

A bird in the bush is worth two in hand

A Briton living in Vietnam indulges in his lifelong passion, birdwatching, and calls the country a birders' paradise

By NGOC TRAN

Richard Craik, who has been living in Vietnam for 17 years and is now head of the Ho Chi Minh City-based Vietnam Birding tour company, calls Vietnam an extraordinary place to enjoy nature and be a birder.

"I've been interested in birds since I was a child in England. I used to go birdwatching in the countryside around my home in Hertfordshire, 40 km north of London. When I started work I didn't have time for birding and it wasn't until I came to Vietnam that I started becoming interested in birds once again."

Explaining why he chose Vietnam to settle down and start his business, he says of all the countries in mainland Southeast Asia, it has the highest number of bird species found only here and nowhere else – or endemic, in birders' parlance.

"I think it's probably because Vietnam is such a long narrow country, and there are many different habitats for birds."

In the south are the wetlands of the Mekong Delta, then there are the lowlands along the coast, the mountains of the Da Lat plateau and Central Highlands, and the Hoang Lien National Park right up in the far northwest of the country, he lists.

The park is located in the Hoang Lien Son mountain range in Sa Pa and Than Uyen districts, Lao Cai Province, and includes Southeast Asia's highest peak, Mount Fansipan (3,143 m).

"In this park, you can find many bird species that are usually found only in southern China or the Himalayas," he says.

Craik's favorite birding spots include the Da Lat plateau which has several endemic species and has been recognized by BirdLife International as one of five Endemic Bird Areas in Vietnam.

The other spots are the Hoang Lien Mountains, Cat Tien National Park straddling Dong Nai and Lam Dong provinces which have the largest remaining area of lowland evergreen forest in southern Vietnam, and the Mekong Delta.



Richard Craik (L) with American tourists Robert and Nancy Dean from Florida on a recent birding tour in Da Lat in the Central Highlands. Richard and his Vietnam Birding tour company offers birdwatching and cultural tours in Vietnam and Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand.

The birder

Richard Craik has been working in Vietnam since 1992, mostly doing mainstream, cultural, and popular tours for inbound visitors.

In 2007, he started the Vietnam Birding tour company which offers birdwatching and cultural tours in Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand.

"I decided it was time for a change. I was in international marketing, traveling overseas to trade shows in Europe, America, and Australia. I wanted to spend more time in Vietnam with my family." He married his Vietnamese wife, Lan, who also helped him learn Vietnamese.



Richard with his wife Lan and five-year-old daughter Carmen at Bach Ma National Park earlier this year

Why birding?

One of the things he finds interesting about birding is that it connects with nature and offers "total relaxation."

"Often when you are birding, it will be just you, alone in the forest with the birds and animals. There are no cars, no motorbikes, no telephones, no emails. So you really do get back to nature and away from everything that's

involved in our everyday life."

The other factor that makes it interesting for him is the skill birders have to learn to locate birds.

"It is a little like being a detective or a hunter, but instead of hunting, you are using the same skills just for the pleasure of seeing them. So you have to put together all the clues like a detective – you have to think about the habitat, the time of year, the altitude, the weather, and

many other factors.

"Birding can be as extreme or as leisurely as you like. But mostly a typical day's birding would involve walking five to 10 kilometers at a very relaxed pace with plenty of stops."

Extinction and protection

Extinction is a real possibility for many endemic species in Vietnam since their numbers are low and the range where they live is very restricted, Craik warns.

"If the forest in the mountains where some of the birds live is cut down, then the birds will disappear. They will become extinct."

Historically the Mekong Delta would also have been of great interest but much of the bird habitat comprising grasslands and mangrove forest has been lost over the years to agriculture and aquaculture and with it many of its unique bird and mammal species, he says.

Forest protection is a problem in Vietnam and even in national parks, it is difficult to protect the forest from poachers and loggers, he explains.

Vietnamese-American scientist wins US president's award

Professor Vicky Thao D. Nguyen is the only person of Vietnamese origin among 100 young scientists recently bestowed an award by US President Barack Obama.



PHOTO COURTESY OF VNA WEBSITE

The 33-year-old lecturer and researcher in biomechanics at Johns Hopkins University received the Presidential Early Career Awards for Scientists and Engineers at a recent White House ceremony.

It is the highest honor bestowed by the US government on young professionals in the early stages of their independent research careers.

Thao graduated from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and got her MA and Ph.D degrees from Stanford University. She was born in Vietnam in 1976 and her family migrated to the US in 1986.

The awards, established by the then US President Bill Clinton in 1996, are based on two criteria - the pursuit of innovative research and a commitment to community service.

Awarded scientists and engineers get a five-year research grant to further their study in support of government missions. (VNA)

In'l frisbee tournament comes to HCMC

(TN-HCMC) Ho Chi Minh City's sixth international ultimate frisbee tournament, to be held this weekend, has attracted 120 players, according to a press release from the organizers.

The "6th Annual Vietnam Hat Tournament" organized by RMIT International University Vietnam, the RMIT Ultimate Club and the Saigon Ultimate Club, will see athletes from Vietnam, the Asia-Pacific, Australia, Europe and North America take part.

They will play at the South Saigon campus of RMIT University in District 7.

For further information about the tournament and the sport in Vietnam, visit www.saigon-ultimate.com.

Ultimate frisbee, invented in the US in 1967, is currently played by an estimated 150,000 players in more than 50 countries and territories.

It was brought to Vietnam by expats in Hanoi, where they established the Hanoi Ultimate Club in 1997.