Beddagana: The Wild Heart of the Capital

Posted on



A platform jutting out to the lake offers a soft, mellow sunrise.

We take a stroll through a wild marsh that is awakening at morning twilight, close to the centre of Colombo City.

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The park is crossed by a variety of walks

Kotte was still slumbering; it was the time between the witching hour and milky morning when no one was out in the dark. The entrance that leads to the Beddagana Wetland Park appeared before us illuminated in glittering yellow, like a

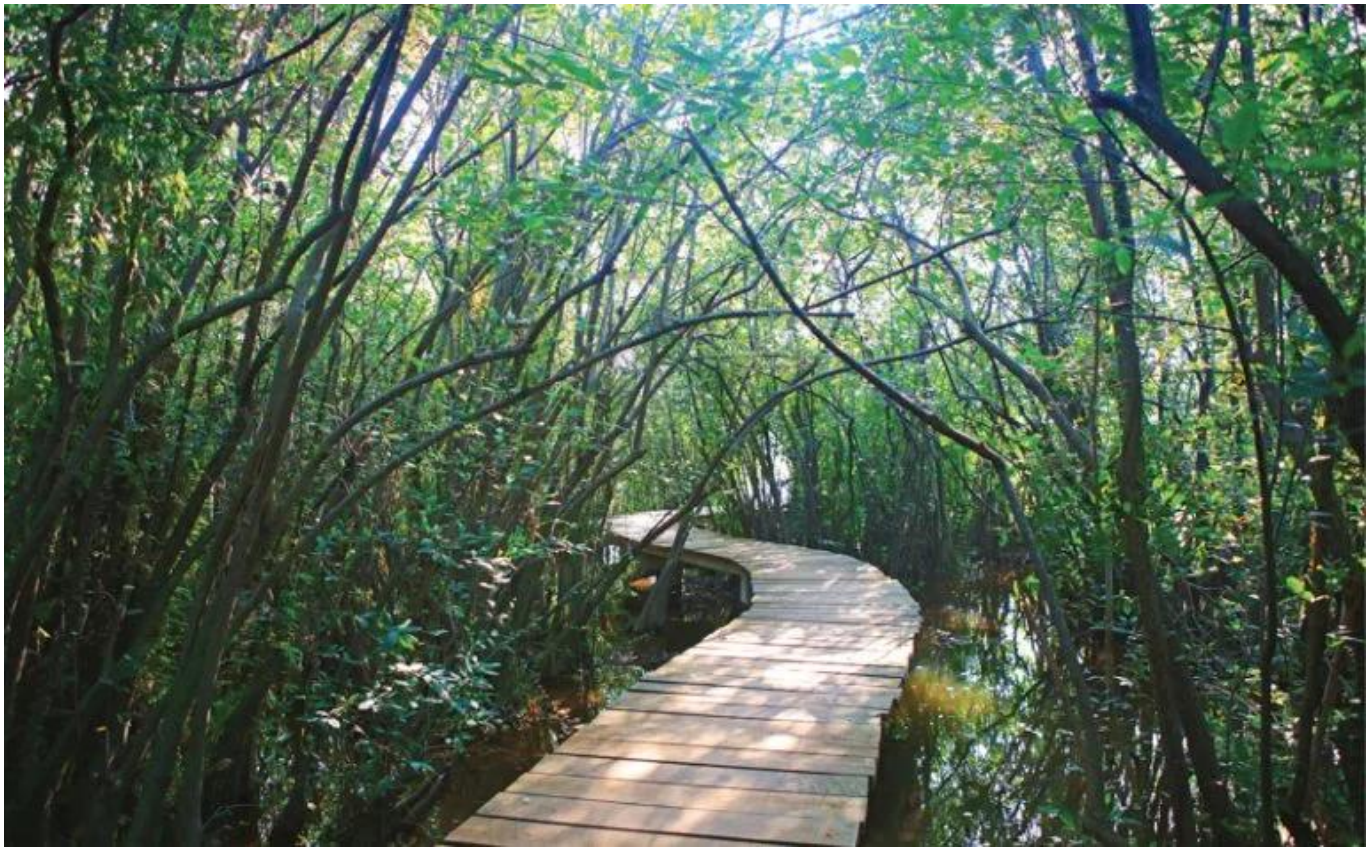
beacon. We were early: we had to keep to bird time and not human. The 80 species of birds, beside the other animals found here, are at their element at daybreak.

It was back in 1984 that human interest was first focused on this wetland, when it was first noted as a stamping and roosting ground for a host of birds, especially migratory birds. When 18 hectares were set apart for its wealth of biodiversity, it immediately also became an escape for the jaded suburbanites dwelling around the perimetres.

Throughout the Beddagana park criss-crosses a wooden platform, a few inches raised above the marsh. It’s a magical route to experience the wetland, letting you walk unhind-ered to its womb; your cheeks softly brushing the greenery, dawdling a toe in the water, just centimetres away from a glittering turquoise Kingfisher posing regally.

The wooden platform had been constructed manually, eschewing all the machinery that would disturb the lives of natural residents. This park manages with the least possible amount of built structures, almost all of it in wood. In the rainy season, when the swollen streams surge in engulfing everything, it is all under water and the creatures inhabiting the park have the run of the place, a flooded wild paradise with not even a trace of man.

The human visitors that morning were all discreet birdwatchers and serious worshippers of nature; even so, the birds remained jealous of their freedom. We were treated with bird call only. Most of their daily drama must be played in the privacy of dark groves and deeply curtained places, which not even the most curious binoculars could penetrate.


The platform snakes its way through the intersected, pristine wild marsh

However, there were revelations. As a hazy gold-orange orb of a sun cast a gold dye over the landscape, a flock of Whistling Teal took flight over Diyawanna Lake. A Jacana picked her way on her fan like toes. A solitary baby duck floated on water, so close to us but with no heeding at all, a lardy pudding of a bird with ludicrously serious determination on her face.

> A birdwatching tower shot up in the middle, dominating the marshscape. At its foot, we found wading Purple Coots.

At one point we borrowed a close walk called the ‘Forest Trail’. It was fringed by tall dark trees from which festooned ferns: a scene right out of a prehistoric world. Peace pervaded the park. The faintly audible soun-ds of the traffic outside seemed to belong to another dimension. The call of the Kirala and the chirruping of a hundred smaller birds were the only sounds that were real.

Standing still, a birdwatching tower with a bright red roof shot up in the middle, dominating the whole marshscape. At its foot, we were able to find several wading Purple Coots. If you were to take these birds for haughty matrons, which their hen-like shape and glittering colours suggest, wait till their gawky cries give away a very different persona.



The Purple Coots flaunt luminous colouring

By now the sunlight had turned honey-gold, and dragonflies hovered buzzing in the air, shimmering in the immature glow. A lone Agamid lizard, his head a crazy crimson and the rest of the body a lime green, was nodding very gravely on a green branch as he absorbed the morning sun. With one eye he appraised us very closely. Wel Aththa fruit (Pond apple) like bulbous green gems studded the high branches of his tree.

Like all wildlife parks, Beddagana has a deep secret heart which throbs in darkness. Within it survives a rare, elusive, fascinating animal; the Fishing Cat which, we were told, pads even close to the orientation centre at the dead of night. However, at this time of the day, we could not catch a glimpse of this rare feline. The thought that this animal, that is probably rarer than the leopard, is found in our capital city itself thrills the true naturalist to the bone.

Only if you are extremely lucky would the Otters pose for you. These endearing, intelligent mammals are known to swim and hunt in the canal. But to get a good action shot would require large portions of luck and patience. We were out of luck today.

It was fascinating to be one with this marshy wilderness, secluded but so fantastically existing next door to the parliament, nudging a highly residential area in the heart of the country’s capital city.

