

MONTHLY REPORT



HEAL

Human & Environment
Alliance League

FEBRUARY 2024

Ripan Biswas©



The month at a glance

Addressing Threats to Migratory Birds in Central Bengal

Field Updates and Wildlife Rescues

Linking Wetland Conservation With Human Sustenance

Gathering Data on Aspects Related to Snakebites in Sundarbans

Talks, Events and More

Addressing Threats to Migratory Birds in Central Bengal

- Throughout early February, HEAL actively maintained anti-poaching surveillance over wetlands which aided swift detection of bird trapping nets in Beel Belun, a large unprotected wetland in Khargram block, Murshidabad district. The nets removed measured over 20 kilometers in length.
- The later half of the month was dedicated to combating commercial poaching of migratory larks and pipits, collectively called 'Bogari' in the local parlance.
- Bogari hunting typically begins in the third week of February when these birds start accumulating fat in preparation of their upcoming journey back to their Trans-Himalayan breeding grounds.
- Large flocks of these birds roost in fallow croplands where hundreds of poaching gangs set up expansive mist nets in the morning or in the evening to ensnare as many bird as they can.



Net removal in progress from Beel Belun wetland in Khargram



Team HEAL with large quantities of bird trapping nets removed from Beel Belun



Bogari rescued from bird trapping nets set up by poachers at Bansapur ground, Birbhum



The two poachers that were caught killing and selling Bogari in Nagarbazar on 20 February 2024

- In 2023, HEAL had conducted extensive field investigations to determine the scale of Bogari trade in two districts and understand the modus operandi of the poachers involved. That year, several hunting grounds were discovered along the border of Murshidabad and Birbhum districts which served as the starting point for HEAL's anti-poaching efforts this year.
- On 18 February, HEAL's field teams intercepted the first group of poachers in Murshidabad. In the ensuing two weeks, seven more poaching attempts were thwarted in various hunting grounds located in Murshidabad and Birbhum. Enforcement authorities showed active involvement, accompanying HEAL's field teams everyday during routine patrols.
- Around 10 kilometers of bird trapping nets were removed, confiscated and destroyed. Nearly 350 larks and pipits were rescued and released from either poacher's possession or from the nets laid by them.
- On 20 February, an undercover operation was executed which culminated in the arrest of two lark poachers from Nagar Bazar, a notorious hub for clandestine trading of migratory bird meat in Khargram. Their bikes were seized by the Khargram Police and 30 live larks were recovered from their possession.

Field Updates: Fishing Cat Presence Confirmed in Bilkurul Beel



Screen grabs of two elusive wild small cats, fishing cat (Top) and jungle cat (bottom) from the video footage captured by camera traps set in Bilkurul Beel in Bharatpur, Murshidabad

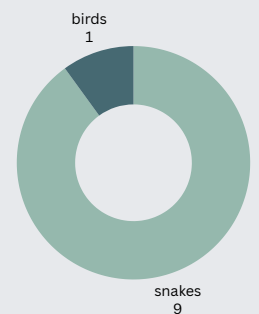
- During routine surveys in Bilkurul Beel, an unprotected wetland located in Bharatpur, Murshidabad district, HEAL's local monitoring team would frequently encounter indirect signs of fishing cats, such as scat and partially consumed fish remains.
- To confirm these reports, a camera trap was deployed in the wetland for a week in February.
- The camera trap captured not just one, but at least three different individuals of fishing cats, including a cub. The camera traps were also witness to never-before-recorded interaction between golden jackals and jungle cats.
- Local residents of several villages in Bharatpur, utilise the wetland for water access, fishing, and crop irrigation.
- However, presence of fishing cats, a globally endangered carnivore and West Bengal's State Animal lends an even greater significance to this wetland, underscoring the need to protect it from encroachment and exploitative practices that could alter its ecological nature.

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month HEAL's rescue teams carried out 10 rescues in 2 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Jayanta Chakraborty in Malda and Ardhendu Banik, and Anirban Das in Cooch Behar

10
RESCUES

2
DISTRICTS



Linking Wetland Conservation With Human Sustenance

**Chilika
Red Rice** LINKING HUMAN HEALTH AND
SUSTENANCE TO NATURE
PRESERVATION



(Top) Logo of the Chilika Red Rice depicting the interconnectedness of wetlands, biodiversity and human wellbeing. (Bottom) Tiasa in a meeting with red rice cultivators.

- Since 2017, the Fishing Cat Project (TFCP), co-founded in 2010 by Tiasa Adhya, HEAL's Joint Secretary and Director of the Ecology and Conservation Program, has been working in Odisha to protect the Chilika Wetland.
- The wetland is a designated Ramsar Site, Asia's largest brackishwater lagoon and home to a thriving population of fishing cats. Farming communities in Chilika cultivate 'red rice,' a flood-tolerant rice variety that grows up to a height of 4-6 feet. Until their harvest, the rice crops serve as seasonal habitat for the fishing cats.
- Selling red rice locally yields poor economic returns. Therefore, farmers are compelled to abandon red rice cultivation and lease their land for aquaculture farming, a detrimental practice that has led to widespread conversion of wetlands across south-east Asia in recent times.
- On 02 February, also known as World Wetlands Day, HEAL, in partnership with TFCP and Veeville Consulting, launched the Chilika Red Rice pilot project to integrate wetland protection and fishing cat conservation with human sustenance.
- The project seeks to incentivise marginalised farmers to continue growing red rice by marketing it to urban consumers for higher profits. This will ensure the persistence of the fishing cat's seasonal habitat and prevent encroachment of Chilika wetlands by aquaculture farms.
- The project is supported by The Habitats Trust, the Future For Nature Foundation-Netherlands, and the Fishing Cat Conservation Alliance.

Fish, Fishermen And Fishing Cat

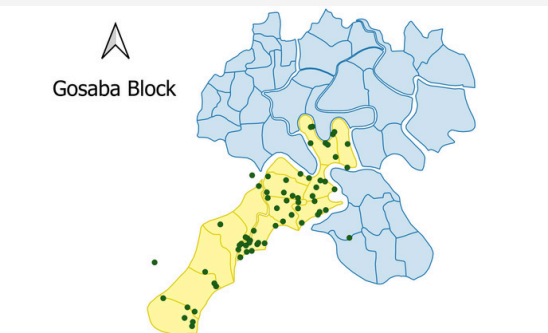
- Tiasa delivered a talk titled "Fish-Fishermen-Fishing Cats: Visualising the Persistence of a Rich Socio-Ecological System in Chilika" as part of a webinar organised by the Global Tiger Forum and the UNDP-GEF program on World Wetland Day 2024.
- Given its status as the apex predator of the ecosystem, the fate of the fishing cat is closely intertwined with the fate of wetlands worldwide. Hence, theme of the webinar commemorated World Wetland Day by organising talks on the fishing cats.
- In her presentation, Tiasa delved into the initiatives devised by her team at TFCP, connecting fishing cat conservation to the preservation of wetland health and the well-being of wetland-dependent communities in Chilika.
- This included a discussion of the Chilika Red Rice initiative launched on the same day.

Watch the webinar here: https://www.youtube.com/live/7_q1VrB3yTs?si=TjxkpPF9CRNJfrF5

Gathering Data on Aspects Related to Snakebites in Sundarbans



- Snake are routinely persecuted due to fear of death and disability in rural parts of West Bengal, including the Sundarbans region, where mortality among snakebite victims is very high.
- In November 2023, with support from Living My Promise's Dolphin Tank initiative, HEAL launched the 'Zero Death from Snakebites' project in Sundarbans' Gosaba block. with the aim of alleviating human-snake conflict by educating the community on ways to prevent snake bites and ensure recovery of victims.
- Last month, a social survey was initiated to collect baseline information on various aspects related to snakebite prevention and treatment methods in Gosaba. As of 29 February, 80 interviews have been conducted in 13 out of 50 mouzas of Gosaba.
- During the surveys, a substantial number of participants admitted to not attending any awareness camps on snakebite prevention and management before.
- Additionally, participants exhibited a lack of knowledge about the symptoms of venomous and non-venomous snakebites and their differential treatment, particularly the use of Anti-venom Serum.



(Top) Field assistant Debobrata Mondal conducting an interview, (Bottom) Mouza map of Gosaba block showing locations of the interviews conducted thus far in 13 mouzas

Heal Felicitated at The Pop Festival in New Delhi

- On 03 February, HEAL was invited to the day-long International Conference and POP Festival for Youth-Led Climate Action, held at the India Habitat Centre in New Delhi.
- At the conference, HEAL was honoured with the "Nature and Biodiversity Conservation Award 2023" in recognition of its work to protect wildlife and their natural habitat across West Bengal.
- Dr. Arka Mukherjee and Mr. Tamanash Dutta, HEAL's Advisory Members, were also felicitated at the event for their contribution to wildlife conservation.
- During the conference, HEAL gave a presentation on the crucial link between wildlife conservation and climate change mitigation, highlighting how healthy populations of wild species enhance the carbon capture capacity of natural ecosystems.
- In this context, HEAL discussed its efforts to mitigate the barbaric hunting festivals and the large-scale commercial poaching of migratory birds which seriously threaten local wildlife populations occurring outside protected areas in West Bengal.
- HEAL is grateful to the POP movement for this recognition and dedicates the award to its team members.



(Top) Arka Sarkar, President, HEAL, giving the presentation, (Bottom) Arka along with Meghna Banerjee, Executive Director and CEO, HEAL, accepting the award