

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR



Masked Finfoot, Sundarban.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

Twilight for the Masked Finfoot?

Rare, endangered and beautiful, the Masked Finfoot shines among the birds of Bangladesh. In the entire world, it is only the Bangladesh Sundarban where it can be found in good numbers. This secretive and mysterious bird sometimes behaves like a duck and sometimes like a bird. The mangrove forest provides grounds for it to live, eat and breed.

About ten years ago, it was estimated that perhaps one thousand Masked Finfoots survive in the wild, the vast majority of them in our Sundarban. However, in a recent paper published in the ornithological journal *Forktail*, scientists report on recent research on the bird in nine countries: Bangladesh, Cambodia, India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore and Thailand. While Bangladesh stands out as the hotspot, the key finding of the paper is disappointing: there are far fewer Masked Finfoot individuals left in the world today than we thought and their number is decreasing.

I saw the Masked Finfoot in Sundarban in one out of every three trips I made there. It is indeed an unusual sight. After watching one for a few seconds you quickly realize that it is unlike any other bird. It swims like a duck but its feet are not webbed like a duck's feet. It has plump toes called "lobes" that enable it to climb trees. It is a poor flier but it can run fast, even on Sundarban's mud. It has a unique way of sitting on a sloping bank of a creek or canal, with one leg folded and the other leg erect to compensate for the slope. When frightened it runs or flies, but sometimes it freezes and sits in this funny posture.

Masked Finfoots seem to blend well

with Sundarban's ecology. They build their nests on *Gewa* tree branches that extend overhead across smaller creeks. They pick their food from the muddy banks of creeks when low tide leaves small creatures exposed. Typically they catch small crab and insects, shrimps, small fish and worms. They swim in the water and wallow in the mud.

After seeing a few Masked Finfoots I surmised that they were nowhere near as wily and skittish as wild ducks are. They were hard to find, but I could not tell whether this was because of their small numbers or because they hid well. In general we were able to approach them closer than we would approach wild ducks. Another point working against them: they place their nests at spots easily accessible by predators or fishermen.

In the paper, Cambridge University Ph.D. researcher Sayam U. Chowdhury along with his co-authors report that Cambodia and Bangladesh are the only two countries left where Masked Finfoots are known to breed today. They estimate that 108-304 adult individuals survive in the wild today.

For survival of this species we need to act urgently on two fronts. One is learning more about the Masked Finfoot. For example, we know little about its seasonal migrations, how it breeds and raises chicks and how climate change might affect it. The other is active conservation measures, including ceasing the clearance of forested riverine vegetation and eliminating the use of monofilament gillnets.

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ENSURING PROPER MAINTENANCE

BRTC to maintain 'history book' for vehicles

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Each depot of Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) has to maintain a "history book" for each vehicle and update those regularly from now on -- all with the aim to ensure proper maintenance of the state-run corporation's properties.

The decision comes following the issuing of a new set of directives by the newly appointed BRTC chairperson to make the service more "pro-people". The directive also requires depot managers to be more cautious of vehicle management.

The new chairman, Md Tazul Islam, took charge of the state-run transport agency on February 7, and issued the 21-set directives nine days later to make BRTC service "modern, time befitting and attractive."

The directives came at a time when mobile courts of Bangladesh Road Transport Authority (BRTA) found irregularities in around one-fourth of BRTC buses during a special drive last month.

Seventy BRTC buses out of 312 which came under a drive of BRTA mobile courts in January were fined Tk 67,000, officials said.

BRTC operates their service through 22 bus and two truck depots.

To name a few, the irregularities include not having digital number plates and fare charts, not having drivers' photos and mobile numbers inside buses, carrying extra passengers

Throughout the last decade, the government has procured hundreds of buses and trucks for BRTC, but many of them have already become rundown, well before their age hit double digits

without following health guidelines, unhygienic environment inside buses etc., BRTA officials said.

However, the document did not include solution strategies for these issues.

Contacted, Tazul Islam told The Daily Star yesterday, "We are studying the papers (collected from BRTA), and I have already called a meeting on February 25. Necessary instructions will follow soon."

According to a recent report of BRTC, the corporation has 1,824

buses, of which 1,362 are now in operation, 226 of which are under heavy repairing, while 236 have to be written off. On the other hand, 570 out of its 588 trucks are in service.

Throughout the last decade, the government has procured hundreds of buses and trucks for BRTC, but many of them have already become rundown, well before their age hit double digits.

A lack of skilled mechanics, unavailability spare parts, inadequate maintenance, poor decision-making, and corruption by a section of BRTC officials are to blame for the early ruin of the buses, said officials concerned, wishing not to be named.

A BRTC official, wishing anonymity, said currently every depot maintains a logbook for buses.

But after the new directives, every depot will have to maintain a separate "history book" where everything regarding a vehicle, including how many time the vehicle goes under repair and has accident, will be updated regularly.

"Our purpose is to make BRTC buses attractive and its service more pro-people," Tazul Islam said.

Replying to another question, he said, "I will personally monitor whether all these instructions are executed."

Other instructions include taking prior permission for changing route and vehicles, updating documents of BRTC's unmovable properties.

No entry into Shaheed Minar without masks

AGENCIES

This year, Amar Ekushey and International Mother Language Day will be celebrated on a limited scale, and people without face masks will be barred from entering Central Shaheed Minar in the capital.

Besides, no more than five people from an organisation and two visitors at a time will be allowed to pay homage to the language martyrs on the day.

Dhaka University (DU) authorities also decided that there will be no arrangement for gathering and reception at the university's central playground.

DU Vice Chancellor Akhtaruzzaman yesterday visited Shaheed Minar and urged people to maintain health guidelines.

"To reduce health risks, there will be marks after every three feet on the street. Hand sanitiser will be available at every point," the VC said.

The authorities have also finalised a route map for going to the Central Shaheed Minar.

The new map will be effective from 8pm today, they added.

Still highly flammable

Two years after Chawkbazar tragedy, Old Dhaka not free from chemical warehouses, stores

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The buildings that caught fire two years back at Chawkbazar's Churihatta have been renovated, but survivors are still reeling from the horrors of that deadly night.

On February 20, 2019, a huge explosion ripped through Churihatta intersection, causing a massive inferno that engulfed three surrounding multi-storey buildings. The tragic incident left 67 people dead on the spot and injured more than 20.

Over the next 11 days, four more victims succumbed to their burns.

The inferno forced the government to take a flurry of measures like sealing off and removing chemical warehouses in the area. Another major plan was to relocate chemical stores from the densely-populated neighbourhood to somewhere safe.

Still, Old Dhaka houses extremely hazardous stocks of flammable chemicals and risky factories without any safety measures whatsoever, putting lives of hundreds of people at serious risk of fires.

The government is still working on relocating



PHOTO: SHAHEEN MOLLAN

Although Hazi Wahed Mansion has been renovated, shops at the building are yet to open. Banners of different groups and organisations now cover the building, remembering the tragedy. This photo was taken yesterday.

chemical warehouses and factories from residential areas to a chemical industrial park, a move that began around 10 years ago following the Nimtoli blaze.

Shifting these establishments was one of the recommendations by the home ministry's

committee formed after the Nimtoli tragedy. But the government could not complete it, due to problems in land acquisition and bureaucratic complexities, according to authorities concerned.

Javed Hossain, nephew of the owner of Mannan Store, a shop just opposite Hazi Wahed Mansion, which had caught fire, said, "I could save my life by jumping off a wall."

He said they faced damage of Tk 5-6 lakh at that time and still could not overcome the losses. "We're yet to get compensated for our losses," he added.

Ashraf Uddin Shadhin, president of Ekota Sangha, said their area is not free from chemicals yet and they want to get rid of them.

Hazi Wahed Mansion has been renovated, but shops at the building are yet to become operational. However, the shops at some other affected buildings have already started their business.

Initially, after the news of the inferno spread, people mistakenly assumed that a cylinder blast at Rajmahal Hotel and Restaurant had caused the fire. Footage from Rajmahal's closed-circuit camera later helped reveal that the fire broke out at the adjacent five-storey Hazi Wahed Mansion.

Form nat'l minority commission: speakers

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Pointing out that minority communities are being deprived of their rights, speakers yesterday called upon the government to take necessary steps to root out all sorts of discrimination against the community members.

They also asked the government to implement its pledges of forming a National Minority Commission to ensure their rights.

They were speaking at a discussion titled "Bir Uttam Major General CR Dutta: Today's Bangladesh", organised by Bangladesh Hindu Buddhist Christian Oikya Parishad at Jatiya Press Club in the capital.

Chitta Ranjan Dutta was the commander of Sector 4 during the country's Liberation War. He died on August 25, 2020.

Awami League Joint General Secretary and lawmaker Mahbubul Alam Hanif said CR Dutta devoted his life to build a society where people will live with dignity and rights. He claimed that the

autocratic governments had created division among people by promoting communalism.

Deputy Leader of the Opposition and Jatiya Party Chairman GM Quader said they will try their best to fulfil demands of the Parishad.

Debapriya Bhattacharya, eminent economist and public policy analyst, called upon the Parishad to continue pressuring the government to fulfil their demands.

He asked the community leaders to be more vocal to ensure implementation of Vested Property Return Act.

Rana Dasgupta, general secretary of the Parishad, recalled the contribution of CR Dutta in the Liberation War. He said the

AL government made several pledges including formulating special security act for minority community, putting an end to discrimination and implementing CHT Peace Accords.

"We're requesting the prime minister to fulfil the pledges before next election," he said.

Mosquito menace beyond control in port city

Residents blame authorities for inadequate measures; CCC to start special drive today

ARUN BIKASH DEY, Cg

For over three months, residents of different areas in the port city have been suffering, as the mosquito population has multiplied, reportedly due to authority's negligence to kill mosquitoes and clean their breeding spots.

Mosquito nets have become mandatory after sunset. In many areas, there are so many mosquitoes that people cannot even stay home peacefully during daytime.

"I cannot study in the evening because a swarm of mosquitoes keeps flying around and biting me," said Dipa Chowdhury, a third-year honour's student at Chattogram Government Women's College in Nasirabad. "After the sun sets, we have to go inside our mosquito nets to save ourselves. I can't sit in my reading room, or drawing room to watch television. I've tried many things like aerosol and mosquito racket, but nothing worked."

Dipa, a resident of Rahattarpool Uzir Ali Shah By-lane, said they have been suffering because of mosquitoes for over three months.

"The drain in front of our house has been filled up with polythene and domestic waste, turning it into a safe haven for mosquitoes to lay eggs. I don't know what the authority concerned is doing," he said.

Kamal Uddin, who resides in the city's West Bakalia DC Road, said they cannot peacefully stay home even during daytime due to mosquito bites. "As bushes and drains in the area have not been cleaned for many days,



STAR FILE PHOTO

mosquitoes are breeding at large," he said.

"Mosquitoes are so many and so aggressive that nothing works, although we have tried using aerosol and mosquito coils," he said. "Dengue season is coming, but the conservancy department of the city corporation seems to be indifferent."

Zadab Kumar Biswas, associate professor of zoology at Chittagong University, said mosquitoes breed in stagnant water. Therefore, drains and canals should be cleaned regularly. Bushes around houses should also be cleaned.

However, residents in different areas said they did not see CCC conservancy workers cleaning drains and spraying insecticide for months.

"I saw them spraying in drains some three months ago, and from then on, no one came here to clean drains or spray insecticide," said Trisha Barua of of Shulak Bahar.

Contacted, CCC Chief Conservancy Officer Shafiqul Mannan Siddique, said he was sick and on leave. He suggested

reaching out to CCC Deputy Chief Conservancy Officer Morshedul Alam Chowdhury to discuss the issue.

Morshedul told The Daily Star that CCC regularly conducts activities of the anti-mosquito campaign. Asked why residents in many areas did not see their workers for months, Morshedul said he would look into it.

To boost the campaign, anti-mosquito activities of a 100-day programme, which was initiated by the new mayor, is scheduled to start today.

"Four teams, comprising 233 workers, have been formed. Each consists of seven men for spraying insecticide and 50 drain cleaners," he said. "The programme will start from Chandgaon and cover 41 wards in phases during the 100 days."

CCC Mayor Rezaul Karim Chowdhury said as he pledged to get rid of the mosquito menace, he made the anti-mosquito drive one of the corporations' top priorities, after taking over charge on February 15. "I expect city dwellers will get relief from the menace soon," he said.

144 BNP activists get anticipatory bail in 6 cases

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The High Court yesterday granted anticipatory bail to 144 BNP leaders and activists including its joint secretary general Habib-Un Nabi Khan Sohel in six separate cases filed in Dhaka and Rajshahi on charges of obstructing police in discharging their duties.

The HC bench of Justice Md Habibur Gani and Justice Md Riaz Uddin Khan came up with the orders after a hearing on 23 separate bail petitions filed by the accused leaders and workers.

The HC asked 74 accused of three cases filed with Shahbagh and Ramna police stations in Dhaka to surrender before a trial court by March 21 in connection with the cases filed against them.

Seventy other BNP men, who were granted bail in three cases filed with Charghat, Bagha and Pathia police stations, have been asked to surrender to lower court concerned by this time, said their lawyer Gazi Kamrul Islam Sajal. He said three separate cases have been filed with Shahbagh and Ramna police stations on charge of preventing police from discharging duties on February 13 and three cases with police stations of Rajshahi on February 15.

SCBA election on March 10, 11

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The two-day annual election of the Supreme Court Bar Association (SCBA) for its 14 executive posts will be held on March 10 and 11.

A total of 7,759 lawyers have registered as voters for the country's prime bar association election, SCBA Secretary Md Ruhul Quddus Kazal told The Daily Star yesterday.

A committee led by Advocate AY Masiuzzaman will conduct the election, he said.

SCBA sources said the main contest will take place between the panels of Awami League-backed Bangabandhu Awami Ainjibi Parishad and BAP-backed Bangladesh Jatiyatabadi Ainjibi Oikya Panel.

Both the panels have recently finalised their candidates for contesting the election.

Former AL law minister Abdul Matin Khasru, MP, and former BNP lawmaker Md Fazlur Rahman have been nominated for the post of president from Awami Ainjibi Parishad and Jatiyatabadi Ainjibi Oikya Panel respectively.



This Shaheed Minar being built by cultural organisation Ikrimikri is going to open at Joybangla Chattar in Purbachal, Dhaka on February 21, marking Amar Ekushey and International Mother Language Day. Ikrimikri will also organise a Baro Utsab (alphabet festival) on the occasion.

PHOTO: COLLECTED