

ELEPHANTS IN YOUR BACKYARD

(A live narration)

Of all the things that one expects to find in Bangalore, a herd of wild elephants on a school campus is probably not something that springs to anyone's mind. Driven out of their natural habitat in search of food, 17 elephants strut into the Inventure Academy School on Sarjapur Road on June 24, 2013, resulting in commotion and confusion.



1. An elephant herd sighted at Huskur

Nooraine Fazal, managing trustee, CEO and co-founder of Inventure Academy, first contacted the Varthur Police Station after a staff member alerted her on the strange incursion. When she received no response, Mrs Fazal sought the help of officials at the Bannerghatta National Park (BNP). Authorities there sprang into action and officials of Hosur, Hoskote, Kolar, Kaglipura and BNP Forest Department were soon deployed on ground. High-ranking forest officials such as the Chief Conservator of Forest, Principal Chief Conservator of

Forest, Assistant Principal Chief Conservator of Forest and a local MLA were also present to assess the situation. A police team was at the spot in an attempt to control the massive crowd of locals, journalists and photographers present at the school to catch a glimpse of the rare occasion. Authorities in the 18 schools in and around Sarjapur Road were told to either retain students at their premises or send them back home.

A member of A Rocha India, an NGO which studies elephants at the BNP, was one of the many experts tasked with ensuring that the wild elephants returned safely back home. He spoke to Mrs Fazal who expressed her disappointment at the poor response of the police. "Around 17 elephants entered the campus and we immediately notified the police. Unfortunately, we got no cooperation or assistance from them. I then contacted the Forest Department, but things were already starting to get out of hand. Many people began to gather and they were bursting crackers in an attempt to disperse the elephants. We tried to restrict the villagers so that we could retain the elephants on our campus. Our aim was to keep them here till the forest officials could come and assess the situation. It is sad that no one seems to have a sense of communication and understanding," she said.

The elephants arrived at the Huskur Lake bed at 11am that day. The officials put their heads together and formulated a plan to drive the herd out of the school after 4pm, as the pachyderms naturally are on the move during evening hours and it is also when the experts hoped the crowd would thin out.

With each passing hour, the elephants stress levels were rising. Not only were they outside the comfort of their natural habitat, they were also in the company of an ever-

increasing human presence. As evening approached, it was time for the officials to act. They attempted to drive the herd from the lake bed, over a bridge and into a village thoroughfare road through a farm with the use of non-lethal guns and crackers. Vanaraja, a tusker from the BNP, was also brought in as a *kumki*. On reflection, the



2. 'Vanaraja' captive elephant from Bannerghatta Biological Park brought in as 'kumki'.

first driving attempt failed as at around 7pm the elephants were spooked by the large crowd and trucks which awaited them at the village. The stressed animals instinctively returned to 'safety' of the lake bed.

Once back at Huskur Lake bed, the team of experts regrouped and put another plan in place. As it got dark, fewer people stayed back and traffic also started to decrease. The team once again began driving out the herd at 9pm towards Chandapura, which is located off Hosur Road. National Highway 7 was blocked with the help of police to ensure that their journey was not disturbed again. By then news had arrived that in Malur Taluk where three people were killed. Two more people were injured when the elephants walked out of the school campus and towards Chandapura.

At midnight, things started to look up. The elephants were steadily making their way out of the highly urbanised areas. The officials, following the herd's tracks, finally traced their journey into the Denkanikotta Forest area at around 4am. The good news only continued pouring in when it was learnt that the animals had made their long way back home to Hosur the next day; thus bringing to close an operation that had both pulses racing and hearts breaking.

We all read about this unusual event which was covered extensively by news channels and newspapers. The question that has lingered on is why those 17 elephants found the need to wander so far out of their homes? Environmental pressure is the biggest reason why wild animals stray into human habitats. This is a common phenomenon in

elephants, as they are migratory and tend to go out of their regular paths, largely in search of food, water and shelter. But deviations like these can be dangerous for both man and animal, as the June incident showed.

When wild animals make their way into urban settlements, it usually results in confusion and trauma. When the herd of 17 elephants strayed into the city's outskirts,



3. Wild elephant chasing the crowd causing trauma

people reacted with shock, anxiety, fear and excitement as they could have never imagined being witness to such a situation. The first response of any human being is to secure their lives and land. This is when things start to take a turn for the worst. Elephants fall prey to human pressures such as the beating of drums and bursting of crackers. This is traumatising for the animal, especially if a herd comprises of calves and juveniles. In response, they move into

whichever space they find with green cover. Such an area could be miles from the elephant's home. In retrospect, if the herd at the school was taken along their proposed path — the regular barricaded and public-controlled path — they would have reached their destination without harming anyone. It must be pointed out that it is not in the elephant's nature to intentionally hurt anyone. They only attack and cause harms when they sense danger and need to defend themselves.

The Huskur Lake bed incident could have been avoided simply with if there was day and night patrolling for elephant excursions in place at Mallur Forest division, as done in the BNP and Kaglipura. The presence of humans makes them uncomfortable and sparks aggression in the animals.



4. Elephant herd free-ranging in forests of Bannerghatta NP

Upon investigation, it was found that the 17 wild elephants entered Karnataka on June 22, 2013, from the Krishnagiri forests in Tamil Nadu. The next day, on June 23, they had reportedly entered the Hoskote-Malur belt in Kolar District. Locals in the area attempted to drive away the elephants, but the animals panicked and in the confusion that resulted, two people were trampled to death and three others

were injured. The elephants then made their way to Huskur-Sarjapur, where they later strayed into the Inventure Academy on June 24. This is when alarm bells were sounded and a driving operation was initiated. The first attempt to guide them out

failed. The second driving operation was successful around midnight on June 24, and by early June 25, the elephants were safely back in Hosur, Tamil Nadu.

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