

The Haor's of Bangladesh - Birders Paradise



One of the unfortunate outcomes of the Holey Artisan attack was that expatriates like us were advised against travelling outside Dhaka. But wildlife enthusiasts that we are, staying away from exploring this country and enjoying its natural beauty was hard. Fortunately, we had already explored the iconic Sundarbans, twenty years ago.

But a place little known to foreigners are the Haors. Especially the knowledge that during the Bangladesh winter months, when the water levels go down, thousands of water birds come sweeping in to these areas, from as far as Siberia, to feed and rest before they migrate onwards.

After two years of waiting, we decided that we would brave a trip to the Haors, to see for ourselves the fantastic gathering of water birds. We approached travel agents in Dhaka, but none were able to come up with an itinerary. Finally, through contacts via... via ... known persons, we managed to organise a four-day trip to the Tanguar Haors, close to Sylhet.

The idea was that we were to spend two nights and three days on a large live-aboard boat that would be anchored close to the Haors. We would then take a wooden row-boat into the beels or low-lying areas of water retention to see the birds. This way we could make as many trips as we liked without disturbing the birds.

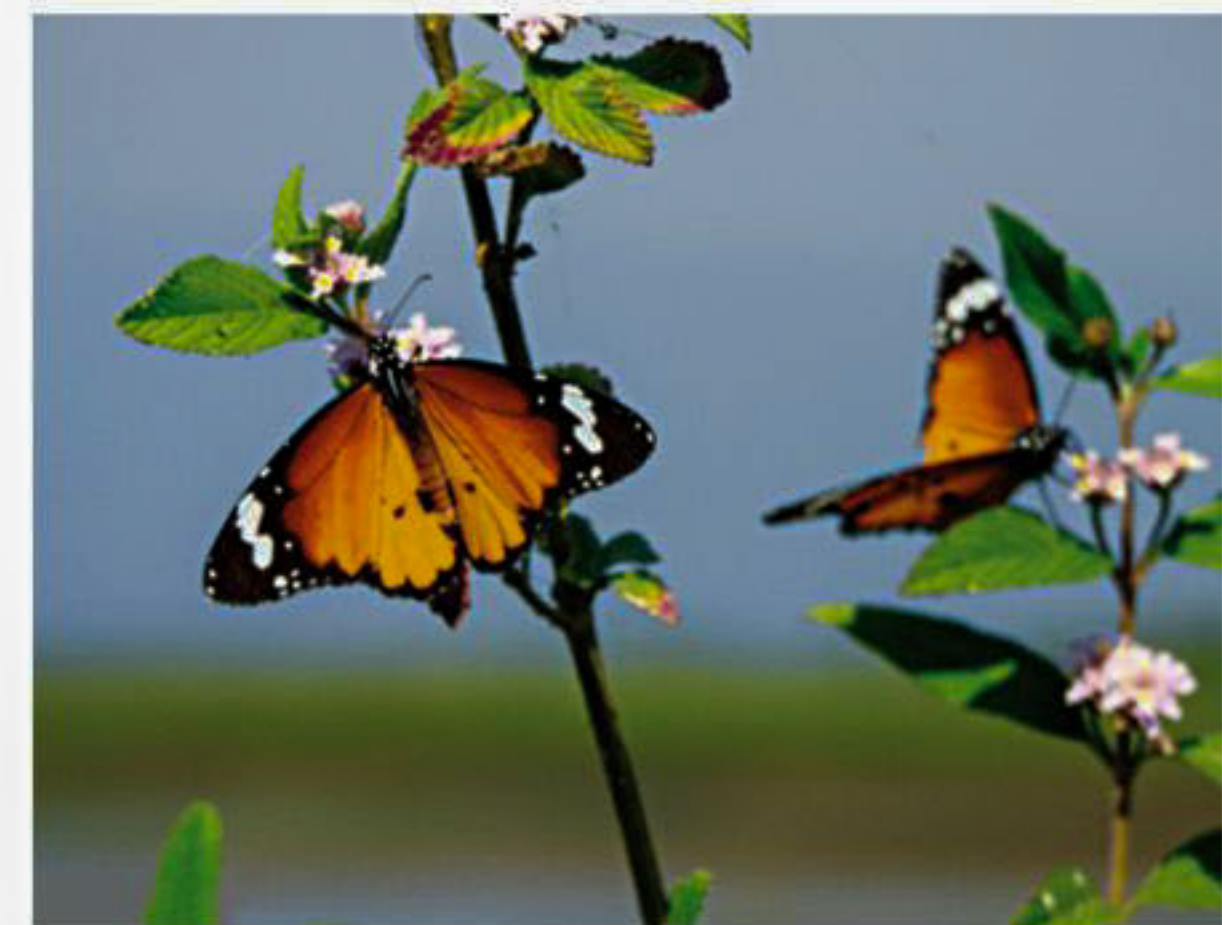
One Friday morning around 6:30AM, we set off by car towards Sylhet. Being Friday and early in the day, the roads were reasonably free. By 8AM we were on the Sylhet road, and from then on we travelled



through beautiful rural roads. Along the way, we saw farmers busily planting Boro paddy, and the fields were awash with the green of the young paddy plants. Boro paddy in the dry winter months is irrigated with ground water. Along the way, Shimul, or Cotton Trees, were blooming with red feathery flowers, attracting birds and insects. We passed around five toll payment spots, each charging for the use of a stretch of road or a bridge. We passed people engaged in collecting stones that roll down from India. The stones were for the construction industry. Finally, after 7 hours on the road, we made it to Sunamganj-- a town in Sylhet. Here, we were met by our guide Raju, with whom we drove towards our boat, which would be our home for the next three days.

Our boat was lying on the river Patlai. Usually, we would have boarded it at the Tahirpur harbour, but because the river was too dry, we needed to drive about 2 hours to another harbour called Sulaimanpur. Finally, around 4:30PM, we were in our boat, and chugging along the river towards Tanguar Haor. On board the boat, there was a cook with his helper, the owner and captain of the boat with his helper, and our guide. The boat had two storeys. The top floor was open and a place to relax and have our meals. The toilet was also located there. Below were the sleeping quarters and place for our luggage. We sailed along, taking in the scenery of green paddy fields, and boats of different sort sailing along. We

saw large commercial boats, with goods or passengers, and also small fishing boats. There was the pretty sight of a commercial duck herder standing and sailing his boat, while herding his large flocks of local ducks, all squawking and following him dutifully. Along the banks people were having their evening baths, or washing their clothes. Children were playing in the cold, cold water before retiring for dinner and bed. Already we could see lots of resident birds.



Flocks of black cormorants, white egrets and herons, and occasionally, terns and even seagulls flying above us, on their way to roost in the trees along the banks. We got to see a spectacular sunset, before arriving at the Haor around 8PM. By then, it was dark, and the winter chill began to bite. After a tasty Bengali meal of rice, fish and vegetable curries, we went to bed, excited that we would be up at dawn and off to explore the beels or lakes to see the migratory birds.

The next morning, at 7AM, while the countryside was still in the grips of winter chill and the landscape was draped in clouds of mist, we set off in a small wooden paddle towards the beels. Only such boats are allowed in this waterway as it minimises the disturbance to the birds. We passed a few fishermen, on their way for some early fishing. Again, black cormorants and white egrets and herons flew in front of us, as though they were ushering in the beautiful sight that we were to behold.

