

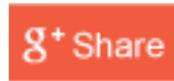


Home » Leisure

Last Modified: Fri, Apr 07 2017. 07 14 PM IST

The cat that stole their fish

Despite suffering losses in livestock attacks by Fishing cats, villagers have joined forces with conservationists to save West Bengal's endangered state animal



 Enter your email

[Subscribe to our newsletter.](#)

Ananda Banerjee



Fishing cats captured on camera. Photo: Bholu Abrar Khan

Strains of a folk theatre tune float through the darkness as we drive into Kamargaria village in Howrah district's Amta Block II in West Bengal. It is late in the night but members of the local village club are there to welcome us. I am accompanying a group of wildlife conservationists working on the endangered Fishing cat.

The elusive, nocturnal creature that was notified as West Bengal's state animal in 2012 is known locally by different names—*baghrul*, *gobagha*, *adhabagha* and *machbagha*. There are few pictures of it in the wild and studies on its ecology, distribution, population estimates and conservation status within or outside protected areas, including national parks and sanctuaries, are few and far between.

"It resembles the panther, and is the size of the average street dog, with black patches on its body and long whiskers. It growls like a tiger; its eyes shine like torchlight and it's not afraid of humans," says Anil Maity, a member of the Kamargaria local club.



Adhya shows images of cat species to a villager. Photo: Partha Dey

“It’s not afraid when we try to chase it away. Instead, it growls and charges at us,” says Maity, adding, “The cat comes to steal fish from our ponds, especially Catla fish. We have to take turns to keep vigil.”

An endangered species under Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, the Fishing cat has long been poached for its skin and meat. The oldest record of its presence in and around Kolkata dates back to 1891. There is no population estimate of the species, which makes it difficult to gauge how many of them survive in the wild.

Now conservationists are roping in villagers into protection committees, trying to

increase awareness and infuse a sense of pride that the state animal lives in their midst.

“The Fishing cat is one of the 15 felid species that is found in India and, like other smaller cat species, is poorly understood,” says wildlife biologist Tiasa Adhya, member of the Fishing Cat Working Group and the Cat Specialist Group of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

Adhya has been conducting research on the Fishing cat since 2010 and now leads a survey with local villagers to estimate the population of this species in the Howrah and Hooghly districts of West Bengal and in Chilika Lake in Odisha. There has been no concerted effort so far to assess the Fishing cat’s current distribution or the threats to it.

Its preferred habitats are the reed beds—*khori bon*—that surround ponds in villages like Kamargaria. The tall reed here is *khori* (*Saccharum narenga*) but the Fishing cat also lives among other types of reeds found in these parts of rural Bengal—*hogla* (*Typha elephantina* and *Typha domingensis*), *nol* (*Phragmites vallatoria*) and *khagra* (*Saccharum spontaneum*).

“The Fishing cat is a marshland species and is only found where there is sufficient reed cover around water bodies. According to our observation, the Fishing cat usually does not exist where the land is devoid of *nol*, *hogla*, *khori* or *khagra* even if the place has a large pond,” says Adhya.

Incidentally, Howrah gets its name from *haor*, which means marshy wetland. The term

haor is still used in neighbouring Bangladesh (Haor basin) to denote a wetland ecosystem.

Howrah district is sandwiched between the Rupnarayan and Damodar rivers. The villages here, surrounded by ponds and bamboo, coconut and banana groves, go back 500 years. The *khori*, which grows in abundance in private waterlogged lands that are unsuitable for crops, is the mainstay of the local economy. The tall grass is harvested, dried and used in betel-leaf (*paan*) cultivation. The dried reed is also used to construct rectangular shaded structures known as *paan boraj*, a type of greenhouse where betel vines are grown in rows.

Even though fishing is a source of livelihood, the villagers have coexisted with wildlife for centuries, despite attacks on both fish stock and livestock. Apart from the Fishing cat, the *khori* is also home to otters, jungle cats, the small Indian civet, palm civet, golden jackal and monitor lizard.



Scarecrows are a tactic of keep Fishing cats away. Photo: Ananda Banerjee

As we visited other villages in Amta Block II, we heard more stories about the Fishing cat. Till a few years ago, reports of poaching and poisoning were frequent, with villagers and tribal hunters unaware of the animal's endangered status.

“Last year, poachers were caught with dead Fishing cats from Munsirhat, after which a directive from the Howrah *zilla parishad* notified village panchayats to form individual Fishing cat protection committees. Also, sustained efforts were made to sensitize people through road shows, posters and door-to-door distribution of handbills for the conservation of the Fishing cat,” says Adhya.

In Sarada village, part of the Kushberia gram panchayat, Joydeb Pradhan and Sudhin Adhikari have formed a Fishing cat protection committee under the Sarada Prasad Tirtha Janakalyan Samiti, a non-governmental organization (NGO). For six years, this NGO has been trying to ensure the Fishing cat is not harmed; it has recently started a compensation scheme for villagers who have lost livestock.



Villagers setting up camera traps. Photo: Partha Dey

Earlier this year, Pradhan was chosen by the Sanctuary Nature Foundation, Mumbai, as one of 12 grass-roots conservation leaders for their inaugural Mud on Boots project—a programme to empower and support grass-roots conservationists in India. Pradhan and his team received a grant of Rs3 lakh, to be used over two years (2017 and 2018) for on-ground conservation work.

Adhya and her team say persistent campaigning and conservation work have resulted in

the formation of four Fishing cat protection committees at the gram panchayat level and nearly 15 committees at the *mouza* (administrative block) level.

The Ghosh Bari in Kalbansh village (also in Amta Block II) has seen better days. A part of the old mansion overlooking a large pond lies in ruins. Ashim Ghosh, the owner, greets us in an adjacent building, a lovely old house with a courtyard and wells. It's in the vicinity of Ghosh Bari, where Fishing cats can often be spotted at night. The team has been tracking Fishing cats by placing camera traps at various locations in and around his estate. Ghosh narrates how Fishing cats stole around 50 grass carps from his neighbour's pond over two months, leading to considerable losses.

Despite such losses, however, Amta Block II's residents have a soft corner for the cat. "We suffer losses but where else will the poor animal go to look for food?" says pisciculturist Lakhi Kanto Bhattacharya (a.k.a. Daku Babu) of Narit village.



Bales of harvested 'khoris' in Narit village. Photo: Ananda Banerjee

It seems the campaign to save Fishing cats *has* managed to infuse a sense of pride in villagers. In March, they appealed to the West Bengal Biodiversity Board to consider declaring 15 *mouzas* under the Kushberia, Jhamtia, Tajpur and Gajipur gram panchayats, an area of around 30 sq. km, as a biodiversity heritage site under the Indian Biodiversity

Act, 2002.

But while there is now support for conservation in Amta Block II, the story is very different in other wetland areas.

In nearby Hooghly district, vast stretches of marshland, spanning hundreds of hectares, along the Durgapur expressway are being lost rapidly to industrial use. Popularly known as the Dankuni wetlands, they are home to many endangered birds and mammals, including the Fishing cat. Since 2013, a Kolkata-based environmental NGO, People United for Better Living in Calcutta (PUBLIC), has been fighting in the Calcutta high court and the National Green Tribunal to get this area notified under guidelines issued by the National Wetland Conservation Programme and the Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2010, of the Union environment ministry.

According to PUBLIC's legal representative, illegal dumping is still going on despite court orders.

Conservationists rue that ecologically unbalanced land policies and land uses, attacks on species due to economic losses and ritual hunts by indigenous tribes are pushing the Fishing cat and other marshland-dependent species to extinction.

Can they turn the tide?



Ananda Banerjee



Kelly Ripa's Son Got In Trouble At School, And Tt Involves Stephen Colbert

Hyperactivz



Tiger Woods' Daughter Was a Cute Kid, But What She Looks Like Now is Insane

Hyperactivz



27 Celebrities With Good For Nothing Children

MommyThing

FROM THE WEB

Ads by Revcontent

If You Own a Home You Are Entitled to \$4,240

Home Finance Daily

Why Doctors in the Know No Longer Prescribe Metformin

Vibrant Health Network

Ranking U.S. Presidents by IQ Score

PollHype

Kelly Ripa's Son Got In Trouble At School, And Tt Involves Stephen Colbert

Hyperactivz

Tiger Woods' Daughter Was a Cute Kid, But What She Looks Like Now is Insane

Hyperactivz

27 Celebrities With Good For Nothing Children

MommyThing

HOME | COMPANIES | OPINION | INDUSTRY | POLITICS | CONSUMER | LOUNGE |

MULTIMEDIA | MONEY | SITEMAP

Subscribe | Contact Us | Mint Code | Privacy policy | Terms of Use | Advertising | Mint Apps |

About Us | Syndication | Mint on Sunday | RSS | Hindustan Times | Desimartini

Copyright © 2017 HT Media Ltd. All Rights Reserved

