

MONTHLY REPORT



HEAL

The Human & Environment
Alliance League

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Ardhendu Banik ©



The month at a glance

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Against Bird Poachers

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Mongabay Highlights Central Bengal's Bird Poaching Crisis

- Districts like Murshidabad, Malda and Birbhum in central West Bengal are hotspots of large-scale commercial poaching of wild migratory birds. Thousands of waders, waterfowls and larks are hunted annually for consumption, endangering their survival.
- Although extremely grave, little attention has been paid to this conservation issue, until now. Mongabay India, a conservation news web portal, published an article in November, shedding light on this impending ecological catastrophe.
- HEAL had conducted a five-month-long Rapid Action Project between December 2022 and April 2023 to bring down the scale of commercial bird poaching in the aforementioned districts (further details in the April 2023 monthly report).
- The article reports on the efforts HEAL undertook as part of this project and the conservation impact which it led to.



HEAL gathered intel on numerous poachers to facilitate enforcement action against them. (Above) Two of the five bird poachers that were arrested during the project's tenure

Article Link: <https://india.mongabay.com/2023/11/intercepting-the-illegal-capture-of-migratory-birds-in-south-central-west-bengal/>

Field Updates: Locals Turn Allies Against Bird Poachers



- As migratory birds begin arriving in Murshidabad, Team HEAL intensifies its efforts to detect potential threats. Assisting them increasingly in these endeavors are members of the local community.
- Making use of the permanent awareness signboards that were installed earlier this year, a concerned villager reported the presence of bird trapping nets to Zonal Coordinator Soumyadip Mondal, in a wetland near Amlai village, Bharatpur-I block.
- Soumyadip shared this information with enforcement authorities and rushed to the spot where he encountered a group of 20 villagers actively disentangling migratory birds ensnared in the nets.
- 50 birds were extricated which included species like Common Snipe, Pintail Snipe, Temminck's Stint, Little Stint, and Wood Sandpiper.
- The villagers then proceeded to dismantle and subsequently destroy all the nets set up by poachers. The nets spanned approximately 800 meters in length.
- The villagers' proactive response not only saved numerous migratory birds but also dealt a significant blow to the illegal poaching activities in the area.

(Top) Villagers extricating birds ensnared in the mist nets laid by poachers. (Bottom) A common snipe being liberated from a bird trapping net

Spotlight on Fishing Cats at a Mini Concert in Kolkata

- Echoes of Earth, a Bangalore-based music festival themed around sustainability had organised its first minicert called 'Ensemble of the Wild - Discover the Majestic Sundarbans and its Rich Biodiversity', on 04 November at Hard Rock Cafe, Kolkata.
- HEAL and its partner organisation, The Fishing Cat Project (TFCP), were invited at the event to facilitate a storytelling educational session titled 'Prisoner of Contradictions to Patron of Wetlands: Understanding the Fishing Cat Better'.
- The session was divided into sub-sessions consisting of interactive games, film shows and discussions. The central concern revolved around this fact - the Fishing Cat has been endowed with the title - the State Animal of West Bengal - yet majority of Bengal does not know this.
- Hence, the Fishing Cat continues facing a combination of threats, apathy, and contradictions. The storytelling session exploring this theme, kicked off the much-awaited minicert.
- First, the audience was engaged in a game called 'Web of Life' to help them appreciate the mangrove ecosystem of the Sundarban forests. Next, a short film about the fishing cats of Chilika, created by TFCP was shown to the audience..
- This was followed by a discussion on the vulnerable status of Kolkata's wetlands and HEAL's efforts to protect them. The session concluded with the screening of a short video of a fishing cat being accepted back by the local communities in Howrah due to TFCP and HEAL's intervention.



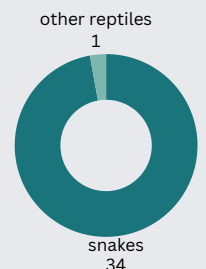
(Top) Team HEAL starting off the event with their segment on the fishing cat. (Middle) Team members engaging the audience in the game, 'Web of Life'. (Bottom) Meghna Banerjee facilitating a discussion on threats to wetlands, the fishing cat's habitat

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 Anirban Das in Cooch Behar, Samar Chakraborty in West Medinipur, Santanu Das and Suman Sadhukan in South 24 Parganas, Bapi Das and Jayanta Chakraborty in Malda, Surajit Dhara in Howrah and Jaydip Sen in Bankura.

35
RESCUES

06
DISTRICTS



Mentoring Young Conservation Filmmakers



GreenHub interns taking shots for their documentaries at various field sites of HEAL's conservation initiatives

- The GreenHub Central India Project is a year-long fellowship designed for rural and tribal youth primarily hailing from states such as Jharkhand, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra, Odisha, West Bengal and Madhya Pradesh.
- The fellowship focuses on training fellows in filmmaking, with the ultimate aim of nurturing future stewards capable of leveraging the visual medium to instigate on-ground change.
- Fellows undergo training at a Bhopal campus before being placed as interns in various organizations or institutes. The objective is to produce 15-minute short films addressing the issues these organizations grapple with, showcasing them during a film festival at the culmination of the fellowship.
- In November, two fellows joined HEAL for their internship. During their time with HEAL, they will gain insights into the organization's work and craft documentaries about it.
- HEAL will mentor these aspiring filmmakers, providing them with a comprehensive understanding of the conservation issues impacting West Bengal and demonstrating how HEAL endeavors to address these challenges.

Understanding Fishing Cat Distribution in Chilika

- A research article co-authored by Tiasa Adhya, HEAL's Joint Secretary and Director of the Ecology and Conservation Program, was published by the IUCN Cat Specialist Group in the latest issue of their newsletter, Cat News. The article is based on the research carried out by TFCP in Odisha's Chilika lake.
- Chilika is more than just Asia's largest brackish water lagoon and India's first Ramsar site; nestled between the Eastern Ghats and the Bay of Bengal, the lake possesses a unique combination of varying depths and salinity gradients.
- These factors play a pivotal role in determining the vegetation surrounding it. The study, which maps the distribution of fishing cats, describes the ecological factors influencing the presence of fishing cats within the Chilika landscape.
- The article also talks about the intricate relationship these water-loving felines share with their wet abode, advocating for a fishing cat-centric conservation action plan as a way forward to bolster protection for the Ramsar Site, its biodiversity, and the well-being of the local human community.



(Top) Illustration of Chilika lagoon and basin area from the publication, showing different land use and land cover types. (Bottom) A fishing cat caught on camera trap deployed in the Chilika lagoon as part of TFCP's monitoring program



Mitigating Human-Snake Conflict in Sundarbans

- The Sundarban region experiences significant human-snake conflict, leading to elevated human mortality rates and widespread persecution of snakes.
- With the support received from the promisors Dipal and Mitesh Damania, Upendra Bhatt and others, through the #LivingMyPromise's Dolphin Tank initiative, HEAL has commenced its human-snake conflict mitigation project in Sundarbans in South 24 Parganas.
- As part of this project, regular snake identification and snake bite mitigation programs will be conducted in the forest-fringe villages of the Sundarban Tiger Reserve.
- These initiatives are integral components of HEAL's long running campaign, "Zero Death from Snake Bites," which aims to prevent snake bite incidents and reduce death and disability among victims.



Suvrajyoti Chatterjee, Secretary, HEAL imparting information regarding snake identification to participants in Bali-II on 18 November



Zonal Coordinator, Ardhendu Banik, sharing his insights on snake behaviour with the audience during the awareness program in Kumirmari on 25 November



A participant sharing an anecdote with team HEAL during the program in Kumirmari on 25 November



Participants, curious about snake identification, at the awareness program in Kumirmari on 26 November

- In November, three awareness programs were organized within various Gram Panchayats of Gosaba block in South 24 Parganas. The initial session took place on 18 November in Bali-II, while the subsequent two were held on 25 and 26 November in Kumirmari.
- The awareness sessions commenced with a discussion on the various species of venomous and non-venomous snakes commonly found in the Sundarbans region. Participants' longstanding misconceptions about these species were dispelled by providing information about their ecology and true behavior in nature.
- Subsequently, there was a discussion on practices that can be adopted to prevent snakes from entering human-use areas, thereby reducing the likelihood of snake bites. The correct protocol to follow in case of a snake bite accident was also explained to the participants.
- On all occasions, participants responded positively to the discussed topics and found our explanations to be helpful. Several participants expressed their interest in gaining further knowledge about snakes and expressed a willingness to assist HEAL in organizing more programs in the future.