

Fruit protection takes wildlife toll

Nets turn orchards into death traps

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Kolkata: Orchards on the city's doorstep are becoming death traps for birds and animals.

Volunteers from a wildlife protection NGO recently found more than 40 dead birds and mammals trapped in nylon nets at fewer than 10 orchards in Baruipur, South 24-Parganas, barely 30km from the heart of the city.

The nets, meant to protect orchards from flying foxes, trap not only mammals but also birds.

Besides flying foxes and fruit bats, the toll includes yellow-footed pigeons, fulvous-breasted woodpeckers, white-throated kingfishers and red-vented bulbuls.

"The fine, hard-to-see nets are causing loss of wildlife. We went to a few orchards. Baruipur has more than 100 orchards," said Santanu Das of the Human and Environment Alliance League (HEAL), who was part of the team documenting the problem.

"The owners have leased out the orchards. A bountiful harvest from a single tree can fetch more than ₹50,000. So, fruit growers are desperate to protect the fruit. However, they don't bother to remove the nets after the harvest season, which usually covers May and June. The nets are put up in March. Removing them is an extra cost for the growers," he said.

An officer of the South 24-Parganas forest division said teams had started visiting orchards.

"I cannot put a number to the toll. We have started pulling the nets down. The owners, and farmers said they could ill-afford damaged fruit and were not aware of the law. We are organising awareness campaigns. If this continues, we will take legal action against them. Wildlife laws provide for their prosecution. The business is profitable, and those earning money must be more responsible," the official said.

"They must devise an alternative way of protecting the fruit," the official said.

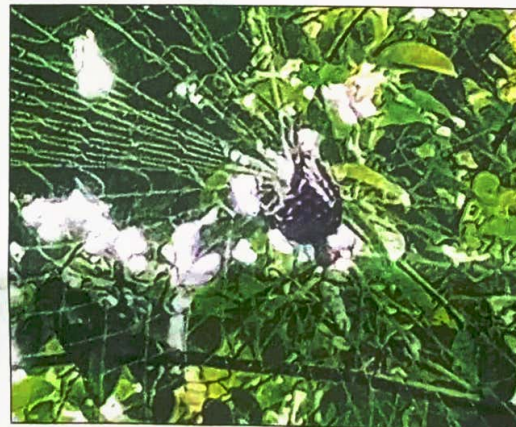
A detailed complaint, along with GPS coordinates of several locations and photographs of mammals and birds found entangled in the nets, was submitted to the chief wildlife warden of Bengal.

The divisional forest officer of the South 24-Parganas forest division was also informed. The department has started engaging with landowners and removing the nets, said Meghna Banerjee, co-founder of HEAL.

"Our team continues to monitor the situation on the ground," she said.

This newspaper has previously reported on the illegal use of nylon nets in Bengal's wetlands to trap birds for meat.

During winter, when the



Birds trapped in nets in Baruipur. Many pictures like these were shared with the forest department.

water recedes, Bengal's wetlands become destinations for migratory birds, mainly from Central Asia and the Trans-Siberian region.

The shallow water left behind by the retreating monsoon provides ideal feeding grounds for insect-eating birds. But the same conditions

also make it easier for hunters to erect poles and stretch nets.

In the dark, the nets are difficult to see, and birds fly into them and get trapped. They are then captured and killed for meat.

The forest department has made arrests in such cases in the past.

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