

Trip Report: Maguri–Motapung Beel, Upper Assam, India 19th and 21st Dec 2010 – By Pritam Baruah

I visited the *Maguri-Motapung Beel* area in Tinsukia District of Upper Assam for two days on 19th and 21st Dec 2010. This wetland complex is part of the Dibru Saikhowa Important Bird Area (IBA IN-AS-13) but is located just outside the Dibru Saikhowa National Park and Biosphere Reserve. The goal was to look for waterfowl and grassland birds.

‘*Beel*’ is the local name for a lake with marshy areas at the edges. *Beels* are often dotted with sandy islands, mudflats and reed-beds of various sizes. These flats may contain mixed grass that harbor typical grassland birds. Waders may use edges that are not very disturbed. The open waters may contain large concentrations of waterfowl. Most *Beels* are threatened by silting (from both man-made and natural causes), reclamation, pollution and over-fishing.

Maguri-Motapung Beel is located in the south bank of the Dibru River, which is a channel of the mighty Brahmaputra River. The Dibru Saikhowa National Park is located in the northern bank of the Dibru River. The *Beel* is connected to the Dibru River by a system of channels and is very rich in aquatic life. Since the area is not protected, it is heavily used for fishing and grass collecting. However, it is still very rich in biodiversity and is important for conservation of waterfowl and grassland birds. The grassy areas in the *Maguri-Motapung* complex are conducive to intensive grassland birding because the only dangerous mammal expected is the odd feral buffalo and other large mammals are mostly absent. So it is possible to crawl around for hours inside the blanket of grass. This is not possible in most of the remaining grasslands of Assam and certainly not possible inside a protected area. However, it is still very important to keep an eye out for danger while inside the grassland. Another method is to stay some distance away from the edge of the grass and observe through a scope, as these notoriously skulking birds rarely settle if they sense human presence nearby.

Almost all my time was spent in two activities: scoping for waterfowl from a row boat and searching for grassland birds in the flats. This could have led to overlooking or missing some species. The area is almost entirely treeless and hence woodland birds were not encountered. Overall, the targeted birding was quite successful having recorded the **Baikal Teal** (*Anas formosa*) in Assam after almost 80 years [2], **Falcated Duck** (*Anas falcata*), **Ferruginous Duck** (*Aythya nyroca*), **Pied Harrier** (*Circus melanoleucos*), threatened grassland specials such as **Swamp Francolin** (*Francolinus gularis*), **Jerdon’s Babbler** (*Chrysomma altirostre*), **Marsh Babbler** (*Pellorneum palustre*), **Swamp Prinia** (*Prinia cinerascens*) and an assortment of other skulking grassland warblers. Baer’s Pochard was my most important target but it was not encountered. Black-breasted Parrotbill was not searched for as all of the known areas of undisturbed *Phragmites karka* reeds are located in the north bank of the Dibru River. Wader numbers were low, possibly because most of the suitable areas were disturbed. Finally, 118 species of birds were identified in two days.

References:

1. Birds of South Asia. The Ripley Guide, Volume 1 & 2. Pamela. C. Rasmussen & John. C. Anderton, Lynx Edicions.
2. The Birds of Assam. Anwaruddin Choudhury, Gibbon Books.

Map:



Map width: 12 Km. Lat,Long of Beel: 27.576308,95.387764

Bird list with selected species accounts:

1	Little Grebe	C	100+
2	Great Crested Grebe	2	*
3	Indian Shag	6	A large gathering had all 3 species. They were overlooked thereafter.
4	Great Cormorant	C	
5	Little Cormorant	C	
6	Little Egret	C	
7	Great Egret	C	
8	Intermediate Egret	C	
9	Eastern Cattle Egret	C	
10	Grey Heron	3	
11	Purple Heron	4	
12	Indian Pond-heron	C	
13	Asian Openbill	C	
14	Black Stork	2	
15	Lesser Adjutant	2	*** [VU]
16	Bar-headed Goose	4	Flyover of a single flock of 4. The low number of geese is probably indicative of how disturbed the marshy edges are.
17	Greylag Goose	8	A single flock of 8 seen.
18	Lesser Whistling-duck	C	1000+
19	Ruddy Shelduck	C	500+
20	Common Teal	C	1000+
21	Baikal Teal	1	*** [VU] 1 male on both days. See appendix 1.
22	Garganey	2	Surprisingly only 2 were seen.

23	Falcated Duck	10	***	[NT] 10 males in a large waterfowl flock of 5000+ birds. My personal best sighting of this species so far. Previously I had seen single males in Kaziranga on 3 occasions.
24	Gadwall	C		1000+.
25	Eurasian Wigeon	C		200+
26	Northern Shoveler	C		100+
27	Northern Pintail	C		1000+
28	Chinese Spot-billed Duck	4	**	4 were seen but many others possibly overlooked. Based on recent data, this species should probably be considered a regular winter visitor to NE India instead of vagrant.
29	Indian Spot-billed Duck	C		100+
30	Mallard	U		Surprisingly uncommon, < 10 seen.
31	Tufted Duck	C		200+
32	Ferruginous Duck	C	***	[NT] 500+
33	Common Pochard	C		1000+
34	Red-crested Pochard	C	*	500+. Largest concentration I have seen in the Brahmaputra Valley.
35	Cotton Teal	C		100+
36	Black Kite	4		
37	Shikra	1		
38	Oriental Honey-buzzard	1		
39	Osprey	1		
40	Griffon Vulture	2		
41	Pied Harrier	1	*	A fine male lingered around the boat for over 30 minutes and it even caught a frog.
42	Hen Harrier	1	*	
43	Western Marsh Harrier	1		
44	Peregrine Falcon	2		
45	Swamp Francolin	2	***	[VU] Only 2 seen and another was heard. These are quite secretive in this area possibly due to trapping.
46	Brown Crake	1	*	
47	White-breasted Waterhen	C		
48	Purple Swamphen	C		
49	Common Moorhen	C		
50	Eurasian Coot	C		
51	Bronze-winged Jacana	C		
52	Pheasant-tailed Jacana	C		
53	Red-wattled Lapwing	3		
54	Grey-headed Lapwing	4		
55	Northern Lapwing	U		A single flock of 23 seen.

56	Pacific Golden Plover	9	*	A flock of 9 Golden Plovers raised considerable excitement because of the possibility of vagrant European. Some were conclusively identified as Pacific. Some remained inconclusive.
57	Little Ringed Plover	2		
58	Common Greenshank	2		
59	Common Sandpiper	C		
60	Temminck's Stint	C		
61	Pintail Snipe	1	*	
62	Common Black-headed Gull	4		
63	River Tern	C		
64	Oriental Turtle-Dove	2		
65	Spotted Dove	2		
66	Rose-ringed Parakeet	C		
67	Black-billed Roller	1		
68	White-throated Kingfisher	C		
69	Lesser Pied Kingfisher	4		
70	Common Kingfisher	2		
71	Blue-throated Barbet	1		Wooded village just outside the Beel.
72	Lineated Barbet	H		Heard calling from above area.
73	Oriental Skylark	1		
74	Grey-throated Sand-martin	U		
75	Barn Swallow	C		
76	Western Yellow Wagtail	C		
77	Grey Wagtail	C		
78	Citrine Wagtail	C		The 2nd most common wagtail.
79	White Wagtail	C		The most common wagtail. Dusk fly by of 2000+ mixed wagtails.
80	Paddyfield Pipit	1		
81	Olive-backed Pipit	2		
82	Red-vented Bulbul	C		
83	Black-headed Long-tailed Shrike	C		
84	Grey-backed Shrike	C		
85	Bluethroat	1	*	Responded well to phishing. Photo in appendix 2.
86	Himalayan Rubythroat	3	*	Responded to calls of other grassland birds. Also responded to the song of Swamp Prinia possibly because they are superficially similar. This delightful bird came hopping right to my feet while crouched under the blanket of grass.
87	Oriental Magpie-robin	1		
88	Common Stonechat	C		

89	Jerdon's Babbler	4	***	[VU] A small flock seen.
90	Chestnut-capped Babbler	C	*	Several seen and heard. Often responded to call playback of other grassland babblers.
91	Striated Babbler	1	*	
92	Jungle Babbler	6		
93	Marsh Babbler	1	***	[VU] One seen and another heard.
94	Zitting Cisticola	4		A single patch of grass and water hyacinth yielded 3 of these birds along with 3 Paddyfield Warbler and 2 Rusty-rumped Warbler.
95	Bright-capped Cisticola	1		
96	Rusty-rumped Warbler	2	*	Photo in appendix 2.
97	Striated Grassbird	C		
98	Ashy Prinia	2		
99	Grey-breasted Prinia	C		
100	Plain Prinia	C		
101	Yellow-bellied Prinia	C		
102	Swamp Prinia	2	***	[NT] Two seen very well. Previously unrecorded contact call was recorded, to which it responded very well. See appendix 3 for spectrogram.
103	Pale-footed Bush-warbler	1	*	
104	Spotted Bush-warbler	1	*	
105	Russet Bush-warbler	1	*	
106	Indian Reed-warbler	1		
107	Thick-billed Warbler	1		
108	Paddyfield Warbler	3	*	Photo in appendix 2.
109	Blunt-winged Reed-warbler	1	*	
110	Dusky Warbler	C		
111	Smoky Leaf-warbler	U		
112	Yellow-breasted Bunting	4		
113	Black-faced Bunting	C		
114	House Sparrow	C		
115	Eurasian Tree Sparrow	C		
116	Eastern Baya Weaver	5		
117	Common Myna	C		
118	House Crow	C		

C - Common, U - Uncommon H - Heard

[CR|EN|VU|NT|DD] - IUCN red list categories

*** - Red listed birds, all of the below

** - Special sighting, all of the below

* - Scarce birds, difficult to see birds, high personal satisfaction

Appendix 1: Alert emails sent regarding the Baikal Teal

Sun, December 19, 2010 8:30:21 PM

Alert: Baikal Teal in Dibru Saikhowa

From: Pritam Baruah <doublebulb@yahoo.com>

To: orientalbirding@yahoogroups.com; nathistory-india@Princeton.EDU;
delhibird@yahoogroups.com

Cc: maanbarua@gmail.com

A single male Baikal Teal (*Anas formosa*) was seen in Maguri Beel today (19th Dec 2010) at 3.55 PM and observed for about 15 minutes by me (until the flock was disturbed and flushed by a fishing boat). It was at a distance of about ~60-70 meters and seen using a Zeiss 85 mm scope from a country boat. It was in a very large flock of more than thousand birds (containing Red-crested Pochard, Common Pochard, Tufted Duck, Ferruginous Duck, Gadwall, Northern Pintail and some others). The duck was in the exact plumage illustrated in "Birds of South Asia. The Ripley Guide by Pamela C. Rasmussen and John C. Anderton" - which I understand, is the breeding plumage.

Maguri Beel is a lake located just outside Dibru Saikhowa National Park in Assam (India). This is very rare record from Assam and most if not all records from the earlier part of the last century.

Thanks,
Pritam.

Tue, December 21, 2010 7:01:38 PM

Re: Alert: Baikal Teal in Dibru Saikhowa (CONTINUES)

From: Pritam Baruah <doublebulb@yahoo.com>

To: orientalbirding@yahoogroups.com; nathistory-india@Princeton.EDU;
delhibird@yahoogroups.com

Cc: maanbarua@gmail.com

The male Baikal Teal continues in Maguri Beel in what looked like the same monster flock. I relocated it today at 7.30 AM and observed it for 30 mins until it was flushed by another boat. This was my first attempt after I found it the day before yesterday (19th Dec).

The location is the same as the first sighting: a few hundred meters right of the Maguri Eco-tourism shed which is run by a few local boys. The monster flock gathers till about 8.00 AM until it gets flushed and split by the arriving fishing boats. The best time to look for it would be from 6.00 AM to 8.00 AM when the fishermen havent arrived yet. Also note that there is very little fog even at 6.00 AM. I think 2.00 PM to 4.00 PM is good as well because by that time the splinter flocks might get flushed again and hence could attempt to congregate back in the aforementioned area (where I first located it on 19th Dec). The flocks are very skittish and they prefer to take flight if a boat gets close so I recommend staying at least 60-70 m away and use a spotting scope. Staying behind the scattered fishing traps made of water hyacinth (locally called 'jengs') can help being unobtrusive.

...

...

Thanks,
Pritam.

Appendix 2: Pictures



1 Bluethroat



2 Rusty-rumped Warbler



3 Paddyfield Warbler

Appendix 3: Spectrogram of Swamp Prinia contact call.

