



Steve at the Wetlands Park.
RIGHT: The Pheasant-tailed Jacana is found in shallow freshwater wetlands.

Eastern delights

Hong Kong: land of dense-housing, amazing markets... and some of the best birding in south-east Asia.

Words & pictures: **Steve Newman**

SPOON-BILLED SANDPIPER, Black-faced Spoonbill and Swinhoe's Egret are the stuff of many European birders' dreams. Magical birds from the east, surely out of reach. But, in Hong Kong they are just the cream of an abundant crop of special birds.

Add Grey-tailed Tattler, Nordmann's Greenshank, Asian Dowitcher, Long-toed Stint, and Saunders Gull and you see the quality which awaits – and these are just the wetland birds.

Think of Hong Kong, and you'll probably think of the enormous city – one of the most densely populated places on earth. But, step outside the urban district and you enter diverse habitats of mountainous terrain, country park valleys, marshland and some 235 islands.

Of these islands, only a tiny number are inhabited (owing to the lack of freshwater), so there is a rich avifauna of undisturbed birds. And the beauty is there are also excellent public and private transport links to take you to some of the remoter areas.

Surprisingly, even the built-up urban areas have some superb birding sites – there is a free, two-hour birdwatching tour every Wednesday from 8 o'clock in Hong Kong's largest urban park, where you should see Yellow-crested Cockatoos, as well as Chinese and Red-whiskered Bulbuls, Yellow-browed Warblers, Fork-tailed Sunbirds and many more. A similar event takes place in Kowloon Park every Friday from 7.30-9.30am where you can see more than 100



Image courtesy of KWRP

species, which should include such beauties as Alexandrine Parakeets and Japanese Paradise Flycatchers.

Best birding areas

There are two major areas for birding: Hong Kong Wetland Park, and Mai Po. Hong Kong Wetland Park comprises more than 60 hectares of recreated wetland, reedbed, ponds, mangroves and mudflats, between Mai Po marshes and the urban sprawl of Tin Shui Wan New Town.

The park has wide paths with wheelchair-access to all its hides. When I was there I watched a gorgeous White-throated Kingfisher perched directly in front of the information centre.

However, the jewel in the crown of Hong Kong birding is Mai Po marshes. The 1,500 hectares of wetland around Mai Po and Inner Deep Bay were formally designated as a 'Wetland of International Importance' under the Ramsar Convention in 1995. Mai Po Nature Reserve is a significant part of this wetland.

Today, three-quarters of Hong Kong's species can be seen here, with more than 300 species recorded. Even on the drive to the gates, I saw Pied Kingfisher, Asian Azure-wing



ABOVE LEFT: The Pied Kingfisher is an uncommon resident in Hong Kong.

RIGHT TOP: The boards at Mai Po hold some interesting species!!

RIGHT BOTTOM: Black-faced Spoonbills. Note the (Eurasian) Spoonbills among them.

LEFT: Chinese Pond Heron is a common to abundant resident in Hong Kong.

Magpies and Oriental Magpie Robins.

The floating mangrove walkway is a joy. It rises and falls with the tide as it leads out to the floating hide, where the mud is alive with amphibious mudskippers, slithering across the surface.

At high tide the water pushes the shorebirds towards so you become face-to-face with thousands of mouth-watering Asiatic waders.

Looking out towards mainland China on the exposed sand and mud, even when the tide was out at its furthest point, I watched Black-capped Kingfisher and Eastern Marsh Harrier. The superb, multi-coloured Chinese Pond Herons were so common there that I started to get almost blasé about them!

Pond magnet

The huge ponds were once used to rear shrimps commercially, and they now draw all kinds of waders, ducks and seabirds, plus the raptors to prey on them.



Image courtesy of HKRPA

The Hong Kong Wetland Park.
RIGHT: The floating hide at Deep Bay.

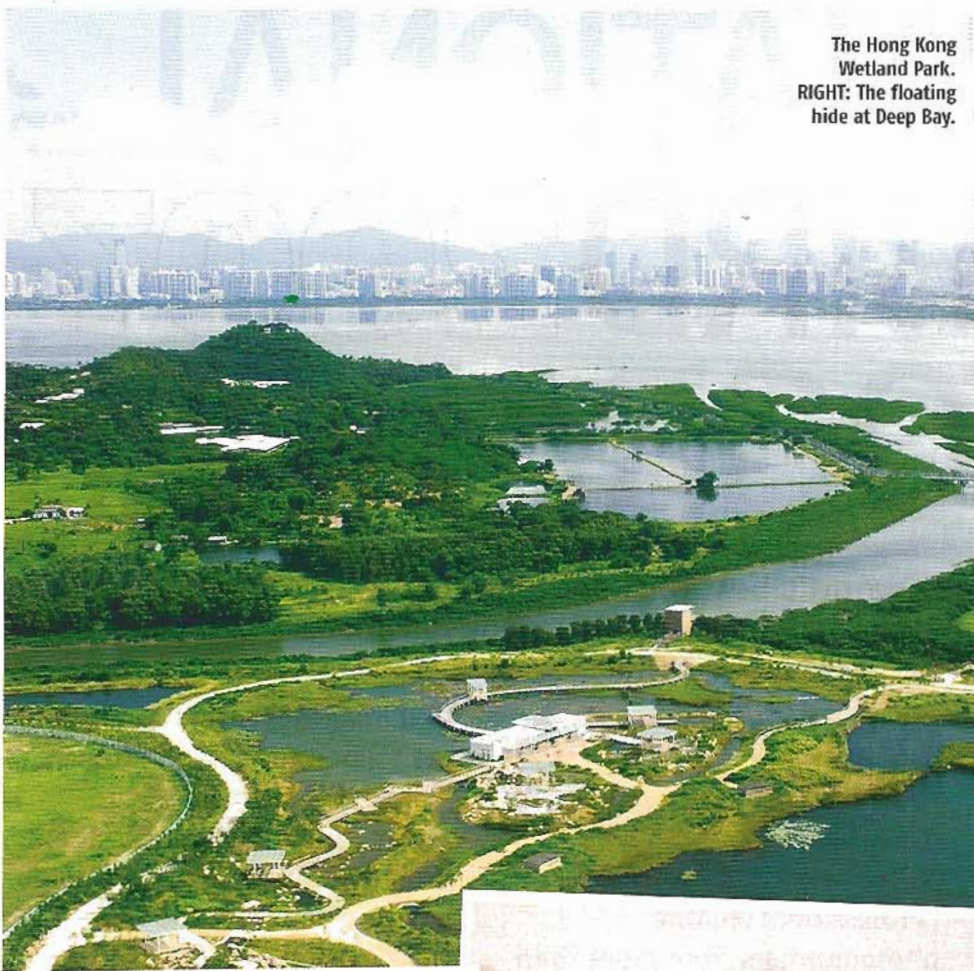


Image courtesy of HKTB



LEFT: The floating walkway in the mangrove forest rises and falls with the tide and leads out to the floating hide. ABOVE: Great Egret.

I saw Lesser Spotted Eagle, Imperial Eagle, Long-tailed Shrike and beautiful Black-faced Spoonbills in less than 30 minutes of being there, while White-cheeked and Black-collared Starlings cavorted in the bushes either side of the pathway.

Island-hopping

In my brief visit, I couldn't cover the whole wealth of Hong Kong's birdwatching areas and reserves. However, I couldn't miss the chance to visit the islands to the north.

The New Territories are separated from the urban sprawl of Kowloon by the Lion Mountains and one of the delights of this area is the archipelago of small islands that you can visit on an 'Island Hopping Tour' across these islands which are paradoxically virtually untouched by tourism.

One of the delights of Hong Kong is the birds that you see from the boat and all the way on this trip we were accompanied by Great White Egrets, dazzling white against

the sun. Ospreys and White-bellied Sea-eagles sat on posts and marker buoys, while kingfishers the size of crows seem to be everywhere. As we pulled in at Tap Mun Island, Crested Mynas flew around in flocks. A short walk inland produced a Blue Whistling-thrush sitting on a roof – the size of a rook, with deep purple plumage.

This is the joy of Hong Kong birding – you can see mountain species and shorebirds in the same day, on the same island. It may not be everyone's idea of a birdwatching paradise, but I can't wait to get back!

■ Steve Newman is a freelance journalist based in Northumberland.

Note: You need a permit to visit Mai Po reserve all visits must be booked before you arrive. Full details on bookings, tours, locations and accommodation for both Mai Po and The Wetlands Park can be found at the reserves' websites.

FACT FILE

Maps/guidebooks

Check the internet for other sites and birders' recommendations. At the airport, there is a wealth of leaflets and guides for you to take.

Get *Hong Kong Walks* and *Discover Hong Kong Nature*, both of which have details of excellent walks. At the map shop in Kowloon at 380 Nathan Road beneath the Eaton Hotel, you can buy detailed maps of various scales.

Fieldguides

The Birds of South East Asia, Robson.
The Birds of Hong Kong and South East China, Viney, Phillips and Ying.
Collins Field Guide to the Birds of South East Asia, King, Dickinson & Woodcock.

Accommodation

From luxury hotels to budget accommodation, Hong Kong has it all.

Recommended websites

www.wetlandpark.com
www.wwf.org.hk/maipo
www.discoverhongkong.com

Eating

Hong Kong is awash with restaurants of every kind imaginable. Market stalls and open-air 'takeaways' offer good fare.

Getting around

Most people speak English and taxis are very cheap. Buses too are very cheap and there's also a railway system that can take you deep into the New Territories. An Octopus card covers several forms of transport.