

In Taiwan, bird catchers turn bird watchers

4 December 2009, by Benjamin Yeh



This undated handout photo provided by the Fengshan Township shows a brown shrike in Taiwan's southern Hengchun area. For centuries, people in subtropical southern Taiwan would look forward to autumn and winter, when migratory birds would fly in from northern Asia. But over the past generation the situation has changed, and the birds are now referred to as "friends from far away."

When Yeh You-chin was a boy half a century ago, he ate migratory birds with relish, but now he is at the forefront of efforts to preserve the feathered visitors to his south Taiwan home.

Yeh, the 59-year-old chief of Fangshan township, recently opened an exhibition hall devoted to the brown shrike, which passes through the area every year -- and until recently did so at great risk to itself.

"I remember how the air was filled with the strong smell of roasted shrikes," said Yeh. "Some villagers made more money catching birds than people in the cities."

Times have changed, and conservation efforts have now moved to the forefront of most people's minds in this rural part of Taiwan. The exhibition hall is testimony to this development.

"People visiting the exhibition centre can learn about brown shrikes, their relationship with human

beings and their plight once they are caught in traps," Yeh said.

For centuries, people in subtropical southern Taiwan would look forward to autumn and winter, when migratory birds would fly in from northern Asia.

They called them "divine blessings" because of the delicious flavour they added to the simple rustic fare they normally put on their dinner tables.

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The dozens of species of migratory birds are now seen as more useful alive than dead, because they can help boost tourism revenues.

Persistent conservation efforts have paid off, as a less-dangerous environment has attracted more birds each year, in turn also luring more tourists to regions such as Hengchun near the southern tip of the island.

"The Hengchun area has become one of the world's top 20 spots for appreciating birds of prey," said Tsai Yi-zung, a bird expert at Kenting National Park in south [Taiwan](#).

Among these is the grey-faced buzzard, better known here as "National Day bird" because its arrival roughly coincides with the island's National Day celebrations on October 10.

This year, the number of grey-faced buzzards in September and October hit a 20-year high of 49,000, according to a survey done by the national park.

"People's thinking has changed completely over the past 25 years," said Tsai.

"I can't guarantee no one here ever eats a bird, but it's definitely a very, very small number."

This is not just because Taiwanese are now so prosperous that they no longer have to rely on wildlife for vital extra protein.

Law also plays a role, and both the rules and their implementation have become stricter, with illegal bird catchers risking jail of up to six months.

But there is still room for improvement, said Yu Weidaw of the Taipei-based Chinese Wild Bird Federation.

Police arrested two hunters at Hengchun in October and later made a rich haul at their homes, discovering 36 slaughtered grey-faced buzzards.

Meanwhile, educational programmes sponsored by the national park seek to make the schoolchildren more conscious of the need to protect the island's natural heritage.

"Many of the children who have been through the programmes have become adults, and they, unlike their parents, no longer eat the [migratory birds](#)," Tsai said.

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