

BANGLADESH 24 November 2013-4 December 2013

About two years ago I watched a program on the Sunderbans National Park and quickly decided it was a place I needed to visit. While the majority of the terrestrial mammals it offered were ones I had seen elsewhere, going to the largest mangrove swamp in the world seemed like an ecosystem too amazing to pass up. I started doing some early research and found a tour called “King of the Swingers” from a company based out of the UK called Royle Safaris. Not only did it include the Sunderbans, but also a few national parks that bordered India that were home to a variety of primate species (my favorite mammals) including the hoolock gibbon. I booked the tour with my birder friend Sarah from Texas ,who I have traveled with many times before.

Just prior to leaving the US I was contacted by Martin Royle ,who runs the company and would be traveling with us, that we were going to have our hotel moved from the old city portion of the capital city Dhaka, which we initially flew into, to one close to the airport. It turned out there had been some recent striking against the government and he wanted to make sure we would not be anywhere near it. In retrospect, this was the first sign of what was yet in store for me.

I flew on the 24th of November from Washington to Dubai then on to Dhaka on Emirates airlines. Our layover in Dubai was interesting. I went into a ladies room (clearly marked by the figure with the dress that all women wear all the time) and all the stalls were full. I waited a second then one by one, a male excited each stall. I thought maybe I had gotten it wrong, went back and saw the dress figure then watched as three more men started walking into the ladies room. I stopped them, pointed to the sign and looked confused. They just laughed and walked out. When we got to the boarding gait, we noticed that we were two of only 7 females on the entire full flight. The others most likely being men that had come to Dubai for work. As we were boarding the plane, an Emirates employee asked us confused if we were going to Dhaka, then busted out laughing when we said yes. Dhaka airport was not pleasurable. The immigration officer gave me a hard time for not having the actual address of the new hotel I was staying at. When I finally gave him the phone number of the local tour agent he let me through. Baggage collection was a circus. Everyone was either jammed up against the conveyor belt, had jumped into the middle raised portion (a behavior I had never seen before in any country I had been in), or had the majority of their bodies outside. 1 hour and 50 minutes later I collected my bag and was on the way to the Innotel Baton

Rouge hotel on the outskirts of Dhaka. We met up with Martin that were night and were given more information on the current political situation. The current prime minister was not in current favor by many people. The start of the next year an election was supposed to take place. Per the constitution of the country an interim government is set up as a third party during the election 90 days prior. The current government was trying to avoid the handover, and an 18 party opposition group, led by a group called the BNP (Bangladesh National Party) had been setting up what are known as hartels, or general strikes to cause disruption. During a hartel no private vehicle is aloud on the road. This includes taxis. Trains however function. We were told that if a hartel was to happen the day that we were going to leave Dhaka, we would travel by train instead of by a car.

Day 1 – We met up with our group for the trip. This included a single male traveler from Scotland, and a husband and wife from England. This was the day for our city tour, which is supposed to involve several sites in the city, but severe traffic congestion made it so we only had time to visit the Ahsan Manzil, also known as the pink palace and the Lalbagh fort. No mammals, besides humans and lone dog, were seen during the city tour. So just like I am sure the majority of us have been to foreign countries where they don't see a lot of tourists and get asked to have a picture taken, Bangladesh was like nothing I had ever experienced before. People were at one point lined up to get pictures with their cell phones. By picture number ten at the fort I wanted to start running in the opposite direction of anyone I saw holding a cell phone. We ended up back at the hotel and by dinner time no announcements of a strike were made. We had plans to leave in the morning for Srimangol which is the gateway city for Lawacherra and Satchari National parks and Rema Kalenga Wildlife Sanctuary.

Day 2 – Woke up early in the morning to meet everyone for breakfast. The first person I saw was Martin who did not look happy and told me he had some bad news. After we had gone to bed, the government had announced the date of the next election and that they were not planning on turning over control to an interim government. They claimed that they were afraid that if they did this, a military coup would occur. In retaliation, the BNP decided to not do a hartel, but instead do a 48 hour blockade of all railways, road and waterway travel. This of course made it so we could not drive and at this point not take the train to Srimangol, and would have to stay in Dhaka for the next 48 hours. Not only were we instructed to stay in Dhaka, but were told that we were supposed to stay in the hotel at all times for insurance and safety reasons , and leaving the hotel would be at our own risk. Martin told us this type of strike had never occurred in the history of Bangladesh.

At this point, while not thrilled about losing two days of the trip, I was trying to stay optimistic. My friend however, from this point onward knew nothing good was going to come from the upcoming days. We decided to do a short stroll by the hotel, saw some striking in the street, then decided to hurry back to the hotel. At dinner we were told that a tour group from somewhere in Europe had tried to get back into Dhaka earlier in the day, but not before the blockades had been set up. While none of the tourists had been hurt, the driver of their vehicle was supposedly pulled out and beaten in front of them at one of the blockades.

Day 3 – The hotel, while nice by many standards, did not have all the amenities making a 48 hour lock down a pleasure. A pool and a bar being the two most crucial (Bangladesh being a Muslim dry country). We talked to the other travelers and decided to see if any cabs would be running and go to the botanical gardens to try for some wildlife watching. We found a cab driver that was willing to take us for a few hours and drove about 25 minutes from the hotel. At this point we didn't see any evidence of striking or blockades, but were well away from the center of the city. The botanical garden was nothing to write home about, but we did see several Irrawaddy squirrels and a lone Indian Fruit bat in a tree.

We also saw several birds and a single Indian Garden lizard. In the middle of our outgoing, a random man (who I guessed worked there) decided to follow us around as what he decided was to be our unwanted escort. When we would find things and start taking photos he would then point to it like he was the one who had spotted it. He also



picked several flowers in the garden to hand off to all us (male and females). The only thing he really succeeded in doing was making us feel uncomfortable. No speed of walking or taking quick turns could shake him. At the end the Scotsman gave him a small tip against the advice of the rest of the group. The Dhaka Zoo was next door to the gardens, and while it was not a zoo I would have wanted to visit at any other time, it beat going back to the hotel. The cab driver was only willing to wait another hour, so it was a quick visit. The zoo was not as bad as I

thought it was going to be, and not as good as it could have been. The majority of the animals looked healthy, they had a vet hospital, the diets in the cages looked adequate, and I didn't see any of the locals yelling at any of the animals (they may however been too busy staring at us). When we got back to the hotel Sarah and I were talking about how much a drink was needed in the situation we were under. The Scotsman in our group then told us that the previous day when he was walking around he had been escorted to a secret bar close to the hotel. Never one to pass up going to a secret place, we all decided to find a restaurant outside the hotel, then go for a drink. The “bar” turned out to be in a restaurant at the end of a questionable street that I would never walk down by myself. We were rushed to the top floor and quickly given a bucket of ice and asked what we wanted to drink. A few beers in, I needed a bathroom and a waiter told me to follow him. I walked into the bathroom with him and noticed a row of men at urinals. I tried to back out and the waiter rushed me into a lone stall/room and at this point I had to do what I had to do. I also flashed back to the men at the Dubai airport I had seen earlier. When I left the bathroom I looked around and noticed everyone in the restaurant where male. That is when I realized, it is doubtful that all any local women ever go there, so why have a ladies room. At this point I was also still pretty optimistic and was hoping the next morning we could leave.

Day 4 – The BNP, not getting their demand for the interim government decided to extend the blockade for another 24 hours. We watched on local tv roads being blocked and trains being de-railed. The Scotsman and I decided to go back to the botanical garden and do a longer tour of the zoo. The previous day he saw a mongoose in one of the enclosures at the zoo, so I thought I would check it out. At this point we got a tuk tuk (my first ever) ride and again so no signs of violence. At the gardens we saw more Irrawaddy squirrels. At the zoo they have an african antelope section with two exhibits with common waterbuck. In the first waterbuck pen I watched a breeding pair of Indian grey mongoose for about 30 minutes. The male was busy catching and eating insects. These were two of the most laid back asian mongoose species I have ever watched.



When we got back to the hotel, we were told by Martin that the next day we had a 24 hour option of leaving Dhaka to go up to Srimangal to look for wildlife. It turned out the next two days were a Muslim holiday and the barricades were coming down. This would involve us leaving at 5:30 am, driving for 4.5 hours or longer depending on the road condition, then leaving the following day at 11 am at the latest to get back to Dhaka in case the barricades were going back up. We all decided to give it a try.

Day 5 – The official blockade ended at 5 am, and we left at 5:30 am. We only saw one police blockade that was not manned, so our drive moved them from the road. We went to Srimangal and 4.5 hours later, with no signs of bad roads or other blockades, we got to our tea plantation hotel. We quickly left for Lawacharra National park. This is the stronghold for the hoolock gibbon in the area, but were told they are difficult to find unless they are calling. It was 10:45am, and way past that time. When you get to the park gate leaving away from Srimangal proper you can access paths from the left or the right of the road. There are also train tracks that go through the park itself. You have to use a park guide at all times. We met our guide and opted to try to left hand side first to try to find the gibbons. Before we got into the park proper, a lone female rhesus macaque was sitting on a fallen log and allowed for some great pictures.



We then started walking on and off paths, going up and down hills, through dry and wet streambeds and along the train tracks looking for the gibbons with no luck. We did come across a small troop of northern pig tailed macaques that were quickly going through a group of trees. None of them stayed in one place long enough to get a picture. We also had excellent but a very brief view of a lone Malayan giant squirrel. After watching the macaques, we hiked back near the park entrance which had a small snack stand. While taking a quick break we were visited by the rhesus macaque we had seen earlier.

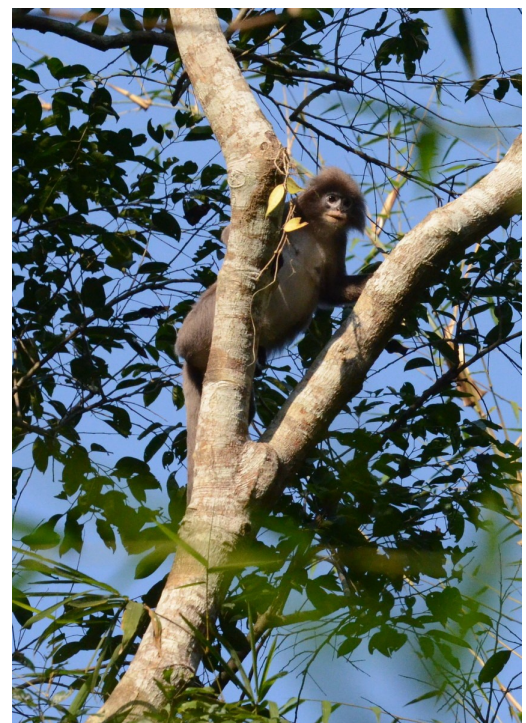
Despite my trying to convince them not to, the locals by the snack stand were



offering her chips and other snacks.



We then decided to go on the path to the right of the main road. Martin set up a camera trap on a small stream bed that we planned to pick up the next morning. After placing the camera, we continued to hike and a very fast moving primate moved quickly just to the right of Sarah and I and up a tree. I initially couldn't understand what the local guide was saying besides langur. I knew capped langurs were in the area, but it didn't look like one. Then I looked up and saw a small troop of about 8-10 Phayres leaf monkeys moving in the trees above me. I was pretty excited about this as it was a species I had dipped on elsewhere. Our group then positioned ourselves on some logs and watched a few of the members slowly move through the trees above us. While a few of them were making alarm calls at us, it didn't stop them from sitting only about 10 meters above our heads staring at us. This was one of the best non habituated langur sightings I have ever had.



At this point I felt something sort of wet dripping down my left leg. I pulled up my pant leg and saw 5-6 leeches all in the process of drinking my blood. Some of them appeared to be pretty sloppy eaters and blood was dripping from around them. I am ok with most insects and I actually like arachnids, but there is something about leeches that almost takes me out at times (I have been an unwilling blood donor in many other countries). I had also asked before going on the trip if I needed my leech socks and was told no, there were not many leeches there. 18 leeches pulled off later, we started hiking again. We saw two Irrawaddy squirrels quickly moving through a tree. At this point it was getting late and we decided to go to Baikka Beel Wetland to look for other animals and the many birds that come in to roost at night. The drive took a lot longer than expected and we took a few pit stops to look at some water buffalo (not wild), a snake and few birds of interest like a feeding Pallas fish eagle. By the time we got to the actual wetland we can hear a lot of birds but not make them out. I decided to walk to the waters edge and I noticed a really large rodent swimming. It then came out of the water and ran into some brush, I alerted everyone else to look at it. I tried to wrap my head around what it was, and Martin later identified it as a large bandicoot rat. My really crappy pictures do not do justice on how large it was, the largest rat I have ever seen in my life.



At this point we went back to the tea plantation hotel and then into Srimangal proper for dinner. Prior to leaving a small bat was flying above our head and into a small tree. We tried to find it with a spot light, but were unable. The plan was to wake up early the next day, find the gibbons and maybe some capped langurs then head back to Dhaka. If the striking had stopped we would then head down to the Sunderbans. As we were leaving the restaurant two large groups of people were marching down the main street shouting, we made a quick exit. Sarah and I were placed in a two bedroom cottage with the British couple. At around 1 am I was awoken to this really loud

ringing noise. At first I did the half asleep hit my snooze button on my alarm ten times motion. The noise continued. I then thought maybe a phone was nearby and if I just rolled over the ringing would stop. 5 minutes later there was banging at my door. I was informed that the BNP had decided to re-instate the blockade at 5 am in the morning. This meant we had to get up, get back in the car and drive as quickly as possible back to Dhaka. This also meant no gibbons. When we got out of our room we started going back towards our van and I was slightly confused as it looked different. IT had a red siren on the top and writing on the sides. The local guides had decided to turn our van into looking like an ambulance and on the sides it said we were foreign journalists. At this point I didn't realize the fact that were going to drive back to Dhaka at light speed with a really loud siren going on and on and frequent intervals making trying to sleep unpleasant. This was the only point that I was scared. Not because of the striking, but because I was pretty sure were were going to crass and explode our vehicle. By the time we got back to the hotel any piece of optimism I had was gone. At this point Sarah wanted to cut our losses and go home. We half debated spending a few days in Dubai, but Emirates was not letting us change any of the details of our flight without paying a huge 1000 dollar plus penalty fee. We finally found a reasonable flight home 2 days later on Saudi Airlines that had a 11 hour overnight layover in Jeddah. While not optimal it beat staying in the hotel. We spent the rest of the day feeling sorry for ourselves, then went back to the “bar” later in the night to make ourselves feel better.

Day 6 – we went back to the botanical gardens, saw more squirrels, more Indian fruit bats, and the creeper/stalker dude showed up again, followed us around, picked more flowers and made us feel uncomfortable.





Day 7 – We left for home. The only way that we could get to the airport was to bribe an ambulance to take us. This was in a real ambulance and I sat on a gurney on the drive in. My first and hopefully only real ambulance drive in my life. My story about going to and being in Saudia Arabia for those 11 hours, I will leave for another day.

A couple thoughts about my trip-

1. It sucked. Well at least most (97.4567%) of it did. I was lucky that the UK people in our group had great attitudes, were funny and had a good sense of adventure. Martin also seemed like a good guy and I would travel again with him as he seems to have a large mammal based knowledge.
2. Because of the force majeure clause , Martin would not cancel the trip and give refunds per his insurance company instructions, and my insurance company would not cover my coming home early. This also was not pleasurable.
3. It was interesting to me with everything that I saw on the news there, that no one I know at home saw anything on the TV about the political situation in Bangladesh. Uprisings in the Ukraine and Thailand were the main focus. The day we left the main BNP leader was shot by the police, and another person was recently hanged making the situation worse. The trip had so

much potential to see so many cool mammals, but at this point I will never go back to Bangladesh and I couldn't recommend it. I still want to see the Sunderbans, but guess I will have to do the Indian side which I have been told is not as impressive and you do not see as much wildlife.

4. While my friends and family were worried about me and kept telling me to get out and be safe, I did enjoy a lot of people telling me I was “about due” for a bad political situation with all the “not normal” places I visit.
5. I really hate leeches.
6. For the first week of being home, every time I saw an ambulance going by my first thought was, huh wonder who is going to the airport.

Trip list

1. Large bandicoot rat – *Bandicota indica*
2. Irrawaddy squireel – *Callosciurus pygerythus*
3. Indian grey mongoose – *Herpestes edwardsii*
4. Northern pig-tailed macaque – *Macaca leonina*
5. Rhesus Macaque – *Macaca mulatta*
6. Indian flying fox -*Pteropus Giganteus*
7. Malayan Giant Squirrel – *Ratufa bicolor*
8. Phayres leaf monkey -*Trachypithecus phayrei*
9. Unknown bat species