

Home sweet home

By CHIN MUI YOON

OUT of 24 species of swiftlets in the world, only five are commonly sighted in Malaysia; of those, it is *Aerodramus fuciphagus* that produces the prized white nests. The other varieties do produce edible nests but they are often filled with impurities and don't command as high a price.

Sarawak's Niah Caves used to have the largest concentration of swiftlets. But over-harvesting has resulted in a drastic drop of nests, from a recorded 1.7 million in 1935 to a mere 65,000 in 2002, and even fewer today, according to swiftlet farming enthusiast, Dr Christopher Lim.

Since the 1980s, wild swiftlets have turned to manmade structures like abandoned buildings to house their young, as their natural habitat is lost to development – the earliest farmers became successful by default.

Then, Indonesia's forest fires and the subsequent haze during the 1990s drove millions of swiftlets to Malaysia, and coastal towns like Sitiawan and Teluk Intan in Perak boomed with swiftlet farms and, today, have the largest concentration, averaging over 1,000 farms each.



This unusual bird farm in Nibong Tebal, Penang, used to be a cinema. Those pipes sticking out are for ventilation. – Reuters

In 1996, after a visit to Indonesia organised under the auspices of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Flora and Fauna, Malaysia's Wildlife and National Parks Department (or Perhilitan) concluded that commercial farming would be the best way to increase the

dwindling number of swiftlets in Malaysia. From fewer than 50 farms in 1997, today there are thousands.

The way to attract these birds is to provide an environment that closely resembles the swiftlets' natural habitat, which are traditionally caves. The right humidity and temperature are vital for the bird to feel at home; and if humidity is insufficient, nests won't be able to cling to the walls.

Another vital factor is the appropriate sound system. Long range speakers must be positioned correctly and must sound the right chirps to attract birds from the surrounding area, and then another set of tweeters must get them to nest in the farm.

“The longer you keep the bird in the farm the higher the chances that it will build a nest,” explains Dr Lim. “You need the right external sounds to attract them into the area and soothing, internal sounds to draw them in.

“The sounds only need to be projected from 7am to 7pm – birds do not hear them at night.”

“You need to do everything right the first time, hence the importance of understanding how a farm works. The most successful farm is operated by you personally, not a consultant. And don't be greedy; you only need to attract one bird a day! And you do not need multiple farms, as just one successful farm can enrich you for life.”

■ *Information sourced from 'Make Millions from Swiftlet Farming: A Definitive Guide' by Dr Christopher Lim.*

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