

natureQuest

BANGLADESH

A publication of The Daily Star

CATS IN THE SHADOWS

RED ALERT

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Cats in the shadow

STORY BY
M. MONIRUL H. KHAN
PHOTOS BY
SOURAV MAHMUD

MOST MISUNDERSTOOD OF THE CAT FAMILY, JUNGLE CATS ARE APPROACHING EXTINCTION BECAUSE OF HUNTING. THEY ACTUALLY DO US MORE GOOD THAN HARM. ONLY WE NEED TO KNOW THEM BETTER.

In my view, wild cats are the most beautiful creatures on earth. Their brilliantly coloured and patterned coat not only makes them attractive to people, but also helps them to camouflage in their natural habitats. Bangladesh is lucky to have five species of lesser cats in the wild, but people treat them as menace and brutally kill them all over the country. This is because people are not aware that the damage the lesser cats sometimes do by killing poultry is negligible compared to its beneficiary role of controlling rodents and insect pests.

Lesser cats are the smaller members of the cat family (Felidae) that cannot roar like tigers, lions or leopards. The association of lesser cats and humans is as old as the human civilization. They are the most popular pets, which are found almost all over the world. The earliest direct evidence of cat domestication is a



kitten that was buried alongside a human in Cyprus some 9,500 years ago. The descent of all domestic cats was from African Wildcat (*Felis silvestris lybica*). In ancient Egypt cats were treated as cult animals that resist the evil spirit.

Despite the fact that lesser cats have a long history of association with humans, they are poorly understood, especially in the wild, because they are usually secretive and nocturnal. All lesser cats are purely carnivorous and the prey animals vary from medium sized vertebrates (rodents, birds, lizards, fish, etc.) to various invertebrates including insects. They occur solitary, except in the breeding season, but young animals often accompany their mother. Cats are very agile and most of them can climb as well as swim.

The five lesser cat species that occur in Bangladesh are Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus*), Leopard Cat (*Felis bengalensis*), Marbled Cat (*Felis marmoratus*), Asiatic Golden Cat (*Felis temminckii*) and Fishing Cat (*Felis viverrina*). According to IUCN (World Conservation Union), all these cats are more or less threatened in Bangladesh, but Marbled Cat and Fishing Cat are globally threatened.

The commonest of the cats in Bangladesh is the Jungle Cat that occurs all over the country, including forests, bushes, villages, croplands and around wetlands. It is about the size of a domestic cat. Brownish coat has some black stripes towards the terminal





ends of limbs and tail. It is locally called 'Bon Biral' or 'Wab'. It has got its local name 'Wab' from its *mob-mob* type of call. It is normally seen in the evenings and mornings. It hunts a wide range of prey species and is capable of hunting the prey that is somewhat larger than its own size. Births have been recorded during January-April and August-November when it lays 3-5 kittens in a secluded place. The eyes of kittens open 11-15 days after birth. Other than Bangladesh the species is widely distributed in Asia and Africa.

Although the Jungle Cat is legally protected under the Bangladesh Wildlife Act 1974, it is commonly killed by the people since it occasionally feeds on poultry. Scientific studies on its food habits reveal that poultry is a rare item for it. It mainly hunts rodents (different species of rats) and large grasshoppers. The cats are killed by poison-baits, traps and gunshots. Considering the total number of cats in the country, and the total number of crop pests they kill and eat, it has been hypothesized that in the absence of the cats, crop production might go down to half than the present level of production. Therefore, the Jungle Cats and all other lesser cats must be protected by educating the local communities and properly enforcing the law.

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SOLID WOOD
HOMEWARE

ofobi
evolves around you

A magical Morning with jungle cats



STORY & PHOTOS BY
SOURAV MAHMUD

FOLLOWING A FAMILY OF JUNGLE CAT IS A THRILLING EXPERIENCE AND ONCE YOU GAIN THEIR CONFIDENCE, THEY CAN GIVE YOU AMAZING PHOTO OPPORTUNITIES, JUST AS THEY DID TO THE WRITER.

I was then eight or nine. Every evening, a medium-sized creature used to come close to my window. There was a chicken coop near my window. I would hear a distinct call -- Wap...Wap... WAP. And our chickens and ducks would start cackling in fear. Then my pet dogs Bagha and Tommy would rush out, barking. Then the stealthy creature would zip into the scrub jungle before you could blink.

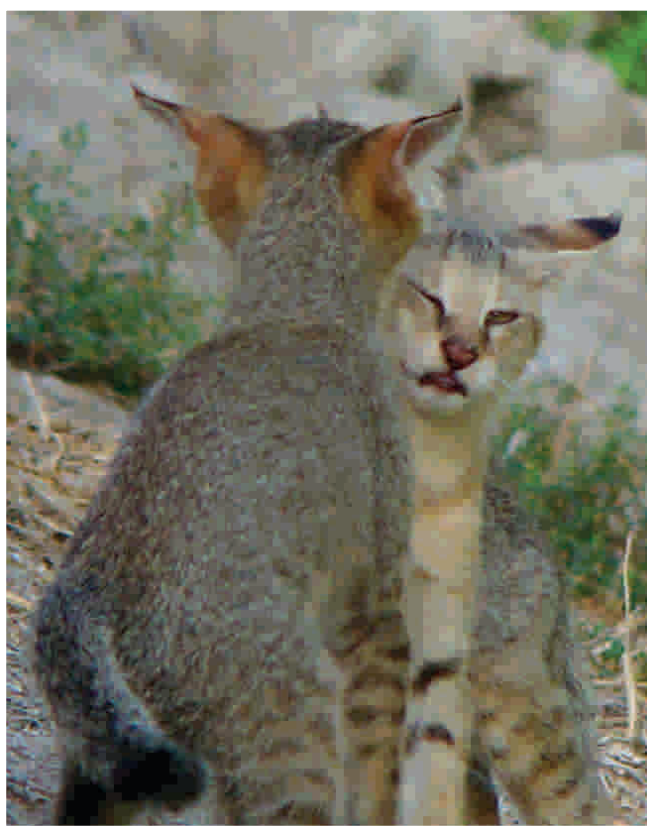
Years have gone by since those days. The jungles have receded as population increased. The bamboo groves and the shrubs have disappeared. I last visited the village in 2008. In the evening there was no Wap..Wap call. I felt sad. I knew the jungle cats have disappeared from my village.

Demorpara. A small village near Pubail in Gazipur. A man is trying to conserve a small forest patch where a few wild animals live in safety. No one can disturb them. No one can collect any fruits or any dead branches from the small jungle.

Fonindro Da, the caretaker, told me that Baral, Diklenja and Darash Shap.

MAIN FEATURE

Published by Our Daily Star







I knew what is Darash Shap-- Indian Rat Snake. But I could not figure out what is Baral. I told him to describe the animal to me. He said it looks like our domestic cat. And Diklenja has a long tail and it jumps from one tree to another at night. It has a pungent smell like Pulau rice. So that was the Small Indian Palm Civet or Choto Bagdash, I reckoned. And the Baral is the jungle cat or Bon Biral.

So I started looking for the jungle cat. After dusk I would go to the east side of the forest patch with a powerful flashlight. I was switching on and off the flashlight and suddenly two greenish specs of light flashed in the distance. I slowly moved forward holding the green spots in the light of the flashlight beam. The creature was now retreating and it gave a last backward look before vanishing in the darkness.

The next morning I came to the same place again. A few minutes later two jungle cat kittens and an adult female appeared. I was surprised!! What a magical morning it is! After a while another kitten came. They started playing, oblivious to my stealthy presence. But the adult cat kept looking at me with some foreboding. Then I started clicking my camera.

I framed some great moments. The cat family gave me more than 10 minutes for the photo shoot. I considered myself very lucky! It was a great moment in my wildlife watching experience because jungle cats are very clever animals and are very difficult to spot. This was in 2009.

A year later, I saw three more cats -- one adult male and two juveniles. At night they came very close to the cottage. Sometimes they even sleep on the sofa left on the veranda of the cottage.

I hope to go to Demorpara village again and again. And I hope the cats will survive well.

Sourav Mahmud is a nature lover and birdwatcher. nature.sourav@gmail.com

The elusive Francolin!

STORY & PHOTOS BY
DELIP K. DAS BISHARGA

BLACK FRANCOLINS ARE ON THE VERGE OF EXTINCTION IN BANGLADESH BECAUSE OF HUNTING. IF YOU HAVE ENOUGH LUCK AND A LOT OF PATIENCE YOU CAN STILL SEE THEM IN PANCHAGARGH.

RED
ALERT



It was September, 2009. I was very excited and was waiting for the bus with my trip mate in Kalayanpur bus stand. Our destination was Kazipara, Tetulia, Panchagarh, in the far northwest of Bangladesh, along the international border with India. The aim of this expedition was to see a bird and if possible to capture through our lenses. Though I haven't seen this bird before but I have heard many unsuccessful expeditions about Black Francolin. Many other bird photographers had spent considerable amount of time, sometimes hiding the whole day under the sand, keeping eyes on the eyepiece of the camera. They have heard the bird calling. But it came out from the cover during the twilight time and offered only glimpses. Only one of them managed to take a single photograph with a 1/25 shutter speed; and as no Bangladeshi photographer could still snap it, he was praised like a hero.

The bus arrived and so our sojourn to the wilderness kicked off. As our bus put Dhaka behind I was musing about this bird. Once black francolin was widely distributed in Bangladesh but now it is only found in Kazipara of Panchagarh. Locals call it Seikh Farid and no-one knows why. Some people also call it "Pan (betel leaf) Biriee Cigarette". This is exactly how the bird's call sounds like.

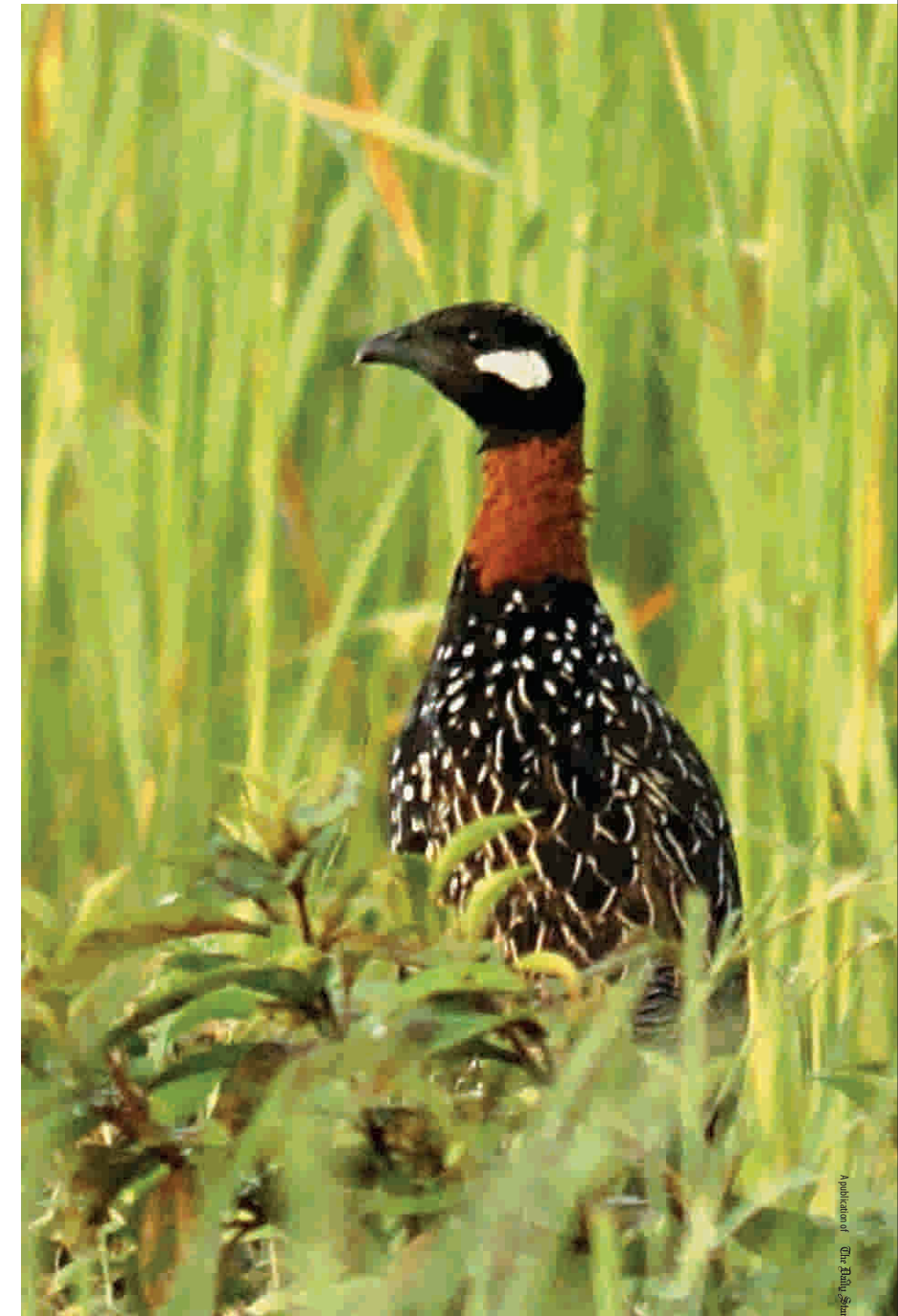
This call is associated with the popular fable of the story of a daughter-in-law who was bullied by her wicked mother-in-law. She was forced to work from dawn to dusk, she did all the house chores and yet never heard a word of praise. Once she baked some bread and the mother-in-law picked an argument about the number of loaves. The young woman said there were 24 loaves but her mother-in-law insisted there were twenty-three. Unable to accept that her daughter-in-law was right, the old woman flew into a rage, grabbed her and pushed her into the oven. Then, God took mercy upon the young woman and turned her into a francolin. Ever since the wailing call of the francolin can be heard repeating over and over -- "Twenty four Twenty four mother-in-law".

The sun was on its westerly traverse, its rays became softer and it was being preparing to go into slumber when we reached Tetulia. The next quest was to find a place to spend the night. Luckily we managed a posh rest house in a very beautiful setting. A river was flowing by the rest house, the barbed fence demarcating the Indian border ran along the other side of the river, a very gentle breeze will give you extra comfort, and

you can feel the sound of silence created by the nature. We could see some villagers collecting stones in shallow river water.

We prepared our backpack with camera, binoculars, some dry food and a water bottle for next morning. The rest house is pretty far from the Black Francolin site, so we arranged a van well in advance and headed off the field sharp at 6 o'clock in the morning. As we reached at the site, my heart start pounding, I took out camera from my backpack and set all the functions. I tightened my backpack with my body so that it does not create

any sound when I move. The place is basically an agricultural land, where we found sugarcane, rice, maze and many others crops. We heard the call of Black Francolin just after launched in that place. We kept searching but could only figure out the calling point but not the bird! My trip mate had a different mission to collect some feathers of Black Francolin, which





FACTS FINDING



IUCN Bangladesh listed this bird as critically endangered. Records away from this Tetulia population are limited to a female found in Modhupur forest in January 1999 and one in Sangu valley in 2006. Probably at present largest population of Black Francolin belongs to Kazipara in Tetulia.

will be used for a genetic study. We knew that the hunting of the Black Francolin is a common practice in the area. Therefore we started to investigate about the hunters and collected their names and addresses from the locals. A renowned hunter of Kazipara passed away and an old man called "Sonalu Bura" is still alive and known as a professional hunter but he also failed to give us any feathers. Later on we found a tribe village and collected


feathers of the francolin. They hunt this brilliant bird every year.

We came back to field again. My excitement went down. I started to think I would not be able to even see the bird at all, and at least a glimpse of it would be delightful. Due to our get up and lenses around our neck, the farmers in the field became interested and interacted with us, one of them informed us that he saw a nest of the Black

Francolin last week. My hopes came back; if the nest is active then we have higher chances to see it. We went with him to check the spot. It was just few yards from Indian Boarder, Where we found an empty nest. Owner of that land (a very young boy) reported he has seen four eggs there and some other boys stole them from the nest. We found a few feather around that nest and one of our missions was accomplished.

It was noon and sun became harsh. We were sweating. We were returning to the same spot where we have heard the call. All of a sudden I found a female Francolin, which was resting beside a sugarcane field. I started to click with my camera though it was very far but I didn't want to take any risk. Later on, we went forward and it disappeared in a moment. I took different strategy, went on the opposite side of the sugarcane field and keep waiting. I found a shady place and in front of that place a pulse field, I hide myself there and found a pair of Francolin through my lens. By the way, male has black face with white ear-covert patch, rufous neck band and black underparts with white spotting. Female has rufous hind-neck, streaked appearance to upperparts, and heavily barred underparts.

Though photo quality was not good enough due to the excitement but I was the happiest person at that moment for seeing the Black Francolin so close and taking its photograph. We went back to rest house and set our plan for next day. We targeted a spot, which is regular calling point of a male Francolin and every morning his high-pitched calls defines his turf. Next morning we reached there just prior to sunrise and get inside the sugarcane field to hide. We heard its call and the graceful bird came out in the open edge of rice field. It was an excellent opportunity to photograph this secretive bird and we were delighted to be able to complete our quest! We found two males afterwards in that field. We counted a total of 10 individuals on that day.

I feel very lucky of being able to observe and photograph this bird. My mind filled with limitless joy but will our next generation be able to see it? Unless we take proper initiative to conserve this bird the scenario would be the same as others. Before losing this bird we should pay attention to save and conserve this bird. 



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Imprints

STORY BY
IFFAT NAWAZ
PHOTOS BY
ENAM TALUKDER

SOMETIMES NATURE CAN STEAL THE LIMELIGHT FROM THE ONES IT NURTURES. THE INTRICATE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NATURE AND ITS DEPENDENTS TAKES A DIFFERENT DIMENSION WHEN LOOKED FROM THE OUTSIDE.

I am not a biologist, an environmentalist, a birdwatcher, a wildlife photographer, I don't know technical terms. Rare species could be right under my nose and I might stare at their unfamiliarity for hours and not know what I have seen. I don't look up the species I spot or snap in books to figure out what I have seen. Not because I do not care but often because I forget or at times I just carry the feeling of seeing something amazing and unknown and rather not find out.

But curiosity still inhibits my non-technical semi-nomad mind, so I go places and have them leave their imprints on me,

staining me from the inside out. And during one of these journeys between the water and the trees I ended up in a mangrove, the one that's talked about in every other sentence now by the environmentalists and the tiger savers, whose name literally translates to "beautiful jungle." I went there in search of new imprints for my inside.

A boat that was made in 1906 took me to the Sundarbans. Myths about the largest mangrove in the world swam around my mind, the wish to see a deadly tiger crawled around my veins. we took off from khulna as the dusk settled over the plates of Iftar, it was Ramadan and I was not fasting

Half built building and returning fishermen wondered by as Bonrani, the boat, took me to the mouth of the Bon, it was 10 pm by then. The august temperature dropped a few notches and the sound of the crickets helped me fall asleep with the humming noise of the engine. I wanted to wake early to see more of the wild but by the time I awoke the only thing that waited for me were villages which were still recovering from two cyclones – Sidr and Aila -- a Kalkatini snake and hundreds of red crabs.

I ended up in Burigoalini, a village on the west side of Sundarbans. It was mainly filled with seasonal fishermen and honey collectors. I crossed a bazaar where the vendors didn't have much to offer, a man sat with four skinny cucumbers, a woman sold a squash, her eyes stared into the forest. I sat nearby wanting some tea.

She told me about the village, her husband a fishermen, her son working as a day laborer. Some foreign and national funding have reached this village but not all villagers are their beneficiaries. The ones who have received some funding do better with fish ponds or vegetable gardens, Others survive on boiled potatoes and Kacha Morich, one potato per meal.

"Give us something to do!" a







woman exclaimed rubbing my arms. “Boin, we can sew, Kamizes, pants, embroidery. You want to see? Let me take you to our home, have a meal with us.”

I went, saw their daughters and the daughters of their daughters, mismatched threads created designs on Kamizes, doilies sat under dirty glasses, flower patterns were made on those.

I explained, it would be hard to come

and collect products from here every month, Burigoalini being remote, most retail shops in the city won't be so keen. She answered “Aren't you wearing clothes made in Japan and America? Those are so much further away than us.”

I was caught off guard. I nodded, yes, and she was right! I was wearing something foreign made, my clothes were made in a place where organized factories

ran their business, where people got their proper wages, where no one had to survive with three potatoes a day.

A girl whose eyes burned like that of tigers told me in school they were told to not destroy nature, to nurture it. Her mom added, “How can we destroy the place where we belong, this is our home, our jungle, we just need to know things will get better.”





I couldn't tell them if things will, I do not know how it might. Will some big company come forward and try to look for manpower in the villages of sundarbans, not out of just sheer mercy but also with a business angle, creating benefits and achieving honest profit? Will the faces of these forever hungry men and women transform with generation, or will they keep living as a part of nature's neglect.

The ride back was long; after a few more sunrises and sunsets I returned with memories. I do not remember the wild birds and poisonous snakes I saw while I was there, what I do remember is a young girl's fearsome face and many able hands, I remember the taste of boiled potatoes in my mouth, I remember the men and women who wait for boats to arrive with more hope than the last one, I remember being different, being ashamed, and wanting to return. I remember telling myself to remember Burigoalini, to not erase the imprints of Sundarbans from my inside, not of the forest's and never of its people.



Hi-tech fishing

STORY BY
INAM AHMED
PHOTOS BY
SANJIDA JUI

DEEP SEA FISHING IS A DIFFERENT BALL-GAME ALTOGETHER. IT IS A PRECISION HUNTING WITH HI-TECH EQUIPMENT. YET UNCERTAINTY LOOMS AT EVERY CORNER.

A large hoot and suddenly the vessel came alive at midnight.

The search lights shone fiercely, trying to illuminate as much of the fishing trawler as the night sea. Feet shuffled. Blunt noises rose from the steel deck as the fishermen

blundered around in their heavy boots and yellow helmets. A group came running down the roof of the ship's bridge, carrying long floats of big orange plastic balls.

Down below on the fish landing deck, the flurry was even greater. The crew were trying to roll a mile and a half long fishing

Crew members rolling in the net in the morning.



net into a huge drum. It was not an easy task. First there was this long line. And then the guiding net that would make the fish swim straight into the net. The fish bag was attached to the end.

The floats were clamped to the net. A yellow box was also attached. It is the fish finder.

There was this man standing on the high deck in front of a small instrument panel with four levers sticking out. It looked like a gun turret one might have seen in Pearl Harbor. His hands fidgeting on the levers. A man on the deck waved and the panel guy pulled the levers and from deep inside the heart of the trawler an engine groaned. The two winches on the lower deck came alive and started rotating the net drum. The line was rolling out.

The fierce current immediately swept back the net into the darkness. It was a scary scene. The waves frothing against the net which quivered violently.

Two five feet long and three feet wide steel plates were hanging from the two gallows in

the back. They were the trawl doors. A guy hooked the doors to the net and waved his hand again. And the turret-man pulled two levers. With loud clangs the trawl doors dislodged from the gallows and disappeared into the sea.

The trawl doors do a tricky job. As they are dipped into the water, they act as breaks. As the gushing water gets resistance, it pushes away the trawl doors. That makes the net wide open to let fish in easily.

I went to the bridge. In the darkness, the LCD screens glowed patterns. On the

extreme left, a green line swept 360 degrees every second against a black monitor. It is the radar. Small dots mark the other trawlers and boats around. The bridge was so high that it was almost impossible to see in naked eyes what lies ahead. So radar becomes the best guide.

Beside the radar sat the huge GPS screen. A greenish arrow blinked to show our location on the sea. Next was the sonar screen. It showed we are at a depth of 35 meters. Orange and yellow lines showed dissected view.

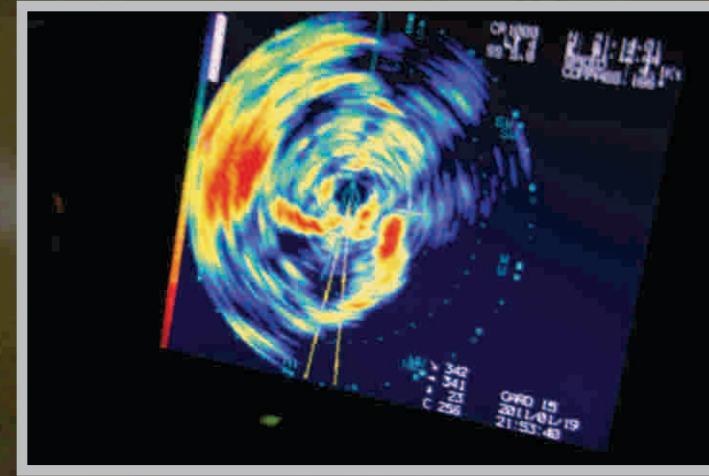
But for now all eyes were fixed on the

extreme right screen – the fish finder. Our trawler glowed in the middle of the deep blue screen, two lines extending in the back in V-shape showed the net span.

At that moment we were heading northeast where a deep red curve was shimmering. The skipper ran his finger over the red. "Wow. Gosh! It is a big school." His eyes glistened in the monitor light.

The red shape was ever changing. It became wide, then it contracted, and all the time it was traveling towards us.

"Check! Check! Check!" the skipper hollered.



The loneliest of the trawler is the oil-man in the engine room who works alone amid high noise and intolerable heat.

The fish finder (top left) shows a huge school of fish ahead. The ship is indicated right in the middle.

The skipper looking out from the bridge.



Fish are being sorted out once they are hauled on the deck.



"Fifteen meters!" the co-skipper replied.

"OK," the skipper nodded. "Looks like Chapila."

He tapped on the red dots on the sonar. "Look at the shape. It gotta be Chapila" Suddenly the red shaped changed course to northwestward.

"The hell with it!" the skipper muttered and quickly turned the steering. In this vast sea, it is difficult to notice how sharply the vessel turned because there is no change in landscape. Only a huge moon shone brightly overhead, casting a magical glitter that spread all the way from the far edge of the sea. But on the fish finder screen, we could see how dramatically the trawler turned almost 60 degrees.

The skipper opened up the throttle and the 960 break horsepower Caterpillar engines growled. We were now approaching with full speed and the red blotch was quite close.

"Check the line! Check the Line! Keep it up! Quick!" The skipper screamed suddenly. The fish school has suddenly changed depth. It is now swimming closer to the surface.

We heard the wince rolling the wires to adjust the height of the net.

We could see in the fish finder that we were ploughing right through the school. In the right hand corner of the fish finder was a bar whose colour was fast changing from green to red.

"That's fish getting into the net," the skipper explained.

It took 15 minutes to sweep through the school. Up in the corner of the screen another school was swimming by. The skipper set his course in that direction. In the next four hours, the trawler skimmed several more schools.

Finally, it was morning. The sun broke over the horizon, casting a golden glaze over a deep blue sea. The whistle blared

again and the crew members popped out on the deck. The turret man pulled his levers again and the winches first pulled the trawl doors out of water. Then the lines started rolling in.

First came in the floats, then the guiding net, it rolled on for at least five minutes. Then the first silver glint came into view, then another and many more. The fish are all tangled in the net and writhing to get free.

The net rolled around the drum and fish got squished under the weight of the net. A few fell through to the wooden deck.

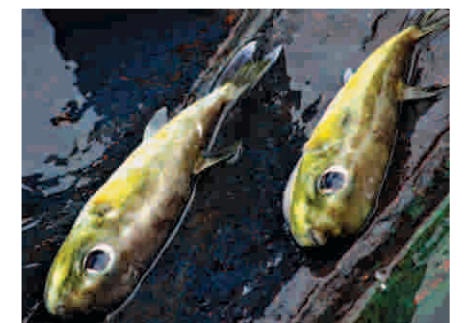
At last the bag, heavy and potent, came into view. The derricks swung into action. The bag's line was tagged to the derrick hooks. As the winch rotates, the bag lifted up and dangled from the derrick.



Somebody loosened the bag's net; and the fish started pouring out in a whoosh.

A small mole of fish built up on the wooden deck. The fish were alive and jumping. Mackerels, pomfrets, moray eels, baby sharks, hard tails, chapilas, snappers, puffer fish, Chhuri, squids and even a few crabs. There were many more species we could not identify.

The crew swung into action again. They brought in plastic buckets and started sorting out the fish by species. They did it in a super fast mode. Buckets after buckets were filled up and dragged away inside the ship





where another sorting took place. The best of the pomfrets were individually packed in plastic. And then the whole consignment was sent to the freezer room.

This whole thing took less than 45 minutes. And then the trawler fell silent again. The crew members disappeared into their cabins and went to sleep. For them it is a 24-hour job and so they snatch a nap whenever the chance comes.

The sea was now changing its colour. It was getting dark. A fear evoking sight for us the land crawlers. The sonar was recording 150 meters. And then in a zoom the depth dropped. The sonar recorded 1,300 meters and then it failed. We were in the Swatch of No Ground. I checked on the GPS. The exact place where our ship was now has a depth of 2,500 meters. Two and a half kilometers! How quickly the sea level falls!

The skipper slowed down the trawler. And suddenly the deep hum of the engine ceased. A strange silence had enveloped us. The sound of waves breaking against ship only intensified that silence. We looked out to the sea where the blue sea had spread immensely into infinity.

There was no line on the horizon.

Crystal clear water of Kaptai Lake reflecting the blue sky prompts us to rethink the beauty of our country.

A bird's Eye view

PHOTOS BY
SHARIF SARKER

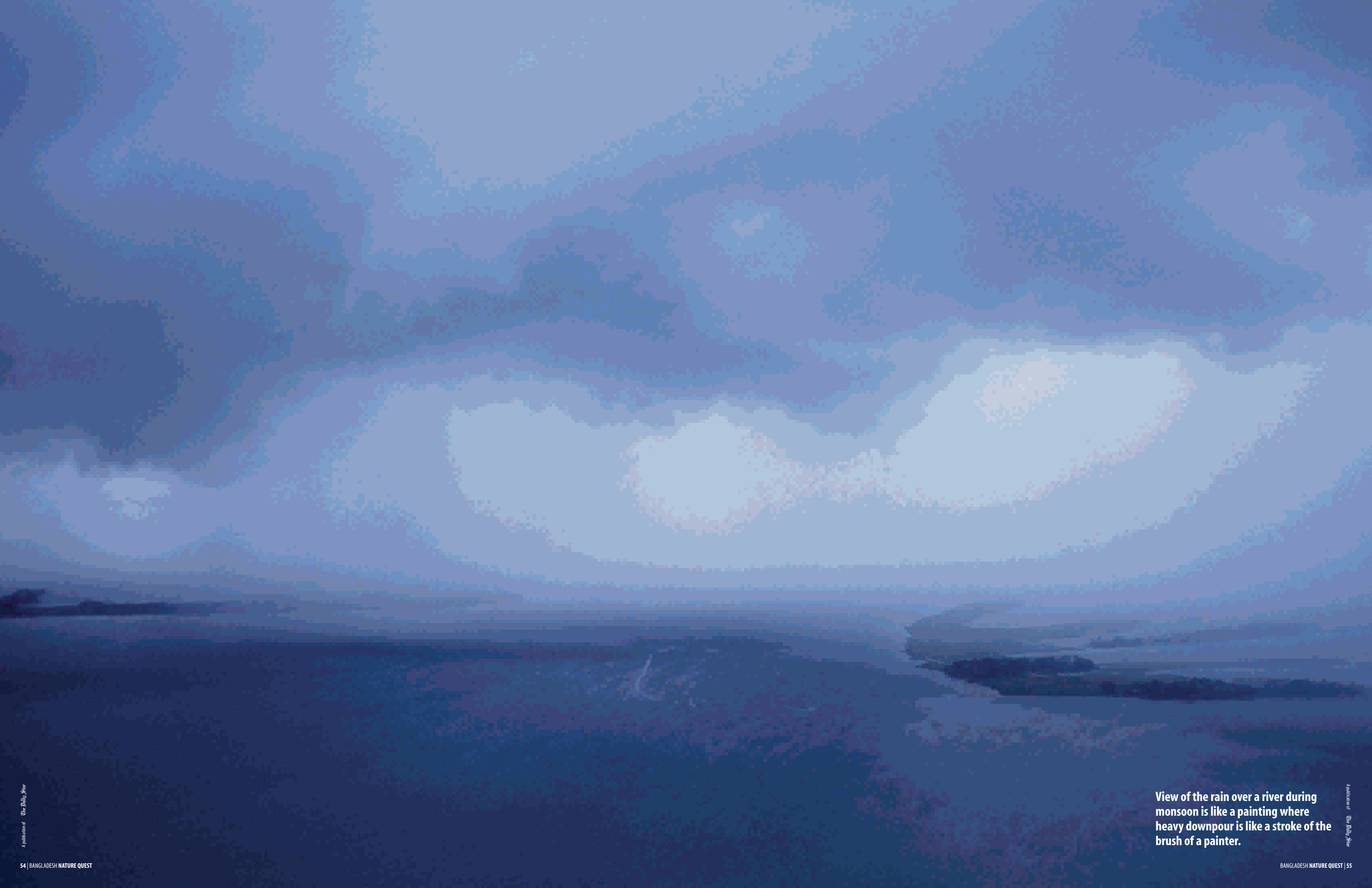
HOW WOULD A SONALI CHEEL -- A BRAHMINI KITE -- WOULD FIND OUR LANDSCAPE FROM ITS SOARING HEIGHT? AS A FIGHTER PILOT I CAN IMAGINE THAT. THE VELVET GREENS AND THE MEANDERING RIVERS CREATE AN UNBELIEVABLE MIX OF DREAMS AND REALITY.

When I was young, I had always wanted to fly, at least in my dreams as Icarus. I still remember those dreams . . . dreams of a screeching Sonali Cheel gliding “over the meandering Kishori Nadimala and the Sonali-Sobuj Dhan velvets”. How would a Sonali Cheel – a Brahmini Kite – would find our landscape from its soaring height? In a bird's eye view or Pakhir Chokhey, the velvet greens and the meandering rivers create an unbelievable mix of dreams and reality.

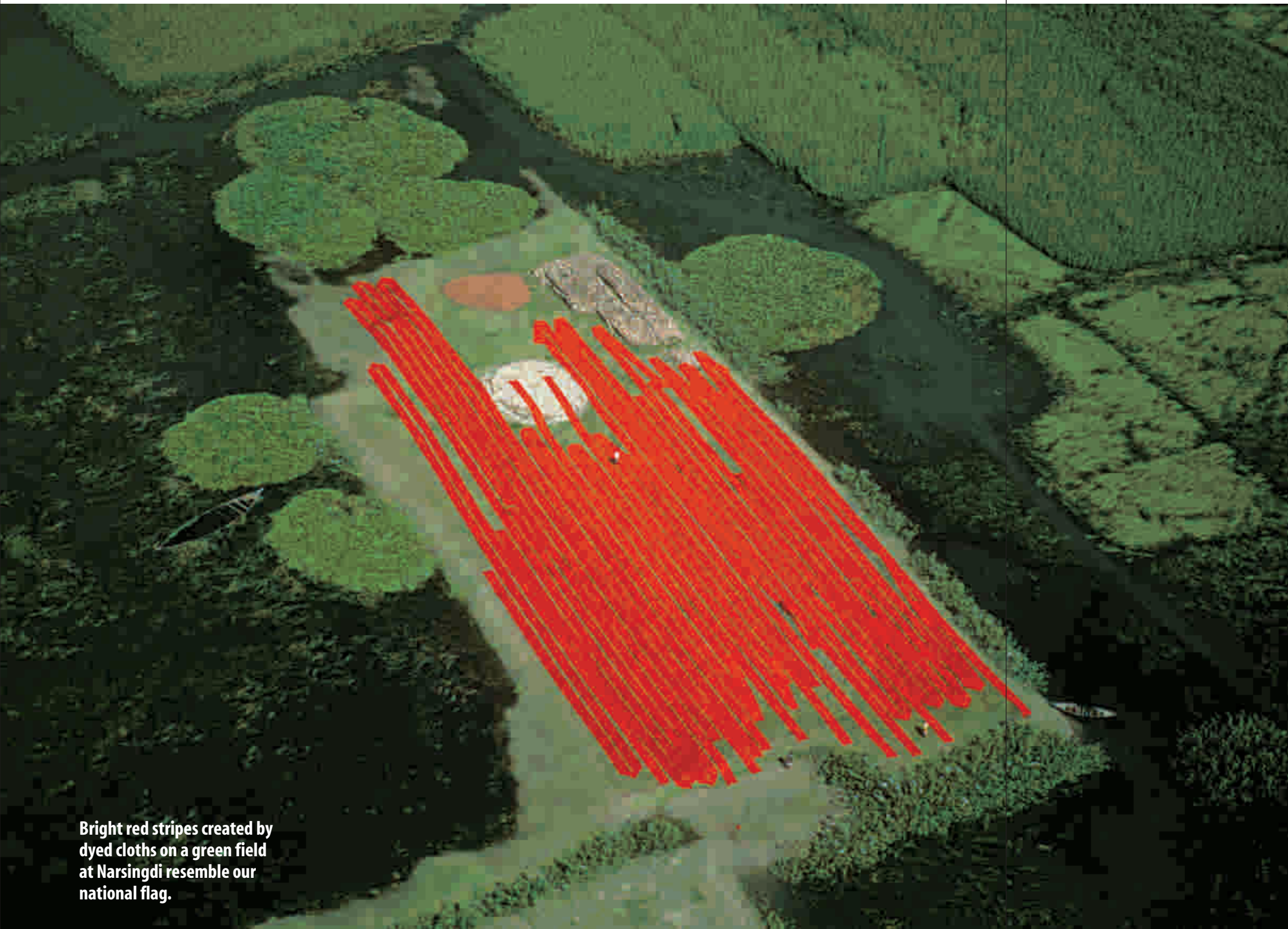
As you flutter your wings to soar high and hover over Dhaka, you see a busy and congested city. A city with pollution, traffic jam and many more unbearable happenings. Does Dhaka portray Bangladesh? Put your head down and get a forward speed to go out of the reality of Dhaka. You feel relaxed as the smoky screen of pollution disappears. You take a deep breath at that altitude and you can smell the fresh air. As you go out of Dhaka, a smiling and happy boy welcomes you with wide open arms in a Sobuj Prantor – a green field. His simplicity and genuine smile remind you the great Bangladeshi Ahban -- hospitality welcome. That simple and

genuine welcome is the spirit of Bangladesh. Green fields, winds blowing over the Sobuj Dhan Khet and the serenity of it all sooth your eyes, charm your heart and help you escape from the madding crowd. The green mosaic of different shades of paddy fields, the Sonali-Sobuj Dhan velvets and the man made canals running through work as the lifeline of agriculture. As you move further a blue water body catches your eye. You feel a little disturbed, a surrealistic landscape puts you in the realm of unreality, shocks you with the

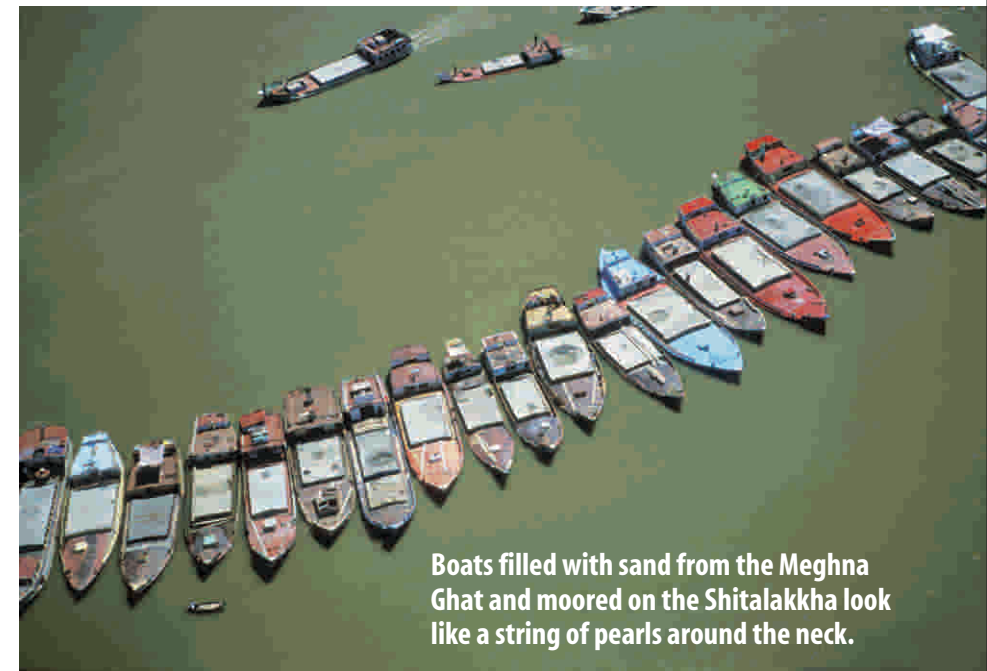
Mile after mile of Green paddy fields make the mosaic outside Dhaka city. A man made canal often snakes through to irrigate the paddy fields.



View of the rain over a river during monsoon is like a painting where heavy downpour is like a stroke of the brush of a painter.



Bright red stripes created by dyed cloths on a green field at Narsingdi resemble our national flag.




Boats filled with sand from the Meghna Ghat and moored on the Shitalakkha look like a string of pearls around the neck.





Green tea gardens at Sri Mongal look perfect in geometrical patterns.

unrealistic view of the fresh and colourless unpolluted water that only reflects the blueness of the sky above. You look up above into the blue and the melting stratus clouds to bring yourself back to reality, to remind yourself that you are not dreaming. . . . this is our loving motherland.Sobuj and Sonar Bangla. As you soar higher and catch the upper wind to glide towards the eastern part of the country, you will see the geometric pattern of the lush tea gardens, enormous water bodies and reflections of cloud will make you spatially disoriented. 

Sharif Sarker is a professional aviator. His passions are flying and photography. He specializes in aviation and aerial photography.

Insect-eating plants

STORY BY
MOKARAM HOSSAIN
PHOTOS BY
DR RONALD HALDER/ WEB

AS PLANTS, THEY ARE SUPPOSED TO JUST STAY OPEN TO THE SUN, TAKING IN ITS RAY USING CHLOROPHYLLS. BUT THESE BUNCHES ARE DIFFERENT. THEY ACTUALLY EAT INSECTS -- MOTHS, GRASSHOPPERS AND SPIDERS -- JUST LIKE ANY LIZARD OR ANIMAL.

There are hundreds and thousands of species of flowers in the world, in various shapes, colours and fragrances. But what about flowers that eat insects alive? Such insect-eating plants are however rare. We know that the orchid plants are 'wind-eaters', they live by 'eating' air. Then do the carnivorous plants live by eating insects? That is not the case, in fact. Insects are their supplementary food.



All plants need nitrate-based salt or fertiliser to live. The plants which cannot get nitrates from the ground turn to eating insects to meet the lack of the chemical.

But how do the flowers 'eat' insects? Do they have teeth? They actually use enzymes to digest the insects trapped into them.

In Bangladesh we also have four types of carnivorous plants -- *Kolosh gachh* or Pitcher plant (*Nepenthes rafflesiana*), *Surja Shishir* or Sundew plants (*Drosera burmanii*) and *Jhanjhidam* or Bladderwort (*Utricularia inflexa*). Roughly 120 years before, few species of pitcher plants were found at Chaitanya Nursery in Jamalpur. No sample of the collection is available today.

***Kolosh gachh*/Pitcher plant:**

They look like stretched-leaves of orchids. The leaf forms a kind of pitcher 6-8cm long which has a trap door above. Foolish insects rush into it thinking food lies inside and the trap door snaps. Enzymes that flow from the inner wall of the pitcher melt the stranded insects. Once the insect is digested, the trap door opens automatically for new insects.

These plants are found on the Khashia hillocks near the bordering area in Sylhet. These species are also found in the tropical or sub-tropical areas of Borneo, Sumatra, Malaysia and Singapore.

***Surja Shishir*/Sundew plants**

Surja Shishir (*Drosera burmanii*) is widely known as *Mukhjali*. In winter, dew drops gather in the tiny hairy plants. The dew drops glint in morning sunlight which attracts ants and other tiny insects. When they get inside, they get stranded and the tiny hairy curls surround them.

Bladderwort/*Utricularia inflexa*

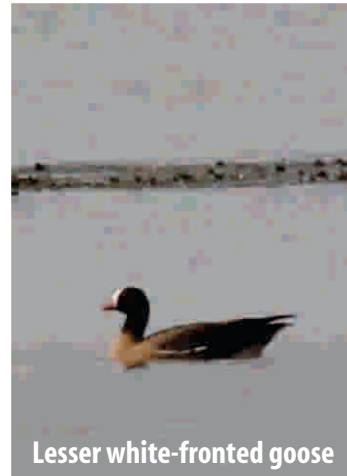
Jhanjhidam is its name in Bangla. It is found in abundance in the wetlands in Bangladesh, India and Africa. Usually they are (*Utricularia inflexa*) found beside water lilies and lotuses. It remains partially submerged in water. Small bags with doors that open inwardly and work as traps hang from its branches. Water insects enter into the bags pushing open the doors and then die.



Goose surprise at Hakaluki

STORY & PHOTOS BY
PAUL M. THOMPSON

AT THE HAOR, YOU ALWAYS MEET SURPRISES WHILE COUNTING BIRDS. THE LESSER WHITE-FRONTED GOOSE WAS SUCH A TREAT.



Lesser white-fronted goose



The lesser white-fronted goose (second front right) among a group of ruddy shelducks.

This 18-21 February I was pleased to join a team of birders from Bangladesh Bird Club who carried out what was the fifth consecutive year of comparable waterbird counts in Hakaluki Haor, this year sponsored by the Integrated Protected Area Co-management project funded by USAID. This was an opportunity to see some areas of this vast wetland that I had not visited before.

The morning of 19th started cool but we enjoyed the spectacle and work of counting a mass flock of about 1,100 Asian Openbill Storks as well as many shorebirds (mostly Ruff and Spotted Redshanks) in the early sun at Cholua Beel. Three beels later and we were

flagging under the hot sun with no shade for miles around, and thinking about lunch, when we reached the furthest part of our survey around Namatorul Beel. On setting up the scope to count a sizeable flock of Ruddy Shelduck I noticed a grey-brown bird among them. Geese anywhere inland in Bangladesh are scarce, but this bird looked dark, and it looked through the heat haze like it had a white forehead and dark bars on the belly. Rather agitated I explained to the group that we had something special, but not wishing to say yet which of the two "Whitefront" species we had, we pushed on. Fortunately our planned route was towards the bird and two local people passed without disturbing the waterfowl. We approached

along a small ridge part hidden by low herbage, and could then see the extensive white forehead, narrow yellow eye-ring, and that our bird was no bigger than the Ruddy Shelducks around it, in fact the head and body looked smaller -- the first Lesser White-fronted Goose in Bangladesh. Everyone enjoyed good views through the telescopes, and we then approached closer to get some photos, although the goose was wary and quietly walked to the water and swam into the middle of the beel before the shelducks moved.

We then sat down to enjoy lunch with the goose swimming in the distance, quietly cheered that we had seen something no-one else in Bangladesh had, and musing on how the bird had reached here. Lesser White-fronted Goose is a globally Vulnerable species with a world population of under 30,000 birds and from its breeding grounds in the tundra of Siberia populations migrate south to winter around the Black and Caspian Seas and along the lower Yangtze River in China. Presumably ours took a wrong turn somewhere in Mongolia or Tibet and headed due south, and there are also a few vagrant records from India. So we had one more among the many reasons - 61 species and 64,282 individuals of waterbirds in 2011 -- for conserving the wonderful wetlands of Hakaluki.