

Bangkok's birdwatching scene offers a different kind of Twitter

By [Ewen Mcleish](#) June 17, 2016 / 13:04 ICT

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A large Asian Openbill at Roi Fai Park. Photo: Ewen Mcleish

Much like formerly nerdy pursuits such as books clubs and board games, birding is cool again too. It makes sense. Just go into the woods and let the stress of life melt away while you concentrate of watching the tranquil life of little feathered friends.

Connecting with nature is great for de-stressing, so why not step into Queen Sirikit, Rot Fai or Rama 9 Park for an organized bird walk?

The Bird Conservation Society of Thailand (BCST) runs regular early morning "Birdwalks." These peaceful strolls use bird watching as inspiration to help increasingly disconnected city-dwellers reconnect with nature, said BCST Chairman Dr. Boripat Siriaroonrat.

Feeling tense after a hectic work week in Bangkok, I wondered whether birdwatching might be the revitalising escape I was looking for. I joined a Birdwalk at Queen Sirikit Park to find out more.

Arriving early, I found the park packed with Bangkokians walking, jogging, cycling, and enjoying the cool of the morning. The early start is necessary because birds are more active before the day's temperature rises. BCST volunteers set up a registration table by the entrance and, in exchange for an ID card, lent me binoculars.

The volunteers are a shy but enthusiastic bunch. The guide, Bank, was in his twenties and said he enjoys sharing his passion for birds with interested members of the public as well as meeting people with similar interests. Bank and his fellow guides can introduce beginners to around 20 species of bird in just a couple of hours.



About 30 people were on the walk. They were young and old, amateurs watched the birds alongside professional-looking types in camouflage gear toting long-lensed SLRs. The guides created two groups: families with young children, and everyone else. The walks are excellent adventures for youngsters. Birdwalk regular, Maythira, told me that introducing birdwatching to children is a first step to getting them to love nature; hopefully teaching them to protect it in future.

Feeling like a novice, I set off with the group across the grass. Seconds later, everyone stopped to stare up into the trees. I had no idea what we were looking at; I could hear birds, but couldn't see them. Our eagle-eyed guide set up a telescope on a tripod and said, "Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker." I looked down the lens and saw a tiny red and black bird sitting peacefully on a branch.

We moved around the park. Soon my senses tuned in, noticing not just birds, but all sorts of nature everywhere, even behind the men's toilets. We followed a narrow, tree-lined canal and spotted a flash of brilliant blue — the telltale sign that a kingfisher had just swooped past. Apparently, it's also possible to see cheerful looking canaries and vivid green parakeets. Although these are not Thai natives, they are escapees from the nearby JJ Market.

I used the illustrated leaflet, given at the start, to check off the birds I spotted, like a game of I-spy. Some birds have amusing local names, such as the "kee moo," or pig shit bird, which hops around on the grass and is easy to find. A more difficult spot is the "kee maa," or dog shit bird. This seems strange given that it is definitely easier to find dogs in Thailand than roaming pigs.

As the day heated up, we explored another scruffy bit of the park, looking for more winged creatures. Later, Dr. Boripat explained how important these untidy areas are as bird habitats. Here, they can find quiet branches, nooks and crannies to nest in. The BCST works closely with park authorities to preserve these wild places for birds.



A coppersmith Barbet nesting in King Rama 9 Park

Sweaty and thirsty, we made our way back to the start of the walk as the park was emptying out. Looking at my now-tattered leaflet, I realized I had crossed off 20 different species — everything from a delicate multi-coloured Coppersmith Barbet to a generously-sized (but plainer) Asian Openbill. Not bad for a first visit.

Quick Guide:



Birdwalks are organized in other parks, too. Suan Rot Fai, which used to be the Thai Railway Authority's golf course, has an open landscaped feel, with fewer clumps of trees. This makes it easier for beginners to spot birds. Also, Suan Luang Rama IX has a large lake with more waterbirds. Its location, further out of town, means a slightly wider range of birds can be seen.

The Birdwalks are organized on the first Saturday (Rot Fai Park) and Sunday (King Rama IX Park) of the month and on the second Sunday of each month at Queen Sirikit Park. Check out the [BCST](#) website for details of specific meeting points. Registration for all walks starts at 7:30am and they are free of charge.

Bangkok's Birdwalks are a chance to get out, gently exercise, meet some friendly people, appreciate the natural world, and get to know some feathered friends. All in all, a brief, relaxing escape from the hustle and bustle of city life.