

LESSER CATS OF MAHARASHTRA

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Introduction

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 "lesser 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 Tiger and Panther mattered much more and even tourists of all colours and hues were obsessed with viewing major carnivores and were hardly impressed by a sighting of small Cats in the wild.

Literature review

Libraries in places like Wildlife Institute of India, Dehra Dun; Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai; Zoological Survey office in Pune etc. were consulted. Literature review including famous shikar stories, generated lot of information on Tiger (it was possible to compile a bibliography covering over six hundred and fifty references), but there were hardly 20 to 30 references on wild Cats of Western and Central India.

Status of wild Cats in Maharashtra

Literature review (Khajuria and Ghosh, 1981; Prater, 1980; Taylor and Francis, 1939; Tikkedar, 1983; Anon., 1982 etc.) suggested possibilities of following Cats :

1. Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus*).
2. Wild or Desert Cat (*Felis silvestris libyca*).
3. Leopard Cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis* Syn. *Felis bengalensis*).
4. Rusty Spotted Cat (*Prionailurus rubiginosus* Syn *F. rubiginosus*).
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 back. Since then there have been sea changes, even at landscape levels. For better comprehension of existing status of these Cats and to pinpoint localities of their occurrence, detailed survey was thus, essential.

Field Survey and information 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

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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 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 "Lesser Cats" in Maharashtra State.

1. Jungle Cat (*Felis chaus* Schreber, 1777)

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

The author has sighted Jungle Cats in Nashik, Jalgaon, Pune, Satara, Sangli, Kolhapur, Dhule, Amravati, Yeotmal, Nagpur, Chandrapur and Gadchiroli Districts. Feedback from the field staff indicates 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 as "Jungle Cat" or *Felis chaus*. All these Cats being nocturnal, normally offer only fleeting glimpses.

State level status of Jungle Cats is in conformity of population status accorded at global level. As these Cats do well even in cultivated landscapes (Nowell Kristin and Jackson, 1996), there is no immediate threat

to their existence. However, there is need to conduct studies to know more about them.

2. Desert Cat (*Felis silvestris libyca* Forester)

There were no reports on this Cat from 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, pelt was not much damaged and 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), Morris-Scott (1951) suggest occurrence of this Cat in Western and Central India and therefore, is expected in drier parts of Eastern and Central Maharashtra. Melghats has predominantly dry deciduous Teak forests and used to have corridors to drier parts of South-Western Madhya Pradesh and then onwards to 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 Pune District namely Shirur, Baramati and Indapur talukas (Fig. 1).

Earlier nomenclature of *Felis libyca*, it appears, is incorrect and the Desert Cat of Central India need now be designated as *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 recent

period and whatever information on record, is too sketchy.

3. Leopard Cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*, Kerr 1792)

True to its common name, its close affinity to Leopard is in its yellowish brown colour, and its dark coloured solid spots (but not roset type). This gives the Cat a distinct appearance. Though this Cat is reported to have wide range of distribution, authentic reports on their occurrence within the State, presently seems to be restricted only to eastern region. Game Wardens of Chandrapur (Chaprala and Tadoba), Wardha and Nagpur Districts have indicated presence of this Cat in their respective protected areas (Fig. 2). Information provided by them was checked for their validation.

There are previous reports of Leopard Cat occurrence in erstwhile Bombay Presidency and thus occurrence is expected in Coastal and Western Ghat areas, but so far, there has been no report from this region as yet.

4. Rusty Spotted Cat (*Prionailurus rubiginosus*)

This smallest of the lesser Cats, the Rusty spotted or rather "chocolate (coloured) spotted" Cat, it is very lovely in its appearance. However, small size, coupled with arboreal and nocturnal habit, makes its sighting very difficult.

Earlier reported distribution is Western and South Central Asia (Prater, 1980; Morrisson Scott, 1951 etc.). However, area specific information during recent times has been from Dang forests situated very close to North-Western part of Maharashtra State. There are old reports

from Khandala in Pune District. Recently Cat specimens were seized from culprits in Murbad Range of Thane District, which were 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 Shri Thosare had reported presence of this Cat in Melghats, during 1994. This claim has been confirmed by senior officials like Shri Sharma and Shri Jagir Singh (Wankhede, 1996).

5. Caracal (*Caracal caracal*)

Caracal was considered to be a special component of drier savannah and thus it surprised many when Dr. Ranjeet Singhji, the then Director Wildlife, Government of India during his visit to the Tiger Reserve sometime during 1986 suggested its presence in Melghats. Enquiries initiated thereafter, revealed that Korkus, the tribal inhabitants of Melghats have a Korku name "Bada Manu" for the Cat and there was no mistake in its identification, as large sized tufted ears were recognized by Korkus when photographs were shown.

Mr. P.J. Thosare, the then Field Director of the Tiger Reserve, very clearly observed in Dhakana Range a Caracal attempting to catch birds. Circumstantial evidences like scratch on the tree boles, also support the claim. Second sighting has been reported from Ghatang Range in Melghat by the present Field Director, Mr. V.T. Patki (Wankhede, 1996).

6. Fishing Cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*)

Literature review had not indicated presence of this Cat within the State

boundaries (Prater, 1980; Sanyal and Roy, 1986). However one of wildlife wardens working in Tansa Sanctuary, District Thane, reported its presence (Fig. 2). The Cat's appearance is similar to civets and habitat is specific.

The Tansa Sanctuary encompasses well protected large water body, that supplies water to Mumbai metropolitan city. The area, till recent times, had corridors to coastal region and thus claim seems to be reasonable and need be further investigated. There is a possibility of mistaking Jungle Cat for Fishing Cat as it also prefers closeness to water courses and may even indulge in catching fish.

Discussion

Typical habitats of all Cats expected to occur in the State have been covered as network of protected areas covering major bio-geographical zones, has already been established. Though major emphasis of management of protected areas is on glamorous major Cats and herbivores i.e. Tiger, Leopard, Indian Gaur, Sambar, Cheetal etc., the lesser Cats are also being benefitted.

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

Many of the rare lesser 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 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 major Cats in the proximity of human habitations as that of Tiger. However, indiscriminate use of pesticides have already taken heavy toll of their prey base which comprises mainly of smaller mammals, predominantly rodents, and even small birds.

Nocturnal and arboreal habits of these Cats makes their presence difficult to locate. Survey of Fishing Cats is also difficult to carry out because of 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 regenerate much needed data base on their status and ecology so that conservation efforts are made in right direction.

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SUMMARY

Based on locations-specific authentic information status of five wild Cats namely Jungle Cat, Desert Cat, Leopard Cat, Rusty spotted Cat and Caracal is reported. Possible existence of Fishing Cat in Tansa Sanctuary is indicated. Need for launching specific conservation efforts for lesser Cats is indicated.

महाराष्ट्र के कनिष्ठ बिडाल

एम०जी० गोगटे

सारांश

विशिष्ट प्रामाणिक जानकारी के आधार पर 5 जंगली बिडाल जातियाँ अर्थात् वन्य बिडाल, मरु बिडाल, तेन्दुआ बिडाल, रोहित बिन्दु बिडाल और शशकर्म की वर्तमान स्थिति सूचित की गई है। तानसा संश्रय में मत्स्य भोजी बिडाल मिलने की संभावना सूचित की गई है। कनिष्ठ बिडालों का विशिष्ट संरक्षण आरम्भ करने के प्रयत्नों की आवश्यकता का संकेत किया गया है।

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