

A Long and
Tortuous Course—

LOOKING FOR IBIS



by Zhang Zhi-yen
Lanzhou, Gansu Province
People's Republic of China

Editor's Note: Although Professor Zhang Zhi-yen failed ever to mention the scientific name of the specific ibis he writes of, I have determined by researching numerous books in my own library that the bird is the Japanese crested ibis Nipponia nippon. This bird is indigenous to Japan where from 1890 to 1930 it was considered extinct. In 1930 small numbers were found breeding in Honshu and perhaps two other places in Japan. During the 1940s much forest was cleared and vast areas of the species' habitat was destroyed. By 1960 only ten of the ibis were alive. In 1986 when Zhang Zhi-yen wrote this paper only five of the ibis were alive in Japan and they were not breeding.

In former years the Japanese crested ibis bred in Siberia, Manchuria and northern China but only on rare occasions. They were not resident in these locations as they were in Japan. These northern populations usually migrated to southern China during the winter. Now, according to Zhang Zhi-yen, there are none of this species in Siberia or Manchuria. It is obviously the small Chinese population of Nipponia nippon that is the focus of Zhang Zhi-yen's article.

Professor Zhang Zhi-yen writes in such a delightful style of extraordinary English that I have left much of it untouched. Some of the phrases I have reluctantly rearranged to render them less poetic but more practical for the benefit of our readers.

In 1979, the Chinese Academy of Sciences accepted from a vice premier of the State Council of PR China an important task — search for ibis. Ibis is a

characteristic species of bird in Asia, one of the rarest birds in the world, and known as "the eastern gem." It was classified as an "international protecting bird" in the 12th World Conference on Protecting Birds, 1960. There were not any ibis in the Soviet Union at that time, nor in Korea either, although five ibis have been kept in cages in Japan, but they have already had loss of capacity to reproduce, because of being infirm with age. If you want to save the bird from extinction, you have no alternative but to place your hopes in our country, China. Scientists of the USA, Japan and UK, etc., have paid a good deal of attention to doing something about it.

Ibis is called in Chinese Zhulu or Honghe — red-headed giant heron. It used to be of wide distribution in our country in history, covering the vast area from Xing-kai Lake, Henongjiang Prov., the Northeast of China to Fujian and Taiwan Prov. of the East, and from Tiansui, Gansu Prov. of the West to Hainan Island of the South. Mainly in the Northeast, North and Qin Mountains, etc., there were many ibis. Up to the 30s they were still seen by some folks in 14 provinces. Though it was regarded as a deity in Tiansui local records, in fact its fate was very bad; it decreased rapidly in quantity, and in the early 1960s a few specimens of them were collected only in Yang and Zhouzhi county and near Xian city, Shanxi Prov. No trace of it has been seen since then.

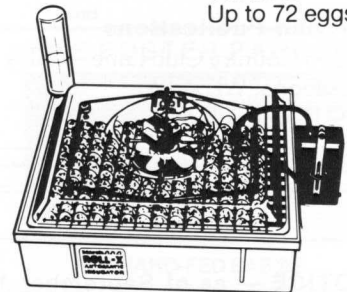
To attempt to search for ibis which had been missing for more than 20 years was very difficult, just like fishing for a needle in the ocean. The task was undertaken courageously by Mr. Liu Ying-zeng, a scientist in the Animal

Marsh Farms INCUBATORS

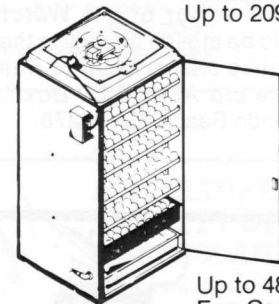
- FEATURING fully automatic turners, temperature and humidity control.



TURN-X
Up to 72 eggs.



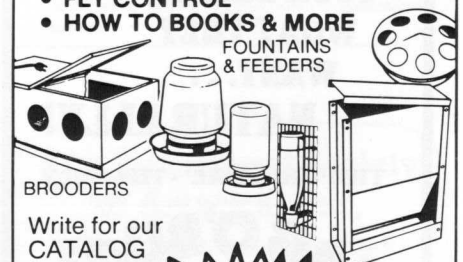
ROLL-X
Up to 209 eggs.



Up to 480
Egg Capacity.

& BIRD EQUIPMENT

- BROODERS
- FEEDERS & FOUNTAINS
- FLY CONTROL
- HOW TO BOOKS & MORE



Write for our
CATALOG
today.

**WE'VE
MOVED!**
Effective Aug. our
new address is:

MANUFACTURED BY

LYON
ELECTRIC COMPANY, INC.

P.O. BOX 3307
CHULA VISTA, CA 92011 U.S.A.
TELEPHONE: (619) 585-9900

WE ACCEPT



SPECIALIZED AND IMPORTED BIRD BOOKS

We can offer you over 200 titles on Aviculture & Cage Birds; plus we have titles on Game Fowl, Waterfowl, Pigeons, Doves, Ornithology and Birds of World Wide Distribution. MANY TITLES NOT FOUND IN PET OR BOOK STORES.

Send \$1.00 for our catalogue (refundable with first order)

Avian Publications™

236 Country Club Lane — AFA
Altoona, WI 54720
(715) 835-6806

NOTICE — as of September 1, 1987, all correspondence intended for the editor of the *Watchbird* should be mailed directly to the AFA business office. Send to Sheldon Dingle c/o AFA, P.O. Box 1568, Redondo Beach, CA 90278.



**FEED
YOUR BIRDS
WHAT THEY
WANT...
NATURALLY!**

THE 'ORIGINAL' - THE ONLY

BAGO'BUGS
INSECT FORMULA

FOR BROCHURE & ORDER FORM
WRITE
EXOTIC BIRD PRODUCTS, INC.
P.O. BOX 128
NEWBERG, OREGON 97132
(503) 864-2827



Research Institute (ARI). He studied carefully the 17 specimens on hand, which had been collected in China, consulted much written material by scientists of China and other countries, analyzed the routes of predecessors to investigate it, and was well prepared for wild jobs, before he started off having an atlas, some relevant materials and apparatus with him.

He spent three years (1979 - 1981) to observe and study in 13 provinces, climbing mountains and wading across rivers, eating in the wind and sleeping in the dew, sometimes having even to deal with beasts of prey, and traveling 50,000 km. The end result was he didn't find any sign of ibis, and hardly found the favorable circumstances for it to perch. Though he didn't find the bird, he saw the reasons why it became almost extinct.

Ibis danger of extinction is caused by many factors: it lives in agricultural districts, its body is big, the feathers in gay colours, the head bright orange, and the rest is white snow so that it is easily made a target for hunting. It has many natural enemies. Crows, birds of prey and black weasels often forcibly occupy its nest, destroy its eggs and harm its young birds. Because of many illnesses to imperil it, its natural death rate is high; but the most important aspect is that the condition of its habitat is seriously destroyed. It is very important for ibis to select the suitable place to build its nest, three requirements must be possessed: high and dense forest necessary for the nest; pools and paddy fields convenient for seeking food (fish, shrimps and river snails, etc.); and peaceful and secluded surroundings advantageous to avert the attacks of natural enemies.

But unfortunately, in the past 20 years, a lot of huge trees have been cut down completely in wilderness areas. After reforming the crop system, pools and paddy fields have disappeared; pesticides, chemical fertilizers and waste gas and water and industrial residue of many factories have polluted many fields and water sources, and the above mentioned have threatened ibis' existence seriously.

Mr. Liu didn't fail altogether in looking for ibis. He found two important clues, first, upon inquiries of a fisherman in Yang county Shanxi Prov., he learnt the district is indeed the haunt of ibis; second, he found three feathers of an ibis in a hunter's home of Hui county, Gansu Prov., and it was said that the ibis had been shot dead only two or three years ago.

Returning to the ARI, he reported all of the details to his leaders and experts, and enjoyed at once their strong support for him to search for it continuously; and the key regions to be examined were narrowed to several points: Yang and Hui county, etc. Then the ARI decided to provide a cross-country-motor for him, increase his exploring expenses, and made a set of slides about ibis for propagation.

He paid the third visit in 1981 to Yang county. In ecological geography, ibis belongs in species of bird living at the foot of mountain, it is impossible for it to haunt the areas with a high elevation, so he searched all over the plains and hilly land in Yang county for it, but found nothing. Just when he had slim hopes and was going to move to Gansu Prov., a peasant from Zhifang village, Mr. Wu, who watched Liu Ying-zeng's slide show about it in a cinema, said he had seen ibis.

Mr. Liu didn't firmly believe his words, for many egrets, herons and white cranes are in those districts and local peasants can't usually draw a distinction between crane, heron, egret and ibis. Mr. Liu showed him a standard ibis photo, and asked him to go and see it once more, and make it clear where it lived exactly. Two days later he came back, and no sooner did he enter than he shouted, "Quite right, it's the very image of your photo!"

They drove to mountains first, walked a distance over 5 km afterwards, and got to Jingjiahe of 1200 m above sea level. A nest was found there, which was bigger than that of heron and simpler and cruder than that of magpie, and it was probably ibis' home (was named No. 1 nest), but where was the ibis? Mr. Liu suddenly gave a cry nervously, "Oh! Is it true? God bless me!" Some bird-talon printed the wet sand by a pool with plenty of water and lush grass. After analyzing them very carefully, he was sure that an ibis, a living ibis, had looked for food there just within past 48 hours. His enthusiasm was redoubled.

He tramped up hill and down dale, and took a circuitous route for two days; returning to Jingjiahe at 3:00 p.m., May 21, he suddenly saw an ibis fly from the East to the Northwest. "Right! That's just what I seek after." Mr. Liu blurted out, "Ibis, why do you live in such a higher place?" Neither documents had any mistake, nor ibis was purposely making trouble for him; but these years, with development of economic and productive activities of people and disruption of ecological environment, ibis

was unable to take peaceful shelter in low-level-mountain, and compelled to transfer to mid-level-mountain.


They pursued it further in the direction of its trail, got to Yaojiagou village on 27 of May where they saw that an ibis was eating something in a field, and guessed it was the bird from Jingjiahe (but it was not so in fact). An old peasant said, "It had built a nest in a high tree nearby, and three nestlings were born a few days ago." Mr. Liu found the tree soon, and just as he expected, three nestlings hid in the nest (No. 2 nest), popping their heads in and looking about, and crying, "Ji-ji-jia..." very happily. To Mr. Liu the sound at the moment was almost like the most beautiful music in the world. The excited tears started from his eyes. He decided to camp himself in a valley, no longer go back to town. Food and vegetables were sent to him once a week.

Because from the first day Mr. Liu always stayed under the tree, the parent ibis dared not return to its home to feed its babies. Three had to go hungry for a day. Up to 11:00 that night, Mr. Liu still recorded at the foot of the tree, suddenly he heard something fall to the ground with a crash. He flashed his torch at once and swept every corner for two hours lest the nestling had a fall and was injured, but none was seen. Next morning he sought through the region. When he was almost at the end of his rope, a boy ran over and said that a nestling was behind their house. Mr. Liu rushed there; the nestling was very hungry, cold and tired, and could no longer crawl. He asked the boy to collect some living river snails and a frog which he then cut into pieces with scissors and fed them to the baby so that it made a recovery slowly. Then it was sent back to its nest by Mr. Liu; perhaps it touched a little bit of human smell, its blood relation regarded it as foreign one, and ignored it, after a while it dropped from the nest, then he put it back again. This happened repeatedly and at last Mr. Liu was obliged to keep the pitiful nestling himself, meanwhile he asked leaders in Peking for instructions whether the nestling should be moved to Peking to be raised.

The nestling, some photos about it, recording tapes and various materials were carried to Peking. "Ibis was found in China." A good news soon got around, and caused a sensation throughout the zoological field of China.

The amount of ibis found early or late in No. 1 nest and No. 2 nest totalled only seven by the end of 1981, and

China's departments concerned have immediately taken emergency measures: the importance to save the rare creature, ibis, from extinction has been propagated in many ways; anyone to offer leads about ibis has been encouraged by giving awards; and someone to kill it was punished severely; some scientists have carried on investigations in the distribution and amount of it; protection stations were set up there, and adopted the methods of observing it for a long time, throwing in food, expanding the area of paddy fields, confining the amount of agricultural chemical within necessary limits, and making the experiment in artificial keeping it: one ibis in Peking Zoo, and some scientists took a new way that a brood of nestlings was decentralized into different nests in suitable places of Yang county and raised artificially, so that all of the four young ibis born on April last year survived, etc. So the ibis have increased gradually: from 7 to 9 in 1982, 12 in 1983 and in May '85 we visited Yang county and were glad to hear there were 17 ibis in wilderness, 21 in January 1986, and up to September 1986 they increased to 28 ibis, to reproduce 7 young ibis within one year — the increasing reproduction rate is higher than before, and the facts prove that the group of ibis in China is the only one having reproductive ability in the world.

Some key problems are unsolved in developing the rare bird. The ibis in Yang country so far reproduced twelve broods. Twelve broods had forty-two eggs, four of them were not fertilized, only thirty-seven nestlings hatched, but six died young, two died of illness and one starvation. Experts said, "Ibis still struggle for existence on the verge of extinction. In scientific aspect, we can only regard it as 'being out of danger'; that ibis must multiply to 500 pairs at least." And a cadre of the protection station told me a bad news that two soft eggs were laid in Yaojiagou, which was a dangerous sign being worth watching. There are indications recently that it was DDT left in food and water that destroyed calcium in eggshell of ibis, such soft eggs were produced, which cannot bear incubation for a long time, and easily ruptured; if we don't take any effective measure promptly to solve it, we would fall into an irretrievable condition. We suggest that scientists in every country carry out international cooperation and depend on modern scientific capabilities to raise ibis' laying-egg-rate, hatching rate and survival rate to save the rare bird from extinction. 



Jewell's Exotic Birds
We buy birds. We sell birds.
Domestic handfed babies;
Macaws, Dwarf macaws,
Cockatoos, African Greys,
Caiques, Conures, Toucans.
Variety of surgically sexed pairs —
call for types available.
(714) 926-4242
34190 East Newport Road
Winchester, California 92396

THE FOSTER PARROT



FOR HAND-FED BABIES
Designed and engineered specifically for the needs of exotic birds. THE FOSTER PARROT provides total body warmth. For brochure and order form, SASE to:
MANION CREST
13846 Kurtz Rd., Grass Valley, CA 95949
(916) 272-6447



AVICULTURAL SOCIETY OF QUEENSLAND
Welcomes new members
An Australian Society catering to all birds both in captivity and in the wild. We publish a bi-monthly magazine on all aspects of aviculture and conservation. Anyone interested in membership please contact: **Ray Garwood, 19 Fahey's Road, Albany Creek, 4035 Queensland, Australia.** Annual subscription: \$22 (A) airmail, or \$16 (A) surface. Please remit monies or bank drafts in **Australian currency.**

The Avicultural Society of America, Inc.,
Welcomes new members.



We publish a monthly bulletin on all aspects of aviculture. Anyone interested in becoming a member please contact: Helen Hanson, (213) 542-3633, A.S.A., Inc., P.O. Box 2796, Redondo Beach, CA 90278. Yearly dues \$15.00. Overseas members, please add \$5.00 to cover postage.