



HEAL

The Human & Environment
Alliance League

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(C) Ripan Biswas



The month at a glance

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A Journey To Death

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Every winter hundreds of thousands of birds are commercially trapped and sold in central West Bengal - particularly in Murshidabad. Waders, waterfowl and passerines like Short-toed Larks are caught in large numbers - the massive scale of which is only becoming apparent of late. Most of these birds are migratory, travelling thousands of kilometres to reach their wintering grounds, only to be killed en masse. Such killings constitute criminal offences punishable under Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 (WPA).



(C) Santanu Das



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A dead snipe stuck in a net laid by bird poachers in Murshidabad

- Hunting of wetland birds is a year-round activity, which picks up pace around October and reaches its peak in February. During this period, nets are intensively laid across wetlands and nearby agricultural fields to trap as many incoming migratory birds as possible.
- In the second-half of 2022, local volunteers frequently reported the presence of such nets in multiple wetlands of southern Murshidabad while also documenting rampant poaching and illegal trading of Short-toed Larks.
- This triggered the conception of a Rapid Action Project in collaboration with Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) which aims to curtail the unlawful exploitation of protected birds, which has gone largely unabated for years.
- The project commenced in December 2022 with a 15-day field operation which entailed a) gathering of intel on the major poaching hubs and complicit villages b) investigating the mode of operation of the illicit enterprise and c) inspection of wetlands for the presence of bird trapping nets.



Short-toed Larks, locally known as *Bogari Pakhi*



Short-toed Larks on sale at a local market



A local volunteer taking down nets



Team HEAL extricating a live pond heron ensnared in

- An astounding amount of nets were discovered in a number of wetlands coming under six blocks of the district. Team HEAL, in cooperation with local volunteers, took down bird trapping nets measuring over 24 kilometres in length, from two such wetlands.
- These nets would have ensnared around a thousand birds every month if left intact. As an intervention measure to thwart poachers, patrolling teams comprising local people have been deployed to maintain vigilance and regularly remove nets from other wetlands in the area.
- Of all birds that get trapped, only the species in demand, such as waterfowls and waders, are extricated by poachers. Other species like Owls, Kingfishers and Drongos are left entangled in the nets to die. Carcasses of many such birds were encountered by team members while taking down nets. Those that could be saved were rescued.



Members freeing a Pied Starling stuck in nets



Removal of nets from Patan Beel



The quantity of nets taken down from Patan Beel



The poacher, Rabi-UI, with three migratory waterfowls - a Common Teal and two Lesser Whistling Ducks

- The operation culminated in the arrest of a habitual bird poacher, largely through HEAL's planning and assistance. The poacher, on being produced before the court, was remanded to judicial custody.
- Members had earlier rescued over 20 live waterfowls as part of evidence and found two more in his possession on the day the Forest Department arrested him.
- The rescued birds included migratory species like Garganey, Red-crested Pochard, Gadwal, Common Teal, Common Coot and various species of snipes and sandpipers which travel long distances to come to their wintering grounds in Central West Bengal.
- Such indiscriminate mass killing of migratory birds is a matter of grave concern considering that India is a signatory to the International Convention on Migratory Species which obligates us to protect and provide a safe passage to migratory birds.
- HEAL's interventions are designed to drastically bring down poaching in the next two years by focusing on awareness initiatives, monitoring and enforcement actions.



Ten migratory and resident wetland birds were crammed in a single bag to be sold to buyers when our team seized it from illegal traders.



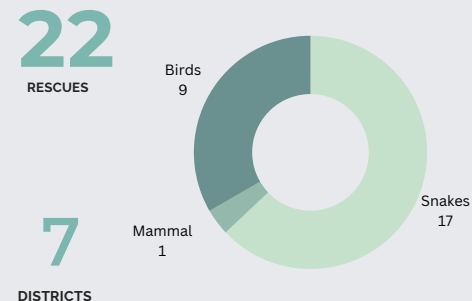
Freeing an immobilised Painted Snipe. Poachers often use a bird's own feathers to tie it up, often causing major, untreatable injuries

Ritual Hunting PIL - Contempt Petition: An update

- As reported in September 2022, HEAL had moved a contempt petition earlier this year, against the state authorities, including West Bengal Forest Department, alleging violation of the Calcutta High Court's order and judgment dated 18 April 2019 that prohibited ritualistic hunting of wildlife in districts of South Bengal.
- Pursuant to the High Court's order in the contempt matter, the Chief Wildlife Warden (CWLW) submitted an Action Taken Report (ATR) detailing the interventions employed by state authorities to avert the mass killing of protected wildlife during the ritualistic hunting festivals of 2021 and 2022.
- Last month, HEAL filed a rejoinder to the ATR and it was scheduled to be heard in December. At the said hearing, the High Court suggested that a committee may be formed for each district concerned, headed by a district judge, to monitor the implementation of the High Court's mandate. Thereafter, the bench indicated that they would need some more time to pass final orders and asked the petitioners to give their suggestions regarding the proposed committee.
- Pursuant to the above, HEAL submitted detailed recommendations on the composition of the committee and its proposed functions, before the bench. Pronouncement of the final order is expected to happen in January 2023.

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month HEAL's rescue teams carried out 22 rescues in 7 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Sanajit Ghosh in Kolkata, Jayanta Chakraborty in Malda, Ardhendu Banik and Rahul Dutta in Cooch Behar, Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur, Santanu Das in South 24 Parganas and North 24 Parganas and Soumyadip Mondal, Suvrajyoti Chatterjee and Tamal Das in Murshidabad



Arrest of a Mongoose Poacher

- Team HEAL in Malda district led by Zonal Coordinator Jayanta Chakraborty facilitated the Forest Department in successfully arresting a resident of Jhanjra village in Old Malda block for killing a mongoose (protected under the Schedule II of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972) on 05 December 2022.
- A joint operation was planned and executed based on intel gathered by Jayanta and his volunteers when they came across a video on the social media platform Facebook, showing the accused Bipin Mal holding a mongoose that he had killed in a rice field.
- The district court denied Bipin Mal's bail plea and remanded him to a 15-day judicial custody.



A screenshot of the video found on Facebook showing the culprit with the killed Mongoose

Proposed Litigation to Protect Rajarhat Wetlands

- Last month, members of Birdwatcher's Society (BWS), a Kolkata based organisation of birdwatchers, encountered indiscriminate encroachment of a biodiversity rich 200 ha wetland patch in Rajarhat area.
- The said wetland is part of a wetland complex in Rajarhat where filling up activities/construction of a bridge are being carried out at the behest of the Housing Infrastructure Development Corporation (HIDCO) (details in the monthly report of November 2022).
- To initiate remediation, a grievance complaint was filed by HEAL with the State Wetland Authority (SWA) which took no proactive measures to stymie the encroachment.



The bridge under construction at the site of encroachment



(C) Dhritiman Mukherjee

Aerial view of the said wetlands showing the canal which will soon be filled up



(C) Dhritiman Mukherjee

The rich floral biodiversity of the wetlands

- Dismayed by the SWA's inaction and non-implementation of the directives laid by National Green Tribunal's (NGT) May 2022 judgement which necessitates protection of all wetlands of the state over 2.25 ha, HEAL in collaboration with BWS is planning to take legal recourse to stop this indiscriminate destruction of wetlands.
- Multiple applications under the Right to Information Act, 2005 have been filed seeking wetland related information from the state and central authorities. These were done with the aim to support the proposed legal action.

Workshop on Snake Awareness and Snakebite Management

- This month two snake awareness and snakebite management workshops were conducted by HEAL members - on 03 December by Zonal Coordinator, Ardhendu Banik at Cooch Behar College, University of North Bengal and on 26 December at Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta by Secretary Suvrajyoti Chatterjee.
- Both institutes support a healthy population of snakes within their premises. HEAL shared its knowledge and expertise on snake identification, snakebite prevention and protocols of managing snakebite victims with a substantial number of city dwellers unfamiliar with urban wildlife.
- Organisation of such sessions by institutes with a predominantly urban and peri-urban audience manifests a growing willingness to understand and coexist with snakes which is a huge step towards curbing human-snake conflict across West Bengal.



Ardhendu Banik (Top) and Suvrajyoti Chatterjee (bottom) conducting the sessions

Fishing Cat Awareness Rally

- The brutal killing of a Fishing Cat in Malda district's Kumarpur village in October (details in the monthly report of October 2022), demonstrated that the knowledge of its status as West Bengal's State Animal and the protection conferred to it by the Wildlife Protection Act 1972 is yet to permeate among local communities in rural Bengal.
- Therefore, in collaboration with The Fishing Cat Project, an awareness rally targeting three villages of Malda district's Kaliachak-I block - Srirampur, Banpur and Kumarpur, was organised on 13 December, to spread awareness about the Fishing Cat's ecological and cultural significance, conservation threats and the need to protect them.
- Students from three local schools, civic volunteers, members of women Self Help Groups (SHGs) and Panchayat Pradhans, participated in the awareness drive. Information was disseminated by miking, leaflet distribution and use of visually attractive banners. Zonal Coordinator Jayanta Chakraborty and his local volunteer team were instrumental in arranging and carrying out all the preparations for the rally.



Posters were stuck, miking of messages was performed and flyers were hand distributed to local community members during the rally, to raise awareness on the Fishing Cat in Kumarpur, Malda