

Herping in Hainan

by Sung Yik Hei

Introduction

Yinggeling (鸚哥嶺) is the second-highest peak in Hainan reaching 1,811m. Basically, the forests in Yinggeling has been disturbed or logged at the sea level below 800m, but there is still a large area of over 300m² covered by pristine mature forests above 800m. China Programme of Kadoorie Farm and Botanical Garden launched extensive biodiversity surveys, the rich biodiversity in Yinggeling was discovered and appreciated, and the need for protection was arose. In 2007, Yinggeling Nature Reserve was official set up and hundreds of people were hired as wardens to provide legal protection to the area from illegal logging and hunting activities.

In early June, Dr Nancy Karraker, Vivian Fu (MPhil student), Bond Shum (undergraduate student), Kelvin Ip (undergraduate student) and I went to Yinggeling Nature Reserve on Hainan Island for herping (herping refers to searching for amphibians and reptiles). Yinggeling Nature Reserve is rich in herpetofauna biodiversity harbouring over 35 species of amphibians and over 50 species reptiles. Over 10 species of amphibians are endemic to Hainan. We were so excited when we read a field guide for herps in China looking for species we could probably be seen

Happy Herping

We stayed in the Yinggeling Nature Reserve for two weeks. The weather of the first few days was terrible, the rainstorm stopped us to get on the mountain, we could only stay in the town. We still kept our enthusiasm on herps and went 'herping' around the town. Many Pointed-tongued Floating Frogs (*Ozzydozyga lima*, Fig.1) were calling in agricultural fields filled with hungry and energetic leeches.



Fig.1

After three days of rainstorm, we eventually saw a brighter sky and deserved a drier and accessible road to go up to a mountain named Zhi Kao Ling (枝考嶺). It took around three hours of walking to reach our camp sites from a village. Ten wardens from the nature reserve had already been there when we arrived and they spent a whole morning to build a naturalistic shelter (Fig.2) for us



by bamboos and fallen trunks. We were all amazed by their efficiency and skills on using natural materials.

Fig.2

We could not wait to look around in the forest where we lived inside. We were welcomed by two lizard species, Dwarf Spiny Lizard (*Acanthosaura lepidogaster*, Fig.3) and endemic Hainan Waterside Skink (*Tropidophorus hainanus*, Fig.4).



Fig.3



Fig. 4



Fig.5

On the next day, when we were walking on a rocky path and returning to our camp site from a forest, I suddenly saw a small and colorful creatures crawling on a rock and rushing into a crevice, then I immediately caught it. 'Oh my god!'. It was a cave gecko juvenile Bawangling's Cave Gecko (*Goniurosaurus bawanglingensis*, Fig.5). It had a red head, black body with yellow and white bands over its body and tails. I could not imagine I could see a cave gecko in the wild, which I usually saw it inside a plastic tank in Tung Choi Street. The cave gecko juvenile was cooperative and behaved as a perfect model for our phototaking. We spent around half an hour to take photos and we were all pleased we could capture its smiley face.

In the first three days in Zhi Kao Ling, we could take a glimpse of the flying lizard Spotted Flying Dragon (*Draco maculates*, Fig.6) gliding up on the canopy. Fortunately, when we were enjoying our last lunch in Zhi Kao Ling, we saw something orange flipping on a fallen trunk. When we got closer, we found that it was a basking



Spotted Flying Dragon flipping its gular appendage on

Fig.6

its throat. It seemed that it was waving and saying goodbye at us. After staying in the first site for five days, we moved to another place called Qing Jie. The forest was even more mature.

Our camp site was next to a small stream, frogs were calling all night long, included several Hainan endemic frog species Fine-spined Frog (*Hylarana spinulosa*, Fig.7), Fragile Large-headed Frog (*Limnonectes Fragilis*, Fig. 8), Hainan Pseudomoustache Toad (*Leptobrachium hainanensis*, Fig. 9). Searching in the forests and along rivers in Qing Jie was always worthwhile to search for frogs, species seen including Serrate-legged Small Treefrog (*Philautus odontotarsus*, Fig.10), Vocal Sacless Treefrog (*Polypedates mutus*, Fig.11), Ocellated Small Treefrog (*Philautus ocellatus*, Fig. 12), Arcuate-spotted Pygmy Frog (*Microhyla heymonsi*, Fig.13) and Lateral Striped Opposite-fingered Treefrog (*Chirixalus doriae*, Fig. 14)



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

Other than frogs, we were lucky that we bumped into some snakes, White-browed Keelback (*Amphiesma boulengeri*, Fig. 15), Spotted Slug Snake (*Pareas macularius*, Fig. 16), Green Bamboo Viper (*Trimeresurus stejnegeri*, Fig. 17), and Mock Viper (*Psammodynastes pulverulentus*, Fig. 18). And the most fascinating one was a keelback (*Amphiesma* sp., Fig. 19) which has a shocking, sharp yellow belly. However, the identification of this individual is difficult and still in process.



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig.17



Fig. 18



Fig.19

Knowing more about conservation

Apart from the herpetofaunal diversity, we were also impressed by the altitude and ability of wardens of Yinggeling Nature Reserve. Many wardens of Yinggeling Nature Reserve were former hunters, they were hired as wardens when the Yinggeling Nature Reserve set up in 2007. They changed their roles from damaging and emptying the forests to protecting the forest. I remembered that one of the wardens who was a former hunters said, 'Wildlife in the forests should possess the right to live and we have the responsibility to protect them.' This showed that some wardens did not only change their jobs, but also altered their mind which gradually developed concept of conservation in their mind. However, their tasks are not easy. They have to tackle illegal hunters with rifles, they put their lives at risk to complete their tasks. Some of the wardens were threatened by loggers after they had taken an action to stop logging activities. We began to realize that conservation is much more about handling with people rather than forests or wildlife. Though the majority of people in China are not positive to conservation, the positive attitudes of these four wardens we met did give us a hope for the future conservation in

China.