

THE BANGLADESH PYTHON PROJECT

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INSIDE THE WILDS OF LAWACHARA

Volunteers from all over the world join in a yearly field workshop to help conserve the extraordinary biodiversity of a National Park. And you can be one of them



The Asian Forest Tortoise *Manouria emys phayrei* is one of 25 species of freshwater turtles and tortoises found in Bangladesh - almost 10% of the global diversity of chelonians. Unfortunately, 18 of these, including this *M. emys*, are threatened with extinction. On the title page, a juvenile Burmese Python *Python molurus bivittatus*.



A beautiful juvenile Bengal Monitor Lizard *Varanus bengalensis* - a common lizard, yet seldom seen due to its quick and alert nature.

TEXT AND PHOTOS
BY SCOTT TRAGESER

Deep inside the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot lays a hidden jewel with a unique and diverse confluence of wildlife: Lawachara National Park. This incredible region is still relatively unexplored by researchers, meaning that many of its cryptic denizens still remain to be acknowledged by science. In a recent exploration of the Park under the purview of the Bangladesh Python Project, an independent research effort, some new light was shed on a few of these rare and novel creatures. As one could expect, during these surveys many other charismatic creatures were encountered and subsequently photographed; all in an effort to showcase the importance of maintaining the protection that the park offers to its many endangered hosts.

Caesar Rahman, a Dhaka resident and rising conservationist, is the head herpetological researcher working in Lawachara. With the help of CARINAM, he has become a hero for its scaly, oft-overlooked residents. As with all research though, time and money is needed to make progress, and securing these necessities can be the most challenging part. This is where the participants of the "Bangladesh Python Project Workshop" come to the rescue. Heralding from Australia, America,

India, and Bangladesh, these dedicated volunteers came for ten days to lend a hand surveying the area and to learn about the research and techniques involved with the Project.

In July of 2013, Caesar and I implanted radio-transmitters into three Burmese Pythons *Python bivittatus* to track this locally endangered species' movements and to learn how they are utilizing the human-altered landscape of Lawachara National Park. Many of the pythons have home ranges that occur in healthy forest but also overlap with tea plantations and even villagers' backyards. This poses a problem if we are going to help increase their numbers in the park. Villagers don't respond well to pythons eating their chickens and ducks, and won't hesitate to elevate the value of their livelihoods over that of the snakes'. It also poses an interesting question for the project: how exactly are the pythons utilizing this ever-changing and ever-diminishing landscape? The most important data we hope to acquire is their day-to-day and seasonal movement patterns. This is what we need to know in order to determine what environmental factors the pythons require so that one day the villagers can peacefully co-exist with these apex predators.

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A portrait of what is possibly one of the rarest inhabitants of the Sundarbans, the Northern River Terrapin *Batagur baska*. None have been observed in the wild for several years but during our surveys in the coming summers, hopefully this will change. Notice the mosquito coming in for a landing!



One of Bangladesh's most adorable creatures: the beautifully marked Phayre's Leaf-monkey *Trachypithecus phayrei*, a denizen of the forest canopy.



Finding Elongated tortoises *Indotestudo elongata* in the forest is near-impossible without the aid of dogs or a radio transmitter such as this one.

A similar question also applies to the Elongated Tortoise *Indotestudo elongata*, which the project has recently expanded to include. Very few of these tortoises still exist in the park and, like the python, are still considered a delicacy for many villagers. Though, thanks to the educational outreach efforts of Caesar's team, the locals in the surrounding villages are slowly beginning to understand the importance of coexisting with these animals. The word was quickly spread that we were looking for tortoises and with a little bit of luck, Caesar got a call that a child in the village of Baghmara had found one right before our team was to arrive. Two other tortoises from a nearby forest were also saved from the soup pots of a rural market in order to test the feasibility of a translocation effort. Mortality rates can be high when relocating reptiles but fortunately, our introductions have gone better than anticipated with every individual surviving, sans one poaching victim. Health of the animals was obviously a concern, thus the introduced tortoises were thoroughly checked to ensure no diseases were being brought in. Along with radio-tracking, daily forest surveys were conducted to discover what treasures the forest had in store for us.

Towards the end of our expedition, one of the locally hired trackers stumbled

upon a new python whilst routinely tracking one of our transmitted individuals. Unfortunately we discovered that this python had been relocated by the forest department a few months prior after rescuing it from a property some distance away. With a limited number of transmitters available to use, we have to be picky about which snakes we track. In this case Caesar decided to only insert a less costly PIT tag, as her habits would not be the same as a resident python's and thusly not as useful to the python study. If we encounter her again though, the PIT tag will tell us exactly who she is and data can still be taken.

Ten days in the jungle can take its toll on you so we end the workshop with a leisurely boat ride down the legendary Sundarbans: the world's largest mangrove system. Three days of normally cost-prohibitive birding, mammaling, and herping accompanied by good food and good company.

As the workshop is an annual event, every summer there are several opportunities for enthusiastic individuals to lend their hand at helping to save the herpetofauna of Bangladesh. If this interests you, spots for June are still available so please don't hesitate to contact Scott Trageser at Trageser.scott@gmail.com. ●



One of the great classic tales of mimicry in nature belongs to Gray's leaf insect *Phyllium bioculatum*.



Red-tailed Bamboo Pitviper *Trimeresurus erythrurus* are one of the more common snakes in most Asian rainforests. Normally found crossing the road after a heavy rain.



Smith's Leaf-litter Frogs *Leptobatrachium smithi* in amplexus, off to find a suitable site to deposit their eggs.



An Orange Blister Beetle *Mylabris pustulata* taking flight.

Participants inserting a PIT tag in a Burmese Python *Python molurus bivittatus*.



This *Micryletta* was one of two potentially new species discovered during 2014.



Red-tailed Bamboo Pitviper *Trimeresurus erythrurus*.



This child in the village of Bagmara saved this tortoise from certain death.



Day and night, throughout the forests of Southeast Asia, one can hear Tokay Geckos *Gekko gecko* from hundreds of meters away calling "Tow-Kay, Tow-Kay!"

Ganges River Dolphins *Platanista gangetica* and Irrawaddy Dolphins were encountered several times during our three days in the Sundarbans.



A fierce persona masks this arboreal, rear-fanged Gray Cat Snake's *Boiga siamensis* rather benign bite.



Assam Snail Eaters *Pareas monticola*, like all *Pareas*, specialize on eating snails and exhibit jaw adaptations to assist with the shucking.



The sexually dimorphic and endangered Western Hoolock Gibbon *Hoolock hoolock* is one of five species of primate that we see every trip.



Elongated Tortoises *Indotestudo elongata* were once very common colonists of the forest leaf-litter, but decades of unsustainable hunting has decimated their populations.