

Cat of nine lives? Not quite

ENDANGERED A survey of fishing cat numbers in areas with high human density in West Bengal has revealed that the major reason for their decline is the degradation of wetland habitats. A cat that depends on wetlands and marshes also symbiotically helps preserve this crucial ecosystem, observes **Atula Gupta**

India is home to 15 species of cats with 11 of these being small and medium sized cats. Yet, for most people enamoured by the charms of royal predators like the tiger and the lion, these lesser cats remain unseen and unheard. Sometimes they are even mistaken for minor variations of the common cat and not the unique felids that they actually are.

One such species is the fishing cat, a feline double the size of a domestic cat but less common. It lives a highly threatened life in a human infiltrated landscape.

In the reed beds and marshy lands of the Sundarbans, as dusk begins to fall, the fishing cat comes out to hunt its favourite meal – fish. Its olive grey double layered fur coat, webbed paws, small stocky built and a rudder like stubby tail help the cat not only dive into the water but swim like a pro. Dispelling the common belief of cats hating water, fishing cats spend hours peering into rivers and ponds tracking the agile shadows and diving at a precisely calculated moment to catch their aquatic prey. It is therefore unjust to call fishing cats merely another cat variety. These feline anglers are in fact a substantial evidence of the great abilities and diversities of the cat family.

Distribution

The fishing cat is unevenly distributed throughout southern and southeast Asia. It is found in northeast India, the foot of the Himalayas, and a few scattered areas in the rest of India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) has marked this species as endangered. In India, these cats have been accorded Schedule I protection. It is the same level of protection that is given to tigers and elephants.

Similar to numerous other small sized species, these nocturnal cats are known only to a handful of locals and researchers. Surprisingly, it is not the lack of familiarity that is driving the species towards extinction. Over the years, these felids have shown an excellent ability to mingle and co-exist with humans. It is actually the string of problems associated with human settlements that are the real cause for concern. According to Tiasa Adhya, a researcher and conservationist who surveyed the fishing cat population in areas with high human density in West Bengal, the major reason for their decline is the reduction and destruction of the wetland habitat. Farms, factories, illegal brick kilns

and the constant need for land have led to the destruction of vegetation and conversion of marsh lands at an alarming pace. In Howrah and Hoogly, two regions where fishing cats were plentiful in the past decades, the soft, muddy grounds, reed beds and mangrove belts are no more the natural environment around which humans adjust and exist.

Repeatedly, man-made topographical changes have ensured that urban structures find firmer ground even as the wetlands and its ancient inhabitants vanish in the rubble. Fishing cats have also been the target of retaliatory killings when they hunt livestock and poultry because of the lack of staple food. Often, killings are also triggered when the cats eye the same fish that villagers catch from their local ponds. Says Tiasa, “It is an ongoing challenge for a conservationist to try and conserve endangered species outside protected areas in human dominated landscapes. Often, there is a clash between development and conservation and I do not think it is at all easy or even possible sometimes to reconcile the differences.”

Dwindling numbers

Even in the other parts of the country, once known to have fishing cats, sightings have become rarer with every passing year. Researcher Shoumita Mukherji has spent more than two decades studying smaller cats of India. She says, while it was easy for her to sit for hours and observe a fishing cat in Rajasthan’s Keoladeo National Park (Bharatpur Bird Sanctuary) in 1989, on her return visit in 2010, she found none had been spotted in two years. Mukherjee says she found indication through scat analysis that the animal still lived in the area but perhaps in a greatly reduced number. In West Bengal, the fishing cat is the state animal but very few people know the fact, says Tiasa. She adds, “Awareness generation about the cat needs both a top-down and bottom-up approach as people living with the cat as well as policy makers need to be educated about the cat’s endangered status.

Creation of empathy for the cat is easier said than done but this is exactly what might save it.” A cat that depends on the wetlands and marshes also symbiotically helps preserve this crucial ecosystem. The fishing cat might be a lesser known and a small-sized cat species but for a country that prides itself in its diversity, safeguarding the future of this species is surely akin to preserving its own identity.



LESSER KNOWN The fishing cat is unevenly distributed throughout southern and southeast Asia. (GETTY IMAGES)