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This column aims to introduce interesting species of Hong Kong flora and fauna that might be encountered during fieldwork. Distinctive physical characteristics and some interesting ecological facts are included for each example.

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Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* by Y. T. Yu

Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor* is one of the well-known animals in Hong Kong. It is famous for its rarity and for being promoted as a flagship species for wetland conservation by both government departments and NGOs.

In Hong Kong, two species of spoonbills are found wintering along the coast in the northwest New Territories, Eurasian Spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* and Black-faced Spoonbill *Platalea minor*. The Black-faced Spoonbill is endemic to East Asian coastal areas, while the Eurasian Spoonbill can be found from Western Europe coasts across to the east coast of Asia. They look similar but can be easily identified through detailed observation have different shapes of bare skin on the face. Black-faced Spoonbill has a bigger and blacker bare skin and is also smaller in size. In winter, over 100 individual Black-faced Spoonbill are present in and near Mai Po and Inner Deep Bay area, but fewer than 10 individual Eurasian Spoonbill are present over the winter.

The known global population of the Black-faced Spoonbill is 1069 individuals (Yu 2003) and the peak count in Hong Kong was 258 birds in December 2002 (P. J. Leader unpublished data). Therefore, Hong Kong has a maximum of 24% of the world's population of this species. There is no doubt that Hong Kong is one of the most important sites for this species. The largest congregation site of this species is in Taiwan where over 500 birds are present over the winter. It is very susceptible to disturbance, as is any species which has a large population depending on a few sites. In winter 2002/2003, an outbreak of avian botulism at the Taiwan site killed a total of 73 Black-faced Spoonbills (about 7% of the global's population) and at least four Black-faced Spoonbills were found dead from botulism in Hong Kong in previous winters.

Besides botulism, the Black-faced Spoonbill is facing other threats in its range. East Asia is one of the regions with the

most rapid growth of economy that causes an expansion of human population and cities in the region. Many Black-faced Spoonbills' habitats have been reclaimed for development. The increase in human population also causes more disturbances, both in breeding and wintering sites. The situation in Hong Kong is better than in Mainland China and elsewhere, however. The set up of Mai Po Marshes Nature Reserve and the Mai Po Inner Deep Bay Ramsar site provides the best on-site protection of this species. However, although the main feeding area of the Black-faced Spoonbill is the intertidal mudflat in Deep Bay, the area of the mud flat is decreasing from silt accumulation and the spreading of mangrove trees. Development pressure still exists in the fishpond area near Mai Po and Deep Bay, where there is an additional feeding site. These existing threats to the Black-faced Spoonbill result in this species still being listed as 'Endangered' under the IUCN criteria (BirdLife International 2000).

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Fig. 1. Black-faced Spoonbill

Hong Kong Hollies by Anita Tsang

The genus *Ilex* L., commonly known as hollies, contains more than 600 species of trees and shrubs distributed in tropical, subtropical and northern temperate regions. Some species are commonly used as ornamental plants at Christmas, such as the European *Ilex aquifolium*, while others are used in medicine or to make tea. The leaves of *Ilex paraguayensis* are used to make the popular maté tea of South America.

The genus is entirely dioecious, with separate male and female individuals. In Hong Kong, *Ilex* is the second largest

woody plant genus (after *Ficus*), with 14 native species: *Ilex asprella* and *I. pubescens* are shrubs and are very common in shrublands and forests; *I. championii*, *I. cinerea*, *I. ficoidea*, *I. graciliflora*, *I. memecylifolia*, *I. rotunda* and *I. viridis* are trees and are common in shrublands and forests; *I. lohfauiensis* is a shrub restricted to montane shrublands and forests; *I. chapaensis*, *I. dasyphylla*, *I. lancilimba* and *I. kwangtungensis* are rare forest trees.

The flowers of *Ilex* are small and male plants produce more flowers than female plants. *Ilex dasyphylla*, *I. lancilimba* and *I. kwangtungensis* produce pink flowers; *Ilex pubescens*, *I. lohfauiensis* and *I. viridis* produce white to pink flowers; *Ilex cinerea* produces greenish-yellow flowers; the others species all produce white flowers. *Ilex ficoidea* flowers first in February, followed by most other *Ilex* species from March to May. *Ilex lohfauiensis* flowers last in June. Only *I. ficoidea* and *I. memecylifolia* produce fragrant flowers. Honey bees, *Apis cerana*, are the commonest flower visitors on *Ilex* species in Hong Kong.

Ilex asprella and *I. viridis* produce black fruits, *Ilex chapaensis* produces green fruits, while all the others produce red fruits. *Ilex asprella* is the only summer-fruiting species, all other *Ilex* species fruit in winter. Some fruiting *Ilex* species are very conspicuous, like *I. cinerea*, *I. rotunda* and *I. pubescens*. The *Ilex* fruit is a bacco-drupe with pyrenes inside. A bacco-drupe is a berry-like drupe containing one or more seeds, each enclosed within a stony endocarp; a pyrene is the stone of a drupe, with the seed surrounded by hard endocarp (Hu, 1950). The fruits are eaten by seed-dispersing birds, except those of *I. chapaensis*. The very large green fruits of this species are eaten by civets and, probably, fruit bats.

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Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden - Wildlife updates & sightings

by Gary Ades

Wildlife recording, surveys and rehabilitation at Kadoorie Farm & Botanic Garden (KFBG) have produced a number of interesting and unusual records since August. In this report, KFBG staff provide some of the highlights of their findings.

General wildlife sightings are posted on the KFBG Wildlife Sightings Board on a fortnightly basis, with records provided by KFBG staff and visitors. Most records tend to be generated by the KFBG Security team on night shifts, the monthly Night Safari activity and regular surveys by the Fauna Conservation Dept. staff. All records will soon be databased to investigate any possible patterns of habitat use by fauna on our hillside.

(1) The following sightings records were posted between August and November, 2003:

August

5 August, 5.10pm; Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker (*Dicaeum cruentatum*), near tropical plants house - adult female with 3 juveniles begging for food.

23 August, (Night Safari) 7.30 pm; Japanese Pipistrelle Bats observed hunting insects, and picked up at 46KHz on bat detectors, over the Butterfly Garden; 8:30 pm - still a few fireflies along the stream at the Fern Walk.

27 August, p.m.; Many-banded Krait hatchling found outside the Admin. Office.

29 August; a male Macaque seen outside the Conservation Office.

September

1 September, 4 pm; at least 5 Birdwing butterflies (*Troides helenus* and *T. aeacus*) flying around the Butterfly Garden.

3 September; Small Indian Civet at Signpost Corner.

6 September; Bamboo Snake at Native Tree Nursery.

8 September; Cobra near Helicopter Pad.

10 September; Atlas Moth (mating pair) at Parrot Sanctuary.

12 September; Muntjac (Barking deer) heard, below Kwun Yum Shan and near Post Office Pillars.

12 September; Porcupine seen on road above Post Office Pillars.

12 September; Wild boar seen on road above Post Office Pillars.

13 September; Barking deer above Post Office Pillars.

15 September; Porcupine at Apiary.

24 September; Burmese Python near T.S.Woo pavilion.

29 September; Woodcock below Twin Pavilion.