



A new hatchling of the Asian Giant Tortoise at the Turtle Conservation Center at the Bhawal National Park.

PHOTOS: CCA

The slow and steady conservation of the Asian Giant Tortoises

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They are famous because they battled petty criminals, overlords, mutated creatures and alien invaders, all the while trying and mostly succeeding to stay hidden. They are famous, for they were cursed and are now manifestations of an evil spirit stuck in a pond for eternity at a shrine in the depths of Chattogram. They are famous because writers, moviemakers, shamans, philosophers, kung fu fighters alike have been fascinated by their slow and steady gait and their resilience. Yet, thousands of years on, this very resilience is under threat. If you have not guessed by now, I am talking about the order Testudines of the animal kingdom, which includes turtles and tortoises.

Much like everywhere else on planet Earth, the storm of extinction rages on. This has so far pushed countless animals towards extinction. Some may be lost forever from science without ever being documented but for the 'fortunate' few, their extinctions have gotten notice. And conservationists are hard at work trying to turn back time.

And one fine Friday morning, we were witness to this small scientific 'miracle' unfold in front of our eyes.

Asian Giant Tortoises: Captive breeding of the reptile giants of the hills

Conservationists confirmed the presence of Asian Giant Tortoises in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh when they started working in the region in 2012. All of that has been document-



A critically endangered Elongated Turtle.

ed and written about in great detail, both locally and internationally.

With the discovery of the Asian Giant Tortoise, while giving a reason to rejoice, the conservationists also knew it was time to take decisive measures for their conservation. They put their heads together and decided the only way to save this species would require drastic efforts.

Thus, was born, the Turtle Conservation Center, established in 2017 by the team of Creative Conservation Alliance (CCA), with full support from the Bangladesh Forest Department and the help of Dr Istiak Sobhan, environment specialist of the World Bank.

Established formally in 2017, the Turtle Conservation Center feels like an establishment taken out of time almost. On a sultry, humid Friday morning just after the Eid holidays, we set out from Dhaka en route to Bhawal National Park.

This is where Istiak Sobhan helped the team of CCA secure a piece of land, which was provided to them by the forest department, to establish their captive breeding programme for Asian Giant Tortoises, now considered critically endangered.

There are seven Asian Giant Tortoises in the facility currently. They have been brought here after they were rescued from different places, one from Dulhazra Safari Park, another from a forest office, a few others from the Chittagong Hill Tracts and one from the enclosure for captive breeding of Batagur Baska (another species of turtle which is critically endangered).

The car ride to Bhawal was quick, thanks to the post-Eid free roads. Groggy, somewhat, still in a holiday delirium, it took us a minute to find our bearings in the humid, green expanse. A quick walk, a sharp turn in the forest, and we were inside this strange life-sized science experiment. I believe I will be speaking for everyone who was there, that the facility and whole experience made us feel like the kids from Stranger Things—where we were privy to nature being handled, revived and somewhat manipulated, by a bunch of young conservationists trying to save the last of these majestic species.

The facility is surrounded by towering shal trees and a huge pond that almost appears as though it is a



The egg of an Asian Giant Tortoise just while it was hatching.

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