

Star WOLIDAY

DHAKA SUNDAY SEPTEMBER 9, 2007

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THAILAND



Elephants of the sylvan shadows

It was another dreary morning. The rain continued in its endlessly monotonous beat. The moistness in the air was gone and it was feeling rather cool. I checked the time – 6:30am. We should have left the bungalow half an hour ago, but the forest officials told us it was no use going in this weather. Even four-wheelers would not be of any use in the hills, they said.

Our restless increased. We came all the way here in search of wild elephants and here we were stuck now. Another half an hour of nervous wait, I stood up in defiance and announced: "I am going out no matter how much it rains, even if I have to walk all the way to Ali Kadam." And then stepped into the rain. Others reluctantly followed me. Khosru, in his usual lazy way, turned away from the bed.

Our car slowly rolled out of the safari park and took the right turn. Fifteen minutes later another right turn and we were on the Lama road

that snaked through thick forest and hills. In this diffused light everything looked so sharp. The greens of the wavy hills looked so brilliant. It seemed we could even pick up every single strand of the wild grass. The clouds played on the hilltops, curling and rolling in ominous moods. Whenever the clouds parted for an instant, the sky beyond flashed in white brilliance and angelic rays beamed down on the hills. It was such an enigmatic show of light and shadow that we stopped our car and watched this heavenly display of nature.

Our car was rolling again – this time through treacherous winding roads. We could see signs of landslide on the roads, the hills were almost on us and the stones and mud slid from the hills and gathered on the road. We had to stop and clean the road once before we could proceed any further.

We crossed a small settlement, just a few huts, a few half-naked

children and some chickens pecking on the ground. We had hardly gone 50 meters from the settlement when we came upon a most interesting sight. Suddenly out of the bush came out a flock of red jungle fowls – all hens. One..two..three..four..five..six. The grayish slim-bodied birds were petrified at our sight and froze. We could see the elements of surprise and pure fright in their eyes. Then they ran across the road and started flying even before they were half way down. In a few seconds they were gone into the forest again and all we were left with is two hurriedly taken hazy photographs.

We were now walking on foot, it was a strenuous job – going uphill and then down, pulling heavy equipment along, the cameras, the lenses, the haversacks full of food and water. The rain and the mud flowing from the hills did not make the job any easier. Every few yards we stopped and scanned the hills for the elephants. We were told a herd had

been roaming around here for the last few days. But after two full hours of walking, we still had no luck. We stopped to photograph the Jhum cultivation, we stopped to refill our water bottle from a waterfall cascading down the hills, its noise quiet deafening. And still no sight of the great tuskers.

It was now nearly three hours and our legs started straining. On our right was a beautiful landscape. The hills were covered in slash-and-burn cultivation and the design made them look like the heads of the African tribal women. We got close to the edge of the hill and started taking pictures. The edge was jutting out and hanging in the air. We crossed over there for a better view. It was slippery and dangerous. But the view was worth taking the risk. And then just as we finished and were about to turn away, something caught my sight – some specs of bright red in the emerald green.

I slowly looked back, my heart

beating wildly. Three elephants, bright as red dust, were standing still like statues. Their colour was surprising as we are used to seeing gray elephants. But these had rubbed against the hills while walking up and down and turned red as the hills themselves.

We were hardly 100 yards from the elephants separated by a deep ravine. We were completely safe from the animals while having a fantastic view. The elephants had sensed our presence. The lead tusker raised its trunk in S shape and kept it like that – it was picking our scent. There was a loud noise like crackers popping. We noticed some movement in the upper hill area. A large mother elephant and her calf were coming down the side of the hill in astounding agility. And then we noticed something moving in the ravine – three more animals including another calf hurrying up the slope. Soon, they all gathered together. The mothers tucked the

calves under their bellies and all stood still.

Our camera kept on rolling. We could not believe our luck – sighting wild elephants in Bangladesh is an extreme rarity (Read Khosru's piece). The last time I saw one was in Mainimukh in Rangamati and it was a close call. I was in so much of panic that I could not even take a single photograph. But it was different now.

Half an hour past and the animals were still standing like statues. Then they started moving. Keeping their calves close to their chest, they proceeded upward into the thickets. In five minutes' time, they were gone.

We stood there some time more and then came back to our bungalow. As we checked on the photographs, we knew we had a real good adventure holiday.

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Story: Inam Ahmed
Photo: Syed Zakir Hossain



A jungle cock in flight



THE TUSKERS

The fossil history of the proboscidea (trunk feeder-derived from the Greek word proboskein), the order of mammals that include modern elephants, is one of the most complex stories of mammalian evolution ever told. However, modern day elephants are the only representative of the family and scientists recognised five subspecies from two species of elephants. Based of external feature, African form (*Loxodonta africana*) are bigger (Weight 5-7 tonnes, height at shoulder 3-4m) in size, having larger ears, concave-shaped back with tip of trunk having two finger-like projections. Both sexes of the two sub-species of African form have tusks.

The Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*) has three sub-species i.e. (Sri Lankan, Mainland and Sumatran sub-species) and their external feature shows convex back, smaller ears, trunk with one finger and tusks only on males (rudimentary tusk may be found in females). Average Asian elephant may weigh 3-5 tonnes and reach reach 2-3.5 metre at shoulder.

North, northeast and southeastern hilly regions of Bangladesh were once considered as elephant habitation. But over the years, degradation and

fragmentation of the once-compact forests drastically led to the decline of this regal animal to a number of about 250-350.

Elephants make large demands on their environment, an adult animal consumes something like 200kg of green fodder a day and probably destroys an equal quantity in the process. At the same time they drink 500 gallons of water a day.

In a small country like Bangladesh where forest land is shrinking alarmingly due to human pressure, there is very little room for sustaining wild elephants. About sixty elephants are now stranded in Sherpur along Indo-Bangladesh border, continues settlement on the elephant corridors forced the animal to confront with man.

Fortunately Cox's Bazar, Bandarban and Kaptai forests still sustain a viable elephant population. And nothing is more worthy and exciting than sighting an elephant herd grazing in their

natural environment.

Khasru Chowdhury

