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HOLIDAY



DHAKA TUESDAY APRIL 7, 2009

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THAILAND



LAUACHAPRA

The evasive elephants

THE morning was full of fog. We came out of our rooms and emerged in a dreamy world of mists. The fog gloomily dropped down like rain. Visibility was so low that we knew we could not drive now. You could see nothing of the road. It was not until ten that the fog cleared a bit. And then we started our car. We were going to Gazni as the locals told us the night before that the elephants had wandered off to that direction. We were passing by a beel and then stopped. We were amazed to find hundreds of marsh swallows here some flying and some sitting on dead branches. Swallows are hardly seen sitting, these small birds love to be airborne all the time. Our attention was attracted by a loud pecking noise, as if somebody was hammering a nail. It was a flame-backed woodpecker working on a tree trunk, oblivious to the world. We were hardly ten feet away from it and yet it did not care. We had never come to such a close contact with a woodpecker. It was an amazing experience to watch the bird working its way methodically round and round the trunk in search of insects.

We reached Gazni after a short travel. Some picnickers were having a cacophonous time there at the tourist spot. We got hold of a Garo man who said he had seen the elephants two days ago. He agreed to be our guide. We left the picnic spot behind and followed a dirt track. The road entered a deep forest, rose up steeply and then dropped with an equal angularity. The canopy of leaves cast a pleasant shade over us as we walked on. We passed by small knells exuding the unmistakable smell of wild grass and flowers. We could see the bee-eaters glancing in the air. The bright sun glinting off their green wings. We could see shrikes and stonechats and warblers and bulbuls. We could see blue jays flashing their brilliance. Our cameras kept on clicking. But birds were just a side story here, we were looking for elephants. We had come to a lone place where a gully ran parallel to the road. The gully turns into a fast running brook in monsoon. We saw some people extracting stones that come rolling from the hills across the border. Indian border is very close here -- just a few hills away, one stone collector said. We crossed the gully. Dr Reza



suddenly got down on his knees and was searching the grass. I thought he had lost something. "Look! These are the smallest butterflies in Bangladesh. Not more than one centimeter in size," he pointed to some small things fluttering close to the ground. Their bluish white wings opened and closed. I remembered in my childhood when we still had green and wild playgrounds in Dhaka, I had seen these butterflies. We advanced towards the hills and were soon lost in a strange forest of head-high Assam Lata and thick sticky bush, looking dry and scraggy. We were now careful because this kind of vegetation is just the ideal place for elephants to hide. You would never know that such huge animals are there just 20 feet away from you until they suddenly appear before you. This was a barren land and only the hills around were thick with woods. We were walking through a valley. An eerie silence prevailed on us. The only sound was the rustle of our footsteps. Our guide was getting nervous by the minute. The Indian border was too close now and we had to be careful not to cross into the foreign soil. With

the recent spree of killing of Bangladeshis by the Indian Border Security Force, border hopping could invite disastrous consequences. "The elephants are just behind this hill," the guide said in a low voice. "Can you hear their noise?" We listened intently and heard the faint murmur bushes being crushed under big feet. Just beyond the hill, the elephants are moving. Our heart beat faster as we could sense the climax. We started climbing the slope. And then stopped. A man was running down the hill. Behind him a child. "Don't go there. The BSF are chasing us," he shouted at us. "Did you see the elephants?" we shot back. "Yes. There. But don't go. The BSF will shoot." We stopped and looked back at Dr Reza. He shook his head. "No, we should not take the risk. It could be too dangerous," he said slowly. We headed back. Through the same forest. Through the same bush. With a broken heart.

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