



Fact Sheet

WATERBIRDS ARE BACK

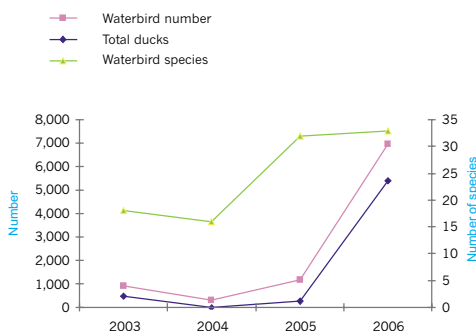
Over a third of Bangladesh could be termed wetlands, considering rivers, estuaries, mangroves, floodplains, beels, baors and haors. Of these the deeply flooded basins of north-east Bangladesh, known as haors, are a habitat unique to Bangladesh. Some haors such as Tanguar still hold large numbers of wintering ducks which migrate from Siberia, China, and neighboring floodplains to find water and food here in the dry season. Hail Haor was one of these important wetlands but despite government bans on hunting birds, wintering ducks had all but disappeared from Hail Haor by the 1990s.



MACH APPROACH

As part of its restoration of wetland productivity and biodiversity in Hail Haor, MACH and the local communities identified an area that could be set aside as a permanent sanctuary within the haor. Baikka Beel, covering about 100 ha, was identified as an area that could be protected without disadvantaging poor resource users who could fish and collect aquatic plants in other parts of the 4,000 ha of dry season waterbodies in the haor. Proceeding upwards from the local community through local government to central government, consensus was eventually reached, and on 1 July 2003 the Ministry of Land decided to reserve the three jalmohals that form this beel as a permanent sanctuary, giving up an annual lease income of about one hundred thousand taka. It is protected by the Barangangina Resource Management Organization, following a management plan endorsed by the Local Government of Sreemongal Upazila. MACH has deepened areas in the sanctuary through excavation and planted native wetland border forest trees to restore a greater diversity of habitats.

Baikka Beel mid-winter waterbird census



Since 2004 the RMO, with the mandate of the haor users and local government, has banned fishing, hunting, and collection of aquatic plants, except for limited grazing in part of the area. Since then 91 species of birds have been recorded within the 100 ha sanctuary. Both numbers and diversity have increased, reaching almost 7,000 birds of 33 waterbird species in February 2006. These include large flocks of Fulvous and Lesser Whistling-duck; Northern Pintail, Garganey and Purple Swamphen. Some rare globally threatened species have also returned to the area: a few Pallas's Fish Eagle and Greater Spotted Eagle (both vulnerable) now spend the winter here, as do the near-threatened Black-headed Ibis and Ferruginous Pochard. Resident birds such as Pheasant-tailed Jacana are also increasing. And their future looks secure; already the RMO, with local government backing, has successfully foiled attempts by local elites to shoot ducks in the sanctuary.

RESPONSE



Once in Hail Haor “From horizon to horizon the sky was full of wheeling ducks and their clamorous voices could be clearly heard for half a mile. ... As soon as we ceased to move, ducks came showering out of the sky, to settle in thousands among the floating vegetation around us, until the water was a solid brown carpet of moving birds.” (Mountfort 1969).

But for long these have been distant memories. Few if any waterfowl visited the haor since the 1980s for fear of being trapped or hunted and for lack of any quiet resting places among the thousands of people fishing day and night. Now some of this natural beauty and biodiversity has been restored. As Mrs. Runa Begum, member, Barangangina Resource Management Organization (RMO) says “Previously there were no wild ducks here, now they have come back and made this place their home.”

Hail Haor is one of just 19 internationally Important Bird Areas in Bangladesh, of which just six including Hail Haor are freshwater ecosystems. Although the return of waterbirds is the most obvious impact of the sanctuary, the haor is home to 98 species of fish, many of which breed within the sanctuary. Hail Haor is also the only location so far found with a healthy population of lotus flowers (*padma Nelumbo nucifera*) in northeast Bangladesh and most are concentrated in Baikka Beel.

MACH is working with Barangangina RMO to develop facilities for eco-tourism visits to the sanctuary so that these benefits can be shared. Already a promotional film and brochures have been produced, and a visitor tower has been built so that visitors will get an eagle's eye view of the sanctuary. RMO members have been trained in guiding visitors and the RMO will be able to cover part of its costs in protecting the sanctuary from visitor fees. The remainder of the costs will be covered by an allocation for maintenance and continued habitat restoration out of the endowment fund that MACH has placed with the Local Government Committee.

“When I first visited Hail Haor in 1986 there was a good diversity of small birds, but access was difficult and there were no ducks to be seen. In later years through the 1990s it was the same story, with ever more people using the haor. Now after 20 years, when wetlands in the rest of Bangladesh are disappearing under more intensive uses, it is incredible to see so many birds there and see in Baikka Beel once again how the haor was and should be.” Paul Thompson, Oriental Bird Club representative for Bangladesh and member of MACH Winrock International team.



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