

# Why count birds?

Conservationists reveal (still) promising numbers after census near Padma char areas, and throw light on important ecosystem services of avian fauna



ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

On a half-wooden, half-iron boat, a team of men and women in heavy winter gear and heavy-duty binoculars set sail on a very, very cold winter morning on January 5. Their destination was the sandbars and shallow

water lagoons of the mighty Padma River. The team comprising conservationists, bird watchers, and foresters were conducting a census, the first of its kind in Rajshahi division. While this was the first time that the Bangladesh Forest Department and other official bodies were involved in a census of this kind in Rajshahi division, it wasn't the first census per se in the area. In fact, bird censuses are now commonplace in the country—well, by commonplace, I mean carried out by a niche group of scientists, conservationists, ornithologists, and birdwatching enthusiasts/experts.

From the high seas beyond Sandwip to the sandbars of Sonadia, from the shrublands of Tetulia to even tea gardens in Srimangal, the country has seen a surge in citizen science revolving around birdwatching and census in the last few years.

I came to know about the census from a facebook post. Not long after, through a strange set of circumstances, I found myself with a group of men, women, and bird guidebooks travelling to the south east coast of Bangladesh.

And in the span of those travels I chanced upon something enchanting. A barren mudflat that stretched for miles ahead; grey and steely, reflecting the mirage of the horizon, yet a land brimming with life. I saw ruddy turnstones appear fleetingly, only to be lost right back into the landscape strewn with red and brown pebbles on a bed of grey mud. Through a spotting scope, we would scan the land and conservationist Sayam U Chowdhury would erupt in squeals as he spotted a spoon-billed sandpiper, busily feeding in the mudflats. That was the identification trait

for the tiny bird, of which less than a few hundred remained back then. The critically endangered bird had this nervous energy—it was tiny, tinier than a house-sparrow and it fed on the soft mud like a supersonic beast. It blended into the landscape and had flown all the way from Russia to spend its winter here.

It is data such as this, and rare sightings and the ongoing biodiversity decline worldwide, that prompt conservationists to continue their work. Bird censuses are a way to monitor environmental trends in our local area, identify potential problems, and create a wealth of data.

In the research carried out in Rajshahi that I mentioned earlier, one day of census counted a total of 4,025 birds of 37 species of water birds in the chars of Padma. Of them, 27 were migratory bird species and the rest were resident birds.

Even the highest and second highest count of individuals—1,100 were of gadwall and 330 of Temnick's stint species—are both migratory bird species. This is important because Rajshahi division



In Rajshahi, for this season, conservationists have tagged common teal with GPS-enabled satellite tags to understand the flight details of birds.

PHOTO: MOHSIN KABIR MIRON

falls under the Central Asian Flyway, which means that migratory birds fly over these areas to reach their wintering grounds and often stop here for rest and replenishment.

The Padma and Brahmaputra river chars have been hotspots for birdwatchers and ornithologists. The somewhat untouched grasslands host many different species of birds, so much so that a rare sighting of Baikal teal, majestic and glorious in gait, was also seen during the census at Padma.

Ornithologists under the Wildbird Monitoring Program, which was established last year, have also been tagging wild ducks with GPS-enabled satellite tags to understand the flight details of birds. The satellite tags and the wealth of data they provide to the conservationists is a long-term scientific endeavour. Flight patterns will reveal where and how the birds interact with their habitats, and their stopovers will show which places require long term conservation plans, among other things.

In Rajshahi, for this season, conservationists have satellite-tagged two species of wild ducks. They tagged a common teal, weighing in at 310 gms and clocking in nearly 10 kms on the first day, and another 13.5 kms on day two.

"We observed that the bird, especially during the nights, travelled to paddy fields to feed on small insects and vegetation in

the soil. It is natural that they also leave bird droppings in the field which in turn enhances the soil fertility," says ABM Sarowar Alam, highlighting some of the ecosystem services of avian fauna on their surrounding landscape.

In addition to enhancing soil quality, birds are also ecological indicators, and maintaining a database of their populations and habitat preferences can even help shape policies.

Sayam U Chowdhury, conservationist working on endangered species in Bangladesh, says, "Scientists and conservationists need such data at their disposal because this can deter development projects on sensitive habitats or help in declaring protected areas."

According to the National Audubon Society, birds are the "canary in the coal mine" for our environment. Their health, abundance, and distribution can signal trends in the health of the larger environment. They are basically like the warning bells of nature—when the birds leave, it means the habitat is not doing well, it is suffering.

Here in Bangladesh, citizen science too is starting to pick up pace. eBird, an app run by Cornell Lab of Ornithology, is being fed by data from local bird photographers and birdwatchers and has gained immense popularity.

"Many people have started to use this app to report sightings of even fairly common birds which are often neglected in more focused censuses. This will help in future predictions and conservation actions. In Bangladesh there has been an overall decline in the number of birds which is no surprise because of the degradation of habitats. But certain areas, especially the coast which is a very dynamic zone and is gaining landmass, was showing signs of improvement and growing number of birds. But now new development plans in the area is likely to threaten that."

Natural calamities, wars, and exploitation worldwide have left the natural order of things under deep, lasting threat. As climate crisis becomes the new reality, it is up to us to continue the scientific work in the backdrop to guide policies and decisions.

Abida R Chowdhury is a journalist at *The Daily Star*, with a background in environmental science and a keen interest in animals and wildlife.

The Bangladesh Bird Club has been assisting various organisations with bird census throughout the years.



Birds are ecological indicators, and maintaining a database of their populations and habitat preferences can help shape policies.

PHOTO: SAYAM U CHOWDHURY

## Sustainable 'costing' can empower factory owners



RMG NOTES

MOSTAFIZ UDDIN

We hear a lot about the concept of sustainability from an environmental and social standpoint. But what about sustainable business? Is the current customer-supplier model sustainable in the long term with respect to the global

apparel industry?

I would argue that, certainly with reference to Bangladesh, it is inherently unstable. Before I continue, I want to stress here that this is not an 'anti-brand' article which claims that suppliers are squeezed too hard and unfairly. My view generally on prices paid by brands is that these are dictated by global market forces, and there is a general over-supply in the market at the current time, which is why prices have been driven down.

But while I believe in the power of the market, I also think there are times when the market needs a helping hand in order to operate more effectively and to achieve more socially desirable outcomes.

I am talking here about the issue of wages paid to garment workers and, also, sustainability. Is enough of a margin currently being built into the negotiation process to ensure that garment workers receive a fair wage—or even a minimum wage? And is enough being built in to cover the costs of sustainable production? At the present time there are huge question marks about these issues. I hear stories of factories taking orders at a loss, or orders where everything is trimmed right to the bone.

This is unsustainable and such businesses will struggle to survive in the long term. It also helps nobody—neither factories nor brands.

The problem here is not necessarily that brands are driving too hard a bargain. Rather, it is the nature of the negotiation process which, in many cases, is inherently flawed. At present, brands often calculate the retail value of a product, and then use projected retail figures to determine the FOB/CMT price that the brand seeks to pay.

However, this 'top-down' way of negotiation often fails to take into account the 'true' cost of production, including paying decent wages, investing in safety, sustainability and so on. Conversely, bottom-up costing, a process whereby

labour and other input costs are used to determine the FOB/CMT price, is rarely practiced.

The result of this is that, in many cases, FOB prices paid by brands are not sufficient to cover minimum wage benchmarks in production countries.

And yet, it need not be this way. There are a number of costing tools which enable minimum wage and other costs to be factored into the negotiation process. It would be a progressive step, I believe, if more of the industry moved towards this method of determining prices.

One of these tools was developed by the Fair Wear Foundation (FWF). The FWF costing tool tries to create greater transparency and precision in determining the labour component of cost price negotiations. This method uses actual wage data to calculate how much it would cost to cover a certain level of wages (minimum wages or higher). The calculator enables

depreciation on a new sprinkler system), divide it by the monthly sewing capacity and multiply this with the number of minutes needed to sew a certain product.

The beauty of this tool is that it gives the factory transparent and verifiable arguments to justify a certain FOB price during negotiations with buyers. It therefore improves a factory owner's bargaining position, providing a compelling—and fair!—reason for brands to pay a certain price.

But brands also benefit as those committed to ensuring that workers producing their garments are paid at least the legal minimum wage now get to see a clear link between wages and prices.

The other benefit of this tool is that it could potentially help us move away from an adversarial approach to price and cost negotiations, building trust on both sides. 'Open book' costing has actually been talked

*The 'top-down' way of negotiation often fails to take into account the 'true' cost of production, including paying decent wages, investing in safety, sustainability and so on. Conversely, bottom-up costing, a process whereby labour and other input costs are used to determine the FOB/CMT price, is rarely practiced.*

suppliers and buyers to determine the cost of one minute of labour in a factory, taking into account factory-specific variables such as workforce composition, bonuses and insurance and actual overtime hours. Knowing the price of one minute and multiplying that with the number of sewing minutes required to make a garment will provide the actual labour costs for a product concerned. When wages go up, for instance because of a rise in the legal minimum wage, the tool allows one to calculate the effect such an increase has on the manufacturing (CMT or FOB) price of garments.

This same method could also be applied in other areas in order to 'build in' extra costs associated with, for instance, factory safety or sustainability. To offer the example of a new sprinkler system, one would simply take the monthly costs (e.g. the monthly

about for many years, but tools such as this take it to another level, providing previously unseen levels of transparency.

Contrary to what many people might think, I believe most brands are reasonable and want to pay prices that ensure their suppliers can treat their workers fairly and pay them a decent wage, as well as cover other issues such as environmental compliance and factory safety.

But they do need clear information to do that, and tools such as this may provide it—ensuring that all parties know exactly where they stand in the negotiation process, and that there can be no hidden agendas.

It's a win-win.

Mostafiz Uddin is the Managing Director of Denim Expert Limited. He is also the Founder and CEO of Bangladesh Denim Expo and Bangladesh Apparel Exchange (BAE). He can be reached at mostafiz@denimexpert.com

QUOTABLE Quote

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American Journalist

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