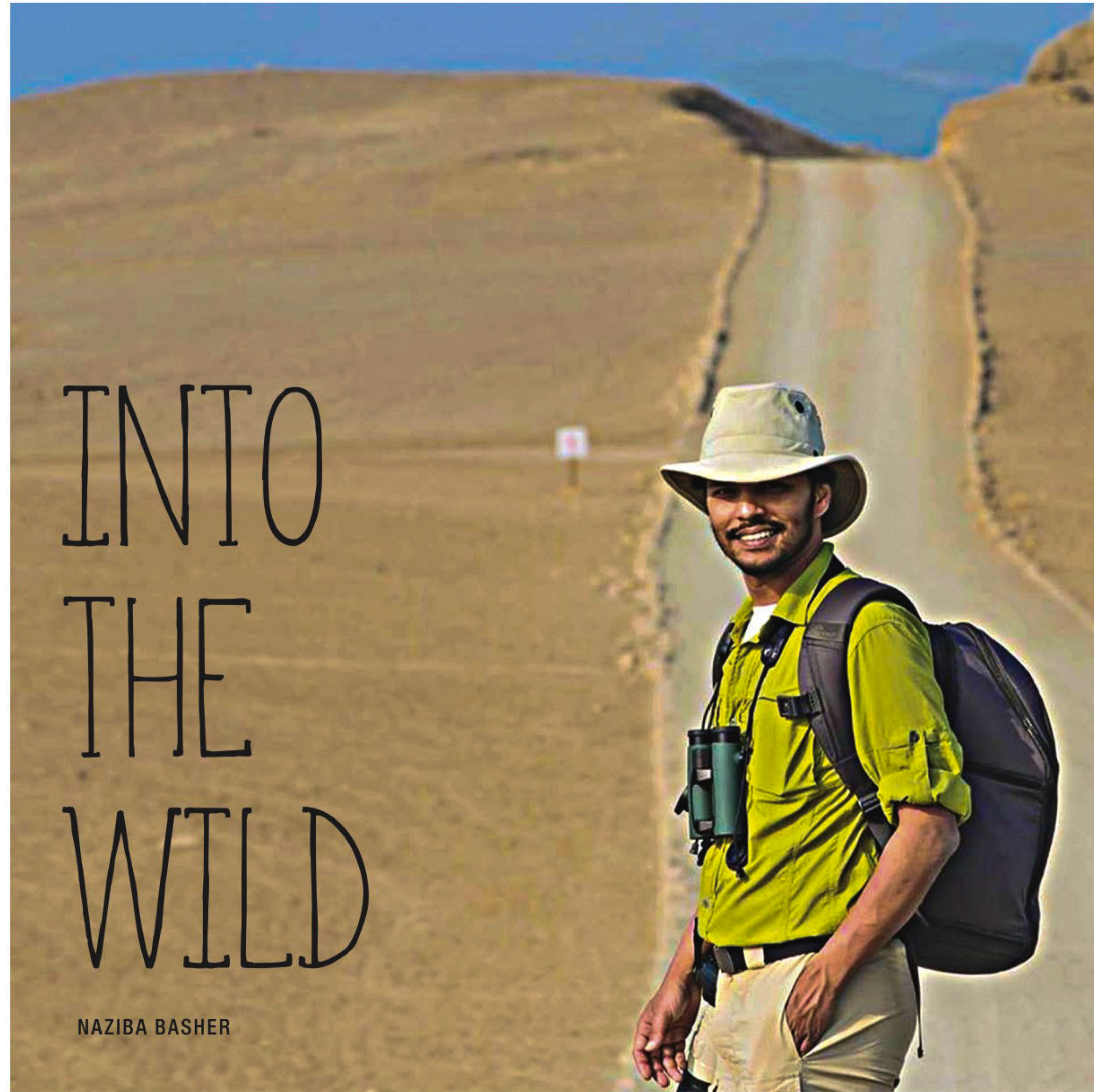


STAR PEOPLE

"I grew up in a place where we had more trees than houses, more birds than people and more ponds than tanks! Each pond would host at least four species of Kingfishers, three species of herons and numerous species of native fishes. Being a child I used to wander into the homestead forests to look for the vivid butterflies, jewel beetles, the calls of unknown birds and Jungle Cat dens. I grew up embracing those innocent memories and perhaps to revamp those profound memories," says Sayam U Chowdhury, Conservation Biologist, Nature Photographer and Writer.

Sayam grew up in a part of Bangladesh, where nature was deteriorating fast, right in front of his eyes. His passion for birds began when he was still in primary school, when he had pet birds of his own. He later on learned more about birds, he was fascinated by their diversity, which led to the desire to conserve them. He pursued a Bachelor's degree in Environmental Science from North South University in Bangladesh and later took up MPhil in Conservation Science under the Department of Geography, University of Cambridge, UK with full scholarship from Chevening and Cambridge Trust. He then began working in behavioural ecology, research and the conservation of globally threatened species. His work with the Critically Endangered Spoon-billed Sandpiper has been most gratifying, among all his works, and involved conservation breeding in Russia and mitigating hunting in the wintering grounds in Bangladesh. This research has now blossomed into a full-blown project that BirdLife International declared as BirdLife Species Guardian. His work on riverine birds has led to proposals for two new protected areas in Bangladesh. "I found a way to get close to nature, found a subject to study and work that will take me to the calls of the childhood birds. When you grow up close to nature, the love for vast untamed fields, for the



Sayam U Chowdhury

PHOTO: COURTESY



PHOTO: SAYAM U CHOWDHURY

wildlife is engrained in you," says Sayam. Sayam got his first pair of professional binoculars in 2003; "my life changed since then and I became a seeker of flying colours." Sayam has been working in behavioural, research and conservation of globally threatened species in Bangladesh for the last eight years, especially on Critically Endangered bird species including Spoon-billed Sandpiper, Endangered Masked

Finfoot, Black-bellied Tern and Baer's Pochard. "In addition, I closely work with Bangladesh bird club and other environmental organisations and help in determining the changes and recommend conservation measures in some of the most important natural habitats of Bangladesh and carry out bird ringing to understand migration pattern of birds." Sayam works with a big team, all of whom have the similar desires and an

undying love for nature and wildlife. "My biggest inspirations are my friends, my team members and my colleagues. Without them I won't be able to continue any of the work that I'm currently doing, these people include Md. Foyzal, Sakib Ahmed, Nazim Prince, Abida Rahman, Onu Tareq, Shimanto Dipu, Abu Diyan and of course my mentors Mr. Enam Ul Haque and Dr. Sabir Bin Muzaffar. Also one source of my inspiration comes from the tremendous destruction of nature and loss of species that we see all around us and these lines by George B. Schaller, "I learned long ago that conservation has no victories, that one must retain connections and remain involved with animals and places that have captured the heart, to prevent their destruction."

In the future, Sayam plans to expand his work help save threatened species and ecosystems in Bangladesh and beyond. "Moreover, I want to devote my time to encourage the youth in order to have more dedicated individuals (especially women) working in nature conservation in Bangladesh." Sayam believes the future of Bangladesh's wildlife is not so bright, "but as an optimistic individual, I still see light.

All is not gone from our land. Our forest in the northeast still echo with magical calls of the Endangered Hollock Gibbons and Elongated Tortoises still twist the leaf litter to find fallen fruits," says Sayam. He fondly recalls how the mighty Sundarbans even now with so much destruction around us supports our last tigers and the murky waterways still hold globally threatened Ganges River Dolphins and Masked Finfoots, elephants continue to silently wander through the Jhum lands and Tigers roam the in the remote CHT. "Our freshwater and coastal wetlands are still home of the critically endangered species like the Baer's Pochard and the Spoon-billed Sandpiper. The mighty Padma and Jamuna rivers have undisturbed sandbanks where riverine birds nest and possibly the Gharial still basks in the sun." Sayam firmly believes that our country has already lost a majority of her biological diversities; and now we cannot afford any more loss. Sayam's relationship with the wild is one that is made in Heaven, they both thrive for each other's existence. "In one word – my life would be meaningless if I'm left without wildlife and nature, and that's probably true for the whole world."

ENDEAVOUR

"What is the main purpose of your life?" was the most frequently asked question throughout my two and a half month journey during the Building Bridges through Leadership Training (BBLT) at Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC). If the purpose of our life was just to live, then we all would fail one day. So I would say the purpose of my life is to mobilize people towards taking action for a common good. I realized that the successful completion of the 12th BBLT program was not the end, but the embryo of my leadership journey. I took the chance to apply to be a campus ambassador for the 13th BBLT program. Ambassadors were recruited from different renowned institutions of Dhaka, including Viqarunnisa Noon College, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh University of Engineering & Technology, Bangladesh University of Professionals, Islamic University of Technology, Brac University, East West University. The Campus Ambassador has the responsibility of encouraging students of their respective education institutions to apply to BYLC programs. Initially, the role of a campus ambassador did not seem very tough to me as I was a fresh graduate of BBLT 12 and had the zeal to bring more young and bright minds under the tutelage of BYLC. I had personally identified many enthusiastic individuals with potential who just needed the appropriate push in the right direction. So, I had to convince



HEADING TOWARDS A COMMON PLATFORM

DIARY OF A BYLC'S CAMPUS AMBASSADOR

ZANNATUL FERDOUS MIFTAH

PHOTOS: COURTESY

the tender hearts to apply to the BBLT program to get their long awaited common platform, and meet other likeminded individuals from diverse backgrounds.

As I worked as Campus Ambassador, I was one again reminded of how important it is to talk about the tenets of leadership to the youth of Bangladesh. There is a common perception that leadership can only be exercised by people in authority positions, such as politicians. But at BYLC, we absorbed the idea that that leadership is all about taking the appropriate action at the appropriate time, the power does not only lie with political parties! So I took my time in explaining to people that leadership is an inherent potential in every individual, all we have to do is to bring the maximum output by utilizing it.

We used the consent letter provided by BYLC to take the permission from the university authority to set up a booth for the applicants at TSC and also post BYLC posters at Curzon Hall, Faculty of Business

The role of a campus ambassador did not seem very tough to me as I was a fresh graduate of BBLT 12 and had the zeal to bring more young and bright minds under the tutelage of BYLC. I had personally identified many enthusiastic individuals with potential who just needed the appropriate push in the right direction.

Studies, Arts Faculty notice board and also to the residential halls and cafeterias at different corner of the campus. We also went on FM radio to talk about our initiatives. Covering the large campus, postering, passionately giving presentations wearing BYLC's green polo T-shirt with my fellow campus ambassadors Mahia, Jubaer and Joy was never hectic, rather, we learned from each other, made new friends and preceded towards fulfilling BYLC's mission to bridge gaps in society by

uniting youth from diverse backgrounds, equipping them with leadership, problem solving, teamwork skills and engaging them in community service and active citizenship. By working as Campus Ambassador, I was able to expand my network and maintain new relationships with the academic professionals, clubs and students of my university. The activities enabled me to develop my communication and teamwork skills and I became more confident in giving presentations.



Performing the responsibilities of a campus ambassador was challenging but also exciting and a continuous learning process. I would encourage anyone who wonders about their purpose, to take on leadership roles such as these because no matter how big or small the task, it eventually leads toward making progress for the common good.

The writer is a graduate of the twelfth Building Bridges through Leadership Training programme and is currently studying at Institute of Nutrition and Food Science, University of Dhaka.