

Star LIDAY

DHAKA SUNDAY MAY 18, 2003

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In Garo land



LOCATION > THE SUNDARBANS. CATEGORY > ADVENTURE

Honey hunters' hymn

Position from Dhaka: South
Distance: About 420km
Drive time: 12 hours
Road: Good. Need to cross one river to reach Khulna
Major spots: You can visit the 16th century Jasereswari temple, said to be built by King Protapadiya at Kwaripur, 12 kilometre off Munshiganj.



fact sheet

EVERYTHING was set for the *mohal* -- the honey hunting adventure to the Sundarbans.

The honey hunters' boats called *palwar* are moored at the Barigoalni forest jetty with food, huge earthen pots filled with drinking water, curved knives and cane baskets for honey collection. The forest department has given them a fortnight's permission for the forest adventure.

The honey hunters and their relatives say their prayers. Their wives and children have come to see off the most adventurous people of the Sundarbans -- the *mowals*.

As the forest officer pulls the

trigger of his rifle, the honey collection season sets in. The *mowals* gently work their boats into the Kholpata river -- each containing an odd number of *mowals* -- five to seven a group. They slowly paddle their way to their chosen mangrove islands.

We tail behind on our motor launch. As the boats fan out to different water channels, we accompany two boats.

We embark on the bank of a creek with seven honey collectors and two armed forest guards under the leadership of the Bahardar. The water current was at its ebb. We cross the knee-deep water to reach the forest fringe. Just a little away starts the dense line of Hental, Goran, Gewa and Kholshi trees.

But what immediately caught our attention is the footprints of a medium-sized tigress going parallel to the bank.

Elahi Box, the eldest of the *mowals*, tried to talk us and the young honey hunters into changing the place. But no one seemed to go for another search. And so, the forest guards fired two blank shots to scare off any tiger that might be around.

I felt the hot caress of the blazing sun. Intoxicating fragrance from wild flowers smacked my senses. Bees were buzzing overhead and small birds like bee-eater, warblers and oriolis were droning through the silence of the forest.

Mangrove pins, scattered twigs

and thorny bushes of Hental slowed our advance with the busy-footed honey hunters. The band was at a quick pace -- as if in search of a priceless prize -- almost running like the deer in search of honeycomb. They quickly melted into the shadow of the woods, leaving us behind with two forest guards. The guards guided us through thick bushes along the track that led into a clearing.

The forest woke up from its slumber to the coos of the hunters. "Allah...Allah," screamed one of them. It sent ripples of an assuring message much across the forest that the hunters scouted out a hive, not very off.

Good news, indeed. But we could not reach the spot within half an hour. We threaded our way through two watery inlets that made our advance difficult. The area is comparatively open. Hunters were busy making torches with Hental leaf and Goran twigs.

From a safe distance of 20 metres, we looked through the green foliage and saw a hive suspending crescent-shaped from the branch of a Passur tree, about four metres from the ground.

As rock bees are aggressive and determined to protect their hives, hunters warned us not to use flashlight in taking pictures of the hive. We were well protected against the stings of bees and hid deep in the bushes, but the shittless hunters muffled only pieces of cloth around their faces, necks and heads. Their unprotected eyes were blinking bright in hopes of honey.

Suddenly, a screen of black smoke blocked our vision, as the honey gatherers lit their torches to smoke bees out of their hive. They raised all the torches closer to the hive and thousands of bees streamed out. The forest came alive with hums of the insects flying to safety.

The deserted nest appeared through the haze left by smoke puffs. I felt a tinge of sadness. The whole scene opened a pattern of images in my mental frame -- a nest pillaged, a family of insects driven away and the plunderers lusting for the booty.

But the hunters have little time to think about the other side of honey hunting. One of them climbed up the tree, a curved knife strapped



Anti-clockwise: Palwar boats of the mowals ready for sail; mowals gather golpata to make torches to scare away bees and then troop through the forest; a beehive under smoke attack.



Budget

You have to hire a trawler from Munshiganj (Tk 2,000 per day appx) and take forest permission in advance. Two forest guards must accompany the team.

Bus fare: Dhaka-Jessore per person **Tk 380** on A/C coach. Jessore to Kaliganj on bus **Tk 70** per person. Kaliganj to Munshiganj on bus **Tk 20** per person.

.....Of.....

Dhaka-Khulna **Tk 410** on AC chair coach.

Launch fare for Khulna-Nildumur **Tk 60** per person. **Boat rent and forest permission** for three days inside the forest may cost around **Tk 2,000**.

Travel tips

If you take the trip by bus, it will take you about 11 hours. Take all preparations for such a long trip.

Honey hunting is a tough and adventurous trip. Having good health condition is a precondition.

Weather will be unpredictable, extremely hot during the day and stormy on most evenings.

Take raincoats and lots of water. You will need them.

Soft-soled shoes, hat, light green shirts and shorts are recommended.

Take a windbreaker, as night might turn cold after rain.

Take insect repellent, sunscreen lotion.

Take good torches and batteries.

Take first aid kit.

Take all types of precautions against mosquitoes.

Binoculars and hunting knife

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Honey hunting Tour offers

The Guide Tours Ltd and Bengal Tours Ltd operate honey hunting trips at the beginning of the season.

Guide charges \$225 per adult person and **\$175** per child (including air tickets, transfers, meals, boat, guide and other things)
Bengal charges Tk 5,200 per adult person (including bus ticket and other costs)
Best Time: April, May and June.