



The waterway narrowed and among the vegetation on either side were hundreds of Purple Swamphen, all in their bright purple and red splendour--feeding, running around excitedly and being Purple Swamphens. As I was busy training my camera on them, the boat took another turn and the beel opened up and lo and behold in front was a birders' paradise! There, in the whitish mist that still hung in the air, swimming in the water were thousands of water birds. Most we were seeing for the first time. There were bright orange Red-crested Pochards, Baer's Pochard, Gadwall, Northern Pintail, Northern Shoveller, Mallard, Teals of all kinds, and Black Coots with bright white beaks, and hundreds of other water birds I could not even name in my excitement.

Along the banks were vegetative patches, where Glossy Ibis, Crakes, Rails, white breasted water hen, different types of Egrets, and Cormorants were in their numbers. Above were hundreds of Terns and Gulls swooping and wheeling. All feeding, feeding..., and occasionally, squabbling over mates. The birds were generally relaxed in the presence of humans, partly because of the good conservation efforts of Bangladesh. Where there are plentiful prey like birds and fish, there are prey birds. We were thrilled to see the Pallas's Fish Eagle several times and also nesting! This eagle is classified as endangered, therefore we felt privileged to see it. The Brahminy Kite was also nesting in the trees. We could see its fluffy chick peeking over the nest.

And I was shooting, shooting, shooting...with a camera of course.

We did four trips like this into the beel. The beel itself was edged by the Indian border and the Meghalaya Hills. The water of the beel is clear and clean, with the vegetation inside visible. This forms the food of many water birds, and a place for fish.

Tanguar Haor is one of many haors in Bangladesh. These are exceptional wetland systems that are vital for birdlife, both resident and migratory. In winter, birds fly in from thousands of miles to avoid the arctic chill. The haors are a place where they rest, recuperate, and nest. It is also home to many unique species of plant life, amphibians, reptiles, mammals, and fresh water fish. The fish are also vital for the people who call this place their home and fish for their livelihood.

Our boat was anchored along the banks of Gulbari, a remote village that was closest to the haor. Therefore, a vital place for conserving the haors. While we were there, we did see security guards overseeing the prevention of hunting of wild birds and

animals. The village was also involved in this effort in their own way. Their remoteness meant there was no electricity, and schools were far away. The tea shop was the only shop for miles around and was a place of communal gathering.

The people who lived in this village were mainly fishing for their food and livelihood. They were also duck rearing, and growing vegetables for their needs. In the rainy season, a lot of their activities are curtailed by the weather, which makes life challenging, to say the least. Despite their poverty, they are the guardians of the haor.

After spending two nights, we left on the third day, sailing back in our boat till we got to Sulaimanpur again. We stayed overnight in Sunamganj, and then back to the hustle and bustle of Dhaka. This was a long and tiring trip, but worth every bit for the fresh and clean air, the rustic landscape, the kind and smiling people and the Birds, Birds, and Birds ...

By Valli de Vries

Photo: Valli de Vries

