

Trip Report: Sunderbans, West Bengal, India, January 4-5, 2000.

Vivek Tiwari (Vivek.Tiwari@intel.com)

In January of this year, Gargi and I had the good fortune of visiting the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve. It was a very short trip, left Calcutta on the morning of the 4th, and back by the evening of the 5th. 2 days does not do justice to a place as special as the Sunderbans, but one has to be content with happiness in small doses. I had a conference in Calcutta and only 2 free days, and even a short trip was better than none at all. This after all is the "Forest of Fear" - man-eater country - subject of an oft-rerun BBC film, home of the largest population of tigers in the world, the largest inter-tidal delta and mangrove system in the world. Got a chance to get a first-hand feel for the place and see some good birds.

The English names in the report below are a mixture of names popular in India and those used in Grimmett, Inskipp & Inskipp's new field guide. The final trip list follows this reference for the species order and scientific names, but English names from Ali & Ripley are also included. Species that are at the edge of their range as shown in the range maps in Grimmett et al. are marked with (+) - these presumably are of local interest. (SHORT-TOED SNAKE EAGLE is the only species that is well out of the range shown in Grimmett et al.)

We started out from Calcutta at about 7:00AM on the 4th of Jan. With us was Asit Biswas (kalighat@vsnl.net - he had organized the trip - Mohit Agarwal (wildindiatours@vsnl.com) had put us in touch with him). Kalyan Dey, a naturalist from Calcutta (associated with the local organization - Prakriti Samsud), also travelled with us. A pleasant drive as we left Calcutta and travelled on the narrow bumpy road towards Sonakhali. A GREAT CORMORANT(+) within city limits. A marketplace with bicycles laden with fresh cauliflowers was a refreshing sight. BAY-BACKED SHRIKE(+) on a wire. ASIAN PALM SWIFTS flying along over the canal that parallels the road for well over the first hour of the journey. Tasty Roshogullas at a roadside shop in the town of Ghatakpur. KOEL and BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON over the canal behind the shop. After a stretch dominated by brick-kilns, the fish-pond country starts. Nothing but ponds stretching out on either side of the road. BARN SWALLOWS were common and occasional PIED and COMMON KINGFISHERS. The small household ponds in the villages along the road were also an interesting sight. Some of these ponds had pink water lillies. Past the town of Maloncha, a flying flock of over a 100 BLACK-NECKED STILTS(+) was quite a sight. Several WHISKERED TERNS at one point. A GULL-BILLED TERN at another.

A distant flock of interesting looking shorebirds about midway through the trip prompted a stop. This was a fortuitous move, for the flock turned out to be composed of over a 100 GREY-HEADED LAPWINGS! This globally near-threatened species was new for me and to see such a large number of them, the very first time, was thrilling. Mixed in were several PACIFIC GOLDEN-PLOVERS. GREY HERON, COMMON SANDPIPER, JUNGLE BABBLER were some of the other species at the same spot. GOLDEN ORIOLE(+) in a nearby palm tree. A LESSER FLAMEBACK seen there was the only woodpecker of the trip.

We did not make any other stops and about noon reached the town of Sonakhali.

The town looked crowded with nothing to indicate that it was at the edge of one of the largest wilderness areas in India. (Actually the entire stretch of road from Calcutta had seemed very populated with villages every few miles.) However, driving through narrow lanes we finally did reach the boat docks on the Bidyadhari river. The wide gentle river, the cool breeze and the promise of interesting sights ahead was instantly rejuvenating.

We decided that we did not need to get to the Sajnekhali tourist/forest dept complex until dark, so decided to take the long way around. This meant going further out on the Bidya river before turning into the narrower channels of the Sajnekhali Wildlife Sanctuary. This also meant that we spent more time travelling along inhabited areas and along mangrove plantations, as opposed to getting to the protected natural areas sooner. However, birding was interesting and we saw several species that we did not come across in the interior of the WS. First we stopped at Gosaba (site of the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve HQ) for the launch driver to pick up food supplies. Along exposed mudflats along the Bidya river, was the best shorebirding of the trip. GREY-HEADED LAPWINGS at a couple of spots. EURASIAN CURLEWS in 1's and 2's. 4 WHIMBRELS together, and then later in 1's and 2's. (Curlews and Whimbrels were common in the park interior too.) COMMON SANDPIPERS were ubiquitous (and were seen throughout the trip). A TEREK SANDPIPER added some variety. COMMON REDSHANKS, a LITTLE RINGED PLOVER, LESSER SAND-PLOVERS feeding on the mud-flats. PACIFIC GOLDEN-PLOVERS were common. A larger, plumper, greyish plover took off exposing a white rump - GREY PLOVER - nice. GREAT EGRET, LITTLE CORMORANTS, POND HERONS were common.

At one point, we came across a large raft of ducks. Pretty much the only ducks we saw on the trip. They spooked at the sound of the boat, and took off in a flurry of wings, in a scene reminiscent of Bharatpur. I counted over 400 LESSER WHISTLING TEAL. Conditions were not ideal to search for any Ruddy Whistling Teal among them, but there were a few GADWALL and TUFTED DUCKS mixed in.

Around 4:00 PM we entered a channel that's within the Sajnekhali WS. The onshore vegetation was now true wild mangrove. A BRAHMINY KITE soared over the channel and ROSE-RINGED PARAKEETS squawked from tree-tops. No more signs of human habitation. I lost track of direction since it was all a large green maze at this point. A RED-JUNGLEFOWL added a dash of color onshore. This was an entirely different world now. An occasional BLACK-CAPPED KINGFISHER would fly by - flashing its absolutely striking purplish-blue wings. COMMON KINGFISHERS occasionally. At one point we entered a very narrow channel and I feared that we may get grounded in the shallow water. It was easy to fantasize a tiger leaping onto the boat from the Hental clumps on the shore! (The Palmacea plant Hental is considered by the locals to be a favourite resting/ambush site for the tiger. The drying orangish leaves among the green do seem like ideal camouflage.) Birding was now slow, as it was for the most part when we were in the interior. Finally, the sight I was waiting for, a LARGE orange & brown kingfisher on an overhanging branch - a BROWN-WINGED KINGFISHER. What a thrill! Like a Stork-billed Kf, except for the brown wings. This globally near-threatened bird is perhaps more likely here than anywhere else in India (Orissa?). We saw 6 on the trip. Soon after that an OSPREY flying with a fish. (This was a nice complement to the OSPREY I had seen a few days earlier in Hardwar, at the other end of the Ganga). Overall it was pretty quite with an occasional bird such as a MAGPIE-ROBIN, a SHIKRA, RUFOUS TREEPIE. But this was true wilderness - crocodile skid-marks on a mud-bank, tiger pugmarks on

another. A WILD BOAR down by the water, and a nervous group of SPOTTED DEER.

Finally we reached the Sudhanyakali watch tower. Several ASHY SWALLOW-SHRIKES were flying overhead. I was shocked to see that the path to the watch tower was enclosed on all sides, including the top, with a wire fence! Within inches of the fence were several tiger pugmarks. The watchtower provides the only opportunity to get an elevated viewpoint, and one can see the mangrove forest stretching out in all directions. The sweet-water pond had a WHITE-BREASTED WATERHEN, but sadly no Crakes. We were starting to lose light so did not linger. However, just as we descended the tower, we heard a loud deep "OOMPH". Tiger! We waited in tension and anticipation, but nothing showed up. The moment ended when the forest workers in the forest dept. boat shouted for us to leave the tower area since it was past the official closing time. From there it was a short ride to the tourist complex.

Next morning, I woke up to find that the complex looked pretty interesting and provided perhaps the only opportunity to bird on foot. Even this complex was fenced on all sides. GREENISH WARBLERS, JUNGLE CROW, PURPLE and PURPLE-RUMPED SUNBIRDS, a HUME'S WARBLER in the garden. In the adjoining forest dept. complex, BLACK-HEADED ORIOLES. Great looks at a BROWN-WINGED KINGFISHER perched on the fence. The best bird for me was a DUSKY WARBLER in a bush outside the fence. I was stumbling around a wood pile while looking at the warbler and came across a freshly shed Cobra skin - it was still wet! Bought some Sunderbans honey, paid homage at the Banbibi temple in the complex and finally headed out on the boat. It was 8:45AM but it was still cool and a bit hazy.

We started out going east and south of the Gumdi river. The other shore of this wide channel was inhabited. But after a while, we turned west into the Sajnekhali WS area. From here on we saw no other humans for a while. Had good overhead looks at a dark-phase SHORT-TOED SNAKE EAGLE as it glided overhead. It even hovered a bit, right above our boat. The bird was outside the range shown in Grimmett et al. (I can provide a brief description of the sighting if anybody is interested). Along the first narrow channel we turned into, there was a small flock of SMALL MINIVETS. Among those, I was thrilled to see a beautiful VERDITER FLYCATCHER. Right after that, a bird I really, really wanted to see - a COLLARED KINGFISHER! I had anticipated this trip to offer one of the better chances for this species on the Indian mainland, and it would have been a pity to miss it.

Birding was slow after that, but as our boat pattered around the maze of waterways, the setting was one of splendid isolation. An occasional bird such as a GREATER COUCAL, COMMON IORA, LITTLE GREEN HERON. At one point, Niranjana spotted an Estuarine Crocodile, which slid into the water before I could turn my head. It was about a ten-footer but still quite a sight as it gently swam behind the boat. That was the only croc we saw. Overhead, a solitary OPEN-BILLED STORK flew by. The narrow channels would merge into larger channels - Gazikhali, Pirkhali etc. Its hard to say how much distance we covered, but while we were in there for over 5 hours, we were still only at the tip of the Sunderbans Tiger Reserve. A couple of LESSER SPOTTED EAGLES flying together overhead were a welcome sight.

Finally we ended up back at the Sudhanyakali watchtower. Across the shore from the watchtower it was unusually active. A LARGE CUCKOOSHRIKE calling from the top of a tree, a BRONZED DRONGO sallying about, several JUNGLE CROWS calling

and flying in and out, a RUFIOUS TREEPIE flying about. I failed to see any significance in this but Niranjan suddenly become very alert, peering intently into the vegetation. I suspected then that a tiger may have been the source of commotion, since a little ways up the shore, we found large pugmarks on a mudbank, still fresh with water in them. The tiger must have swum onshore, walked across the wide mudbank in broad daylight, in view of some boats and huts on the far bank of the Gumdi river.

On the way back we took the short-cut - the Durgadwani River channel back to Gosaba. Came across 3 more COLLARED KINGFISHERs and several PIED KINGFISHERs. The channel was heavily inhabited on both sides and commoner village birds were now in evidence. Reached Sonakhali at 4:00PM and after an uneventful road journey, we were in Calcutta by nightfall.

Species List

OBC English Name	OBC Scientific Name	Ali/Ripley English Name
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Red Junglefowl	<i>Gallus gallus</i>	Red Junglefowl
Lesser Whistling-duck	<i>Dendrocygna javanica</i>	Lesser Whistling Teal
Gadwall	<i>Anas strepera</i>	Gadwall
Tufted Duck	<i>Aythya fuligula</i>	Tufted Duck
Black-rumped Flameback Woodp.	<i>Dinopium benghalense</i>	Lesser Goldenbacked
Common Kingfisher	<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	Common Kingfisher
Brown-winged Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon amauroptera</i>	Brownwinged Kingfisher
Black-capped Kingfisher	<i>Halcyon pileata</i>	Blackcapped Kingfisher
Collared Kingfisher	<i>Todiramphus chloris</i>	Whitecollared Kingfisher
Pied Kingfisher	<i>Ceryle rudis</i>	Lesser Pied Kingfisher
Green Bee-eater	<i>Merops orientalis</i>	Green Bee-eater
Asian Koel	<i>Eudynamys scolopacea</i>	Koel
Greater Coucal	<i>Centropus sinensis</i>	Crow-Pheasant, Coucal
Rose-ringed Parakeet	<i>Psittacula krameri</i>	Roseringed Parakeet
Asian Palm Swift	<i>Cypsiurus balasiensis</i>	Palm Swift
House Swift	<i>Apus affinis</i>	House Swift
Rock Pigeon	<i>Columba livia</i>	Blue Rock Pigeon
Spotted Dove	<i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>	Spotted Dove
Eurasian Collared Dove	<i>Streptopelia decaocto</i>	Indian Ring Dove
White-breasted Waterhen	<i>Amaurornis phoenicurus</i>	Whitebreasted Waterhen
Whimbrel	<i>Numenius phaeopus</i>	Whimbrel
Eurasian Curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	Curlew
Common Redshank	<i>Tringa totanus</i>	Redshank
Terek Sandpiper	<i>Xenus cinereus</i>	Terek Sandpiper
Common Sandpiper	<i>Actitis hypoleucos</i>	Common Sandpiper
Black-winged Stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	Blackwinged Stilt
Pacific Golden Plover	<i>Pluvialis fulva</i>	Eastern Golden Plover
Grey Plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	Grey Plover
Little Ringed Plover	<i>Charadrius dubius</i>	Little Ringed Plover
Lesser Sand Plover	<i>Charadrius mongolus</i>	Lesser Sand Plover
Grey-headed Lapwing	<i>Vanellus cinereus</i>	Greyheaded Lapwing
Red-wattled Lapwing	<i>Vanellus indicus</i>	Redwattled Lapwing
Gull-billed Tern	<i>Gelochelidon nilotica</i>	Gullbilled Tern
Whiskered Tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	Whiskered Tern

Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	Osprey
Black Kite	<i>Milvus migrans</i>	Pariah Kite
Brahminy Kite	<i>Haliastur indus</i>	Brahminy Kite
Short-toed Snake Eagle	<i>Circaetus gallicus</i>	Short-toed Eagle
Shikra	<i>Accipiter badius</i>	Shikra
Lesser Spotted Eagle	<i>Aquila pomarina</i>	Lesser Spotted Eagle
Little Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	Little Cormorant
Great Cormorant	<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	Cormorant
Little Egret	<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	Little Egret
Grey Heron	<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	Grey Heron
Great Egret	<i>Casmerodius albus</i>	Large Egret
Intermediate Egret	<i>Mesophoyx intermedia</i>	Smaller Egret
Cattle Egret	<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	Cattle Egret
Indian Pond Heron	<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	Pond Heron
Little Heron	<i>Butorides striatus</i>	Little Green Heron
Black-crowned Night Heron	<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	Night Heron
Asian Openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>	Openbill Stork
Bay-backed Shrike	<i>Lanius vittatus</i>	Baybacked Shrike
Rufous Treepie	<i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>	Indian Tree Pie
House Crow	<i>Corvus splendens</i>	House Crow
Large-billed Crow	<i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	Jungle Crow
Ashy Woodswallow	<i>Artamus fuscus</i>	Ashy Swallow-Shrike
Eurasian Golden Oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus</i>	Golden Oriole
Black-hooded Oriole	<i>Oriolus xanthornus</i>	Blackheaded Oriole
Large Cuckooshrike	<i>Coracina macei</i>	Large Cuckoo-Shrike
Small Minivet	<i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>	Small Minivet
Black Drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	Black Drongo, King-Crow
Ashy Drongo	<i>Dicrurus leucophaeus</i>	Grey Drongo, Ashy Drongo
Bronzed Drongo	<i>Dicrurus aeneus</i>	Bronzed Drongo
Common Iora	<i>Aegithina tiphia</i>	Common Iora
Red-throated Flycatcher	<i>Ficedula parva</i>	Redbreasted Flycatcher
Verditer Flycatcher	<i>Eumyias thalassina</i>	Verditer Flycatcher
Oriental Magpie Robin	<i>Copsychus saularis</i>	Magpie-Robin
Indian Robin	<i>Saxicoloides fulvicata</i>	Indian Robin
Asian Pied Starling	<i>Sturnus contra</i>	Pied Myna
Common Myna	<i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	Common Myna
Bank Myna	<i>Acridotheres ginginianus</i>	Bank Myna
Barn Swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	Swallow
Red-vented Bulbul	<i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	Redvented Bulbul
Oriental White-Eye	<i>Zosterops palpebrosus</i>	White-Eye
Common Tailorbird	<i>Orthotomus sutorius</i>	Tailor Bird
Dusky Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus fuscatus</i>	Dusky Leaf Warbler
Hume's Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus humei</i>	(Hume's) Yellow-browed W.
Greenish Warbler	<i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i>	Dull Green Leaf Warbler
Jungle Babbler	<i>Turdoides striatus</i>	Jungle Babbler
Purple-rumped Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia zeylonica</i>	Purplerumped Sunbird
Purple Sunbird	<i>Nectarinia asiatica</i>	Purple Sunbird
House Sparrow	<i>Passer domesticus</i>	House Sparrow