

CAUGHT DOWN THE WIRE: PUNJAB'S BLACKBUCK FIGHT FOR EXISTENCE

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Marred by strays: A herd of blackbuck sauntering in open fields in Sardarpura village in Abohar district of Punjab. These indigenous deer often fall prey to barbed wire fences or get injured by stray dogs. At right, injured animals undergoing treatment at a rescue centre at Fazilka. AKHILESH KUMAR

On the foggy winter afternoon of February 3, a phone call from a local, saying “An injured blackbuck, apparently attacked by stray dogs, is lying on a farm in Sardarpur village...” was enough to send a team of forest and wildlife personnel into rescue mode. They rushed to the spot in the Abohar Wildlife Sanctuary (AWS) to save the animal.

A young deer, about two years old, was lying on the farm with multiple injuries, after being attacked by a group of stray dogs. Chased by the canines, the blackbuck had rammed into barbed wires, which enclose agricultural fields to avoid crop damage from stray cattle. The injuries proved to be fatal, even though medical treatment was given, and the blackbuck succumbed within a few hours of the attack.

This is not an isolated incident. In 2019, so far, as many as eight blackbuck have died in the AWS, and a majority of them succumbed to their injuries, caused by barbed wires while trying to escape from stray dogs, officials told *The Hindu*.

Other unnatural reasons for blackbuck deaths include road accidents and falling into water storage tanks and concrete drains.

For the blackbuck, Punjab's State animal, it's a fight for existence at the AWS in Fazilka district. It faces a severe threat from stray cattle, attacks by stray dogs, and habitat fragmentation due to change in land use and cropping patterns over the past few years.

Avoidable casualties

State government data show that, in 2018, as many as 25 blackbuck died, while the Wildlife Wing was successful in saving the lives of 18 injured ones. In 2017, 42 blackbuck died in the sanctuary area, while 33 were saved after being provided medical treatment.

“Most of the blackbuck here are dying due to injuries caused by stray dog attacks. Feral dogs target young deer and expecting females. The problem has been aggravated in the past few years as locals trying to save their crops from stray cattle have put up barbed wires and nets. Such fencing of fields restricts the free movement of blackbuck and results in fatal injuries when they are chased by dogs,” said Malkit Singh, Range Officer at AWS.

The district administration has banned the sale and use of barbed wires, yet its use continues unabated in the sanctuary area. Fencing agricultural fields, especially with cobra wires that have blade-edged iron wire mesh, has been a major cause of worry, and a key reason behind causing fatal injuries to blackbuck during dog attacks.

“We make people aware of the ill-effects of barbed wires. On Friday, in Khairpur village, our team convinced two farmers to remove cobra wires from their farms. This an ongoing process.

We are making efforts to convince locals to take off these wires for the safety of blackbuck,” said Mr. Singh.

The AWS is an open sanctuary, spread across private land in 13 villages. The blackbuck was notified as the State animal of Punjab in 1989 and its presence in the State is confined to the AWS due to the unique habitat of semi-arid plains consisting of agricultural fields, intermittent fallow-barren lands, scattered sand dunes, sand mounds and ridges.

Locals who have been peacefully co-existing with this near-threatened species of blackbuck for several years are annoyed with the alleged indifference of the State government towards solving the problem of stray cattle. They say that if the problem of stray cattle is resolved, then there would be no need for them to fence their farms with barbed wires, which would eventually allow free movement of blackbuck and help them thrive.

‘Out of compulsion’

“It’s not by choice but out of compulsion that I have fenced my farm with barbed wire. Stray cattle will destroy my standing crop if I don’t take precautionary measures. I, or for that matter no one in my village, would want to hurt blackbuck, but what options do we have? We have to sustain our family,” said Naresh Kumar, who has sown wheat in his 10 acres of family land in Mehrana village.

In AWS, where land is mainly owned by the Bishnoi community, there were 3,273 blackbuck according to the 2017 census, conducted jointly by the Punjab Biodiversity Board and the Department of Forest and Wildlife Preservation, against 3,500 in the year 2011.

Habitat disturbed

R.D. Bishnoi, State president of the Akhil Bhartiya Jeev Rakshak Bishnoi Samaj, said that, over the years, with habitat fragmentation due to change in land use and cropping pattern, the natural habitat of blackbuck had been disturbed.

“A few years ago, blackbuck in herds of 100-150 could be easily seen running here but nowadays, you will only find a group of 20-25 deer. Over the years, the fallow-barren lands have turned into lush green fields due to better irrigation facilities. Scattered sand dunes and sand mounds, which provided a unique environment for the blackbuck, are now vanishing as the area is being brought under farming with the help of the latest machines. All these factors have contributed to the fall in the population of this majestic species,” said Mr. Bishnoi.

He said that successive governments had failed to find a solution to the problem of stray animals, which were not only destroying crops but had also caused the deaths of humans.

“While the government collects cow cess in the name of taking care of stray animals, the problem continues to grow.”

“The growing population of stray animals also competes with blackbuck for the already shrinking open grasslands, resulting in their migration to adjoining areas outside the sanctuary,” said Mr. Bishnoi.

AWS’ Sub-Divisional Magistrate Poonam Singh said that the local administration, along with the Wildlife Department, had been persuading locals to remove barbed wires, especially the “cobra wires”. “We are creating awareness among people about the ill-effects of these wires. Also, our teams remove these wires from time-to-time,” she said.

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