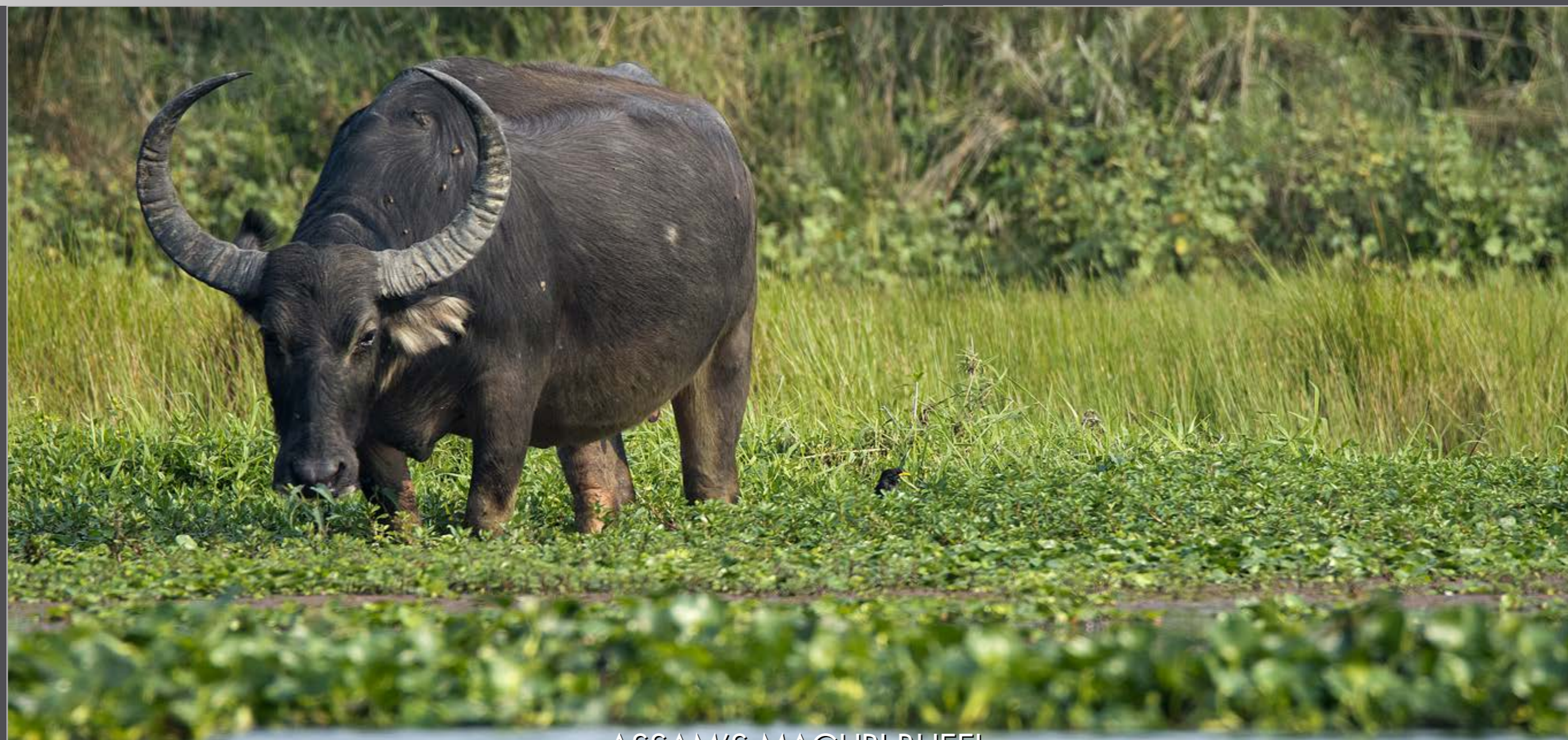


WorldWideWonders



ASSAM'S MAGURI BHEEL

WATERBIRDS PARADISE

A beautiful man-made lake in a remote corner of North-Eastern India is the perfect destination for spectacular birdwatching and peaceful canoeing



Ruddy Shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*

The spectacular Ruddy Shelduck is one of the species which can be most commonly observed and photographed at Maguri Bheel. On the previous page, a pure-strain Wild water buffalo *Bubalus arnee* - sadly this huge and occasionally aggressive species is getting more and more often interbred with the domestic water buffalo.



Fisherman at dawn

Boat trips for bird photography are taken with these low-slung wooden canoes, expertly maneuvered among the water channels by the local fishermen.

TEXT BY ANDREA FERRARI
PHOTOS BY ANDREA & ANTONELLA FERRARI

The state of Assam, in North-Eastern India, is well known among travellers and wildlife photographers for its spectacular National Parks and Natural Reserves, most notably Kaziranga. Less known, but well worth a visit by the discerning nature lover and demanding birdwatcher, is the little visited and rather remote Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, and most specifically the nearby Maguri Bheel (a *bheel* is a water reservoir or a man-made lake). Dibru-Saikhowa itself is located in the Dibrugarh and Tinsukia districts, and was designated a Biosphere Reserve in July 1997 with an area of 765 sqkm (295 sq mi), including a core area of 340 sqkm (130 sq mi) and a buffer zone of 425 sqkm (164 sq mi). It is located at about 12 km (7.5 mi) north of Tinsukia town. The protected area is bounded by the Brahmaputra and Lohit rivers in the north and Dibru river in the south. It mainly consists of moist mixed semi-evergreen forests, moist mixed deciduous forests, canebrakes and grasslands. It is the largest salix swamp forest in north-eastern India, with a tropical monsoon climate with a hot and wet summer and cool and usually dry winter. Annual rainfall ranges from 2300 mm to 3800 mm. It is a haven for many endangered species and rich in fish diversity. Originally created to help conserve the habitat of the rare white-winged wood duck, the National Park is also home to other rare creatures such as pure-strain water buffalo, black-breasted

parrotbill, tiger and capped langur, while the more accessible and more easily visited Maguri Bheel is famous for its waterbirds, water buffaloes and feral horses. Here the best option is to stay - as we did - at Kohuwa Eco Camp, a very basic but quite pleasant lakeside lodge from which daily canoe trips around the still, clean waters of the lake can be taken. The local boatmen are experts at their trade, and understand the need of bird photographers well. A huge number of species can be observed at Maguri Bheel - some migratory, some resident - including rare ducks such as the goldeneye, Baer's pochard and the eastern spot billed duck. Waders are common, and endemic riverine grassland species include striated grassbird, sand lark, chestnut-capped babbler, yellow-breasted prinia and ruddy-breasted crake, a secretive but stunningly dark red colored hen-like skulker of the river edges. Another rare species which can be seen at Maguri is Jerdon's babbler. But above all the feeling at Maguri Bheel is one of utmost serenity and natural balance. Gliding slowly and silently on its clean waters without a worry in the world - albeit momentarily - and watching immense flocks of ducks taking off against the sunset or groups of wild water buffaloes quietly bathing by the lake's edge truly rejuvenates one's soul, and the weary traveller can rest and relax for a few days in peace and calm, soaking in the bucolic atmosphere of a still unspoilt natural environment. ●



Lesser adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus*

Adjutant storks are mostly scavengers and can be often observed in Assam, often near garbage dumps and abattoirs. These are very large, broad-winged, majestic birds - quite ungainly (and possibly even rather ugly) on the ground but always supremely elegant when soaring.



Wild water buffalo *Bubalus arnee*

Wild water buffaloes are present in good numbers near Maguri Bheel, and will occasionally be encountered as they bathe in its cool waters or feed by the lake's edge. This is a huge and rather irritable species which can however be observed at close range and in reasonable safety when exploring the *bheel's* channels by canoe.



Baillon's crane *Porzana pusilla*
A beautiful but rather wary waterbird species commonly encountered at Maguri Bheel.



Grey-headed swamphen *Porphyrio poliocephalus*
Swamphens are easily identified by their iridescent blue plumage.



Feral horse *Equus caballus*

The stunningly beautiful and rarely observed feral horses which can be occasionally seen along the shores of Maguri Bheel are the free-roaming and truly wild descendants of the horses left behind by the Allies after the end of WWII. We were lucky - this is a mare with her day-old colt.



Pied Harrier *Circus melanoleucos*
 This is one of the most beautiful and colorful raptors which can be seen at Maguri Bheel, often hovering above the reed beds by the lakeside while looking for prey - mice, frogs, water snakes, chicks.



Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*
 An immature individual of this impressive, much-loved and much-photographed fish-hunting raptor species.



Asian openbill stork *Anastomus oscitans*

This is a largish, elegant and very common species all across Asia - its peculiarly nut-cracker shaped beak betrays its specialized diet consisting of water snails. At Maguri Bheel fishermen and waterbirds coexist peacefully in seemingly perfect harmony, with net-entangled birds being often saved by the villagers themselves.

**Mixed flock**

At Maguri Bheel huge numbers of ducks occasionally take off simultaneously, offering wonderful photographic opportunities and an unforgettable spectacle. This mixed-species group includes several specimens of Eurasian wigeon *Anas penelope*, Northern shoveler *Anas clypeata* and Gadwall *Anas strepera*.

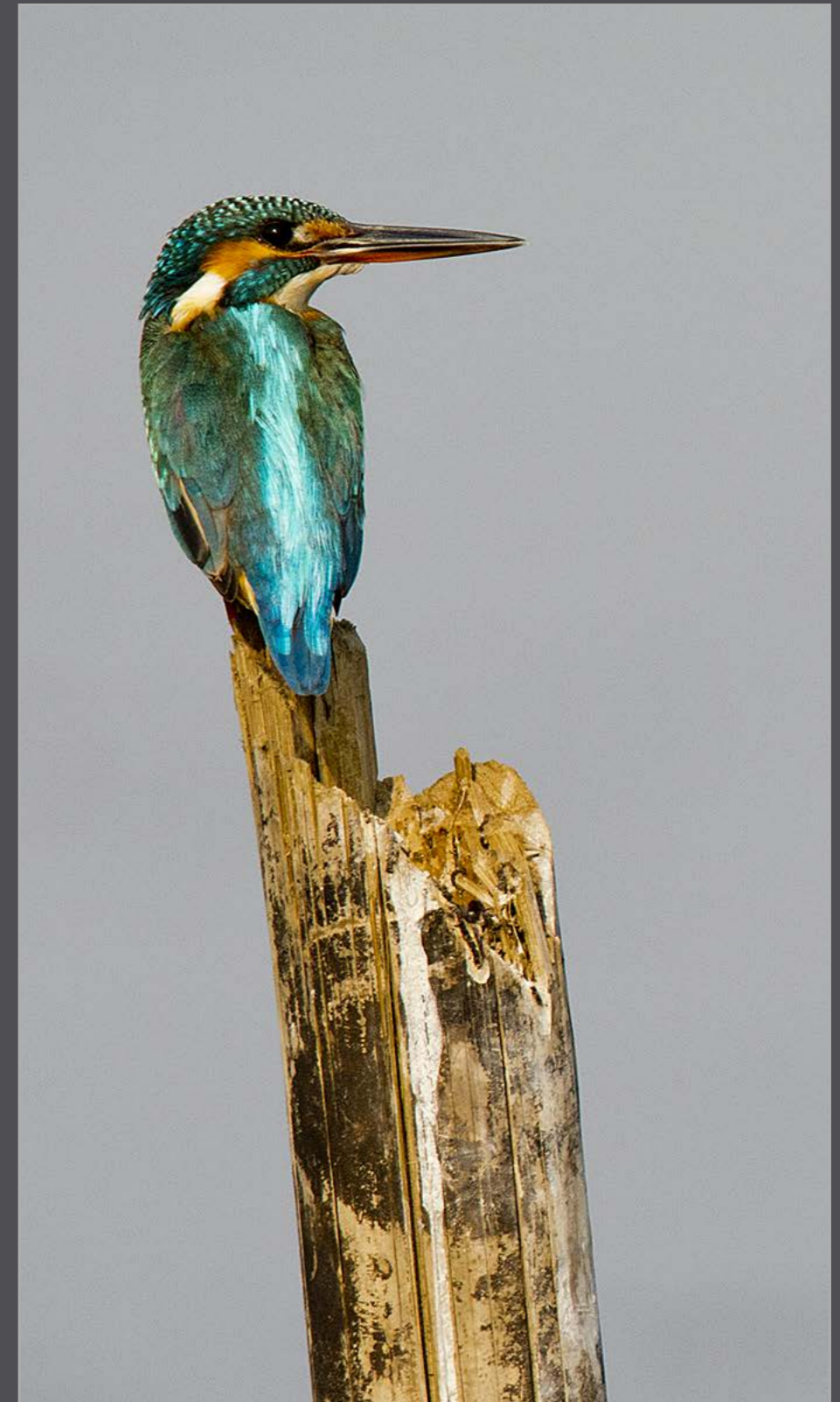


Lesser Whistling-duck or Lesser Whistling-teal *Dendrocygna javanica*

The Lesser Whistling-duck or Lesser Whistling-teal *Dendrocygna javanica* is very commonly observed all across India and Asia in general.



Spot-billed duck *Anas poecilorhyncha*
A beautiful species and a photographer's favorite due to its brilliant colors and very elegant flight.



Common kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*
Very common but always stunningly beautiful!



Wild water buffalo *Bubalus arnee*

Pure-strain wild water buffaloes are not commonly observed in India, and usually only in the North-East - prime locations to watch and photograph them are Kaziranga National Park, Manas National Park and Dibru-Saikhowa National Park, all sited in Assam. Notice the incredible span of the huge, sickle-shaped horns.



Slender-billed vulture *Gyps tenuirostris*

Not in Dibru-Saikhowa itself, but nearby - this is currently a severely threatened species.



Asian openbill stork *Anastomus oscitans*

Shown feeding on a water snail with its highly specialized beak.



Asian openbill stork *Anastomus oscitans*

Boat trips at Maguri Bheel offer unbeatable opportunities to photograph waterbirds in both their elements - in the water and in the air. The use of specialized equipment here however is a must - long-range binoculars and a stabilized telephoto lenses (at the very minimum 600mm focal length) will offer good chances of success.



Mixed flock

A mixed-species group including Ferruginous duck or ferruginous pochard *Aythya nyroca*, Eurasian wigeon *Anas penelope* and Gadwall *Anas strepera*.



Eastern water rail *Rallus indicus*

One of the rarest and most difficult to photograph species at Maguri Bheel...



Wood sandpiper *Tringa glareola*

...And one of the more easily observed and photographed ones.



Common Coot *Fulica atra*

This very wary species can be immediately identified by its uniform dark grey or blackish plumage and its bright white beak and forehead.



Gadwall *Anas strepera*

An archetypal but still very elegant duck species which can be seen in large numbers at Maduri Bheel.



Bronze-winged jacana *Metopidius indicus*

A somber-colored but rather elegant species. Like all jacanas, *Metopidius indicus* utilizes its highly specialized, long-fingered feet to lightly but surely tread on broad-leaved floating plants like water hyacinths without sinking. Adults will carry the chicks under their wings, with only the feet protruding.



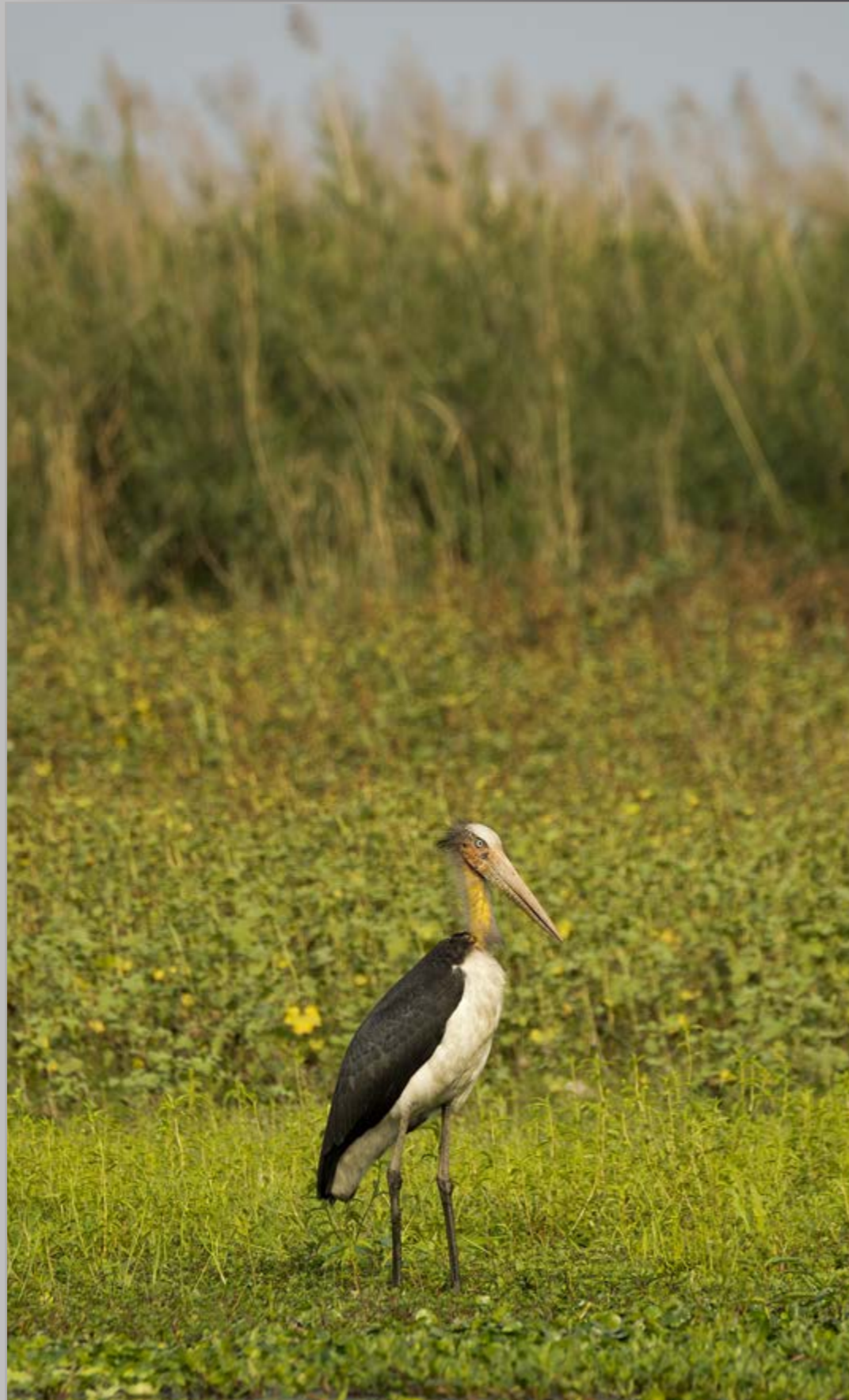
Red-crested pochard *Netta rufina*

A stunningly beautiful and very colorful species - alas, it is also very easily alarmed and not easily approached by canoe.



Lesser Whistling-duck or Lesser Whistling-teal *Dendrocygna javanica*

The rather somber but warmly toned plumage helps in identifying this very common species in flight, even at a distance.



Lesser adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus*
An opportunistic feeder, here looking for frogs or water snakes.



White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*
Ubiquitous and easily approached, but always splendidly colored.



Osprey *Pandion haliaetus*

We observed several juveniles of this fish-hunting species while at Maduri Bheel - the site is clearly being used as a breeding area by many pairs.



Spot-billed duck *Anas poecilorhyncha*

Our favorite! Very few other duck species can compete with this one regarding elegance and colors.