



The *Sanctuary* Interview

DR. PANJIT BASUMATARY

*A distinguished veterinarian and recipient of the IFAW's prestigious Animal Action Award, **Dr. Panjit Basumatary** has dedicated over 15 years to wildlife rescue and rehabilitation. As the Manager of the Centre for Bear Rehabilitation and Conservation (CBRC), Arunachal Pradesh, with the Wildlife Trust of India, he has played a crucial role in rehabilitating displaced wildlife, especially the Asiatic black bear, along with a variety of other species. In conversation with **Rithwik Sundar**, Dr. Basumatary reflects on his remarkable journey and the challenges of his work, and offers insights and advice for those passionate about wildlife conservation.*

When Dr. Panjit Basumatary asked, “Is it possible to reschedule today’s call?” after we’d agreed, I candidly asked, “Where to, Dr. Panjit?” Having grown accustomed to his last-minute emergencies, I wasn’t surprised by his response: “There’s an injured elephant somewhere in Itanagar that needs treatment.” Duty calls.

The next day, he shared the full story. Over treacherous, hilly terrain, Dr. Panjit and his team had to endure all sorts of risks to tranquilise the giant and administer care. I listened, trying to absorb the gravity of his daily life. The following day, it was another

call to Dirang, this time for a Black-necked Crane, badly injured by a feral dog. Again, Dr. Basumatary had to make the journey. In his line of work, danger and dedication come hand in hand. But this has been the routine for this distinguished veterinarian for the past 15 years, working in wildlife rescue and rehabilitation with the Wildlife Trust of India. Today, he’s the manager of the Centre for Bear Rehabilitation and Conservation (CBRC) in the Pakke Tiger Reserve, Arunachal Pradesh, established jointly by the Arunachal Pradesh Forest Department, International Fund for

Animal Welfare (IFAW), and Wildlife Trust of India (WTI) in 2002.

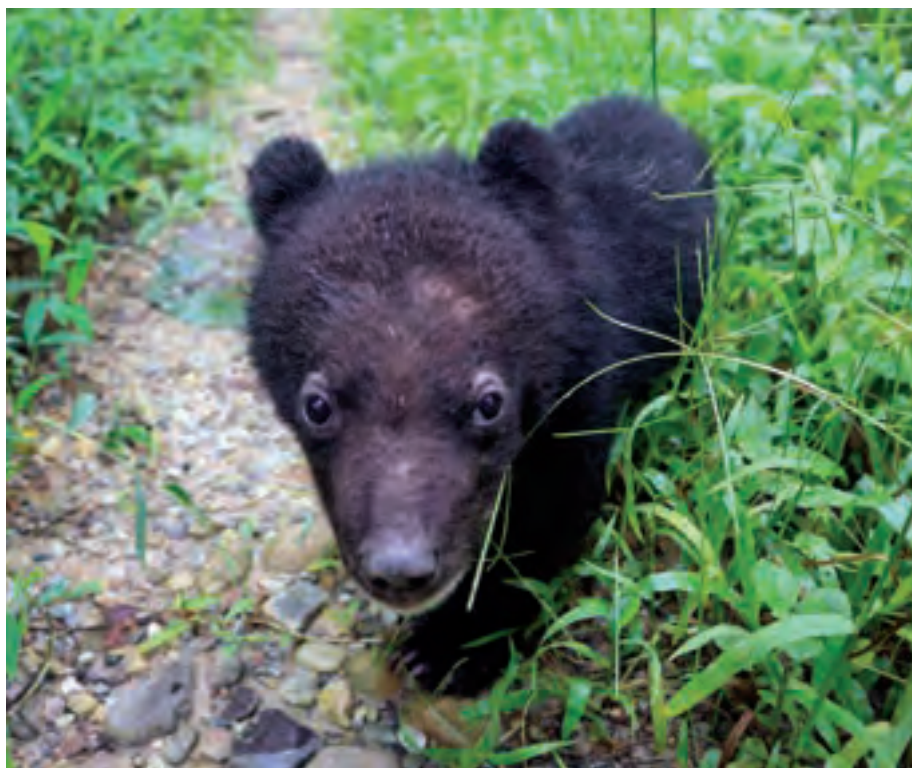
In October 2024, at the 24th annual Animal Action Awards in London, the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) recognised Dr. Basumatary’s valuable contributions to conservation and honoured him with an award. When I asked him how he felt about this international recognition, he said, “I didn’t know I was being silently watched while doing my work. I didn’t expect this to happen; I was just doing my duty, as I have been all these years.”

A Different Path Dr. Basumatary grew up in Kokrajhar, a town in western Assam, bordered by Bhutan to the north and close to Manas National Park. Surrounded by the awe-inspiring foothills of the Himalaya, he spent his childhood immersed in the natural richness of the region. After completing his schooling, he moved to Guwahati to pursue his degree at the College of Veterinary Science, graduating in 2009, and immediately joined WTI.

“During my college training to become a veterinarian, almost all my peers wanted to work in animal husbandry, primarily focusing on domestic animals. To this day, this remains the trend in veterinary sciences. We have thousands of qualified professionals caring for domestic animals, but in my opinion, very few focus on wildlife care. This is why I chose to specialise in wildlife care. So much in this field is still undiscovered, and I wanted to learn more about it,” says Dr. Basumatary, reflecting on how, despite the pressure to follow a more conventional path, he pursued his passion for wildlife conservation. Dr. Basumatary has authored several scientific papers addressing topics related to wildlife rehabilitation and release.

In October of last year, videos of two orphaned Asiatic black bear cubs, Papum and Tezu, being released back into the wild by CBRC began circulating on WhatsApp groups. It was the first time I reached out to Dr. Basumatary, asking if he’d be interested in writing a rescue article (Vol. 44, No. 11, November 2024) for *Sanctuary’s* young readers, and he happily agreed. Since then, he has occasionally shared rescue stories, whether it was an orphan pangolin, leopard cats, civets, or others.

A Sanctuary of Hope, Healing, and Recovery The Centre for Bear Rehabilitation and Conservation was established in 2002 to rehabilitate displaced bear cubs and returning them to the wild. The Asiatic black bear *Ursus thibetanus*, one of India’s four bear species, ranges from Jammu and Kashmir in the north to Arunachal Pradesh in the northeast, where CBRC is located. Dr. Basumatary and his team primarily oversee the care and rehabilitation of this species. However, beyond bears, the CBRC has also rescued, rehabilitated, and released several other species. Dr. Basumatary has personally administered care to over 3,000 animals from 250 different species, including 20 Asiatic black bear cubs.



COURTESY DR. PANJIT BASUMATARY

The Asiatic black bear, a Schedule I species, faces numerous threats in Arunachal Pradesh. It is hunted for its body parts and meat, and suffers greatly from habitat destruction and human-wildlife conflict. Hunting, in particular, often results in orphaned cubs. These cubs have a slow growth rate, with mothers typically nursing them for almost the first two years of their life, making them particularly vulnerable when they lose their mother. These cubs are frequently captured to be sold or kept as pets. Every year, a significant number of bear cubs are handed over to the Forest Department, either seized from hunters or surrendered by locals when they become too challenging to care for.

ABOVE *The Asiatic black bear faces severe threats in Arunachal Pradesh, including hunting, habitat loss, and human-wildlife conflict. Orphaned cubs, vulnerable owing to slow growth, are often captured, sold, or kept as pets, worsening conservation challenges.*

FACING PAGE *Dr. Panjit Basumatary and his team primarily oversee the care and rehabilitation of the Asiatic black bear at the Centre for Bear Rehabilitation and Conservation (CBRC).*

The Centre for Bear Rehabilitation and Conservation (CBRC) was established in 2002 with the primary goal of rehabilitating displaced bear cubs and returning them to the wild. However, beyond bears, the CBRC has also rescued, rehabilitated, and released several other species. Dr. Panjit has personally administered care to over 3,000 animals from 250 different species, including 20 Asiatic black bear cubs.



ABOVE The Wildlife Trust of India also operates another major centre, the Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation (CWRC), near the Kaziranga National Park in Assam. WTI also runs Mobile Veterinary Services in eastern Assam, in Tinsukia, and in western Assam, near Manas, in Kokrajhar.

“At the centre, orphaned cubs are provided food, shelter, and veterinary care. From the day of their rescue to their release back into the wild is a series of carefully calculated steps spanning several months,” says Dr. Basumatary. Once stabilised at the centre and after they have been weaned off milk, the cubs are relocated to a forest rehabilitation site for an ‘assisted release’. “Extensive scientific deliberations are carried out to evaluate the suitability of the site for the release. Topography, vegetation, habitat suitability, food availability, biotic pressure, and predators are all factored in before the release,” he adds. The cubs still cannot be released into the wild immediately. They begin with daily walks into the forest, accompanied by a foster parent (an animal keeper) responsible for their well-being. “During these walks, the cubs learn to identify natural food sources and develop essential

survival skills. As they grow, they become more reluctant to return to the campsite in the evening. Once we are confident in the cubs’ ability to survive in the wild, they are fitted with radio collars for post-release monitoring. Eventually, the cubs are left to roam on their own. They are tracked remotely for six to eight months, at which point the radio collars naturally detach, confirming the cubs’ ability to survive in the wild,” explains Dr. Basumatary. At present, there are seven bears at the centre receiving care. The Wildlife Trust of India has been working in the northeast for over 25 years and operates another major centre, the Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation (CWRC), near the Kaziranga National Park in Assam. It also runs Mobile Veterinary Services in eastern Assam, in Tinsukia, and in western Assam, near Manas, in Kokrajhar.

Setbacks, Hurdles, Hardships

“However, despite our best efforts, there are times when we cannot rescue an animal, and the challenges can be overwhelming. Arunachal is vast, with locations that are often not easily accessible. We sometimes receive rescue calls from places hundreds of kilometres away, and by the time we arrive, the animal has often already succumbed to its injuries,” he says, highlighting the disappointments that one must be prepared to face in this line of work.

“There are also cases where, even after admitting the animal, there are factors beyond our control. Recently, we received a juvenile pangolin at the centre. Despite our best efforts, the pangolin refused to eat and, sadly, passed away. Cases like this are heartbreaking, but we at the centre always give our best,” he adds.

Dr. Basumatary’s commitment extends to the hand-raising and rehabilitation of over 26 orphaned greater one-horned rhino calves at the Centre for Wildlife Rehabilitation and Conservation (CWRC) in Kaziranga. When I asked him to recount a memorable experience, he shared a story from 2014 that still resonates deeply with him. “A three-month-old rhino calf was found in the backyard of a house, its body bearing the cruel marks of a tiger’s attack,” Dr. Basumatary recalls. “The calf arrived at CWRC in a dire state, with numerous injuries, the worst being a severe wound on its left foreleg and a painful swelling at the base of its horn, from which pus was oozing.” The recovery process was long and arduous, but gradually, the calf began to regain strength. “The day the rhino first ventured out into the open, taking those cautious steps, was

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a moment of pure joy,” he says. “It’s moments like these that make the countless extra miles worthwhile,” he adds with a warm smile.

I made a bit of a misstep during my conversation with Dr. Basumatary when I asked if he would recommend establishing more rescue centres to address the issue of orphaned or injured wildlife. He gently corrected my oversight by highlighting the broader issue. “Certainly, more centres and quicker response services can help, especially given the number of cases we’re seeing these days. However, that doesn’t address the root cause, which is the bigger problem we’re all facing: habitat loss, human encroachment on wildlife territories, and poaching,” he explained, emphasising the importance of conserving and restoring protected habitats without which wildlife rescue calls are bound to increase. He was absolutely right. A recent study has revealed that the northeastern region of India accounts for the largest portion of the country’s tree cover loss, disproportionate to the rest of the nation. Between 2001 and 2020, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, and Nagaland each contributed to five to 14 per cent of the country’s total forest area loss.

When asked if he had any advice for young people wanting to enter this field, Dr. Panjit responded firmly, “I’m not here to convince anyone to take this up. I’d rather

see more people recognise that wildlife has a right to exist like us. They’re not separate from us; they’re all part of the ecosystem we depend on. This work is tough, no doubt, but it’s incredibly rewarding to see the difference it can make. And remember, there are many ways to contribute to conservation.”

With that, our conversation came to an end, and Dr. Basumatary had to return to the few precious hours he gets to spend with his family amidst his hectic schedule. But one thing he said stayed with me: in the 15 years of his career, no two days at the centre have ever been the same. Each day brings a new challenge, a new opportunity, and new lessons. For the orphaned bear cubs, injured wildlife, and countless other animals, Dr. Panjit Basumatary’s open arms have become a place of refuge, a sanctuary, where they can recover and heal under his careful watch. 🐾

ABOVE A juvenile pangolin under care being fed by Dr. Basumatary. His work is equal parts heartbreak and hope.

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