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On the swatch of no ground

Mashida R Haider goes to the Bay of Bengal and comes back full of the marine life there

The excitement palpable on board the MV Aboshar on the wintry morning was akin to Vasco da Gama's as he alighted India. Nothing less would do. There was the sense of anticipation, of expectation, and the sheer thrill of the possibility of witnessing the unknown. As the boat took off from Dublar Char in the Sundarban, there was a collective cheer from the small group. We were on our way to the great wide open.



When Rubai and Liz, wildlife photographer friends, offered to take us to the Bay of Bengal for a trip, I didn't know how to react. I had never been on the sea, and the Swatch of No Ground, a deep sea canyon, where we would be ultimately headed, sounded intriguing. I had seen photographs and the turquoise meshed with indigo where the water became deeper was certainly breathtaking.

I didn't know how much of marine life we'd actually see though.

Our first sighting was of the Irrawaddy Dolphins (*Orcaella brevirostris*). Slow swimming and inconspicuous, these mammals are commonly found in the shallower and warmer coastal waters. Even though they are deemed 'common', I had hardly ever seen dolphins except in aquariums, and out in their natural surroundings they moved with a freedom that pleased the eye. Distracted by shouts and whistles on the opposite end of the deck, I moved quickly to see a marlin shimmying the surface of the water with its tail, in a public performance of gaiety.

While some of us missed the next spotting because we were inside having breakfast, the rest got to see a huge Indo-Pacific humpbacked dolphin (*Sousa chinensis*), just fifteen feet away from the boat. With a long, narrow beak and its pinkish white colour, these mammals are very distinct and easy to identify. I was sorry to miss it—the other night Rubai had shown us an amazing picture of a pink dolphin and its calf, a jet black shade, which made an interesting contrast with its mother.

All binoculars went up as one of the surveyors cried 'Whale!' With bated breath we scanned the horizon. Nothing for a while, and then it emerged slowly. A majestic animal in shades of dark and light grey, and two blowholes, it was like nothing I had seen before. It went down again, coming back for air every fifteen minutes roughly, while we gasped and kept a close look out. It travelled at speed befitting its great size, and ten minutes later it was gone. We exhaled. It was identified as a Bryde's whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*) unmistakable in appearance because of three longitudinal ridges on its head.

It was too much to digest in just one morning and by this time, our exhilaration had reached a fever pitch. We didn't even want to take bathroom breaks. The big find of the day still waited though. We came across schools of dolphins, of two species, the bottle nose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*) and the spinner dolphin (*Stenella longirostris*). There were hundreds of them and when we got close, they swam in our wake, bow-riding. They cavorted in the water, leaped, spun and played. It was like being in the middle of a nature documentary, with the widest screen ever. It was surreal.

This was the first time ever that spinner dolphins had been sighted and recorded in Bangladesh.

sea change colour from aquamarine to midnight blue and noted the readings on the depth-sounder which varied around three hundred meters. Not talking much, lulled into a state of quiet satisfaction, we saw one or two dead turtles floating by. We had reached the deep sea.

Whale stranding on Kotka Beach, Sundarban



On December 22, the crew members and guests of the M.L. Bonbibbi, a Sundarban cruising vessel of The Guide Tours Ltd, found the carcass of a whale washed up on the beach of Kotka East Sanctuary, Sundarban.

The cetacean was flipped on its back, with its white underside showing. 54 ventral plates, running from its chin to the navel, were clearly visible. Sadly the tail and pectoral fin, both important parts for identification, had been cut.

The remaining body measured 28 ft, 9.3 m. These measurements suggest that the animal might be a Bryde's Whale, previously recorded in the Bay of Bengal and sighted 35 Kilometers offshore by the first tourist expedition to the Bay of Bengal just the day before.

In order to positively identify the animal, the skeleton must be obtained and measured. About half the animal's body was already buried in the soft sand, while the upper jaw, tongue and eye remained clearly visible. Below the navel a large gash revealed the whale's intestines.

A rope mark running around the whale's torso might indicate, that the animal had gotten entangled in an off-shore fishing net, thereby drowned and later been cut out of the net and released.

This sad finding has strengthened the dedication of The Guide Tours Ltd. To study and document the marine life in the Bay of Bengal and the adjoining Sundarban Forest.

Through further research ways might be found to prevent such killings and conserving the abundant but little known diversity of Bangladesh's wildlife.

The elusive Atlantic bowhead whale

The harshness of its Arctic home belies the gentle, playful nature of one of the rarest whales in the world, describes Paul Nicklen and Lyn Hartley

Alone in a kayak, I ride the undulating swells of the Arctic Ocean, off the coast of Canada's Baffin Island. Icebergs the size of apartment buildings drift by, creating thunderous roars as they drag across the ocean floor 100 metres below. Polar bears ride these ice-floes, swimming ashore when they drift close to land. This is no setting for the faint-hearted.



My task is to take pictures of the endangered Atlantic bowhead whale *Balaena mysticetus*. But first, I must see one.

Suddenly, a blow erupts behind me. Slowly, I spin my kayak around to see two forms surface, 20 metres away. They're not as big as I thought they would be. Then I realise that the inky knobs in front of me are, in fact, joined to form one massive animal, which must be at least 15 metres long.

Calm in the face of the storm

With one flick of its massive tail, the whale could destroy me and my kayak. But I feel surprisingly calm and blessed. Cautiously, I slip the blade of my paddle into the water to push backwards. But this is enough to unnerve my companion, who sinks below the surface and into the depths.

To get the necessary pictures, I must leave the comfort of my boat. I hesitantly slip into the frigid waters to get a better look at a

nearby glacier-capped mountains. Dipping my face below the surface, I stare in utter awe of what is beneath me.

The head of this large, adult male is the size of a large pick-up truck, his eye as big as a grapefruit. I dive to get a closer look, but my kicking motion startles him from his slumbers and he sinks out of sight.

The whale's turn

Disgruntled, I head back towards the kayak. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice a huge shadow below me. The whale hasn't left. Rather, he's taking a turn at observing me.

He starts swimming in a circle around me, less than six metres away. If I swim too fast, he disappears. But as soon as I stop kicking and float, he's back. After 45 minutes, the whale seems to tire of our game and disappears.

By this time, I'm cold so I return to the kayak. Sticking my mask in the water one last time to remove my fins, I suck in a mouthful of salt water in shock. The curious whale is less than two metres away. Chills rush down my spine as I stare into his eye. Overwhelmed by euphoria, fear and gratitude, I mumble into my snorkel that he's won our little game.

— **BBC Nature**

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