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Poachers kill only rhino in 'forest man's' woods

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NEW DELHI: Poachers killed a full-grown male rhinoceros inside a forest in Jorhat district, Assam. A forest department team found the carcass on Friday evening in the woods hand-reared by 'forest man of India' Jadav Payeng.

"I heard gunshots around 10am on Wednesday and immediately alerted the forest department. But nobody came until Thursday morning. It was the only rhino in my forest. I have lost him," Payeng told TOI amid sobs.

Divisional forest officer (DFO) Naba Kumar Malakar confirmed the killing and said the team did not find any visible proof of poaching on Thursday despite combing the forest the whole day; the carcass was spotted only around 4pm on Friday, he said.

"The poachers sawed off the rhino horn and its nails. We have found holes in the hide, which look like bullet wounds, but until the postmortem happens, we cannot confirm if the animal was shot dead. It's already late today and the autopsy will happen only tomorrow," Malakar said.

Ranger Pankaj Kalita said the difficulties in reaching the forest—locally known as 'Molai Kathoni' (Molai's Woods) after Payeng's pet name Molai—also hampered the search operation. But not everyone has been convinced by this "explanation". "I had called up the forest office around 12pm on Wednesday when I learnt about the gunshots from Payeng. Why did it take four hours for the message to be relayed to the DFO? If they had acted with alacrity, they could have nabbed the poachers before they left the forest. Poachers were seen earlier in the forest and two of them had been arrested due to Payeng's timely information. Only if they had acted with a sense of urgency,"

said Jitu Kalita, Payeng's associate.

This year's flood in Assam alone claimed 17 rhinos in Kaziranga National Park, with poachers adding two more to the tally last month. With this latest killing, the rhino death toll in the state has gone up to 20. That's an awful statistic for Assam that is the last home for the Indian rhino in India.