

WorldBirdwatch

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Living on the edge project
High hopes for the High Seas
10 years of China Programme

Supporting birdwatching organisations to increase overall public awareness about birds and the environment has been one focus of the China Programme's work (Vivian Fu)

Stepping out across China

In 2015, BirdLife International and the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society celebrated ten years of our joint China Programme.

There is a Chinese saying “*qiān lǐ zhī xíng, shǐ yú zú xià*”: a thousand mile journey begins with the first step. In 2015, BirdLife International and the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society (BirdLife Partner in Hong Kong SAR, China) celebrated the tenth anniversary of their joint China Programme. The bulk of the route to safeguard China's birds may remain to be hiked, but this initiative has progressed well beyond its first step.

In the early 2000s, the BirdLife Secretariat and its Asian Partners concluded that establishing a programme in the world's fourth largest and most populous nation was important and urgent. In terms of importance, only six nations have more Globally Threatened Birds (89) than China, and only seven have more bird

species (1,240). As for urgency, recalls Mike Crosby, Senior Conservation Officer in BirdLife International Asia Division, “rapid economic growth was putting huge pressure on the natural environment”.

The Programme's proverbial first step was to support development of birdwatching organisations across mainland China. BirdLife's inaugural vision, recalls Simba Chan, Senior Conservation Officer in BirdLife International Asia Division, was that these organisations would “increase overall public awareness about birds and the environment, then engage in conservation”. “At that time”, recalls Vivian Fu Assistant Manager of the Hong Kong Bird Watching Society/BirdLife International

China Programme, “environmental education was a very new concept to China”.

Public engagement has proved critical to the Programme's success—and for good reason. Simba Chan explains that wildlife is typically valued in China for providing food or medicine. “Changing Chinese attitudes to the value of wildlife”, says Simba, is a key target outcome from the Programme. Terry Townshend concurs. Director of EcoAction (a Chinese organisation dedicated to environmental education and ecotourism) and BirdLife Species Champion for Rufous-backed Bunting *Emberiza jankowskii* (Endangered), Terry laments that environmental issues “are almost completely absent from the Chinese state curriculum”,

which “is why it is so important to focus on public education, especially in schools”.

Birds have proved a good way in, says Vivian Fu: “as birds can be seen everywhere, they are a good starting point for people to get closer to nature”. Awareness of environmental issues, says Mike Crosby, “is rapidly increasing thanks to press and social media, providing a great opportunity now to promote actions to address conservation issues”.

In addition to producing key publications (*Important Bird Areas in China*, a Chinese edition of *Saving Asia's Threatened Birds*), the Programme has strengthened the capacity of Chinese birdwatching societies through technical training workshops, site conservation activities

and bird festivals. The collective participation in China's 30-odd birdwatching societies may now be as high as 20,000—and “their growth in expertise has also been amazing”, observes Mike Crosby.

This interest has blossomed into full-on “citizen science” (research by non-professional scientists). At the 2015 China Ornithological Society congress, delegates highlighted citizen science as a key opportunity for the study and conservation of wild birds. Vivian Fu flags the China Coastal Waterbird Census, which has been run collectively by volunteer participants for ten years, as “a great example” of citizen science.

This matters because China's coastal wetlands harbour some of the East Asian—Australasian Flyway's most significant passage and wintering sites, used by millions of shorebirds. Bai Qingquan of the Forestry Bureau of Dandong was lead author on a 2015 paper published in *Avian Research* that summarised eight years of monthly surveys. Volunteers recorded 21 globally threatened birds and found internationally important congregations of 75 species. “We discovered at least 10 sites of international importance for birds, yet still without proper protection”, Bai says.

For 13 species—including Siberian Crane *Leucogeranus leucogeranus* (Critically Endangered), Saunders's Gull *Saundersilarus saundersi* (Vulnerable) and Spotted Greenshank *Tringa guttifer* (Endangered)—more than one-fifth of the total Flyway population were found at a single wetland. Without Census volunteers, that degree of dependence might never have been discovered. Little wonder that Vivian Fu hopes “that more people from different stretches of

the Chinese coast will join the Census”.

Given its focus on people, you might conclude that the Programme had little time to do anything about birds. Far from it. Conservation successes during the initiative's inaugural decade are impressive.

Projects, most in partnership with local birdwatching societies, have targeted four Globally Threatened Birds: Chinese Crested Tern *Thalasseus bernsteini* (Critically Endangered); Spoon-billed Sandpiper *Calidris pygmaea* (Critically Endangered); Blue-crowned Laughingthrush *Garrulax courtoisi* (Critically Endangered); and Rufous-backed Bunting.

Fewer Blue-crowned Laughingthrushes exist than there are days in a calendar year, and all cram into a few sites in China's Jiangxi Province. Bird-monitoring groups have now been established at six schools near Laughingthrush breeding locations.

Surveys for Spoon-billed Sandpiper shed light on the extent of illegal bird trapping threatening this and other shorebirds. One count revealed a combined length of 11.5 km of mist-nets flanking key roosting sites. Swift intervention by the local government authorities eradicated the problem. Just as important, says Vivian Fu, was the “growth and evolution of local partners”. At a personal level, Vivian was also particularly proud of contributions by hundreds of Chinese children to an animation of the Spoon-billed Sandpiper's journey along the East Asian—Australasian Flyway. (If you haven't seen this yet, you're missing a treat: visit <http://www.tinyurl.com/SpoonieVideo>)

Perhaps only a few thousand Rufous-backed Buntings remain, testament to conversion of natural grasslands for agriculture, pasture and forestry. The Programme unearthed

new breeding sites and ran workshops that, says Species Champion Terry Townshend, persuaded local government authorities to help conservation efforts. “Provided we can secure further support”, says Terry, “I am optimistic that this beautiful bird will be saved from extinction”.

Even these fine examples of BirdLife conservation in action are eclipsed by Programme efforts to deny Chinese Crested Tern an entry in the catalogue of expired species. At the start of the Millennium, this seabird was presumed extinct. Fifteen years later, 16 chicks fledged from a brand new colony established in innovative fashion through decoy terns and audio playback. Education initiatives have reduced collecting of seabird eggs for human consumption. See feature article on pages 14–17.

All those involved in the Programme look back on a first decade of achievements with immense pride. Nevertheless, Vivian and colleagues are clear that BirdLife's work in this

massive country is still in its infancy. Future priorities for expansion include capacity building, species conservation activities, the conservation of intertidal wetlands, using citizen science to “keep common birds common” and counteracting illegal hunting of wild birds.

Looking ahead a further decade, what does the Programme want to have achieved? Simba Chan's aspiration is for “BirdLife's presence in China to be wise and strong”. Vivian Fu wants the Programme to “exert more influence on conservation and environmental issues”. Mike Crosby hopes for strengthened local birdwatching and conservation organisations that “help government agencies address the conservation issues affecting threatened species and IBAs throughout China”. If the China Programme achieves such aims, it will have covered impressive ground along the proverbial thousand-mile journey.

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By James Lowen

Children being Spoon-billed Sandpipers and learning about the importance of the Yellow Sea for migratory birds (Vivian Fu)





Active conservation by a team of people has helped increase breeding success of Chinese Crested Tern (Simba Chan)

Brighter future for world's rarest tern

Recent work suggests that the outlook for Chinese Crested Tern is now brighter than at any moment since its rediscovery at the turn of the century.



The rediscovery of the enigmatic Chinese Crested Tern *Thalasseus bernsteini* is one of the most remarkable stories in 21st century ornithological history. This medium-large, pale tern, which has a distinctive black-tipped, orange-yellow bill, had not been positively recorded anywhere in the world for more than 60 years, before its rediscovery off the east coast of mainland China in the summer of 2000. Four adults and four chicks were found among a mixed tern colony in the Taiwan-administered Matsu Islands, offshore from China's Fujian Province, which is about 750 km to the south of Shanghai; and a second breeding ground was discovered on the Jiushan Islands, Zhejiang Province, 200 km south of Shanghai in 2004.

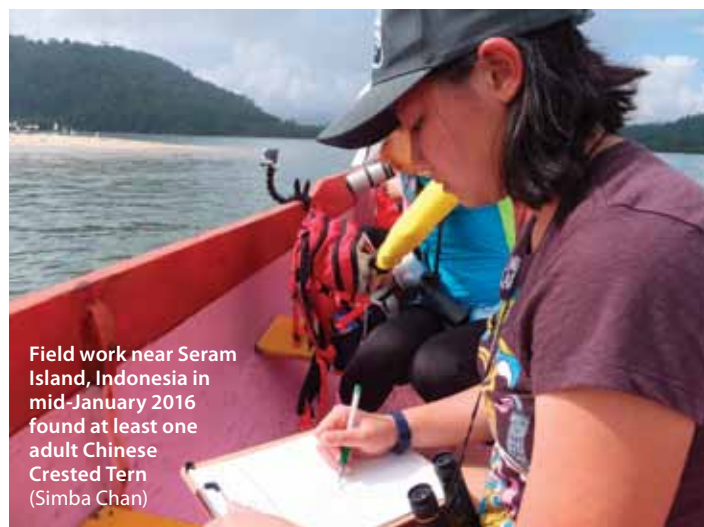
Despite a few subsequent ups and downs (for instance no breeding birds were located during a number of the following years; the tern's eggs were illegally collected by local people from the Jiushan Islands in 2007), recent events suggest that the outlook for the species is now brighter than at any moment since its rediscovery.

Classified by BirdLife as Critically Endangered, the present global population of Chinese Crested Tern is estimated at around 70–100 adult birds. There are three known breeding sites, with 2015 being the first year that birds bred successfully at all of them. The largest colony is at Tiedun Dao in the Jiushan Islands, with smaller colonies on the Wuzhishan Islands (also Zhejiang Province), and the Matsu Islands (the location of the species' rediscovery).

The most significant development in the species' conservation came in 2013, when Tiedun Dao was restored as a seabird colony. Vegetation was cleared, 300 tern decoys were placed on the island and solar-powered playback



Habitat restoration and the use of 300 tern decoys (see arrow) has brought terns back to Tiedun Dao (Simba Chan)



Field work near Seram Island, Indonesia in mid-January 2016 found at least one adult Chinese Crested Tern (Simba Chan)

systems were used to play the contact calls of Greater Crested Terns *T. bergii*, as well as their rarer relative; This conservation strategy was developed by Professor Steve Kress of Cornell University and Audubon (BirdLife in the USA). From late July, 19 adult Chinese Crested Terns (the largest count since the species'

rediscovery) and 2,600 Greater Crested Terns were present; by September, at least one juvenile Chinese Crested Tern had successfully fledged.

In 2014, a minimum of 43 adult Chinese Crested Terns were present on Tiedun Dao for the breeding season, a figure even bettered during 2015, when at least 52 adult

terns were attracted to the site by the decoys and sound-playback system. Remarkably, this constituted more than 70% of the global population; 25 pairs subsequently formed, fledging a minimum of 16 chicks.

Simba Chan, BirdLife's Asia Division Senior Conservation Officer, was instrumental in the colony's breeding success. For the second year running, he stayed on the island throughout the season to monitor and protect the birds, even braving a severe typhoon that struck during the middle of the breeding season, to ensure the colony's survival.

"Although the typhoon was very strong and hit us directly, less than 5% of the colony were casualties because we maintained vegetation to shelter the colony, and tried to discourage the chicks from moving down to the shore before the typhoon hit the island", says Simba



The past three breeding seasons has seen increases in Chinese Crested Tern pairs breeding at Tiedun Dao (Simba Chan)



Chan. “This shows how we could apply our scientific observations from the previous year to improve the survival rate of the terns”.

Solving the mystery of where Chinese Crested Terns winter

It is also hoped that another project may help to build more knowledge of this little-known species. In August 2015, some 31 crested tern chicks (probably all Greater Crested Terns, which share the colony with their rarer relatives) were ringed with numbered red bands at Tiedun Dao. This formed the first step in a systematic study that aims to investigate the movements of the colony’s terns and to start to build a definitive picture of where Chinese Crested Terns go during the non-breeding season. It is assumed that both species probably winter in the same localities; future observations of banded

birds will hopefully act as confirmation.

Other recent observations are already beginning to shed some light on this mysterious species’ movements. In mid-January 2016, at least one adult and possibly one first-year Chinese Crested Tern were seen in a flock of up to 250 Greater Crested Terns near Seram Island in Indonesia, approximately midway between Sulawesi and Papua, by a survey team led by Burung Indonesia (BirdLife Partner) and BirdLife’s Asia Division. Threats to the site and the birds were assessed in detail during the week long survey; the team also visited local university and government institutions to raise awareness of the nearby presence of this Critically Endangered seabird.

Despite its common name, Chinese Crested Tern was first found near Halmahera, in the Wallacea region of eastern Indonesia. However, after its 1861 discovery, the species was

not subsequently recorded in Indonesia (apart from an unverified record in Bali) until December 2010, when a lone bird was photographed near Seram. As a result of this initial sighting, along with further reports in 2014/15, BirdLife and Burung Indonesia believed that the area might perhaps be a regular wintering site. A survey team was formed, including local conservationists and three university students from Hong Kong.

“Although the number of Chinese Crested Terns found during the survey is low, it does confirm that the species is a regular wintering bird to the Seram Sea, and it is very likely that Wallacea is a main wintering area for this species. As the local authorities and community are starting to be aware of and feel proud of its presence, it will surely only be a matter of time before more sightings are reported from the region”, explains Simba Chan.

BirdLife is planning to carry out more surveys and outreach work around Seram in the future.



By Edward Parnell

The Tiedun Dao restoration project was initiated in 2010 by the Xiangshan Ocean and Fishery Bureau, the Zhejiang Museum of Natural History and the Wild Bird Society of Zhejiang, with technical support from the tern group at Oregon State University (USA) and Hong Kong Bird Watching Society. The Seram winter survey was sponsored by the Ocean Park Conservation Foundation, Hong Kong and BirdLife’s Preventing Extinctions Programme, with invaluable advice from Craig Robson. Both projects show the benefit of a team of partners working together to secure the future of a globally threatened species.