

KANGAROOS IN FOREST REVEAL SMUGGLING IN WEST BENGAL

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Rare rescue: A sub-adult kangaroo rescued in Baikunthpur Forest Division of West Bengal. **Special Arrangement** AFP

Forest officials of the Baikunthpur forest division in West Bengal initially did not believe their ears when local people told them that they had seen kangaroos hopping about in the forests in their jurisdiction.

However, late on Friday evening, they found not one but three joeys in the narrow forested patches bordering Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts of the State. On Saturday morning, the carcass of another kangaroo was found in the nearby Farabari area, taking the number of these Australia natives recorded in north Bengal to four.

“This is very unusual for us — to rescue kangaroos, which are not native to the continent [of Asia]. Earlier, we have rescued animals that were being smuggled through the corridor that starts from the northeast [of India] to north Bengal, and we heightened security,” Debal Roy, Principal Chief Conservator of Forest and Chief Wildlife Warden-North Bengal, said.

While no one has been arrested and the forest official are not sure where these animals were being taken to, he pointed out that kangaroos were certainly being transported in small containers, and the moment the smugglers got a whiff of security checks, they abandoned the animals and slipped away.

Hari Krishnan, Divisional Forest Officer (DFO), Baikunthpur, said the rescued kangaroos had been handed over to the Bengal Safari Zoo in Siliguri. He later confirmed that the rescued animals were sub-adults (not fully grown).

Smuggling of exotic birds and animals, is not uncommon in West Bengal, which shares its borders with the northeastern States, Nepal and Bangladesh.

The seizure of kangaroos is, however, a more complicated story. About a fortnight ago, forest officials seized one kangaroo in the Buxa forest division in north Bengal and arrested one person.

The person in custody produced a “supply order” from the Indore Zoo.

According to the rules of the Central Zoo Authority, zoos cannot purchase animals through a “supply order”. Animals can be procured for zoos through the exchange of other animals, or from the personal collection of people, or through donations.

The supply order was directed to a farm in Mizoram. Sources in the West Bengal Forest Department said that their Chief Wildlife Warden had written to the head of Mizoram’s Wildlife Department, and the latter had denied any such farm existed in that State.

Species not native to India are not protected under the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 but for the possession of species listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), owners have to declare them in the ‘Parivesh’ portal

of the Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change (MOEFCC). Meanwhile, the Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Bill, 2021 was introduced in the Lok Sabha, which seeks to increase the number of species protected under the law, and to implement the CITES.

Experts said the kangaroos were being smuggled into India from Myanmar and from the northeast. Smuggling of exotic birds and animals, which are kept as pets and fetch a very high price, is an organised crime. In June 2019, a lion cub was rescued in Kolkata from wildlife smugglers.

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