



In this issue of Red Panda Network eNews, Phinju Sherpa and the most red panda sightings ever on an RPN ecotrip, first FGs in Kalikot, and a red panda hide seized in Jajarkot.

Phinju Sherpa: From Livestock Herder To Red Panda Tracker



He was there in the beginning and he is there now to see the forests protected, communities involved and more wild red pandas than ever before.

At the young age of 13, Phinju Sherpa had to make a difficult choice; stay at home on his traditional family farm, or pursue a semi-nomadic herding life raising cows and goats. If he stayed, there was not enough food to feed his family, if he left, his family could survive. He made a hard decision,

then ventured into the forest to become a livestock herder.

Now 36 years old, Phinju is best known for his exceptional red panda tracking skills in the Ilam district of Eastern Nepal. His job is to make sure the red panda habitats are protected and properly managed.

His transformation from a livestock herder to a red panda conservationist is inspiring. When Sherpa decided to take up herding, he had no money, so he managed other locals' livestock herds. He often bartered his time herding in exchange for milk and cheese. He lived with the herds in temporary sheds set up in the forests. One day he was collecting firewood when he glimpsed Punde Kundo, (the name for 'red panda' in the local dialect). He had heard stories about Punde Kundo but didn't know much about red pandas or their importance.

"I used to hear villagers blaming red panda for attacking their livestock but they didn't retaliate by killing them. It must be because the majority of the villagers are Buddhists and they refrain from harming any living beings," he said. But Sherpa adds, "Some locals kept guard dogs to protect their livestock against attacks by wild animals. The dogs sometimes killed red panda inside the forest,".

Life was arduous as a herder, but then in 2001 a chance meeting with Brian Williams, an American scholar, changed both of their lives. Thanks to Pinju's help, Brian would later found Red Panda Network.

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Kalikot district gets its first Forest Guardians!

Kalikot district in Western Nepal has appointed its first group of Forest Guardians (FGs). Ten locals, representing five Community Forest Users Groups (CFUGs) in the district, were selected and received capacity-building training on January 22-24th in Manma, Kalikot.

In partnership with local organizations' Himalayan Community Resource Development Centre (HCRDC) and Human Rights and Environment and Development Center (HuRENDEC), RPN now has 22 FGs working in three districts in Western Nepal-Jumla, Jajarkot and Kalikot.



New FGs during capacity-building training.

RPN started the FG program in 2007 as part of a sustainable livelihood initiative to provide local people with financial opportunities that are alternatives to forest exploitation. **Presently, a total of 96 members from various CFUGs across the country are working as FGs to support red panda conservation through activities such as monitoring red panda populations and habitat, outreach and education, identifying threats and developing threat mitigation strategies. They are also actively engaged in our anti-poaching network.**

"Forest Guardians are playing a crucial role in creating awareness and mobilizing communities into protecting red pandas," said Dinesh Ghale, RPN's Program Officer in Kalikot district. Last month, the newly appointed FGs were provided with a three-day training on red panda monitoring techniques. The training was facilitated by representatives from RPN, Divisional Forest Office, HuRENDEC and HCRDC.



Participants of training in Manma, Kalikot district.

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Red Panda Hide Seized In Jajarkot!

Authorities have arrested three people for smuggling a red panda hide in Nalgad municipality in Jajarkot, one of the most remote and mountainous districts in Nepal. Acting on a tip, Jajarkot police arrested Ganesh Sunar, 25, and Yubaraj B.K., 24, for possession of a red panda skin.

About 5 months ago, the police had received information about the possible smuggling of wildlife parts of the white-rumped vulture and red panda, along with medicinal herbs and drugs from the district. This resulted in the police team in Jajarkot, led by Deputy Superintendent, Rabindra Bahadur Singh, making the arrest in the first week of January. A day after Ganesh and Yubaraj's arrest, a third person named Dipak from Dolpa district was arrested in association with the illegal trade.

"The duo was arrested at around midnight from a hotel room. This is the first case of red panda hide seizure in Jajarkot," said Singh. Once Ganesh and Yubaraj were arrested, they revealed that Dipak was who asked them to carry the skin to Jajarkot where another unknown person would come and collect it. All three arrested men were sent to the Divisional Forest Office (DFO) for further investigation.

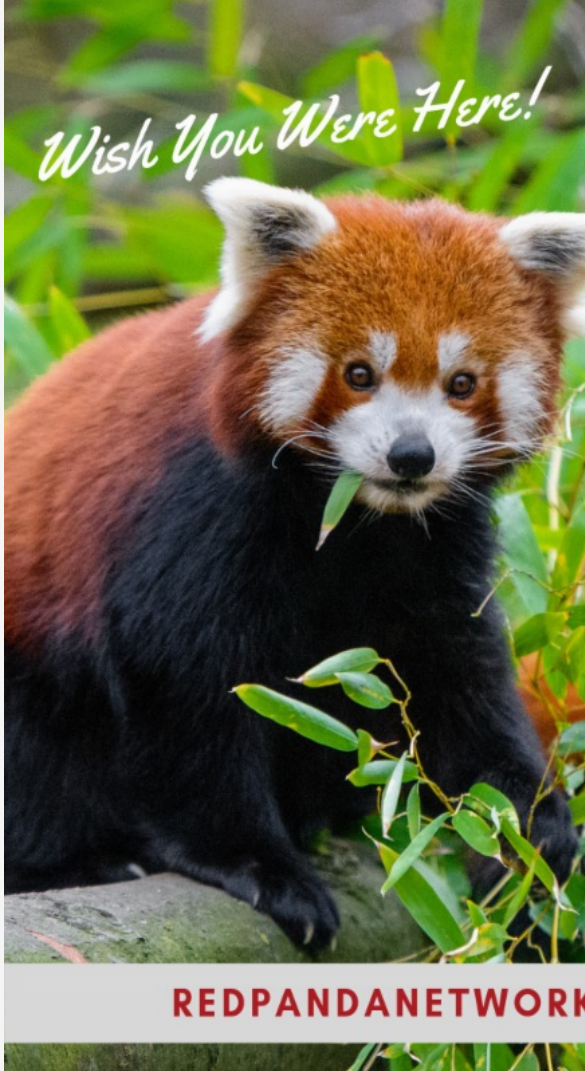


Ganesh Sunar and Yubaraj B.K. arrested for possession of red panda skin.

According to Singh, Jajarkot-and neighboring Kalikot district-are being used as a major transit hub for illegal wildlife trade, medicinal herbs, and logging. There are a host of reasons for this: ranging from the remote location of red panda habitat, poverty and lack of red panda awareness among local communities, and weak regulation and enforcement. In addition, the expansion and construction of a rural road network, is facilitating the illegal trade of wildlife and medicinal plants among these mountainous and remote locations.

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Red Panda Network is committed to the conservation of wild red pandas and their habitat through the education and empowerment of local communities.

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