

Three weeks, eleven rhinos, one epic rescue mission in north Bengal

Early this month, flash floods in north Bengal swept away at least a dozen rhinos from Jaldapara National Park, some as far as 30km away. A massive operation over three weeks has managed to bring home 11 rhinos

For more than three weeks, it has been a relentless fight between man and nature. Ever since the heavens broke upon north Bengal on the night of Oct 4, trampling flash floods that washed away homes and the massive operation to rescue and rehabilitate residents. But a parallel operation has also been under way, the largest of its kind in India in recent memory: the mission to rescue and rehabilitate the greater one-horned rhino.

The operation to save north Bengal's rhinos has so far managed to rescue 11 of them — all residents of Jaldapara National Park, which houses India's second-largest rhino population (330+), after Assam's Kaziranga. Most of the animals got swept away by strong currents and were stranded in Alipurdwar's far reaches or in human-heavy landscapes of Cooch Behar, more than 30km from the national park.

Rescuing the first five animals — in the first two days since the flood — was relatively easy but the other six required tranquilizing and careful transport in fire department trucks (to keep the animals properly hydrated), not to mention the creation of green corridors.

Even as flooding is usual each year in Kaziranga, which is spread over a vast area, Jaldapara — with a much smaller area of about 216sq km, with hu-

man settlements in surrounding areas — presented bigger challenges for foresters, who had to tweak their operation, based on local needs.

Deluge & Damage

The unprecedented rainfall on the night of Oct 4 led to a sudden rise in the water level of not only the Torsha — which flows through Jaldapara — but also rivers like the Murti and Jaldhaka, which flow through and alongside Gorurama National Park, another key rhino habitat. The resultant flooding a day later disrupted movement of wild animals, particularly of rhinos, completely submerging their natural habitat.

"Rhinos in Jaldapara are mainly concentrated on the Torsha's grasslands and banks," explains Purvesh Kaswan, divisional forest officer, Jaldapara Wildlife Division. "On Oct 5, as floodwaters from the Torsha inundated large portions of the park, at least 11 rhinos were either swept away by the river or left stranded in human-dominated landscapes, extending up to parts



A rhino being rescued after tranquilization in Cooch Behar

Fire department staff spray water on a rescued rhino on its way back to Jaldapara to keep it hydrated



A forest department elephant during the rescue operation. Several such elephants were deployed during the mission to rescue Jaldapara's rhinos



One of the rescued rhinos, after it was released back into Jaldapara

deployment of hundreds of forest staff of Jaldapara Wildlife Division, a large contingent of more than 11 departmental elephants from Jaldapara — which were pressed into service across Alipurdwar and Cooch Behar — and even drone surveillance.

Track, Drive & Guide

Kaswan said five rhinos were swept into adjoining human habitations/forest ranges of Alipurdwar district, while another five were swept downstream into Cooch Behar. Monitoring teams with forest staff, range officers and trained

elephants tracked the rhinos stranded in areas close to the park to guide them back. "In an overnight operation on Oct 5, two rhinos were successfully guided back into the park using elephant squads and vehicle lights for directional movement. Given their proximity, we took the decision to guide, and not lift, them. On Oct 6, three more rhinos were located and guided back safely to Jaldapara through field coordination and overnight operations," says chief conservator of forests (wildlife), North Bengal, Bhaskar Jy.

Bigger Challenges Ahead

On Oct 10, the first of the six rhinos that remained stranded had to be tranquilized in a human habitation of Cooch Behar's Pundibari — more than 25 km from Jaldapara — with the help of local administration and police. "The animal was in dense human habitation, posing a danger to the public and itself. It was tranquilized, lifted using machines and brought back to Jaldapara in a specialised tractor-like open-air vehicle. It was released back into Jaldapara after veterinary examination and health clearance," Kaswan adds.

INDIA'S LARGEST COORDINATED RHINO RESCUE-RELEASE OPERATION

- > 5 rhinos tracked and guided back in first two days after floods of Oct 5
- > Other 6, stranded far from park, were tranquilized, transported, and released into their home range between Oct 10 and 27
- > Jaldapara is in Alipurdwar district of West Bengal. It is spread over 216sq km. It is also home to leopards, elephants, sambar, etc



JALDAPARA RHINO NUMBERS



On Oct 13, two rhinos were found stranded in the Paltakha forest in Cooch Behar — around 30km away — which is a small patch of forest on Torsha and surrounded by a dense human population. "Under the supervision of field officers and veterinary experts, both animals were tranquilized and rescued. They were subsequently transported and released back into Jaldapara. The rescue was conducted using a coordinated set-up involving ground teams, elephant squads, and drone surveillance to minimise stress and ensure the animals' safety. In each case, the animal was well cared for during the transport, with ample provision of water from fire department vehicles," says Bhaskar, adding that another rhino was rescued the following day from the Paltakha area of Cooch Behar after it got stranded in a banana plantation on the banks of the Torsha.

The next rhino was rescued on Oct 17 after remaining stranded for 12 days since the floods. "It was stranded in a low-lying area of Cooch Behar. The searching and rescue was conducted on Oct 15 and Oct 16, but it was not successfully located. On Oct 17, following tranquilization by the veterinary team, and with coordinated support from elephant squads, local police, and ground staff, the rhino was safely rescued and released back into Jaldapara," says Kaswan, adding that every time an animal was to be transported, a green corridor was created to ensure uninterrupted, safe passage for the rescue vehicles.

But the mission was far from over. On Oct 27, the foresters had to rush back to Cooch Behar's Paltakha with a rescue team to save a female rhino that remained stranded there. "It was rescued and released back into the forest in a healthy condition," an official says, adding that search operations are on to find whether more rhinos are stuck in nearby human habitations. "Every release is being documented. After release, the rhinos were monitored by the elephant-patrolling teams. All the rescued rhinos are doing well."

Inputs from Pinak Priya Bhattacharya in Jalpaiguri