



In the mudflats of Sonadia, the sky and land go on for miles.



Birds and people sharing the same landscape in the intertidal areas of Bangladesh.

# The million promises and little perils of bird-watching by the coast of Bangladesh

*A part essay, part story of the mudflats beyond the sea, the countless mysteries they contain and chancing upon the difference between birdwatcher and birder*

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY

It is years ago now. The day I took a bus to the southernmost tip of Bangladesh with a group of people wearing khaki-coloured shirts, two-in-one pants, carrying heavy duty binoculars, spotting scopes and talking excitedly about a bird. They were so eager to see and photograph this bird that they took a mid-week trip to St Martin's Island, where news of this sighting was reported. I happened to join this group as a student of environment studies, in my junior years, trying to figure out which topic I should specialise in (I am still looking for it).

On a busy Sunday some eight years ago, we headed out en route to Teknaf and onto St Martin's Island. It took a bus ride, a missed cruise ship, a rented fishing trawler and some coaxing to finally get us to our destination. And as soon as we reached the island, the group did not

looking through the binoculars. Nature was displayed on zoom. Through crystal clear lens. The wind breezed over the tree branches and the birds became forever etched into the landscape. And from then on, if the tree didn't remain, I imagined the bird would not either. Tying bird to tree, tree to bird forever.

That was one of my first trips with birders. It was the beginning of a long love affair between birdwatching and I. And watching birders birding through the day. It was their meticulous note-taking, their near obsessive documentation of each and every species they saw and my part awe and absolute enchantment with the wild that kept both of us going.

From the very beginning, it was clear I would be a birdwatcher and not a birder. Mine would be a more "I chanced upon this magical landscape and it is littered with life" rather than a scientific or



The endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper is a regular winter visitor to the intertidal mudflats of Bangladesh.

knee-length to now almost four-feet long, long enough for anyone to find a shady nook and take an afternoon nap. But most of the time, for worse. Brick kilns, construction sites, buildings and manicured roads are slowly replacing nature. This sense of loss and quick removal of everything that is known and familiar stirred in me an urgency to write and document each district I have been to, each mudflat I have gotten access to, every tree and every forest that has revealed itself to me. It has sent me on an introspection yet again, trying to connect the dots between writers and birdwatchers. According to the article by Towler that I referred to earlier, she says, "Anyone can become a bird-watcher, but the number of writers who have revealed themselves as birders in recent years and written about birds suggests there might be more than a casual connection. I sought out a few bird-watching writers to learn how they see the relationship between their work and the time they spend with birds."

When she asked Margaret Atwood, her reply covered both science and the poetry associated with bird-watching. She says, "On the level of knowledge: An involvement with birds is a reliable hook into the state of the planet. (Hint: we're not doing so well.) On the personal level: Watching birds takes you out of yourself. It's a flow state. Writing ideas come in sideways during such states. So perhaps it is a form of meditation."

Meanwhile, Jonathan Franzen, who has become almost as high profile a birder and environmental activist as he is a writer is a step ahead. In an interview with Audubon Magazine Franzen likened it to religion. He said, "It's very much like any other religion. It spreads through direct contact with other believers. Birders think the same way. We want there to be more birders. We want more people to be interested in birds because when you create somebody who cares about birds, you create somebody who is concerned about the environment."

And no one understands that better than Bangladeshis, the need to be concerned for the environment, the need to take a step back and look at everything that is at stake, and the need to realise that thanks to climate change, we will be one of the worst affected and we need to educate ourselves, understand that without nature, we too cannot survive. It is like a complex puzzle and if you lose one tiny little piece, it will never be the same.

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days on the mudflat. Watching over the land, trudging knee-deep through the soft mud as the tide changed course over the day. As the day would progress, the land we surveyed would get smaller and smaller due to the incoming tide rushing in. Here in the emptiness of nature, all of us were left alone with our thoughts and it gave me years and years worth of inspiration and stories to write from. These trips also showed me why birding and writers are so interconnected. It is exactly as Katherine Towler described in her essay on the reason why writers love birding so much. "Being a writer means living in an inquisitive state. I am constantly turning over my own experience, looking for the stories beneath the surface and questioning my hidden motives and the motives of others."

"Writing demands a strange double vision, with a gaze focused simultaneously outward and inward. In order to write works of substance that speak to our times, we must be connected to human society and culture, but the act of writing requires separating from the din of people and news and striving," Towler opined.

This is most of what time spent birding feels like. Removed from the whole world, you are tuned into just this moment. It is watching silently at the brooding landscape, waiting for the branches to move, it is waiting for the mangrove to show some signs of life and reward you with the sighting of a masked finfoot. It is also feeling both bored and melancholic at just how little nature changes minute from minute yet over the years, changes entirely.

Each time, I revisit some old fishing village, I visited as a young student, I see how much it has changed. Sometime for good—like how the little mangroves planted by Sonadia have grown from



Asian Dowitchers forage for food on the banks of the mudflat in Sonadia.

waste a moment. They were here to look for the Rosy Starling—a baby pink and brown bird much like the *Shalik pakhi*. That was my first time in the island. And somehow the island popular for its sandy white beaches and turquoise waters became the land of rosy starlings, tall grasses, stony streams and swaying palm trees. We walked through the rice fields, stumbling over little mounds of raised earth, beside streams, over narrow aisles coming across galloping dogs, all blanketed under a strikingly blue sky.

As we walked, I tried to take mental notes of everything. There was not much conversation between the birders. They walked, ears perked, heads tilted above, searching and searching some more for the Rosy Starling. Until eventually, after scouring through the entire island, resting beside a bamboo grove watching little fuzzy yellow balls—Baya weavers—flit through the sky, we reached what felt like the loneliest end of the island. It is here, the birders came to a standstill. Something in their movements changed; they propped their binoculars and with a surgical precision pointed it towards a bird resting on the branches of a pine fir like tree.

The bird was pink, cute and very much like a *shalik*. One of the birders kindly lent me his binoculars allowing me a close view of the starling. I looked at it for a while. It flew from one branch to the other. And soon I lost sight of it. But I didn't tell that to the birders. I kept

personal expedition to find birds, know their names, uncover their stories and habits. But by pure chance I happened to spend many a week with people looking for birds, trying to conserve them and in turn making me fall irrevocably in love with the wild.

Every place we went, I felt at odds with myself. On one side there was beauty in the boundless mudflats of Sonadia and on the other was the knowledge that all of this was at stake. Even sweeping measures to protect the wild would not work, because often people failed to recognise that the seemingly empty mudflat was full of life. You need

only to look. It was in Sonadia. I saw my first spoon-billed sandpiper, a critically endangered bird, smaller than a house sparrow that had triggered a worldwide effort to conserve the species. Wildlife conservationists from Bangladesh to Russia banded together to try and save this little bird. And again, I was privy to the scene. Watching from the sidelines as surveyors scanned the landscape—grey-brown mudflats with a wall of planted mangroves in the background—watching Ruddy Turnstones, Grey Plovers, Little Stints, Ibis, Seagulls, Pacific Swifts and Godwits dot the landscape. During those surveys, we would spend whole



Shorebirds blending in perfectly with their habitat. Sometimes, from afar they appear as little dots until you notice them moving.

PHOTOS: SAYAM U CHOWDHURY