

Bengal forest department plans conservation programme for fishing cat

The programme is likely to start from mid-2023

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The West Bengal Forest department is all set to undertake a conservation-cum-breeding programme for fishing cats, Bengal's state animal, from next year with support from an international agency.

“With funding from the Japan International Cooperation Agency, we have finalised a conservation breeding programme for fishing cats in West Bengal. The programme is likely to start from mid-2023,” said Debal Ray, principal chief conservator of forest (wildlife), forest department.

The various threats to the survival of fishing cats range from habitat shrinkage due to encroachment of wetlands to killing and accidents.

Significantly, fishing cat, *baghrol* in local parlance, is placed under ‘Schedule I’ category of the Indian Wildlife Act, which grants protection to the animal from poaching, killing, trading as well as being hunted throughout India.

The survival of fishing cats in the state has recently come under scanner after three of the animals were killed in the Bagnan area of Howrah district.

“Fishing cats are definitely under threat. The state biodiversity board had carried out a fishing cat status survey sometime back and is now in the process of updating it. However, unless the awareness of local people can be increased, conservation of the species will be difficult,” said H.S. Debnath, the chairman of the state biodiversity board.

“Fishing cats are mostly found in Howrah followed by South and North 24-Parganas as well as the Hooghly and Murshidabad districts,” pointed out professor Goutam Kumar Saha from the zoology department of Calcutta University, who led a project on fishing cats commissioned by West Bengal Biodiversity Board from 2017 to 2019.



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The study, jointly executed by Zoological Survey of India, Calcutta University and the non-profit Nature Environment Wildlife Society (NEWS), confirmed the presence of fishing cats in nine districts through camera trapping photography and predicted presence in another five districts of the state.

Wildlife activists claim that the government should be more proactive in conserving the state animal on the ground rather than focusing on research.

“The government agencies need to be more proactive on the ground to prevent killing of fishing cats, which has almost become a routine. We have seen how the people, who killed three fishing cats in Howrah recently, easily got bail after absconding initially,” said Samrat Mondal from Howrah Zilla Joutho Paribesh Mancha, who has been working on saving the animal.

Mondal pointed out that apart from declining wetlands, peoples’ aversion towards the animal stems from its similarity with tigers, both in name and appearance.

“Apart from these, people often catch and kill fishing cats while trying to catch non-domesticated pigs,” claimed a member of the activist group and a local forest officer confirmed it.

“We are looking into the Howrah case,” assured principal chief conservator Ray. He also added that the monitoring becomes difficult for the forest department as the animal mainly stays in non-forest areas.