NOTES FROM THE FIELD

— FALL 2023 —

ABSOLVING INDIA'S FISHING CATS

FOSTERING THE NEXT GENERATION OF MACAWS

KEEPING NIASSA SAFE FOR LIONS

WCN
Wildlife Conservation Network

Absolving India's Fishing Cats

The afternoon heat draped across Murthy Kantimahanti as he entered Baruva, a village in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. He gently pushed through the murmuring crowd gathered at the corral, revealing the body of a goat killed the previous night. Baruva and several other villages had been plagued by livestock predation for nearly three months. Murthy, founder of the Eastern Ghats Wildlife Society (EGWS), a partner of the Small Wild Cat Conservation Foundation, had been contacted by the state forest department to

help identify the predators behind these killings. Villagers believed that nearby fishing cats were to blame, but Murthy had doubts about their prime suspect. To exonerate these vulnerable wild cats and ease rising tensions, EGWS set about solving this murder mystery.

Since locals regularly spot fishing cats in the rivers and wetlands near their homes, they naturally thought of them when the trouble began. While livestock predation from wild cats is not uncommon, fishing cats, as their name suggests, primarily dine on fish. One of EGWS' main focuses is protecting the last remaining inland populations of fishing cats in Andhra Pradesh by mitigating conflict with local communities and assessing threats like poaching, habitat loss, and retaliatory killing. Conservation requires working with local people to find solutions to certain problems so that they can more easily coexist with wildlife, so Murthy and his team knew that in order to prevent retaliation against fishing cats, which have no legal protection in this region, they had to stop the attacks on livestock.

With over 20 goats, sheep, and calves lost over the course of this spree, EGWS had to act fast to temper hostilities. Up until now, authorities had quickly disposed of the dead livestock after each incident, but what they didn't know is that carnivores will often return to a carcass multiple times to feed. By removing each kill, they prompted additional attacks to occur. To identify which predators were responsible, Murthy's team set up camera traps around one of the more recent carcasses that hadn't yet been moved. It wasn't long before the cameras unmasked the culprits—a pair of golden jackals, which regularly visited the carcass at night. This surprised the villagers, who always considered jackals to be scavengers, not hunters. No new attacks occurred during the time they were allowed to feed from the carcass, proving that these jackals were the ones preying upon livestock. No fishing cats were ever recorded in the village on any of the cameras.

With the jackals discovered, Murthy's team sought to help Baruva improve security for their livestock. They provided predator-proof fences, recommended purchasing dogs to guard their corrals, and helped community members apply for and receive compensation from the government for their losses. And to reassure them that they need not fear fishing cats, Murthy shared footage from nearby trail cameras of their fishing cat neighbors staying near water sources, not their livestock.

While livestock predation may still sporadically occur, Murthy and EGWS stand ready to help Andhra Pradesh communities reduce conflict, avoid retaliation against innocent fishing cats, and learn to coexist with wildlife. ■

Above: Murthy (left) speaking with livestock owners in Baruva. Right: A camera trap photo of the jackals caught preying on local livestock. Opposite page: Protecting livestock helps reduce conflict between villagers and nearby carnivores.

In addition to fishing cats, EGWS helps protect rusty-spotted cats and other wildlife like Indian leopards, Indian pangolins, king cobras, sloth bears, smooth-coated otters, and more. The Small Wild Cat Conservation Foundation has supported EGWS' efforts since 2015 and both organizations are members of the Fishing Cat Conservation Alliance.

MACAW RECOVERY NETWORK

Fostering the Next Generation of Macaws

MRN already released 14 scarlet macaws from their aviary this year, and are currently planning their first great green macaw release. When these chicks are freed, they will be fitted with lightweight radio transmitters so MRN can track them in the wild. To protect released macaws from the illegal pet trade, MRN educates people through community outreach about the importance of keeping them wild.

Fabio Castrillo was greeted by the sparse squawking of macaws as he entered the aviary at sunrise. Some birds still slept in their nest boxes, but most woke each morning to watch the Macaw Recovery Network (MRN) team arrive with breakfast. At MRN's Breeding Center, rescued scarlet and great green macaws that are unable to return to the wild are cared for and bred, with the goal of releasing their chicks to join Costa Rica's wild macaw populations. As a Breeding Program Assistant, Fabio looks after the macaws in the aviary, including Lizzy and Cliff, the program's very first pair of great green macaw foster parents.

MRN has spent years reintroducing macaws confiscated from the illegal pet trade back to the wild, but some rescued macaws, like Lizzy and Cliff, lack social skills or are physically or mentally unfit to survive in the wild. These macaws are cared for in MRN's aviary, giving them a high-quality life where they can express their natural instincts. Their chicks will one day be released and contribute to the rebuilding of their species; this is especially necessary for Critically Endangered great green macaws, of which less than 1,000 individuals remain in the wild.

Every day at 5:30AM, Fabio and his colleagues clean the aviary, prepare food, and provide enrichment for the macaws, repeating the process again in the afternoon. During breeding season, they inspect nest boxes for any hatched chicks and provide veterinary service as needed. To prepare young macaws for release, Fabio's team gives them flight training by hanging food or toys high up in the aviary, so they grow accustomed to flying and hanging from branches, and teach them to identify fruits they'll encounter in the wild.

Yet some macaws, like Lizzy and Cliff, cannot have chicks of their own. Infertility is a serious concern for a species with so few remaining individuals; some macaws lay clutches that simply never hatch, and even if a full clutch of eggs successfully hatches, some parents may neglect certain chicks for unclear reasons. To prevent abandoned chicks from perishing, the Breeding Center team began placing them with macaws with infertile clutches, who were already in the parent mindset. This is very uncommon, and for Lizzy and Cliff, who had never been parents before, Fabio wasn't sure how well they would handle their new responsibilities. But to the team's delight, the pair have excelled as foster parents. They spend all day watching and feeding their adoptive chick, with Lizzy becoming quite the protective mother. Their chick is now 61 days old, weighs more than any other chick in the aviary, and Fabio suspects that it will be ready to leave the nest in a few weeks.

This success proves that fostering can be a viable way of supporting MRN's goal to raise as many great green macaw chicks as possible to help the species recover. Not every macaw chick survives in the wild, but in MRN's aviary, foster parents like Lizzy and Cliff give Fabio hope that MRN can give all their chicks a loving chance at life. ■

Opposite page: Lizzy and Cliff in MRN's aviary. Top: Fabio holding a newborn macaw chick in MRN's Breeding Center. Bottom: Lizzy and Cliff's chick, healthy and on track to be released to the wild.

Keeping Niassa Safe for Lions

At dawn, Eusebio Waiti stepped out of the Land Cruiser he had parked deep in Mozambique's expansive Niassa Special Reserve. He stretched after a night curled up in the front seat of the battered vehicle, which was camouflaged in children's brown paint. Blending into the environment is critical when collaring lions, which Eusebio and his team regularly do with veterinarians so Niassa Lion Project (NLP) can track pride movements and protect lions from increased poacher activity. When Eusebio returned to the front seat, he told his colleague, Samuel Massingir, to turn on the loudspeaker. As Samuel flicked the switch, the recording of pig squeals meant to attract hungry lions heralded the start of the team's long day.

Niassa Special Reserve is larger than Switzerland and houses between 800 and 1,000 lions, one of Africa's largest lion populations. Since 2003, NLP has protected Niassa's lions and other carnivores in partnership with Mozambique's National Administration of Conservation Areas. For much of that time, Eusebio and Samuel have led NLP's lion monitoring and collaring program. These satellite collars generate tracking data that NLP shares with anti-poaching units in 15 of the Reserve's intensive protection zones. Their patrols keep Niassa safe by removing bushmeat snares that accidentally kill lions. But in recent years, a new threat has emerged that deliberately targets the big cats.

Poachers have been poisoning lions to harvest their teeth, paws, and claws for illegally trafficked trinkets. NLP's community wildlife guardians first noticed an increase in lion deaths in 2015, and Mozambique has since become a hotspot for the illegal lion body part trade. To fight this rising threat and stabilize the lion population, NLP began their Lion Coalition project to align Reserve management, tourism operators, and all 47 of Niassa's villages around a common objective—stopping the illegal killing of lions. Every summer, Eusebio and Samuel's team survey Niassa to locate new prides. When they do, they assist veterinarians in collaring lions, begin tracking their movements, and inform each zone's anti-poaching unit where the lions go so they can remove snares and poisoned animal carcasses in those areas.

Collaring lions takes tremendous ingenuity and patience. Eusebio and Samuel's team travel extreme distances across Niassa's vast woodlands, living and sleeping in their vehicles for days. To draw lions to them, they play recordings of distressed prey species over loudspeakers mounted on the vehicles. Lions can hear these calls from several miles away, and when one eventually strolls up to their location, a veterinarian darts it from inside the truck. Once the lion is sedated, Eusebio and Samuel's team collar it and then wait until it wakes up and rejoins its pride. They then track that pride's real-time movements using a mobile app, allowing NLP and the anti-poaching units to address threats wherever they go. To date, NLP has collared over 80 lions and currently monitors 16 prides throughout Niassa.

As Eusebio watched the lion approach their truck after enduring two hours of pig squealing, Samuel prepared the next collar. Their dedication and NLP's collaboration with Reserve management and their partners are disrupting the efforts of wildlife criminals in Niassa and protecting lions in this important stronghold. ■

NLP only collars female lions because the health of a successful pride is measured by its number of females.

Top: Samuel Massingir (driving) and other members of NLP's lion collaring team in the field. Bottom: Anti-poaching units utilize NLP's tracking data to coordinate their patrols and follow lions across Niassa.

One of NLP's core philosophies is expanding their reach through collaboration—they partner with the Mozambique Wildlife Alliance for veterinary support when collaring lions, receive funding from the Lion Recovery Fund to support the Lion Coalition project, and work with the Mozambican government and Wildlife Conservation Society, who co-manage Niassa Special Reserve, to keep lions safe.

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