

Trip report: Bangladesh (20/12/2023 - 27/12/2023)

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Sayum Chowdury's [paper](#) from 2020 describing the Masked Finfoot's catastrophic decline must have sent a shock to many, especially to those who have not had the chance to observe it before. The Sundarbans – the world's biggest mangrove patch – is possibly the last remaining stronghold for this bird, and even so only in several pockets of forests. Multiple birding expeditions have managed to successfully document the species in recent years. Since 2023 was undoubtedly the most stressful year of my now-no-longer-describable-as-short life so far, I decided to at least attempt to end it on a high note. The trip, with an endless array of memorable moments, worked out relatively well, but I will have to wait till a later time to see the White-eared Night Heron properly (assuming I ever do).

I have a backlog of over two years of post-processing and side projects and hence drafted this trip report up on the flight back home to avoid a potentially three to five years delay before it gets blogged. The document might be hasty, but I hope it would supply sufficient details for planning purposes. The population trajectory of the Masked Finfoot is unfortunately still downward, and I wish that everyone can continue to enjoy equal if not better chances with this chunky marvellous bird for the years to come.

On a personal note, apart from the handful of lifers, this trip had several other firsts for me: the first time doing a trip that had logistics pretty much entirely managed by a local tour agent, and also the first time travelling with a small but international group of birders.

The trip was split into two main sections, first targeting the Masked Finfoot at the Sundarbans, then the Cachar Bulbul at Satchari National Park.

eBird report: <https://ebird.org/tripreport/185560>

Itinerary

20 December: arrive in Dhaka, van to Khulna (5 hours 15 minutes), dinner and night on the passenger boat while it sailed to Kalabogi.

21-24 December: birding around Kalabogi, sail back to Khulna on 24th evening, night on boat.

25 December: van from Khulna to Satchari (11 hours excluding lunch break), night at Satchari.

26 December: birding Satchari, night at Satchari.

27 December: morning birding at Satchari, van to Dhaka airport (5h 30 minutes excluding lunch break).

Resources

I would like to extend a huge thanks to the authors of the following trip reports that I referred to: [Josh Beck](#), [Lonnie Bregman](#). Trip reports from the previous two Birdtour Asia trips also provided some clue on what to look out for ([2022](#), [2023](#)).

Preparing for the trip

A. We engaged Mr. Bachchu who owns Pugmark Tours (contactable at nibachchu[at]gmail.com; WhatsApp +880-171-five-one-six-seven-740) to organise all logistics. The Masked Finfoot leg of our trip was very smooth, but the same could not really be said about the Satchari leg. Without going into the specifics, I'd just offer two simple advice when communicating with Mr. Bachchu: 1) make sure that all details for the trip are actually confirmed and 2) check the cost for every single piece of item in advance (e.g. a short birding detour that was already communicated a month in advance, guiding fee, entrance fee, and double check the logistical aspects that are unconfirmed and the additional costs they might incur). We were asked to pay fees for what we were not told about at least thrice during the trip. Those were reasonable costs we were perfectly alright with paying (and which we paid for, of course), but it's just never a nice feeling to be told by your tour operator that the logistics are all settled, and that the payment has been received, only to be told after flying into the country that there are actually additional costs for items a b c d e f g. This problem was made additionally troublesome because Mr. Bachchu repeatedly ignored our WhatsApp questions specifically about costs during our ~8-week correspondence (at least four times!!!), even though he responded instantaneously when it came to questions about the whiskies which he requested us to help him buy. I'm not sure if others have had similar experiences, maybe we are just dumb and naive college kids? However, while saying this, I need to note very clearly that the crew onboard our Masked Finfoot passenger boat were PHENOMENAL and extremely professional. Our guide, Romeo, was excellent too – a he was sharp and knew the site well. They did everything to make sure the Masked Finfoot leg of our trip was fruitful and comfortable, and for this very reason I recommend engaging Pugmark Tours.

B. We all managed to get our Visa on Arrival (VOA) semi-smoothly for 51 USD. I recommend paying the exact amount. For VOAs, an invitation letter (which Mr. Bachchu can send upon request), a hotel reservation for the first night, and return flight tickets are required. Our group flew in separately from Singapore and China and had mixed experiences. As a general rule, make sure to have a hard copy of all documents per person. We did not have a hotel reservation for the first night since we were staying on the boat, so you can either explain that to the officers or call Mr. Bachchu if that doesn't work.

C. Mosquito-borne diseases are unfortunately present in Bangladesh, have some insect repellents handy. The arrival hall of Dhaka airport was full of mosquitoes. At the Sundarbans there were pretty much none (I only recall seeing one throughout our few days there), but there were quite a number on the last night when we were docked at Khulna. Satchari had ignorable numbers. Separately, we collectively encountered two leeches and two ticks at Satchari. Our visit was during the dry season, and local researchers we met described the painful sounding situation surrounding the wet season.

D. The Sundarbans gets quite chilly once the sun is down and you'll be birding from an open boat with wind blowing. Make sure to prepare warm clothes. The local boatman there all looked like they were dressed for winter.

E. SIM cards were available at the airport. We purchased Banglalink (15GB, 450 mins, 400BDT/USD4) and Teletalk. Banglalink worked fine throughout our trip and just lacked signal in the smaller channels of Sundarbans and at Satchari. The latter was rubbish and pretty much only worked on the first day. It didn't work on subsequent days even when we were in Dhaka.

F. I strongly [recommend](#) bringing masks especially if you have respiratory health issues.

G. USD seems to be readily accepted throughout the country, but we changed a total of ~25000 BDT at the airport for local purchases. We paid the Satchari entrance and accommodation fees in BDT. A restaurant meal cost us ~2000BDT for five pax. Snacks and bottled water were ~40 BDT each.

Birding and general logistics

1. Sundarbans

At the Sundarbans you will basically live on a passenger boat that is anchored along a wide river channel. We were based around Kalabogi ([GPS: 22.404217, 89.463188](#)) and made daily birding trips to the surrounding narrower and shallower channels on a small boat. Both the passenger and small boats were very stable, and nobody had seasickness even though some of us are quite susceptible.

There are two passenger boats that Pugmark Tours provide – Mawali, designed for five passengers, and Bawali, for twelve passengers. Since we were in a group of five, we booked the smaller Mawali, but Pugmark Tours very kindly offered us the bigger Bawali at no cost since it was unoccupied, which I'd like to thank Mr. Bachchu for. Living conditions were very comfortable, with a nice lounge where we spent most of our non-birding time, well maintained bunk rooms each with a power plug, and shower with sporadic and limited warm water.

The entire crew on board Bawali, I have to repeat again, were tremendously great. My five days in the Sundarbans was definitely the most luxurious and lazy form of birding I've had the chance to experience so far. We were also very well fed (even while birding on the small boat!) and I surely gained some weight from the boat trip.

A) Masked Finfoot

On the first night, Romeo provided us a breakdown of the channels in the area, along with a description of the historical and present situation of the Masked Finfoot throughout the Sundarbans. The Finfoot search is straightforward in theory – scan the known channels during low tide when they come out to forage. I'll refrain from giving exact coordinates here, and it would be quite pointless anyway since your guide would know the latest situation best.

On our first afternoon, our search soon yielded an extremely brief view of a female that only two of us managed to see marching deep into the mangrove.

Our boatman very quickly located another far away male that we slowly crept up to, but it too eventually shied away into the mangroves after offering some alright views.

Soon after, we found a third bird, another female, that offered an unparalleled experience and photographic opportunity which we duly enjoyed. She was thankfully not as timid as the first two birds, and we actually ended up seeing her again every day for the next three days, even roosting!

B) White-eared Night Heron

Our secondary key target at the Sundarbans was the White-eared Night Heron which was [recently documented](#) in Bangladesh for the first time. Multiple expeditions have since found this bird, and it seems a small number (?) of this poorly known bird might (??) actually winter in the Sundarbans (???).

We searched known and other potential channels for this bird with a thermal camera every morning and night but did not have as much luck. All we managed were flushed views of what, by elimination, must have been this species on our first night, but not everybody in our group managed to see it. We were otherwise just ~~amused~~ excited by the many Striated Herons and several Black-crowned Night Herons appearing as bright spots on our screen. (A thermal camera seems essential, many of the herons we encountered flushed upon spotlighting).

C) Other birds

Apart from the two main targets, other diurnal birds came along the way while we were cruised around the small river channels. Of some of the more desirable species, we only encountered Pale-chinned Blue Flycatcher thrice (unresponsive and just seen by chance once) and did not manage diagnosable views of Streak-breasted Woodpecker. We had two heard only unresponsive Mangrove Pittas, and only saw a silent Ruddy Kingfisher once at the Kalabogi [boardwalk](#) which Romeo skilfully spotted. We chanced upon multiple Buffy Fish Owls, a Large-tailed Nightjar, but had no other nocturnal birds.

Separately, we visited the fields of Kalabogi village for a short afternoon ([GPS: 22.427817, 89.450330](#) northwards) and found multiple grassland birds, a nice Streak-throated Swallow spotted by Larry, but had no luck with any Bengal Bush Lark or Indian Silverbill which we hoped for.

2. Satchari National Park

Rudimentary [accommodation](#) is offered at Satchari National Park. We were told right before heading to Satchari that our room, that Mr. Bachchu said would arrange, was unconfirmed (we were provided three different reasons). We were told that we instead had to travel all the way to the town of Sreemangol to stay (~1 hour 20 minutes from Satchari National Park), with quite an additional fee for the driver. I'll skip the whole bunch of back-and-forths and the near 2 hours of wasted time, but in summary, we eventually managed to stay at Satchari thanks to the very kind gesture by local researchers who accommodated us. As mentioned earlier, make sure to confirm this aspect with Mr. Bachchu. While doing so I'd also recommend checking the actual cost you'll be paying for the park entry fees (575 BDT/pax/day) and the guiding fee. The accommodation was 500 BDT/pax/night.

A guide is mandatory at Satchari National Park, that Mr. Bachchu can help arrange. We were assigned Mr. Shaymol, who was not a bird guide, but he helped us with some logistics and showed us the trails.

Food is available at a small restaurant at the National Park entrance. Their prices change before and after you actually eat the food. There are also two small stalls selling some snacks, bread, and bottled water that are open in the day (but not at dawn, so purchase your breakfast the day before).

A) Cachar Bulbul

We spent a full day and one morning at Satchari and only ever encountered this species once, at a pond 15 minutes from the entrance which is a known stakeout ([GPS: 24.119794,91.446262](#)). The stagnant looking pond was devoid of life in the morning but hosted no less than twelve species of bathing birds including the Cachar Bulbul during the one evening we spent there (from 1530 to 1710).

B) Other birds

The forest was very dull on our first morning, perhaps due to fog, but our late morning spent at the [watchtower](#), located less than 10 minutes from the entrance, was fairly productive with expected species. Our second morning, less foggy, featured higher bird activity, and we managed to tick off the Green-crowned Warbler near the tower. White-cheeked Partridge and Blue-naped Pitta were heard only for us, and our attempts to find the other desirable Warblers were futile.

Owling was decent. We spent our first night near the accommodation and had heard only Brown Boobooks and Asian Barred Owlets. On our second night we visited a larger pond ~500m from the accommodation ([GPS: 24.127613, 91.448357](#)) and scored Collared Scops Owl and Oriental Scops Owl in the area. We also heard Asian Barred Owlets and Brown Boobook there. We tried for Spot-bellied Eagle-owl on both nights but had nothing.

3. Other mentions: Dhaka Botanical Gardens

As the Singaporean team arrived earlier on the first morning, we spent about 2 hours birding at the Dhaka Botanical Gardens. The entry fee was 40 BDT per pax. Species we saw here that we never did later in the trip were just Jungle Babbler and Pale-billed Flowerpecker (latter heard only at Satchari).



Bawali, birding in a small channel, and looking at Masked Finfoot



Accommodation at Satchari, watchtower, and pond. The birds bathe at the top left corner.

EDIT: 21 January 2024. In an earlier version I wrongly wrote Streak-breasted Swallow instead of Streak-throated. There's no such bird for now.