

Photographing friendly fowl

By Yu Nan

Waving and saying "goodbye" to his beautiful friends hovering and chirping in the crystal blue sky, Hu Yitian could hardly hold back the tears in his eyes.

He knew he wouldn't see them for several months until April, when winter ends and spring falls on Xingrentuo Island near the coastal city of Dalian in Northeast China's Liaoning Province.

The birds in question are a flock of 10 black-faced spoonbills (*platalea minor*) who were flying southward in September along East China's coast to escape from the harsh winters in the north.

These birds are also one of the world's most endangered species. "They will be coming back for breeding next spring and summer," said Hu.

Called "Man-shaped Island" (Xingrentuo), this is the only breeding site found on the Chinese mainland for black-faced spoonbills. Hu has shot hundreds of pictures of the birds over the past two years on the island.

"I miss them very much. And I am worried about the long journey facing them," Hu said. The pictures Hu has taken are his only link to them now. And Hu also hopes the pictures can arouse public awareness for the protection of the precious species.

"They are so elegant and beautiful and should be one of our best friends," he said.

“The birds could smell my love and care for them, and after a few days of connecting, they accepted me.”

HU YITIAN

Wildlife photographer

Endangered species

Hu said he knew little about birds until he was invited to take pictures of the black-faced spoonbills by one of his friends, Wei Guo'an, a researcher with the Institute of Zoology, Chinese Academy of Sciences.

The team Wei works with is in charge of a project studying the breeding habits of the black-faced spoonbill.

Studies on black-faced spoonbills, a kind of amphibious bird with white feathers, black cheeks and a long beak, began to surge in the early 1990s in China, when people found it harder to find the fowl which were once sizable in numbers.

An ever-growing search among scientists for the breeding sites thus began until researchers from the Chinese Academy of Sciences located Xingrentuo in 1998.

The tiny island, without any signs of human settlement or activity, is a paradise for more than 300 species of waterfowl, among which the black-faced spoonbills face the greatest peril.

According to statistics Wei cited from last year, there are only around 1,000 black-faced spoonbills left in the world.

The island, luckily, has maintained its tranquility and peace since it has been found.

"Only a few scientists and photographers are allowed to visit the island," Hu said. "The pictures Hu has taken are valuable research materials for us," said Wei. "They cover every tiny move and habit of the black-faced spoonbills during their three-month breeding period."

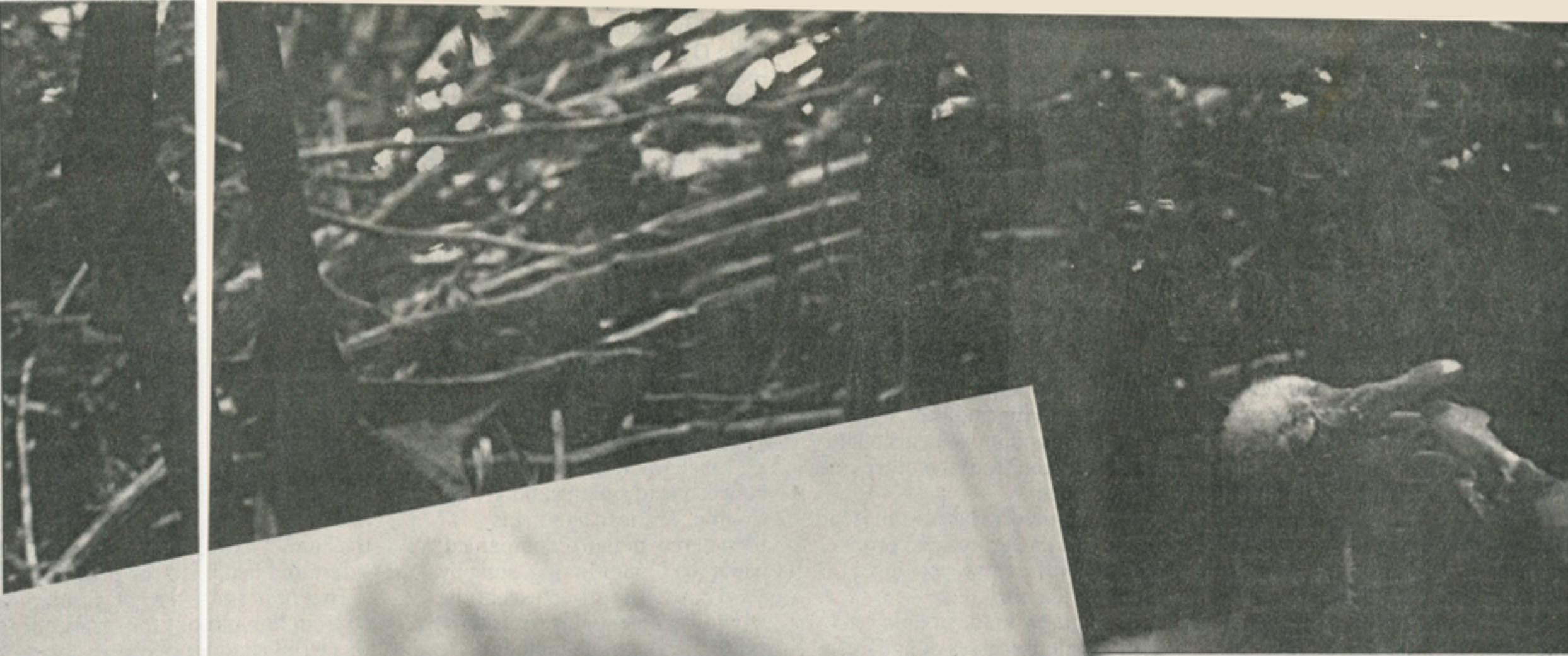
Making best friends
Taking pictures of black-faced spoonbills and befriending them is easier said than done, Hu said.

Hu's home in Shenyang, capital of Liaoning Province, is 300 kilometres away from the island. He commutes four hours by car and 40 minutes by boat to spend time with his feathered friends.

"The most difficult part was not the driving actually," Hu said. "It took me a long time to find ways to shoot close-up pictures without disturbing the birds' natural living conditions."

Hu spent three months in 2002 watching and studying the living habits of the bird, trying to find the best angles and places to take photos.

During the winter break when the birds fly south, he bought dozens of books to study the basic skills and rules involved with



A pair of black-faced spoonbills help each other while building a nest on Xingrentuo Island, near Dalian in Northeast China's Liaoning Province.

HU YITIAN

Hu Yitian poses for a picture during a trip to photograph black-faced spoonbills.

COURTESY OF HU YITIAN



photographing wild animals.

He even designed a small tent. The colour is close to the natural landscape of the island, and made it convenient for him to hide his camera. To avoid too much movement, he made a remote controller for adjusting the camera's angle.

"The birds could smell my love and care for them, and after a few days of connecting they accepted me," he said with pride.

"They looked as though nothing had happened when I tried to set up the camp and camera only 20 metres away from them," said Hu.

Hu spent all of his vacations and weekends from April to August with the birds last year.

"It was really a wonderful time," Hu said. "It is the black-faced spoonbills who have given me such a good chance to get close to nature and escape from bustling city life."

Hu, in his 40s, deals with stocks, securities and money in his working days as the manager of the Shenyang Sales Department with China Sci-tech Securities Ltd.

"Only when I was out on the island, ready to press the shutter, could I feel totally peaceful and relaxed in my heart. And by then, I thought about nothing but the amazing creatures in front of my lens," he said.

From photographer to protector
Hu said a natural feeling to protect the elegant birds would rise into his heart each time he saw them through the lens.

"Each movement of the bird is like that of a woman, slow and graceful," said Hu. "They never fight or chirp overly loudly."

Struck by their beauty, Hu began to read books and pay attention to news about bird protection.

Hu said he realized that one of the main reasons that the number of birds declines dramatically is because the wetlands and shallow sea areas, which the black-faced spoonbill relies on, have been seriously eroded by people.

Along the East China coast, people have reclaimed large areas of the shallow sea for raising profitable marine products, making it difficult for the birds to find food during their migratory trips.

"I hope my pictures can stimulate people's love for the black-faced spoonbill so that more people will join the efforts to better protect this disappearing species," he said.

Spoonbills number 1,000

The black-faced spoonbill (*platalea minor*) is a globally endangered species with a known worldwide population of around 1,000. It is only distributed along the eastern fringe of Asia.

The black-faced spoonbill is a large white wading bird with a distinctively shaped beak - looking like a spoon, or a *pipa* (Chinese pluck-stringed instrument). The facial skin is bare and black in colour - hence its name. It is about 76 centimetres long and weighs about 1 kilogram.

The black-faced spoonbill lives on fish and shrimp in shallow waters, mainly in coastal areas. Most of the East Asian coast is subject to very heavy pressure from dense human population involved in rigorous agricultural and industrial activities, which cause destruction and pollution of the birds' habitats.