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Preening for a gorgeous view

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Spotting our feathered friends

JAMES HIPKISS discovers the joy of bird-watching
and invites you to do the same.



A Chinese pond heron well-hidden in the wetlands of Langkawi.



— PICTURES BY JAMES HIPKISS

A beautifully-coloured purple swamp hen looking for lunch in Langkawi.



This green pigeon is well camouflaged.



A yellow-billed stork.



A rather sad-looking stork, of the milky or painted variety, I'm guessing.

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Surely a pair of pigeons deep in contemplation, but so many varieties, which one?



Definitely an oriole, and probably a black-naped one.



Looks like an ibis to me, of the pinky red variety.

THERE are several outdoor pursuits that one could take up here in Malaysia but alas, many require working up a slight sweat, and when it boils down to this, many of us go: "Oh, it's too hot to play football, go cycling, do some gardening!"

So, instead we inevitably either remain indoors at home or in the air-conditioned environs of a shopping mall.

I confess that I'm one who only engages in outdoor activities if they involve jumping into water at some stage.

However, after being given a rather large book about the birds of Southeast Asia, I have discovered a new outdoor pastime which is cheap, not strenuous and involves Mother Nature. It's bird-watching!

Armed with said book and binoculars, I now enjoy the great outdoors, observing and learning a little about the wide variety of birds, either native to Malaysia or frequent visitors.

Does bird-watching sound a little weird or offbeat? All I can say is don't knock it till you've tried it.

Do you have to trek into the wilderness, crouch uncomfortably under a bush for several hours, get attacked by swarms of insects and more, waiting for a glimpse of the lesser-spotted marsh warbler?

Well, you can if you wish, but you could also visit a bird park in the middle of Kuala Lumpur, hardly a physical ordeal, though with the entry prices, it could be a financial ordeal.

However, there are so many good bird-watching sites — the country's beaches, its highlands, the rainforests, river banks and more. These are not difficult sites to reach, some a five-minute walk or drive away. What more could a bird-watcher want?

Malaysia does have one of the most exquisitely coloured and marked birds in the world, but there is much more... Birds, like us, lead busy and active lives, foraging or hunting for food, courting, building nests and rearing their young.

At the risk of sounding like a voyeur, all these activities can be fascinating to watch.

To see a brahminy kite soaring over the ocean looking for food and then swooping down

upon its prey is a breathtaking sight. Observing three male purple swamp hens strutting their stuff in a desperate bid to win the attention of a very nonchalant and unimpressed-looking female is an entertaining spectacle too.

Poor chaps, I can empathise. I know exactly how it feels. One also has some sympathy and admiration too while watching a weaver bird laboriously and with great skill, constructing its hanging home.

Then there are the overworked new parents. I recently watched a pair of hummingbirds working from dawn to dusk, flitting to and fro with food for a nest-full of ever hungry, twittering chicks, right outside my chalet window in a Langkawi resort. The private lives of birds are not boring if one just takes the time to observe.

Is observing all there is to it then? Open your ears and close your eyes a while for Malaysia's birds sing some of the most amazing tunes.

There is such variety to their calls, from the insistent call of cuckoos outside my city centre window every day to the incredible mimicking of drongos. And mynahs never cease to put a smile on my face as they chatter away with ever growing exasperation in an attempt to win food from my plate when eating outdoors.

I confess I sometimes chatter back, and they cock their heads, pause, then reply and soon we are in a deep two-way conversation!

The easiest form of bird-watching is of course to visit a bird park for its large number and variety of birds, usually the most colourful ones in an albeit captive environment.

The Bird Park at the Lake Gardens (Taman Tasik Perdana) with its exotic hornbills and herons is accessible and offers so much to see in a short time. This is bird-watching at its simplest, a good introduction for the family, no accessories needed, though at a price.

Moving on from this though, the basics required for bird-watching are:

- a fairly powerful pair of binoculars (birds can be shy)
- a good guide book to birds of the region
- some bug repellent

You may also wish to take along a notebook to record the birds you see and a camera as well, but bear in mind that you will need a zoom lens — 200mm to 600mm — to photograph the birds up-close.

The natural habitat of Malaysia's birds falls into three categories, namely coastal/wetlands, rainforests and highlands.

Wetlands and coastal regions are where you see the most birds, including many migratory species, as these are open areas and the birds easily visible.

In forests, on the other hand, due to thick foliage, you are likely to hear rather than see them, unless you go to a park where there are towers or tree-top walkways. In hill country, you will find open views where you can spot birds fairly easily.

Any frustrations or drawbacks? Well, you may get a little muddy if you stray off the tracks, the odd insect bite and the difficulty of identifying what you see.

Imagine me in the wetlands, binoculars in one hand and Craig Robson's *A Field Guide to the Birds of South-east Asia* in the other.

Is that some variety of heron I see among those reeds or maybe a crane? Leafing through the book, with all 1,327 species covered, I spot so many cranes and herons... are they juveniles or adults, males or females? Oh no, they just flew away!

Now you know why it may be a good idea to take a camera along, bag some shots of the birds and do the detective work later. But that's part of the enjoyment too, and as I said, don't knock it till you've tried it.

When bird-watching:

the Four Seasons Resort's in-house naturalist Aidi Abdullah (who graciously gave me a lot of his time and opened my eyes to some of the birds of Langkawi), reminded me that it might be a good idea to bring along:

- A guide book for local birds, which are readily available in major bookstores
- A pair of binoculars
- A sun hat or other protection such as sunblock cream
- Insect repellent
- A bottle of water
- A notebook and pen simply because you will never know when inspiration hits you
- A camera and zoom lens

There are myriad places to go bird-watching:

It might be a fun day out in the highlands:

- Frasers Hill
- Cameron Highlands
- Sabah's hill country

Or, if you prefer water, wetlands and coastal regions:

- Langkawi
- Kuala Gula Bird Sanctuary in Perak
- Similajau National Park in Sarawak
- Wetlands Park in Putrajaya
- Kota Kinabalu City Bird Sanctuary in Sabah
- Kuala Selangor Nature Park in Selangor
- Malim Nawar Wetland in Perak

For the more adventurous, the rainforest may offer a challenging trek:

- Taman Negara (with tree-top walk), Pahang
- Forest Research Institute Malaysia (tree-top walk), Kepong, Selangor
- Tabin Wildlife Reserve, Sabah
- Karang Tree-Top Walk, Kedah
- Temenggor Forest Reserve, Pahang
- Kinabatangan Wildlife Sanctuary, Sabah
- Sungkai Sambar Deer and Pheasant Wildlife Reserve, Perak