

# MONTHLY REPORT



# HEAL

Human & Environment  
Alliance League

## APRIL 2024



### The month at a glance

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Combatting Migratory Bird Poaching in Central West Bengal

Wildlife Rescues

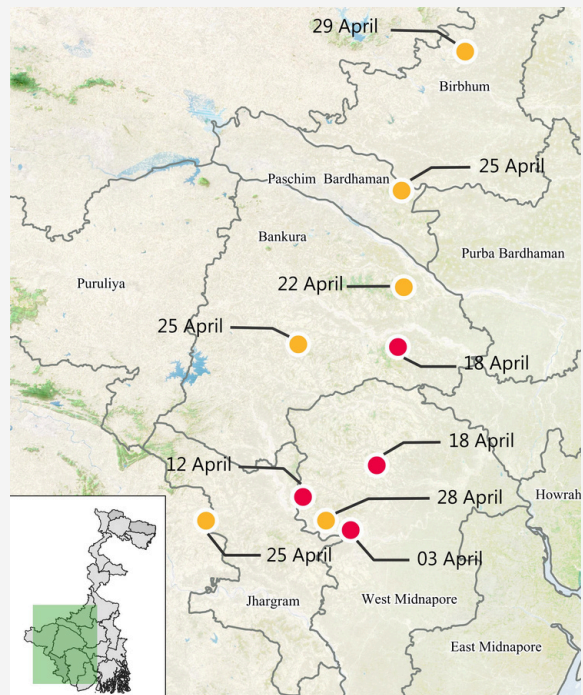
Paddy Fields that Promote Coexistence with Pachyderms

Outreach to Facilitate Coexistence with Snakes

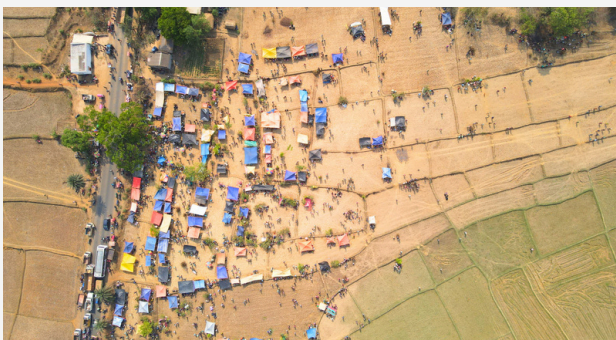
## Monitoring and Documentation of Hunt Season 2024

### Background

- Hunting festivals pose a severe threat to the wildlife of South Bengal, much of which resides outside protected areas.
- These events take place on multiple dates over a period of three months, attracting thousands of armed hunters who indiscriminately kill any wildlife they encounter.
- April marked the beginning of this year's annual hunting season, with multiple hunting festivals organised across Jhargram, West Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia.
- This is the second hunting season which the court-appointed Humane Committees will be addressing (further details are in the February 2024 monthly report).
- To ensure implementation of court orders prohibiting hunting and assess the effectiveness of state authorities in protecting wildlife, HEAL monitored and documented four large-scale hunt fests and six small-scale hunt fests in April 2024.



Map of South Bengal showing the locations and dates of the hunting festivals monitored by HEAL in 2024. Points in red denote large hunt fests and those in yellow denote small hunt fests



Drone footage depicting the reduced scale of hunter congregation during the Gopegarh hunting festival on 03 April 2024



Car dashcam footage showing a hunting party carrying weapons inside the Gopegarh forest on 03 April 2024

### A] Large-scale Hunting Festivals

- The large-scale hunting festivals took place on 03 April in Gopegarh, West Medinipur; on 12 April in Pakhibandh, Jhargram; and on 18 April at two locations, Arabari, West Medinipur; and in the Joypur Forest, Bankura.
- These are some of the largest hunting festivals in South Bengal, previously attracting 15,000 to 20,000 armed hunters. While attendance has steadily declined over the years due to HEAL's efforts, this year saw a drastic reduction in participation.

- The Joypur hunting festival recorded around 7,000 hunters, while the remaining festivals saw no more than 1,500 participants each. Several factors seem to have contributed to this decline.
- Fearing vehicle seizures by authorities similar to last year, vehicle rental owners likely refused to rent trucks and minivans to hunting parties residing far away from hunting grounds. Consequently, only hunters from nearby villages participated, significantly reducing the scale of hunts at the Gopegarh, Pakhibandh, and Arabari festivals.
- Participation in the Pakhibandh hunt fest on 12 April was further reduced due to the arrest of a hunter on 11 April for killing a white-breasted waterhen, protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (WPA, 1972). The hunter was intercepted by HEAL in Lalgarh and handed over to the Lalgarh Police and Jhargram Forest Department.
- The hunter received 14 days of judicial custody in an unprecedented instance of law enforcement in Jhargram, where even the perpetrators behind the killing of a tiger in 2018 had gone unpunished.



(Top) Forest Department officials intercepting an armed hunter at a checkpoint put up during Pakhibandh hunting festival on 12 April 2024. (Bottom left) A hunting party on their way to the Pakhibandh forest. (Bottom right) The hunter who was arrested on 11 April, just a day prior to the Pakhibandh hunt fest



(Top) Drone footage of a nearly empty congregation ground during the Arabari hunt fest on 18 April 2024 in West Medinipur. Also known as Dilli Shikar, this hunt fest would witness a footfall of 10,000-15,000 armed hunters. Mutilated carcasses of two jungle cats (bottom left) and a wild boar (bottom right) killed by hunters at hunting festival on 18 April 2024 in Joypur forest, Bankura

- Police and Forest Department checkpoints were absent at major entryways to Joypur forest in Bankura, but some were established to prevent hunters' entry into Pakhibandh, Gopegarh, and Arabari forests.
- Enforcement authorities at these checkpoints turned hunters away without seizing their weapons which would have led to hunting if hunters managed to enter forests through alternate routes.
- While patrolling, HEAL found many hunting parties with arms inside forests during all hunt fests. But they were documented carrying hunted wildlife only during the Joypur hunt on 18 April.
- A team of hunters with a large wild boar (Schedule II, WPA, 1972) and another hunting party with a booty of two poached jungle cats (Schedule I, WPA, 1972) were observed inside Joypur forests.
- Upon receiving HEAL's reports of hunting, the Bankura Humane Committee held an emergency meeting on 19 April, where HEAL highlighted the stakeholders' lapses at the Joypur hunt fest. As a mitigation measure, the Committee decided to organise targeted awareness camps with hunting communities before each hunting date in May to prevent further wildlife deaths.
- At other hunt fests, kills were not observed possibly due to fewer animals being hunted or carcasses being clandestinely taken home by hunters instead of being taken to congregation grounds.

## B] Small-scale Hunt Fests



A group of hunters gathered at the edge of the Patrasayer forests in Bankura district during a hunting festival on 22 April

- In four out of the six small-scale hunt fests monitored by HEAL, no significant activity was observed. Hunter presence was documented only at a hunt in Bankura, in the Patrasayer forests on 22 April. During this festival, Forest Department checkpoints were established, but no effort was made to stop hunters from entering the forests with weapons.
- Additionally, a hunt fest was organised in Makorchoka, Purulia district on 28 April. This hunt was not monitored by HEAL, but information gathered from locals on the next day revealed that there were around 1,500 hunters and it was speculated that 6-7 Indian hares and one Bengal fox, both of which are protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 were killed.

## C] Anti-hunting Awareness and Outreach

- In addition to monitoring and documenting hunts, HEAL conducted awareness campaigns before the hunting festivals in Jhargram and West Medinipur to dissuade locals from participating.
- Volunteers from Cooch Behar, Murshidabad, and Jhargram visited various villages around the Pakhibandh and Arabari forests on April 11 and April 17, respectively, broadcasting anti-hunting messages over loudspeakers.
- They also distributed leaflets and put up posters to spread anti-hunting messages and inform locals about the legal implications of killing protected wildlife. These efforts were aimed convincing locals to organise festivals that are aligned with values of wildlife conservation and don't involve hunting.
- Additionally, on 28 April, HEAL organised an awareness program in Ganpur, Birbhum, in collaboration with the Forest Department.
- Team HEAL emphasised the need to conserve the wildlife present in these forests, making the attendees aware of the ecological and legal implications of hunting. They also provided examples of other parts of the country where tribal communities have given up hunting.



Awareness campaigns prior to Pakhibandh hunting festival (top), Arabari hunting festival (middle) and at Ganpur in Birbhum (bottom)

## Combatting Migratory Bird Poaching in Central West Bengal

- Last month, central West Bengal witnessed an all time high in poaching of migratory larks and pipits, locally known as Bogari. Poaching attempts were reported daily from several locations, at times even twice a day, in Murshidabad, Birbhum and more recently, in East Bardhaman.
- HEAL's 15-member field team was working tirelessly across 10 blocks to protect migratory birds against acute hunting and illegal trade with the cooperation of enforcement authorities from 7 forest ranges and 10 police stations.
- The momentum built in March was sustained till the time migratory birds had finally retreated back to their breeding grounds around mid-April.



Larks ensnared in mist nets put up by bird poachers



Bird trapping nets removed by team HEAL and local volunteers from a lark hunting ground in Birbhum district



Team HEAL sharing a leaflet with a local containing contact details for reporting poaching activity, during an awareness and sensitisation drive in Rampurhat, Birbhum



Team HEAL putting up posters to sensitise locals regarding the legal implications of bird poaching and encouraging them to provide HEAL with intel on the same

- In the intervening period, six poaching attempts were intercepted and 10 kilometers of bird trapping nets were removed and destroyed by team HEAL.
- Coordinating efficiently with Birbhum Forest Department and Kirnahar Police Station, HEAL managed to get a Bogari hunter arrested for laying bird trapping nets in Panpur fields, Birbhum on 01 April.
- The poacher was remanded to judicial custody for 15 days. Four days later, another poacher was arrested by officials at Bolpur Police Station in Sonsod, Birbhum.



Enforcement officials with the apprehended poacher at Panpur fields in Birbhum on 01 April 2023

- As a token of appreciation for their active involvement and cooperation in anti-poaching efforts, HEAL donated field equipment to Rampurhat Forest Range Office and Md. Bazar Forest Range Office in Birbhum. They were each provided with a set of binoculars, searchlight and headlamp.
- Awareness efforts such as campaigning inside villages using audio messages played on speakers, distribution of leaflets and putting up posters were carried out simultaneously with patrolling and surveillance.
- Gradually, the large murmurations (flocks) of larks and pipits that were visible in March started thinning out, disappearing entirely by 12 April indicating return migration. Poaching attempts followed a similar trend calling for a suspension of HEAL's successful anti-poaching interventions.



Sighting of a large murmuration of migratory larks and pipits from an agricultural field near the Birbhum-Murshidabad border area



Team HEAL donating a set of field equipment to forest officials at Rampurhat Range Forest Office



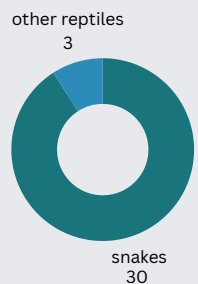
Team HEAL donating a set of field equipment to forest officials at Md. Bazaar Range Forest Office

## WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month, HEAL's rescue teams carried out 33 rescues in 04 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Ardhendu Banik and Anirban Das in Cooch Behar, Jaydip Sen in Bankura, Surajit Dhara in Howrah and Jayanta Chakraborty and Bapi Das in Malda.

33  
RESCUES

04  
DISTRICTS



### Paddy Fields that Promote Coexistence with Pachyderms



- In HEAL's ongoing project supported by Coforge Ltd. to promote coexistence between people and elephants in the Jamboni block of Jhargram district, a key intervention has been the cultivation of paddy exclusively for elephants (further details in March 2024 monthly report).
- This month, in a heartening development, elephants began visiting these fields to feed on the crops. Since HEAL had leased the land for these crops, local residents did not drive the elephants away.
- Elephants were able to feast on this paddy without the fear of being violently chased away which led to another positive development. Local community members reported that the availability of food in these designated patches decreased the elephants' crop-raiding activities elsewhere reducing negative interactions.
- Additionally, the installation of solar fencing further prevented accidental intrusions of elephants into human settlements. Early results suggest a reduction in property damage and a slight improvement in the community's tolerance towards elephants.

(Top) A lone tusker munched away paddy at daytime in HEAL's rice fields cultivated in Rehara area, Jamboni. (Bottom) CCTV footage showing a herd of elephants peacefully foraging paddy cultivated by HEAL

### Outreach to Facilitate Coexistence with Snakes

- On 17 April, 2024, HEAL's Zonal Coordinator Jayanta Chakraborty and his local team conducted a snakebite awareness session during a program organised by the Basanti Puja Committee in Gazole block, Malda district.
- The session began with a discussion about the various species of venomous and non-venomous snakes commonly found in the district. Participants were educated about the ecology of these species, dispelling long standing misconceptions.
- Following this, the team discussed practices to prevent snakes from entering human-use areas, thereby reducing the risk of snake bites. They also explained the correct protocol to follow in the event of a snake bite.



Scenes from the awareness program in Gazole on 17 April