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Birdwatching is a rewarding activity that's also suitable for the whole family. — Filepic

Flying high

Birdwatching brings people closer to nature.

THE cool breeze and sound of birds and crickets chirping perked up the spirits of 12 nature lovers who woke up early to do some birdwatching at Paya Burung, located within the Forest Reserve Institute Malaysia (FRIM) in Kepong, Kuala Lumpur.

Participating in a citizen science project organised by FRIM's Ecotourism Division earlier this year, the group was hoping to catch a glimpse of, among others, the red-wattled lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*), a protected bird species on the brink of extinction.

Paya Burung is an 8ha bird sanctuary situated within the FRIM campus, and is a natural habitat and rest stop for over 90 bird species.

University student Amira Nor Sabrina Ambran, 21, who was among the participants, said that it was her first birdwatching activity. "Each time we hear the sound of a bird, we would try to detect the direction the sound is coming from and then use our binoculars to take a better look at the bird's physical shape and figure out its species.

"I learned a lot that day ... not only did I get to identify various bird species but I also got to know more about their habitat and how they survive, as well as the importance of protecting the environment," she said.

Shukri Mohd Yusof, 31, said he found birdwatching a calming and soothing experience.

"The wild bird species here come in a variety of colours. We were lucky we saw a species of migratory birds catching fish with their long bills," he said.

Head of the Ecotourism and Urban Forestry Programme at FRIM Ahmad Azaruddin Mohd Noor said the citizen science project was organised to bring people closer to nature and to raise awareness on the importance of biodiversity conservation.

He said so far 86 bird species are known to exist in Paya Burung, including four new species identified by the participating group that day. The diversity and abundance of food sources, greenery and humid environment are the main factors that make Paya Burung an ideal habitat for birds.

"Besides educating the public about our rich biodiversity, this project is also a collaboration with the public to collect data on bird species that exist on FRIM's premises," he said, adding that it also exposes the participants to the joys of

observing birds in their natural habitat.

He said with the help of reference books on birds, and the eBird mobile application, participants are able to identify the birds by gender, characteristics, markings and habitat, following which they can tag their location and contribute the information to eBird.

Through such projects, FRIM hopes to enhance public awareness, especially among schoolchildren, on the importance of recognising and identifying natural resources such as birds, which are indicators of the richness of an area's flora and fauna, explained Ahmad Azaruddin.

He added that birdwatching should be promoted as an ecotourism activity in certain areas in Malaysia where a diverse range of wild bird species can be found.

"Ecotourism is not just about enabling visitors to enjoy the beauty of nature in tourism spots. It's also about raising awareness on biodiversity conservation through collaborations with villagers. We can get the local community to be involved by engaging them as guides in birdwatching activities," he said.

Meanwhile, FRIM Ecotourism and Urban Forestry Programme researcher Norsham Yaakob said birdwatching is not only for nature and wildlife lovers but also for families to participate in.

"A lot of people think birdwatching is a boring and 'geeky' activity. It's actually a rewarding activity that combines a sense of adventure and discovery and the joy of visiting fascinating landscapes. It is suitable for the whole family ... in fact, it's a good way to train children to appreciate wildlife as well as the beauty of our flora and fauna," he added.

Ecotourism and Conservation Society of Malaysia chief executive officer Andrew Sebastian said people who wish to try birdwatching must first equip themselves with a good pair of binoculars.

"The binoculars need not be expensive, just a basic but good quality one will do. Of course, they must have an interest in birds. When going birdwatching, they need to wear hiking shoes and comfortable clothes just in case they want to head to 'hotspots' that may require them to hike," he said.

According to Andrew, there is so much to see and experience while birdwatching as Malaysia's avifauna comprises 873 species of birds, with 91 endemic or near-endemic species recorded.

"Some of our birdwatching hotspots are located in Kuala Selangor, Royal Belum State Park (Perak), Taman Negara and Fraser's Hill (Pahang), as well as in the Bako National Park (Sarawak) and Kinabatangan (Sabah)," he said. — Bernama

