

# A visit to the Pani-Dihing Bird Sanctuary, Assam (an IBA)

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**P**ani-Dihing Bird Sanctuary (27°04'N and 94°34'E) is an Important Bird Area (IBA IN-AS-36) in the Sibsagar District of Assam. Pani-Dihing is a wetland covering 3,393 hectares of waterbody and 600 hectares of Phokolai and Dorou *beels*. We visited the Pani-Dihing Bird Sanctuary on 16<sup>th</sup> April, 2010. Mr. Mukunda Hazarika (Field Coordinator for the CEPF Project), Mr. Profulla Phukan and Mr. Lakhan Gogoi (Field Monitoring Coordinator) accompanied us during the visit to the Sanctuary. The sanctuary was well known since decades as a wintering ground of several thousand wetland birds specially ducks and geese. It was earlier known as Maharani Reserved Forest and also as Chetolia reserve. In former days, this area was also home to other species of wildlife especially the Wild Buffalo *Bubalus arnee*, the Royal Bengal Tiger *Panthera tigris* and various species of deer, besides the wetland birds. Herds of wild elephants had been visiting this area since time immemorial and the phenomenon still goes on with somewhat frequent conflicts with humans. To the north of Pani-Dihing are vast areas of riverine tracts consisting of sand bars and large sand islands of the river Brahmaputra, which together constitutes the riverine island of Majuli. Though these areas are inhabited by thousands of people, there are some good birding areas among these sand bars.

Pani-Dihing has a long history of anthropogenic intrusions and exploitation; it was a sought after hunting ground



L to R: Asif Hazarika, Lakhan Gogoi, Mukunda Hazarika and Raju Kasambe at Pani-Dihing Bird Sanctuary

of bird hunters and the local villagers had almost continuously exploited it for collection of bird eggs during the breeding season, both for domestic use as well as for sale. Apart from this, the grasslands of Pani-Dihing have been used as grazing lands for buffaloes and cows. Cattle camps locally called *Khutis* are spread out around the fringes of the sanctuary. But now the forest department is keeping control on them. There were several instances of the Rhinos *Rhinoceros unicornis* straying into the Sanctuary and the adjoining areas from the riverine areas of the north, contiguous with the Kaziranga National Park.

BNHS and its partner Site Support Group (SSG) is working on the north-eastern part on the outskirts of the Sanctuary under the CEPF project. This area has the confluence of one of the

most important river in Assam “Dihing” with the river Brahmaputra and has some fine wetlands and a reserved forest called Dihing Mukh Reserved Forest under Dibrugarh Forest Division. At the mouth of the Dihing River where it meets the Brahmaputra River is a wetland bird habitat, but it is under much human assault both from commercial fishing as well as poaching of birds, difficulty being that the area is quite remote and inaccessible.

## Threatened species

We saw 12 critically endangered White-rumped Vultures *Gyps bengalensis* soaring high in the sky and landing to the far side of the Sanctuary. Three Greater Adjutants *Leptoptilos dubius* were also sighted along with many Lesser Adjutants *Leptoptilos javanicus*, five Black-bellied Terns

*Sterna acuticauda* and one Black-necked Stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*. Other threatened species of birds recorded here are: Slender-billed Vultures *Gyps tenuirostris*, Spot-billed Pelican *Pelicanus philippensis*, Baer's Pochard *Aythya baeri*, Pallas's Fish-Eagle *Haliaeetus leucorhynchus*, Greater Spotted Eagle *Aquila clanga*, Swamp Francolin *Francolinus gularis*, Oriental Darter *Anhinga melanogaster* and Ferruginous Pochards *Aythya nyroca*. Sarus Crane *Grus antigone* was also sighted here on many occasions, but now it is very rare. There is a historical record of Black-breasted Parrotbill *Paradoxornis flavirostris* from the Sanctuary.

#### Other avifauna

We saw many common species such as Asian Openbill *Anastomus oscitans*, Red-wattled Lapwing *Vanellus indicus*, Black Drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*, Indian Pond Heron *Ardeola grayii*, Purple Heron *Ardea purpurea*, Little Cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*, Cattle Egret *Bubulcus coromandus*, Little Egret *Egretta garzetta*, Common Myna *Acridotheres tristis*.

#### Winter migrants

Pani-Dihing supports thousands of wintering Greylag Geese *Anser anser* and Bar-headed Geese *Anser indicus* besides many species of waterfowl during the winter months. These waterfowl include Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*, Gadwal *Anas strepera*, Northern Shoveler *Anas chrysoptera*, Garganey *Anas querquedula*, Red-crested Pochards *Netta rufina*, Tufted Ducks *Aythya fuligula*, Common Pochards *Aythya ferina*, Common Teals *Anas crecca* and Ruddy Shelducks *Tadorna ferruginea*.

#### Threats and conservation issues

Illegal fishing is a major problem as locals use various methods in the Sanctuary area for fishing. The herdsmen and fishermen also build small huts or camps (*khutis*) on the islets in the wetlands for their convenience of fishing and grazing their livestock.

Attempts by the forest department to remove the encroachments are undermined as the locals build the *khutis* again. The overgrowth of invasive species like Common Water Hyacinth *Eichhornia crassipes* and *Ipomoea* has spread over a large part of the once inundated wetlands.

#### Names of birds in Assamese language

We collected names of birds in local Assamese language and found that the locals knew names for more than 50 species of common birds found in the area. Here we present a checklist of those names collected along with meanings of some names given in brackets:

Ruddy Shelduck: *Chakoi Chokua*  
 Little Cormorant: *Pani Kawri*  
 Coot and Common Moorhen: *Dheko*  
 River Tern (all Terns): *Ganga Chiloni*  
 All Jacanas: *Lorioti*  
 White-breasted Waterhen: *Dauk*  
 Purple Moorhen: *Kam Chorai*  
 Geese: *Dhritraj*  
 Asian Openbill: *Hamuk Bhoga* (E: Shell breaker)  
 Woolly-necked Stork: *Konua*  
 Black-necked Stork: *Telia Hareng*  
 Cotton Teal: *Batolu Gutia Horali*  
 Northern Pintail: *Dighol Niji*  
 Lesser Whistling Teal: *Horu Horali*  
 Large Whistling Teal: *Bor Horali*  
 Mallard: *Bonoriha Patiha*  
 Red-crested Pochard: *Ronga Muri*  
 Tufted Pochard: *Kola Muri*  
 Oriental Darter: *Moniori*  
 Great Cormorant: *Doi Kola*  
 Indian Pond Heron: *Konamuchori*  
 Cattle Egret: *Gubog*  
 Little and Median Egret: *Borbo*  
 Black-headed Ibis: *Akahi Bog*  
 Spoonbill: *Khontiabog*  
 All Snipes: *Khusa*  
 All Pelicans: *Dhera*  
 House Sparrow: *Ghor Chirika* (E: House Bird)  
 Small Blue Kingfisher: *Horu Masruka* (E: Fish eater)  
 All Kingfishers: *Masruka*  
 House Crow: *Pati Kowri*  
 Swamp Francolin: *Hoikoli*  
 Grey-headed Fish Eagle: *Borchorai*,

*Kuruwa*  
 Chestnut Bittern: *Itaguria* (E: Brick coloured)  
 Purple and Grey Heron: *Ajanpokhi* (E: Unknown bird)  
 All Vultures: *Hogun*  
 Rails and Crakes: *Jekor*  
 All Woodpeckers: *Kathkhula*  
 Large Golden-backed Woodpecker: *Barhoi Tuka*  
 Indian Roller: *Kowchorai*, *Neelkanth*  
 All Bee-eaters: *Mou Khati* (E: Bee eater)  
 Falcon, Shikra, *Sparrowhaek*: Hen  
 Marsh Harrier: *Buka* Hen  
 Golden Oriole: *Hakhi Ati*  
 Red-vented Bulbul: *Bulbuli*  
 Crimson-headed Barbet: *Hatuluka*  
 All Babblers: *Satbhani*  
 All Sunbirds: *Moupia* (E: Honey Drinker)  
 All Hornbills: *Dhanes*  
 Black Partridge and Khaleej Pheasant: *Dorik*  
 Peacock Pheasant: *Deodorik*  
 Red Junglefowl: *Bonoria Murgi* (E: Forest Hen)  
 Yellow-legged Green Pigeons: *Haitha*  
 Emerald Dove: *Porghuma*  
 Red-wattled lapwing: *Bali Ghora* (E: Sand Horse)

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