



HEAL

The Human & Environment  
Alliance League

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(c) Santanu Das



## The month at a glance

- Ritual Hunting PIL - Contempt Petition
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## Ritual Hunting PIL - Contempt Petition: an Update

- HEAL had earlier moved a contempt petition against the Chief Wildlife Warden and other senior state officials, in June 2022, alleging non-implementation of the High Court's order and judgement dated 18 April 2019 which places a complete embargo on the hunting of wildlife during West Bengal's hunting festivals (details in the December 2022 monthly report).
- In the said contempt proceedings, the Court passed a detailed order and judgement on 20 February 2023.

### Salient features of this judgement

- The Court made a specific observation that hunting of wildlife for fun and bravado is as grievous a crime as the offence of murder under the Indian Penal Code.
- It formed 'Humane Committees' headed by the District Judges to tackle ritual hunting festivals and ensure implementation of the April 2019 order.
- The Committees were formed for Jhargram, West Medinipur, Bankura, Purulia and Murshidabad. The members of the said committees include, among others, the District Magistrates, Superintendents of Police, Divisional Forest Officers of the districts concerned, and conservationist and HEAL's Joint Secretary Tiasa Adhya.
- The High Court directed the committees to hold their first meeting at the earliest to chalk out a plan of action for the hunt season of 2023. It also endorsed the suggestions made by HEAL, on the measures to be adopted by the Committees to curb hunting festivals.
- This is a first for West Bengal, wherein a member of the civil society has been inducted in such a committee to ensure greater transparency. Further, the Court itself intends to supervise and keep track of the functioning of the Humane Committees.
- Most significantly, the scope of the said judgement extended beyond hunting festivals and brought other forms of hunting under the scrutiny of the Committees as well.



(C) Kiran Halder  
A hunter with two Small Indian Civets and a Jungle Cat during a hunting festival in 2017

## Arrest of Jackal Hunters in Murshidabad



- Relying on the Calcutta High Court's judgement dated 20 February 2023, on 27 February the Court of Chief Judicial Magistrate, Murshidabad remanded 10 hunters to judicial custody for 14 days after rejecting their bail plea.
- The accused were members of a hunting party apprehended by Forest Department on 26 February at Bazarsau station, Murshidabad based on the intel provided by Zonal Coordinator Soumyadip Mondal and his local volunteer team.
- The culprits confessed to hunting down a golden jackal but subsequent searches revealed more carcasses in their possession. The hunters had also killed a mongoose, a jungle cat and some squirrels.

The group of hunters, detained at Bazarsau station. (Inset) Squirrels killed by the hunters

# Crackdown on Commercial Lark Trade in Central West Bengal

- HEAL and the Wildlife Trust of India, through a Rapid Action Project launched in December 2022, are working to curb the extensive and illicit commercial trade of migratory birds in Murshidabad and Malda districts (details in December 2022 monthly report).
- Increased surveillance of hunting activities and trading hotspots, sensitization of locals regarding legal implications of bird poaching and coordination with the Forest Department to ensure penalisation of offenders, were some of the measures undertaken to achieve the project objectives.
- As a result of these efforts, a significant reduction in poaching attempts has been reported by local volunteers and community members alike, especially after the installation of permanent awareness signposts last month (details in the January 2023 monthly report).



A Bogari (Lark) caught in a net laid by poachers



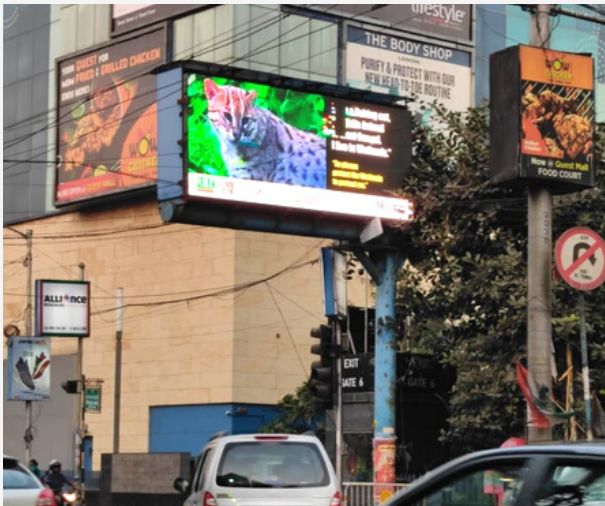
Soumyadip Mondal, Zonal Coordinator, Murshidabad, releasing the rescued Larks



The culprits, Manjur Sheikh (left) and Minarul Sheikh (right) in custody, along with the Larks they had caught

- The project's focus for February 2023 was to investigate and mitigate the trading of various species of Larks. Known locally as Bogari, these flock-forming migratory songbirds, native to Russia, Mongolia and China, are intensively hunted during this month. In February itself, team HEAL rescued close to 300 Bogari from traders and released them back to the wild.
- On 26 February, using the intel gathered during covert investigations, two key Bogari traders were apprehended in a joint-raid conducted by team HEAL, the Forest Department and the Police department. The poachers were picked up from their homes at around 9:30 PM in the evening.
- During the raid, a total of 24 Larks - 17 Short-toed Larks, 06 Oriental Skylarks and 01 Bengal Bushlark - were found in their possession following which, the father-son duo was taken into custody. On 27 February, their bail plea was rejected and they were initially remanded to judicial custody for 12 days which was later extended further on the subsequent day of hearing.

## Fishing Cat February: A month-long awareness campaign



(Top) A graphic poster designed for the digital hoardings to raise awareness on the fishing cat among urban masses; (Bottom) One of the digital hoardings displaying the appeals

- Fishing Cat February is a month-long awareness campaign observed worldwide to garner support and bolster conservation efforts for the globally endangered fishing cat.
  - As part of the global event, HEAL undertook multiple initiatives in collaboration with East Kolkata Wetland Management Authority (EKWMA), The Fishing Cat Project and People United for Better Living in Calcutta (PUBLIC).
  - In early February, a campaign was launched in partnership with Selvel One, which employed display of visuals on digital hoardings placed at prominent locations across the city. The visuals were in the form of an appeal to save the fishing cat and its habitat - wetlands.
  - The appeal targeted the urban populace of Kolkata and had a twofold objective a) to raise awareness of the fishing cat's status as the State Animal (which often goes unrecognised), and b) to garner support for mitigating the threats faced by the species and its fast-depleting habitat.
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- To disseminate a similar message among the peri-urban masses of East Kolkata Wetlands, two awareness drives were conducted in the vicinity of the wetlands.
  - The first was held on 28 February, to mark the end of the Fishing Cat February and the second was conducted on 03 March as part of World Wildlife Day celebrations.
  - The campaign utilised public announcements made via loudspeakers in localities where fishing cats live in close quarters with people.
  - Additionally, leaflets containing relevant information on the fishing cat, along with contact details to report sightings, offences and accidents involving the species, were distributed among locals and passersby.



Member Vasudha Mishra distributing leaflets during the fishing cat awareness drive on 28 February near East Kolkata Wetlands

## Training Sessions on Human-Wildlife Conflict

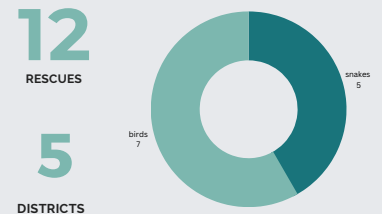
- Recently, the Wildlife Trust of India had organised human-wildlife conflict mitigation training for frontline forest staff in various Protected Areas of Karnataka.
- HEAL's Secretary Suvrajyoti Chatterjee was invited as a resource person for conducting one such training program at Sharavathi LTM Wildlife Sanctuary and Jayamangali Conservation Reserve, Tumkur on 20 and 21 February.
- The workshop participants were trained in various aspects of human-wildlife conflict with the aim of enhancing their decision-making capabilities on the drivers of conflict and the role of various stakeholders.
- The sessions also incorporated a thorough discussion on conflict-management strategies and the technicalities of dealing with different conflict animals.



Suvrajyoti Chatterjee, Secretary, HEAL conducting the training program

## WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month, HEAL's rescue teams carried out 12 rescues in 5 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Ardhendu Banik, Atanu Banik and Rahul Dutta in Cooch Behar, Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur, Santanu Das and Suman Sadhukhan in South 24 Parganas and Kolkata and Soumyadip Mondal in Murshidabad.



## Awareness Programs in Malda



Member Bapi Das addressing the students on the importance of snakes

- HEAL's local team in Malda district, led by Zonal Coordinator Jayanta Chakraborty and member Bapi Das organised awareness programs at two schools in Gazole block.
- The first program was conducted at Lukhu Tudu High School in Jalsa Mahadevpur village on 03 February, followed by a similar session for students of Saraswati Bidyamondir High School in Mayna village a week later on 11 February.
- The aim of these sessions was to enhance the students' overall awareness levels concerning various wild animals that they may encounter, including birds, reptiles, and mammals like fishing cats and jungle cats.
- Additionally, a section of the program was dedicated to educating the students about snakes and measures to prevent snake bites.