

WEEKEND FOCUS

Fishing Cat: 2nd Life

A unique project aims to conserve the fishing cat, Bengal's state animal, by involving local residents. **Krishnendu Mukherjee** reports from Ground Zero



Images of fishing cats caught on camera traps

FISHING CAT (PRIONAILURUS VIVERRINUS)

- Habitat** | Vicinity of wetlands, along rivers, streams, oxbow lakes, in swamps and mangroves
- Threat from** | Destruction of wetlands over the last decade
- Found in India in** | Documented in Ranthambhore Tiger Reserve, in Sur Sarovar Bird Sanctuary, outside protected areas in Bengal, in and around Krishna Wildlife Sanctuary, in Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary and adjoining reserve forests in Andhra Pradesh
- State animal of** | West Bengal

27

Fishing cat killings reported in the belt in 2010-11

7

Fishing cat deaths reported here since August 2016

18

No. of villages in Amta II block that are collectively likely to be declared a biodiversity heritage site

30

sq km Total area under consideration for biodiversity heritage site

10

sq km Reed bed habitat at the site

8

Number of camera traps being used in Howrah to study fishing cats



Pics: Sudipto Das

On a sultry summer morning, Subrata Maity of Kamargaria village in Howrah's Amta — around 45km from Kolkata, barely one-and-a-half hour's drive away — wakes up early and quietly approaches the backyard of his house. Deviating slightly from his daily routine of tracking birds like the barbet, Asian paradise flycatcher or the magpie robin, which often nest in the trees easily visible from his bedroom window, Maity rushes towards a tree on which is fixed a camera trap, a gadget that has become synonymous with wildlife conservation, and about which he was not even aware of a couple of months ago. As Maity scans through the recordings, he pauses for a while. A child-like emotion grips the 30-year-old private tutor as he spots an adult fishing cat — Bengal's state animal — in one of the recordings. "I have seen the animal in fields near our house, but never knew it had been frequenting our backyard," he erupts in joy. It's easy to see why he is so excited. Maity is one among the lucky few villagers of Howrah's Amta II block who, under a project to save the endangered fishing cats, are getting to study their feline neighbours whose photographs in the wild — leave aside sighting one outside protected zones — are extremely rare. "At first sight, it looks like a leopard, of the size of a street dog, with black patches on its body," says Anil Malik, another villager of Kamargaria. "They are not scared of humans and are so focused while fishing that even if you flash a torchlight on its face, it won't look at you," says Malik, who stayed awake the previous night to keep vigil at his pond, to save his fish from the fishing cats.

TORMENTORS TURN SAVIOURS Villagers like Malik know the behaviour of fishing cats inside out. And it's this knowledge that wildlife biologist Tiasa Adhya, who leads the project, is banking on to save Howrah's fishing cats — a Schedule I animal (the same status accorded to the tiger under the Wildlife Protection Act). A study on its population status was probably earlier done only in Andhra Pradesh's Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary, a protected area. "You can understand the challenge of protecting the species outside a protected area, and in a human-dominated landscape. First, they take away the villagers' fish — they prefer Katla the most — and in summer, when the ponds are cleaned and all fish taken out, the fishing cats will attack their livestock," Adhya points out. Narit's Lakshmikant Bhattacharya alias Daku Babu, is a case in point. The 60-year-old, who's been cultivating fish for 20 years now, has seven ponds. "I have taken them on lease for 6-7 years against an amount of more than Rs 6 lakh. In one of these ponds, I had 50 Katla fish this year. Between February and April, 'gobagha' (the fishing cat's local name) took away 48 of them, and I was left with only two. Now that I have cleaned the rest of the ponds, they have started attacking the goats in my neighbourhood," rues Bhattacharya. The tide, however, is turning. "I have heard stories about my forefathers killing fishing cats, but not any more. Where will they go? They can't live in the city. I have heard their population is declining across India, then why can't we save it? If the Bengal Tiger can become the Sunderbans' pride, why can't the fishing cat be ours?" he wonders. His spirit also seems to be yielding results at the grassroots. "In 2010-11, at least 27 fishing cat killings were reported from areas like Shyampur, Bagnan, Amta, Bally, Domjur and Dankuni — all in conflict with locals. From August 2016 till date, only seven fishing cat killings, including two road kills, were reported in Howrah," Adhya says. The villagers now also take pride in saying that they share their landscape with the state animal.



(Top) Subrata Maity and Ashim Maity fit camera traps near their home at Kamargoria village in Amta II; (above) wildlife biologist Tiasa Adhya goes over the findings with Subrata at his home; (left) local resident Ashim Ghosh installs a camera trap in a pond near his home at Kalbansh village

Last year, a proposal was also sent to the state biodiversity board to declare 18 villages under 15 mouzas, — including Kushberia, Kamargaria, Tajpur, Narit, Shauria and Kalbansh, covering almost 30sq km — as a biodiversity heritage site. **PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE** A 15-minute drive from Kamargaria will take one to Kalbansh, where the other side of the fishing cat story is unfolding — that of peaceful co-existence. Fifty-six-year-old buildings material supplier Ashim Ghosh stands on the first-floor balcony of his palatial bungalow (mostly in ruins now), overseeing a pond. But he's not keeping vigil on his pond; he's trying to track a fishing cat, for which he has also placed camera traps at strategic locations near his pond. "I'm exploring a tourism project with one of my relatives, focusing on a lesser-known species like the fishing cat. It's the pride of Howrah. Why not bring tourists from outside to have a look at it?" he says. But isn't he worried about his livestock and fish? "No," pat comes the reply. Unlike other parts of Amta II, there are quite a few natural ponds — around 22 — in Kalbansh. "These supply fish to fishing cats throughout the year. So, why will they attack our livestock? We have 100 goats in the area, but no fishing cat attack has ever been reported on them. Golden jackals, though, at times lift poultry from our farms, but not fishing cats," he says. As dusk sets in, he goes back to his room. "On a human-dominated landscape, they will hardly show up in daylight. I have seen pugmarks of a fishing cat near my pond this morning. Hope to get some good photographs of it in the camera traps tomorrow," he says.

HABITAT WOES Fishing cats prefer reed beds — khori, in local parlance — which are found aplenty around waterbodies in this belt. This also forms a key component of the local economy. It's cultivated and dried for use in betel-leaf cultivation and

also sent to places like Midnapore and the Sagar Islands and even outside the state. "But its cultivation is taking a hit because of the falling price of betel leaf. We are not getting enough labour. People here are, instead, shifting to peanut and jute cultivation," Maity rues. In neighbouring Hooghly, marshlands are rapidly being converted into brick fields for supply to Kolkata. In Howrah alone, there's more than a 40% decline in marsh and grassland in the last two decades. The camera-trap exercise has so far revealed that fishing cats prefer reed bed habitats that are surrounded by shallow waterbodies. "At Kalbansh, we have photographed three individuals within 750 metres. At one such area in Kamargaria, three juveniles, one male and one female were found," Adhya adds.

UNIQUE EFFORTS At Sarada village in Kushberia, Joydeb Pradhan, under the Sarada Prasad Tirtha Janakalyan Samity, an NGO, has started a goat compensation scheme for villagers who have lost livestock to fishing cats. "We have pooled in funds to raise goats. So far, we have helped 12 families this way. While eight families were given two goats each, four were given one goat each. But each family will have to give at least one calf to us. This way, we will form a seed goat bank to carry on with the scheme," he says. The administration, too, is extending a helping hand. "We are conducting awareness campaigns mostly in schools and also giving jobs to tribals under various government schemes so that they stay away from the traditional practice of killing these endangered animals," says Manas Basu, forest and land reforms karmadhakshya of Howrah zilla parishad. Echoing his views, Howrah divisional forest officer Niranjan Mitra says: "We are also conducting awareness meets in various places and helping conservationists carrying out arrests whenever there's a case of poaching." What's more important is that the larger implications of conservation — and, more importantly, the relationship of the fishing cat to the entire micro-ecology — are beginning to be understood, thanks to the initiative. "If fishing cats survive, the marshlands that act as a carbon sink will also flourish," Maity signs off.

URBAN WILDLIFE

GOLDEN JACKAL

Protection Status | Schedule III of Wildlife Protection Act 1972

It's often said that one of the best places in India to see a golden or common jackal is Kolkata's Tollygunge Club. That perhaps best describes how adaptable it is. They were once common, but faced habitat woes due to urbanization. The golden jackal is believed to have become 'locally endangered' in Kolkata.

Threats | Urbanization

MONITOR LIZARD

Protection Status | Schedule I of Wildlife Protection Act 1972 (same as tiger)

Monitor lizard is the common name of several large lizard species, comprising the genus Varanus. They are native to Africa, Asia and Oceania. Bungalows with sprawling gardens that once used to dot Kolkata used to be their refuge. But several of those have been demolished to make space for multi-storeyed buildings, reducing their space and ruining the city's biodiversity.

Threat | Urbanization

ASIAN/COMMON CIVET

Protection Status | Schedule II of Wildlife Protection Act 1972

The civet that's found in the city is the Asian palm civet (Paradoxurus hermaphroditus), also called toddy cat. Large bungalows with gardens in Kolkata used to be their ideal habitat. With rising urbanization, they are losing ground and sneaking more into human habitation.

Threat | Urbanization

JUNGLE CAT

Protection Status | Schedule II of Wildlife Protection Act

The jungle cat, also known as reed cat or swamp cat, is a medium-sized cat native to Asia, from southern China in the East through southeast and central Asia to the Nile valley in the west. It's widespread and common in India. They prefer wetlands environment with tall grasses and reeds to hide. They are very common on the outskirts of the city — Garia, Baruipur, Narendrapur and Rajarhat. They are also found in Howrah and Hooghly because of marshlands there.

Threat | Habitat loss

SNAKES

Among venomous snakes found in and around urban areas are the spectacled cobra, monole cobra, common krait and Russell's viper. Non-venomous ones like the Indian rat snake, checkered keelback, buff striped keelback, common smooth-scaled water snake, painted keelback, bar-necked keelback share space with humans in urban areas.

Threat | Habitat destruction due to development activities, pesticide use

HOUSE SPARROW

Protection status | Schedule IV of Wildlife Protection Act

This is not only the most commonly found bird species in urban areas, but also the most loved one. This small brown bird, not bigger than a tennis ball, is a social species. It's known to nest in buildings, finding holes in walls.

Threats | According to a report by WWF-India, in the last two decades, the sparrow population is on the decline in every city. The reasons: the rapidly changing cities are no longer a suitable habitat for the house sparrow, as modern designs do not leave any room for them to nest; and pollution caused by microwave towers and pesticides

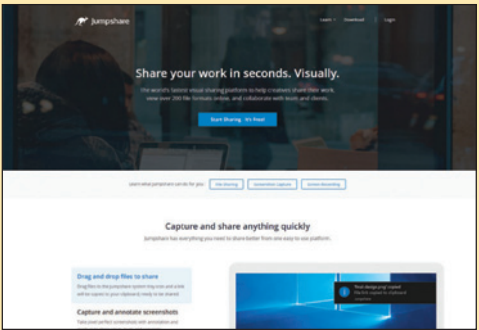
TECHTONIC

BOOKMARKS

JUMPSHARE

Jumpshare is a collaborative platform that lets you upload and share your work with colleagues in a hassle-free manner. Notably, this service lets you preview files — up to 200 file formats including JPG, BMP, RAW, MP3, MP4, MKV, PDF and ePub — from within the PC web browser itself. When you register for the free plan, you get 2GB of online space. You can also install its app — for Windows and Mac computers — to take screenshots with keyboard shortcuts and use the included screen recorder to create quick 30-second video screen grabs (with a voiceover) of your desktop in a jiffy. Sharing files, folders and web links is a simple drag-and-drop affair. Jumpshare automatically copies the web link to the clipboard and lets you share the files via the app itself.

Website | jumpshare.com



GREATDJ

GreatDJ lets you create and share music playlists online without registering for the service. All you need to do is search for music by songs, artists and albums and GreatDJ will list relevant tracks from YouTube and SoundCloud. The search bar also lets you look for multiple songs and artists in a single search. Click on "Add to Queue" and tracks will be placed into your list in a jiffy. After you finish adding songs to the queue, click the Save button and copy the unique web link to your playlist. A Party Mode lets others connect to, be in sync and control the same playlist from multiple devices. You can also share the URL with friends, embed it to your blog and revisit it from any other web-enabled computer to listen to your favourite music.

Website | great.dj



DOWNLOADS

NINJA ARASHI

In this side scroller, you have to help Ninja Arashi save his son from the clutches of the evil Orochi. To do this, you have to guide him across a treacherous landscape that is patrolled by dark warriors and littered with deadly traps. Controls comprise forward/back buttons on the left side of the screen and a set of buttons that make Arashi jump over obstacles, throw shuriken, dash charge with a samurai sword and also temporarily disguise himself as an inanimate object to avoid detection. You have to collect coins, diamonds, scrolls and powerups along the way. These could be in the open or hidden in chambers that need to be broken into with shuriken. The scrolls are required to unlock three new maps that span 45 levels. The coins go towards upgrading Arashi's fighting skills and meditation powers for advanced healing. Ninja Arashi's silhouetted foreground and mood lighting makes it difficult to spot traps, but this unpredictably lends itself well for hours of engaging gameplay.

Price | Android, iOS | **Free**

