Script for the AOS storytelling night. Sunny Tseng.

* Start of the story – the Siberian Crane flying to Taiwan, at the summer that I was graduated from University trying to figure out what I wanted to do in the future. And the crane bought this opportunity to me.

In 2014, there was a big news happened in Taiwan. For those of you who don’t know Taiwan, it’s an island in east Asia serving as a mid-point stop for a major migratory route, and it’s also the country I was born and raised. So, in 2014 winter, there was a Siberian Crane appeared in one of the wetland in the northern Taiwan. If this was other species of birds it wouldn’t be that surprising, but the news about the visit of this rare Crane was soon distributed worldwide as we have never had reported sightings of Siberian Crane in Taiwan. Siberian Crane is listed as critically endangered species and usually migrates from the Siberian Tundra to southeast China, so obviously, having this bird showed up in Taiwan was unexpected. People started calling this crane “shao bai he” which means “little white crane” in Mandarin.

The little white crane was apparently blown off course while flying to southeast China with his parents. He is lost from other members in the group. Taiwanese people tried to help sending little white crane back to Russia, back to Siberia. One of the Taiwanese conservation agency contacted the Russian Academy of Science, and everyone decided that it might be the best to not interfere, and let the little white crane fly back to Siberia by itself.

This unexpected visit of little white crane was the catalyst for Taiwan to send a small group of young scientists to Siberian Arctic Tundra to visit the breeding ground of the crane and learn more about how these two very different places are connect by birds. They were calling for proposals from young scientists to do bird research in arctic tundra. Now, you can probably guess how the story would go.

* Learning about birds because I wanted to get the opportunity. Physical strength and mental strength. So many people told me that I won’t get it.

The time I saw this opportunity I was 23. I was a student freshly graduated from university, not knowing for sure where my life should go. The only thing I knew was the world is so big, and I haven’t had the chance to explore the it. I thought “arctic tundra, who wouldn’t want to go”, and especially you have people pay for you to go. So I “bravely” wrote up a proposal saying that I could record the sounds of the birds in the Arctic Tundra, to document the birds in the ecosystem that few people can get access to. But funny enough, at that time I haven’t started birding at all. I know nothing about birds, and nothing about field sound recording. Like none. At that time, there were many people telling me that it’s almost impossible for me, who didn’t have any experience working with birds, to get this opportunity. But I just wanted to try it and see how far I can go.

So I started contacting professional field recordists to learn about recording bird sounds. I took several sound recording courses. Another thing I did was that I spent 10 days riding my bicycle from the north point to the south point of Taiwan, and recorded my trip using sounds. I was carrying my MP3, the little sound recording device, to record sounds on my journey, like the sounds of a train passing by, sounds of the fireworks on the beach, sounds of the crowd in the market, and also sounds of the wind blowing through trees. Each night, I would put my headlamp on in my tent, squishing in my sleeping bag, and write all the stories down. I wanted to practice how to use soundscapes to tell stories. After all these training, technically and physically, I got the opportunity. I got it! I was so happy and I want to run like three kilometers to celebrate the moment.

* I got the opportunity! But the story wasn’t smooth after this. My fieldwork was cut short, and there is a storm hitting the town.

After 3 months of preparation, I started the journey that I have dreamed for so long. The first stop was Yakutsk, the capital city of Siberia. My flight landed at 2 am, and all I can see from the airplane window is the brightness in the city. And I realized “Oh right, because I am at such a high latitude of the earth so it’s almost 24 hours daylight.” I came down the plane, it was Ruslan, my Russian fieldwork partner, who came to greet me and gave me a hug. I don’t speak Russian and he barely speak English, but I can feel his kindness through smile.

Everything was going smoothly until we arrived this village called Chokurdakh. Chokurdakh locates within the Arctic circle with latitude around 70 degree. It’s the final stopover before entering the area that we would do our research work. So after arriving Chokurdakh, I felt like I arrived the end of the world. We purchased rice, noodles, breads and all the foods we need for fieldwork, but the next day, the boat that we are going to take was cancelled because of a big storm. We couldn’t travel on the river.

I was looking through the window hearing the wind hitting the house, lots of rain, and the temperature kept dropping. It gets colder and colder. It was like typhoon but with temperature close to zero. I started to have the feeling “Why I am here”. I was only 23 at that time, I was so young, a young girl, and I have worked so hard and travelled so far to this place far away to my beloved country. I travelled so far to Arctic. I have no access to internet, no access to cell phone connection. And everyone around me was speaking Russian, speaking languages that I don’t know. With the storm going on, and with the dropping temperature, I felt I am abandoned by the world. It was the first moment I realize how fragile human beings are.

Fortunately, after two days, the storm settled down. So got on the boat travelling on the river to this place called Kytalyk Natural Reserve. There are only 40 people allowed to enter the place every year to do research. So this is a very precious place. By the time I arrived, I only have a total of seven days to work in the tundra.

* The ecosystem in Tundra and how I got injured in the tundra

I stepped on the tundra and the first impression I had was “it’s so muddy”. I can feel the cold water around my wader and if I step my foot down, I can feel the slippery ice below the soil. The broad landscape, the cold feet, fresh air on the face, strong wind, noisy birds, and tons and tons of mosquitos flying around like black storms. Nowhere I have been is comparable to the Arctic Tundra. It’s so special.

So Arctic tundra by definition, it is the place where much of the soil, especially deep down, is permanently frozen. Which means it is impossible for trees to grow in that area. The tundra vegetation is composed of shrubs, grasses, and lichens. In summer, the top layer of the soil can melt, making the ground very soggy, covered in marshes, lakes and bogs. Wet areas are ideal habitat for many species of insects. Many birds that feed on insects and because of this kind of food chain, the tundra is the ideal breeding ground for many bird species: 40 to 60 migratory bird species each summer. Like arctic terns, yellow-billed loon, ross’s gull, and many other rare species... Bird sing like craze in tundra to defend territory and attract mates. They keep trying to capture food for their young and to feed them and to breed and non-stop for the whole breeding season given the 24 hours daylight. They don’t even feel tired when they really need rest.

During my fieldwork, one of my target species to record is the Siberian crane. But the Siberian crane is relatively shy.

* The recording of the Siberian Crane with Ruslan
* The ending. How this trip influence my life.

As a girl who didn’t know what to do after her graduation in university, it turns out I found field sound recording fascinating. I have been continued my journey of bird sound recording and have recorded sounds from almost 300 bird species around the world. I also started my graduate study working on avian bioacoustics and absolutely loved it. All this career changing experience started from one single stray Siberian Crane, the little white crane that got lost in Taiwan. It’s the lost Siberian Crane that helped me find my way to my life. Thank you.