

21/05/2000

Labuan's bird haven on hilltop

K. Navarat

A HITHERTO unknown hill covered with rainforest in Labuan is attracting the attention of ornithologists and bird watchers.

The Labuan Bird Park, opened to the public late last year, is well on its way to becoming the premier bird sanctuary, reproduction centre and educational hub on the study of birds in Borneo.

With 400 birds from 65 species, it is the ideal place for scientists, zoologists and academics interested in the subject..

Located 14km from the town centre in Labuan, the park receives an average of 5,000 visitors a month. The fact that there is no entrance fee has encouraged visitors.

Work on the RM6.3 million park began in 1995 after the proposal received the blessings of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Veterinary Services Department under the Agriculture Ministry has been placed in charge of the management and operation of the park.

An official opening ceremony is being planned for the end of the year.

"The Government has plans to establish the park as a centre for observing all species of birds available in Borneo," said park manager Ghazali Othman.

Currently, only one-third of the area has been developed and utilised.

Ghazali said the concept at the park was the "walk-in-aviary" which means that visitors walk through tunnels and domes to watch birds in their natural environment.

"The 400 birds are in four tunnels and three domes," he said. And by 2005, the park expects to exhibit up to 500 different species of birds of Borneo.

The aviaries have lush flora and fauna, combining artificial fibre-rock waterfalls and gardenia ponds that may eventually accommodate 2,000 birds.

On the drawing board is a fourth dome to be built to connect to existing ones.

"There is even a jogging track within the park for health enthusiasts to enjoy fresh air and the panoramic view from atop the hill," Ghazali said. The path takes one uphill and between massive trees that provide excellent shade and breeze.

According to him, a well-designed and constructed aviary plays a significant role in preventing accidents and illnesses. Birds fly horizontally habitually rather than taking a swerve upwards and downwards.

It is therefore crucial to consider the length of the aviary rather than height.

Once the inhabitants are comfortable the rewards are the beginning of reproduction and of course the never-ending "chirpy music".

He said temperature, water and feed are other important factors to consider.

Birds need sunlight for vitamin D production. This is where aviaries are most suitable as they allow just enough exposure to the sun and protect the birds from too much heat, rain and wind.

Ghazali said statistics confirmed that reproduction of certain local birds such as fowls, mynahs, and pigeons had successfully begun at the park.

Park officials expect other species to follow suit soon.

"For this purpose, the park has prepared a quarantine-cum-reproduction section to help assist in the process," he said.

Birds seen in and around the aviary are, among others, doves, starling, bulbul, hornbill, parrots, wood dove, Japanese bantam, buffyfish owl, herons, storks, egrets, magpies, parakeets, pheasants.

Also fascinating to see are "show birds" like the greater flamingo, dutch swan, moluccan cockatoo, giant cochin and blue peacock. To complete the park's ambience, one cannot help but mention shoals of colourful red tilapia, patin, and a pair of red arapaima splashing in the cool waters of the landscaped pond.

Ghazali who has over 15 years of wildlife and livestock experience said the park had conducted assignments and outings with the co-operation of Sabah's Wildlife Department to capture other species of birds in south-west Sabah.

"This is no easy task. Once we have done enough of this, we are confident the park will be as successful as we have projected."

Ghazali hoped that diversification plans for the park in terms of a bird sanctuary, reproduction centre and educational hub would help generate revenue in future.

"Once we have achieved this, we hope income will improve. Right now, we are spending RM20,000 every month to maintain the park," he said.

With an 11-member team, Ghazali is focusing on training and bird knowledge at the moment.

The park is open daily from 9am to 6pm.

(END)