

Dear All,

It is high time that I compose another email update.

At breakfast, as I was conducting interviews about local peoples' wildlife use, a young man pulled up with a yellow plastic bag tied to his motorbike handles. The bag flipped and flopped as if there was a fish inside, but soon I saw it was a baby owl. The villagers have quite a few activities that negatively impact wildlife, and I usually try to express my concern without directly confronting anyone. I want to maintain a good relationship with as many people as possible. Where did you get it? What will you do with it? Will you let it go or raise it? The man spoke only in the most incomprehensible dialect of Chinese, laughing at my concern and not making any effort to answer my questions clearly. I was distressed and incapable of expressing myself clearly. I told him he needed to put it back exactly where he found it—the parents were probably nearby. So he laughed at me and let it go right there on the side of the street. Perhaps the man was only playing with the owl—maybe he took it for the amusement and did not actually intend to sell it. Still, I grabbed up the flightless bundle of fluff. Suddenly the owl was my problem.

I had no idea where to release it. The man would not tell me where its nest was, and I didn't know for certain how long ago he had taken it. If I let it go just anywhere it would certainly perish—this place is simply crawling with dogs and cats. So here I am raising a baby owl. In the past weeks I told many people that raising wild birds is not good for the owls; owls raised by people have not learned to properly hunt and fend for themselves when released. Granted, most people take the owls directly from the nest, whereas I took it from a man with questionable intentions. Still I feel hypocritical.

I called my friend Ai Hanliu, who promptly took me to the Luosuo River to catch live fish—villagers typically raise these owls on fish, it seems. He taught me how to catch fish with a net. It was quite a special experience wading out into the river in the tropical sun, throwing an old fishing net like a local. I never learned to throw the net as skillfully as my friend, and I only caught a couple little fish. But it was enough for the owlet, so we returned to the village.

My friend showed me how to feed the owl—you have to push the food into its mouth a little bit before it realizes it is being fed. Perhaps later I will be able to feed it more insects, frogs, and mice, like I suspect it would naturally eat. I think it is best to wait until the bird is big enough to fly away from predators before I release it.

Yesterday my host father and his five close friends transformed the space beneath our house to accommodate important guests from Beijing and Shanghai. They brought in beautiful new wood tables and polished tree stump seats, a fancy tea serving set, and they created an entire set of bowls, cups, spoons, etc from freshly chopped bamboo. I was excited to eat authentic Dai cuisine: glutinous rice steamed with sugar and bananas inside of pineapple, sticky rice cakes steamed with banana flowers inside banana leaves, etc. However, I quickly discovered that I was not invited to join in the meal. I was hurt and confused. Eventually it became clear that this was a business meeting. The guests were representatives of a big tourism company that wanted to start bringing tourists into this village, and my host father and his friends wanted to sign a contract to become local guides. Here I was witnessing potentially the start of tourism directly within the village! After the meeting ended, I was invited to the table, where there was still plenty of food left. My friends spent the entire afternoon drinking rice liquor, and I sat with them and chatted and consumed perhaps two pineapples full of sweet, fruity steamed rice.

I have been investing more and more time in studying Dai. I can communicate a little about where I am going and when I am coming home, and I can say a few phrases concerning food. I am starting to understand perhaps one hundredth of the conversations happening around me. I know a couple Dai names for birds. And I have a Dai name now: Ai Zhuoc. It means "Sparrow."

My personal project investigating hunting and wildlife exploitation progresses frustratingly slowly. Perhaps I simply need to be patient. I must first finish the bird surveys for Green Rubber. This project keeps me out for countless hours alone on the mountain, which is really not good for any sort of community study. I have changed the survey protocol to make data analysis feasible, and I realized that I need to establish control points that are independent from the treatment points. Originally the plan was to compare birds between different intercropping treatments, but the plots are so close to each other that they are not independent. So now I am trying to establish clusters of control points that are definitely independent of the treatment points so I can compare the impact of intercropping in general on a larger landscape scale. This involves hiking many kilometers through rubber plantations searching for farms with similar characteristics to the treatment points. It is much harder than it sounds, as there are numerous variables to consider (distance from human settlement and forest patches, age of rubber trees, and nearby habitats like streams and bamboo thickets). I have completed all the surveys in the treatment plots, yet I have only partially established three clusters of control points. It is a race against time—birds are due to reduce their singing very soon. It is the end of the breeding season.

I am always very hungry and sleepy. I eat twice as much as anyone else in the family. I am always covered in sweat and surrounded by hordes of mosquitoes, tripping on vines and walking face first into more spider webs than I can count. I'm always covered in spider webs when I'm in the field—some as sticky as Elmer's glue. Every tree has little black caterpillars with long poisonous white hairs just waiting for you to bump into them. I must watch every step to avoid slipping in the mud—the ground is perpetually wet. It rains every day, and I often get caught in the most violent of torrential downpours. I bike to all the plots. Surveys thus entail mountain biking many kilometers on steep slippery plantation trails every day, and highway biking to access two more distant clusters. I have already had to get my bike repaired three times; I broke the gear shift once and I bent the rear wheel axle twice.

Well, that's nearly two pages and likely more than you really had time to read. I hope everything is going well wherever you are these days. As always, I'd love to hear about how you are doing!

Cheers,

-Francis



A valued butterfly at this time of year



This is “The Boss” who comes around to collect the butterflies. She works for a large company that packages them up alive and ships them off to be sold in Beijing and Shanghai.



My favorite place around here is the Nature Reserve. The only downside is the cicadas, which scream as loud as they possibly can at nearly all times of day. It’s a deafening competition to see which one can imitate the world’s loudest beard trimmer.



This little bat flew into the house and I caught it. Cutest little mammal I've ever held!



Super cool caterpillar. SE Asian biodiversity is a real deal!!



At the center is Ian Davies, Project Coordinator for eBird. He is probably the sharpest birder I've ever met, and he is world famous at only 24 years old! He gave an incredible talk at XTBG about the contributions of eBird to birding, science, and conservation. To the right is Gabriel Davis, an incredible birder and beginning graduate student with interests in evolutionary biology, migration, and biogeography of SE Asian flycatchers. Gabriel has already become an important mentor to me. I spent a full day birding in the gardens with these two 😊



These ponds are here so farmers can mix herbicide powder with the water when they need to kill the understory. With so much stagnant water around, it's no wonder the mosquitoes are so intense in the rubber plantations!



My friend Ai Han Bing raised three owlets, as I explained in the last email. Here is one of them the day he released it. I told people that the bird had a smaller chance of survival because it wasn't raised by its parents, and I said people shouldn't be raising wild birds.



So here I am raising an owlet myself. Hmm.



Fish Baskets. These traps, handmade from bamboo, catch lots of fish. I had the opportunity to see how Dai people traditionally fish with baskets. Later I saw how they fish with rods and nets. I already knew about the electroshocking method (that's a new phenomenon).



A rare day with clear skies. Better be out surveying birds!!



This patch of forest is not protected by any Chinese laws. All around its periphery are pineapple fields with recently planted rubber tree saplings. These large areas have been cleared in the past 2-3 years. Deforestation before my eyes.



White Dragonfruit



Graduation at the XTBG. I was surprised that many of the Chinese students didn't even bother to dress up. Formal attire is not as important to people in China as in America.



The community derives a lot of happiness from its numerous adorable toddlers



This is where mangoes come from.



This may be the most formidable hunter in the village. He catches upwards of 300 bats a year and about a hundred birds—at least according to his own estimates.



These people have never seen snow in their lives. TV is such an incredible invention.



This is where pineapples come from. Sweetest pineapple I have ever eaten.



Migrant laborer brought in to cut down and replant a rubber plantation. These guys are from elsewhere in Yunnan, but they are still really friendly.



When it rains it pours. I have gotten caught in a torrential downpour several times already.



Good Friends ☺