

DHAKA MONDAY JULY 23, 2007

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THAILAND



It was Dr Reza Khan, the zoologist, who once told us about a mysterious cave somewhere in Teknaf. He enchanted us with the description and photographs. A elongated gap in the hills through which you can see the green vegetation outside. The cave floor filled with water. The picture remained with us as we dreamt of stepping into that cave one day.

That one day came on a sun-baked afternoon. The Naf river was dappled with sunlight as our car rolled by. Half an hour later we lost touch with the river as the car swerved to a narrow lane. The car bumped dangerously on the pitted road and we swayed from side to side. We were now passing through a beautiful village. Against the distant blue hills, the green village looked like an emerald piece, glowing in the sun. The wooden huts peeked through what looked like jungles. Sprawling ponds full of pink lilies reflected the blue post-winter sky. The water in the ponds were higher than the road and the edges had been built high to stop spillover.

We crossed a small village centre. Just a few benches by the road and a few sheds for people to loiter around. A few indigenous people were sitting there. They looked quite different to us, not like the Chakmas or Marmas. Not the usual wide face we see, but something very supple and sleek. They were Tongchangya, a small indigenous group. Some say they belong to the Chakma community, but the Tongchangyas would claim their independent identity. We tried to start a conservation with them, but they seemed too shy. Or may be too wary of the city-sleeks.

We pushed on and after half an hour's ride on a snaking dirt road we came to a wide clearing. A few tall trees frilled by undergrowth were standing around. A signpost announced that we were about to begin our trekking to the Kudung cave. We followed a narrow trail through thick bush. After a few minutes the trail disappeared and we were left in total wilderness. We climbed the hills and made our own way, using sticks and machetes. At times we were coming face to

face with impenetrable undergrowth.

But then there was no more going straight and we climbed down into a gorge sloshing with water. It now looked like some deep Amazon forest. The long leaves of ferns and unknown plants created canopies overhead. Logs, eaten by termites and withered by rain, lay across the gully. All kinds of moss and fungus had developed on the gully floor. Toads and water insects watched us in wonder. Had we not had the sticks to balance, we would have slipped on the slippery ground.

After an hour's walk, we came to another small clearing. In

front of us was a towering hill. Its steep sides covered in ferns and creepers. In the late afternoon light, the leaves had a strange dappled effect. Light and shades played on them and the whole hill looked like a digital mosaic of matt and shiny green. The patterns looked so mesmerizing that we stood there and admired the nature's play. But then which way should we go now?

"There it is," our guide pointed his finger into a huge dark patch in the hillside. "The cave."

We strained our eyes and advanced a few more yards. And then we heard the noise -- a strange high-pitched noise, as if somebody

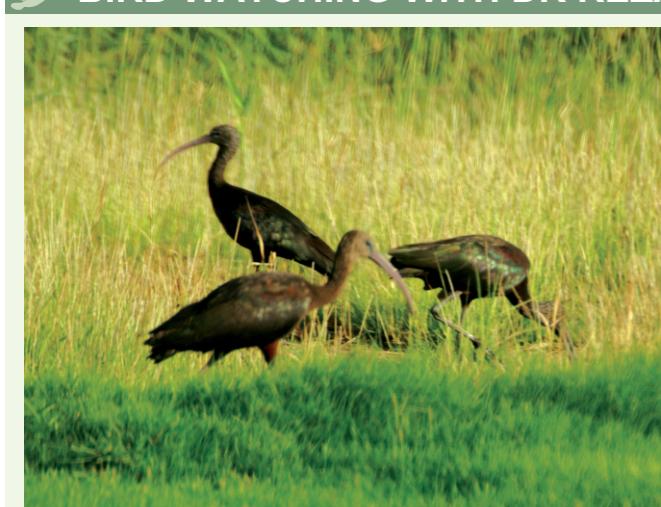
is hitting thousands of strings of a musical instrument. Tanpura. Then we saw the huge gaping hole like a wedge. And immediately a got that awful stench. Now we knew what the sound was about -- the cave is full of bats, thousands and thousands of them. We could feel the bats flying close to the cave mouth as the high-pitched noise turned to a crescendo and then receded.

Then we discovered that the cave was filled with water. We slowly stepped into the cave and were soon wading through waist deep water. The stench was now so strong that it was difficult to breathe. The bats were now flying with a kind of frenzy. They flew low and we could feel their wings batting desperately. We switched on flashlights and threw beams above. Thousands of eyes looking like amber pinheads crossed the shafts of light.

The beams shifted to the wall of the cave and our eyes caught the strange contours and cavities set deep into the sides. Lime seeped by water had created strange and crooked patterns on the wall. Then we saw something sliding across the ledge of a cavity. Something long and slithery. A snake. The reptile was skimming the wall of the cave, it must not have any shortage of food with all these bats around. Then we froze with fear as something was swimming towards us. We could only see the trail left by the moving object on shiny blackish water and a small object keeping above water. Is that another snake? Should we try to go back and risk being stung? Or should we stay calm and let it pass by? It was now only a few feet away and we recognized it now -- a turtle, slowly flapping its legs lazily. Phew! We suddenly felt life back into us and we turned around. Outside it was getting dark fast and we had a long way to go back.

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Story: INAM AHMED
Photo: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

BIRD WATCHING WITH DR REZA



Glossy Ibis

Plegadis falcinellus

A very rare migratory bird seen once in a while in our haors, rivers bordering with eastern India and the Kaptai Lake during winter. Chestnut or dark brown with mottling on head when we see it in Bangladesh. From a distance it may look purplish or blackish. Smallest of the three ibises having decurved bill. Usually found in company of other ibises and herons.

Actual size ± 65cm with ± 15cm long bill.

