

Paradise for birds

Catching close-ups of feathered travellers

By YU NAN
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At dusk, a small bird with enchanting black eyes, perched on a tiny branch, elegantly and leisurely plumbs its wings.

It did not seem to mind that a little more than 10 metres away, several people were excitedly watching it through telescopes and binoculars.

"This is the band-billed crane, remember the dark red colour of its feathers and the white bands on its belly," whispered Gerold Dobler, an ornithologist from Austria.

"It's so rare it is listed in the red data-book of endangered bird species."

Everyone was so busy catching a glimpse of the rare crane, a fine reward for their hours of waiting, that they almost ignored the black-crowned night herons flying over their heads, or the agile swallows chasing insects above the low bushes.

Just 100 metres east of the woods, the ocean waves roll in and out. More than 10 species of shore birds enjoy the sea breeze and a tasty meal of crab.

"The crane added a new name to my birding checklist," said Zhong Jia, aged about 50, who came from People's Daily and started to joined bird watching groups three years ago.

"The number of rare birds I've seen has increased to 270 in the past three years and my personal goal is to reach 300 this year," she said.

The nine-person bird watching team was mostly composed of Chinese journalists who had just finished covering the 23rd World Ornithological Congress in Beijing, which was held two weeks ago.

Happy Island

The peaceful place the avid bird watchers chose for their post-congress adventure is called Happy Island.

Situated in Laoting County of North China's Hebei Province, it is only a three-hour drive from Beijing and about 80 kilometres south of another famous bird watching place in China — Beidaihe.

Beidaihe won world recognition as a birding haven during the 1999 Sky and Ocean International Bird Watching Race, which attracted nearly 200 Chinese and overseas bird watchers.

Best-known as a summer resort for its beaches, Beidaihe is home to tens of thousands of vacationers between July and September each year.

"Compared to Beidaihe, Happy Island seems much more lucky," Zhong said, "because it is almost a pure paradise solely for birds and with little disturbance from tourists."

Happy Island's name came from Martin Williams, a British man who has been studying birds in the Beidaihe area since 1985.

He chanced upon the island in 1987 and his eyes kept on opening as wide as they could during the whole trip, recalled

Xu Xiaohong, director of the Beidaihe Convalescence and Tourism Administration, who accompanied Williams to the island.

Xu said Williams found the island was entirely free human activities, although it is located just a few kilometres from the mainland.

Being a great island for birds, ornithologists and bird watchers, its name was a logical choice.

From then on, international bird watchers flocked in spring and autumn to the tiny island, which is 2 kilometres long and 1 kilometre wide, as it played host to numerous migrating birds, mainly shuttling between Siberia and South China.

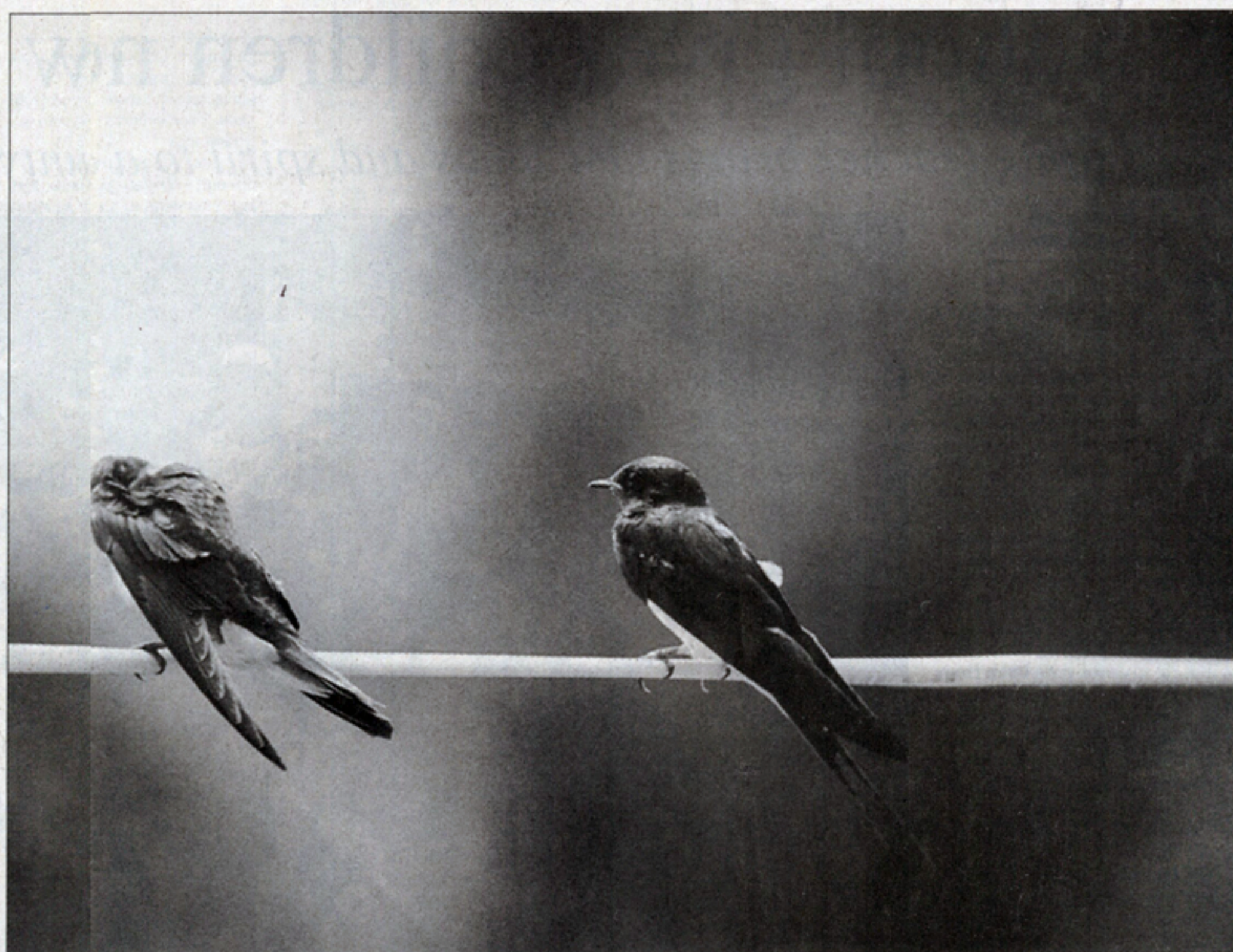
The island's name then spread rapidly among bird watchers worldwide, who gave it the Chinese name of *Kuaile Dao*.

Only locals still call it by its original Chinese name, Shijiu Tuo.

Situated between Bohai Bay to the east and the Yanshan Mountain Range to the west, the island provides feathered travellers with a resting place.

While there are more than 9,000 species of birds in the world, 1,200 can be seen in China and about 400 have been spotted at Beidaihe. "The number on Happy Island will be about the same due to its proximity to Beidaihe and their similar geographical conditions," according to Dobler.

"It is one of the best places for bird watching in East Asia. The varying geographical



Barn Swallow

ERIC HAU

condition and changing weather gives different birds everyday is part of the fun for bird viewers."

Conneq birds

Except Dobler, Zhong and Yu Haiyan, Guangzhou TV Station, led in South China's Guangdong province, most team members were beginners in birding, a short training course necessary.

Zhong appointed as the teacher. Said a telescope, binoculars and an illustrated bird book were requirements for bird-watching. And to avoid disturbing birds, bright-colour clothing it allowed.

"Altho it is the hottest days in area, long-sleeve shirts, trousers and galls of insecticide are strongly recommended because during the whole n, the island is alive with nites," Zhong said.

"Emorning is a good time for watching, when the birds are feeding."

So land trip started at 7:30 am a 5-minute ride on a small boat.

The island is covered with shrubs and a scattering of bushes by small tracks. Due to small size, a bird watcher easily cover the island or.

The coming bird was a brown one, quietly sitting on top of bushes. Dobler explained it was waiting for chance to catch its insect breakfast at evening speed, after it spotted.

Having been to the island several times, Zhong suggested that the members go through a small wooded area. It was a shortcut to get to the beach and a good place to find forest birds.

But mosquitoes came before the birds, dozens of them rushed to the intruders' legs, arms and even faces. Although protected by clothes and insect repellent, no one emerged from the woods unscathed.

But the small group quickly put aside the discomfort caused by the insects after Yu Haiyan spotted a small dark-green bird in the branches of a fir.

Everyone fixed their telescope on the tree and no one spoke.

The silence was broken by a small dispute over the name of the bird until Dobler whispered to the group that it was an arctic warbler, identifiable by its white, long and thin brow lines and distinctive chirping.

To get to the beach before the tide had ebbed too far out, taking all of the shore birds, the team decided to leave the mosquito and spider-web-ridden area and rush to the shore.

But the original shortcut was stopped by noisy human construction.

Workers pointed out the right way and explained that they were repairing an old temple, which was expected to attract more tourists besides bird watchers.

"It shows that the value of the place is obviously unknown to the local people," Zhong sighed.

Luckily, shore birds such as dunlins, gulls and plovers seemed undaunted by the construction noise.

They peacefully gathered around, catching food or resting. Dobler explained the difference between various species of dunlins and plovers and how to spot them by distinguishing between the length of their beaks, body size and the colour of their claws.

"Most birds are molting in preparation for winter so it's harder to identify them than in spring," Dobler said.

Most of the team were busy checking the guide book after finding a new species, in an effort to find its name and body characteristics.

They were excited to find out they could accurately distinguish between eastern and Eurasian curlews and Asian dowitchers.

Not satisfied with watching birds through telescopes, Ding even took off his shoes to walk into the mud to gain a closer look.

Maybe because he moved so slowly the birds felt he meant no harm — they did not fly away even when he stopped less than 10 metres away.

Yu was pleased to add so many new birds to her watching list, most of which she had no chance of seeing in her hometown in South China's Guangdong Province.

The joy overcame her weariness



Asian Brown Flycatcher

ERIC HAU



Take a closer look: Most of the group members are well equipped with binoculars to search for birds and a telescope for close-up views.

ROBERT A. THIEM



Ardent observers: Bird watchers on Happy Island look at a species they have never seen before.

ROBERT A. THIEM



Map of Happy Island.

ness after carrying the same heavy equipment as the men, a binocular to search for the animals and a half-metre-long telescope for catching close-ups.

Yu said she began to watch birds in her childhood because one of her neighbours was a university biology teacher.

The neighbour taught Yu how to watch birds in their natural environment, to find differences in their behaviour and most importantly, to love and protect them.

"Birds are friends of humans," Yu said.

"They are connected with us in nature."

Join the group

Zhong regretted that although China is one of the countries gifted with a rich bird life, the number of people appreciating its beauty is still small.

There is only about 100 people regularly taking part in birding trips around the country.

"I believe the number will increase rapidly as more and more people recognize the fun of it," Zhong said.

She said most trips were or-

ganized by the Friends of Nature and the Green Earth Volunteers, two environmental non-governmental organizations based in Beijing. There is also a regular training course given by Zhao Xinru, a biologist from Beijing Normal University, every Wednesday evening at the university.

The bird watchers, most of whom are students and professors who study birds, exchanged their experiences during the breaks.

And through the Internet, bird watchers from Xiamen, in East China's Fujian Province, South China's Guangdong Province and the Beijing and Shanghai municipalities share new findings, questions and answers.

"Birds are everywhere around us, in the parks, on the windows, above the antennae," Zhong said.

"Holding binoculars is no harder than holding a camera. Bird watching offers a good chance to think about ourselves."

"Humans and birds used to be harmonious. It's humans who destroyed the harmony and we should stop right now."