

TANGENTS

BY IHTISHAM KABIR



Grey-headed Fish Eagle staying cool.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

Amusing Bird Behaviour

Birds do funny things sometimes. In the heat of summer you are likely to see one sitting with its mouth open. Why? When our bodies become hot, we eliminate excess heat by sweating. But birds have no sweat glands. By keeping their mouths open they stay cool by expelling body heat.

While it is perched you might see a bird twisting its head into impossible angles so it can reach into its feathers with its beak. It is preening its feathers. Feathers are crucial for a bird's survival and must always be kept in top form. Preening cleans them, aligns their barbs and keeps parasites in check. Birds spend up to ten percent of each day on preening.

Some birds take preening a step further. I have seen Jungle Babblers sitting in a row preen their neighbour's feathers. This mutual practice, called allopreening, helps build stronger bonds within the flock.

Eating and drinking can look funny for birds. When we eat, the muscles in our mouth help us chew and push the food down into our stomachs. Birds catch food with their beak, and their means of chewing and swallowing are different. After catching a fish with its sharp pointed beak, a kingfisher may repeatedly clobber it on a branch. Lacking teeth, it softens the fish this way. Birds which catch insects that sting - bees and wasps, for example - will pummel it against a branch to expel the venom before consumption. Birds such as bee-eaters and darters flip their prey upwards and open their beaks so it lands inside their mouth because they don't have the muscles needed to swallow food.

Funny behaviour erupts during mating season when male birds try to

attract a mate. One spring day, I saw a Bengal Bushlark rise vertically from the ground, make a dozen circles in the air and drop down to the ground like a stone - all the while making its loud mating call. In Florida, an Osprey carrying a fish almost half its size astonished me by hovering perhaps ten seconds in the air while holding the fish up for display - to prove to any nearby female it would be a good provider.

When their chicks are too small to fly, raptors drop food into the nest. But once the chicks start flying, their parents will transfer food to them in the air. Black-shouldered Kites may hover briefly in the air while holding the prey in its talons. The chick flies up from underneath it and takes the food. Sometimes talon-to-talon transfer becomes complicated. I saw a parent Brahminy Kite hovering while holding the prey in its talons. Its chick flew directly underneath it and briefly turned upside down to take the prey into its talons.

Some raptors are also scavengers and will take dead prey. But other raptors want live prey only. For example, a bee-eater catches flying insects such as bees, butterflies and dragonflies with its sharp, pointed beaks. But it will only eat live insects it has caught on the wing and will avoid dead or static insects.

Amusing bird behaviours can be seen in your rooftop, in the sky above you or at a nearby park or lake. You do not need to venture far but you need patience.

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Putting the flame out of a heritage site

Century-old establishment turned into fire service quarters

DIPAN NANDY

33, Revati Mohan Das Road, used to be known as the Sutrapur Zamindar Palace, with a history and legacy of hundred years attached to it.

The establishment is listed as a heritage site under the Department of Archaeology (DoA). However, these days, locals know it as a fire service quarters.

As the area did not have a fire service office, the building was turned into a station years ago. Moreover, it is also being used by families of fire service personnel.

Visiting the site, this correspondent saw no signboard from the archaeology department on the premises listing it as a heritage site. Instead, a cautionary notice from the Fire Service and Civil Defence Department was seen hanging, restricting access for the masses.

More than fifty families are currently living in the building,

formerly a palace in the British era.

Moreover, a two-storey barrack has also been established for the officers, along with thatching to park vehicles belonging to the department, apparently with permission from the DoA.

According to section 61 of the Dhaka Mahanagar Imarat Bidhimala 2008, construction of any establishment cannot take place without the permission of the Nagar Unnayan Committee under RAJUK within the 250-metre radius of the heritage site. The proposed Antiquities Act 2015 states that no establishment can be constructed within the same radius without permission from the archaeology department.

The palace came to be during the time of Zamindar Ray Bahadur Satyendra Kumar Das. The adjacent road was named after Satyendra's father, Revati Mohan Das.

The zamindar palace is a combination of two adjacent buildings. The original building

faces the south -- its 50-foot entrance has three Corinthian columns, with floral structures covering them with a half-circle from both sides, while a circular design adorns the space below.

The north-facing building, built a few years later by a relative of Revati Mohan Das, has a 50-foot entrance as well. The entire establishment has 35 rooms in total.

The descendants of the zamindar family left the establishment and migrated during the partition of 1947. It later came under the jurisdiction of the government as vested property.

Despite repeated enquiries, it could not be known when the establishment started being used by the fire service department.

"Fifty-two officers of the fire service have been living in the establishment for quite a long time," senior station manager of Sutrapur fire service station told this correspondent.

"They have been living here with permission from the department of archaeology," he informed.

When asked about the construction of the new barrack, the official said the building had been constructed before he took over.

"As far as I know, the department had permission to construct the building. The construction was necessary," he said.

Contacted, Rakhi Roy, regional director (Dhaka) of the DoA told this correspondent, "The area didn't have an office for the fire service. We consulted experts and permitted the fire service department to build a station there on humanitarian grounds."

"We also permitted some officers to stay there with their families on an emergency basis," she added.

The official said the government plans to establish a fire-service museum on the premises as well.

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Sutrapur Zamindar Palace, a 100-year-old establishment listed as a heritage site by the Department of Archaeology, has been turned into a fire service station and quarter for its staffers. Around 52 families are currently residing in the building, making the conservation of the archaeological site increasingly difficult.

PHOTO: FIROZ AHMED, STAR

WORLD FRESHWATER DOLPHIN DAY

Dolphins disappearing from Halda

Human-made hazards led to death of 49 dolphins in the river since 2017

ARUN BIKASH DEY, Ctg

On October 4, a dead dolphin washed up on the shores of Hathazari upazila's North Madarshah Ramdas Munshirhat area.

Chittagong University's Dr Manzoorul Kibria, professor of zoology department and Halda researcher, suspects it might have died from being suffocated on a stray fishnet -- a recurring issue on the river.

This follows another dead dolphin -- around five-feet long, weighing 30kg, that washed up in the same area four days earlier on September 30.

The Halda river is an important



FILE PHOTO

KEY POINTS

- Reasons for disappearing dolphins human-made
- Recommendations to save dolphins include ban on mechanised boats, extraction of soil from the river, gill nets for fishing in the river, declaring it as a sanctuary for dolphins
- Action plan developed in 2019 identified 25 important habitats of the Ganges river dolphin to conserve
- Pace of implementation slow due to resource constraints of relevant department

habitat of the endangered freshwater Ganges river dolphins (Platanista Gangetica). The dolphins are an integral part of the area's ecosystem, to the point that their conservation can benefit a wider range of aquatic and threatened species, including turtles, gharials, and otters.

But despite this, the species is

disappearing from the river at a worrying rate over the last few years.

And experts say the reasons are entirely human-made, with a majority of the blame going to fishing practices in the river.

According to Prof Kibria, a total of 49 dolphins have been killed in the river Halda since 2017.

Kibria, also coordinator of the Halda River Research Laboratory of Chittagong University, said they conducted the first autopsy of one such dolphin carcass in February 2018. It was found that the cause of death was an injury caused by a sharp propeller.

"At the time, we submitted a six-point recommendation to the authorities, which included a ban on plying mechanised boats in the river, a stop to extracting soil from the river, not allowing gill nets for fishing in the river, and declaring it as a sanctuary for dolphins," he said.

"The authorities actually complied with most of the recommendations. As a result, the rate of death has

decreased to a great extent."

For example, he said, a total of 18 dolphins were killed in the five months between September 2017 and February 2018.

Compared to this, a total of 28 dolphins were killed in the three years between February 2018 and December 2020, while this year has seen the death of three more.

"This goes to show the benefit of following our recommendations. However, that's not nearly enough," he said.

With a lifespan of 25 years on average, a dolphin takes nine to 10 years to mature, and it takes around two years for an adult dolphin to birth a calf. This means a dolphin can give birth to around five calves during its reproductive years at maximum, he said.

"The rate at which dolphins are dying in the river is way faster than their reproduction rate. If proper steps are not taken in time, they could get

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123 more hospitalised with dengue

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

At least 123 patients were hospitalised in the last 24 hours till 8am yesterday. Of them, seven are from outside Dhaka, according to the Directorate General of Health Services (DGHS).

With the new cases, a total of 3,933 were diagnosed during the current month, out of a total 22,130 infected this year. Of the total, 3,121 are from outside Dhaka.

At least 7,841 patients were diagnosed in September, 7,698 were diagnosed in August, 2,286 patients were hospitalised in July, 272 in June, while 43 were infected in May.

The rest are from January to April, according to the DGHS. Meanwhile, 84 people have died of dengue infection in the country this year, all of whom died in July, August, September, and October.

Twelve people died in July, 34 have died in August, 23 in September, and 15 have died in October so far. Among the deaths, 78 have died in Dhaka division, two each in Chattogram and Khulna, and one each in Rajshahi and Mymensingh division.

Though most of the patients who were hospitalised have so far been released, 780 are still undergoing treatment at hospitals in Dhaka, and 155 outside the capital, the DGHS data shows.

As if trees don't matter

1,700 trees cut to facilitate a mega project, another 1,000 to see same fate

SANJAY BARUA

In a naked attack on the environment, the Roads and Highways Department (RHD) have cut down around 1,700 trees to construct the connecting road of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman Tunnel in Chattogram.

The trees -- around 1,400 of them rain trees -- lined up both sides of the road stretching from Anwara upazila's Choumuhoni area to Shikalbaha of Karnaphuli upazila.

The 11.05-kilometre connecting road is to be constructed at an estimated cost of Tk 267 crore, said RHD executive engineer in Chattogram Suman Singha.

Locals and environmentalists said the trees protected the road from erosion, maintained the area's ecological balance, and also contributed to enhancing its natural beauty.

Rafiqul Islam, an RHD official in

Chattogram, told this correspondent that they have cut down the trees for the sake of the government's development project.

Asked, he claimed that RHD did not need to take permission from the Forest Department to cut down the trees, though they have informed the department of the matter.

However, Md Shafiqul Islam, divisional officer of the Forest Department's Chattogram South Zone, differed with the RHD official's claim.

"Permission from the Forest Department is mandatory for cutting trees," said Shafiqul. He also said he did not know about felling such a large number of trees in the area. He warned of legal action against the RHD if they cut down trees without permission in this way.

Contacted, Anwara Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) Shekh Jobaer Ahmed also said he knew nothing about the incident.

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Around 1,400 of the trees were rain trees. Before being cut to facilitate construction of the 11.05-kilometre connecting road, they stood on both sides of the road stretching from Anwara upazila's Choumuhoni area to Shikalbaha of Karnaphuli upazila.

PHOTO: SANJAY BARUA