Getting Serious about Birding in China

When Zhong Jia took her first birding lesson in 1997, she never expected she would be organizing China's first national birding contest some five years later.

“I never cared much about pets or wild animals before,” confesses the senior journalist with the People's Daily based in Beijing. “I just took part casually in birding activity in a Beijing park, but started to become intrigued by what the instructor said about birds. There is so much about them! I found it a good challenge to learn all about them—their identification, habitats, migration routes, diet, etc.”

Besides, she says, as an office worker she enjoyed the opportunity to get close to Nature through birding. “All at once I became addicted to it,” says the 49-year-old journalist. “I think their wisdom—or the wisdom of Nature—as manifested in their pretty colors, living styles, and behaviors, is so fascinating, and they give much inspiration to me as a human being.”

In the past few years, Zhong has never missed one of the weekly lectures on birding given by professors from Beijing Normal University. And she has been to many places to watch birds, such as the beach at Beidaihe in North China, the grasslands of Inner Mongolia, the Yellow River delta in the east, forests in Central China, and lake areas in the south. “So far, I have spotted over 380 bird species,” she says.

But even when she made her first trip to the East Dongting Lake near Yueyang, Hunan Province, in South China in February 1998, she could not imagine that four years later she would play a key role in establishing China's first national birding contest there.

On that trip with nine other bird-lovers, “I spotted over 60 bird species,” recalls Zhong. That tally was not bad for a beginner, and Zhong left with pride in herself and a good impression of the East Dongting Lake as a national natural reserve.
Dongting, China’s second-largest freshwater lake with a water expanse twice the size of Hong Kong, is home to some 255 bird species, including 158 migratory wintering species, among them Swan Goose (Anser cygnoides), Lesser White-fronted Goose, Tundra Swan, Oriental White Stork (Ciconia boyciana), and Siberian Crane (Grus leucogeranus).

Ever since birding began to draw more and more people in China in the mid-1990s, East Dongting has become one of the hot field-birding attractions. “The reserve is extraordinarily alluring,” Zhong says. But the idea to have it as a site for a national birding contest did not occur to Zhong Jia until March 2002, when she went to Yueyang, a city by the lake, to cover its urban construction and the preservation of the reserve.

“It struck me in a chat with local officials,” she says. Although the city government and the reserve authorities were interested in the idea, they had misgivings about the attendance. What if there were not enough teams to show up for a national contest? After all, birding was too novel a game for China, a developing country.

Zhong Jia, who in her spare time has served as host of a popular birding BBS (an electronic “Bulletin Board System”) at the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) China’s web site <www.wwfchina.org/bbs/guanniao.htm>, was quite sure of that. Through the internet, she told the local
officials, birders could be mobilized to enter the contest.

Even with such confidence, she says, she did not expect to receive so many entries for the unprecedented event. The contest, held 5–8 December 2002, drew some 300 participants, including 12 six-member contesting teams from across China, with the farthest from Xinjiang in the northwest. Among them were government officials, college students, business people, retired teachers and workers, and ornithologists. Experienced birders from some other countries, like the United States and New Zealand, came as observers.

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The contest mirrors the short but colorful history of the birding community in China, as the birders of various backgrounds were drawn to the sport for various reasons.

Xiong Yan, a 31-year-old public servant from Central China's Henan Province, has no more than two years' birding experience, with a list of 78 species. “I fell in love with birding because I found birds such as swans to be graceful and enchanting. What's more, going birding is a way to enjoy the outdoors,” she says.

Yu Haiyan, in her thirties, headed the team of “WWF Guangdong”. A reporter with Guangdong Television, Yu says she became obsessed with birds when she was only six. “When my cousin came home with a young sparrow, quivering in the cold, I kept it and took care of it for some days before my aunt told me the bird should be freed or it might die.”

But the little girl was reluctant to let it go. “It took my cousin three hours to persuade me to give it up,” recalls Yu Haiyan, whose very given name is a kind of seabird—the storm-petrel. In her teenage years, her family happened to live in the neighborhood with Gao Yuren, a noted ornithologist and vice chairman of the Chinese Ornithological Association, in Guangzhou. With her childhood fondness of birds, Yu soon found her guide and tutor in birding.

“Professor Gao took me on my first birding trip, to Hainan, in late 1996,” Yu says. “That kindled my lasting interest in birding, and I have since sojourned to many hotspots including once to Hong Kong,” says the avid birder, who is also a member of the Chinese Ornithological Association. With a life list of 260 species, she says she favors the Black-winged Stilt, most of all for its delicate figure.

Her cousin Liao Xiaodong also took part in the birding contest, representing another team from Guangzhou. “We are both working as volunteers to help collect data on the wild birds of China's mainland,” says Yu.

Among the contestants were a few professionals, like Ma Ming, 45, who is an ornithological researcher based in Urumchi, the capital of Xinjiang. Having a birding experience of more than ten years, plus a life list of over 700, Ma has taken birding trips around China, as well as in Australia, Japan, the United States, and Latvia. He was among the first five mainlanders to contend in the world-famous Hong Kong Big Bird Race, back in 1996. His team finished eighth, with a list of 128 species, and was dubbed “Mainland’s Five Tigers” by the local media.

Ma describes himself “as avid as those amateurs, if not more.” He says, “I enjoy birding not only for the sake of scientific research, but also because it can help tranquilize your soul, especially if you are a city dweller. It does good to you physically, too.”

While many of the contestants had never met with one another in person before they came to Yueyang, they were not strangers. “We'd already got acquainted on the web, mostly under nicknames,” says Zhong Jia, whose web name is “Orange Tree”.

That endowed the contest with a fraternity missing in most other competitions, as the contestants didn’t care too much about the win, although they did try to spot and record as many species as they could within the given time.

Given most of the contestants’ amateurism, Prof. Zhao Xinru of Beijing Normal University, a noted ornithologist and one of the five judges for the contest, did not have high expectations for the event. However, he admits, the contestants’ performance “was far better than we anticipated.”
CLOCKWISE:

Together, they spotted a total of 165 species, among which several species, such as Asian Barred Owlet (*Glaucidium cuculoides*), were observed for the first time within the reserve. Considering it was winter, at which time no more than 200 species of birds have been recorded at the preserve, and given that most of the contestants were green birders, Zhao says the record is quite impressive.

Zhao, 48, has personally witnessed and fostered the growth of China’s burgeoning birding community. In the past six years, he has been voluntarily hosting most of the weekly lectures on birds for Green Earth Volunteers, a loosely organized environmental-protection group in Beijing. Zhong Jia is one of his students.

Another birding community in Beijing was formed by Friends of Nature, a more-formal environmental non-government organization than Green Earth Volunteers. Under the guidance of Professor Gao Wu, a 62-year-old biologist with the Capital Normal University, Friends of Nature set up the first birding team in China’s mainland in September 1996. So far, the team has organized 74 outings for birding in Beijing and more than 20 birding trips to other parts of the country.

Compared with their counterparts in other countries, whose

**Hot Birding Spots in China’s Mainland**

**Donghai, Henan Province, Central China** • Seated in the mountainous area in southern Henan province, Donghai National Nature Reserve is a vast forested expanse, boasting at least 213 bird species, including Reeve’s Pheasant (*Syrmaticus reevesii*), Black Baza (*Aviceda leuphotes*), Chestnut-winged Cuckoo (*Clamator coronatus*), Tiger Strike (*Lanius tigrinus*), and Ashy Drongo (*Dicrurus leucophaeus*).

Among these birds, Reeve’s Pheasant, for which the reserve was designated, is a rare species endemic to China. Called the White-crowned Long-tailed Pheasant in China, this species numbers more than 1,100 individuals within the reserve. Summer is the best season to tour here.

**Xianghai, Jilin Province, Northeast China** • Xianghai National Nature Reserve, about 310 kilometers west of Changchun, the capital of Jilin, is a 105,400-hectare wetland reserve neighboring Inner Mongolia. Within the Reserve, more than 200 bird species roost and feed, among them Swan Goose, Falcated Duck, Oriental White Stork, Eurasian Spoonbill (*Platalea leucorodia*), and six species of cranes, namely Red-crowned (*Grus japonensis*), Siberian, White-naped (*G. vipio*), Hooded (*G. monacha*), Common, and Demoiselle (*Anthropoides virgo*). Adding to the allure of Xianghai Nature Reserve as a paradise for cranes and birders alike is Jankowski’s Bunting (*Emberiza jankowskii*), an enigmatic endangered species endemic to China. This seldom-seen bunting was spotted here a few years ago. Summer is the best season for a birding trip to Xianghai. Once there, you will want to make at least a casual visit to Zhalong National Nature Reserve. Zhalong, several hundred kilometers north of Xianghai, is reputed to be the “Hometown of the Red-crowned Crane.”

**Poyang Lake, Jiangxi Province, South China** • Situated in the north of Jiangxi, Poyang Lake National Nature Reserve covers an expanse of mudflats, lagoons, and grasslands within Poyang Lake, China’s largest freshwater lake. The reserve holds an impressive range of species. Every year in October, some 100 species of waterfowl and other aquatic species descend on the neighborhoods and over-winter here until March. Among these migratory birds are the Lesser White-fronted Goose, Swan Goose, Baer’s Pochard (*Aythya baeri*), Scaly-sided Merganser (*Mergus squamatus*), Common, and Demoiselle (*Anthropoides virgo*). Adding to the allure of Xianghai Nature Reserve as a paradise for cranes and birders alike is Jankowski’s Bunting (*Emberiza jankowskii*), an enigmatic endangered species endemic to China. This seldom-seen bunting was spotted here a few years ago. Summer is the best season to tour here.

**Caohai Lake, Guizhou Province, Southwest China** • Sitting more than 400 kilometers west of Guiyang, the capital city of Guizhou, Caohai National Nature Reserve is home to more than 200 bird species, among them Black-necked Crane (*Grus nigriceps*), Hooded Crane, Black Stork (*Ciconia nigra*), Eurasian Spoonbill, Northern Harrier, and Peregrine Falcon. Every year, a flock of Black-necked Cranes, totaling about 400 individuals, spends the winter here in Caohai. No more than 6,000 individuals of this crane are believed to live worldwide, among which about 4,000 dwell in China. Winter is the best season to watch birds in Caohai.

**Yellow River Delta, Shandong Province, North China** • The estuarine Yellow River Delta National Nature Reserve serves as a critical refueling stopover and also as a wintering ground for numerous migratory birds. More than 260 bird species have been recorded within this vast wetland expanse, including Whooper Swan, Oriental White Stork, Black-shouldered Kite (*Milvus migrans*), Great Bustard (*Otis tarda*), Saunders’s Gull (*Larus saundersi*), Reed Parrotbill (*Paradoxornis heudei*), and four species of cranes, namely, Siberian, Red-crowned, White-naped, and Hooded. Both spring and autumn are great times of year for birding here.

**Beidaihe, Hebei Province, North China** • Beidaihe, a coastal resort 280 kilometers east of Beijing, is well known for its unique position as a stopover for thousands of migratory birds both in spring and autumn. It boasts a record for hosting about 415 bird species, accounting for more than a third of the total 1,186 species in China. Among these bird species are Oriental White Stork, Pied Harrier (*Circus melanoleucos*), Red-crowned and Siberian Cranes, Far Eastern Curlew, Nordmann’s Greenshank (*Tringa guttifer*), Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Eurasian Oystercatcher, Relict Gull (*Larus relictus*), Saunders’s Gull, and Gray-sided Thrush (*Turdus fuscater*). Beidaihe is one of the best destinations in East Asia to experience the spectacle of migrating shorebirds.

— Zhong Jia contributed to this sidebar
That is why Zhao has sacrificed his spare time to give lectures to curbstone bird lovers like Zhong Jia every Wednesday over the past six years. “Environmental and wildlife protection calls for the participation of ordinary people,” he says. “Birding offers a good way to get them involved.”

He acknowledges that birding, as an exotic game, is still in its initial stage in China’s mainland. “But it has spread very quickly, with China’s booming economy, improved education level, and people’s rising environmental consciousness,” he says. “It may be too early to hail the Yueyang race as a milestone event. But it certainly is shaping up to be an impetus behind the increasing prevalence of birding in China’s mainland and to leave its mark in our birding history.”

Zhong Jia (at scope; center) played a key role in organizing China’s first national birding contest. © Lin Jianyang.