

MONTHLY REPORT



HEAL

The Human & Environment
Alliance League

MAY 2023



The month at a glance

Monitoring and Documentation of Hunt
Season 2023

Wildlife Rescues

Ritual Hunting Contempt Proceedings

Enabling Human-Fishing Cat
Coexistence

Monitoring and Documentation of Hunt Season 2023

Background

- HEAL continued to monitor and document hunting festivals during the month of May to ascertain the true impact of judicial strictures on stemming ritual hunting festivals of South Bengal.
- The experience varied with the district. The district administration of Howrah and East Medinipur in collaboration with civil society members did commendable work in making this year's Falaharini Kali Pujo Shikar Utsab almost completely "hunt free". Till HEAL's intervention in 2016-2017, this festival was one of the most horrifying hunt fests which annually saw the killing of more than 5000 wild animals.
- This year, killing during the aforesaid hunt fest was close to zero. Unfortunately, unlike Howrah and East Medinipur, the management of hunts by the other districts of South Bengal, particularly Bankura, West Medinipur and Jhargram left much to be desired. The detailed account of on-field activities in different districts during the month of May is provided below:



Locations of the hunts which took place during May 2023

A] Jhargram

- HEAL's members had come across flyers circulated among hunting communities to invite participants for a hunt fest at a village called Jual Bhanga on 04 May. HEAL promptly informed the Jhargram Humane Committee about the event, urging them to deploy authorities to prevent the hunt fest.
- On 04 May when HEAL's team visited the location they found that the hunting party had moved to another location and Jual Bhanga was deserted. Local residents informed them that the actual gathering was happening in a nearby forest adjacent to the Banstola railway station.
- As the team approached the local forest office, they encountered a crowd of nearly a thousand hunters with weapons heading towards the railway station. Unfortunately, no enforcement authorities were present in the vicinity and they moved unhindered.
- Although HEAL could not capture photographic evidence on that particular day, given the new trend among the hunters to move the hunted animals surreptitiously out through the forest, it is likely that hunting happened as usual.

B] West Medinipur

- On 09 May, HEAL representatives conducted surveys in the areas of Gilaboni-Kuilibad and the vicinity of Belti forest.
- During the survey, minimal hunter activity was observed. The field officers only noticed a small group of 25-50 hunters. Local residents shared that the reduced presence was due to many hunters being engaged in rice harvesting during that time.

C] Purulia

- The Buddha Purnima hunting festival in Ajodhya Hills, Purulia, is widely recognized and draws a large number of hunters from the Jangal Mahal districts. This year's festival took place on 05 May 2023, and HEAL members were present to document the event. One team reached the location by road while another team arrived by train.
- By daybreak, most hunters had already arrived at Ajodhya Hills. The armed hunters freely used trains under the Adra Railway Division's jurisdiction. At Urma railway station, along the route to Ajodhya Hills from Purulia town, approximately 3000 hunters were encountered. Additionally, hunters were spotted in hired pickup trucks on the roads leading to the forests.



Armed hunters on their way to Ajodhya hills



Arms being transported by hunters using trains



Hunters gathered at Urma station

- HEAL's field team did not find any kills, and it was widely reported that hunting did not occur due to increased police surveillance. However, considering that hunters were allowed to enter the forests with their weapons without any seizures, it is very much likely that hunting took place as usual. In fact, reports from local villages indicate that porcupines were killed.
- In the late evening, some weapons were eventually seized by the Railway Protection Force at Purulia Junction railway station after HEAL incessantly demanded their seizure.

D] Bankura

- During May, two small-scale hunting festivals took place in Bankura, and HEAL's field team encountered about 1500 hunters on each occasion.
- The first hunt occurred on 04 May in Dhengasole area, Bishnupur. The number of hunters was relatively low, with mostly local participants arriving on bicycles.
- Due to hunters actively concealing their kills, no documented evidence of the kills could be obtained. In fact, hunters were observed making announcements over loudspeakers cautioning fellow hunters in *Olchiki* the language spoken by Santhal tribes, against openly displaying their kills.



Hunters gathered inside the forests of Dhengasole



Screen grab from a video showing hunters making announcements over loudspeakers to carry kills secretly through the forests

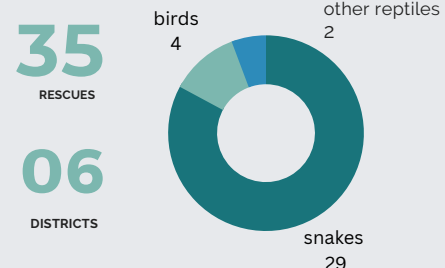
- On 07 May, another hunt was documented in the Patrasayer forest range. Although enforcement authorities were present in the vicinity, they did not take proactive measures to halt the activities of the hunters. No seizure of weapons was reported.
- Later that day, some forest officials cornered some of the members of HEAL's field team and harassed them. These officials unlawfully seized their mobile phones and managed to delete some of the documentation of the hunt.
- The matter was reported to the Chief Wildlife Warden and the Bankura Humane Committee. Further meetings have been proposed by the Committee to resolve this matter, the dates of which are awaited.



A hunter inside Patrasayer forest

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month, HEAL's rescue teams carried out 35 rescues in 06 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Ardhendu Banik and Rahul Dutta in Cooch Behar, Santanu Das in South 24 Parganas, Jayanta Chakraborty in Malda, Soumyadip Mondal in Murshidabad, Joydeb Majumdar in Nadia and Jaydip Sen in Bankura



E] East Medinipur and Howrah

- Falaharini Kali Pujo hunt fest, which is the main hunt organised in these two districts, would lead to major loss of biodiversity. This year, the hunt took place between 16 May-19 May 2023 and was effectively contained for the second consecutive year.
- This is mainly a train dependent hunt. Hunters from Jharkhand, Jhargram, Bankura, West Medinipur and other locations commute to East Medinipur and Howrah availing trains to participate in the hunt.
- They target wildlife such as jungle cats, fishing cats, mongoose, monitor lizards, snakes, and birds found in peri-urban wetlands and agricultural fields.
- To devise effective anti-hunting measures, the Howrah and East Medinipur Forest Divisions had conducted meetings with the District Administration, Police, Railways, Excise Department, Block-level Administration, Gram Panchayats, and local non-profit organisations.



A gang of hunters intercepted by team at a railway station



Forest Department patrolling railway stations



A pick up truck intercepted and seized by the Howrah Forest Department to prevent hunters from reaching hunting grounds

- Joint teams of forest officials and volunteers from local NGOs, including HEAL, maintained round-the-clock surveillance at railway stations, ferry ghats, and strategic checkpoints along major roads to detect and intercept hunters.
- Excise officials conducted raids in East Medinipur to seize illegal liquor during and immediately before the hunt days. Such raids were necessary to stall illegal sale and distribution of liquor in order to control the hunters' mobs which mostly congregate around areas where there are *haria theks* (liquor shops).
- The Brick Field Owners Association cooperated in prohibiting migrant labourers from hunting, and awareness drives were conducted at railway stations and tribal settlements in Howrah and East Medinipur, further reducing the scale of the hunt fest.
- The Kharagpur Railway Division also actively monitored the railway stations along with volunteers from HEAL and other NGOs, thereby preventing armed hunters from boarding trains or getting down at destination stations.
- Around 250 armed hunters, a significant reduction compared to previous years, were intercepted. Their weapons and hired vehicles were seized by the Forest Department.

- The diligent implementation of well planned preventive measures and extensive involvement of civil society groups for monitoring and vigilance contributed greatly to achieving the near zero hunt record.
- While large scale hunting continues to occur in the districts of West Medinipur, Jhargram and Bankura, over the years we are seeing a gradual decline in the overall numbers of hunters who participate in the hunt fest.
- Further, in contrast to the previous years, when there was hardly any awareness regarding the illegality of such hunts, the hunters have now become aware about the legal violations.
- Increased awareness among the hunter communities have also led to increased hostility towards NGO members documenting the hunts. In fact, in order to stop NGOs from documenting the hunts, messages in the local language, *Olchiki* are often broadcasted over loudspeakers during hunt fests discouraging the hunters from bringing the kills to the congregation spots where they maybe photographed.



Inter-departmental meeting organised by the Howrah Forest Department to plan countermeasures to curb the Falaharini hunt fest

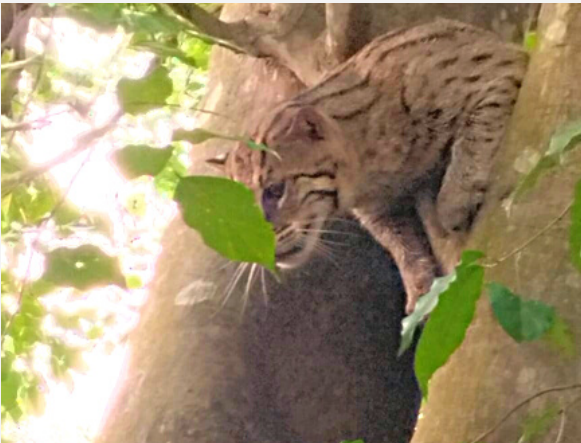


Inter-departmental meeting organised by the West Medinipur Forest Department to plan countermeasures to curb the Falaharini hunt fest

Ritual Hunting Contempt Proceedings: an Update

- In the previous month, the Calcutta High Court had passed an order dated 28 April 2023 summoning the Superintendents of Police (SPs) of Jhargram and West Medinipur districts to appear before the court on 10 May 2023.
- This directive was a result of the allegations raised by HEAL against the Jhargram and West Medinipur Police Departments. HEAL had submitted detailed reports to the High Court, providing evidence of deliberate inaction and blatant violation of court orders by the police officials in these districts.
- The reports also highlighted the failure of the SPs in implementing proactive measures endorsed by the High Court and adopted by the Humane Committees in the two districts. HEAL had alleged that such failure led to the unrestricted hunting of wild animals during various hunting festivals in April and May 2023.
- During the hearing on May 10, the SPs, represented by the State's Senior Counsel, submitted the Action Taken Reports as required by the High Court. The SPs were also present before the Division Bench physically.
- The State's Senior Counsel then responded to the allegations raised by HEAL. The Senior Counsel representing HEAL, Mr Siddhartha Mitra made rejoinder submissions reiterating HEAL's stand.
- After hearing submissions of both the parties, the Division Bench acknowledged that the state authorities were taking efforts to implement the court's orders. The matter was listed for further orders on 15 June 2023.

Enabling Human-Fishing Cat Coexistence



The fishing cat at the time of being discovered by the villagers of Hamidpur

- A fishing cat was rescued by the Forest Department in Hamidpur village, Murshidabad, on 28 May. The capture was necessary to protect the cat from potential harm by villagers who mistakenly believed it to be a leopard or tiger cub.
- Such situations frequently occur due to the general lack of awareness about fishing cats, which are naturally elusive and can easily go unnoticed even in areas with high human presence.
- The cat's release back into the wild faced challenges due to people's intolerance and misunderstandings surrounding the species.

- HEAL stepped in to remedy the situation. On 30 May, a team from HEAL visited Hamidpur to engage with the villagers and educate them about fishing cats and their ecological importance.
- The team worked diligently to substitute fear with appreciation and pride for coexisting with the State Animal of West Bengal. HEAL's objective was to secure safe release of the fishing cat in the same habitat from where it was captured.
- Gradually, after several rounds of dialogue initiated by HEAL, the villagers overcame their fears and agreed to the release of the fishing cat at the exact location from where it was originally captured. The next day, amid widespread jubilation and excitement, the fishing cat was successfully returned to its natural habitat.



Leading fishing cat ecologist and HEAL's Joint Secretary Tiasa Adhya along with HEAL's Secretary Suvrajyoti Chatterjee interacting with locals of Hamidpur to allay their fears of the fishing cat



The fishing cat at the time of being released. The complete video of the release can be accessed here: <https://youtu.be/bsy9XVGI41Y>