

## Finding fascinating Finfoots

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Cruising through a ropey canal, after dusk, in the heart of the tiger-swamp, certainly sounds most daunting. The glimmering eyes of fish owls perched on overhanging trees, alarm calls of spotted deer, and the tender tone of the rowing boat make for a stirring adventure, whose climax reaches its highest peak if a tiger roars close by! Those who have spent a little time in the mangroves of the Sundarbans would clearly understand what I am trying to portray, and the uniqueness of it.

Well, other than tigers, crocodiles, and deer, our Sundarbans is home to many fascinating life forms that we hardly hear about. There are some captivating species in this unique mangrove forest, which are little known to science, but hold the dubious distinction of a superior space in the world's threatened species lists.

One of these only-found-in-the-Sundarbans-in-Bangladesh species is the Masked Finfoot *Heliopais personata*, a duck-like bird, but largely differing from it, and placed in its own family by taxonomists with only two other similar birds, found in Africa and South America. Finfoots are named for the lobes on their feet, which enable them both, to swim well, and to clamber about among fallen trunks and branches of dense mangrove forest.

While only a thousand or less mature individuals of Masked Finfoots are left in the world, our Sundarbans supports a considerable number of these. BirdLife International (2012) classifies the species as Endangered, due to the destruction and increasing disturbance to rivers in lowland riverine forests, hunting, and the collection of eggs and chicks for food. Masked Finfoots are thinly distributed from north-eastern India, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam to peninsular Malaysia, Sumatra, Java, and Indonesia—but the Sundarbans of Bangladesh remain a definite place to see this elusive bird.

As we struggle to save endangered mega-fauna like the tiger or elephant, it is even more challenging to think about overlooked

species like the Masked Finfoot—so rare and elusive that till date very little is known about its biology and ecology. To understand more about this highly threatened species, we braved the hot, humid, and wet summer to find Masked Finfoot nests in the Sundarbans.

Even the ones with not-so-adventurous-hearts get excited at the thought of visiting the Sundarbans and exploring her mysteries, and our team held people who were seeking not just adventure but knowledge about the most mysterious bird in the largest mangrove forest in the world. We spent almost two months on a boat without much contact with the outside world, taking only a few days' break to replenish supplies.



The presence of a horn on the bill, hitherto recorded only for male Masked Finfoot, is also present on a female's bill, as evident from this and subsequent photos.



Masked Finfoot habitat at low tide.





Photos: Sayam U Chowdhury

A male Masked Finfoot sitting close on its nest, staring at us.

The days were long, for we were at the mercy of the tide, starting at dawn and sometimes ending after dusk. From our boat we got on a small *dinghi* and searched never ending *khals* (narrow creeks) along the eastern side of the Sundarbans, starting from Chadpai up to the Sarankhola range, covering more than 100 km<sup>2</sup>.

We found 12 nests, of which two were active, and 10 were from last year or had already been used during this year. Our *dingi* rode up and down the canals, at times with nothing but hope, tired bodies, the heat of July, the monsoon rain of August, the starting of Ramadan and breaking fast—in between our search for the bird continued.

We interviewed fishermen on the way; nearly a hundred by the end of our stay, and almost all of them had hunted or at least tasted Masked Finfoots once in their lifetime! Most of them had captured Finfoots, or found their nests, while setting up *Charpata Jaal* (=fishing nets) along narrow streams in the Sundarbans. *Charpata* fishermen usually set up long fishing nets at low tide along banks of *khals* and harvest fish after high tide. Many of them flushed incubating finfoots while affixing *Charpata* nets either underneath, or near nests, and came back at night to grab the unfortunate finfoot, its eggs, or chicks from off the nest.

Camera trap reveals the secret life of Masked Finfoots by documenting its behaviour for weeks.



08-05-2011 11:22:42



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Photos: Sayam U. Chowdhury

Masked Finfoot nest with eggs

Some even claimed to have chased fledgling or juvenile finfoots to the shore and captured them for lunch or dinner. We kept our emotions under control and used the fishermen as leads to where we might be able to find an active nest. At times they were unhelpful, but cooperated some times. We had realised by then that every bit of information was important, and noted all that we saw and heard.

There were days when we came back in higher spirits, having spotted Masked Finfoots foraging during low tide, and there were days when nothing, absolutely nothing was found, except for watching the common kingfishers, hearing the calls of the Mangrove Pitta, and spotting footprints of the spotted deer.

After searching high and low, a brilliant ray of hope lighted our path one afternoon in early August, in Chhita-Kotka, in an unnamed canal; there he was, the male guarding its three eggs! We rode right under the nest and he literally gazed at us intruders. We were delighted at finding an active nest, for having overcome

the shadows of uncertainties: dealing with the changes in the mighty tides, the mysterious jungle, the venous canals, and our fading confidence.

To observe and document the Masked Finfoot's nocturnal behaviour, for the first time ever, we set up camera traps in a safe location not to disturb the Masked Finfoot couple, and also watched them from a hide. We took turns and kept a watch to learn more about their behaviour, their feeding habits, and their patterns of incubation. After about a week and a half the male Masked Finfoot left the female to guard and incubate the nest. He never returned. Most of these data were new to science and we were extremely excited to share this with others.

23 days passed and there was no sign of the chicks. The eggs had not hatched, and we started to worry. Had something gone wrong? Was there no light at the end of this journey? We realised we were now at the mercy of Mother Nature and left it to her to decide the fate of the three eggs. We waited patiently.

Then one afternoon in late August the eggs hatched—bringing hope for the future, an understanding for tomorrow, and a pledge for their continued existence. The precocious chicks left the nest within a day and our time in this magical land of finfoots, tigers, dolphins, and many wonderful species came to an end.

Looking back to the last summer, and our quest in the Sundarbans to understand, and later help the survival of Masked Finfoots, there are many memories that come to mind. Strangely it's not the hardships that I see, but the positives, the finding of the nest, the attachment to the Masked Finfoot family, comprehending their behaviour, and later taking steps to improve their condition.

We want the government to change its policies of natural resource management, especially regarding fishing in important Masked Finfoot breeding areas from Supoti to Chhita-kotka. We want to change the habits of the fishermen, for *Charpata* net fishing to be done on a limited basis in Masked Finfoot zones, especially during the breeding season; we want to go to villages of the fishermen and make them understand what they do not know yet, the gems they have and are destroying due to being unaware. Most importantly, we want to continue our work, more research, more findings, and help the Masked Finfoot grow with generations, for Bangladesh, and for our future.

For a short video of our Masked Finfoot research please visit: <http://www.youtube.com/user/SayamUChowdhury>

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## Reference

BirdLife International., 2012. Species factsheet: *Heliopais personatus*. Downloaded from <http://www.birdlife.org> on 25/01/2012.



A day old Masked Finfoot!



## Photo feature



Masked Finfoots are expert swimmers.



A female Masked Finfoot clambering out of the water.







Sometimes they do use their wings along with the lobed feet to climb overhanging trees near water.



Masked Finfoots mostly forage during low tide; this female is eating a big shrimp.



Photos: Sayam U. Chowdhury

They used this spot to clean their feathers.



Male Masked Finfoot.





Male Masked Finfoot in rain.



A male Masked Finfoot watches us warily while patrolling its territory.



The male on its way to the nest.



The male rushing to its nest as the rain starts.