In search of warmer air and food

State’s coastline a stop pit for Chinese egrets and other migratory birds before flying further south

ZHONG LOONG, a Chinese egret from China, leads a very busy life. Like all of its own kind as well as other migratory waterbirds, in eight weeks or so it must find a female to mate, make a nest, raise its young, stock up on extra fat and energy and make sure its young is big and strong enough to fly long distance journey.

This is because the birds need to escape the annual winter that normally comes in November. Otherwise come winter time, they will die of cold and starvation.

So between July and September, Xiao Loong will join million other migratory birds leave their breeding countries in the northern hemisphere — some as far as Siberia — to South-East Asia where the weather is warmer and there is more food.

Some birds will fly further down to Australia. The birds travel through the invisible “East Asian-Australasian Flyway”, one of the nine routes used by millions of migratory birds worldwide. Based on global surveys, it is estimated that more than five million birds will journey between 10,000km and 12,000km to warmer places in the southern hemisphere annually to escape the winter.

Adult birds will normally fly south first, leaving the juveniles to find their own way later.

Some can fly non-stop up to 8,000km, which is equivalent to three to six days.

One of the places where these birds will stop over while on their journey is the Sarawak coastline. Xiao Loong and its fellow migratory buddies will spend a few months finding food on the rich mudflats and sandflats during low tides, at the same time roosting along the coastline till late March.

In the world, the Chinese egret is a globally threatened species with about only 4,000 left in the wild.

Annual surveys such as the Asian Waterbird Census and birdwatching activities at selected areas by local ornithologists (bird researcher) and conservationists estimate between 500 and 600 Chinese egrets are found in the state during the wintertime in the northern hemisphere.

The highest count for Chinese egret sighting is in Bako-Bunting Bay in Kuching, with about 400 birds, said a local bird expert and Malaysian Nature Society (MNS) member Daniel Kong.

“Therefore, Sarawak coastline is an important feeding and roosting ground for Chinese Egrets. The state is also equally important for other migratory water-birds species,” he told The Star here recently.

It also supports near threatened species like Nordmann’s Greenshank, Asian Dowitcher and Far Eastern Curlew. Species like Common Sandpiper, Terek Sandpiper, Common Red Shank, Common Green Shank, Greater Sand Plover and Lesser Sand Plover are also seen feeding on the mudflats and sandflats here.
This has prompted local conservationists and ornithologists to initiate an ambitious project — to conduct a waterbird survey along Sarawak coastline encompassing the western tip in Tanjung Datu right up to Lawas.

Sarawak Forestry Corporation (SFC) and MNS Birds Conservation Council Waterbirds Group had conducted the Sarawak Waterbirds Survey, the first of its kind in the state, on the entire coastline of the state’s key sites to identify and count the number of waterbirds during the northern winter period from October 2010 to March last year.

The survey, which covered about 1,000km of the state’s coastline, also involved volunteers from Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (Unimas) and Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), said Kong.

“It provides important and much-needed data for future water birds conservation efforts in the state.

“The survey was done on land and by air. The team is now in the midst of compiling all data.”

Funded by MNS through the MNS Merdeka Award, the findings from the survey will serve as a basis for future policy and management strategies for wetlands and water birds in Sarawak.

The project also aims at building capacity of members, participation of stakeholders and volunteers in water birds identification and monitoring as well as wetland habitat surveys.

It also hopes to increase awareness of the importance of the state’s coastline for waterbirds and wetland habitats at local, national and international level through awareness, training, publications and sharing of output with stakeholders and relevant organisations.

Kong also said SFC together with Kuching and Miri MNS had been holding community/school outreach programmes along the coastal towns Telok Melano, Sematan, Sampadi, Sebuyau, Maludam, Tanjung Manis, Mukah, Miri, Limbang, Lawas and Bintulu to create public awareness of the importance of migratory waterbirds.

The final outreach programme was held for 60 primary and secondary school students and teachers at Similajau National Park last month.

“Waterbirds are also known as shorebirds,” said Kong.

In the world, there were 15 families of waterbirds comprising 222 species, out of which 10 families (67%) and 61 (27%) species could be found in Malaysia.

In Malaysia, the waterbirds are categorised into six main groups namely herons, egrets and ibiterns; stork and ibises; ducks and grebes; rails and crakes; gulls and terns; and shorebirds.

About 62% of waterbirds recorded in Malaysia are migrants, with vagrants (23%), migrant/vagrants (5%), resident (5%), resident/migrant (3%) and resident/vagrant (2%).

Kong said the waterbirds normally arrived on Sarawak shores in October and between late March and May, these birds would fly back to their breeding ground in the north.

However, not all would travel back, he said, adding that birds that flew back would repeat the marathon journey to the south as winter approached.

“These birds fly according to the position of the sun and stars, magnetic field of the earth and landmarks,” he explained.

Kong said the decline in the population of migratory waterbirds due to hunting and conversion of coastal land that resulted in the destruction of their nesting and roosting sites should be of grave concern to all.

“Waterbirds are important indicators of the ecological condition and health of wetland ecosystems.

“Their future is in our hands,” he concluded.
**Group hunting:** Little egrets perching and waiting on a rope over the water, tucking in their necks and crouching in a low forward position over the water for their prey. - YAP CHEE HONG / The Star

**Hunting to stock up:** Chinese egret, a globally threatened waterbird, should be made the iconic bird for Bako-Buntal Bay. - Photo courtesy of TK Ting of MNS.

**Candid shots:** MNS birders watching graceful birds as they return home to the mangrove to roost and feed along the mudflats.
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Hunting ground: Mangrove trees are planted in neat rows on the mudflats of Kampung Bako. The mudflats are important area for migratory waterbirds to feed and rest.