

# Turtles set free in wildlife hubs

## ASTAFF REPORTER

The endangered turtles rescued while being smuggled to Bangladesh on Monday were released in wildlife sanctuaries in three districts on Tuesday.

The Indian Softshell Turtles travelled in special forest department vans to the sanctuaries in Ramnabagan (Burdwan), Ballavpur (Birbhum) and Bethuadahari (Nadia). All three are under the state forest and wildlife department.

Officials of the wildlife department and North 24-Parganas district administrations accompanied the turtles during the transit.

"These are river turtles and will survive in the sanctuaries where they have been released. These sanctuaries have several water bodies and canals," said Bikash Ranjan Chakraborty, the divisional forest officer of North 24-Parganas. The water bodies in each sanctuary are spread across several acres.

Wildlife department officials said some of the turtles



**Some of the Indian Softshell Turtles that were seized in North 24-Parganas on Monday.** (Bhabatosh Chakraborty)

died in transit.

"We have taken court's permission to release the turtles into nature. If some turtles have not survived the journey to the sanctuaries, they will be buried at an appropriate place," said a forest department official.

The process of releasing the turtles into nature started on Monday evening. The first batch was released in the Bethuadahari sanctuary a lit-

tle after midnight. The other two batches were released in the Ballavpur and Ramnabagan sanctuaries on Tuesday.

A team of forest department officials and policemen on Monday morning seized 4,720 Indian Softshell Turtles, packed in boxes and concealed under fish, at Kalupur in North 24-Parganas, 12km from the Bangladesh border.

Three people were arrested on the charge of smuggling

the turtles. Wildlife officials said 270 of the seized turtles were found dead. "They died probably because of rough handling by the smugglers," said an official.

Indian Softshell Turtles, found in rivers of south Asia, are listed under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife Act. Adult turtles weigh between 10 and 12kg.

These turtles have been kept under Schedule I because poaching and river pollution are threatening their existence. Also under Schedule I are the Royal Bengal Tiger and Swamp Deer.

Most species of turtles are smuggled for their meat.

Monday's seizure — this was the first time such a huge consignment of turtles was seized in the state — has prompted the wildlife department to step up vigil on the India-Bangladesh border.

"The police and the Border Security Force need to be sensitised about the issue because we cannot crackdown on illegal wildlife trade without their help," said the official.