large Hawk-Cuckoo which made its piercing call for 7 nights running from 9th to 15th April 1957. The greatest rarity was a Frigate Bird seen over the harbour on 25th September 1956.

The total number of species at Severn Road was 53 against 47 at the Albany. Many were common to both but there were

interesting differences. Birds seen only at Severn Road (1200 feet) were seven species of Thrush, three species of Warbler, Ferruginous Flycatcher, Robin Flycatcher, White-backed Munia, Tree Pipit, Fire-breasted Flower-pecker, the two species of Crow Pheasant, House Swift, Rufous-backed Shrike, Roller, Large Hawk-Cuckoo and Frigate Bird. Birds on the Albany list only were Philippine Brown Shrike, Chinese Starling, Java Sparrow, Greenfinch, Red-throated Pipit, Koel, Kestrel, Sparrow-hawk, Spotted Dove, Rufous Turtle-Dove, Pond Heron, Parakeet, White-faced Wagtail and Yellow Wagtail. The differences in the lists were probably due more to the differences in the habitats than to the differences in height above sea-level. Both houses had extensive views over the harbour.

The founding of the Society in 1957 made my last three years the most interesting of all. Bird-watching then became an activity shared with other enthusiasts and I have many happy memories of society outings in the New Territories. It also acquired a more definite purpose and scientific value. In the last 20 years I have watched birds in many parts of Europe, Morocco and India but never have I found any places with quite the same fascination as the Ping Shan—Mai Po marshes with their hilly fringes, and the fung shui woods behind the villages in the New Territories.

Since I left Hong Kong at the end of 1960 it has been a great pleasure to read the Annual Reports which seem to me to get better and better. Then there have been the second edition of the Check List and the start of scientific ringing. I should like therefore to conclude by congratulating most warmly all those who have contributed to this noteworthy progress. Without doubt they have done a job of permanent value.

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