

# HKBWS Chairman, 1974-1982 looks back



## *The British Ornithologists' Union*

First, a correction. I must have impressed Brian Wilson more than I realised. . . M.B.O.U. (Member of the British Ornithologists' Union) simply indicates membership of the BOU, the world's leading ornithological society. Anyone can join; - all you need is someone to propose you, and an annual cheque for the subscription. The main benefit is its quarterly journal *Ibis*, much of which is way above my head. Perhaps the most interesting part of *Ibis* is the book review section. There should be some old copies in the Society's library. The "qualification" Fred Hechtel and I had which did require the passing of an informal test was the Bird Ringing Permit; I forget exactly how we got our Permits, but certainly someone experienced had to be satisfied that we were fit to be trusted with bird rings.

## Mai Po.

I first went to Mai Po on May 30, 1965. . . and was rewarded by a sighting of a Spoon-billed Sandpiper (not new to me, as I had the first sighting for Singapore a year or two before). Fred Hechtel was delighted; - I was not yet a member of the Society, and he wanted me to take over as Recorder from Maura Benham. The Society in those days was tiny, about 30-40 members, of whom only a few were active birders. The Society was, almost literally, held together by Commander Edgar Webb, who was Chairman, Treasurer, Bulletin Editor, convenor of outings, and almost everything else.

In the mid-sixties, we were mainly "simple birdwatchers", as Edgar Webb liked to describe himself. We were still finding out what birds could occur in Hong Kong, and many of the rarer species which are now seen every year were first recorded during this period. I can remember our first Asiatic Dowitcher, American Dowitcher (Long-billed or Short-billed; I forget which) and Spotted Greenshank among the Mai Po waders. Our first Yellow-bellied Tits and Greater Necklaced Laughingthrushes as well as several others were also seen in that period. Identification was a problem. For the Yellow-bellied Tit I actually carried my copy of La Touche's *Handbook of the Birds of Eastern China* to Tai Po Kau, and sat down to compare it feather by feather!

In 1966, the Cultural Revolution erupted in China. We did not know what was going to happen to Hong Kong, and understandably the Government here became preoccupied with relations with our giant neighbour. Conservation was not forgotten, though it had nothing like the priority which it has nowadays, and in 1968, Fred Hechtel produced the first detailed report on the Mai Po Marshes for a Government committee. From this early date, Fred, Dave Robertson and I, together with our fellow committee members of the HKBWS, already realised that Mai Po could only be conserved if we could get a lot of Chinese people involved, and if it could be presented as an educational facility. Clive Briffett developed this theme enthusiastically, initiating a number of schemes aimed at schools, but he was, as far as I remember, not in Hong Kong for very long. The first attempt to provide Chinese names for each species was made by Lawrence Tam, after discussion with me, in the 1972 edition of the Checklist, and most of Lawrence's names remain in use (*unless CY changed them when he wrote the Chinese version of Viney's Field Guide*).<sup>1</sup>

Michael Webster

It so happened that the South China Morning Post asked me to write a weekly article on birds, and this appeared regularly for almost four years. At the same time, I was Executive Secretary of the Conservancy Association. I lost no opportunity to publicise Mai Po and other conservation concerns in the papers and on radio, making me well-known (or notorious?) among expatriates. . . but not amongst the Chinese.

I also gave a series of lecture courses on birdwatching at the Hong Kong University Extra Mural Department, which attracted the first Chinese birders, one being C.Y.Lam. The Fairview Park project, which sliced off a large area of excellent birding marshland (where Pheasant-tailed Jacanas bred), was probably, in hindsight, a blessing in disguise. It enabled us to make vigorous protests, and to gain much-needed publicity. About this time General John Chapple became Commander British Forces, and was able to push for conservation of the marshes at a very high level. David Melville, in the Agricultural and Fisheries Department, was doing what he could to help.

In the late seventies, I became less active, and the development of Mai Po as an educational facility was carried through by World Wildlife Fund, with Clive Viney and David Melville. The number of Chinese birders gradually increased, largely because of CY, Albert Cheung and the Conservancy Association.

Parallel with this development was the increasingly scientific approach to identification, aided by good field guides illustrated in colour, and later by ringing schemes. My version of the Checklist was further improved by Mike Chalmers in about 1984, and again by the recent much more extensive *Avifauna of Hong Kong* by Geoff Carey and others.

I would hardly recognise the Society as it is now, nor would I recognise many of the species added to the Hong Kong list in the last 15-20 years! It is interesting to see the shift in emphasis towards ringing data and photography in recent reports. A living Society will continue to change, as it should, and in another fifty years it will be quite different from what it is now. This is how it should be.

The regular Reports and bulletins indicate that there are far more birds, and far more species, on the Mai Po Marshes than there were in the sixties and seventies. This has been brought about by the management of the core area by the World Wildlife Fund. . . and probably even more by the destruction of alternative habitats in China. This suggests that Mai Po is even more important now than when we started working for its conservation in the late sixties and early seventies.

<sup>1</sup> *Actually, both Lawrence Tam and CY Lam followed the Chinese bird names of Prof. CHENG Tso-hsin (ZHENG Zuo-Xin), - so few changes — Ed.*