

Small cats in Rajasthan

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THE BIG CATS have always inspired our imagination. They are admired, even worshipped, and at the same time, feared by the people who share their habitats. In recent past, however, the big cats have been ruthlessly persecuted by man for a number of reasons, and their habitats have been destroyed by an ever increasing human population. Consequently, special programmes were launched to save these big cats, providing them with a new lease of life for some time.

The small cats, on the other hand, were neither sought after as hunting trophies nor posed any threat to our livestock, and so did not attract our attention. But these very secretive small cats are every bit as interesting as the big cats and, in fact, at times exhibit more stealth, ferocity and cunning in their daily activities.

Only sketchy and relatively inaccurate information about the occurrence and distribution of small cats in Rajasthan is available in literature. In his book *The Western Rajputana Rifles*, Lt Col Archibald Adams (1900) wrote, "There are at least four varieties of wild cats met with in these states, viz. the marbled tiger cat (*Felis marmorata*), the leopard cat (*Felis bengalensis*), the common jungle cat (*Felis chaus*), and the common tree cat (*Paradoxurus musanga*). These cats do much harm to small game and poultry, and

should be destroyed when opportunity offers."

Prater has described the occurrence of Desert cat, Jungle cat and Caracal in the arid parts of Rajasthan. Dr Ishwar Prakash (1961) recorded evidence of Caracal in the desert region near Bikaner. Sen and Sankhala (1962) have described the occurrence and distribution of the Desert cat and Jungle cat in Rajasthan, although later observations and seizures of cat pelts from poachers produced evidences of their occurrence in areas not reported earlier. Saxena (1975) reported Fishing cat and Leopard cat in the Keoladeo Ghana national park, Bharatpur. The presence of Fishing cat was confirmed, but no evidence of presence of the Leopard cat could be collected. Recently Shomita Mukherjee (Wildlife Institute of India) recorded the presence of Rusty spotted cat in Sariska tiger reserve.

In all, there are the following five species of small cats found in Rajasthan. Their following description is based on whatever little information available.

DESERT CAT (*Felis silvestris ornata*)
Found all over the state. Earlier it was reported to inhabit only the arid areas on the western side of the Aravalli, but in a recent survey conducted by the Zoological Survey of India, Desert cats have been

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reported in Jhalawar district (Kankane, 1997) which is on the eastern side of the Aravalli hills. Prater (1965) has described its distribution in the desert in north - western India. Westward, the range extends through the deserts from Sind to northern Africa, and northwards into the steppes in central Asia.

The Desert cat's most preferred habitat is dry scrub area with an abundance of desert gerbils and other prey species, such as rodents, insects, reptiles and a variety of birds like doves, grey partridge, sandgrouse, peafowl, etc. It is also known to kill cobras, saw-scaled vipers, geckos and scorpions. It needs some kind of cover to hunt and ambush its prey. Its burrow, made in slightly raised ground, has tufts of grasses or bushes used ingeniously to provide some concealment.

However, the Desert cat has also been observed by the author near cultivated fields in Choti Bagru and Kukas villages in the Jaipur district. In fact, the wild cats sometimes mate with the village cats and mixed breed cats are often found near habitations.

The female attain sexual maturity at about 10 months of age whereas the males take up to 21-22 months to attain sexual maturity. The mother looks after the kittens and hides them in the burrows, till they are weaned.

The main threat to the Desert cat is from poachers and skin traders. Although the cat is listed in Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, it continues to be killed for its pelt. In a wildlife offence case registered by the wildlife staff in December 1997, in the Barmer district, 703 animal skins were recovered from a poacher, of which 97 were of the Desert cat.

The other threat to this cat is from the so-called planned development of the wastelands which has resulted in the destruction of the Desert cat habitat and breeding areas. The kittens are also vulnerable to getting killed by the males and cats of other species such as the Jungle cat or even the village cat.

JUNGLE CAT (*Felis chaus*)

The long legs, slender body and a short tail give the Jungle cat a very distinctive appearance. The winter coat is darker and more dense than the summer coat. Melanistic individuals have so far not been reported from Rajasthan.

Called *jungli billi* or *ban bilao* in Rajasthan, it is found in a wide variety of habitats, from dry arid areas in the Desert national park to the swampy areas of Keoladeo Ghana national park. It has been reported from all the sanctuaries and national parks in the state. It also inhabits the forested areas of the Aravalli and Vindhya hills, and is also present on the outskirts of villages and cultivated fields.

The Jungle cat preys mainly on rodents, reptiles and birds. In Sariska, it has been seen feeding on carcasses. Cats frequenting habitations and villages can become a menace for the poultry.

Although now included in Schedule II, Part II of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, the Jungle cat is still hunted for its fur in the state, by nomadic tribes viz., *jogi* and *kalbelia*. Two cases, involving Jungle cat skins were registered by the field staff of the wildlife wing in December 1997 in Barmer and Jodhpur districts.

CARACAL (*Caracal caracal*)

Locally called *siyeh gosh*, the Caracal is easily recognisable from its tufted

black ears, larger hind limbs and erect walk. Its coat is a uniform reddish grey above, fading into buff or white below. There are faint impressions of spots on the undersurface and at times on the back.

In the past, Caracal was reported in number of areas of Ajmer, Pali, Tonk, Sikar, Bikaner and Jaipur districts, but it has not been sighted or reported from these districts for quite some time now. In the past, the skins of Caracal were recovered along with skins of other animals like the jackal, fox and other cats in seizures made by the wildlife staff, but no such recovery has been made of late. In fact, this rarest of the small cats found in Rajasthan is now probably confined to just two protected areas in the state - Sariska tiger reserve and Ranthambore national park where they are occasionally sighted. There is a need to conduct an intensive survey in the known habitats of Caracal to confirm its presence.

FISHING CAT (*Prionailurus viverrinus*)

This is a comparatively larger sized, stoutly built cat which may attain a body length of up to 86 cm. and tail up to 33 cm. It is nocturnal in nature.

Prater (1965) and Tikkedar (1983) have not mentioned the presence of this cat in Keoladeo Ghana national park, but about 20 Fishing cats live in the different areas of the park, like Baba Sita Ram ki diggi, Sapan mori, Kadam kunj and the Keoladeo temple area. Although, the cat is not known to enter water in pursuit of its prey, I have observed it plunging into water to catch fish. A study based on scat analysis of cats in Keoladeo Ghana national park indicated that fish constituted a major part (up to 76 %) of their diet all round the year.

Other food consumed included reptiles, molluscs and seeds, etc. One cat here was seen feeding on the carcass of a cow.

The cat breeds well inside the Keoladeo yet no information about its breeding and other habits has been collected. In Rajasthan, there are many areas where it can be found but no systematic surveys have been undertaken to find its occurrence in these areas.

RUSTY SPOTTED CAT (*Prionailurus rubiginosus*)

A Rusty spotted cat was observed and photographed in Sariska tiger reserve for the first time by Shomita Mukherjee (Wildlife Institute of India) in 1994-95. Prior to this, a dead Rusty spotted cat was reported in 1992, near Udaipur, by Tehsin Raza (1994). Due to its small size and arboreal, nocturnal and secretive nature, the Rusty spotted cat escapes detection by casual observers. However, there is strong possibility of its existence in other areas in the state having grassland and scrub forest. A systematic survey of these habitats is needed to establish its distribution.

CONCLUSION

The Jungle cat and the Desert cat are distributed all over the state. Although the expansion of agriculture over large areas into the pastures and wastelands, have reduced their natural habitats, these two species still have sufficient habitat left to survive. In fact, they have learnt to live in and around the cultivated areas where their breeding has been observed.

The major problem is that the small cats have never been taken seriously. As a result of our apathy, the Jungle

The jungle cat's bold and aggressive behaviour is recorded in the history of Mewar (Udaipur). It is told that when Maharana Pratap was in hiding after losing the battle of Haldighati, a jungle cat snatched away the only piece of *roti* (bread) from the hands of his hungry daughter. The Maharana was so shaken up by the incident that he even considered surrendering himself before the ruler of Delhi.

cat is officially not recognised as a wildlife species and finds no mention in any of the schedules in the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. The Desert cat finds mention, but in Schedule IV. These omissions have proved very costly for these cats.

The pelt traders dealing in wildlife products pose another major threat to these species. They have taken full advantage of the legal lacunae and get these cats killed for their skins. In Rajasthan, the skin traders pay in advance to collect the skins, particularly of the Jungle cat whose pelt is soft and used for making gloves and caps, from the nomadic tribals like *jogi* and *kalbelia* who traditionally hunt animals in the desert region. One such skin dealer in Rajasthan reported a stock of 24,552 skins of Jungle cat in his return to the Forest Department for the month of November 1977. Such large scale slaughter of these cats was indeed startling and these destructive practices must be controlled rigidly to conserve these cats.

In August 1980, the Rajasthan government approached the Centre for inclusion of the Jungle cat in Schedule I and upgradation of the Desert cat from Schedule IV to Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, within the state of Rajasthan. The request of the State government was partially agreed to in December 1981, by which the Desert cat was placed in Schedule I and the Jungle cat in Schedule II, Part II. However, these amendments in the Schedules were effected only in 1986.

The number of Caracals and Fishing cats in the state might not be more than 20 individuals of each species. A survey for the three species of cats viz. Caracal, Fishing cat and Rusty

spotted cat needs to be undertaken urgently to ascertain their distribution and status in the various protected areas and other natural habitats in the state. A programme to reintroduce the Caracal in suitable habitats, which are still available, should also be undertaken at the earliest.

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