

Rare crane a boost to Taiwan's troubled wetlands

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The bird migration zone that links Siberia with tropical Asia and southern New Zealand for some 50 million waterbirds

It has a Facebook page, two books and its own brand of rice. A Siberian crane that landed in Taiwan after getting lost on migration over a year ago even made international headlines when it was found wandering

outside a train station.

But to conservationists, the [crane](#) is known as more than just a flash-in-the-pan media star. It is a godsend in their push for environmentally friendly farming as the island's birds suffer at the hands of development and pollution.

Taiwan is a mid-point stop on one of the world's eight major migratory routes and a wintering ground for numerous waterbirds from Siberia, China, Japan and Korea on their way further south.

However, in some areas of the island waterbird numbers are down due to the destruction of habitats.

There had never been any reported sightings of the rare white crane in Taiwan until December 2014 when the crane first made the wetlands after taking a wrong turn on its migratory route.

It hit the headlines again last winter when it was found wandering around a subway station in Taipei and was returned once more to Jinshan.

The Siberian crane is on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's red list of critically endangered species with an estimated population of less than 4,000.

"I didn't expect the crane to stay. I thought it would fly away very soon," said farmer Huang Cheng-chun, whose rice and lotus field is nicknamed "little crane base" since the bird took residence there.



The Siberian white crane that landed in Taiwan after getting lost on migration over a year ago made headlines

"When I work, the crane follows me around. It's like a friend to me. It's been helpful by eating a lot of apple snails (a pest) in the field."

As the crane helped rid them of pests, more farmers in the area agreed to go green to protect the bird's health, a boost for ecologists, who had until then been struggling to persuade them to stop using pesticides, rat poisons and herbicide.

Last year, pre-orders for "Jin Ho rice"—which combines Jinshan and the Chinese word for crane "Ho"—were sold out months before the harvest.

The eco-friendly farming area in Jinshan has now expanded from 3.5 to 10 hectares.

"It's inevitable that the bird will leave," said Liao Jen-hui, director of the Taiwan Ecological Engineering Development Foundation.



Jeff Yeh, director of the Guandu Nature Park, checks on an injured green-winged teal while patrolling a park in Taipei

"We hope that by the time it's gone, eco-friendly farming and the Jin Ho rice brand will be well established."

Thanks to safer farming methods, the Chingshui wetland now has an abundance of food for birds and more migratory flocks stopping by, including the black kite, rarely seen there previously, the foundation said.

Disappearing habitats

But elsewhere in Taiwan, habitat destruction caused by industrial development and pollution is taking its toll.

While the number of endangered black-faced spoonbills hit a record total of 2,060 in January this year, only 14 were seen on the northeastern coast of Yilan, half the number from 2014, the Chinese Wild Bird Federation said.



A common sandpiper searches for food in polluted water at the Hua Chiang wetlands in Taipei

The decrease was likely linked to wetlands being converted into bed-and-breakfasts and aquaculture ponds, said Tsai Shih-peng, president of the

federation.

In central Changhua county, the number of far eastern curlew has dropped from around 3,000 in 1993 to 600 in recent years since a huge coastal industrial park was set up, he added.

"There have been many cases of wetlands being filled up for economic and industrial projects that damaged the habitat, especially smaller plots that attracted less attention," added Jeff Yeh, director of the Guandu Nature Park in Taipei.

The Guandu wetland, a major wintering ground for waterbirds in northern Taiwan, was saved from being turned into a stadium in 1996 after lobbying from civil groups to protect the area.



A flock of Black-winged Stilts fly above a wetland at the Guandu Nature Park in Taipei

Cruelty to birds

There are also new man-made threats, especially with the trend of posting image of birds on social media, said Chinese Wild Bird Federation's Tsai.

Some birdwatchers use food to lure a bird out and throw stones if it is not a rare kind. They were also seen trimming trees to expose bird nests, removing chicks from nests or chasing birds in wetlands in order to snap better shots, according to Tsai.

In one shocking case, a Japanese bush warbler, a migratory bird found in Taiwan in the winter, died after swallowing a pin believed to be used by birdwatchers to keep a worm in place so they could photograph it eating.

"These people are not interested in ornithology or conservation. They just want to take more photos of birds than their peers and get more 'liked' on their Facebook for their vanity," Tsai said.

Besides protecting the wetland habitat, promoting public awareness of conservation is a major task for the Guandu Nature Park, which operates weekend birdwatching activities as well as school field trips and guided tours to the wetland, said director Yeh.

"Having one more ally is better than having one more enemy. When one more person acknowledges our conservation concept, even if it's just not to litter, it will have some direct impact."

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