

MONTHLY REPORT



HEAL

Human & Environment
Alliance League

MAY 2024



The month at a glance

Monitoring and Documentation of Hunt Season 2024

Field Updates: Foiling Poachers' Plans and Saving Dying Turtles

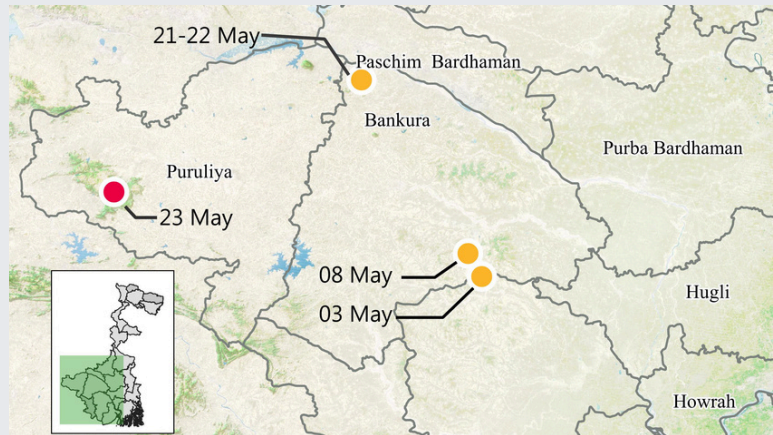
Scientific Monitoring as a Tool to Conserve Fishing Cats

Wildlife Rescues

Community Engagement Drives for Promoting Human-Elephant Coexistence

Monitoring and Documentation of Hunt Season 2024

- HEAL continued its efforts to protect wildlife in South Bengal by monitoring and documenting the hunting festivals organised in May 2024.
- Four hunting festivals took place this month, one each in Purulia and West Medinipur districts and two in Bankura district.
- According to data gathered by HEAL over the last one year, many smaller hunting festivals were expected to occur.
- However HEAL's on-ground team found out that such hunts did not happen for reasons such as fear of being stopped by enforcement authorities and also due to prevalent heat waves.



Map of South Bengal showing the locations and dates of the hunting festivals monitored by HEAL in May 2024. Points in red denote large hunt fests and those in yellow denote small hunt fests



(Top) Hunting parties arriving in Ajudhya hills at dawn (Bottom) A group of armed hunters moving through the forest in Ajudhya hills

A] Large-scale Hunting Festivals

- The Ajudhya Hills Hunting Festival of Purulia, which occurred on 23 May 2024 this year, is one of the biggest hunt fests in South Bengal. In 2024, this festival too saw a significant reduction in scale, with attendance dropping from over 20,000 hunters to barely 3,000-4,000.
- Enforcement authorities were deployed in large numbers to manage the crowds, which included many tourists in addition to hunters. Their presence appeared to deter hunting.
- To substantiate this, a member of HEAL's field team went undercover with a hunting party deep into the forest in Ajudhya hills.
- It was discovered that the hunters, many of whom had travelled all the way from Jharkhand to attend the hunt fest in Ajudhya, failed to find wildlife to hunt.,



Armed hunters inside the forests of Biharinath hills in Bankura during the hunt fest organised in the said location on 22 May

B] Small-scale Hunting Festivals

- In the remaining two hunting festivals, the number of hunters varied between 1,000 and 200. Enforcement authorities were either present in small numbers or completely absent.
- Weapons were not seized at any of the hunts, and hunters were seen moving through the forest with arms. Kills could not be detected during these hunting festivals.
- The hunt fest organised on 22 May 2024, in Biharinath, Bankura, was documented for the first time, validating the information that HEAL had gathered through a survey conducted between August and December 2023.



An awareness program in Fulkushma on 01 May 2024



An awareness program in Patrasayer on 03 May 2024



An awareness program in Dhengasole on 08 May 2024

C] Awareness Programs by the Bankura Humane Committee

- Last month, evidence of wildlife killing gathered by HEAL during the Joypur hunting festival in Bankura on 18 April led to the Bankura Humane Committee convening an urgent strategy meeting on 19 April.
- Pursuant to a resolution adopted unanimously by all Committee members during this meeting, the Forest Department organised a series of targeted awareness camps for hunting communities in various locations across Bankura.
- The awareness camps were held from 01 May to 09 May in the Dhengasole, Fulkushma, Patrasayer, Khatra, and Dhansimla forest ranges, with hunting communities residing in villages within these ranges as participants. Representatives from HEAL, Santanu Das and Aditya Pardhan, were also present at these events.
- During the aforesaid awareness camps, forest officials along with HEAL members stressed on the importance of conserving wildlife and the legal implications of hunting in order to dissuade the attendees from participating in these hunt fests.

Field Updates: Foiling Poachers' Plans and Saving Dying Turtles

- Lack of round-the-clock surveillance in unprotected wetlands is a risk factor for wildlife crime and species population decline. HEAL's field teams in various districts across West Bengal are working tirelessly to address this conservation gap.
- On 02 May, 2024, team members Soumyadip Mondal, Kankan Barman, and Aditya Pardhan aided the Nadia-Murshidabad Forest Department, Kandi range, in arresting three bird poachers from Bilkurul Beel, a wetland in Bharatpur, Murshidabad district. The arrest resulted in a five-day judicial custody for all three culprits.
- The poachers had laid extensive nets in the wetland, trapping 18 birds, including three Red Wattled Lapwings, four Common Snipes, seven Spotted Redshanks, one Pacific Golden Plover, one White-throated Kingfisher, one Pond Heron, and one Greater Painted Snipe.



(Top) The wetland birds recovered from the poachers' possession. (Below) The poachers being taken away by Forest Department officials.



(Left) Carcass of a dead softshell turtle which could not withstand the scorching heat in the absence of adequate moisture. (Right) Team HEAL carrying out the rescue operation at the dried up pond.

- The next day, on 03 May, 2024, HEAL's field team in Cooch Behar district, led by Zonal Coordinator Ardhendu Banik, undertook a rescue operation, saving 53 softshell turtles from a dried-up pond in Baneshwar.
- The turtles were in severe distress as the pond, where they were aestivating (reducing activity to survive unfavourable conditions during summer months), had completely dried up due to unprecedented heat.
- Without any moisture, the turtles were baking in the sun. Few small-sized turtles trapped under dried mud had died. The remaining live turtles were relocated to a pond containing sufficient water levels

Scientific Monitoring as a Tool to Conserve Fishing Cats

- A research article on the density estimation of fishing cats in Chilika, Asia's largest brackishwater lagoon in Odisha, authored by HEAL's Joint Secretary and Director of Ecology and Conservation Programs, Tiasa Adhya, was published in the peer-reviewed journal Inter-Research on 08 May, 2024.
- The article is based on a study conducted by The Fishing Cat Project (co-founded by Tiasa) and Chilika Development Authority in 2021 and 2022.
- The study represents the first attempt to investigate the population of this wetland-dependent felid outside the protected area network with active participation of local community and student volunteers.
- The study found that the density of fishing cats in Chilika is among the highest in the world for a non-protected area, approximately 60 individuals/100 sq km.
- These findings highlight the urgent need for measures to mitigate local and external threats to the fishing cats and their habitat, bringing much-needed conservation attention to Chilika.
- On 09 May, 2024, Mongabay published an article highlighting this study, along with other ongoing efforts by The Fishing Cat Project and similar conservation organisations working to protect this threatened species worldwide.



(Top) A fishing cat captured on a camera trap set up in the Chilika wetlands as part of the study. (Bottom) The student volunteers and local community members who assisted in data collection and field surveys.

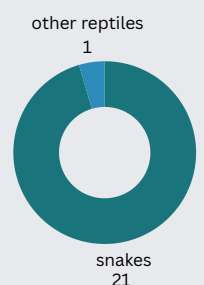
- Access the publication here: <https://www.int-res.com/articles/esr2024/54/n054p001.pdf>
- Read the Mongabay article here: <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/05/saving-asias-fishing-cat-means-protecting-threatened-wetland-habitat/>

WILDLIFE RESCUES

This month, HEAL's rescue teams carried out 22 rescues in 05 districts across West Bengal. These rescues were carried out by: Ardhendu Banik and Anirban Das in Cooch Behar, Jaydip Sen in Bankura, Surajit Dhara in Howrah, Bishwapati Kuiry in Purulia and Jayanta Chakraborty and Bapi Das in Malda.

22
RESCUES

05
DISTRICTS



Community Engagement Drives for Promoting Human-Elephant Coexistence

- HEAL's Human-Elephant Coexistence Program, in collaboration with Coforge Ltd. (further details in January 2024 Monthly Report), underway in Jhargram district, achieved notable progress this month.
- Solar fence installation has been completed in four villages—Bhursan, Kuraria, Malbandi, and Kendangri. Following this, solar fence installation was commenced in two more villages—Telamuri and Choto Kuraria.
- The aforesaid activity is just one of the four interventions being implemented as part of this project to reduce the socio-economic costs of living with elephants borne by Jhargram's local community, thereby promoting human-elephant coexistence.



Warning signs being attached onto the solar fences



A fully installed solar fence in Kendangri



Installation work in progress in Choto Kuraria

- The other interventions include, a) planting tree species that form the natural diet of elephants, b) cultivating paddy for elephant consumption until the trees mature, and c) compensating farmers for losses due to crop raiding.
- The compensation program was launched on 26 May, 2024, during a football tournament organised to foster community cooperation and team spirit. The tournament was hugely popular among the village youth, who showed great enthusiasm in participating.
- The community welcomed the compensation program, with beneficiaries expressing that the compensation validated their losses and provided them with much-needed relief.



(Top) HEAL's field team assessing the damage caused by elephants in local farmers' paddy field. (Bottom) The local residents after receiving their compensation.