

A trip to Ahiran Wetlands

Basabendra Basu

Four Prakriti Samsad members and a guest set out for a trip to Ahiran Wetlands in Murshidabad district on 18th January, 2008. We headed to the spot from Sealdah by 111 up Lalgola Passenger which departed at 23.05 hours. The next day, 19th being a holiday (a Muslim festival – Moharrum) hoards of passengers (all non-birding battalions, we presumed) had thronged the station from the evening. Nevertheless, our overnight journey to Berhampore by sleeper coach was, on the whole peaceful and undisturbed. Intruders were conspicuous by their absence.

Ahiran is a sprawling wetland situated at a distance of about 62kms. from Berhampur, the district head quarters of Murshidabad. The nearest town is Umarpur. The area is, on the whole shallow, with patches of fisheries, cultivated fields and aquatic vegetation. I had previously visited the place in 2005 in the last week of January with one of my friends and local guides. The diversity of avifauna had impressed me.

It was still dark when we reached Berhampur Court railway station at about 4 a.m. The 50kms. bus journey from Berhampore to Umarpur by NBST Express bus was strenuous with innumerable bumpers and holds on the highway. We reached Umarpur at about 8 a.m. Our board and lodging at ‘Hotel Royal’ had previously been arranged by Dr. Supam Mukherjee, my friend and a college teacher at Murshidabad. The car also arranged by him arrived sharp at 8-30 a.m.

What disheartened us was a dense fog that had engulfed the area. This was rather unprecedented according to the Hotel management. The weather had been clear previously. We never-the-less embarked on our expedition. It was still partly foggy when we reached the wetlands. Our perseverance was rewarding and we saw glimpses of several wetland birds. The Red-crested Pochards seen in the previous tour were there. But their numbers were fewer. Small flocks of 5 to 10 birds were seen drifting silently in different parts of the wetland. The male birds looked gorgeous. Their fluffy full, mop-like rich chestnut crests were visible even through semi-darkness created by fog.

Gradually the fog receded and more ducks were visible – Gadwalls, Pintails, Grebes, Shovellers and even small flocks of Garganies. More Red-crested Pochards appeared on the scene.

The approximate area of the wetland was about 4 sq.kms. It was flanked on its western side by NH 34 and a railway line (Howrah-Katwa Jn.-Jangipore Road-New Farakka Jn.-line). Both the highway and railway line were situated on an elevated level. Although the highway offered a panoramic view of the wetland and surrounding area, fog and better spotting chances had compelled us to get down. The slopes had patches of dense foliage and trees which sheltered a number of arboreal birds like Spotted Doves, Eurasian Collared Doves, Brown Shrikes, Long Tailed Shirkes, Starlings and Mynas. Bank Mynas were quite numerous. They sauntered along confidently both on the highway and along the banks of wetlands.

The area (wetland) east of the highway was more extensive in duck population. It also supported such wetland birds as Egrets, Cormorants, Grebes, Herons and Openbills. This was basically a

fishery area. The volumes of pisciculture was not very large as evident from very few number of country boats. Fishes and birds seemed to co-exist. However, local sources referred to occasionally cases of poaching. Intervention by the ‘Panchayats’ was suggested. The area (wetland) west of highway was smaller. It had patches of aquatic regulation, cultivated field and shallow water holes and ponds. This area was inhabited by Kingfishers, Moorhens, Coots and Lapwings, Jacanas, Sandpipers were seen in both parts.

The driver of the car helped us to locate a hitherto unexplored area – the Jangipore Barrage area. There is a BSF camp on the shores of the reservoir and at first the guards objected to parking of the car. So we had to offer a little bit of ‘Bakshish’. The post-lunch session of our expedition to area was no less fruitful. The reservoir was teeming with large flocks of ducks mostly Whistling ducks. And what a pleasant surprise! A majority (400+) of them were Fulvous-whistling Ducks. There was basically a mixed flock, smaller pale brown and maroon – chestnut ducks (Lesser-whistling Ducks) co-existing with their senior (bigger) cousins. Uniformly chestnut upper-tail coverts distinguished them from the latter (Fulvous-whistling Ducks) in which they are creamy-white. The shrill wheezy call of ducks was audible. The BSF camp was surrounded by large trees like Peepal and Mango and variety of bushes and scrubs. It was inhabited by numerous arboreal and other birds like Large-billed and House Crows and Orioles, Robins, Sunbirds, Leaf Birds, Bee-eaters and a solitary Coucal. The melodious songs, joyous notes and vivacious disposition of these feathered beauties filled the quiet afternoon air of the camp with unearthly pleasures.

Poor visibility and occasional unfavourable against-light conditions prevented the participations from preparing a census report of the two areas. Nevertheless, the spots (rather off-beat and far from common tourist destination) are worth visiting for any serious and inquisitive naturalist (not excluding our own Prakriti Samsad fraternity).

The participants – Mr. Shankar Sett, Mrs. Dalia Sett, Mr. Basabendra Basu, Mrs. Maitreyee Das and Ms. Mahua Basak.

A checklist of birds seen at Ahiran Wetlands (AW) and Jangipara Barrage (JB) :

Sl. No.	Common Name	Scientific Name	Area
1.	Fulvous-whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna bicolor</i>	JB
2.	Lesser-whistling Duck	<i>Dendrocygna javanica</i>	JB
3.	Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	AW
4.	Gargany	<i>Anas querquedula</i>	AW&JB
5.	Northern Pintail	<i>Anas acuta</i>	AW
6.	Northern Shoveler	<i>Anas clypeata</i>	AW
7.	Red-crested Pochard	<i>Rhodonessa rufina</i>	AW
8.	Feruginous Pochard	<i>Aythya nirocta</i>	AW
9.	Black-rumped Flameback	<i>Dinopium benghalenses</i>	JB
10.	Blue-throated Barbet (call)	<i>Megalima asiatica</i>	JB

11.	Coppersmith Barbet (call)	Megalima haemacephala	JB
12.	White-throated Kingfisher	Haleyon smrymensis	AW
13.	Pied Kingfisher	Ceryle rudis	AW
14.	Green Bee-eater	Merops orientalis	JB
15.	Common Hawk Cuckoo	Hierococcyx sparveriodes	JB
16.	Asian Koel	Eudynamys sclopacea	JB
17.	Greater Coucal	Centropus sinensis	JB
18.	Asian Palm Swift	Cypsiurus falasiensis	AW
19.	Rock Pigeon	Columba livia	JB
20.	Oriental Turtle Dove	Streptopelia orientalis	JB
21.	Spotted Dove	Streptopelia chinensis	AW
22.	Eurasian Collared-Dove	Streptopelia decaocto	AW
23.	White-breasted Waterhen	Amauornis phoeniccurus	AW
24.	Purple Swamphen	Porphyrio porphyrio	AW
25.	Common Moorhen	Gallinula chloropus	AW
26.	Common Coot	Fulica Atra	AW
27.	Common Sandpiper	Actitis hypoleucos	AW
28.	Pheasant-tailed Jacana	Hydrophasianus chirogus	AW
29.	Bronze-winged Jacana	Metopidius indicus	AW
30.	Red-wattled Lapwing	Vanelus indicus	AW
31.	Black Kite	Miluos migrans	AW
32.	Unidentified Eagle		AW
33.	Little Grebe	Tachybaptus ruficollis	AW
34.	Little Cormorant	Phalacrocorax pygmeus	AW&JB
35.	Great Cormorant	P. carbo	AW
36.	Little Egret	Egretta garzetta	AW
37.	Great Egret	Casmedorios albus	AW
38.	Intermediate Egret	Mesophoyx intermedia	AW
39.	Cattle Egret	Bubulcus ibis	AW
40.	Indian Pond Heron	Ardeola grayii	AW
41.	Grey Heron	Ardeola cinerea	AW
42.	Purple Heron	A. purpurea	AW
43.	Asian Openbill	Anastomus Oscitans	AW
44.	Brown Shrike	Lanius cristatus	AW
45.	Long-tailed Shrike	L. schach	AW
46.	Rufous Treepie	Dendrocitta vagabunda	AW&JB
47.	House Crow	Corus splendens	JB
48.	Large-billed Crow	C. macrorhynchos	JB
49.	Black-hooded Oriole	Oriolus xanthornus	JB
50.	Black Drongo	Dicrurus macrocercus	AW
51.	Oriental Magpie Robin	Copsychus saularis	JB

52.	Chestnut-tailed Starling	<i>Sturnus malabaricus</i>	AW
53.	Asian Pied Starling	<i>S. contra</i>	AW
54.	Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	AW
55.	Black Myna	<i>A. ginginianus</i>	AW
56.	Jungle Myna	<i>A. fuscus</i>	AW
57.	Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	AW
58.	Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	AW
59.	Jungle Babbler	<i>Turdoides malcolmi</i>	AW
60.	Purple Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia jugularis</i>	AW
61.	White Wagtail	<i>Motacilla Alba</i>	JB
62.	Gold-fronted Leafbird		JB