

MONTHLY REPORT



HEAL

Human & Environment
Alliance League

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The month at a glance

Anti-Hunting Awareness Programs by Humane Committee

Combating Migratory Bird Poaching in Central West Bengal

Wildlife Rescues

Promoting Human-Elephant Coexistence in Jhargram

Anti-Hunting Awareness Programs by Humane Committee

Background

- The annual hunting festivals of South Bengal are set to begin in April 2024. Over the next two months, more than 50 hunt fests are expected to be organised across four districts, attracting 10,000-15,000 armed hunters.
- The task of averting the impending massacre of invaluable wildlife has been entrusted to Humane Committees established in seven districts, by Calcutta High Court's judgement and order dated 20 February 2023, pursuant to HEAL's litigation efforts.
- Chaired by the District Judge and convened by the Secretary of District Legal Services Authority (DLSA), these committees include Divisional Forest Officers (DFOs), District Magistrates (DMs), Superintendents of Police (SPs), high-ranking Railway Protection Force (RPF) officials, and conservationist Tiasa Adhya.
- The Humane Committees are expected to conduct year-round awareness camps and anti-hunting campaigns just prior to the hunting season to discourage village residents' participation in hunting festivals and promote pro-conservation attitudes.

A] West Medinipur and Jhargram



- The DLSA in Jhargram district organised 'Legal Awareness Programs' under the banner of the Jhargram Humane Committee on 06 February and 06 March 2024, inviting Gram Panchayat leaders and local residents residing in areas where hunting festivals are held in Jhargram district.
- The programs attempted to impress upon the attendees the criminal nature of wildlife hunting and the legal consequences of engaging in the same during hunting festivals.
- Following introductory addresses by the DLSA, DM, and SP, representatives from HEAL delivered a presentation on the adverse effects of indiscriminate wildlife hunting on ecosystems. They also highlighted examples of hunting communities worldwide that have given up hunting in favour of wildlife conservation.
- HEAL gave the same presentation at a similar program targeting hunting communities. It was organised by the Forest Department of Midnapore Range on 19 March, under the banner of West Medinipur Humane Committee.
- Representatives from HEAL and other local NGOs, who were invited to the program, engaged in a dialogue with the attendees, seeking to dissuade them from participating in the upcoming hunting festivals.

(Top) Legal awareness program in Jhargram (Bottom) Awareness program in West Medinipur

B] Birbhum



(Top) The jungle cat hunter who was apprehended by Birbhum Forest Department with assistance from team HEAL, (Bottom) Teammate Soumyadip Mondal and Biplab Biswas representing HEAL at the Urgent Liaison Meeting

- While large-scale, organised hunting festivals are not known to occur in Birbhum, sporadic hunting of wildlife is extremely common in the district. On 18 March, HEAL's field team discovered a group of hunters carrying the poached carcass of a large jungle cat.
- Enforcement authorities were immediately informed, who arrived at the scene and apprehended one of the hunters as the rest managed to flee. The hunter was remanded to judicial custody of eight days.
- In response to the incident, the Range Forest Office in Birbhum, Suri, organised an 'Urgent Liaison Meeting,' on 21 March, marking the first time all stakeholders of the Birbhum Humane Committee were invited together since its establishment by the High Court in October 2023.
- HEAL representatives Soumyadip Mondal and Biplab Biswas attended the meeting, providing valuable insights from their on-ground experience of investigating and combating rampant illegal poaching of migratory birds.
- The stakeholders at the meeting resolved to a) organise awareness camps for sensitising communities and promoting wildlife conservation and b) actively coordinate with authorities from Murshidabad district for imposing a stringent crack down on illegal migratory bird trade.

Combatting Migratory Bird Poaching in Central West Bengal

- Last month, the districts of Murshidabad and Birbhum witnessed a resurgence in commercial bird poaching, signaling the onset of the *Bogari* hunting season. Each day until mid-April, poachers set mist net traps in croplands known to host large numbers of migratory larks and pipits (i.e *Bogari*), and capture hundreds of them in each attempt.
- To prevent this imminent decimation of migrant bird populations, HEAL initially deployed six field operatives to monitor and patrol known hunting sites, and collaborate closely with local law enforcement and forest authorities to prevent poaching.
- Following a slow start in February, poaching attempts increased rapidly, with multiple gangs laying nets at multiple sites simultaneously. In response, more field operatives were deployed to ensure greater vigilance and timely threat mitigation.
- Throughout March, HEAL's field team, now comprising 15 members, intercepted a total of 20 poaching attempts, removed and destroyed over 65 kilometers of bird trapping nets and rescued nearly 950 ensnared birds.
- Additionally, with HEAL's assistance, enforcement authorities were successful in apprehending two bird poachers in Burwan, Murshidabad, on 17 March for attempting to hunt *Bogari*.



(Top) Several *Bogari* ensnared in poachers' nets (Bottom) A field team member from HEAL rescuing migratory larks from poachers' nets. Several other larks trapped in the net are visible



- In addition to proactive surveillance and interception efforts, the field team conducted extensive anti-poaching sensitization campaigns, particularly in villages with high poacher presence and illegal activity.
- They put up posters in public areas, distributed leaflets to villagers, and installed permanent metal awareness signboards at 10 new locations, supplementing the 16 installed in the previous year.
- These efforts were intended to raise awareness about the illegal nature of migratory bird poaching and consumption, while providing contact information for reporting the same.
- As a result of these efforts, the team received more leads and tip-offs than ever before, which led to the discovery of additional lark hunting locations in Birbhum, and even in a third district - East Bardhaman.



HEAL's field team members with the poachers who were arrested on 17 March in Burwan, Murshidabad



A permanent metal awareness signboard, serving to deter poaching and encourage reporting, installed near a *Bogari* hunting field



An awareness campaign by team HEAL in a village in Rampurhat-II block of Birbhum where a significant number of poachers reside



HEAL's field team member pasting posters raising awareness to dissuade poaching of larks and facilitate reporting of poaching activities in their vicinity

- During the 'Urgent Liaison Meeting,' organised on 21 March by the Range Forest Office in Birbhum, Suri, HEAL's team members and enforcement authorities from Birbhum and Murshidabad deliberated extensively on a plan of action for protecting migrant bird populations against commercial bird poaching.
- This marked the first time a stringent crackdown had been imposed on the illegal migratory bird meat trade in Birbhum. The sight of large murmurations - gigantic flocks of thousands of larks feeding and flying together in areas where poachers had been thwarted from setting bird traps - symbolised the effectiveness of this intervention in safeguarding them.

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month, HEAL's rescue teams carried out 20 rescues in 03 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Ardhendu Banik and Anirban Das in Cooch Behar, Bapi Das and Jayanta Chakraborty in Malda, and Jaydip Sen in Bankura.

20
RESCUES

03
DISTRICTS

snakes
20

Promoting Human-Elephant Coexistence in Jhargram

- Over the years, the human-elephant conflict in South Bengal has escalated to alarming levels, posing a threat to the conservation of Asian elephants and the safety of local communities.
- With the support of Coforge Ltd, HEAL launched a project in January 2024 in Jamboni block of Jhargram district, situated in the South Bengal landscape, to promote human-elephant coexistence (further details are available in the January 2024 monthly report).
- The project employs a multi-faceted strategy aimed at reducing elephant incursions into villages through the installation of solar fences and providing alternative food sources for elephants. This includes allocating exclusive paddy fields on leased land and planting fodder crops around nutrient-poor plantation forests.
- These efforts are anticipated to decrease the need for elephants to raid crops in the quest for food and minimise property damage caused by them, thereby fostering greater tolerance among local communities and garnering their support for elephant conservation.
- In the past two months, the project has made significant headway. An additional 12 bighas of land have been leased, supplementing the previously leased 44 bighas, and paddy has been sown. This expansion followed thorough consultations with local communities during meetings and routine field engagements.
- Solar fencing has been completed in one village, Bhursan, with ongoing work in two more villages, Kuraria and Malbandi.
- Local women have been actively involved in nurturing seedlings at a nursery in Jamboni. In addition to this nursery, two more nurseries have been established at another location.
- All three nurseries house mature saplings of 19 elephant-preferred tree species, which will soon be planted at the onset of the monsoon.



(From top to bottom) Team HEAL conducting a meeting with community members, transplantation of germinated paddy seedlings into the leased rice fields, women watering the growing saplings in the nursery, an installed solar fence in Bhursan.