



MAI PO: THE SEASONS

A PHOTOGRAPHIC ESSAY



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DAVID DISKIN

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INTRODUCTION

As the waters of the Pearl River Estuary run south towards the South China Sea, they cut northeast into the coast near Shekou, forming the inlet known as Deep Bay. The name is misleading as it refers to the length of the coastal indentation rather than its depth. The bay is, in fact, very shallow. With a tidal range of 2.8 metres, at low tide acres of mud are exposed and this mud supports a rich and complex eco-system.

Myriad species of worms, shellfish and shrimps are abundant under the brown ooze and in the shallow tidal water, and crabs and mudskippers are obvious throughout the year out on the exposed mud itself. This abundance of aquatic life attracts thousands of birds to feed, and it is for its avifauna that Deep Bay is most well-known.

The World Wide Fund for Nature Hong Kong began to manage the gei wai (shrimp ponds) adjacent to Deep Bay at Mai Po in 1983, and Mai Po's status as a wetland of international importance was recognised in 1995 when it became a designated Ramsar site. Up to 90,000 birds feed on the mud flats during the winter months comprising roughly 70 different species. Peak counts in recent years have consisted of 10,000 cormorants, 13,000 ducks and grebes, 3,000 herons and egrets, 8,000 gulls and 22,000 shorebirds. In addition, up to 24,000 shorebirds – many of them from as far away as Australasia – use the mud flats as a place to refuel during spring migration to their northern breeding grounds.

Thirty-five of the 400 or so bird species that have occurred at Mai Po are on the Red List of threatened species drawn up by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), including regular migrants such as Swinhoe's Egret, Falcated Duck, Greater Spotted Eagle, Eastern Imperial Eagle, Nordmann's Greenshank and Spoon-billed Sandpiper. Most important perhaps is the Black-faced

Spoonbill. Mai Po is one of the few sites where this endangered species winters regularly and it has in the past held up to 25% of the known world population.

Although the emphasis is on birds, the reserve has been managed to increase its ecological diversity and a variety of other animals and plants can be found. The numbers are impressive: 104 butterfly species, 52 different dragonflies, 29 amphibians and reptiles, and 18 native mammals have been observed in the area.

This book is not meant to be a comprehensive account of the fauna and flora of Mai Po. Rather, it is a personal photographic exploration of the marshes, and details the changes that occur on the reserve and the surrounding area during the course of a year, from summer through to the following spring.

I have been visiting Mai Po as a bird watcher since the early 1990s and began photographing there in 2009. The text for *Mai Po: The Seasons* covers the period from June 2013 to May 2014 – a time when I visited the reserve two to three times a week. Most of the images were taken during this period, but I have also included some taken in earlier years.

I have concentrated on birds as they are my primary interest, but I have also been drawn to the landscapes, flora and fauna (particularly insects and spiders) to be found around the marshes.

For me, Mai Po is a fascinating, at times magical place, and I hope that some of that beauty and magic is captured in the images and words that follow.

David Diskin
Hong Kong



Black-faced Spoonbills *Platalea minor*

Page 1	Pied Avocets <i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>
Page 2	Sunset over the southern end of the reserve
Page 3	Pied Kingfisher <i>Ceryle rudis</i>
Page 4	Great Cormorants <i>Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis</i> at sunset
Page 8	White-winged Tern <i>Chlidonias leucopterus</i>
Page 9	Mangroves in gei wai

Pheasant-tailed Jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus*



AUTUMN

Low pressure systems at the end of August and in early September bring heavy rain to Hong Kong.

On the first day of September, there are at least 400 Wandering Gliders *Pantala flavescens* over one of the ponds, and doubtless hundreds more elsewhere on the reserve. This species is migratory, moving in front of tropical storms so that when heavy rain occurs the dragonflies lay their eggs in the temporary pools formed by the storm, or any more permanent wetland pools they encounter on landfall. The larvae develop within one or two months – an exceptionally rapid rate for a dragonfly – to take advantage of the temporary pools, although presumably the mortality rate is high if these pools dry up quickly.

Now, migrant songbirds on passage to their wintering quarters in southeast Asia begin to occur. Bad weather often forces them down and on September 6th, after two days of rain, I find Yellow-rumped Flycatcher, Asian Brown Flycatcher, Arctic Warbler and Oriental Reed Warbler on the reserve. All of these are expected migrants. The most numerous passerine migrant on the 6th, however, is the Pallas's Grasshopper Warbler. Members of the Hong Kong Bird Ringing Group trap 46 in mist-nets set up amongst the reedbeds, yet there is little sign of this skulking species elsewhere on the reserve. (I do, however, have one fly through the open shutters into one of the hides out on the mud flats on September 9th. The bird thrashes up and down in the dark interior before finally flying out the way it came in).

Wader migration continues, but for some species the peak movement has already passed. In September, the larger waders are conspicuous; smaller waders are in very low numbers.

Typhoon Usagi begins as a tropical depression east of Luzon on September 17th. As it moves west across the Pacific it intensifies into a super typhoon on September 20th. It continues to move west between Taiwan and the Philippines and passes just to the north of Hong Kong on the night of September 22nd. Although it causes far less harm than predicted, it damages the boardwalk hides and brings in an unseasonal variety of gulls, terns and jaegers to the relative shelter of Deep Bay. These birds soon move on, although 23 Whiskered Terns over the ponds at Lut Chau on September 26th may have been brought in by the storm.

The first stirrings of the northeast monsoon are felt in the middle of the month and a breeze tempers the heat, although temperatures still reach an uncomfortable 30°C during the day. After the mid-autumn festival, however, the northeast monsoon becomes more noticeable

and temperatures at the end of the month fall below 30°C, finally bringing a vague autumnal feel to the territory. The first Great Cormorants arrive from the north, albeit in single-digit numbers.

In mid-October a cold front from the north forces temperatures down further into the twenties, which makes walking in the middle of the day more comfortable than it has been for several months. Dawn and dusk are refreshingly cool. There is an arrival of wintering birds around this time, most noticeably an influx of Great Cormorants. Suddenly, there are parties of hundreds flying in skeins away from their roost on the reserve in early morning, or feeding in densely packed rafts on the gei wai or out in the bay. In addition, 30 Black-faced Spoonbills are counted and duck become more noticeable: a flock of 113 Eurasian Teal and eight Garganey occur on the scrape. The first few Northern Pintail and Eurasian Wigeon are seen.

Almost all of the drupes of *Cerbera* have now fallen from the trees and the pods of Sea Sword Bean are turning brown and rotting. But other plants are coming into fruit. There are berries on the Hong Kong Hawthorn bushes and the Chinese Feverine vines. The red berries of *Ardisia elliptica* that can be found on the edge of mangroves near the scrape are slowly deepening to dark red.

The flowers of the copious *Bidens alba* that line the bunds on the reserve are now beginning to wither and seed. However, there are still enough of the daisy-like flowers to attract nectar-feeding insects, especially butterflies. Common Awl and Chocolate Royal are visible once again after an absence of a few weeks, and there is an emergence of Red-base Jezebels here and elsewhere in Hong Kong. This is a peak time for butterflies, and other species visible on the reserve that I don't recall seeing in summer include Common Tiger, Common Bluebottle, Long-tailed Blue, Angled Castor and Great Mormon.

Some people refer to this time as a "second spring" as the increase in butterflies corresponds with an increase in the number of plants in flower. I come across a few distinctly out-of-season flowering Spiny Bear's Breech and Hong Kong Hawthorn, but others are expected: *Ipomoea triloba* with its pale purple corollas; the pale red spherical inflorescences of the Sensitive Plant; the distinctive lilac-and-white Passion Flower; yellow Cuban Bast flowers; the tiny green flowers of the Pop-gun Seed trees, that are so attractive to wasps and bees; and the lilac racemes of Lily Turf in the shade beside the car park.

At the end of October, the flowers of *Mikania micrantha* dominate the scene. This creeper, known in English as Mile-a-minute Weed, is na-



Daurian Redstart *Phoenicurus aureus*, male

tive to South America but has been widely introduced in the tropics, including Hong Kong where it is common. As its name indicates it spreads rapidly once it has set seed, twining over the tops of other plants –at Mai Po mainly mangrove – depriving them of sunlight and nutrients and, over time, effectively smothering them. The small white flower heads persist through November into December.

Bird numbers continue to increase. By the end of October, at least 190 Black-faced Spoonbills are on the reserve, roosting on one of the shallower ponds and flying off together soon after dawn. Greater Spotted and Imperial Eagles have been sighted and the first gulls are seen out on the mud flats.

During November, more wintering cormorants, herons, waders and ducks arrive so the main reserve seems to be alive with birds. Ducks in particular are of interest as the males are now moulting from eclipse and juvenile stages and assuming their far more colourful breeding plumage. Apart from the commoner species, there are reports of Gadwall, Common Pochard and the rare Baikal Teal, although the latter is only present for one or two days. Out on the mud flats there is now a wider variety of gulls, including the threatened Saunders's Gull which can be seen hunting crabs over the exposed mudflats. Several thousand small waders, mainly Dunlin and Kentish Plover, are now present and perform aerial manoeuvres en masse if disturbed by a raptor such as a Peregrine.

Smaller birds such as Dusky Warbler, Stejneger's Stonechat and Olive-backed Pipit are also present on the bunds around the reserve. The most striking, however, is the male Daurian Redstart with its deep orange underparts and contrasting black face and silver-grey crown.

At the end of the month, a surge of the northeast monsoon causes temperatures in the New Territories to fall to around 10° Celsius, marking the definite arrival of winter.





Great Cormorants *Phalacrocorax carbo sinensis*

Great Cormorants arrive in Hong Kong from their Mongolian breeding grounds in October. Over 10,000 birds regularly occur in the Deep Bay area, making this one of the largest wintering populations in Asia.



Black-faced Spoonbills *Platalea minor*

On the IUCN Red List, the Black-faced Spoonbill is classified as Endangered. It breeds on cliffs and islets off the coasts of Korea and northeast China, and winters mainly at wetland locations in Japan, Taiwan and southern China. The annual census in January 2014 found a total world population of 2,726 individuals, which is a considerable increase over the 300 birds that were known to exist in the 1980s.

The count of birds wintering at Deep Bay in the twenty-first century peaked at 496 in December 2010, but numbers have fallen since then to a low of 252 in January 2014. The reason for this local decline is unknown.



Black Kite *Milvus nigrans lineatus*, juvenile, in flight

The Black Kite occurs in Hong Kong throughout the year. About 30 pairs breed annually and there is also a significant non-breeding population present during the summer months. Numbers increase markedly from October to March, with a peak in winter. The highest count on a single day in the territory is 11,424 on 5 February 2005. The species is regular at Mai Po in all months and at least one pair breeds in the area.



Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus spilonotus* in flight

This species is a regular passage migrant and winter visitor to the Deep Bay marshes. The highest count is of 11 birds on 7 January 1989.



Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus spilonotus* and **Collared Crow** *Corvus torquatus* in flight





Eastern Marsh Harrier *Circus spilonotus* being mobbed
by **Eurasian Magpie** *Pica pica*



Marsh Sandpipers *Tringa stagnatilis* and **Common Redshanks** *Tringa totanus* in Deep Bay at high tide

