

Now, poachers bleed Birbhum sanctuary

Migratory Birds Under Attack In Ballavpur; Dept Nonchalant

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Kolkata: A wildlife sanctuary in south Bengal has become a haven for poachers.

A gang of two dozen youths, some barely out of their teens, has turned Ballavpur Wildlife Sanctuary in Birbhum into a happy hunting ground where migratory birds can be killed at will while local foresters and district administration look the other way.

If that isn't shocking enough, the gang uses hunting dogs much like spaniels, terriers and daschunds that were used in the late 19th and early 20th century to locate and point at small game. According to a witness, the hunters use dogs to frighten water birds out of their roosting site in wetland. Once the birds fly off in panic, the men spread nylon net in the water and leave the site. When birds return to the roosting site after a while, unaware of the trap lurking beneath the water surface, their feet get entangled. The poachers later return to collect the catch.

Dogs are also employed to locate the nests of grey francolin, also commonly referred to as grey partridge. Hounded by the dogs, when the panic stricken bird tries to flee, poachers strike using catapults, long knife stick and fishing net.



"Hunting has become a past-time of locals at Ballavpur Wildlife Sanctuary that attracts a large population of migratory birds each winter," said Shuvendu Das from the department of environmental studies at Visva-Bharati.

Recently, Prakriti Samsad, a Kolkata-based NGO working



(Clockwise from above) Villagers use a dog to scare away birds; a boy with the illegal catch; a group of young villagers sets out on a poaching trip and a turtle killed by the locals

on birdlife and their conservation, counted 14,860 water birds in Ballavpur during their mid-winter Waterfowl 2015 census. Birds that fall prey to poachers include lesser whistling duck, northern pintail, purple heron, white-breasted water hen, purple swamp hen and grey francolin.

"I have seen people move around brazenly with 'catapults inside the sanctuary,'" recounted Avisek Chatterjee, member of Prakriti Samsad.

The hunting spree is not restricted to birds only. The



youths also target Indian pond terrapin, a Schedule I species under the Wildlife Protection Act (1972) and black-napped hare, a Schedule IV species.

Access to the Ballavpur Wildlife Sanctuary is easy through four yawning gaps in the metal fence. The fence has



deliberately been cut to ensure unrestricted entry and exit.

When a birder asked one of the elder poachers why they kill birds, the latter replied: "You'll eat chicken, mutton and other expensive fish on weekends. We can't afford to

Shuvendu Das

have them. We therefore kill 15-20 ducks. Around 60% is for consumption and the rest for sale in the village at Rs 70-85 per duck, depending on its size." For the young ones in the team, it's pure fun to learn to kill birds. After the winter season, lesser whistling ducks become expensive and sells for Rs 250-300 a piece.

Birbhum divisional forest officer G R Santosha admitted locals entered the forest but denied that birds were being killed. "For tribals, birds and chicken are the same thing. There may be minor incidents but forest guards ensure that there is no large-scale poaching," he said, taking a rather lenient view.

On the other hand, he questioned how Prakriti Samsad members had entered the sanctuary and taken photographs without permission. Chatterjee of Prakriti Samsad clarified that it had the requisite permission to conduct the annual census.

Ornithologist Sumit Sen felt the forest department would be on its toes and prevent a recurrence. "Now that they are aware of the situation, they will ensure that there is no more killing. At least for the time being, the birds will be safe," he said.