

## THE CHANGING FACE OF BIRDING IN SINGAPORE

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### INTRODUCTION

During the early years after the founding of Singapore in 1819, trading in exotic birds was rampant. Many European collectors, the most famous being Alfred Russel Wallace (later to become a co-discoverer of the Theory of Evolution together with Charles Darwin), made extensive collections from the region (Bircham, 2007). Dead specimens were deposited in museums or were displayed in the living rooms of the upper class in Europe—this being a time when ornithology was in its developing stage. When shooting birds was frowned upon in Europe, studying them in the field became fashionable. However, in colonial Singapore, catching birds for food and trapping them for the cage-bird trade continued because, keeping cage birds had a long tradition in this part of the world (Layton, 1991).

In the mid-1960s, David Wells and Ian Nisbet established a bird-ringing centre in nearby Malaysia to coordinate activities under the Migratory Animal Pathological Survey or MAPS (Wang & Hails, 2007). Sponsored by the United States Army, the survey attracted the participation of birders in Singapore, mainly members of the Malayan Nature Society (MNS), British Army Bird Club and the Royal Air Force Ornithological Society. Working closely with their counterparts in Malaysia, these birders actively mist-netted and ringed migratory birds. The survey yielded much information on bird migration, breeding and moulting (McClure, 1998).

This article traces the transformation of the local birding scene from the early scientific-based, bird-ringing activities to the mainly recreational birdwatching of the 1980s to the present. We have now gone full circle and returned to the study of birds, but through photography.

### BIRDERS

In the mid-1960s, the Bird Study Group was formed by the then Singapore Branch of the MNS, now Nature Society (Singapore) or NSS. Although most of the birders were British expatriates working and living in Singapore, there were also a handful of locals, mostly students from the then University of Malaya, or later, the then University of Singapore (now the National University of Singapore). Enthused by the excitement of ringing mist-netted birds, a loose group of locals continued with the activity after the conclusion of the MAPS project. Led by Ng Soon Chye, then a young local birder, this group was active for two years (1975–1976), making studies of the migratory birds that were prevalent in the Serangoon Sludge Treatment Works and in neighbouring Johor, Peninsular Malaysia. Bird-ringing subsequently lost its appeal among birders but currently it is still undertaken by the staff members of the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve of the National Parks Board.

Activities of the Bird Study Group fluctuated as the mainly transient expatriate birders came and went. It was only in 1984 that a formal Bird Group was formed that saw continuity down the years. Still, the core birdwatchers were not locals though there was a concerted attempt to attract local participation. Activities were purely recreational—spotting and identifying the few hundred species of resident and migratory birds. Attempts were made at encouraging field observations on nesting and feeding behaviour, as documented in the early few volumes of *Singapore Avifauna*, the in-house newsletter of the NSS' Bird Group. Unfortunately, this was not sustained (Wee, 2006b).

Singapore birders have now been watching birds for nearly half a century. The birding community has grown and more locals have become adept at identifying birds in the field. This skill proved useful when surveying habitats and listing bird species. More than a handful of such habitats were earlier surveyed and eventually proposed for conservation to the Singapore government. Unfortunately, only the degraded mangrove area around Sungei Buloh saw success (Hale et al., 1987; Briffett, 2004; Hale, 2004; Wee & Hale, 2008). This area, designated the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve, is now one of Singapore's four nature reserves [Schedule of the Parks & Trees Act (Chapter 216)] and Singapore's only ASEAN heritage park (ASEAN, 2008).

So the birding community continued to watch birds and enthusiastically participated in recreational activities such as bird races, bird counts and censuses, all activities of which were practised earlier. As 'twitching' (compulsive bird watching, but merely to identify and check species off a list, like 'collecting' trophies) and merely listing became the order of the day, most birders gradually lost interest in making scientific field observations. This was aptly summarised when an eminent field ornithologist commented that there was a tendency among regional birders to "learn more and more about less and less" (S. Sreedharan, pers. comm.).

### **NATURE PHOTOGRAPHERS**

Up to the 1980s there were books aplenty on the flora and fauna of temperate countries, but few on tropical plants and animals. Most people grew up being more conversant with hummingbirds than sunbirds, and oaks trees rather than meranti trees. There was obviously an urgent need for local popular nature publications. But interest in the local flora and fauna was only just developing. The few nature writers that were around worked closely with nature photographers and the resulting collaboration saw the publication of the first popular colour book on regional insects by Murphy & Hun (1983). Bird photography came into its own later when Chew (1989, 1991) published his mainly portrait images of some local birds. There were a few other serious bird photographers then. One subsequently brought out a guide to the birds of Malaysia and Singapore (Strange, 2000) and others published magazine accounts on nesting studies (Ong, 1996, 1999; Poon, 1998). Hails (1987) published a book on the birds of Singapore that listed birdwatching sites and provided interesting snippets on the common species but then he used the services of an artist, rather than a photographer to illustrate his book.

The NSS subsequently formed an active Photo Group whose interest in the flora and fauna spawned a series of books on the different aspects of nature in Singapore (Chua, 1993, 2000, 2002, 2007).

### **BIRD PHOTOGRAPHERS**

The standard equipment of birders has always been a pair of binoculars. Those who could afford the more expensive but more powerful spotting scopes had the advantage of viewing birds from a further distance. When digital cameras came onto the scene, enterprising birders found a way to link the scope to their cameras. This resulted in reasonably good images of faraway birds without the need of powerful but expensive telephoto lenses. But digiscoping has its disadvantages. As distance increases, there is a need to increase exposure time. There is also the problem of subject movement because most birds are not cooperative enough to stay still long enough for motion free photographs.

As the price of digital cameras plunged with the rapid introductions of newer models during the early 2000s, a group of photographers came onto the scene, preferring the digital single-lens reflex (SLR) camera attached with telephoto lenses instead of scopes (Fig 1). The use of memory cards instead of film allowed photographers to expose almost unlimited numbers of photographs and to be able to immediately check on the quality of the results in the field. There were also longer and longer focal length lenses coming on to the market, as well as new accessories for those who could afford them (Fig. 2). All these contributed to the bird photography craze.

Popularity in bird photography in turn led to a number of online forums where members could keep others informed of sightings, showcase their images and seek assistance in the identifications of the birds they photographed.

The downside of this sudden interest was the droves of photographers that descended onto the scene whenever a new sighting, especially nesting, was located. Traditional birders complained of the stress photographers were creating for the nesting birds, especially when the latter use their flash equipment excessively. It should however be noted that these photographers were relatively new to wildlife photography and needed guidance and education on what to do and not to do when in the field. After all, even birders cannot claim to be all that considerate during their early years in the field. Unfortunately, the NSS lost an excellent opportunity to work closely with photographers when it spurned the attempt of a group of nature photographers to take over the Photo Group that was then in dormancy (Wee & Subaraj, 2006). The net result of this was the formation of the Nature Photographic Society (Singapore) that had a major role in further popularising bird photography.

Much to the credit of bird photographers, they have, time and again, proved their worth in documenting bird behaviour, albeit unconsciously. The availability of an image makes it difficult to dispute claims of new sightings, records, etc., especially by photographers who are not experienced birders. Also, an image allows for details, easily missed in the field by binocular-toting birders, to be carefully examined on the computer and in the comfort of the home. These images can be reviewed, magnified and even sent to the relevant experts for comments and confirmation. Not so when viewed through the binoculars where the fleeting moment seen can easily fade away, especially where details are concerned.



Fig. 1. K. C. Tsang with his photographic equipment in the field.

Fig. 2. Eric Tan with his state of the art DSLR equipment.

### BIRD BEHAVIOURAL STUDIES

In 2005, the Bird Ecology Study Group (BESG) was formed with the specific aim of encouraging the study of bird behaviour (Wee, 2006a). As birders had always only been watching birds, not strictly studying them, there have always been major gaps in the information on behaviour and ecology of local birds (Wells, 1999, 2007).

The BESG has since been working closely with bird photographers (Chan et al., 2007) and recently, it has formed an excellent alliance with the photographic online forum, Nature Pixels. Images showcased in the forum are now available to the BESG for posting at its website: <http://besgroup.talfrynature.com/>. Admittedly, most photographers are not well versed with bird behaviour. However, once documented, the images can always be sent for interpretation by specialist biologists, ornithologists included. This has proved to be a workable relationship and, so far, the website has been hugely successful in amassing information on the foods different bird species eat (Fig. 3), comfort behaviour (Fig. 4), courtship rituals (Figs. 5–6), nesting habits (Figs. 7–8), interspecific relationships (Chan et al., 2008), etc. More than 800 posts have so far been made, with the site proving to be a useful database on bird behaviour of the mainly local species.



CHANGEABLE HAWK EAGLE, ADULT DARK MORPH,  
31/01/2008, SINGAPORE, K C TSANG

Fig. 3. Changeable hawk eagle (*Spizaetus cirrhatus*) with a squirrel caught earlier.



Fig. 4. Chestnut-bellied malkoha (*Phaenicophaeus sumatranus*) sunning itself by a forest path.



Figs. 5–6. The effect of display by a male common iora (*Aegithina tiphia*) on a female was such that the latter fell over while still clutching on to the branch!



Fig. 7. Family of pink-necked green pigeons (*Treron vernans*) in its nest.



Fig. 8. Black-naped oriole (*Oriolus chinensis*) collecting nesting material.

Information collected is being slowly published in the print media as a way to formally acknowledge the efforts of contributors, albeit in a traditional manner (Lau & Tsang, 2006; Subaraj, 2006; Tang, 2006; Chan et al., 2007; Wee et al., 2006, 2008). Recently, we have begun publishing some of these in Nature in Singapore, an online journal of the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, National University of Singapore, in an effort to speed up the process (Wee, 2008; Chan et al. 2008; Cheah & Ng, 2008; Wee & Wang, 2008). Hopefully, this will encourage birders and photographers to report and publish their individual findings. After all, every small observation, however irrelevant it may seem, may prove to be an important item of bird behaviour when collated with other seemingly irrelevant observations and together, these may contribute immensely to local ornithology.

## CONCLUSIONS

Traditional birding in Singapore, being recreation-based, involves watching birds with binoculars. Birders visit specific sites where birds are known to congregate and spend hours looking for as many species as possible. Many birders still carry checklists with which they meticulously tick off species seen, and once seen, they move on to other yet unseen species. Such activities hone their identification skills and are extremely useful for surveys, censuses and other recreational activities but they miss out on observing important aspects of bird behaviour.

The entry of digital photographers onto the birding scene has shaken traditional birders out of their complacency. Previously just literally birdwatching, they are only just beginning to study birds as well. Indeed, it can be said that photographers have, in their own way, pushed the quality of birding up a notch. Extremely focused in locating birds and photographing their activities, these modern-day photographers are not satisfied in just acquiring portrait shots of the birds they encounter. They strive for more exciting compositions and in the process, unconsciously document many exciting behaviours that birders have so far failed to notice and report.

Bird photographers are currently at the forefront of new sightings and bird behavioural observations. Their excellent images are eagerly sought after for use in webpages, blogs, e-forums and print media—even those run by birders (Anon., 2008). The recent publication on the brood care of the chestnut-bellied malkoha (*Phaenicophaeus sumatranus*), where one of the co-authors is an award-winning photographer, is another example of this (Lok & Lee, 2008).

All these developments are for the good of the fraternity of birders, bird photographers and those interested in the study of bird behaviour. As Eric Tan, a prominent bird-photographer noted recently, this is an indication that the fraternity is slowly but surely maturing.

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