



HEAL

The Human & Environment  
Alliance League

## OCTOBER 2022

### Our Approach To Conservation

At **HEAL**, we believe in adopting a multi-pronged strategy to solve conservation problems, working together with multiple stakeholders and creating local conservation groups that can fight conservation battles in their own areas.

The three core aspects of our work are **protecting species** which exist alongside humans outside protected areas, **conserving habitats** that are vulnerable to encroachment and **mitigating human-wildlife conflict** to promote peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife amidst shrinking natural habitats. Here is a summary of our activities in October 2022

### The month at a glance

Ensuring a safe habitat for migratory birds

Saving critically endangered ailing turtles

Wildlife rescues

Justice for the State Animal of West Bengal

Protecting the Dankuni Wetlands

Mitigating conflict with Jungle Cat

Workshops, article publications and more

### Ensuring a safe habitat for migratory birds

- With the onset of the month of October, migratory birds have started arriving in thousands in the wetlands of West Bengal. Unfortunately, this also implies that bird poachers have resumed their illegal trade of bird meat by trapping the incoming feathered visitors.
- On 28 October, Soumyadip Mondal, zonal coordinator, Murshidabad along with HEAL's volunteer team led by member Kankan Burman aided the arrest of a bird poacher in Bilkurul Beel, Murshidabad.
- The members relayed a tip received from local volunteers to the Forest Department on 27 October which culminated in the arrest of the poacher the very next morning while he was still extricating live birds from the net traps.
- The culprit was produced before the magistrate where he was denied bail and remanded to judicial custody till 11 November 2022.
- This is the same habitat where HEAL is also working to prevent the proliferation of Makhana plants. These plants, which are colonizing the surface of this vast wetland, are detrimental for both avian population and the local fishing communities [Details in monthly report of September 2022].



The bird poacher [first picture, centre] and the birds he sought to trap and sell illegally. These are various species of sandpipers which migrate to India from Central Asia during winter.

Read the coverage of this incident by The Telegraph here: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/mykolkata/news/murshidabad-man-held-for-poaching-migratorybirds/cid/>

### Rescue of critically endangered ailing turtles

- The Black Softshell Turtle [*Nilssonina nigricans*] is a critically endangered freshwater turtle whose only habitat in West Bengal are temple ponds in Cooch Behar district. In one of these ponds situated in Baneshwar, the turtles have been mysteriously falling sick and dying since the past few months.
- On 25 and 26 October, three such ailing turtles were rescued by Ardhendu Banik, zonal coordinator, Cooch Behar and members Rupjyoti Kar and Mrinmoy Sarkar in collaboration with members from other environmental groups.
- Currently, two turtles are in rehabilitation and the post mortem report of one of the turtles which died post rescue, is awaited. Additionally, toxicological analysis of the pond water and pond bottom soil is underway.
- The results of the aforesaid investigations will help in the formulation of restorative measures necessary for preventing further turtle deaths and reviving their habitat.



Ardhendu Banik and Rupjyoti Kar rescuing a Black Softshell Turtle

### Justice for the State Animal of West Bengal

- An excellent example of HEAL's volunteer network facilitating law enforcement and apprehension of wildlife criminals is the recent incident of Fishing Cat poaching in Malda district.
- On 22 October, HEAL members detected a photograph of a man flaunting an apparently battered Fishing Cat on the social media platform Facebook.
- Teammate Samar Chakraborty from West Medinipur, tracked the perpetrator and his accomplice in Aiho village, Malda. Immediately, on 22 October itself, our team reported the killing to the West Bengal Forest Department, placing on record all the evidence that could be garnered.
- Acting on this written complaint, forest officials took swift action and arrested one of the poachers from their village on 23 October.
- Our team members from Malda, Jayanta Chakraborty and Tanmay Bakshi, were present on-ground during this operation. The forest officials continued to pursue the other culprit visible in the photograph on Facebook. Eventually, on 28 October, the second poacher was also apprehended.
- Both the perpetrators were produced before the magistrate where they were denied bail and subsequently remanded to judicial custody.
- Ironically, this was the first record of the Fishing Cat from Malda. This population had not been detected even in the recently completed state-wide Fishing Cat survey by the West Bengal Biodiversity Board.
- The Fishing Cat is not only a Schedule I species under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 [WPA] but also the State Animal of West Bengal and a globally endangered species. As such it was imperative that the perpetrators be punished in accordance with the provisions of the Act in order to prevent such blatantly illegal activities in the future.



The picture that was discovered on Facebook by HEAL members. The culprit was later arrested

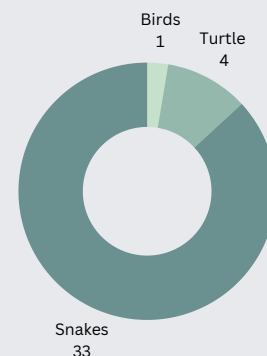
Read the coverage of this incident by The Times of India here:  
<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/koolkata/malda-youth-detained-for-poaching>

### WILDLIFE RESCUES

HEAL's rescue teams in various districts across West Bengal regularly receive calls for rescuing wild animals in distress. They respond to such calls as speedily as possible. This month, 38 rescues were carried out by: Surajit Dhara in Hoogly, Jayanta Chakraborty in Malda, Ardhendu Banik along with his teammate Mrinmoy Sarkar in Cooch behar, Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur, Soumyadip Mondal in Murshidabad and Santanu Das, Field Officer, HEAL in South 24, Parganas and North 24 Parganas

38  
RESCUES

07  
DISTRICTS



## Protection of Dankuni Wetlands: An update

- Recent field visits by HEAL members to the Dankuni Wetlands in the month of October revealed that encroachments are continuing in these areas despite repeated intimation of the same to the committee headed by the Chief Secretary of West Bengal.
- To recap, this committee was appointed by the National Green Tribunal by its order 09 May 2022 to demarcate, identify and protect all of the wetlands in the State of West Bengal having an area over 2.25 hectares. [Details in monthly report of September 2022].
- Next steps are being evaluated with external lawyers to seek judicial intervention in the matter in the coming days.



① Encroachments at Panchghara, Dankuni



Encroachments at Joykrishnapur, Dankuni ②

## Makhana: the multiheaded monster

- The arrest of the bird poachers in Bilkurul Beel can be attributed to the regular monitoring of the wetland undertaken by HEAL members as part of its ongoing restoration.
- HEAL is currently engaged in a battle to safeguard Bilkurul Beel from the ecologically damaging practice of Makhana cultivation. The practice pollutes the water, destroys waterbird habitat, depletes fish populations, jeopardises fishermen's livelihood and negatively impacts their health.
- In spite of this, the cultivation is being carried out illegally in the wetland at the expense of its biodiversity and well-being of the wetland dependent fisher communities.
- In an article for the Birdwatchers' Society Newsletter, 'Fantail', Arkar Sarkar, President, HEAL, elaborates on the problems arising in Bilkurul Beel due to the illegal Makhana cultivation and reports on the remedial actions taken by HEAL in this regard.

Download the newsletter here: <https://birdwatcherssociety.org/newsletters/>



Makhana infestation in Bilkurul Beel, Murshidabad

## Mitigating conflict with Jungle Cat

- In the wake of a retaliatory killing of a Jungle Cat in Tapurhat, Cooch Behar I block, North Bengal, an awareness program was organised by the Cooch Behar Forest Division on 30 October for the locals of the village.
- Representatives from several environmental groups, including HEAL, were invited as resource persons for the session, among which member Ardhendu Banik went as a representative of HEAL.
- The Jungle Cat, a Schedule II species under the WPA, is a medium-sized elusive wild cat that frequents human-use areas adjoining forests to hunt poultry.
- Fed up with the repeated loss of their chickens, the villagers in Tapurhat set traps to capture Jungle Cats. Two were caught, of which one was reportedly sold and the other was killed.
- Hence, the awareness program's thrust was to raise the Jungle Cat's profile by highlighting its role as nature's pest control that keeps rodents in check and, thereby, reduce peoples' animosity towards it.
- The villagers were also acquainted with the provisions of the WPA which prohibit and criminalise the hunting and killing of native wildlife, so that such instances do not occur in the future.



[From top to bottom] Jungle Cat [*Felis chaus*], Ardhendu Banik addressing the audience, the attendees of the awareness program

Ardhendu Banik [far right], with other resource people at the awareness program.

### Learning to teach better at Training of Trainers

- Renowned non profit organisation working in the field of biodiversity conservation, Wildlife Trust of India [WTI] had organised a workshop called 'Training of Trainers' [ToT] from 12 to 15 October at Delhi-NCR. HEAL's Secretary Suvrajyoti Chatterjee was invited as one of the participants to this workshop.
- ToT is an endeavour by WTI to create competent trainers who can coach others on a particular topic or skill pertaining to wildlife conservation.
- The four-day workshop was organised on two topics - illegal wildlife trade prevention and human-animal conflict management.
- Experts from the field of wildlife law and enforcement, forest management and wildlife conflict management attended the workshop to create standardised training procedures.
- Using the modules, these master trainers can now engage in capacity building and impart training to frontline forest staff in various landscapes on methods to counter illegal wildlife trade and manage human-wildlife conflict efficiently.

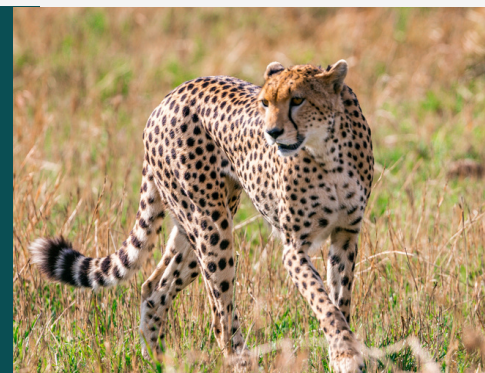


Participants and organisers at Training of Trainers workshop conducted by Wildlife Trust of India

### Spotty Priorities

- Last month, eight African cheetahs were brought to India amid widespread jubilation and sparse scepticism; the latter coming mostly from ecologists and conservationists.
- Proponents of the so-called cheetah "reintroduction" tout it as a move to secure India's grasslands while scientists opine that the project lacks scientific rigour and therefore, have raised concerns over its success.
- Many have deemed it a vanity project given the abundance of conservation issues that could have received the government's much needed attention.
- In an article for The Telegraph published on 06 October, HEAL's Joint Secretary Tiasa Adhya argues why the introduction of African cheetahs is the least of India's conservation priorities.
- Through her arguments she emphasises that India's grasslands do not need an ecologically vulnerable exotic species to revive them, but rather the political will to rescue and restore them in time.

Read the article here: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/spotty-priorities-narrative-that-cheetahs-are-coming-back-to-india-is-technically-incorrect/cid/1890385>



Two grassland species the exotic African Cheetah and the native Indian Grey Wolf; the latter needs urgent conservation attention

