

The Waiting Game



A rare pose.

It is noon on a hot and humid April day. I am standing with my camera amidst some trees when I see two unusual flying bugs. They come and go in random trajectories. Then they tire and sit – but only for a split second, too quick for my camera to focus – before flying off again. I stay still, looking through my camera viewfinder, sure that the next time they sit, or the time after that, I will get their picture.

Indeed, waiting is a large part of photographing birds, wildlife and insects. I usually try to find a likely place, hopefully spot a creature, and wait for the right moment to photograph it.

The trouble is that none of the creatures follow my wish. They move of their own free will, which is driven by priorities such as finding food, mating, feeding their young and avoiding predators. At times, out of sheer desperation, I concentrate hard, solemnly sending reiki and assorted mind control commands their way, but they are impervious. Either they do their own thing, or they run away.

Playing “take my picture please” with the photographer is not an important part of their daily routine.

The insects I am tracking return presently. It is difficult to follow them with my eye, even harder through the camera’s viewfinder. I have a sudden epiphany. How painfully slow we humans are compared to other creatures! The blink of an eye is time enough: a frog jumps three feet, a finge (drongo) snatches a dragonfly mid-flight, a lizard sensing my presence vanishes, a kingfisher takes off with a fish, a squirrel leaps from one tree to the next. Their muscles have zero inertia, reaching top speed in a fraction of a second.

Compared to them, I must be a study in clumsiness: large, slow-moving, sweating profusely in the heat, blinking rapidly as sweat stings my eye; unable to sit in odd positions, jump from one tree to another, race like a bullet or simply vanish.

To make matters worse, my largeness presents obvious dietary – nay, feasting – possibilities to other creatures. The mosquitoes and leeches I can understand. After all, it takes one tiny incision to access several litres of nourishing blood coursing through my veins. But why do those red ants love stinging my legs? Why does that large beetle dive for my nose? Does my nose look like his potential mate? Huh?

This is the dilemma of the waiting game. While waiting for my photo target, I become lunch target.

I have become so accustomed to non-cooperation that when I finally find a bird close by and unafraid, I am more startled than the bird, and, fumbling with the camera, miss the photo opportunity.

Yet I persevere, telling myself the waiting game has not become an obsession. I need just one more chance, one more shutter-click, one more time the bug sits down or the bird shows its face...I will get it, and then I will rest.

Hunting and Shooting



Black-winged stilts in flight.

In one of my earliest memories of the outdoors, I am shivering at the edge of a gigantic marsh as winter's dawn breaks. Several men stand nearby, guns in hand. Behind us, helpers carry boxes of spare cartridge, food and water. The hunter with best eyesight is scanning reeds at the far end of the water. He gestures to silence the others, then points: following his finger we see a flock of pintail ducks paddling in the water. The hunters raise their guns and start tracking the ducks; I cover my ears. When they fire, the gunshots shatter the silence and momentarily drown out the frenzied cackling of the ducks as they take off. The hunters anticipate when firing their second round, aiming ahead of their target so flying bird and bullet can meet.

Then silence - except for wounded ducks thrashing on the water. Helpers run along and retrieve them, quickly slitting their throats before adding them to the day's cache.

Later that day in our campsite at Hakaluki Haor - indescribably beautiful, the largest wetland (or *haor*) of the country - dozens of ducks are stripped of their feathers and hung in a row from a rope.

At eight years I am old enough to accompany a hunting party led by my uncle Mr. Moazzem Choudhury, avid hunter and adventurer.

Two days later, we return home in our jeeps carrying the *haor's* bounty. I am joyfully reunited with my parents. My mother immediately separates out the pintails and proceeds to cook them into an aromatic *bhuna* curry. This duck, also known as *lenja hansh*, is the best-tasting because of the generous marbling of fat in its dark flesh. Others such as *chokha* (shelduck), *dahuk* (waterhen), *jolmurgi* (moorhen) - and various ducks - are also good. The worst is *pankouri* (cormorant) with no fat and tiny sharp bones scattered in its meat like a fish.

But you had to be careful when eating because even though metal pellets had been picked out before cooking, one or two remained hidden in a drumstick or breast, and you could easily break a tooth.

Looking back, this is what puzzles me: while relishing the adventure and the scenic outdoors, I never once felt the desire to pick up a gun and hunt, even though hunting - a highly illegal activity today's Bangladesh - was once an exciting, obsessive, fashionable and legitimate pastime.

Fast-forward several decades to 2013. I am once again shivering at *haor's* edge one January morning, scanning the water, looking for ducks and birds. I see a flock of black-winged stilts at water's edge. Should I shoot them while they are in the water or when they take off? Which way will they fly at the sound of my shooting? Will my aim be true?

I shoot when the moment is right. I anticipate their movement and must be an instant ahead. Just like those long-ago hunters, because, as their bullet took an instant to reach its target, so my camera's shutter takes an instant to capture the picture.

Later at home, I admire rows of birds - on the computer screen, not on the rope.