

# When winter escape becomes flight of death

## Call to prevent migratory birds from smashing into buildings

Jose Hong

It is a grisly sign of the peak bird migration season, said National University of Singapore researcher David Tan.

He was referring to more bird carcasses being found on pavements these past few weeks.

All had crashed into buildings.

The avian ecologist, who has collected around 700 carcasses of birds killed in this manner in the past five years, said that he and his team were analysing the data behind the phenomenon.

As winter approaches and the weather gets colder in the northern parts of the world, birds begin flying south, in some cases travelling thousands of kilometres and passing through countries such as Singapore.

The migratory season typically begins around September and ends in May.

Mr Tan collects the birds when members of the public spot the dead creatures and call him. He said he has collected 17 carcasses so far this season, which is “fairly normal”.

Patterns have emerged from the

data collected over the years, he said.

For instance, he and fellow researchers now know the order in which certain species of migratory birds will appear in Singapore and smash into windows.

The yellow-rumped flycatcher, also known as the Korean flycatcher, begins appearing in late September. They are then followed by birds such as the blue-winged pitta and oriental dwarf kingfisher in October, and the western hooded pitta in November.

Mr Tan also said certain species, which he terms “super colliders”, are found dead more often than others. Blue-winged pittas, western hooded pittas and bitterns are examples of “super colliders”.

Researchers also know that specific parts of Singapore are “hot spots” for dead birds. These include the National University of Singa-

700

Number of carcasses, collected by avian ecologist David Tan in the past five years, of birds which died after crashing into buildings.

pore and Jurong Island.

But Mr Tan said this is where uncertainty creeps in. “The reason why Jurong Island, for example, is a ‘hot spot’ is that there is a very good level of observation there. Does this mean that the area is genuinely a hot spot for birds?”

Mr Tan is certain that what he collects is only a fraction of the number of birds killed.

“You’re competing with the cleaners all the time here in Singapore. And we have a veritable army of cleaners in the country. Furthermore, sometimes people call pest control or the authorities to clean up the birds.”

Furthermore, Mr Tan said the “super colliders” may appear to kill themselves more than other migratory bird species simply because people notice them more.

“Birds like the pittas are colourful, and bitterns are big,” he said, which immediately makes their dead bodies easier to spot. This is why he wants to do more research.

He said that even though bird strikes do not occur frequently enough to affect their populations, it is still important to prevent them from flying into buildings.

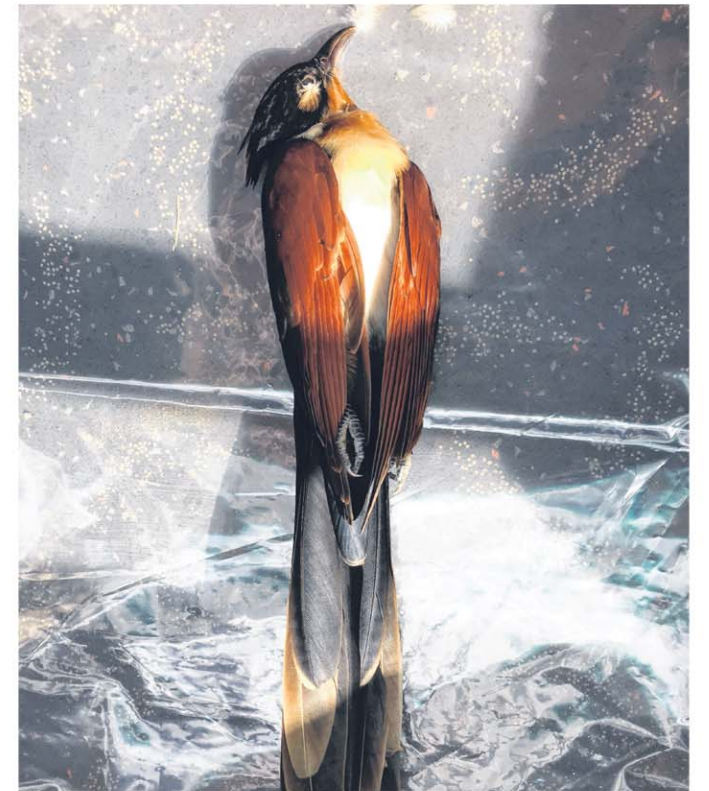
“It’s not a good thing for birds to fall out of a sky in urban areas. You don’t want to (spark) alarm, and you might get the public assuming that these birds were poisoned.”

Conservationist Teo Kah Ming, who has studied bird strikes, said: “Many birds that fall victim to building collisions are migratory birds. Some of them are uncommon or even have conservation status, and it is important that we make Singapore as safe as possible for them.

“Birds are important pollinators and seed dispersers in the ecosystem so it’s paramount to protect them.”

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• If you see a dead bird on the ground and want to contribute to science, call Mr David Tan on 91768971.



Birds found dead after crashing into buildings in Singapore (clockwise from left): an adult male jambu fruit dove, a near-threatened species that is native to South-east Asia; a sparrowhawk, which migrates during the northern winter months from its breeding grounds in south-eastern China, Taiwan and the Korean peninsula, to Indonesia and the Philippines; a blue-winged pitta; a female yellow-rumped flycatcher, which breeds in East Asia; and a chestnut-winged cuckoo, a species more often seen in wooded areas in the Central Catchment Nature Reserve or on Coney Island.

PHOTOS: COURTESY OF DAVID TAN