

# Bird business

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KASEM JANDAM

*Birds' Nests: Business and Ethnicity in Southeast Asia*  
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The alarm woke me at 4am. Outside the gate my guide Lean was waiting quietly as I stepped on to the road. A member of the Cambodia Bird Guides Association, Lean is an acknowledged expert on the qualities of Prek Toal, a bird sanctuary fifty kilometres to the north of Siem Reap, home of the famous temple complex Angkor Wat. Over the day, Lean's tutelage proved invaluable in unpacking its intricacies for me. From my house, we travelled to Chong Kheas, a bay on the edge of the Tonle Sap Lake. Here, still in the dark, we boarded a small craft to ferry us to the village of Sangkae, our entry point to Prek Toal.

Out on the Tonle Sap River, dawn was breaking as we entered the open water, shards of red and orange lighting up the sky and piercing the horizon as we moved north. Around us the air was chilled. At Sangkae, one of several floating villages bordering the Tonle Sap Lake, we switched craft, the slim long-tail we stepped into better suited to the narrow confines of the flooded forest to come.

From the floating village we moved swiftly, our craft barrelling down the sanctuary's narrow channels, its wake pushing mats of water hyacinth against nearby trees and shrubs. Above, a sky of striking blue was starting to transform, its canvas filling with a growing number of birds. Peering up, I could identify some of them, flight lines of open-billed storks, black-headed ibises, grey herons and painted storks filling the clear air. Open-bills appeared the most numerous, the visible space between their mandibles—the source of their name—making them easy to recognise.

The boat slowed as we approached a large tree, its trunk the base to a platform on which we would spend the coming hours taking in the bird world of Prek Toal. As we climbed to the deck's top, that world revealed itself, a feathered metropolis pulsing with the energy and prolificacy of several thousand water birds.

Over the next six hours, Lean and I scanned the surrounding flooded forest as daily life unfolded around Prek Toal. In front of us birds alighted and departed—darters, egrets, adjutants, storks and others—perching, flapping and remonstrating. At certain moments, drama would intervene, a fish eagle or other bird of prey appearing to send a nervous bolt of energy through the colony. At other times things would move more sedately, birds lifting into the air and settling back down at various rates as the day unfolded.

In ornithological circles, Prek Toal has garnered a global reputation, but it was not always this way. Before 1994, when it first came to the attention of conservationists, it was known only to locals, many of whom harvested the birds and eggs found in its 'hard to reach' forest: up to 26,000 eggs and 2,600 birds annually into the mid-1990s. In these times, secreted among its submerged trees, remnants of the Khmer Rouge remained armed and active. In fact, so lawless was the northwest end of the Tonle Sap that the first ecological surveys undertaken there were completed with a 50-calibre machine gun mounted to the front of the surveyor's boat.

Since then, the transformation has been impressive. The sanctuary is home to the largest colony of oriental



Bird watching in Prek Toal

darters—a dark and sleek cormorant-like bird—and greater adjutants—a huge bird in the stork family—in Southeast Asia. Their population in Prek Toal represents 30 per cent and 40 per cent of the global population respectively. In addition, the sanctuary houses the region's last breeding colony of spot-billed pelicans and its only mainland colony of milky storks.

Many of these species have increased markedly from the 1990s. The number of Asian open-billed storks, for example, grew from 200 to 14,000 birds, while the nests of the oriental darter have climbed from a few hundred to 7,000. Appreciable increases have also been witnessed among other nesting birds, including painted storks and spot-bill pelicans.

Instrumental to these changes has been the strategy of converting poachers into protectors, the former harvesters of Prek Toal's wildlife being trained to enforce the kingdom's wildlife laws and patrol the sanctuary. (Who better to catch a poacher than an ex-poacher?) Alongside these efforts, international concerns such as the Wildlife Conservation Society, working in tandem with government partners, have added their expertise and financial clout to various protection, education and monitoring measures. But the future of the sanctuary, like so many other wild places, remains uncertain. A host of issues—climate change, hydro development and forest loss—pose existential challenges to the future of Prek Toal, the Tonle Sap and the wider Mekong catchment.

These realities were pushed to the side as, preparing to leave, I looked upwards for a final time. High in the sky, a slowly whirling helix of birds had materialised. In the ever expanding circle, I could see storks, pelicans, adjutants and others: a world of blood and feathers

ascending. 'Amazing,' whispered Lean, the pair of us hypnotised. Neither of us spoke further for the moment. We gazed on, spellbound, the uncertainties of the terrestrial world surrendering to the majesty above.

For those who hold the feather sacred, the places where birds live, their songs, colours and habits are a source of unfathomable wonder. This holds as much for the lands of the lower Mekong River—Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia—as any other, where birds have woven their way into the fabric of environment, culture and economy to become a part of everyday life. Even the humble chicken, perhaps the most important bird to human civilisation, sources its wild progenitor—the red jungle fowl—to Southeast Asia, the colourful bird still stalking its rainforest regions.

Birds have even birthed multimillion-dollar industries here, with the swiftlet being a notable example. This small bird, or more specifically the nests that it produces, have become part of a lucrative trade across Southeast Asia. So popular is this gastronomical oddity that few elite tables in Hong Kong or mainland China are complete without a course of the swiftlet's nest soup on their menu. With such status and popularity—explored extensively in Kasem Jandam's *Birds' Nests: Business and Ethnicity in Southeast Asia*—the egg-home of the swiftlet has garnered the title of 'white gold' or the 'caviar of the East', somewhat to the detriment of the bird's well-being.

Jandam's research traces the market links between the sources of the region's nests—Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines—to the gourmet tables of China, Taiwan and Hong Kong. He notes that Chinese traders are dominant in this flow, with Hong Kong accounting for the largest annual sales of the delicacy (HK\$2 billion). At the supply end, Indonesia leads, with a staggering 2,000 tonnes of nests being harvested each year. Thailand follows at 600 tonnes.

Jandam, a researcher at the Thailand Research Fund, highlights the increasing significance of 'bird condos'—purpose-built buildings that entice swifts to build their nests inside their sheltered beams and walls—as a harvest location. It is a popularity that has grown since the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, the structures steadily replacing natural locations, usually caves, as the source of the region's bird nests. The author identifies several factors as responsible for this, including the overharvesting of natural locations and the ability to harvest more nests from the condos. Whatever the source, conspicuous consumption, allied with traditional beliefs, makes the bird nest market an important economic factor, linking caves and condos on far off Indonesian islands to the wealthy tables of Hong Kong, mainland China and beyond.

Beyond such examples of conspicuous consumption, before the onset of the pandemic, Southeast Asia had experienced a boon in an industry dedicated to serving the global tribe of bird watchers. And with its members often paying thousands in travel and guiding expenses, these folks had injected welcomed cash into remoter corners of the Mekong region. These fabled places—birding spots of repute—have emerged as more than locales to watch birds or as village 'cash cows'. For many they have become sites to reconnect to nature: places to push beyond our Anthropocene selves and bond with a wider world. □

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