

MONTHLY REPORT



HEAL

The Human & Environment
Alliance League

APRIL 2023

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The month at a glance

Monitoring and Documentation of Hunt Season 2023

Wildlife Rescues

Ritual Hunting Contempt Proceedings

Engagement of Field Officers

Mitigating Migratory Bird Poaching in Murshidabad

Monitoring and Documentation of Hunt Season 2023



Awareness programs organised by Humane Committees in Jhargram (top) and in West Medinipur (bottom)

Background

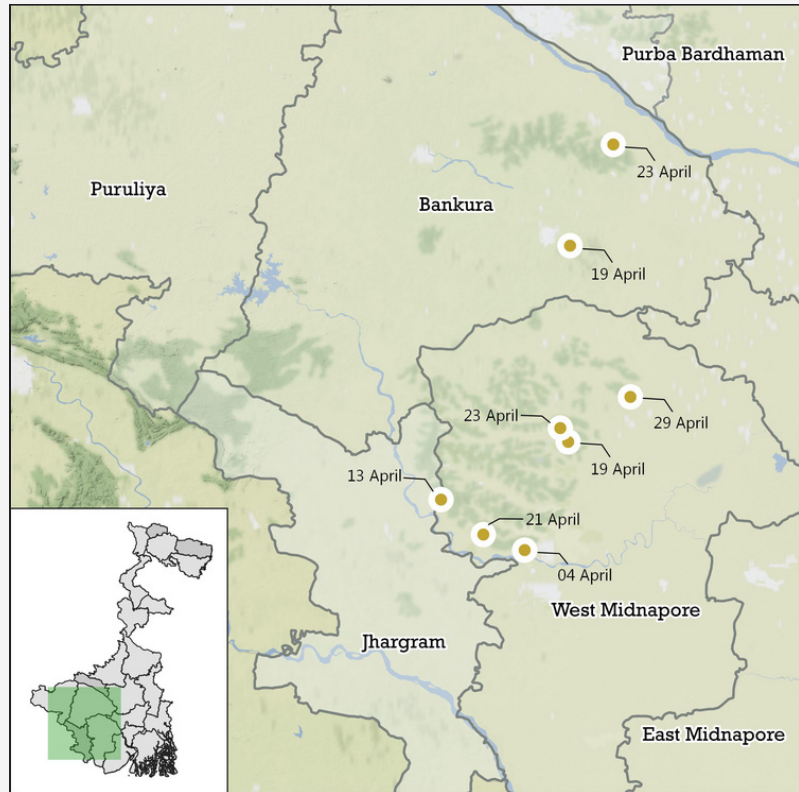
- Thousands of hunters annually invade South Bengal's natural habitats, decimating wildlife under the guise of 'traditions.' HEAL intervened in 2016 and started documenting hunting festivals and advocating for implementation of wildlife laws.
- Two Public Interest Litigations (PILs) were filed in the Calcutta High Court, leading to an order in April 2019. The order prohibited hunting festivals and required the state authorities to prevent wildlife killings.
- Despite multiple court orders, the state authorities failed to implement any mitigating measures, resulting in mass wildlife slaughter during the hunting festivals of 2021 and 2022. Consequently, HEAL filed a contempt petition alleging violation of the High Court's prior order, leading to a landmark judgement on 20 February 2023.

Humane Committees and Ritual Hunting

- The February 2023 judgement transformed wildlife conservation in South Bengal. Humane Committees, comprising senior officials from Police, Railways, District Administration, and Forest Department, are now collectively responsible for safeguarding wildlife during hunting festivals or otherwise, in Purulia, Bankura, Jhargram, West Medinipur and Murshidabad.
- Civil society representation in each of these Committees through conservationist Tiasa Adhya allows for prioritisation of critical conservation issues directly before the State government's highest offices.
- Additionally, due to HEAL being the petitioner in the Court proceedings, the Humane Committees are legally bound to address the concerns raised by it, granting HEAL a distinctive advantage as an advocacy group.
- However, as far as tackling the hunting festivals on-ground on the D-day is concerned, the Humane Committees failed despite having a district-specific robust action plan in place. Although activities like awareness programs, meetings with village heads and poster campaigns were conducted, they were clearly inadequate. Further, hardly any of the enforcement measures agreed to be implemented as part of Action Plans, saw real time execution on ground.
- HEAL diligently monitored the state authorities' implementation of High Court orders and documented the successes/failures in preventing wildlife killings during various hunting festivals. Here's a summary of the progress in curbing hunt festivals in April 2023 across districts:

A] West Medinipur

- HEAL's efforts at raising awareness on the illegality of ritual hunting resulted in fewer small-scale hunts being organised by village heads or *Morols* this year. Seven hunts were documented in West Medinipur which attracted 10,000 (Arabari fest) to 1200 hunters (Choto Tara fest).
- The West Medinipur Police Department's failure to effectively execute the agreed Plan of Action and implement on-field preventive measures allowed hunters to freely enter forests and unlawfully kill wildlife without much hindrance.



Locations of the hunts which took place during April 2023



A dead Mongoose (top left) and a dead Indian Hare (top right) killed by hunters at Gopegarh hunt fest on 04 April. (Below) Two hunters with a killed monitor lizard being stalled and documented by our team while enforcement authorities avoid arresting them during the Arabari hunt fest on 19 April

- Police checkpoints at crucial entry points to forests either remained inactive or were insufficiently manned. Enforcement officials took no efforts to confiscate weapons from hunters or turn them back.
- Despite hunters' open threats to damage equipment and heightened efforts at hiding their quarry, HEAL's dedicated field team successfully documented a substantial number of wildlife killings taking great personal risk.
- At least 22 animals, including Indian Hare, Mongoose, Monitor Lizard, Small Indian Civet, Jungle Cat, Golden Jackal, and Wild Pig, were reportedly hunted. These species are classified as Schedule I and Schedule II under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.
- Overcoming challenges, HEAL's team also apprehended hunters with killed wildlife twice: during the Gopegarh Hunt Fest and the Arabari Hunt Fest.
- However, the enforcement authorities strongly resisted arresting the hunters, directly violating the Court's order that mandates arrest of hunters seen with kills.

B] Jhargram



Our team members actively stopping armed hunters at a police checkpoint from reaching the hunting grounds.

- The Pakhibandh hunt fest organised on 13 April in Jhargram is one of the largest hunt fests of South Bengal. During this very hunting festival a Royal Bengal Tiger was killed by hunters in 2018.
- HEAL's intervention has significantly reduced the scale of this hunt and an even greater reduction was anticipated through the active support of enforcement authorities this year.
- However, despite advance notices and meetings of the Jhargram Humane Committee specifically to tackle this hunt, preventive measures taken by the district administration, particularly the police, were significantly inadequate.
- There was reluctance to seize weapons from hunters or deny them entry into forests; seizures happened only on two occasions after strong insistence from HEAL's field team.



Hunters bypassing police checkpoints and reaching hunting grounds through alternative routes



An Indian Hare killed during the Pakhibandh hunt fest on 13 April



Screen grab from a video taken of the mob attack on team HEAL from afar

- The hunters' customary congregation ground, i.e. Pakhibandh, was cordoned off by the Excise department. However, the hunters were able to gather at a new location i.e. Gondordanga by bypassing police checkpoints due to insufficient deployment of police personnel.
- At the new congregation spot, HEAL witnessed around 5000 armed hunters, many of them in an inebriated state, with one displaying a killed Indian Hare. Authorities were immediately informed and requested to send backup.
- Shortly after, the intoxicated mob of armed hunters unexpectedly and without any provocation, attacked HEAL's 15-member team. HEAL's members were physically assaulted, and their cars were vandalised. Personal belongings of some of the team members were also stolen. The team managed to escape to safety and reported the incident to the authorities.

C] Bankura

- In Bankura, a similar scenario unfolded during the two hunt fests organised in April. Around 15,000 hunters, mainly from Jharkhand had gathered at Bankura's Joypur forest on 19 April.
- Vehicles were parked deep within the forest, and armed hunters roamed freely in front of enforcement officials who made no efforts to stop the hunters.
- HEAL's field team bravely documented several kills, including two Wild Pigs, one Indian hare, and a Southern Coucal. However, more wildlife is suspected to have been hunted.
- As per field reports from volunteers, at least 30 Indian Hares were hunted at various locations during the Bankura hunts.
- A smaller hunt took place on 23 April at Joypur forest and Patrasayer forest, attracting about 1,500 hunters. There was no law enforcement presence, allowing unhindered hunting.
- Volunteers captured photos of a killed Small Indian Civet and a Jungle Cat.



Hunters carrying a butchered leg of a wild boar during the hunt fest at Joypur in Bankura



A hunter hiding its kill under leaves. The species is possibly a Small Indian Civet



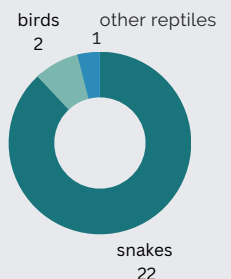
Armed hunters waiting for game inside Joypur forests on 19 April

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month, HEAL's rescue teams carried out 25 rescues in 05 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Ardhendu Banik and Rahul Dutta in Cooch Behar, Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur, Santanu Das in South 24 Parganas and Jayanta Chakraborty in Malda.

25
RESCUES

05
DISTRICTS



Ritual Hunting Contempt Proceedings: an Update

- Field Reports detailing the on-field situation during various hunt dates were submitted by HEAL to the Humane Committees of West Medinipur, Bankura and Jhargram. These independent field reports provided an impartial and factual account of the stakeholders' measures and the on-ground implementation of Court Orders.
- Subsequently, after the attack on HEAL's team on 13 April in Jhargram, HEAL moved an application before the Calcutta High Court highlighting the deliberate inaction of the Paschim Medinipur and Jhargram police authorities.



An insufficiently manned police checkpoint failing to stop the incoming traffic of hunters to Gopagarh forests on 04 April



A group of hunters seen looking for game in the vicinity of the Arabari Range Forest Office on 19 April

- During the hearing on 28 April, HEAL's Senior Counsel categorically submitted that the Police in West Medinipur and Jhargram had been negligent in implementing Court orders.
- It was pointed out that such inaction allowed armed hunters to gather and slaughter wildlife and attack HEAL's field team at Pakhibandh. The police authorities' resistance to arrest hunters found with killed wildlife was also brought to the attention of the Bench.
- After hearing the submissions, the High Court directed the Superintendents of Police of Jhargram and West Medinipur to personally attend the next hearing on 10 May to respond to HEAL's allegations.
- Requiring personal attendance of the police officials is reflective of the seriousness shown by the judiciary in mitigating the problem of ritual hunting.

It is expected that such continuous and relentless pressure on the authorities to take enforcement measures will produce a favourable outcome in the long term even if the results are not very obvious in the short term.

HEAL Recruits Field Officers to aid On-ground Activities



(Top) Field Officer in Jhargram Rabin Mahato conducting an anti-hunting awareness drive in March 2023. (Bottom) Field Officer in Murshidabad Aditya Pradhan dismantling and destroying the nets used to trap migratory birds

- To aid HEAL's work in multiple districts, 05 Field Officers were recruited in April. They would be reporting to HEAL's core team. The details of officers are as follows:
- Aditya Pradhan in Murshidabad, Sushanta Basani in Bankura, Bishwapati Deb in Purulia, Rabin Mahato in Jhargram, and Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur.
- The Field Officers actively participated in monitoring and documenting hunting festivals across various districts. They garnered information on the scale of each hunt, the animals killed, and extent of preventive measures taken by the authorities.
- They also provided real-time updates from the field through WhatsApp groups which enabled active coordination with the authorities on the hunt days.
- This evidence gathered by the Field Officers was also incorporated in HEAL's pleadings and filed before the Calcutta High Court. Continuous gathering of such intel will be crucial to the fate of the current legal proceedings.

After the hunt season, these Field Officers would be actively engaged in the following activities across the year:

- On ground investigation and intel generation on hunting (including wildlife trafficking and commercial poaching), human-wildlife conflict and other recurring conservation problems through their volunteer networks.
- Facilitate enforcement actions and implement HEAL's interventions on ground. Active work by field officers have yielded significant results in curbing the illegal trade of migratory birds in Murshidabad.
- Awareness generation amongst local communities to forge conservation values and liaising with them to gather data for conservation projects.



Field Officer in West Medinipur Samar Chakraborty aiding law enforcement by investigating and reporting illegal trading of native birds.

Mitigating Migratory Bird Poaching in Murshidabad

- From December 2022, HEAL commenced a five month long collaborative Rapid Action Project with Wildlife Trust of India to combat illegal commercial trade of migratory birds in Central West Bengal.
- The project included monitoring wetlands, removing trapping nets, collecting intel on poachers, coordinating with authorities, and community sensitization. It concluded in April 2023, after significant progress was made.
- Over these five months, extensive wild bird habitats in 11 blocks with fisheries and wetlands across three districts were vigilantly monitored by volunteers and authorities, an uncommon practice outside Protected Areas.



Short-toed Larks, a heavily trafficked migratory bird species, trapped in a poachers net



Bird trapping nets removed by team HEAL and local volunteers from a wetland in Murshidabad's Bharatpur-I block



Rabi-UI, an illegal bird trader at the time of his arrest which was planned and executed with HEAL's help



Permanent metal signboard installed at a marketplace to warn against trapping or selling of migratory birds.

- Approximately 37 km of bird trapping nets were dismantled, and another 10 km were confiscated. Over 900 birds of 30 species were rescued and released alongside countless others saved indirectly.
- The project also led to the arrest of five bird poachers. Out of these five poachers, four were apprehended during joint operations conducted by HEAL, the Forest Department, and the Police.
- Additionally, permanent metal sign boards were installed at 18 locations to raise awareness. The activity was supported by the Wildlife Trust of India and the Bird Watcher's Society in Kolkata.