

The Return Of The Three Bite Sparrow

Will the yellow breasted bunting go the way of the passenger pigeon?

By Daniel Liang



Daniel Liang looks at a familiar world in an unfamiliar way - through a skeptical lens. Every month he peeks under the hood of a meme, myth, bias, or news article. Disclaimer: the opinions expressed do not represent the magazine, advertisers, employer, or the International Union for the Conservation of Nature.



Readers of Hubhao may remember the "Three Bite Sparrow" story in October's Hardcore Food Challenge. This month we look more closely at the Three Bite Sparrow, a.k.a. the Yellow-breasted Bunting in its uncooked form, and the rather sad story behind it.

Known as "Ginseng of the sky" for its nutritional and medicinal values, it has been a popular dish in southern China, especially right here in Dongguan. It should come as a surprise to no one that the main alleged benefit is, well, aphrodisiacal. Is there any truth behind these claims? Let's take a look.

Background

The Yellow-breasted Bunting passes through southern China during its annual autumn migration. Feasting on ready to harvest rice, the small bird has been traditionally considered a pest by farmers. Decades ago in the western townships ("water country") of Dongguan, the farmers would intentionally leave a patch of rice field unharvested, and catch the birds at night using a large net and firecrackers. The

bird was an important part of an autumn feast called San He Yan (三禾宴), which also included grain worms and carp.

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Dongguan has long since transformed into a manufacturing powerhouse, and where rice fields once were now stand factory buildings. Yet the tradition of eating Yellow-breasted Buntings has not only survived, but continues to thrive. Today in Dongguan there are still plenty of these birds; however instead of arriving by air, they arrive by truck as they are caught farther and farther inland.

My factory happens to be right at the epicenter of sparrow eating land. When I came here in 2002, it was commonplace to order them by the dozens to eat in the restaurant, and order additional dozens to take home. A sharp decline in availability has caused the price to skyrocket in recent years, and it is now far removed from its humble roots as a farmer's seasonal protein supplement. Today this local dish is often eaten for reasons such as nostalgia, tradition, wealth flaunting, novelty, imagined health benefits, and even Hardcore Food Challenges.



Is This The Next Passenger Pigeon?

The Yellow-breasted Bunting is eerily reminiscent of another bird, the Passenger Pigeon. Once the most abundant bird in North America, the flocks were so dense that they would blacken the sky; indeed, a flock in 1866 was described as being a mile wide, 300 miles long, and taking 14 hours to pass. Unfortunately, the Passenger Pigeon proved to be no match for its ultimate predator, humans. Industrial scale hunting and deforestation led to a swift decline in numbers, and eventually on September 1, 1914, the last known Passenger Pigeon died at the Cincinnati Zoo.

A similar story is sadly unfolding with the Yellow-breasted Bunting. Prior to 2004, the bird was so abundant that it was listed by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as a species of "Least Concern". In 2004, the status was changed to "Near Threatened". In 2008 it was upgraded to "Vulnerable", and finally in 2013 to "Endangered".

In a 2015 study published in Conservation Biology, the population of the Yellow-breasted Bunting is estimated to have declined by 90% since 1980. The media jumped on the story, using sensational headlines like "Yellow-breasted Buntings Being Eaten to Extinction by China". One should be skeptical of such claims, as a rapid decline in a species is rarely the result of a single cause, but usually

a manifestation of a wider, systemic problem such as habitat loss. Be that as it may, the decline is nevertheless real, and widespread trapping and consumption definitely does not help. The study concluded, "the combined evidence suggests that songbird trapping levels in China are currently unsustainable and that trapping at least partly contributed to the decline".

Although Guangdong has officially banned the trapping and sale of Yellow-breasted Bunting since 2001, it is still widely available in markets and restaurants. The price per bird has surpassed that of a chicken despite being a fraction of the size, making it a very expensive source of protein.

Are The Health Benefits Real?

Traditionally the Three Bite Sparrow is prepared without evisceration, so the innards and its contents are intact. In addition to the flesh and bones, one can expect to also ingest whatever the bird had recently consumed, partially digested, and fully digested but unpurged. Contained in each scrumptiously crunchy bite are squished bugs and, literally, cooked crap.

The other claim of it being an aphrodisiac is implausible, but not impossible. For example, eating the bird whole could have real sexual enhancing effects, say, if the bird had just visited a Pfizer plant and accidentally swallowed a few Viagra pills. Another possibility is that some people may find munching on tiny crunchy birds to be sexually appealing –there is a kink for just about everything, so who am I to judge?

On Reflection

Humans are the most evolutionarily successful species ever. We are the ultimate invasive species, having irreversibly changed the environment to suit our needs, largely at the expense of other life forms. Species are going extinct at a far higher rate than would otherwise have occurred naturally; indeed, many scientists argue we are now in the Anthropocene, and directly causing a sixth mass extinction event. The Yellow-breasted Bunting is just another twitching canary in the coal mine.

Like it or not, we are the de facto custodians of Earth and all the life on it. reminisce of a nostalgic past, dreaming of turning the clock back as we collectively resign to inaction, realizing we cannot undo the changes to our biosphere. However, although we may not be able to fix the situation immediately, we can at least ameliorate the situation. Wishful thinking is not a strategy, and we need to take action by starting somewhere. Perhaps as good a place as any to start is by not eating Three Bite Sparrows for frivolous reasons.

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