

THE RADICAL RANGER

浪漫巡山員——從海拔 0 到 3000 公尺，熱血堅毅的 台灣山林守護者

The Radical Ranger is the first-person account of author Chang Wei-Chun's nine years of fighting fires and illegal logging and protecting wildlife in Taiwan's rugged interior. His lived experience provides an inspiring story of the dangers, challenges and undeniable allure of safeguarding Taiwan's mountain forests.

The Central Mountains, Taiwan's high-mountain spine, is a north-south mountain range capped by well over 100 peaks rising above 3,000m and blessed with irreplaceable ecological and cultural wealth. However, the public forest rangers tasked with its protection go largely unsung, their authority and effort often discounted. *The Radical Ranger* narrates the author (Chang Wei-Chun, aka A-bu)'s real-life story over nine years working as a Central Mountain Range forest ranger. Since joining up in 2015, A-bu has done mountain rescue work, fought wildcat fires, rescued trapped wildlife, conducted regular forest patrols, and prosecuted illegal activity. This groundbreaking work is the first to explore comprehensively the challenges of forest ranger work in Taiwan and to highlight the structural problems that stand in the way.

The first section of this book narrates the challenges of fighting fires, illegal logging, and other illicit activities. The second recounts A-bu's forest ranger training, deep-forest missions, and stories of his colleagues. The third and final section highlights bureaucratic gaps and systemic difficulties as well as inherent contradictions in the human-nature relationship. Drawing on lived experience, the author describes confrontations with rogue logging gangs, detailing their targets and strategies and bemoaning the paucity of resources available to stop them. He also details the unwieldy and generally inadequate equipment rangers have on hand to bring deadly forest fires under



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control. Further, he shares the myriad tasks rangers regularly perform to help protect the environment – from rescuing black bears to stopping illegal camping, thwarting disruptive nature paparazzi, and dismantling illegal temples. All told, this work highlights in approachable and remarkably relatable prose the complex of critical tasks performed by Taiwan’s forest rangers.

The Radical Ranger gives a sincere account of both the grueling hardships and exceptional rewards of high-mountain work, drawing readers into the ineffable beauty of Taiwan’s interior, demands of forest ranger work, and sheer power and romance embodied in safeguarding this treasured land.

Chang Wei-Chun 阿步（浪漫巡山員）

Chang Wei-Chun (aka A-bu) is a professional forest ranger and administrator of *The Radical Ranger* (浪漫巡山員) Facebook blog. He has accumulated years of experience in forest fire fighting, mountain search and rescue, wildlife rescue, and illegal activity search and seizure, which he incorporates into his nonfiction writings on real-world forest ranger work.

THE RADICAL RANGER

By Chang Wei-Chun

Translated by Chris Findler

Chicken Farm

I hurried to the police station to report the crime, not realizing it would be the final straw that broke me.

The exceptional environment that gives Daxue Mountain its rich variety of flora and fauna is the reason the area plays host to an international bird watching competition every year from September to October.

Not just bears

Daxue Mountain teems with wildlife, especially birds. In fact, 209 bird species, 32 of which are endemic to Taiwan, were spotted this year. If you go to Daxue Mountain and keep your eyes peeled, you'll likely see nearly every species Taiwan has to offer. That's why many birders, from Taiwan and around the world, form teams each year to go birding on Daxue Mountain.

There's a great deal to take in here, too: a colorful titmouse foraging on an igiri tree; the disproportionately sonorous "to meet you! to meet you!" of a tiny Taiwan yuhina perched on a blossom-carpeted cherry tree branch; and a Taiwan whistling thrush flitting over from a slope embankment – its bluish-purple feathers glinting with a slightly metallic sheen and piercing tweet reminiscent of an old bicycle's screeching brakes.

This is Daxue Mountain, aka "Bear Forest". In addition, because of the abundance of bird species found here, the area also answers to the euphonious nickname "Chicken Farm".

Hold on a second! On what planet is "Chicken Farm" a "euphonious nickname"? Your incredulity is understandable but, nevertheless, it is a playful, tongue-in-cheek pet name for the area used in the media and by visitors.

Luring birds

Famous as a prime birdwatching destination, one reason for Daxue Mountain's "Chicken Farm" moniker traces back to the well-documented timidity of its bird populations. They're so shy that many visitors never see any of them. Equipment is also an issue. The titmouse may be gorgeous, but unless you have the right (i.e., expensive) gear, its diminutive stature makes it extremely

difficult to photograph.

That's why hopeful birders have been using every trick in the book to coax birds out into the open and catch them on film. The most common ruse is playing bird sounds on radios and cell phones to attract males looking to procreate.

Another ploy is scattering birdseed or some other tasty treat on the ground and photographing the glory of our feathered friends as they partake. These pictures are often posted on forums and social media platforms for hits and likes.

As a result, Daxue Mountain's stately Mikado pheasants have lost their once rarified position and, today, are treated as something on par with roosters raised on a chicken farm.

Some visitors have even won prizes and fame for pics poached on Daxue Mountain and submitted to *National Geographic* photo competitions. Clearly, some find getting good shots through "fowl play" to be quite tempting. It goes without saying, these shameless rascals are seen as master ecological photographers by those unaware of the truth.

I went to a *National Geographic* photography forum where Frans Lanting, a great ecological photographer from the Netherlands that I truly admire, was a speaker. I learned from his talk that every work captured by professionals in his field is the result of hard work, because they have to watch and wait for long periods of time to capture the most natural scenes possible.

Lanting once said, "The most important thing in ecological photography is to present 'real situations'. Never intentionally stage scenes to snap the perfect picture." His words left a lasting impression on me, but many people don't think this way.

Rage and sophistry

I remember sometime around 2017 riding my motorcycle on patrol down the mountain. On Forest Road near the 23 kilometer marker, I spotted a number of Swinhoe's pheasants flock over to a suspicious container along the side of the road and start noshing.

My first thought was somebody must be feeding them; otherwise, there was no way so many Swinhoe's pheasants would have gathered there.

I dismounted and was on my way to collect the empty container when an older man with a bald head photographing the birds intercepted me mid-step. He kicked the can backwards with his heel saying, "That's our garbage. Leave it alone!"

Knowing what it was, I said, "Are you luring birds with birdfeed so you can photograph them? That's really dangerous. I almost hit those pheasants with my motorbike!"

Who would have guessed he would start getting unreasonable, "That's your problem. Did you actually see us feeding them? No, you didn't. So where do you get off claiming we were feeding them? This birdfeed container is our trash. You don't have our permission to take it. You were going to take our litter without so much as a by your leave. Who's the one breaking the law here? We taxpayers pay your salary and you have the audacity to give us attitude. If we're not allowed to feed the birds, tell a chicken to come tell me!"

Right, I don't pay taxes, you take care of us civil servants out of the goodness of their heart and, what's more, you want animals to start speaking intelligibly ... It always starts like this. They always berate me like that, and I'm not even a civil servant. They commit an offence and then get all uppity about it. Their lack of logic makes my brain short out.

This bunch of bird baiters then began dragging out all kinds of bizarre arguments with me. They said I broke the law and that I was impervious to reason. They then asked, because I liked picking up garbage so much, why wasn't I cleaning up the whole area?

Film everything

As I felt trying to communicate further would be pointless, I took out my cell phone to both record the perpetrators in the act and protect myself.

I had no idea that move would serve only to trigger them further. They asserted I couldn't just go around filming people. They had rights.

I thought to myself: *Don't try to pull a fast one on me. I know more about rights than all of you put together.*

Realizing they couldn't deter me, the four or five of them surrounded my ride. One, a refined-looking guy in a photography vest, suddenly snatched the keys out of the ignition. So much for looks.

Luckily, I had good reflexes and grabbed the keys back.

I started backing my bike up as I yelled, "Why did you take my keys? Back off!" Then I roared, "Why would you try to take my keys?!"

That was behavior you'd only expect of lowlife. It actually kind of scared me. I never imagined a group of respectable-looking people would do something like that.

They warned me they wouldn't let me go until I deleted the video.

The last straw for me

Shouting at them from a safe distance, I hopped on my motorcycle, whipped it around, and rode down the mountain toward the nearest police precinct office just over 15 clicks away. I'd report the incident in hopes the cops would go up and deal with them. Even then, I had no idea I was facing down the final straw that broke me.

I explained to the police officer what had happened, hoping they would do something, like go up and talk to them or write them a ticket.

The police office supervisor and conservation officer both overheard my story and exclaimed, "That's insane!"

But the police officer simply said, "A-bu, why do you want to make everything so complicated? You sure you want to file a report? It'll only make trouble for you."

I had no idea I would be grilled by a cop for trying to file a report.

He went on, “Did you identify yourself? If you didn’t let them know who you are first, that’s going to be an issue. They can turn around and press charges against you. Think carefully. Are you sure you want to do this?”

Huh? The more I listened, the more things weren’t adding up.

“Why can’t you be more like that other forest ranger who works with you. Just talk to them. Explain they aren’t allowed to feed birds here. Why do you want to be all gung ho about this? He gets paid the same as you, but he’s smart. He says what he has to say and then leaves so he doesn’t get pushed around. You want to file a report? I can help you file one, but it might not turn out the way you want it to. Think through this carefully.”

I knew the police officer just wanted to sweep the incident under the rug.

The supervisor and conservation officer also wanted to help out but, because of the cop’s attitude, I said, “Forget it,” got back on my bike and continued my patrol down the mountain.

That day, the forest witnessed my helplessness, my inability to do anything

While giving my report, the conservation officer, who knew me well and likely sensed something wasn’t right, asked, “You want to talk?” We rode our motorbikes over to a pavilion, where I could no longer hold my emotions back and started bawling like a baby.

Maybe it was because the adrenaline rush was over or because my heart was filled with bitter resentment. Whatever the case, frustration streamed out of me in the form of tears.

“I feel so useless! Why couldn’t I stop them?... Why couldn’t I handle the situation? Things like this keep happening, but we don’t have the authority to issue citations. I try my best to do my job well, but our hands are tied because the laws are so lax. Why do the police dismiss my efforts? Why do those people keep messing with the birds? Why do they think they are above the law? I’m really thinking of quitting. Everything I do is pointless. I work so hard and, in return, I get, ‘Why can’t you care less, like that coworker of yours?’ I don’t get it. I just don’t get it!!!”

The conservation officer listened quietly as I blubbered. She gently pulled my head to her shoulder and held it there for a long time. She told me, “Sometimes, perhaps, no matter how hard you try, nothing changes. But if no one tries, you can be sure nothing will ever change... What matters is that you can look at yourself in the mirror and say you’re doing your best.”

The journey back up Forest Road this time was bereft of the chirping of birds. The only audible sounds were the desolate autumn wind rustling the trees and the sniffing of a young man whose pride had been utterly shattered.

That afternoon, the forest witnessed my helplessness, my inability to do anything.

Exhort, exhort, and exhort some more

“It seems to me that we all look at Nature too much, and live with her too little.” — Oscar Wilde

Whenever something like this happens, I once again ask myself: *Is enticement the only means at our disposal? Do people really not understand the consequences of their feeding and luring birds to photograph them?*

I once had to deal with a chubby older guy broadcasting bird songs on his phone to attract birds. I went over and asked him to stop, but he snarled, “I’m not playing bird songs. That’s my ring tone. I’m listening to my phone’s ring tone. You have a problem with that?”

I continued trying to reason with him calmly, “Imagine these are your children, and I’m looking to kidnap them. I come along every day offering candy and other treats and mimic the sound of your voice, enticing them to come out and show themselves. When the time is ripe and those kids come out whenever they hear the sound of my voice, what’s to keep me from abducting them and demanding a ransom from you? How would that make you feel?”

The old guy stared at me in utter disbelief, “How could you even think of doing something that evil? That would be horrible.”

Exactly! It would be evil. And that’s exactly what you’re doing right now!!!

These birds may not be my children, but they do dwell here in the woods. Both guileless visitors and people seeking to make a profit off these birds come here. Who’s going to protect them? Just because you’ve never seen it happen doesn’t mean it doesn’t. And because the laws are lenient, all we can do is exhort, exhort, and exhort some more.

With no authority to enforce laws, the government calls on us to be simultaneously firm in our messaging and gentle in attitude. I’m gentle to the point of nearly groveling. What little self-respect I have left gets further trampled by these people. I can’t issue citations, so I don’t instill fear.

Bodycam

They used to not even issue us bodycams as part of our gear. But, because episodes like these kept occurring, I bought one on my own dime out of fear I wouldn’t be able to fully explain myself after run-ins with these irresponsible reprobates.

The aforementioned episode was just one of my experiences on the mountain dealing with people luring birds with food. There’ve been quite a few others.

After a nest of collard owlets (Taiwan’s smallest owl) was discovered in the woods next to Forest Road, a plethora of people surrounded it to catch it on film. Someone played the call of a bird of prey, which made the owlets’ parents afraid to leave the nest to search for food and almost starved the young to death as a consequence. Two volunteers had to be posted there to urge people to not bother the nest.

These are all true stories, but I'm sure that they are just the tip of the iceberg. If I don't come across these people, if forest rangers decide to ignore these incidents, if law enforcers refuse to write tickets, would Taiwan's forests be better off? I don't know...

Do we really want to live in harmony with nature? Or is the reality more like Oscar Wilde's insight: "We all look at Nature too much, and live with her too little." My personal view is that we view nature not as a pleasure in itself, but as a commodity.

Sweet burden

Yikes! How can a forest ranger like me get lost on Xue Mountain!?

Joining deep mountain taskforces is one of the most important parts of a forest ranger's job. We go out on such adventures two or three times a year. The purpose of these jaunts, each of which lasts at least five days, is to visit the deepest corners of Taiwan's forests to confirm ancient trees, aka "sacred trees," remain safe from illegal logging and to see how trees in these areas are faring.

Because of the length of these deep mountains trips, we often have to carry up to 35 kilos of gear. For me, this is a forest ranger's sweetest burden because it is all you have, so you have to take good care of it. If you lose your pack, you're up a creek!

Earning my stripes

Soon after reporting to my post, I took part in several deep mountain taskforces. It was 2015, when I was about 28 and still wet behind the ears.

Because most everybody else was relatively up there in age, guys like me were considered "fresh meat" and were assigned to handle most of the harder tasks. As a consequence, I have basically trekked all of the more difficult and longer trails, accumulating an impressive amount of experience in the process.

When I reported for duty, because I had told the team I'd already trekked the entire island, my supervisor gave me Xue Mountain West Ridge duty in addition to other important tasks.

What really gets me is the fact that when I went from having never climbed Xue Mountain to ascending it some five to seven times. I was given the nickname "Xue Mountain West Ridge Man".

The Xue Mountain Range, the northernmost mountain range in Taiwan, is home to Taiwan's second-highest peak, Xue Mountain, and stretches from Sandiaojiao (San Diego Cape) in New Taipei City's Gongliao District southward to Zhuoshui Mountain on the northern bank of the Zhuoshui River in Nantou County's Mingjian Township. Spanning 260 kilometers, this mountain range is an important natural feature in northern Taiwan.

Back then, when it was still closed to the general public, Xue Mountain West Ridge was a favorite of climbers. Anybody wanting to hike it then had to do so on the sly and risked being

discovered. We referred to unauthorized activity like this as “black mountain climbing”. But I could hike the trail because of my work. Maybe it was my reward for being a good person in a previous life.

Xue Mountain West Ridge has three “treasures”: fallen trees, falling rocks, and swaths of arrow bamboo. Whenever I was scheduled for a trek, seasoned colleagues, who had all experienced their share of grief on the West Ridge trail, cautioned me to stay alert.

When the area was still off limits to the public, GPS service was unreliable and the wild arrow bamboo and Chinese silver, which was grass taller than me often made the route indistinguishable from the surrounding terrain. There were also few water sources along the way. A veteran coworker informed me warmly, “We’ve left lots of bottles of mineral water by the arrow bamboo on the Pipida Grassland, so you will have plenty of water,” before patting me on the shoulder and walking away.

I just stood there with a “What the... !?” look on my face, because I wasn’t sure what she was trying to telling me.

She turned around again and said, “Oh, by the way, be sure to bring extra toilet paper and plenty of antidiarrheal medicine with you.” Finishing with a knowing chuckle, she returned to her seat.

That female colleague was over 170 cm tall and had a great deal of experience in the wild. She’d even surveyed black bears with Professor Mei-hsiu. She was a seasoned expert and I was still a newbie. Her saying these things sent a shiver up my spine. Maybe it was just the cold, humid air of the mountain forest.

30 kilos on my back

The West Ridge route starts at Wuling Farm Trailhead on Xue Mountain and ends at Forest Road 230 on Daxue Mountain. Along the way, it traverses well-known geographical features like Xue Mountain’s East Peak, Black Forest, glacial cirques, and Main Peak as well as Cui Pond, Huoshi Mountain, Mount Touying, and Mount Qijun. The typical hiking party needs some five or six days to trek the entire trail.

We, however, weren’t going to simply hike the Xue Mountain West Ridge. We were given various tasks such as surveying the forest and apprehending illegal loggers, so our backpacks tended to tip the scales at 30 kilos.

It wasn’t my first time going into mountain forests weighed down with heavy gear, but it was my first time being cut off from the rest of the world for a full week. And then there were all of those “experiences” my more seasoned coworkers were sharing with me as we headed down the trailhead. I was getting really concerned.