

Birds in the city



We share our cities with more than just other people. Author and lawyer Min Lim reflects on how one urban ark has changed and might change to support her feathered travelers.

Growing up in the 70s and 80s in Singapore, the bird that Singaporeans called the 'common myna' was, indeed, the **common myna**. An open woodland bird native to Asia, and well adapted to urban environments, you used to see them perched on benches in downtown streets, flitting around in parks and suburban gardens, and strutting about the void decks of the Government Housing Development Board flats (in which most Singaporeans live). The birds would settle on chairs and tables in hawker centres after diners left them, pecking at the remains of meals.

Now, it is the Javan myna, the new 'common' myna, that is doing all these things. It is grey-black to the other's burnt umber, with beady white eyes rather than black eyes fringed with yellow. The Javan myna apparently came over from Indonesia as a caged bird in the 1920s and, over the century, outcompeted its milder, brown cousin. One evening, I drove down Orchard Road, Singapore's major downtown shopping street, with its wide boulevards lined with giant malls, hearing what sounded like a thousand pieces of glass jangling together. It was the cacophony of all the Javan mynas roosting in the trees, I suppose saying hello and good night to each other before they went to sleep.

Another blackish bird that has done very well for itself here is the house crow, with its grey collar and jet black head and wings. You can see them almost anywhere on the island, and hear them too – harsh, guttural calls, matching their Darth Vader looks. They are menacing birds, adept at scavenging from rubbish bins and known for attacking humans, especially those who get too close to their nests during fledgling season.

Singapore is a city-state, so parks and nature reserves are just a few minutes' drive from housing and industrial estates. The following is an extract from a longer poem called *Birds in the City*, unpublished at the time of writing, and features, in order: the red jungle fowl, the little egret, the ashy tailorbird, the Asian glossy starling, the black-naped oriole and the house crow. I wrote this poem as a kind of anti-ode to the house crow after visiting a local nature reserve, the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve. Sungei Buloh sits right next to a belt of giant flatted factories, like an oasis in the desert.

Something crowed
We looked up to see
Four figures roosting on a tree branch
Stoic in the grey morning drizzle

...At the next hide,
A whole flock in the mud,
Each one as pristine as a new handkerchief

There was a dance,
each dancer with a chest of black feathers
And a mantle of barred gold
Staying with each other like the earth
and the sun
Over the muddy constellation,
Strewn with sea-shells, for stars

On the way out,
Tree-dip, tree-dip

They called with great merriment
Each of them no bigger than a hen's egg
With a little cap of red, and a breast of
charcoal-grey

...

On the way out,
four perched up bone-bare branches,
Glaring down with ruby eyes
Striped breasts a badge of youth

Meanwhile, a swoop of lemon feathers,
black masked faces whistling three
clear notes

But in the end,
Paths choked with people, massing

They flew
They perched

Heavy winged and numerous
Sombre-black, ubiquitous,

Ash-grey, ominous.

The morning began like Eden, and ended with an anthill crowd, surrounded by crows. I wondered, later in the week, after seeing a crow prey on half a roadkill rat on the road outside my office block, why certain birds seem to do so well in our cities. I suppose it is because they are intelligent, adaptable, aggressive and reproductively extremely productive. They could grow sleek and fat on a fallen ice cream cone, a rotting apple and a cold plate of unfinished char kway teow (a local fried rice noodle dish with prawns, chives, Chinese sausage, bean sprouts, fish cake and other delicious things).

If I had one wish for my city, it would be for us to build or adapt our buildings and our environment in such a way that other, more delicate, more specialized, more discriminating birds could survive and thrive too.

I have heard a kingfisher call above the drone of traffic, seen the flash of a black-naped oriole in the shadow of a mall, spotted a white-bellied fish eagle soar in the bright blue gap between two skyscrapers. It is not impossible to imagine a city that could be a home to all the rest of the birds in the poem, and not just at the fringes.

This is so that what can flourish alongside us is not just what is most like us. We will not reach Eden by ourselves.

Min Lim ✉
Unaffiliated
✉ e-mail: min.nimmil@gmail.com

Published online: 1 March 2024