

Conserving the smaller cats

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THERE ARE A FEW places in India where you may see tigers; in one place you can see lions; but where can you go to see India's 11 smaller cats? Except for lions and cheetahs, cats are generally extremely secretive as they go about their lives. Seeing tigers, as we do today in Ranthambhore, Bandhavgarh, Kanha and Corbett, is actually quite remarkable, for they are renowned for their ability to remain unseen. Hunters and biologists relate how seldom they have seen tigers. Only in the past 20 years have some appeared calmly in the open in human presence, as a result of the protection provided by Project Tiger and the dedicated work of field staff who daily track the big cats. If tigers as well as leopards and snow leopards are so expert at evading observation, despite their size, what hope is there of spotting a smaller cat?

Who would think of looking in a house? That is where Rusty spotted cats and Jungle cats have been found. But, in general, the cats live in forests, and in grasslands with some bush to provide cover. Protected areas are important as reservoirs of natural habitat, but the smaller cats are able to make use of small amounts of cover and are able to live over a much wider area, away from protected reserves, than the big cats.

India is a meeting point for species of three regions. To the west, lie arid and semi-arid lands, stretching to

Arabia and through North Africa, from which the ranges of species such as the lion and Caracal (and formerly the cheetah) extend into India. To the north, lie the Tibetan plateau and central Asia, strongholds of the Lynx, the Manul (or Pallas cat) and the Steppe wildcat, which cross into India. To the east, the tropical forests of south-east Asia are the principal homes of Clouded leopard, Leopard cat, Marbled cat and Golden cat, which are also found in the forests of north-eastern India. A semi-indigenous species is the Rusty spotted cat which is found only in India and Sri Lanka.

The following are the small cat species, with brief description, found in India :

Genera : *Felis*

JUNGLE CAT (*Felis chaus*)

The name Jungle cat is something of a misnomer, for, in the Indian subcontinent and as far west as Israel, Jordan and the Nile Valley, this species is especially associated with water and dense vegetation, such as swamps and river banks, giving rise to its alternative name "swamp cat". In south-east Asia, it ranges from Myanmar to Vietnam (but not south of the Isthmus of Kra into Malaysia), and is found mainly in tropical deciduous forests. There are records of the Jungle cat as high as 2400m. in the Himalaya and 1000m. in the

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Caucasus. The cat also thrives in cultivated landscapes, especially where there are plenty of rodents.

DESERT CAT (*Felis silvestris ornata*)

The range of the Desert cat, elsewhere known as the Steppe wildcat, is mainly in the central Asia. In India, it is found only in the extreme west - in Rajasthan and Gujarat. Scrub desert is a preferred habitat, where it feeds on rodents and other small animals, including insects, lizards and snakes.

Genera : *Prionailurus*

LEOPARD CAT (*Prionailurus bengalensis*)

This is especially numerous in China, where its population has been estimated at 20,00,000. However, it has been heavily exploited there for pet. In India, Myanmar and Thailand, it is threatened and is listed in Appendix I of CITES, which bans all international trade in this species.

FISHING CAT (*Prionailurus viverrinus*)

This species too is considered threatened, especially in its limited range in northern India and the south-west coast of Kerala and Kamataka, where its wetland habitats have been destroyed or degraded. It is feared extinct in the latter region. However, it has been found around fishponds in West Bengal, despite a dense human population.

RUSTY SPOTTED CAT

(*Prionailurus rubiginosus*)

The Rusty spotted cat remains a mystery. Its range was considered to be confined to south-western India, but few records existed. In 1975, a specimen was collected by the Zoological Survey of India in Udampur (Jammu & Kashmir), far north of the accepted range. Another,

a pet specimen in Orissa was said to have been collected in Tuluka reserve forests, Angul district, but there was doubt about the reliability of the record. However, recently, two kittens were found in Daringbadi Block, Phulbani district, which indicates that its known range should be extended eastward deep into Orissa. The species was first photographed in 1990 in the Gir Lion wildlife sanctuary, where it was not previously known to occur.

In the past, it was thought that Rusty spotted cat in India favoured grasslands, scrub and forest, while, in Sri Lanka, it was considered a forest resident ranging up to 2135m. in Horton Plains. But Rusty spotted cats were found in house attics near Cochin (Kerala), well away from forest, and also in a house in the Vansda national park (Gujarat)! One was run over by a car on the outskirts of Mumbai. Other sightings have occurred in the Panna district, Madhya Pradesh.

Genera : *Lynx*

EURASIAN LYNX (*Lynx lynx*)

This cat appears in India only in the far north, bordering Tibet. Its recent records are only from Ladakh, where the species may not survive for long.

Genera : *Otocolobus*

PALLAS CAT (*Otocolobus manul*)

Like the Lynx, Pallas cat or Manul lives mainly in central Asia, and its range only touches the northern fringe of India. However, there are no recent records. These cats survive in extremely low temperatures and snow. Their thick fur led to their once being thought to be the ancestor of the domestic Persian cat. However, that is now discounted.

Genera : *Caracal*

CARACAL (*Caracal caracal*)

A cat of the arid and semi-arid lands, Caracal is found in India from Rajasthan and Gujarat in the west to Madhya Pradesh, but there are few records. It has been sighted in Sariska and Ranthambhore tiger reserves.

Genera : *Neofelis, Catopuma and Pardofelis*

The primary habitats of CLOUDED LEOPARD (*Neofelis nebulosa*) and small MARBLED CAT (*Pardofelis marmorata*), which have similar coat patterns, as well as the GOLDEN CAT (*Catopuma temmincki*), are in south-east Asia and China. But their ranges include the dense forests of north-east India, and extend into Bhutan and Nepal.

A Clouded leopard was found in the bathroom of a house near Buxa tiger reserve and later released into the forest, and another in a garage in Pokhara, Nepal. Although usually said to be inhabitants of pristine forests, two were captured in degraded forests around Chitwan national park, and later released.

Leopard cat, Marbled cat and Golden cat have all been recorded in Namdapha tiger reserve (Arunachal Pradesh), Manas tiger reserve (Assam) and Balphakram national park (Meghalaya).

Almost all these cat species are up against odds. The fur trade is a serious threat to the smaller cats, especially those with attractively marked pelts, such as the Clouded leopard, Lynx, Leopard cat, Marbled cat, Fishing cat and Rusty spotted cat in India, and the South American spotted species. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered

Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), together with campaigns by conservationists, has been effective in ending the formerly devastating international trade in skins of threatened spotted cats. Nevertheless, small scale trade continues, usually 'under the counter', and particularly in tourist areas. Seizures of large numbers of skins in various places in India from time to time are evidence of this clandestine trade.

There are other aspects to consider as well. The small cats may prey on small animals such as chickens, rabbits and small goats. Heavy losses, as when a cat kills a large number of chickens in a henhouse or others small livestock can be catastrophic for poor families, as these represents for many people their personal or family wealth and support for life. As such, it is understandable if the humans retaliate and destroy the predators that threaten their livelihood. But whereas compensation schemes are generally provided for losses of large livestock in order to encourage the owner not to kill the predator, none exist for small stock. There is little that can be done to improve the situation, beyond encouraging small livestock owners to take better precautions.

WHY CONSERVE SMALL CATS

If the small cats are sometimes pests, then why conserve them?

There is a very weighty reason: why we must. The principal prey of the small cats consists of rodents, rats, mice and squirrels, which, all over the world, feast on human food supplies, from seeds to fruit. In India, a very substantial percentage of grain production, which could feed a large number of people, is lost to rodents

The wildcats must have chosen themselves to live close to human habitation because of the abundance of their natural prey, and people noted that their presence was useful in killing rodents and protecting their grain stocks. Out of the close association, the wildcat was adopted as a companion of the human family.

Domesticated, the cat is still a natural hunter of rodents and other small creatures, which feed on human food stocks. European farmers benefit from colonies of feral cats around their barns, and a "good mouser" is treasured in the house. Such stray cats are performing a great service to humanity at virtually no cost.

every year. Protected storage is costly and seldom completely effective.

Furthermore, rodents cause considerable damage to the grazing land. Farmers and agricultural authorities in many countries spend large amount of money and time combatting them. They also spread disease among livestock and humans, including bubonic plague, which still exists in parts of India.

Clearly, smaller cats, as well as other small carnivores, such as foxes, mongooses, civets and weasels, which are also persecuted for livestock predation, have a heavy impact on rodent pests and should be encouraged in the human interest.

CONSERVING SMALL CATS

Given the secrecy of their lives, and the few records confirming their presence in various areas, planning conservation measures for the small cats presents considerable difficulty. Moreover, since they lack the glamour of the big cats, it is difficult to persuade governments to set aside

areas only for the smaller cats. However, they share the habitats of the big cats, and like their bigger cousins, their real habitats are natural areas of forest, grasslands and wetlands. Protection of these ecosystems is therefore an essential element in ensuring the smaller cats' future. Protection for the big cats will benefit the small ones too.

CONCLUSION

Yes, the smaller cats can be a problem when they take someone's chickens - and one should sympathise with the losing owner - but the benefits they bestow on us by consuming pests are overwhelming. Furthermore, they are some of the most beautiful and attractive of all the wild species which inhabit the world. We seldom, if ever, see them, but they are there, and we should ensure that they survive.

Selected reading

NOWELL, K. and P. JACKSON (1996) - *Wild cats: Status survey and conservation action plan. IUCN Gland, Switzerland.*