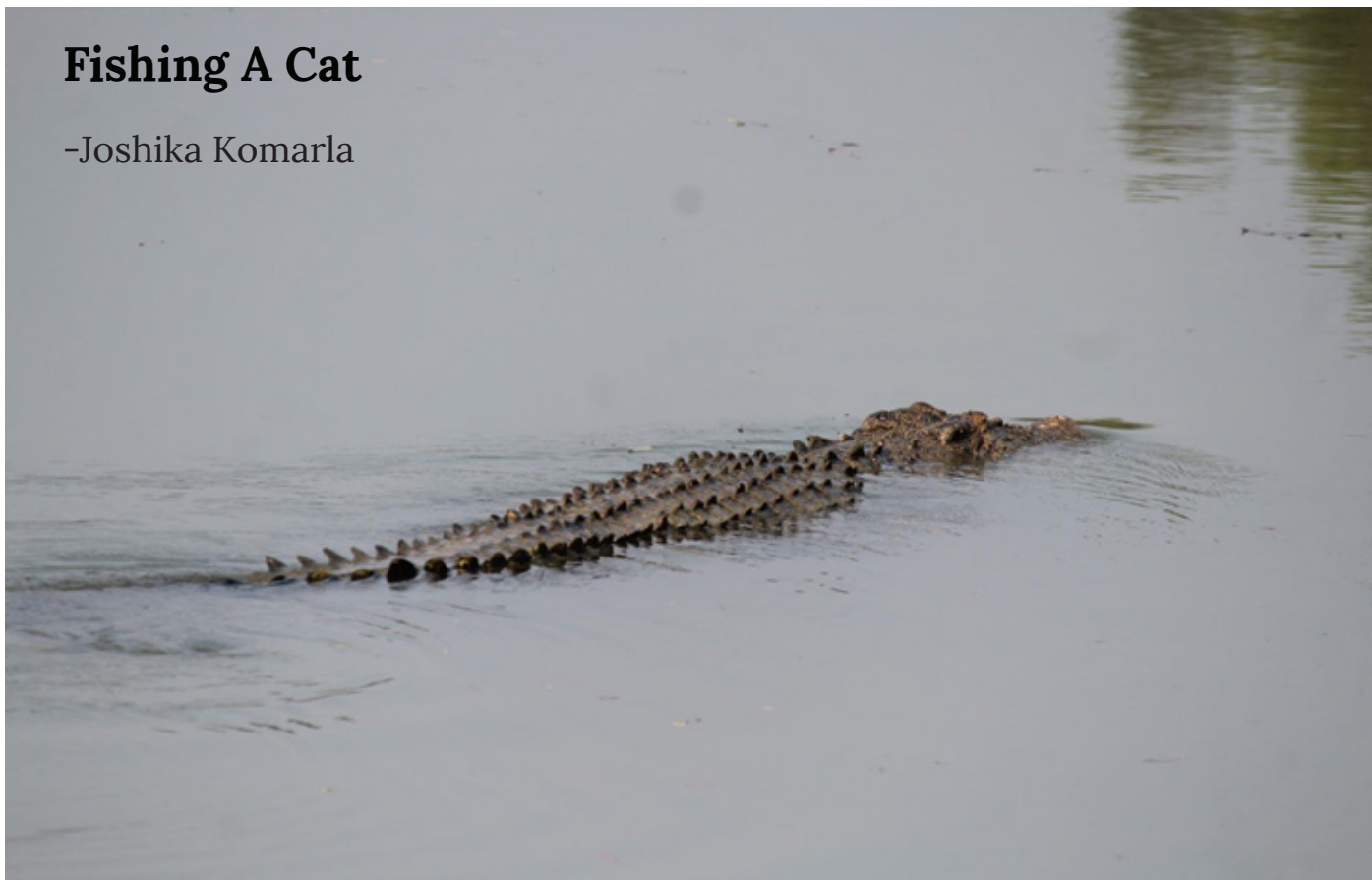


Fishing A Cat

-Joshika Komarla



From the boat at night, we spotted the eye-shine of salties just like this one.
Photo Credit: Shreyas Prashant.

Cats are generally elusive, and this is especially true for the smaller ones. As a group, we were all ruefully reminded of this on our Techniques Tour in Tadoba—where our fascination with a tiger cub on the trail caused us to miss a rare sighting of a Rusty-Spotted Cat mother and cub! We saw around ten tigers on that trip, but never a Rusty, except on camera traps.

This time, heading out for our Wetlands Tour, we were all excited for the chance to spot a fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*) - a cryptic felid found in Bhitarkanika. On our second night, we boarded our bus around 10 PM, heading to a jetty where we'd switch to a boat to search for fishing cats. Somewhere along the way, the bus braked hard - just in time for us to see something sandy-shaded dart across the road. A Jungle Cat! Our luck wasn't looking too bad after all. We hadn't even

reached the jetty, and we'd already seen more than we'd bargained for - a lifer for many of us.

Once at the jetty, we quickly took our places on the boat, gripping the rails for support. Within minutes, we were off along the channels of the Brahmani River. Our Tour-In-Charges, Dr. Gopi and Dr. Chinmaya, reminded us to keep our windcheaters handy, anticipating a return by midnight. None of us knew what the night had in store for us.

Looking down at the waters around us, we expected darkness. After all, it was late at night in a place far from city lights. We should have seen nothing - but instead, the river shone back at us. It took us a moment to realize that the waters were teeming with bioluminescent algae.

As the bow of our boat sliced through the current, the disturbance shimmered with light. Mullet fish skipped across the current, breaking the water's tension; wherever they jumped, they left light in their wake. For the first hour or two, it felt like a dream. However, as the night dragged on, the luminescence dimmed and the wind hit hard, leaching warmth from our bodies. Eventually, we drifted into the mouth of the Bay of Bengal. We moved back and forth between the waters of the Brahmani River and the open expanse of the Bay, and somewhere in between the mangroves sent out ripples of light - they were fireflies!

We had seen these flashes the night before as well. As we walked back from the jetty in Bhitarkanika National Park to our accommodation, hundreds of thousands of fireflies lit up the canopy. Male fireflies pulsed their beams in unison, signaling to nearby females. The night sky and

the trees became one, stars and fireflies twinkling alike. As beautiful as everything around us was, we had yet to achieve our objective: spotting a fishing cat.

Finally, around 1 or 2 AM, we pulled into a floating jetty. Imagine our dismay when we realized this wasn't the end of our journey - it was just another tactic in our search for the elusive cat. We had arrived at Habalakatti Island. There, we set off on foot, tracking for about 30 minutes. But with nothing to show for our efforts, except a brief sighting of an unassuming dog-faced water snake, we decided to head back and continue our search from the boat instead.

Back on the boat, our sentry was slowly losing men - one by one, we slipped below deck, hoping to sneak in a quick nap. A few of us weren't so lucky; both the fishing cat and sleep had managed to evade us. By 3 AM, the night was cold, and swarms of mosquitoes drained the last of our energy.



The handful of us who stayed up all night.

Then, suddenly - at around 4:15 AM - the field assistant, who had stood firm at the bow since we boarded, began gesticulating wildly at the few of us still awake on deck. He had seen something. It was the cat!

Talk about elusive and cryptic - we had spent the better part of six hours being bitten raw by mosquitoes, only to catch a fleeting glimpse of the cat's rear end as it slinked back into the thick cover of the mangroves. The cat was much larger than we'd pictured, nearly twice as big as a house cat, with a sturdy build and gangly legs.



The dog-faced water snake we saw slithering along a small stream on Habalakatti Island.

Photo Credit: Shreyas Prashant.

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