

Smaller cats of Maharashtra

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SMALLER CATS HAVE proved to be far more elusive than the legendary movement of tiger, described as "flowing past of a ghost". Thus the group of "small wild cats" has not received as much attention as tiger or lion. Information on their status is generally scanty. The need to understand these "small cats" is realised when one sees lack of even basic information on their very existence.

As a Field Director of Melghat tiger reserve, during 1987-1991, available literature on "cats" in general was collected by the author and analysed. While talking to wildlife wardens in the field, it was realised that the tiger and panther mattered much more, and even tourists were obsessed with viewing major carnivores and were hardly impressed by the sighting of small cats in the wild.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Libraries in Wildlife Institute of India, Dehra Dun; Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai; Zoological Survey office in Pune, etc. were consulted. The literature review including the famous *shikar* stories, generated a lot of information on the tiger (it was possible to compile a bibliography covering over six hundred and fifty references), but there were hardly 20 - 30 references on wild cats of western and central India.

Khajuria and Ghosh, 1981; Prater,

1980; Taylor and Francis, 1939; Tikkedar, 1983; Anon., 1982, etc. have suggested the possibilities of the following cats being in Maharashtra :

- (1) Jungle cat (*Felis chaus*);
- (2) Wild or Desert cat (*Felis silvestris ornata*);
- (3) Leopard cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*);
- (4) Rusty spotted cat (*Prionailurus rubiginosus*); and
- (5) Caracal (*Caracal caracal*)

Most of the available literature is not site-specific, distribution being indicated very broadly and that too, as it occurred may be over fifty years ago. Since then there have been sea changes, even at landscape levels. For a better comprehension of existing status of these cats and to pinpoint localities of their occurrence, detailed survey was thus, essential.

SURVEY AND DATA VALIDATION

Most of us have only rudimentary knowledge of Felidae taxonomy and therefore, to facilitate correct identification of cats, extracts of Prater's (1980) work were circulated to the field staff, initially in the tiger reserve and then subsequently to all protected areas in the state. Range Forest Officers were asked to interact with tribals on the subject and provide feedback on the existence or otherwise of the cat species in their respective areas. For authentication

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of information, collections available with the Bombay Natural History Society and regional office of the Zoological Survey of India were examined for comparison. Following is the gist of information on the status of the "smaller cats" in Maharashtra.

JUNGLE CAT (*Felis chaus*)

Bombay Natural History Society's collection includes five specimens of Jungle cat collected from Satara (1912), Thane (1917), Nasik (1943), Ambamath, Thane district (1948) and Raipur, Amravati district (1951). Collection from districts Amravati and Thane are labelled as *F.c.Kutas* Pearson, which according to Morrison (1951) are expected from Kutch to Bengal. Other collections are indicated as *F.c. Prateri* Pocock.

The author has sighted Jungle cats in Nasik, Jalgaon, Pune, Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur, Shule, Amravati, Yeotmal, Nagpur, Chandrapur and Gadchiroli districts. Feedback from the field staff indicates the presence of Jungle cat in all the protected areas of the state (Fig. 1). Unfortunately there seemed to be tendency to call all small cats and even civets, "jungly cat" or *Felis chaus*. All these cats, being nocturnal, normally offer only fleeting glimpses.

The state level status of the Jungle cat is in conformity with its population status accorded at global level. As this cat does well even in cultivated landscapes (Nowell and Jackson, 1996), there is no immediate threat to its existence. However, there is need to conduct studies to know more about it.

DESERT CAT (*Felis silvestris lybica*)

There were no reports of this cat by the field staff. However, a cat specimen received during 1990-91 at Semadoh, Melghat as Jungle cat, on

closer examination by the author, showed characteristics of a Desert cat. The specimen was probably hit by a speeding vehicle on the highway but nevertheless, its pelt was not much damaged and so was removed and treated locally, for preservation. The cat was rather squattish and had faint spots and patterns, unlike that of Jungle cat.

Prater (1980) and Morrison (1951) suggest occurrence of this cat in western and central India and therefore, is expected in drier parts of the eastern and central Maharashtra. Melghat has predominantly dry deciduous teak forests and used to have corridors to drier parts of south-western Madhya Pradesh and then onwards to the scrub forests of Rajasthan.

The cat has been reported from Pench district, Nagpur and Tadoba, district Chandrapur (Personal communications by Dr Pradhan of Zoological Survey of India, Pune). It has been also reported from drier parts of the Pune district namely Shirur, Baramati and Indapur talukas (Fig. 1).

The earlier nomenclature of *Felis lybica*, it appears, is incorrect and the Desert cat of central India has now been designated *Felis silvestris ornata* Gray, 1830. A critical study of local specimen by taxonomist is called for.

Hardly any work has been reported on Desert cat from this state during the recent period and whatever information on record, is too sketchy.

LEOPARD CAT (*Prionailurus bengalensis*)

True to its common name, its close affinity to the leopard is in its yellowish brown colour, and its dark coloured solid spots (but not rosette type). This gives the cat a distinct appearance.

Fig. 1. Smaller Cats of Maharashtra

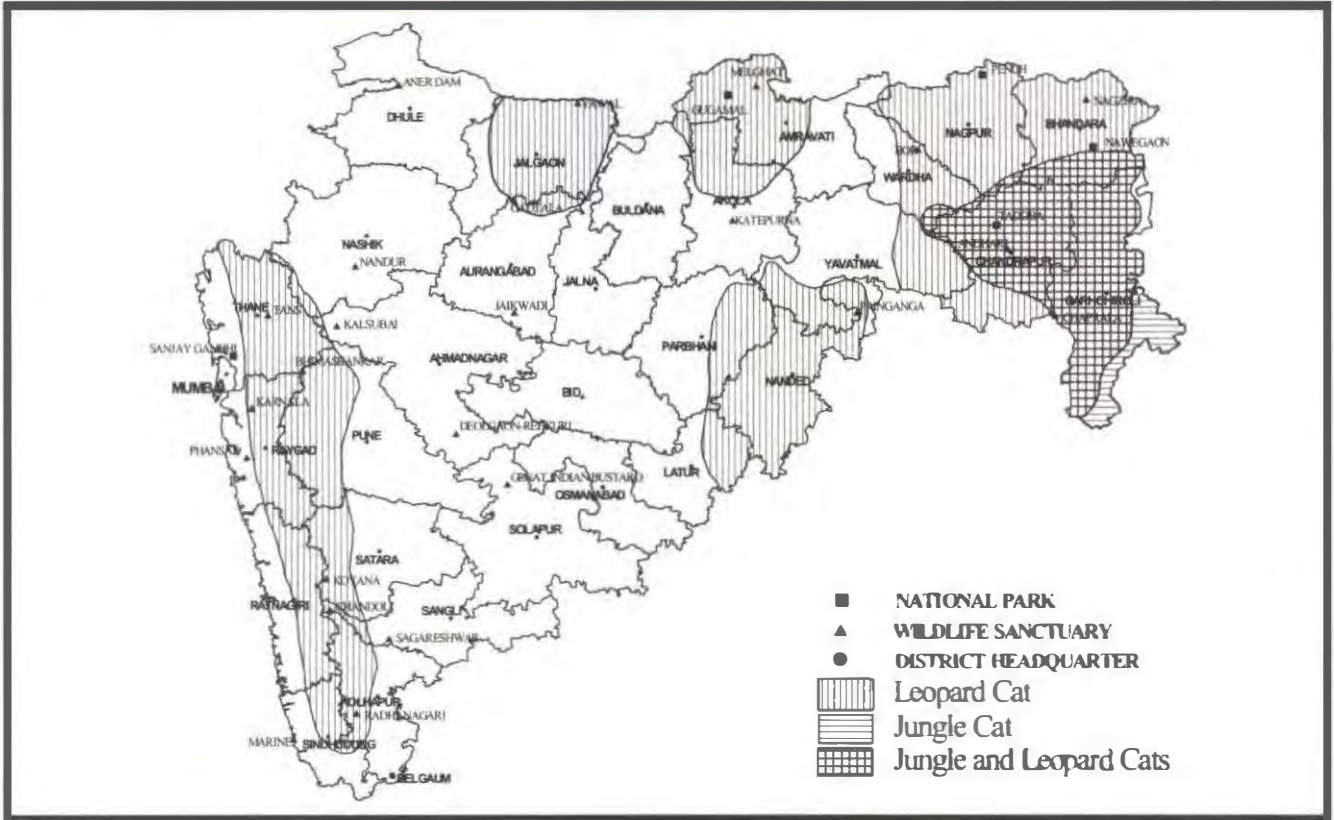
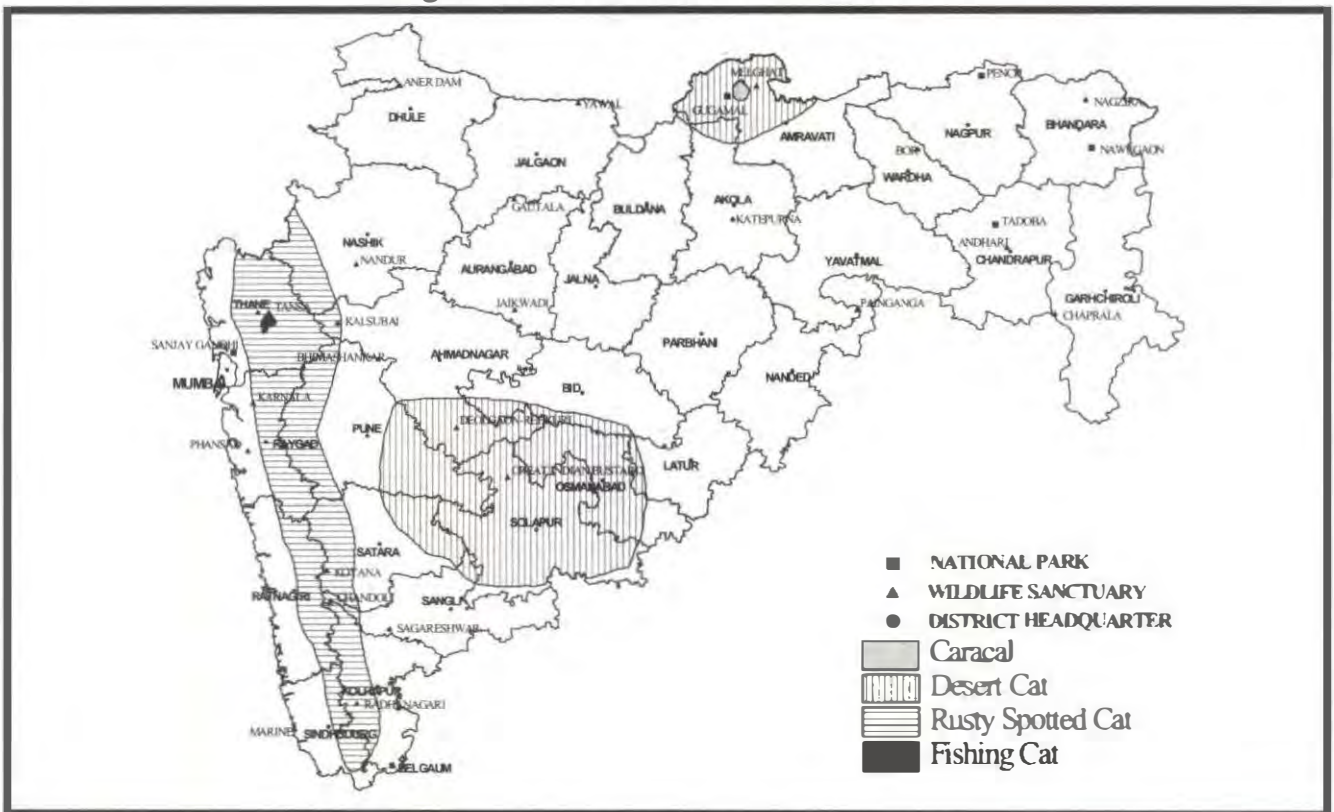


Fig. 2. Smaller Cats of Maharashtra



Note: The maps have been retouched for reprinting

The smaller cats of India and their distribution



The most common of small cats
in India

Jungle cat (*Felis chaus*)

Biogeographic zones - 2A, 2B, 2C,
2D, 3A, 4A, 4B, 5A, 5B, 6A, 6B,
6C, 6D, 6E, 7A, 7B

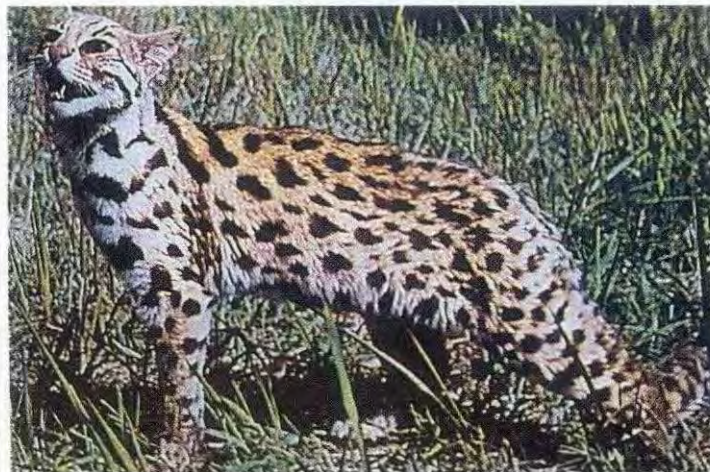
Closely resembling the house cat
Desert cat (*Felis silvestris ornata*)
Biogeographic zones - 3A, 3B, 6D*, 6A*



A denizen of the drier regions in India

Caracal (*Caracal caracal*)

Biogeographic zones - 3A, 3B, 4B, 6A, 6D



Spots and rosettes like that
of a leopard

Leopard cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*)

Biogeographic zones - 2A, 2B, 2C,
2D, 4B, 5A, 5B, 6A, 6B, 6C, 6D,
6E, 7A, 7B, 9A, 9B



A diet consisting mainly of fish

Fishing cat

(*Prionailurus viverrinus*)

Biogeographic zones - 2B, 2C, 4B,
5A, 5B, 6A, 6B, 6C, 6D, 6E, 7A, 7B,
9A, 9B



In India, found in the far north
Eurasian Lynx (*Lynx lynx*)
Biogeographic zones - 1A, 1B



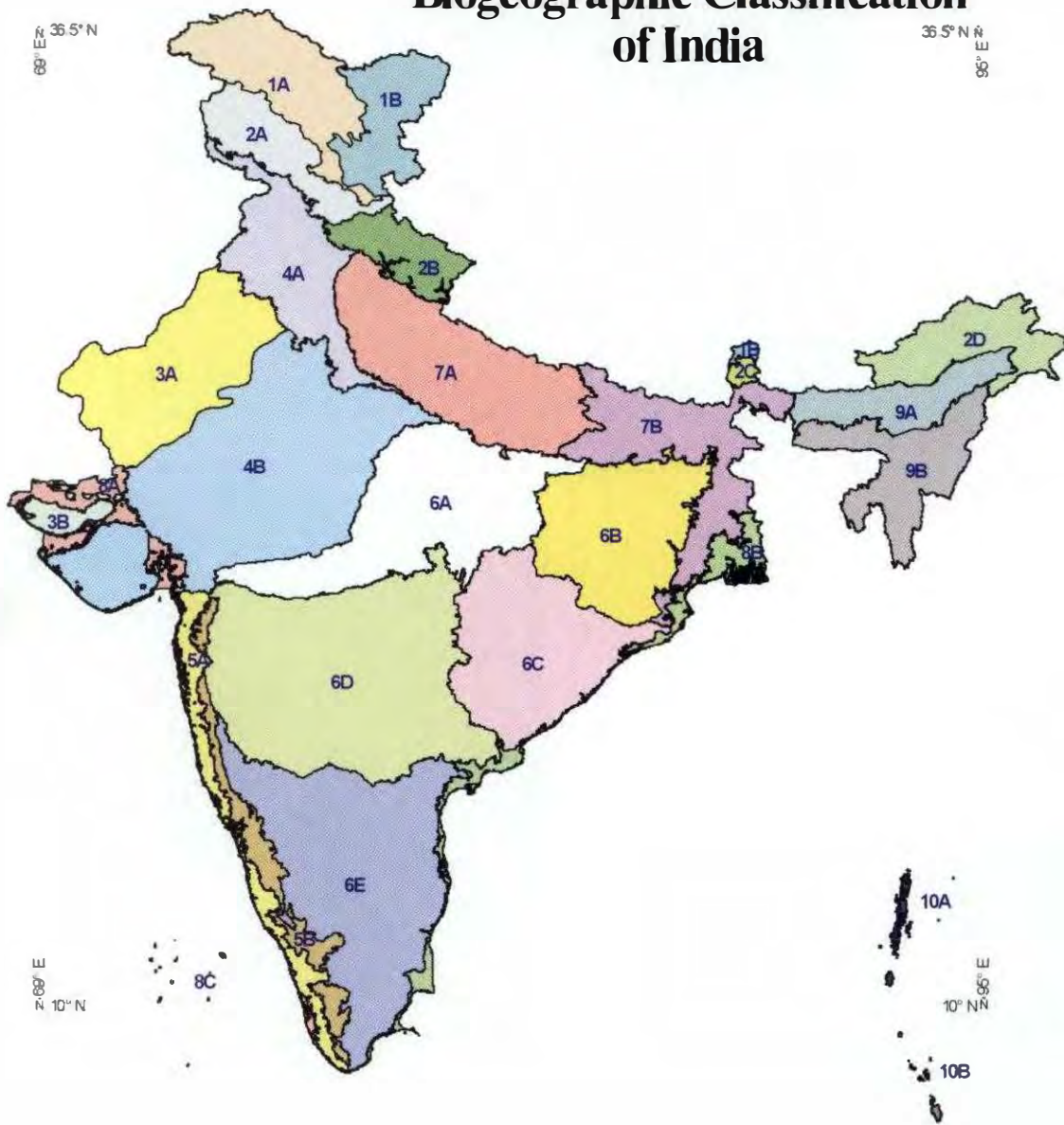
Adapted to living in open habitat

Pallas cat or Manul

(*Otocolobus manul*)

Biogeographic zones - 1A, 1B

Biogeographic Classification of India



- 1A: Trans-Himalaya-Ladakh Mtns.
- 1B: Trans-Himalaya-Tibetan Plateau
- 2A: Himalaya-North-West Himalaya
- 2B: Himalaya--West Himalaya
- 2C: Himalaya--Central Himalaya
- 2D: Himalaya--East Himalaya
- 3A: Desert-Thar
- 3B: Desert-Katchchh
- 4A: Semi-Arid--Punjab Plains
- 4B: Semi-Arid--Gujarat Rajputana
- 5A: Western Ghats--Malabar Plains
- 5B: Western Ghats--Western Ghats Mtns.
- 6A: Deccan Peninsula--Central Highlands

- 6B: Deccan Peninsula--Chotta-Nagpur
- 6C: Deccan Peninsula--Eastern Highlands
- 6D: Deccan Peninsula--Central Plateau
- 6E: Deccan Peninsula--Deccan South
- 7A: Gangetic Plain--Upper Gangetic Plain
- 7B: Gangetic Plain--Lower Gangetic Plain
- 8A: Coasts--West Coast
- 8B: Coasts--East Coast
- 8C: Coasts--Lakshadweep
- 9A: North-East--Brahmaputra Valley
- 9B: North-East--North-East Hills
- 10A: Islands--Andamans
- 10B: Islands--Nicobars

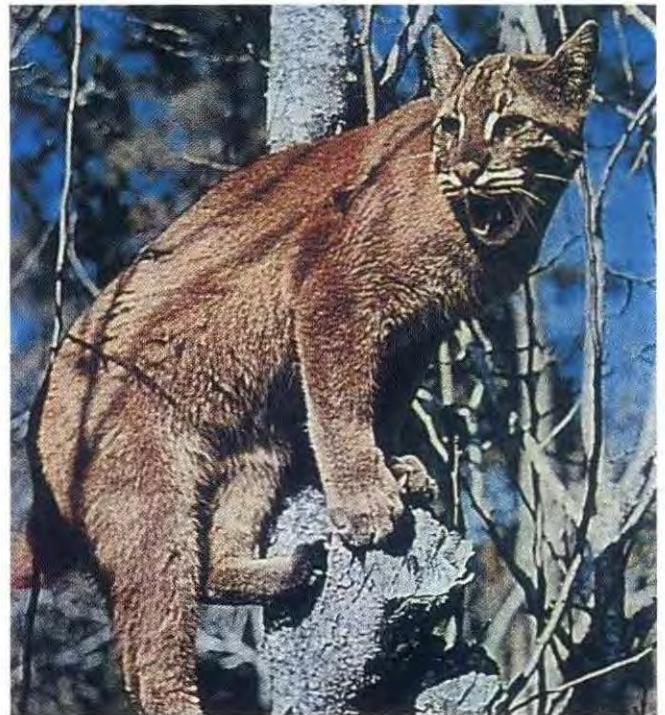


0 1000 Km



The smallest of the cat family
Rusty spotted cat
(*Prionailurus rubiginosus*)
Biogeographic zones - 2A*, 2D*, 4A,
4B, 5A, 5B, 6A, 6C, 6D, 6E

This cat has a distinct coat pattern
Clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*)
Biogeographic zones - 2C, 2D, 9A, 9B



An oriental cat
Golden cat (*Catopuma temmincki*)
Biogeographic zones - 2C, 2D, 9A, 9B



Akin to Leopard cat but smaller
Marbled cat
(*Pardofelis marmorata*)
Biogeographic zones - 2C, 2D, 9A, 9B

Though this cat is reported to have a wide range of distribution, authentic reports on its occurrence within the state at present seem to suggest its restriction to the eastern region. Game wardens of Chandrapur (Chaprara and Tadoba), Wardha and Nagpur districts have indicated presence of this cat in their respective protected areas (Fig. 2). The information was checked for validation.

There have been previous reports of Leopard cat occurrence in erstwhile Bombay Presidency and thus its occurrence is expected in coastal and Western Ghat areas, but so far, there has been no report from this region.

RUSTY SPOTTED CAT

(*Prionailurus rubiginosus*)

This smallest of the smaller cats, the Rusty spotted or rather "chocolate (coloured) spotted" cat, is very lovely in its appearance. However, its small size, and arboreal and nocturnal habit, make its sighting very difficult.

The earlier reported distribution of this cat is western and south-central Asia (Prater, 1980; Morrison, 1951, etc.). However, area specific information during recent times has been from the Dang forests situated very close to the north-western part of the Maharashtra state. There are old reports from Khandala in Pune district. Recently some cats were seized from culprits in Murbad Range of Thane district, and then transferred to Sanjay Gandhi national park, Borivili, Mumbai (Fig. 2). One of the cats has been duly preserved and is available for examination with the Veterinary Officer, Dr Barahate.

Ex-Field Director, Project Tiger. P J Thosare, the then Field Director of Melghat tiger reserve, reported the presence of this cat in Melghat, in 1994. This claim has been confirmed

by senior officials like S/Shri Sharma and Jagir Singh (Wankhede, 1996).

CARACAL (*Caracal caracal*)

Caracal was considered a special component of the drier savannah and thus it surprised many when Dr MK Ranjitsinh, the then Director (Wildlife), Government of India, during his visit to the Melghat tiger reserve in 1986 suggested its presence in the region. Enquiries initiated thereafter revealed that Korku, the tribal inhabitants of Melghat have a local name "bada manu" for the cat and there was no mistake in its identification, as large sized tufted ears were recognised by Korkus when photographs were shown.

Shri Thosare very clearly observed in Dhakana Range, a Caracal attempting to catch birds. Circumstantial evidences like scratch on the tree boles, also support the claim. A second sighting has been reported from Ghatang Range in Melghat by the present Field Director, VT Patki (Wankhede, 1996).

FISHING CAT (*Prionailurus viverrinus*)

Literature review had not indicated presence of this cat within the state boundaries (Prater, 1980; Sanyal and Roy, 1986). However, a wildlife warden working in Tansa sanctuary, Thane district, reported its presence (Fig. 2). The cat's appearance is similar to civet and its habitat is specific.

The Tansa sanctuary encompasses a well protected large waterbody which supplies water to the Mumbai city. This area, till recently, had corridors to the coastal region and thus the claim seems to be reasonable and needs to be further investigated. There is a possibility of Jungle cat getting mistaken for Fishing cat as it also prefers to be in proximity of water

courses and may even indulge in catching fish.

DISCUSSION

Typical habitats of all cats expected to occur in Maharashtra have been covered and a network of protected areas covering major bio-geographical zones, has already been established. Though major emphasis of management of protected areas is on the more glamorous major cats and herbivores i.e, tiger, leopard, Indian gaur, sambar, cheetal, etc., the smaller cats are also being benefitted.

Most of the smaller cats enjoy legal protection. However, in the absence of concerted conservation efforts, they are not likely to receive protection in the real sense.

Many of the rare smaller cats could be confused with domestic cat and therefore, their hunting may not even be taken cognisance of. Taxonomical studies are therefore essential.

Protection of the habitat alone is not sufficient for comprehensive gene pool conservation efforts to cover the lesser cats. Being very versatile, most of them are able to survive even outside high forests and can easily take to areas on the fringes of human habitations and sometimes even within the human habitations. Their survival is not as much jeopardised as that of the major cats in the proximity of human habitations such as the tiger. However, indiscriminate use of pesticides has already taken a heavy toll of their prey base which comprises predominantly smaller mammals, mainly rodents, and even small birds.

Nocturnal and arboreal habits of these cats make their presence difficult to locate. It is also difficult to carry out a survey of Fishing cats

because of the specific habitat which it enjoys. Approaches like use of camera traps are therefore essential for conducting thorough surveys.

Protected area managers should pay more attention to these interesting cats and generate a much needed database on their status and ecology so that conservation efforts are made in right direction.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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