

Under Our Wings

It's always pleasing to take a walk accompanied by the autumn wind on CSC's campus. Walking on the riverside path, I'm alone enjoying a feast for my senses. Behind this thick curtain made by the luxuriant vegetation, sounds come from every visible and hidden nook and cranny. The clearest ones are the birds' chittering, trilling and hustling. In every form they occupy all of my sense of hearing, broadcasting their utter existence. Yeah, birds. They're the real owners of this place, but seldom do their figures show up.

I keep on walking, enthralled by the charm of the environment. Some footsteps suddenly break the unison, apparently produced by someone sprinting hastily. A man with broad shoulders and a pair of glasses appeared before me. On his neck is a strap connected to a very professional-looking camera. He kneels down, lens on the camera towards somewhere in the reeds and his index finger on the shutter button. I turn to the direction his lens is pointing at, curious about what he has discovered. It's a bird with a yellow beak and feather that is pure white, strolling near the river down in the reeds.

He must have sensed my curiosity. "It's the first time I've seen an intermediate egret on campus!" He made no effort to disguise his excitement, with a wide grin on his face.

"'Intermediate'?" Though I mainly study science, biology is a painful subject for me. "Are there 'small' egrets?"

"Yes, of course. The most obvious difference is that intermediate egrets have yellow beaks and bigger bodies. "

He's in a mood for conversation. According to his self-intro, I know that his name is Antonio Sui and is currently the leader of the Birds Conservation ZhiXing. As birds mostly come out before sunset, it becomes a daily routine for him to come here at this time. He asks if I'm willing to join him observing the birds, and I accept the invitation without hesitating.

I queried about what observing has to do with conservation. "Well, it is actually one of the most effective ways to do my job. By observing, you can get to know how do certain species like the environment, and most importantly, identify the disturbances that exist. "He leads me to a downward sloping hill, its bottom extending into the lake. There are some reeds dangling nearby and ends of aquatic plants emerging on the surface of the water.

He carefully descends to the base of the slope, squats down and pulls off some part of the clot made up of the plants' branches. He then climbs up again and opens his palm before me. "This, the relatively thinner one, is watercress. The other one is called eclipta. Watercress is the kind of material local birds use to build their nests. For eclipta, it is a potential evasive species. It's obvious that it absorbs some of the nutrients the

watercress is supposed to have. Their stems are mixing up in a clot!”

I nodded, my mind running. It’s the first time I see a real-life example of an invasive species. Throwing away the “dangerous” plant, he then shows me another tall plant on shore. Such plants are scattered among the reeds, flowers blooming at the end of the long stems. With a disgusted look on his face, he informs the plant is probably also an invasive species. “They’re called Canadian goldenrods. About a month ago they seemed like tall weeds, but right now, as they fight for space against the reeds, they’re almost as tall as me.”



Antonio(right) holding the Canadian goldenrod.

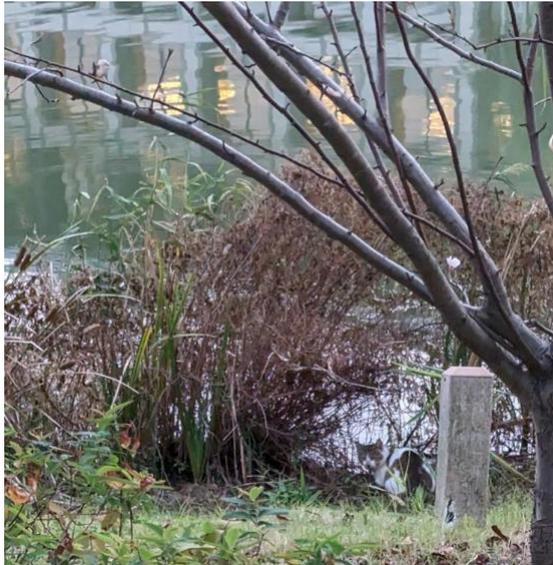
I wonder aloud about why the reeds are this important and Antonio chuckled. He looks at the sky thoughtfully, and then signals me to be quiet. Following his order, I start to hold my breath. A long, rhythmic series of bleating coos, and gulping notes flies into my ears. “It’s the little grebe. Well, you can hear them but not see them. They’re very shy little creatures. Their homes are built in the reeds, in case humans, or their natural enemies see them.”

“However, our school cuts the reeds every year.” He lets out a sigh and shakes his head. “You should propose this to the College Council!” I asked with some indignation. “Well, back when I was taking FP I tried to do so, but they’re still doing that” He smiles bitterly, with a hint of sadness in his eyes. He then explains how he doubled down on the chance he’s got this time. “I even risked my PGs to spare time to collect evidence on how much birds rely on the reeds! It’s our last straw. We’ve got a chance to talk to the school leadership this time.”

In the philharmonic played by the birds, we continue our journey along the riverside. I suddenly sense some impurity in the sound of water lapping on the shore as an accompaniment. It’s coming from downhill, and before I can recognize what’s producing it, a cat emerges from the reeds.

“A cat!” As a cat lover, I cry out indignantly with surprise. I turn around and look at Antonio but to find no sign of joy on his face.

“It must be on a hunt for birds again...” he says, slightly frowning.



“Isn’t it normal for cats to hunt for birds? They’re a part of the, uh, food chain.” I question his statement using my superficial bits of knowledge.

“Not stray cats.”

I raise my eyebrows slightly. Is there a difference?

“Stray cats are **NOT** wild animals. You can’t say cows are wild animals, right? If you release the cow in your farm to some

random grassland, the resources the local herbivores are supposed to have would be depleted. The same thing applies to any cat in the urban ecosystem. Their ancestors are cats tamed by humans. They know how to cooperate with humans to obtain resources like food. You can’t allow them to get food from humans and then hunt for wild animals at the same time. They’ve got pretty good appetites. Stray cats are the leading cause of accidental death of wild birds. On our campus, sometimes we catch cats hunting for birds red-handed. “

Antonio’s speech, of course, has subverted my existing understanding. I know stray cats can be a problem for some people, but right now it seems to be more important to rethink profoundly before irresponsibly abandoning your cat for the reason that the small animal could have caused harm to innocent wildlife in the urban ecosystem as well.

The red sun is not so distant from the edge of the sky anymore. The birds’ singing isn’t as strong as before. We’re on the way back and Antonio is tweaking his camera, obviously taking inventory of his loot - photos. At probably the end of this excursion, I ask him if he thinks his effort really has some effect on the overall ecological prosperity.

He keeps his eyes fixed on the camera for a little while. “Well, we find problems and try to solve them. After all, we’re still students. We may not do much, but we can do our best to contribute to the current situation.” He starts to talk excitedly about how he’s going to report some people who do illegal trafficking involving endangered species of birds.

The sun is sinking into the horizon. Antonio says he’s going to meet with a teacher before dinner, and I watch his back disappear in the pitch-black corridors of the academic building. As I proceed towards the dormitory, two wagtails appear behind me and together draw two beautiful curves in the space above me. They land on the top of

a tree, chitchatting happily.

Yeah, we're under their wings, and they can also be under our wings.