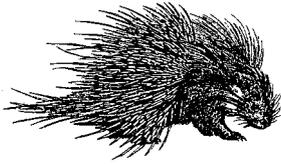


Porcupine!



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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Episode IV— A New Hope	1
Editorial	2
DEB news	2
<i>Feedback</i>	3
Invertebrates	3
Vertebrates	8
Diversity at a glance	14
Miscellany	15
Book Review	18
In the News	19
Wild Corner	21
Recent publications	23

Editorial

It is the Year of the Monkey and everywhere there are pictures of monkeys - and of gibbons, and of bizarre gibbon-monkey hybrids, with gibbon arms and a monkey tail. Gibbons aren't monkeys, of course, but apes, more closely related to us than to the macaques, which are the most widespread monkeys in China. Why this confusion between two very different native animals? The reason is both instructive and very, very sad. A millennium ago, there were gibbons throughout southern and central China. The rich kept them as pets, and both painters and poets admired their graceful movements and haunting calls. Nobody confused noble gibbons with vulgar macaques. China's population increased, forests disappeared, and gibbons became increasingly scarce. By the 17th century they were confined to the south - including, probably, Hong Kong - and by the twentieth century to the remote southwest. As gibbons retreated, painters and poets came to depend on secondhand sources and gibbons were increasingly confused with macaques, which remained widespread in China until recently. In December, I visited Bawangling and heard one of the last two groups of Hainan gibbons. Gibbon songs are targeted at rival groups kilometres away, but there is no need for this at Bawangling. The sad and lonely calls echo over across plantations where no gibbons survive to listen. No, this is not the Year of the Gibbon.

News from DEB

With university funding in Hong Kong in a state of crisis, staff salary cuts and changes to terms-of-service, plus uncertainty of the future form and mode of operation of Hong Kong University, departmental concerns have been relegated somewhat to the back burner. And while rows about funding and a variety of other shenanigans have been occupying the attention of Hong Kong Government, biodiversity has been at the centre of a media circus. Biodiversity as represented, in this instance, by a small crocodile – a juvenile *Crocodylus porosus*. This animal, and the polluted Yuen Long creek that it (at least at the time of writing) calls home have been on TV screens worldwide, demonstrating to anyone who may have temporarily forgotten or somehow been unaware that the Hong Kong 'world city' has anything but a world-class environment. Indeed, the crocodile hunters, photographers, and government officials that have been hoping to have a close encounter with the crocodile have shown a marked reluctance to enter the waters where it lives. Pictures of tilapia gasping for air at the water surface, and the many dead fish littering the surface and banks, are indications of conditions in the creek. That aside, however, what is fueling the rush to capture the crocodile? A possible risk to human life? Unlikely. One Mrs Chan, who lives alongside the creek said, when interviewed on camera, that she liked having the animal around. Anyway, it isn't as if the crocodile is big enough to cause much harm. And given the ready supply of dead fish in its neighbourhood, there doesn't seem to be much likelihood that it will suddenly turn man-eater. That possibility doesn't seem to be keeping Mrs Chan or her family awake at night, nor does it seem to be keeping sightseers at bay. Moreover, the species isn't even exotic so that can't be used as an argument for capturing it. *Crocodylus porosus* has an extensive natural range that would once have included southern China, although it has long since been hunted to extinction in this part of Asia. Whatever its source, we could treat this specimen as the first step in a reintroduction programme for *C. porosus* in Hong Kong. There is plenty of scope for increasing local biodiversity by planned introductions of species that would have occurred here in the past. Many exotic species have become established already without any evolutionary history adapting them to conditions in Hong Kong, so the planned reintroduction of species that were formerly native and hence preadapted to local conditions would have a good chance of resulting in self-sustaining populations. This may already have happened (albeit in an unplanned manner) in the case of the Water Monitor, *Varanus salvator*. And yes, I know that *C. porosus* grows big and is potentially dangerous to humans when large, but Ferraris are big and potentially dangerous too. No one is proposing that they should be exterminated or that their importation should be banned. I think we should let the Yuen Long crocodile live, and encourage her to invite a few friends to stay.

David Dudgeon