

# Bangladesh for the Masked Finfoot

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After several years of muttering / dreaming / floating ideas and generally saying “yeah we need to go sooner rather than later” a plan was finally hatched to go to Bangladesh’s Sundurbans, one the largest mangrove forests in the world and the last stronghold of the critically endangered and tragically still declining Masked Finfoot. I scrounged up all the gen I could, found a great boat with a really helpful, professional, and responsive owner, wrangled up a group of friends, settled some dates, and we bought tickets. Then we really crossed our fingers that everyone would get visas and that we would actually be able to find the bird. We only know of one other group to have gone looking for Masked Finfoot in the Sundurbans in recent history - a Birdtour Asia group that went in early 2022. (Footnote - another couple groups have gone since we went but before I got this TR online, apologies for the delay there).

In the end, we all miraculously made it to Dhaka on schedule, nobody had any visa problems, our boat operator and the surrounding logistics were absolutely terrific, we had a hell of a good time, laughed ourselves sick, and we even saw two **Masked Finfoots**. It was a really great trip with an awesome group of friends.

After the Sundurbans, the group divided up a bit due to varying schedules / desires but most of us went on to Satchori NP (for **Cachar Bulbul** among others) and Baikka Beel wetlands, and some of us added Cox’s Bazaar (principally for **Spoon-billed Sandpiper**).

I’m not much for typical trip reports with a lot of photos, species lists, and day by day accounts. Anyone, particularly any birder who is interested in going to Bangladesh for the Finfoot, can look at eBird, iGoTerra, guide books, etc and sort out what birds can be seen where. Instead, this is an attempt to write an idiot’s guide to seeing Masked Finfoot and visiting Bangladesh.

## KEY THINGS TO KNOW

1. Masked Finfoot is essentially not seen anywhere outside of Bangladesh anymore. There are almost certainly still a few birds here and there in SE Asia, but to have a realistic chance, you need to go to the Sundurbans, and you should go sooner rather than later as the population is still decreasing rapidly.

2. You probably should go in Boreal winter. Probably Dec - Feb is best. How realistic it is to try to see it outside of that season we don't really know, unfortunately.
3. You need a houseboat and depending on what boat you charter, you need a group of 4-10 people, give or take. Based on our experience, I would recommend a slightly larger group so that a larger boat can be chartered, which will be more comfortable.
4. You should probably plan on 4-6 days in the Sundurbans. We had 5 nights and 4,5 days. Our strategy to see the bird was good if not optimal: we searched where they historically had been concentrated and where recent sightings were with no luck, then changed tactics in the middle of the trip, make a long overnight sailing to another area with recent sightings of multiple individuals, and finally saw the bird on the afternoon of the 4th day.
5. The other "target birds" for Bangladesh can definitely be seen in India or Thailand. However, if you're going to visit and want to spend a bit more time, both Cox's Bazaar and Satchori/Baikka Beel were worthy destinations and added some fun, though the lodging options at Satchori left a bit to be desired.
6. As of December 2022, VOA (visa on arrival) seems to be reliable. 7 of us got visas ahead of time (a bit of hassle and more expensive), and two of the group did VOA at the airport, which worked flawlessly. This had been a source of concern as there are a lot of anecdotal reports out there of people not succeeding with VOAs.
7. Pugmark (the boat operator) can help with all the paperwork you'll need for visas, whether you get them ahead of time or on arrival. Basically you'll need a letter of invitation and a hotel reservation for the first night (even if you won't use it). You might also need a copy of your host's ID (in this case, the owner of Pugmark, Bachchu) or a copy of a return flight reservation.

## **THE BOAT / HOW TO GET TO SUNDURBANS**

We chartered a boat called Bawali which is operated by Pugmark Tours. I contacted about 8 guides / boats / agencies in Bangladesh and Pugmark was the most responsive and the most helpful of the lot, so I ultimately was most confident choosing them and it worked out well. There was a second agency that also responded very well and provided seemingly solid information, and that also seems to book with / work with Pugmark. This other company is Royal Bengal Tours and seemingly did some of the work for Pugmark to book our hotels for the second part of the trip, so I guess they know each other and work together. Given that the most important part of the trip is the Sundurbans and the boat, it seemed best to book with Pugmark directly, and I would recommend doing the same. Of note, Bawali is also the boat that BTA used for their group, though from the operators I spoke with / the boats I looked at, I would have chosen Pugmark/Bawali either way.

If you have a smaller group, Pugmark has a smaller boat as well, Mawali, which would be apt for a group of 4-6. Bawali, the boat we used, has a capacity of 12 guests. It has

6 double occupancy cabins with A/C, 3 bathrooms, one hot shower, a comfortable lounge / dining room, and overall was really comfortable and served us very well. The crew of the boat were phenomenal and never pushed back on our very early starts, late returns, very full days, or any other requests. The food was tremendous and the boat did a perfect job of catering to our desires (we discussed food preferences quite a bit ahead of time) and, critically, one friend's very serious food allergy. Also worth mentioning is how helpful Bachchu, the owner of Pugmark Tours, was throughout every step of the process from initial questions to last minute plans changes while we were in Bangladesh. Our guide/translator on the boat, Romeo, was also really excellent and did everything he could to help at every step of the way.

Pugmark also arranged transfers to/from Dhaka International Airport for us. Despite a little risk of flight delays throwing a wrench in the works, we chose to all arrive to Dhaka and have a small van waiting for us when the last were due to arrive, and to head straight to the boat. After the boat, we transferred directly back to Dhaka in the same van, and stayed in a hotel close to the airport. All of this worked well for us: the airport hotel is not just near the airport (shrewd details like this just make a trip report!) but also convenient for leaving/entering Dhaka to the NE, in the direction of Satchori NP and Baikka Beel.

It is also possible to fly Dhaka -> Jashore and then transfer to the boat from there, but this doesn't really save time, it just trades van/road time for airport/flight time. It is about 5-6 hours from Dhaka Intl Airport to Mongla, where you board the boat, and the van is comfortable, so I don't see any need to add cost or complexity with another internal flight.

A side note - if you want to have alcohol on the boat, best to buy it at duty free on your last flight leg to Dhaka as BD is nearly a dry country. Bachchu had said it was very hard for him to get beer for us, so we let that go. We did later find beer once at a touristy hotel in Cox's Bazar, and then in the lounge at the airport before departure, but it was generally very hard to come by. We had Pugmark stock the boat with tonic, soda water, and coke and brought a couple bottles of gin and whisky from Singapore duty free.

Ultimately the cost for Bawali for 5 days for 9 people and the transfers to/from the airport was approximately \$1150 USD per person / \$10500 USD total. Pugmark asked for a deposit to confirm the boat when I was booking, a couple of months in advance, so I wired USD \$4400 to them which they duly received, then we paid the balance in cash (USD) upon arrival.

## **MASKED FINFOOT AND WHERE TO SEARCH**

Now for the fun part! The hardest part is to know where to look and to know whether you have the right strategy. I'll address the **where** part first.

Traditionally (ie, following publications, known nests, historical observations and more, a lot of which is the work of Sayam Chowdhury), the more south-easterly regions of the Sundurbans (ie, the areas around Katka and Jamtola) have been a region with a good population of Masked Finfoot. However, new threats (increasing salinity, recent use of poison fishing) are adding to old threats (overfishing, harvesting of adults and eggs, drowning in fishing nets, storm damage, etc), and there haven't been any real efforts to survey or collect more than anecdotal data in several years (the pandemic has of course not helped). It is absolutely not sufficiently surveyed / understood to do anything more than talk in really vague terms, and Sayam Chowdhury (probably the person who knows more about Masked Finfoot than anyone) commented to me that "he doubts the birds will have completely disappeared from that area in just 1-2 years," but it seems like the birds might be getting harder to see in the SE. It really isn't known if birds are still there in the same numbers and if not, if they are declining or relocating.

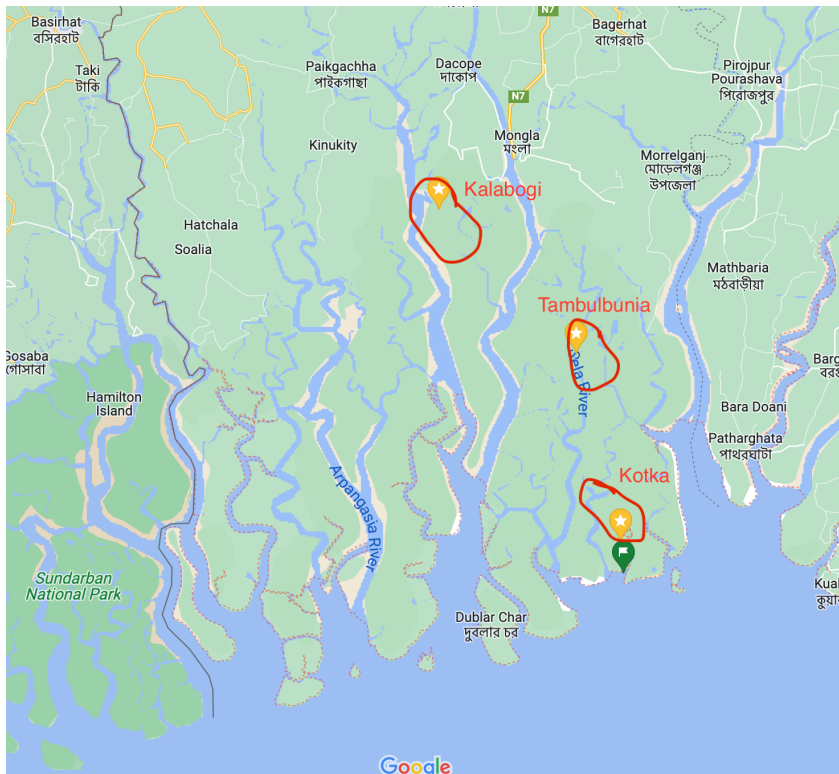
We spent our first day in an area called Tambulbunia as the most recent sighting we knew of was in that region and only about two weeks old. A full day's searching was not productive. Then we spent two days in the Kotka area, including areas where fishermen said they had seen the Finfoot reasonably recently, but again without any luck.

Based upon BTA's success seeing the Finfoot in the Kalabagi area (far further NW) earlier in the year, and based upon up to date information that Pugmark was able gather by calling the rangers in the Kalabagi area, we felt like we had a better chance relocating from the SE to Kalabagi for our last 1,5 days. Note that it's quite a long sailing to move between the two regions. Depending on the tides and exactly where you are, somewhere around 10-15 hours are needed.

Accompanied by a ranger from the Kalabagi station, searching in channels where fishing is strictly prohibited, and in the general area where BTA's group saw Masked Finfoot in the spring, we found a female **Masked Finfoot** in the mid afternoon and were able to spend an hour watching her swimming, foraging both in the water and on the bank, and scurrying up and down the muddy banks. Then later that evening, in another canal in the area, we found a male **Masked Finfoot** that was a little more skittish but still provided 15 minutes of great observations.

With the pressure off, we did not work as hard the final morning to find another bird but still, based upon 3 days of intense searching in Tambulbunia and Kotka netting us zero sightings, and then seeing two birds in one afternoon in Kalabagi, we all felt that, at least at the present, the Kalabagi area is a better area to at least start your search. I would certainly recommend asking Pugmark to contact rangers, biologists, and everyone they can, as well as trying to get ahold of Sayam, to gather as much up to date gen as you can before starting your search.

Here is a very rough map to give an idea of the areas I am talking about:



Our eBird lists with more specific place names are here, in an eBird Trip Report:  
<https://ebird.org/tripreport/89475?view=checklists>

## HOW TO SEARCH

It is also difficult to know if you have exactly the right strategy and are making best use of your time. I will recommend what we felt was the best strategy based upon our collective experience, based upon recommendations from the Pugmark crew, and based upon discussions with and recommendations from Sayam Chowdhury.

To go looking, you'll transfer from your house boat to a "country boat" as it's called, which is a wooden boat with a flat deck, about 8 meters long, with a really noisy

inboard engine and some plastic deck chairs to sit on. It's actually quite comfortable but the engine is really, REALLY loud.

Basically, you want to look in "smallish" channels, perhaps 5 to 25 meters wide, and you want to really focus on falling and low tides. We presume that morning and evening are best but tide seems to be more important. Given that you are there with limited time and are not likely to casually come back for a second try, I would recommend that you do what we did which is look non stop all day every day, heat and sun and tide be damned, until you find the bird! But your best chances are going to be on lower tides. While the birds do get seen on larger channels, there is more disturbance and they are presumed to not regularly use the largest channels. The birds presumably do use really small channels as well but there is a logistical problem with searching in these really tight / small channels. Either you turn the (really loud) engine off and row / pole up and down these small channels, which takes a lot of time and covers little ground while you are looking for a really rare bird in a huge area, or you use the engine in these small channels and potentially / likely scare the bird up the bank and into cover before it is even visible. I don't have any proof that we had the best strategy, but in the end what we felt was the best way to go about it, and what Sayam also feels is a good strategy, is to use the engine despite how loud it is, in order to cover more ground, and to perhaps not spend too much time in the really small channels where you cannot see far ahead and have to fight through a lot of vegetation. These really small channels LOOK like excellent habitat, and must get used by the birds, but again you're making so much noise and can't see very far ahead that it seems unlikely to actually see one there.

Both of our sightings were in channels about 10-15m wide, easy to navigate, and where you can see a reasonable way ahead. Both were at reasonably low tide. The first sighting was still mid afternoon when it was quite warm, and the bird was swimming very close to the muddy bank at the water's edge. The second sighting was later in the evening and the bird was walking on the large exposed muddy bank. In both cases we were navigating with the engine but turned the engine off instantly when the birds were sighted and in both cases, the birds either remained calm or only moved off a bit and then quickly calmed back down and we were able to observe them well by maintaining a reasonable distance and keeping quiet. They were not any really very skittish as long as we maintained distance.

Of note, we also spent quite a bit of time out after dark and pre dawn, as many of us have thermal scopes and the birds are reputed to roost and nest near/over water. We didn't find any roosting Finfoots but we generally had a good time, saw a lot of mammals, owls, and nightjars, and would suggest doing the same to maximize chances. Despite not finding any Finfoots at night / by thermal scope, we did turn up a **White-eared Night-Heron**, which was a really unexpected find! We initially thought it was a first record for BD but our find prompted a local birder to re-examine his photos and it turns out he had also photographed a White-eared Night-Heron just before we found ours, in a quite different part of the Sundurbans. So it seems a reasonable

conjecture there are more than one of them there - perhaps they disperse in the non breeding season, or perhaps there could even be an overlooked breeding population? Worth keeping eyes open and taking a good look at all the Night-Herons you find!

## THE REST OF BANGLADESH - COX'S BAZAR

Five of us travelled to Cox's Bazar for two nights to look for Spoon-billed Sandpiper and other waders. Domestic flights are available multiple times per day, hotels are abundant, you just need to get a speedboat once you are there to get out to the mud flats.

You can get a speedboat from the jetty at 21.4502, 91.9696. We paid \$70 USD for a full day. The area to look is called Sonadia Island and surrounds. Some key GPS points:

- There is a high tide roost at roughly 21.5445, 91.8410 - the far point of Sonadia Island
- There were at least 3-4 Spoon-billed Sandpipers known to be in the area when we were there, and the area they typically feed in is the exposed mud around 21.5575, 91.8633
- Depending on the tide, there are a lot of mudflats between the high tide roost and the SPSA feeding area.

When we first arrived, the tide was quite high, so we looked through the many thousands of waders at the high tide roost but without luck. We then started working our way NE working the groups of waders that were moving onto mud banks as they were exposed, but also without luck.

The following day, on the morning low tide, we went straight to the mudflats where the SPSA are meant to feed typically, but there were no waders anywhere nearby due to a very inconvenient Peregrine Falcon. We spent some time looking around the general area but found very few waders and the tide was rising. We then returned to the high tide roost, arriving shortly before high tide. There were initially few birds but they started to arrive in large numbers and we eventually found a minimum of two **Spoon-billed Sandpipers** in the roosting birds, one flagged and one unflagged.

Not surprisingly, scope(s) are essentially mandatory if you want to find SPSA and enjoy the wader show. Also, Nordmann's Greenshank is meant to be in the area as well but we did not find any.

## THE REST OF BANGLADESH - SATCHORI NATIONAL PARK

We used Pugmark to arrange transport to Satchori, our (mandatory) local guide, and the park accommodation. The accommodation is poor, particularly for what you pay, but it is the only option without a long drive, so it is what it is. Different parts of our group actually visited at different times due to some of us going to Cox's Bazar first, but here's the synthesized info:

There is some very rustic park accommodation near the main entrance. Generally, the best birding was from the watch tower (24.1255,91.4462) in the morning, and at the pond (24.1198,91.4462) in the afternoon/evening. To get to the pond, turn right (S) onto a side track in a little wash before the watchtower, then keep right at 24.1205,91.4463. Your local guide will know the route in any case.

Our local guide was not a birder, and really only helpful to show us the trails initially and where the water pool is. The guide is mandatory apparently though, particularly if you leave the short main paved path from the entrance to the watch tower, so probably best to just suck it up and have the local guide (US\$50/day).

**White-cheeked Partridge** and **Blue-naped Pitta** are present along the trails and both were seen by some of our group, the Pitta proving particularly difficult. **Cachar Bulbul**, the most interesting bird for most world birders here, if not particularly interesting to look at, is seemingly reliable from the water pool in the mid-late afternoon.

Overall birding at Satchori is quite enjoyable and between the watch tower, the mixed flocks with wintering warblers, and the thrushes and flycatchers and bulbuls that come to the water pool, a decent collection of birds can be found.

At the park itself, there are two extremely basic restaurants and a couple of very basic stores selling water and biscuits. The food at the restaurants is pretty grim, and efforts to have food ready for us at certain times or to have certain foods made never went well. We generally ended up waiting around a long time for what was never quite what we thought we had agreed, and was invariably also not very good. On our last night both restaurants were semi-closed and we couldn't convince them to feed us. It was at that point that we found out that there is a really decent restaurant about 10-15 minutes away (to the west, back the way you came), not the 45 minutes - 1 hour we had initially been told. So I would highly, highly recommend taking some biscuits / nuts / whatever snacks you want with you, and either winging it for breakfast or having leftovers from your dinner for breakfast, and getting restaurant meals at the nice restaurant in the first town to the west.

## **THE REST OF BANGLADESH - BAIKKA BEEL WETLANDS**



We were told by Pugmark that we needed a guide for Baikka Beel but this is absolutely not the case. You can just go, there's not a lot to it other than birding along the dirt entrance road, a few of the side roads and dikes there, and then in the actual reserve itself there is about 1km of walkable trail and two observation towers. The first is generally locked and the second we never even made it too.

Google will give you correct directions to Baikka Beel, in case your driver doesn't know how to get there. The reserve entrance is in Google Maps as "Baikka Beel Ticket counter" at 24.350857,91.7046886.

Essentially, the last 1km or so of the entrance road is probably best for finding a perched or flying **Pallas's Fish-Eagle**, and the reserve itself and the last few hundred meters of road just before the reserve are best for the myriad warblers (ie, Pallas's Grasshopper, Baikal Bush, Spotted Bush, Thick-billed, Paddyfield, Blyth's Reed, Oriental Reed, Clamorous Reed, and Black-browed Reed, though we didn't find Black-browed Reed) that can be found. Pipits (Richard's, Rosy) are probably best outside the actual reserve in more open areas. Overall the birding is enjoyable if not spectacular, and it's generally pretty birdy if far from pristine habitat. A scope is quite useful.

Half of the group overnighted in the area, and Pugmark booked us into a tea estate type of hotel that was further than necessary from the birding (10 minutes the wrong side of Sreemangal). I would recommend finding your own lodging closer to the birding or pushing Pugmark to book you a basic hotel in Sreemangal rather than a tea estate type place.