

## **THE GREAT RAPTOR MIGRATION: Nature's awesome free show**

2009/03/14

Starting today, thousands of people from around the country would be flocking to a little known, idyllic cape in Malacca to cheer on the arrival of some VIBs - Very Important Birds. CHAI MEI LING finds out what is so enrapturing about the raptor watch "A BIT more, a bit more! C'mon!" yelled Caroline Ho at the top of her lungs.

With whatever remaining strength it could muster, the despairing bird flapped on for the last metre of the long-haul journey.

Whoosh! It crashed head-on into the trees by the Malaccan shore, marking a dramatic entrance into the shores of Malaysia.

Ho and other birdwatchers, readily stationed a few metres away at the Tanjung Tuan lighthouse with binoculars and scopes in hand, let out a whoop.

The little fellow made it. It was soon spotted perched on a branch with its beak wide open, gasping for air.

The Oriental honey-buzzard is one of the five main species of migratory raptors which passes through Tanjung Tuan after crossing the Straits of Malacca.

Year after year, these raptors move south during the northern hemisphere's autumn to escape the harsh wintery weather and to feed in food-abundant areas.

The adults would fly off first, leaving the young to pilot on their own their very first migratory trail that spans continents.

Come spring, these birds of prey, which are characterised by sharp talons, powerful eyesight and agility in the air, return to the northern hemisphere to breed.

It is during this journey home to places like Siberia, China, Mongolia, Korea and Japan that the mighty birds make landfall at the Malaccan coast. It is an amazing spectacle if you are lucky enough to catch it.

Through a good pair of binoculars, the black dots that sail through the sky are transformed into thousands of majestic eagles, hawks and buzzards soaring against a backdrop of blue canvas.

For many birdwatchers, or even the public, this sight is almost second to none.

Khoo Swee Seng, coordinator of the Malaysian Nature Society Selangor bird group, describes it as "one of three birdwatching events that I'd classify as National Geographic-class".

While the raptors have been at this for thousands of years, programmed by instinct to follow the same routes that lead them home year after year, Raptor Watch as an event came into being only 10 years ago in this country.

Today, it has become the single most widely attended public event for MNS.

The PNB Ilham Resort in Tanjung Tuan is hosting this year's Raptor Watch, which begins today.

Lined with activities like guided forest and mangrove walks, games, crafts and talks by international bird experts, the two-day event is expected to pull in a crowd, anywhere between 5,000 and 8,000 people.

The watch is more than just an occasion to admire the spectacular natural phenomenon of raptors flying across the country, says Andrew Sebastian, MNS head of communications.

It is a platform to create awareness on the need to protect the coastal rainforest of Tanjung Tuan, located 16km off Port Dickson, as a valuable natural resource.

"When the weather turns bad, the big birds have to rest or roost somewhere, especially if they are tired or injured.

"Tanjung Tuan is the perfect place because of its large trees. It is the only coastal virgin forest left on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia," says Sebastian.

Listed in the Directory of Important Bird Areas, Tanjung Tuan, together with 54 other sites in Malaysia, has been identified as a key area for conservation of biodiversity using birds as indicators to gauge the health of the environment.

And because raptors sit atop the food chain, they are good indicators of the environment. A drop in the number of raptors signifies a problem in the environment, says Khoo.

Despite annual monitoring efforts on raptor migration, which began even before the establishment of the Raptor Watch, there is still a wealth of information to be discovered about these birds.

For this reason, MNS has this year decided on doing a 65-day count, their most ambitious thus far. Previous counts have never surpassed 20 days.

Throughout the two months starting from Feb 14, Selangor birdwatchers would be craning their necks at the sky, taking down the number of raptors which fly over their heads at the Tanjung Tuan lighthouse.

As of March 6, close to 9,500 raptors were spotted. Last year's figure over a 16-day count stood at 35,000.

It is also the first time the society is sending a team across the straits to Pulau Rupert, Sumatra. Their count would then be matched with that of the team in Malaysia.

This year's figures are building up slightly slower, probably because of the cooler weather.

Raptors often depend on thermals, or hot air rising from the ground, to help them gain a good height.

They then glide a long distance using the warm currents as lifts, after which they would have to flap or find another good thermal to ride on.

It is no surprise then that the peak of the count is during lunch time as it's the hottest time of the day, says Khoo, who is Ho's husband.

"Before the birds leave Sumatra, a thermal is needed to start them off with a good height, because there's none over the sea.

"If they don't make it, they land in the water and sink. We've seen birds barely making it to the shore. Some, when desperate, get thermals off the big exhausts from ships.

"Once they hit this side, it's land all the way through, so there's less of a danger. This sea crossing would be the most dangerous point."

Many raptors, especially big and slow-flying ones like Oriental honey-buzzards, cross the straits using the Tanjung Tuan route because it is the shortest point between Malaysia and Indonesia over the sea.

Smaller birds like the peregrine falcons can fly across a greater distance of water because they are swifter and stronger flyers, and therefore, do not depend much on thermals.

While there is no guarantee the sighting of raptors would be great this weekend as weather conditions are unpredictable, Sebastian hopes the public would join in the fun.

"Bring your baskets and have a picnic. When times are slow, take a walk.

"Spend one weekend of the school holidays doing something interesting and learning new things.

"This is natural heritage. Come be part of it."

## **PROGRAMME FOR TWO-DAY RAPTOR WATCH**

### **TODAY**

**9.30am:** Unveiling of Important Bird Area (IBA) plaque at Tanjung Tuan.

**10am:** Booths and stalls open at Ilham fields.

**Every hour:** Talks, video screenings, nature walks.

**1.30pm/2.30pm/3.30pm:** Marine walks.

**2pm/4pm:** Mangrove walks

### **TOMORROW**

**8am:** Raptor Watch Lighthouse Run (win a return ticket to Hong Kong courtesy of Cathay Pacific).

**10am:** Booths and stalls open at Ilham fields. Make the Switch (bring an old incandescent bulb for a free Philips energy saving bulb).

**Every hour:** Talks, video screenings and nature walks.

**1.30pm/2.30pm/3.30pm:** Marine walks.

**11am/1pm:** Mangrove walks.

***Raptors usually pass through Tanjung Tuan between 11am and 3pm.***