* Section 1

In 2014, there was big news in Taiwan. For those of you who don’t know Taiwan, it’s an island in east Asia, and it’s also the country I was born and raised. So, in 2014 winter, there was a Siberian Crane landed in a wetland in northern Taiwan. If this was another species of birds it wouldn’t be that surprising, but the news about the visit of this Crane soon get 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 blown off course while flying to southeast China with his parents. This unexpected visit of little white crane become a catalyst for Taiwan to send a small group of young scientists to Siberian Arctic Tundra. A Taiwanese conservation agency was calling for proposals from young scientists to do bird research in arctic tundra, to visit the breeding ground of the crane and learn more about how these two very different places are connect by birds.

* Section 2

The time I saw this opportunity I was 23 years old. 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 really want to explore it. So I “bravely” wrote up a proposal saying that I could record bird sounds in 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 and see how far I can go.

So I started contacting professional sound 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. Each night, I would put my headlight on in the tent and write down all the stories. I wanted to practice how to use soundscapes to tell stories. After all this training, I got the opportunity! I was so excited that I could have the chance to visit the arctic tundra.

* Section 3

After 3 months of preparation, I started the journey. 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. It took me a while to adjust to the fact that I have 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. Everything was going smoothly until we arrived this village called Chokurdakh. Chokurdakh located within the Arctic circle. It’s the final stopover before entering our field sites. Unfortunately, the next day, the boat that we are going to take was cancelled because of a big storm. We couldn’t travel to our field site.

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. The storm 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, and I have travelled so far to this place, like at the end of the world. 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 in this trip I realize how fragile human beings are. Fortunately, after two days, the storm settled down. So we got on the boat travelling to our field site. By the time I arrived, I only have seven days to work in the tundra.

* Section 4

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. Nowhere I have ever been is comparable to the Arctic Tundra. It’s so special.

So Arctic tundra is the place where most of the soil is permanently frozen. Which means it is impossible for trees to grow. In summer, the top layer of the soil can melt, making the ground very soggy, which makes it ideal habitat for many insects, and support about 40 to 60 migratory birds, like arctic terns, yellow-billed loon, ross’s gull, Siberian Crane and many other rare species... Birds trying to capture food for their young and to feed them and to breed and they do this non-stop for the whole breeding season given the 24 hours daylight. They don’t even feel tired when they really need rest. It’s a heaven for birds.

* Section 5

During my fieldwork, one of my goal is to record Siberian crane. But the Siberian crane is relatively shy and it is hard to record their sound from far distance. The environment is not good for sound recording, either. The wind is very strong that sometimes I cannot even stand still. And when the wind settled down, you thought you can do some recording, you would get attacked by mosquito army.

It was the final day of my fieldwork, I haven’t recorded sounds from Siberian Cranes yet. I had walked with Ruslan for about 10 hours at that day. We were in the middle of the field and I told him “Oh, I’m so tired. I need to take a rest.” So we sat down, and we were chatting, and suddenly, Ruslan, he just looked up to the sky and say, “Sunny, Sunny, turn on your recorder!” And I looked up, didn’t see anything and asked, “What, what, what happened?” So Ruslan just grabbed my microphone, pointing to the sky and asked me to start recording. Three were Siberian Cranes flying toward us. So the distance is from two kilometers, one kilometers, 500 meters. And they just flew right above our head.

I was so astonished. Sounds like they are talking to each other when they are flying. And another reason I really, really love that recording is because it is two of us who experienced the beautiful moment together. It’s like the achievement, it’s not belong to me. It belong to all the team, it belong to us.

At the end of the fieldwork, I showed the Siberian Crane recording to Sergei, an ornithologist who worked in tundra more than 30 years. He listened quietly, then took down the headphone and told me “Sunny, you are very lucky, it is very rare for the cranes to make this kind of call.”. It is the Siberian Crane who brought me to the tundra, and it is also the Crane that connect me with the people, with the environment. It connects everyone together.

* Section 6

As a girl who didn’t know what to do after her graduation after university, it turns out I found bird sound recording fascinating. I have continued my journey and collected sounds from almost 300 bird species. And I have met so many wonderful people, create wonderful stories along the way. All this career changing experience started from 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.