

Mistaken identity becomes a major threat for India's small wild cats

by Shailesh Shrivastava on 15 November 2023

- *Small wild cats in India, often become victims of retaliatory killing or dislocation due to misidentification as more dangerous cats.*
- *Pastoral communities resort to retaliatory killing whereas farmers in the plains mistake cats like rusty-spotted cat, jungle cat, fishing cat and leopard cat cubs for big cat offsprings and try to get rid of them.*
- *In West Bengal, direct persecution is one of the major threats the population of fishing cat is facing.*
- *Experts stress the necessity of awareness campaigns to mitigate the threat of misidentification. Such initiatives have shown promise in reducing retaliatory killings and fostering coexistence.*

In a tiny village of Tardaha Kapasati, in West Bengal's South 24 Parganas district, volunteers were handing out papers to the residents. The papers contained images of West Bengal's state animal, the fishing cat, and other fauna found in that area.

Volunteers working with Nature Environment and Wildlife Society (NEWS), were doing this exercise to spread awareness about how to identify the fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*) and not mistake it with its associated fauna. This exercise was part of a status survey

(<https://naturewildlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/11pr.pdf>) of fishing cats in the state.

"A lot of people don't know much about the fishing cat since it is nocturnal and comes out only in the darkness. The residents of the village often mistake them for Indian civet and end up killing them. With this programme we created awareness among people on how to identify a fishing cat and save its population," Sumit Moulik, one of the volunteers, told Mongabay-India.

Small wild cats in India, often become victims of retaliatory killing or attacks due to misidentification as more dangerous cats. Pastoral communities resort to retaliatory killing of cats like Eurasian lynx and jungle cats to save their livestock, whereas farmers in the plains mistake cats like rusty-spotted cat, jungle cat, fishing cat and leopard cat cubs for big cat offsprings and try to get rid of them. Some of the wild cats are also unintentionally dislocated by humans who have empathy and a desire to protect the cat but are misinformed in their actions.

In Ladakh, Eurasian lynx is often mistaken as wolf because of its height and tufted ears. When Sandeep Sharma and their team first encountered (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236621234_Sighting_of_Lynx_Lynx_lynx_isabellina) a lynx in Ladakh's Hemis National Park, their field assistant thought it was a red fox or a wolf. Similar incident took place when researcher Amit Kotia encountered a Eurasian lynx in Ladakh's Chushul village at a distance of around 80 metres. Kotia's "three field assistants were unable to identify the cat and just called it 'shanku, shanku' (the local name for the Tibetan wolf)."

"Most of the local people confuse the lynx with shanku (wolves) and kill the lynx (to protect the Even during the present investigation, local people identified the lynx as shanku," Kotia wrote (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304775289_Sighting_of_a_Eurasian_lynx_near_C) in an article.

Mistaking them for big or domestic cat

In Gujarat, a team of Wildlife SOS and the Gujarat Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (GSPCA) was recently apprised of a rescue call regarding a leopard cub, however, it eventually turned out to be the offspring of a jungle cat.



Wildlife SOS and GSPCA are involved in wildlife rescue and operate a rapid response unit in Maharashtra and Gujarat, where the team often gets rescue calls involving mistaken identities.

According to Raj Bhavsar, project coordinator at Wildlife SOS and president of GSPCA, the highest concentration of instances mostly originate from southern Gujarat, especially near the Maharashtra-Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh-Gujarat borders.

Read more: Ladakh's small cats face resource competition, intimidation by free-ranging dogs

(<https://india.mongabay.com/2023/11/ladakh-small-cats-face-resource-competition-intimidation-by-free-ranging-dogs/>)

Neha Panchamiya, founder and president of RESQ Charitable Trust, another organisation involved in wildlife rescue, highlights the need to differentiate between the domestic cat and wild ones as it helps reunite cubs with their mother in case of abandonment.

RESQ's operations are focused on areas outside protected forest areas in Maharashtra. They are largely human-dominated agricultural landscapes. According to Panchamiya, they receive a number of rescue calls during the harvesting season of sugarcane. The calls mostly involve rusty-spotted cats, jungle cats, leopards and jackal pups. She says 90% of these calls originate from three districts – Satara, Pune and Nashik.

“In the case of rusty-spotted cats, people mistake them for domestic cats. They take them home and call us one week later, saying that they found it in their field and now realise that it is not a typical cat, it looks like some wild cat. Then, those reunions are next to impossible because very often, by then the mother has moved on and has given up searching for her young ones,” Panchamiya says.

“It is our general observation that rusty spotted kittens, if provided an opportunity to set-up a proper reunion onsite quickly within 24-48 hours, the mother comes back to them. If not done quickly or set-up is not specific to rustys, it takes quite some time to reunite them or can fail. It takes anywhere from 7 to 10 months to rehabilitate them and reintroduce them back into their habitat,” she says.

In Gujarat and Maharashtra, the instances of retaliatory killing are not found much. However, fr (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/263855844_Survey_of_the_Fishing_Cat_Prionailur) the population of West Bengal's state animal is facing.

“Fishing cats are known as baghrol (fish-eating tiger) in Bengali and when they are small, they look like tiger cubs because of their stripes on the neck. People often mistake them for tiger

cubs and resort to retaliatory killing for their own safety. Since these cats are nocturnal, they are often seen near ponds or mangroves at night, so the darkness also plays a role in their mistaken identity," says Ajanta Dey, Programme Director, Nature Environment and Wildlife Society (NEWS).



A waterbody in West Bengal's Shahapura. Fishing cats are often seen near ponds or mangroves. Photo by Sumit Moulik/NEWS.

Unlike Maharashtra, the cases of lesser cat cubs, especially of the fishing cat being mistaken for the kittens of domestic cats are hardly found in West Bengal. Dey feels that people's familiarity with domestic cats in the state and wild traits of fishing cat cubs can be the reasons behind it.

"In West Bengal, almost every household has a cat (domestic) and that's why people here are very familiar with domestic cats; also, the fishing cat cubs are pretty wild even if they are small, these can be the reason why instances of people mistaking fishing cats with domestic cats are very low," Dey told Mongabay-India.

Importance of increasing awareness

Experts say that to counter lack of knowledge and information on small cats and to save them from becoming victims of mistaken identity, awareness can play a crucial role. Working with communities, talking to farmers, or even organising awareness campaigns can help in this regard.

"We work very closely with communities and that's when awareness plays a crucial role. We identify people who know about fishing cats and mobilise them to spread awareness. We have seen that when people know about fishing cats, then they know that it is not harmful for them and they leave it saying that it's our state animal. But when people don't know about them, many times they resort to retaliatory killing," Dey told Mongabay-India.



Sumit Moulik addressing the residents of Tardaha Kapasati during an awareness camp. Photo from Nature Environment and Wildlife Society (NEWS).

For their awareness campaign, Dey's organisation uses an interesting identification method. The community members are shown some photos of different species found in their area and they are asked to identify them if they have seen them. Most of the people confirm that they have seen these species but are unable to identify them. However, in subsequent camps, people are able to identify and correctly recall their latest sightings. Panchamiya highlights 'the fear of the unknown' felt by locals and says, "Anything that is unknown, brings fear for people. The more you tell them about it, they calm down. When we were doing the reunion, there have been times when the locals question it saying, 'why are you doing all this here?' It just takes some convincing, we explain to them that it's a rusty-spotted cat, it's even smaller than a house cat. And then, they agree." According to Wildlife SOS, there were instances in the past where natives or residents of villages in Maharashtra had mistaken the offspring of a small wild cat to be a leopard cub or a domestic cat. "However, these were during the early stages of our operation when awareness and education about these species were still sparse. With time, people are now more cautious and many can even distinguish between the cats," Wildlife SOS told Mongabay-India in reply to an email.

Read more: Clouded leopards develop ways to survive competition
(<https://india.mongabay.com/2023/10/clouded-leopards-develop-ways-to-survive-competition/>)

Banner image: A fishing cat in its habitat in West Bengal. Photo by Sumit Moulik/NEWS.



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