

CAT

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news





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Original contributions and short notes about wild cats are welcome

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Leopard cat at high altitude in Makalu-Barun National Park, Nepal

A camera trapping survey in Makalu-Barun National Park in eastern Nepal has yielded the picture of a leopard cat *Prionailurus bengalensis* at 3254 m above sea level – which is the highest documented record for the species. The image was taken on 19 November 2009 10:05 PM at 27°48.344'N/87°16.012'E. The habitat is dominated by rhododendron-oak-maple associations.

For the first time, a leopard cat was photo trapped at an altitude of 3254 meters in Makalu-Barun National Park (Fig 1, 2), Nepal, which is the highest documented record for the species. The cat was photographed in Saldim Valley in the upper temperate forest zone of the park close to a trail that is used by wildlife as well as herders and poachers. In a sampling effort

of 1030 trap nights we obtained 15 images of leopard cats in a study area of 52 km². Analysis of distinct markings on the bodies of these cats suggests that at least 6 individuals reside in the area of our study. Leopard cats were the most commonly trapped cat species.

Although the leopard cat is one of the most common cat species in Nepal with

its range extending from the lowlands of Terai to the high Himalayas, it has not yet been studied in the country. It is widely distributed in Asia, ranging up to 3,000 m in parts of its range, which extends into the Himalayas along river valleys (Habibi 1977, Feng et al. 1986, Sanderson et al. 2008). The subspecies *P. b. bengalensis* occurring in Nepal is listed in CITES Appendix II (Wilson and Reeder 2005).

Being small in size, leopard cats usually have a small home range. However, in a more comprehensive study on 20 radio collared cats in Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary, Thailand, the mean home range size of 12.7 km² was larger than anywhere else (Grassman et al. 2005). We recorded one individual walking past two consecutive camera traps covering a total distance of 1.5 km. The same leopard cat – identified from the markings on the body – was pictured in a camera trap at a different location 6 km away.

The area is relatively undisturbed and offers a very good prey base for the species. We frequently sighted and recorded rodents like red giant flying squirrel *Petaurista petaurista*, Himalayan striped squirrel, rats, pygmy white toothed shrew and pheasants such as Satyr tragopan *Tragopan satyra*, Himalayan monal *Lophophorus impejanus*, Kalij pheasant *Lophura leucomelanos* and Hill partridge.

The conservation status of the species seems to be good with a diversity of prey species available and good habitat quality. The most serious threat to the leopard cat population in the area is poaching and their being killed by local villagers, who perceive them as a species that harms their crops and livestock. We recorded one such incident in a village called Syaksila, where a leopard cat was killed by a villager in his cardamom plantation thinking it to be a Kaala (Civet). We convinced the person that the leopard cat predated on rodents and birds that destroy their crops. We came across another such occasion where a black giant squirrel *Ratufa bicolor* was killed and skinned by a small boy in a village called Num. These incidents represent the common problem of very low level of conservation awareness in the buffer zone of Makalu-Barun National Park.

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Fig. 1. Leopard cat camera trapped at 3240 meters at Saldim valley, Makalu-Barun NP (Photo: Y. Ghimirey).

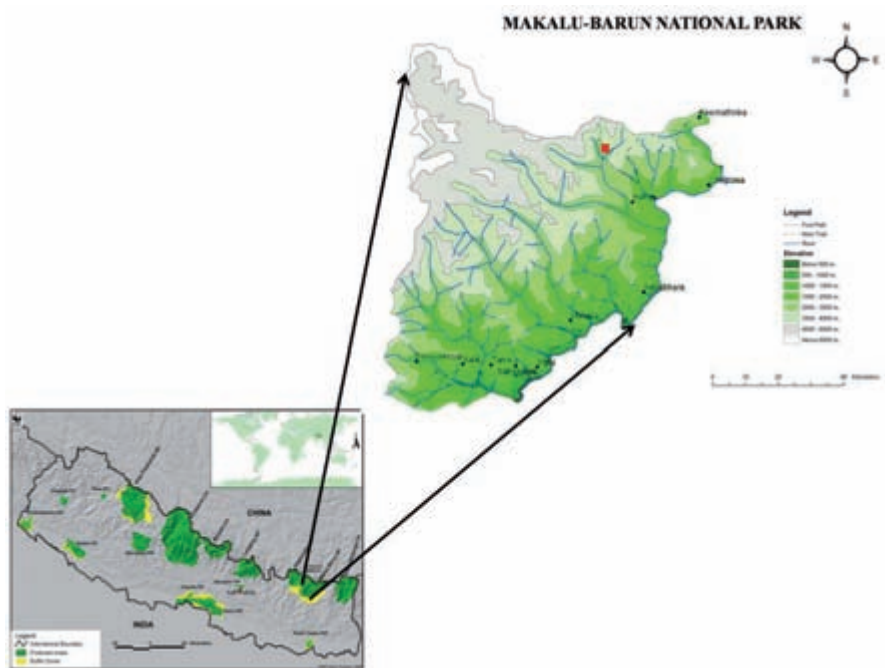


Fig. 2. Location (red dot) where the cat was photographed in Makalu-Barun National Park and its location in Nepal.

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