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Ten-Year Protection of Critically Endangered Seabirds

Every April volunteers arrive on the Jiushan Islands in Ningbo's Xiangshan county to protect the Chinese crested terns (*Thalasseus bernsteini*). Thanks to the Chinese crested tern's attraction and restoration monitoring project that commenced in 2013, a global observation record was set in 2022 when 93 Chinese crested terns were spotted simultaneously along the islands' National Nature Reserve. This "Bird of Legend" - close to extinction for over half a century - has now been saved from endangerment.

每年4月,是中华凤头燕鸥保护志愿者们登岛的日子。去年,象山韭山列岛国家级自然保护区一次性发现93只中华凤头燕鸥,创下全球观测纪录。这归功于2013年开始实施的中华凤头燕鸥监测与招引项目。一度绝迹半个多世纪的“神话之鸟”,在经历十年的守护后,终于从灭绝的边缘被一步步拽回。

This April, photographer Yang Zhonghua is preparing to visit the islands with high hopes for the continued preservation of the birds. Since 2014, Yang—then president of the Xiangshan County Photographers Association—has filmed the recovery of this once-endangered species.

如今,又一年的期待与守候即将拉开序幕,摄影师杨忠华也在作着上岛的准备。从2014年起,这位当时的象山县摄影家协会主席就开始跟踪拍摄,记录下“神话之鸟”起死回生的每一步。

Included below is his autobiography:
以下是他的自述——

I came to the islands in the second year of the restoration project, before which I had heard many legends of Chinese crested terns. I learnt that the earliest specimen was discovered in 1861, and their last appearance in China in the last century was in 1937. Afterwards, these near-extinct seabirds hadn't been spotted for 63 years until they reappeared in 2000. The year of 2004 saw their appearance on Xiangshan Jiushan Islands; after having searched more than 70 islands of all sizes, researchers finally found over 20 Chinese crested terns among 4,000 greater crested terns.

我是在中华凤头燕鸥监测与招引项

目实施的第二年上岛的,在这之前,中华凤头燕鸥的传说已经听了很多了。我知道它们最早被发现标本是1861年,而上世纪最后一次在中国出现是1937年,之后消失了63年,直到2000年又一次横空出现。2004年,它们在象山韭山列岛被发现——科研人员排摸了70多个大小岛屿后,最后从4000只大凤头燕鸥中找到了20多只中华凤头燕鸥。

On my first day on the islands ten years later, I was instantly stunned by the magnificent view of greater crested terns soaring through the sky. Volunteer bird protectors revealed to me that the two species of terns are quite similar in appearance, but the Chinese crested tern—with a slightly larger body—has a yellow bill with a black tip.

十年后,我上岛的第一天就感受到了这种震撼,大凤头燕鸥漫天飞舞,极少数中华凤头燕鸥混迹其中。志愿者指给我看:两种燕鸥长相非常相似,只有嘴尖不同:中华凤头燕鸥黄色的喙端带有一点黑色;体型更大一点。

I was intrigued at the time: How did you distinguish Chinese crested terns from thousands of other terns with tiny differences? It was revealed that initially, they relied primarily on perseverant and patient observations to make such discernment. Thereafter, we concentrated on bird banding, which involves affixing leg bands to fledglings and later releasing them in order to monitor the bird population.

我当时特别好奇,这么小的差别,你们是怎么从数千燕鸥中找出它们的?他们说,一开始当然就凭肉眼找啊,全凭精诚所至金石为开的耐心。之后就开始了环志研究。所谓鸟类环志,通俗的说法,就是给幼鸟戴上脚环,再放到大自然中去,以此监测鸟类种群数量。

The leg bands will impose no negative effects on the birds. In fact, everything the researchers and volunteers do on the islands is implemented with great care to avoid disturbing the birds. Initially, people lived in tents for several years before constructing any facilities. Once the birds had acclimatized to the presence of humans, wooden buildings were gradually



Greater crested terns are hovering around the island. (Photo by Yang Zhonghua)

constructed in the reserve. Over the past two years, prefabricated container houses, solar panels, and white water-storage equipment have been installed. As the birds become accustomed to humans, human living conditions can improve as a result.

环带不会影响鸟类的飞行和生活,事实上,科研人员和志愿者在岛上所做的一切,都小心翼翼,尽量不打扰到鸟儿。最早的时候,他们不敢搭建任何建筑,连着几年都住在帐篷里。后来人和鸟渐渐熟悉,保护区才循序建起了木屋。这两年总算装了集装箱板房,太阳能电池板、白色储水设备,鸟渐渐习惯了,人的条件就可以好一些了。

Nests of the terns are usually built on the exposed rocks at the islands' edge, where the terrain is steep and the eggs tend to roll off. The volunteers leveled a field, which was weeded on a regular basis and covered with stones as well as carpets to make nests much safer and more comfortable. Prior to 2013, the Chinese crested terns were on the verge of extinction caused by typhoons and egg snatchers. Now that the entire islands are under protection, no one is stealing eggs now; in the case of strong winds and snakes, 24-hour supervision is however required. On a couple of tranquil nights, I sat by the sea with the volunteers, watching this group of birds. Beyond the islands, everything has faded into the distance. These unique animals and we humans are nothing significant but a speck of dust in this world, alone but unrestrained, defenseless but tenacious. Every unique existence deserves

to be respected.

燕鸥的巢一般都安在岛边裸露的岩石上,那里地势陡峭,鸟蛋容易滚落。他们打造出一片平坦地块,定期除草,铺上石块、地毯,让它们的家安全舒服一点。2013年前,因为台风和人为偷蛋,中华凤头燕鸥几次绝迹,现在整片岛都保护起来了,没人偷蛋了,还是要防止大风和蛇,所以需要日夜监控。好几个安安静静夜晚,我和他们一起看着这群海边的生灵。岛外的一切都变得非常遥远。天地辽阔,我们和这些稀有生命一样,不过是海天之间小小的一点,孤独而自由,微弱而坚定。每一种独特的生命都应该被尊重、被善待。

This underlying philosophy, I believe, is why volunteers from all over the world come to protect this special species without complaint. This spring, migratory birds are returning to the islands, where they will breed. I am also ready to land on the islands and celebrate the start of a new life circle.

我想正是因为这一点,才吸引越来越多的志愿者从各地千里迢迢赶来,无怨无悔地守护这群生灵。又一个新的春天,候鸟正在陆续归来,它们将在岛下诞育新的生命。我也作好了准备再一次登岛,和它们一起迎接又一个生生不息的开始。

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