

**W**ith their parallel lives, animals offer men a companionship different from any other human exchange. Different because it is a companionship offered to the loneliness of man as a species."

And maybe no one could explain it better than John Berger himself. In his raspy yet commanding voice, he is heard reading from *Why Look at Animals under shots from Zoo Berlin* and the *Jardin des Plantes* in Paris in *The Seasons in Quincy*.

In those lines and from other lines I came across as a reader in various books and essays, I know nature is awe-inspiring, not just to me but to anyone blessed to be privy to it. And it is with this awe of sentient life, a life other than human, I aim to pen this article. To shed some light on the possible loss of a species and what each loss means for us.

#### The Masked Finfoot, surely not another Dodo?

After the mighty dinosaurs, it was the humble flightless bird Dodo that enjoyed much media attention, thanks to extinction. You may remember it from its short stint in the animated movie *Ice Age*, where the Dodos fall over the cliff one by one trying to save a melon, thus driving themselves to extinction. The reality is hardly such. In fact it is quite bleak, and not rife with comic relief, I am afraid.

According to a study published in 2014 in *Conservation Biology*, the case of natural extinction is 10 times worse than scientists previously thought with extinction rates 1,000 times higher than natural background rates.

The Masked Finfoot—the protagonist of this article—an incredibly shy, a veritable master of the mangroves, complete with lobed green feet (giving it its name) and a bright yellow beak, is also among one of those birds faced by the threats of extinction if quick steps are not taken.

Which explains why it was with a mix of a heavy heart and a sense of adventure, we went in search of the Masked Finfoot or *Sundri Haansh* as Sayam U Chowdhury, the man behind the present conservation efforts of the Finfoot likes to call the bird.

Among one of the last strongholds of the endangered Masked Finfoot is the mystical, unabashedly beautiful Sundarbans. She, as many of you know, is the last home to many. To the stealthy crab fishermen, the Bengal Tiger, the Irrawaddy and Gangetic River Dolphins, the colorful Mangrove Pitta and to many, many others.

It was in 2004, that Gertrud Neumann-Denzau, Elisabeth Fahrni Mansur and Rubaiyat Mansur observed the nesting of this species in the Sundarbans.

In the later years, starting from 2011, Sayam U Chowdhury and his team searched through the many creeks for the Masked Finfoot along the eastern side of the Sundarbans of Bangladesh.

The team surveyed from Chandpai in Sundarbans all the way up to the Sarankhola range, covering more than 100 sq km, finding a total of 25 nests,

among which five were active, says Sayam U Chowdhury, a conservation biologist, currently working on preserving threatened species in Bangladesh and abroad.

An occupied nest is a rare chance for collection of data. The nests were observed from hides set up on boats. One of the nests was lovingly named Riri, said Sayam.

And then later in 2015, a team of four including Sakib Ahmed, Nazim Uddin Khan Prince and Gertrud herself were to trace the route taken almost a decade

country boat, working sometimes against the tide, sometimes in favor, in search of the bird, with most days ending in disappointment and despair. As rain pelted down us, the old forest hung low and sometimes we were rewarded with sightings of the Masked Finfoot.

We however, did not find any active nests along the route in 2015 compared to the three active nests among a total of 19 found by Gertrud and the team in 2004, throwing light on their decline.

The sight of a Finfoot, knowing only

requires immediate action.

"Sporting a prominent yellow bill and black face mask, this is one of the most beautiful species of water birds. The Masked Finfoot is a mangrove specialist. It is a master of the waterways and the narrow banks where it forages for crabs, shrimps and fishes. Unfortunately only 1000 or less individuals survive in the wild today, and the species is considered endangered and declining," says Sayam.

As our landscapes change drastically, we are fast shrinking key habitats for wildlife.

## NOT ANOTHER DODO PLEASE?

### *In search of the last of the Masked Finfoots, the elusive bird of the forest*

ABIDA RAHMAN CHOWDHURY



PHOTO: COURTESY

back by Gertrud through the Sundarbans.

I read and re-read the scientific paper published by the team of their observations made during the journey, naively hoping that this time would be no different.

In the hot, humid and rain-soaked days of April, we trailedd creek after creek in search of the elusive bird of the forest.

In the days we stayed in the Sundarbans, each day we took our

so few remain in the world, was always enthralling. It made me come to terms with the epoch of Anthropocene. We were in the eye of the storm, the great storm of extinction.

#### What we know, what we can do?

It is hard to imagine in the age of the internet, that little can be known of something. Despite being endangered very little is known of this bird and thus

For the Masked Finfoot, the blow is especially hard. Opportunistic hunting by humans, changing riverine landscapes has found these birds at the brink of extinction, says Sayam.

"Only the efforts of a few to save the last of our waterways and as a result save this species from impending doom is our only hope. The most imminent threat in Bangladesh is opportunistic hunting by fishermen who come across

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the nesting sites while they are fishing; this is especially true of a method of fishing named Charpata, causing the population to dwindle in the Sundarbans," says Sayam.

However the scope of what can be done remains huge. Save the habitat of one animal, and a positive domino effect is created. Here I have to repeat the words of the great conservationist George Schaller, "If you protect that area, you're also protecting thousands of other plants and animals. You're saving all

Science and corresponding action based on findings by conservationists alone is not enough. Diplomacy also plays a crucial role in tilting the balance in the favor of a species.

If the government sets up long term

predation by humans as fishermen will not be able to access the nests.

"In addition, the growing tourism in the Sundarbans may pose a significant threat as the Masked Finfoot is an extremely shy bird. Therefore, it is important that we identify all its hotspots so that we could suggest areas where flow of tourists and tourist boats can be controlled," adds Sayam.

We need long term protection of riverine habitats not only in Bangladesh but in all countries of the Masked Finfoot's range, and we need to see it from a global perspective, says Sayam.

#### The 'irrational tragedy' of losing wildlife

I have often found that it is both deeply saddening and a quick jolt to reality when holding conversations with my conservationist friends. They are all realists, optimists and pessimists at the same time. The discussion over coffee or tea often takes a turn for the depressing with ominous talks of climate change, rapid extinction rates and the despair at the impending doom.

And when I ask, why try, why conservation and what is in it for us except the irrational tragedy (A world without wild animals feels like a special tragedy, even if it is hard to rationalise why it should, says journalist Jon Mooallem) of losing wildlife, they do not answer with Economics, which by the way has almost always tipped in favor of saving the species than letting it go extinct (Read: BBC's *What is the point of saving Endangered Species*), they tell me it is a matter of the heart.

Journalist Jon Mooallem put it even more poignantly in *'Wild Ones: A Sometimes Dismaying, Weirdly Reassuring*



PHOTO: COURTESY

The threats to the species are multifaceted, as Birdlife International reports:

"Habitats have been further degraded by the removal of bankside vegetation and changes in hydrology resulting from dam construction, and siltation. Moreover, population declines in areas such as the Sundarbans may be directly or indirectly related to climate change; with the possible effects of climate change including frequent tropical cyclones, a decline in preferred nesting habitat due to lack of suitable trees (effected by salt water intrusion due to sea level rise and reduced freshwater influx), and lower density of prey species due to environmental changes such as saltwater intrusion and cyclone."

The Sundarbans, one of the homes of the Masked Finfoot, is further threatened by a proposed 1,320 Megawatt power station to be built 14 km away from the forest.

This could mean huge traffic of water vessels and disposal of treated water from the power plant into the rivers of the Sundarbans.

And if the water quality changes then it will affect all aquatic organisms including the Masked Finfoot, believes Sayam.

Even now as very little is known of the bird and the range of its habitat is tricky, conservation efforts so far have been limited too.

these species that future generations will want - you're saving the world for your children and your children's children. . . . The destruction of species is final."

According to Birdlife International, "It (Finfoot) has been recorded in protected areas in most range states, potentially the most important being the Sundarbans, Bangladesh, and the Chindwin Basin in northern Myanmar. It is depicted on conservation awareness material in Cambodia and Laos."

"The proposed Hukaung Tiger Reserve in Myanmar covers an area that is considered to be of high national and global significance for the species. The Sundarbans Finfoot Research Project has developed a breeding bird monitoring protocol in collaboration with the Bangladesh Forest Department," adds Birdlife International.

More and more extensive surveys can shed light on distribution, population status, breeding range and seasonal movements of the Finfoot. Its ecological requirements and tolerance to habitat degradation and disturbance if better known can help chalk further plans.

"Afford protected-area status to key breeding sites, and strictly minimise habitat loss, hunting and disturbance within them. Campaign for increased protected-area representation for riverine habitats, particularly in Myanmar, Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia," urges Sayam.

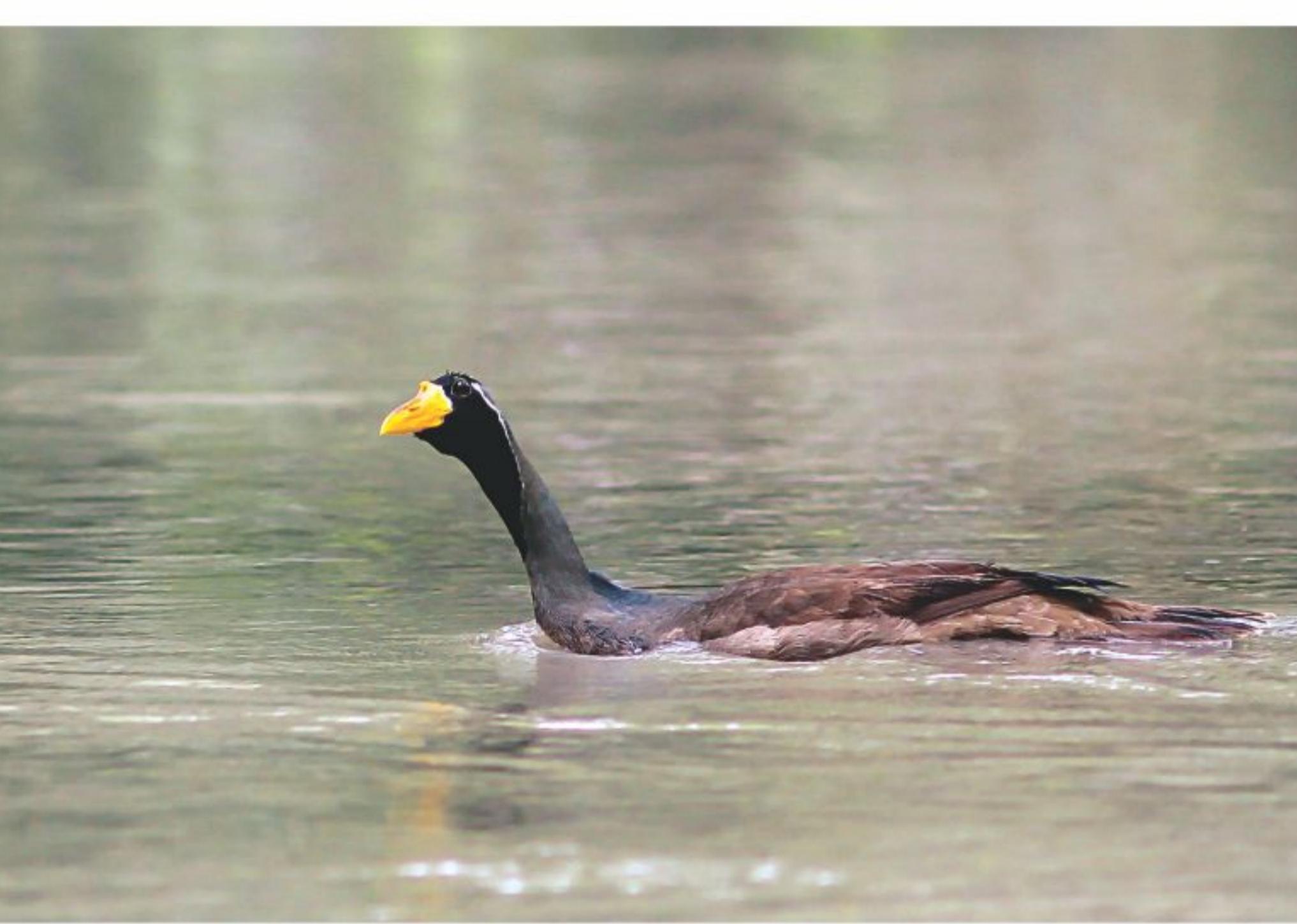


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understand population increase or decrease, says Sayam.

The recent expansion of sanctuaries within the Sundarbans fits well with the range of the Masked Finfoot. Along with that, the ban on collection of all types of natural resources from areas designated as sanctuaries plays in favor of the Finfoot.

The ban, if strictly followed could significantly reduce the threat of nesting

*Story About Looking at People Looking at Animals in America*, his contemplation on the fate of wildlife today.

"Maybe you have to believe in the value of everything to believe in the value of anything."

Abida Rahman Chowdhury is an online journalist, The Daily Star.

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to Sayam U Chowdhury and his team at The Sundarbans Finfoot Research Project: Gertrud Denzau, Nazim Uddin Khan Prince, Sakib Ahmed and Mohammad Foyas.