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news





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Original contributions and short notes about wild cats are welcome

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Recent records of rusty-spotted cat in dry deciduous forest of Tadoba, Maharashtra, India

Recent observations of rusty-spotted cat *Prionailurus rubiginosus* in a dry deciduous forest in Central India are reported. The animal was photographed twice in the repetitive trapping sessions in 2014 and 2015 at different locations in Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra. The ecological information on RSC is scanty for this landscape, therefore such records frame a big picture about its distribution and habitat preference.

India has 11 species of small cats besides the magnificent big cats like tiger *Panthera tigris*, leopard *P. pardus* and snow leopard *P. uncia*. Rusty-spotted cat is a forest dwelling species with a distribution restricted to India and Sri Lanka (Khan & Mukherjee 2008).

Its current status has not been assessed extensively except for few recent records dispersed throughout India and Sri Lanka. These records suggest that the species is fairly widespread throughout India (Wright 1984, Patel & Jackson 2005, Manakadan &

Sivakumar 2006, Anwar et al. 2010). Rusty-spotted cat is enlisted in Schedule I of Wildlife Protection Act in India and categorized as Vulnerable in the Red List of IUCN as the total effective population size in the world is below 10,000 mature individuals (Khan & Mukherjee 2008). Substantial efforts to understand the population status of the species are lacking, making it essential to document every possible record.

Here we report three different observations of rusty-spotted cats from Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra (Fig. 1). A team of researchers observed a single individual walking along the forest road on 22 February 2015 at 19:16 h. Photograph captured on the site was later matched with the description from field guide for Indian mammals (Menon 2014). Two longitudinal, white stripes on the forehead, white rings around the eyes and white lips, chin are clearly visible in the photograph (Fig. 2). The area is dominated by woody lianas with few old trees in the vicinity which might be providing refuge site in the hollows of the trunk.

Rusty-spotted cats were also captured at two different locations in camera traps on 4 March 2014 (79° 28' 26.8" N/ 20° 13' 5" E) and 24 February 2015 (79° 23' 06.3" N/ 20° 21' 07.2" E) respectively (Fig. 3, Fig. 4). The brown spots arranged in neat lines on its back and flank are clearly visible in the photograph and identify the individual to be a rusty-spotted cat (Fig. 3, Fig. 4). Faintly ringed tail with rusty bands can also be seen in the picture (Prater 1998, Menon 2014). The habitat for the camera trap locations can be described as forest dominated by bamboo *Dendrocalamus strictus* and *ain Terminalia tomentosa* with moderately dense shrub cover which has also caused formation of number of forest trails (Fig. 5).

The camera trapping exercise had a design of one camera pair per 2.01 km² and it majorly intended to capture large mammals in

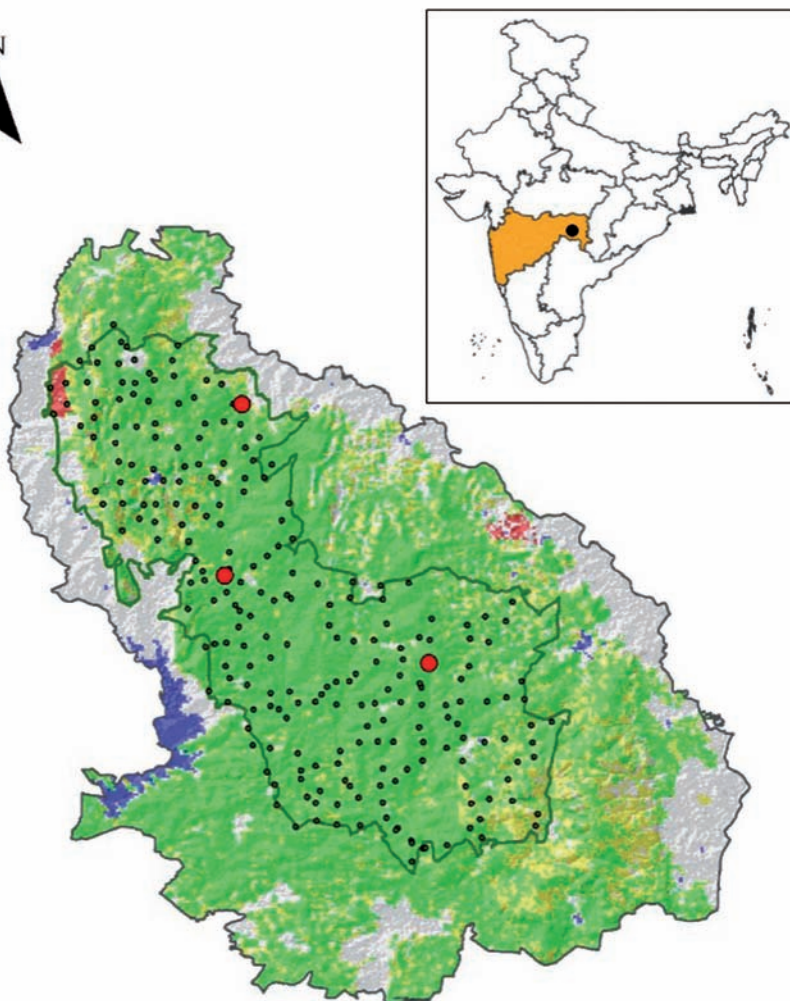


Fig. 1. Rusty spotted cat capture location in Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve TATR. Black dot in the map of India is the location of TATR. Black dots in TATR are camera trap stations, red dots are the camera trap stations where the rusty-spotted cats were pictured.



Fig. 2. Direct sighting of rusty-spotted cat along a forest trail (Photo N. Chatterjee).

the landscape and hence these pictures from Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve are opportunistic captures. The trapping exercise with a total of more than 200 locations yielded just two captures of this elusive cat during 2,156 trap nights which might be supporting the past studies and records indicating arboreal nature of this species (Patel 2006, Vasava et al. 2012)

A wide array of faunal species including a variety of small mammals have been reported from this forest. Rusty-spotted cat has been previously recorded from many protected areas in central India (Gogate 1998, Vasava et al. 2012). The nocturnal nature and presence of a variety of refuge sites might be facilitating the presence of species in the landscape. (Khan & Mukherjee 2008, Athreya 2010).

These observations confirm the continual presence of the species in this landscape in line with few older records in TATR and Nagzira wildlife sanctuary (Dubey 1999).

Following these recent records of rusty-spotted cat from Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve, we recommend further assessment of this area to understand the extent of presence and ensure survival of this species in the landscape which can be exercised in consortia with studies on large mammals.

Acknowledgement

The camera trapping exercise is part of a long term monitoring project in Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve. We are thankful to the National Tiger Conservation Authority and Maharashtra Forest Department for funding and the necessary permission for this project. We thank the Director and Dean of the Wildlife Institute of India for facilitating the project work. Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve staff and our assistants Ghanshyam, Santosh and Roshan are also thanked for all the help in field.

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Fig. 3. Rusty-spotted cat pictured on 4 March 2014 in camera trapping survey.



Fig. 4. Rusty-spotted cat pictured on 24 February 2015 in camera trapping survey.

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Fig. 5. Typical habitat in Tadoba-Andhari Tiger Reserve (Photo N. Chatterjee).