



SMALL WILD CATS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH



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Spellings of the local names of the species are subject to change and are indicative of how they were pronounced during the workshop interviews with local communities in Arunachal Pradesh

Maps prepared by Tech for Conservation, WWF-India

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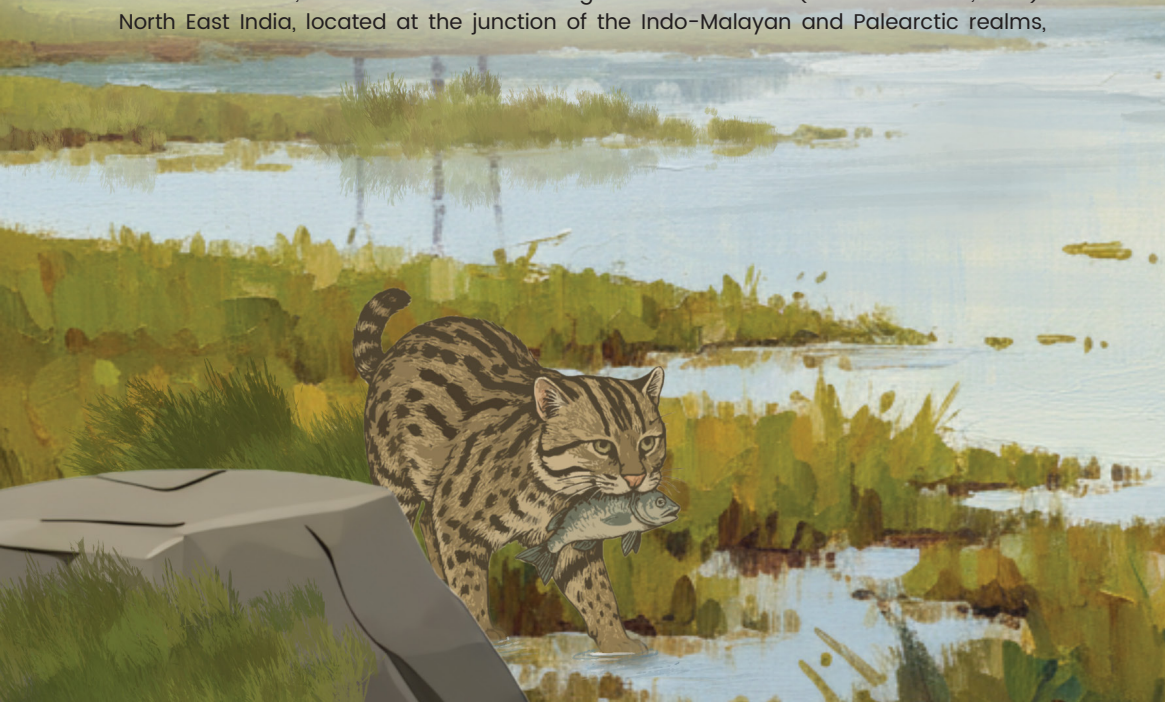
SMALL WILD CATS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH



Small wild cats of Arunachal Pradesh

Small wild cats constitute an ecologically important but under-researched group of carnivores in India. They inhabit a variety of ecosystems including arid deserts, high elevation montane habitats and cold deserts, temperate grasslands, wetlands, mangroves and tropical rainforests (Hunter, 2015). In their functional role as mesopredators in ecosystems, they prey on small to medium-sized mammals, birds, reptiles and insects, thereby regulating the populations of their prey species, influencing community dynamics and indirectly affecting forest regeneration (for example, by hunting seed predators) and nutrient recycling. Small cats also control rodents and other small mammals that are considered pests in agro-ecosystems, reducing crop damage and disease outbreaks (Mukherjee et al., 2004; Sunkuist & Sunkuist, 2002; Salom Pérez, 2019; Bandyopadhyay et al., 2024). Thus, small cats are important indicators of ecosystem health and habitat integrity.

India supports 11 species of small cats, including the jungle cat (*Felis chaus*), rusty-spotted cat (*Prionailurus rubiginosus*), leopard cat (*Prionailurus bengalensis*), fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*), Asiatic golden cat (*Catopuma temminckii*), marbled cat (*Pardofelis marmorata*), clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*), caracal (*Caracal caracal*), Pallas's cat (*Otocolobus manul*), Eurasian lynx (*Lynx lynx*), and desert cat (*Felis lybica*). These species range in diverse habitats, from wetlands and grasslands to dense forests, cold deserts and even agricultural mosaics (Kitchener et al., 2017). North East India, located at the junction of the Indo-Malayan and Palearctic realms,



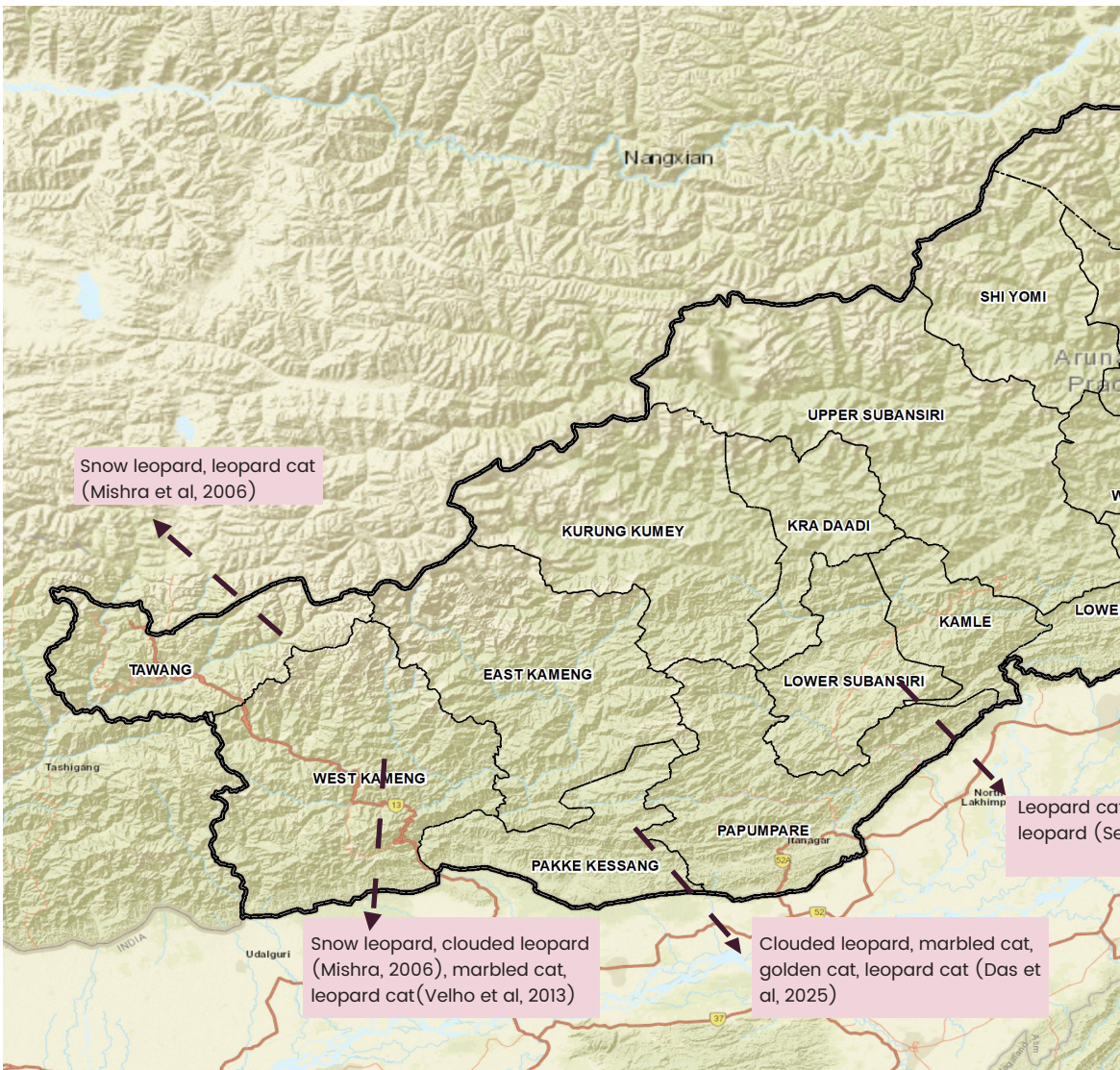
is a hotspot for small wild cat species. The region harbours seven species, including rare, elusive and understudied species such as the marbled cat and Asiatic golden cat (Bashir et al., 2011; Selvan et al., 2013). Recent records from Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, and Nagaland reaffirm the significance of North East India for small cat conservation (Bora et al., 2020).

There are numerous threats to small wild cats. There are direct mortality concerns associated with local hunting, frequently from snaring (Aiyadurai, 2011). In Arunachal Pradesh, buffer zones, multi-use forests, road expansion, shifting cultivation, and timber extraction cause habitat degradation and fragmentation, which reduce forest cover. Camera-trap surveys from Pakke and Eaglenest showed extensive overlap between areas used by small cats and humans, making them more vulnerable (Datta et al., 2008; Borah et al., 2014). Therefore, conservation priorities need to go beyond the core Protected Areas. Ensuring ecological connectivity between the Pakke and Eaglenest landscapes and surrounding small cat habitats and strengthening community-based protection, particularly through anti-snaring initiatives—in Khellong and Sessa are essential. Periodic monitoring using standardised camera-trapping, combined with awareness programmes that highlight the ecological value of small wild cats, will help secure these often-overlooked species in Arunachal Pradesh's forests.

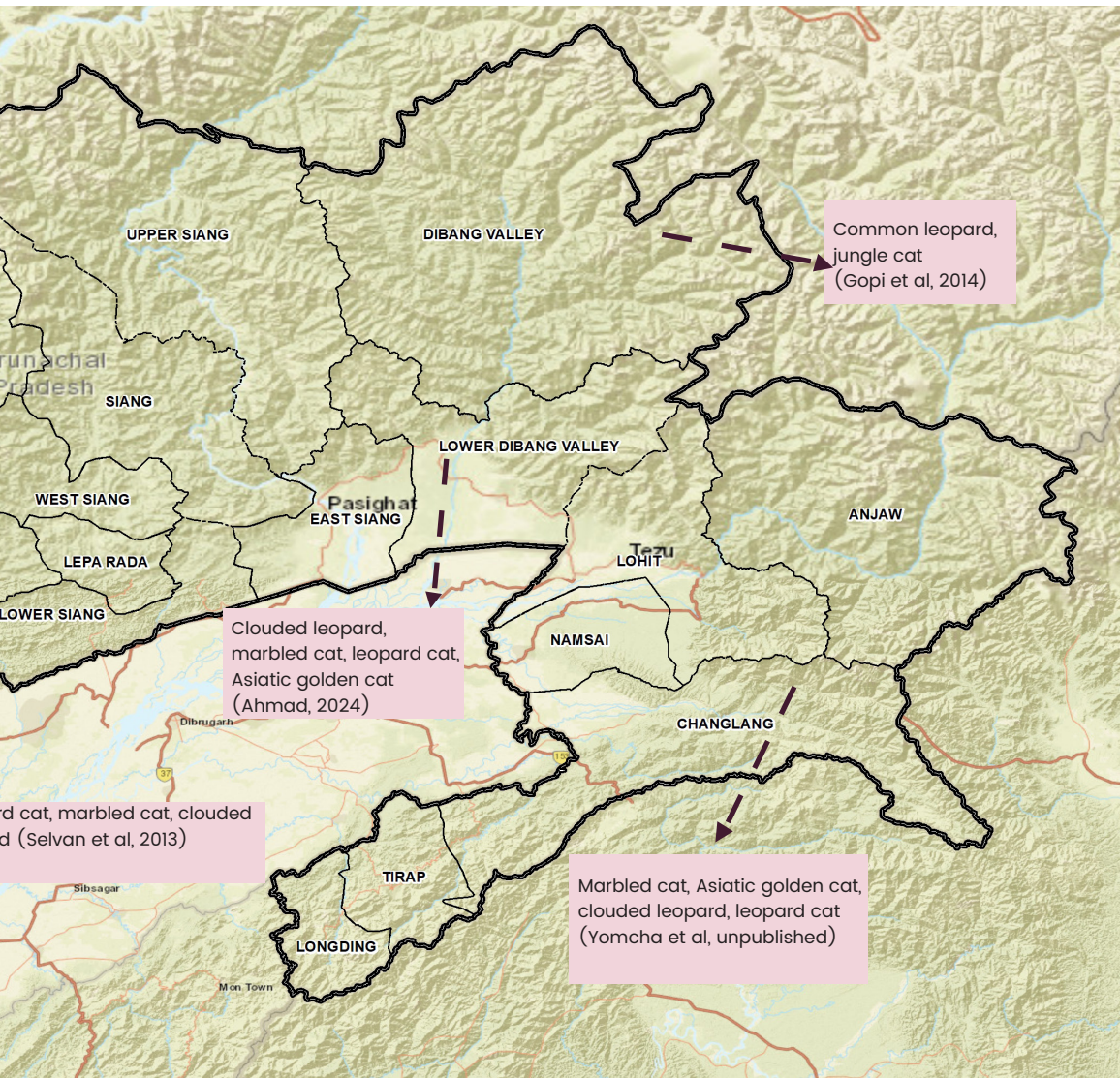


Presence of small wild cats in Arunachal Pradesh

According to peer-reviewed papers from the state, most common small wild cats are the clouded leopard, marbled cat, and leopard cat. Information on the Asiatic golden cat and jungle cat is limited. Although the fishing cat has not been reported in published studies from Arunachal Pradesh, its known distribution extends into the foothills of the state. There are anecdotal reports of the species' presence, suggesting the need for more surveys in potential habitats. Protected Areas in the western part of Arunachal Pradesh, notably Pakke Tiger Reserve, Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary, and the adjoining Khellong and Sessa Forest Divisions, form important strongholds for small wild cat species.



Leopard cats are frequently recorded in Pakke's lowland forests and along riverine tracts, indicating tolerance to habitat mosaics and secondary growth (Datta et al., 2008). In contrast, marbled cats are mostly associated with Eaglenest's subtropical and montane forests, where dense canopy and low disturbance provide suitable conditions (Borah et al., 2014). The records from Khellong and Sessa highlight the potential connectivity of these adjoining habitats for felid movement. A landmark wildlife survey conducted by WWF-India in Arunachal Pradesh in 2024 has revealed the first-ever photographic evidence of the elusive Pallas's cat in the state, from Tawang, West Kameng district. Additionally, photocapture records of clouded leopard, marbled cat and leopard cat have also been found (<https://www.wwfindia.org/?27922/first-photographic-record-of-pallas-cat>). Published studies provide only a partial snapshot of the status of small cats in the state, but many people who reside in the state are very familiar with its myriad wildlife.

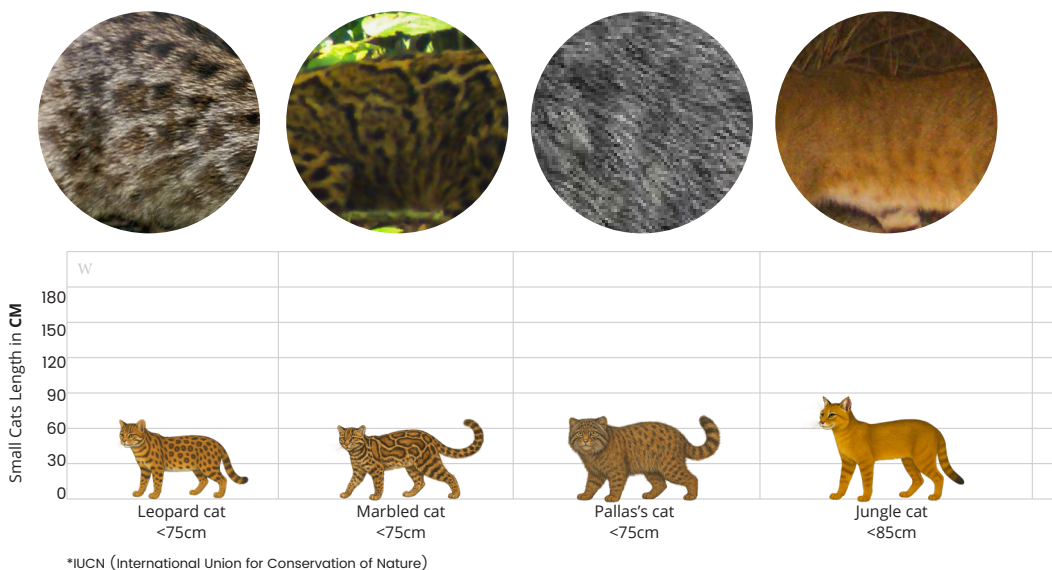


Small wild cats of Arunachal Pradesh

Identification

Small wild cats lack the ability to roar due to their ossified hyoid bone and can purr for a long time, making them difficult to distinguish via vocalisation. Identification of small wild cats in the field poses challenges due to their cryptic morphology, overlapping ranges, and their often elusive behaviour, typically in areas with dense cover. Unlike the big cats like tigers and leopards, which can be easily identified through distinct big pugmarks, small wild cats are quite difficult to recognise by their smaller sized, and often similar looking pugmarks. However, these cats do have distinguishable coat patterns, differ in size, and inhabit different habitats. The following are a few key features which can aid in distinguishing them:

Coat patterns



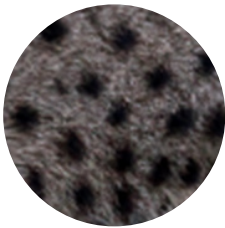
Pugmark



Clouded leopard pugmark



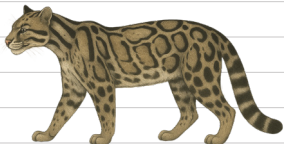
Fishing cat pugmark



Fishing cat
<100cm

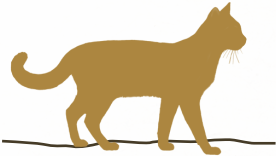


Asiatic golden cat
<105cm

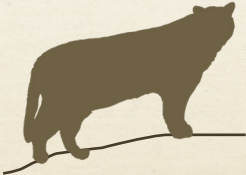
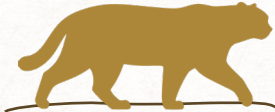


Clouded leopard
<105cm

Comparative morphometry of small wild cats in Arunachal Pradesh

Species	Body length (cm)	Shoulder height (cm)	Weight (kg)
 Leopard cat	38–66	~40	2–7
 Jungle cat	55–94	35–40	4–16
 Asiatic golden cat	66–105	56–66	9–16
 Marbled cat	45–62	~35	2–5

Key adaptations	Key identifying features	Key habitats
Agile, arboreal, dense undergrowth use	• Distinct rosette spots • Two prominent black stripes running from the eyes to the ears • Relatively long tail with a blunt tip (Sunquist & Sunquist, 2002)	Broad distribution in forests, edges, and secondary growth
Robust, grassland–wetland predator	• Sandy to greyish coat • Longer limbs • Relatively short tail with dark rings • Black ear tufts (Mukherjee, 1998)	Foothills, riverine belts, tall grasslands
Medium prey specialist, forested areas	• High pelage variation • Ranging from golden to grey and melanistic forms • Solid build, short rounded ear. Faint stripes on the head and neck (Lyngdoh et al., 2020)	Montane evergreen & temperate forests
Arboreal, elongated tail for balance	• Elongated tail nearly equal to its body length • Irregular marbled blotches that mimic canopy-filtered light providing effective camouflage (Bashir et al., 2011)	Montane forests, canopy-dense habitats

Species	Body length (cm)	Shoulder height (cm)	Weight (kg)
 Fishing cat	57–78	38–40	6–16
 Pallas's cat	46–65	~30	2–5
 Clouded leopard	68–108	50–55	16–23

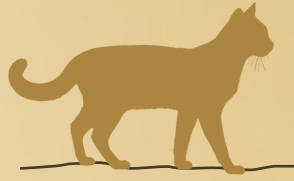
Key adaptations	Key identifying Features	Key habitats
Semi-aquatic, webbed feet	• Stocky build • Short legs • Olive-grey coat marked with elongated spots and stripes • Partially webbed feet adapted for an aquatic lifestyle • Relatively short tail with black rings • Distinctly rounded head • Two dark lines running between the eyes and ears (Sunquist & Sunquist, 2002, Mukherjee et al., 2016).	Wetlands, marshes, riverine zones (localised)
Cold-adapted, squat body, dense fur	• Compact body with long dense fur • Broad head with low-set rounded ears • Bushy tail with black rings • Flattened face • Stocky legs give it a “crouched” appearance aiding camouflage in open rocky terrain (Ross et al., 2016).	Trans-Himalayan high-altitude steppe and grasslands (fringe records)
Powerful build, large canines, arboreal adaptations	Comparatively much larger in size than the other small cats, cloud-like rosettes with dark outlines and lighter centres	Montane & lowland forests, often canopy-dwelling



The seven small wild cats of Arunachal Pradesh

Leopard cat

LC



Prionailurus bengalensis

Chingkor (Sherdukpen)

Mufusa (Aka), Tasso (Nyishi)

***WLPA – Schedule I, IUCN – Least Concern, CITES – Appendix I**

Habitat type

- Moist, thick canopied forests
- Monoculture plantation habitats
- Tropical evergreen forests, secondary forests, scrubland

Leopard cats inhabit scrublands, lowland and montane deciduous, and tropical evergreen forests, favouring moist, dense canopies with minimal disturbance. They have also adapted to agricultural areas, human settlements, and monoculture plantations like coffee and tea (Srivathsa et al., 2015).

Elevation

up to 3,000m

Food habits:

They opportunistically hunt small mammals (such as rodents and squirrels), birds, amphibians, reptiles, and insects. They commonly hunt in paddy fields and village edges. They are also good swimmers, sometimes take aquatic prey (Mukherjee et al., 2004; Shehzad et al., 2012; Xiong et al., 2017).

Identification:

- Coat ranges from brownish buff to ochre
- Slender body, relatively long legs
- Spotted coat with black rosettes,
- White underside with “M”-shaped forehead

Behaviour:

Leopard cats are solitary and territorial, communicating through meows, hisses, growls, and scent marking. Skilled swimmers and climbers, their spotted coat aids camouflage. Ecologically adaptable, they are widespread, with males ranging over 4.1 km² and females 2.5 km² (Grassman, 2000). Mostly nocturnal and crepuscular.

Reproduction:

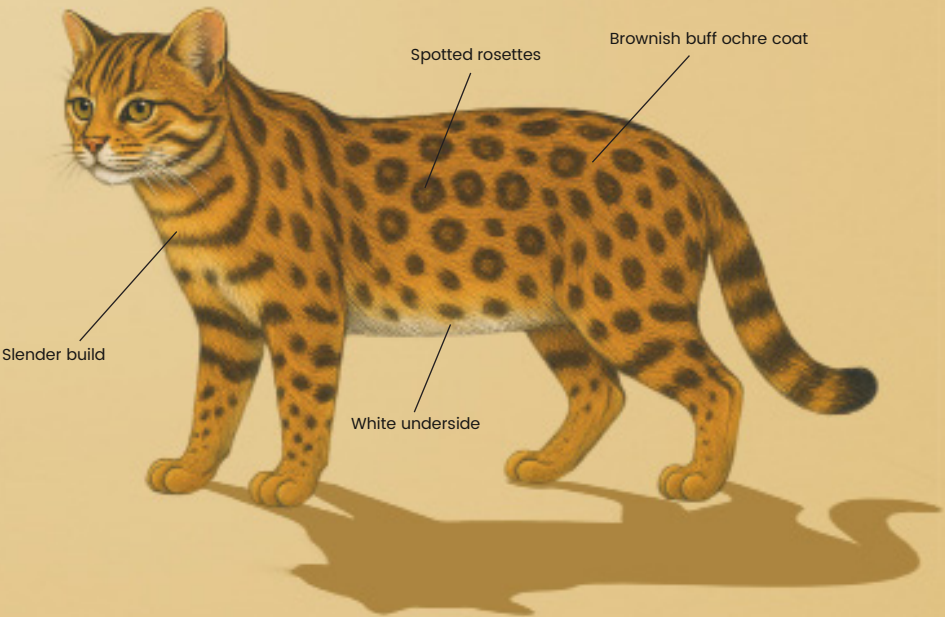
Breeds year-round with a 60–70-day gestation; litters of 2–3 kittens, occasionally up to 5. Dens in tree hollows, burrows, grass, or rock crevices, typically breeding in spring.

Threats:

Illegal hunting, pet and pelt trade threaten leopard cats (Selvan et al., 2013; Ghimirey et al., 2023). Road kills, deforestation, and climate change further shrink their range (Silva et al., 2020; Habib et al., 2025). Their current status remains poorly known due to limited research.



Distribution of leopard cat in Arunachal Pradesh according to IUCN 2022. *Prionailurus bengalensis*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2025-1



Marbled cat

NT

Pardofelis marmorata

Daning (Monpa)



WLPA – Schedule I, IUCN – Near Threatened, CITES – Appendix I

Habitat type

- Moist and mixed deciduous evergreen tropical forests
- Secondary forests and rocky scrubs

Mainly located in the eastern foothills of the Himalayas in India, particularly in moist deciduous and semi-evergreen forests (Jhala et al., 2021; Habib et al., 2025).

Elevation

up to 2, 750m

Food habits:

Although little is known about the diet of marbled cats, they are known to prefer arboreal or semi-arboreal prey, such as rodents, squirrels, birds, and lizards, under closed-canopy forests.

Identification:

- Fur with dark-edged blotches and banded like marble (marbled fur appearance)
- Ears are short with white spot at the back
- Shorter and rounder head
- Very long thickly furred and bushy tail, longer than its body

Reproduction:

Marbled Cats, though poorly studied, are presumed to produce 1–2 kittens after ~70 days of gestation, using tree cavities as natal dens (Ross et al., 2015).

Behaviour:

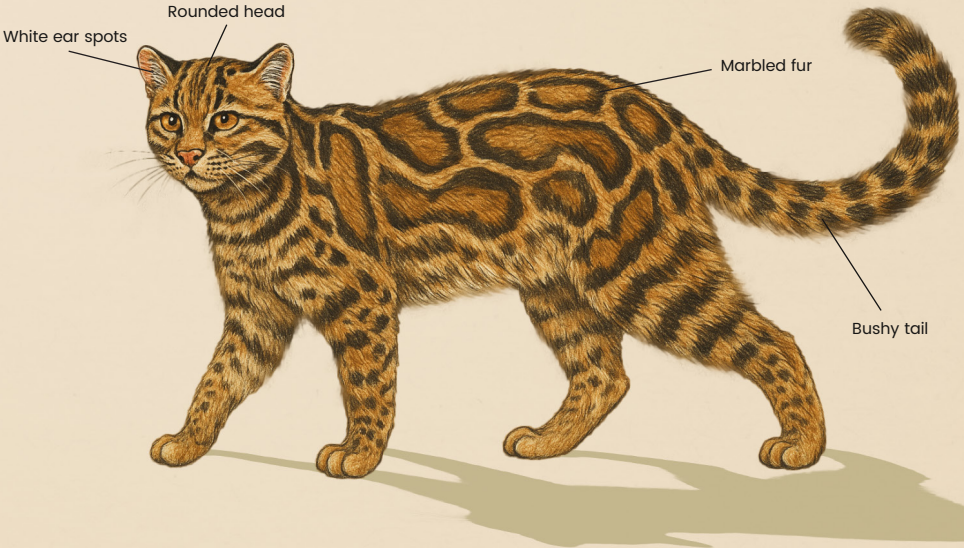
Marbled cats typically are solitary. However, camera trap photos have recorded a pair together (Grassman & Tewes 2002). As per current research, marbled cats may be active throughout the day, contrary to the conventional belief that they are more active at night and in the evening (Mukherjee et al., 2019; Jhala et al., 2021). They are quite arboreal, use their long tails for balance, and are rarely observed. Vocalisations are not widely known, but growls and soft meows have been documented.

Threats:

Increasing human disturbance is one of the main threats to the species, indicating their vulnerability to anthropogenic pressures (Habib et al., 2025).



Distribution of marbled cat in Arunachal Pradesh according to IUCN 2015. *Pardofelis marmorata*.
The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2025-1



Jungle cat

LC

Felis chaus

Jungli Niyam (Bugun), Jungli billi (Hruso), Jungli Assa (Nyishi)



WLPA – Schedule II, IUCN – Least Concern, CITES – Appendix II

Habitat type

- Grassland, scrub
- Dry-deciduous and evergreen forests
- Close to semi-urban areas

The jungle cat shows remarkable ecological plasticity, adapting well to human-modified landscapes such as agricultural fields and fragmented forests. It is India's most widespread small wild cat, inhabiting diverse habitats ranging from dry deciduous and scrub forests to wetlands and grasslands. However, it generally avoids dense rainforests and extreme arid regions, preferring habitats that balance cover and openness (Chatterjee et al., 2020; Jhala et al., 2021).

Elevation

< 4000m

Food habits:

Their diet predominantly consists of small mammals, rodents, birds, reptiles, amphibians and insects; also raid poultry. It frequently uses a covert stalk-and-pounce technique to hunt in tall grasses. According to studies, over 70% of their diet consists of rodents (Mukherjee et al., 2004).

Identification:

- Short ear tufts, smaller than the caracal's.
- Pelt is pale sandy grey to yellowish grey
- Tail bears a black tip
- Two black stripes on its forelegs and tail

Behaviour:

Jungle cats are primarily crepuscular and solitary hunters, relying on stealth and agility to capture their prey. Extremely versatile, jungle cats can climb well and swim well enough to dive into shallow water to capture fish. Diurnal activity is typical. Growls, loud "meow-like" cries, and a bird-like "ow-ow-ow" call during mating are examples of vocalisations.

Reproduction:

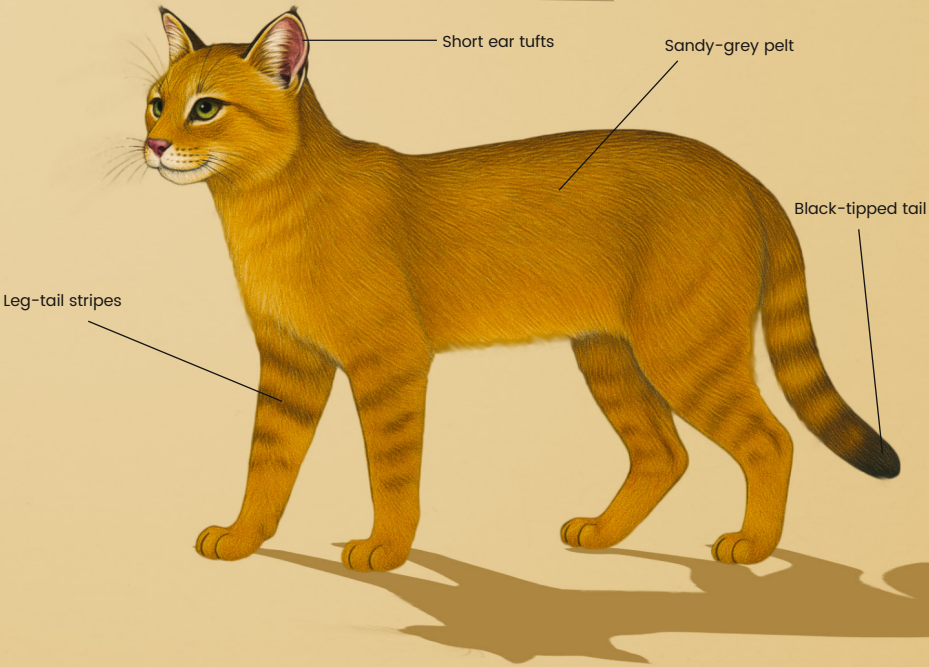
Breeds year-round; peak litters during spring. Gestation ~63–66 days; 2–4 kittens. Dens in grass tussocks, hollow logs, or reed beds.

Threats:

Habitat loss, poaching, and retaliatory killings threaten the species' survival (Grey et al., 2021). Its persistence depends on conservation efforts, as those living outside protected areas face ongoing human-wildlife conflict.



Distribution of jungle cat in Arunachal Pradesh according to IUCN 2020. *Felis chaus*.
The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2025-1

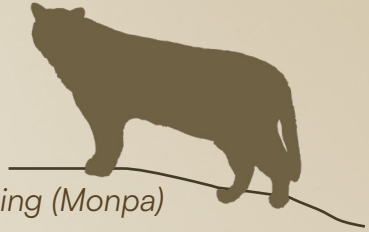


Fishing cat

VU

Prionailurus viverrinus

Chi-za (Aka), Machi billi (Hruso), Nga-Daning (Monpa)



WLPA – Schedule I, IUCN – Vulnerable, CITES – Appendix II

Habitat type

- Brackish wetlands or mangrove forests
- Swamps, marshlands, oxbow lakes, tidal creeks

Fishing cats are closely linked to wetlands and swamp habitats because they are habitat specialists (Mishra et al., 2022). They usually hunt in shallow waters, using their webbed hind feet to propel themselves while allowing their front limbs to remain free to catch prey. The ecological importance of riverine and mangrove environments is highlighted by the presence of wetland-specialist fishing cat. As they depend on aquatic areas for feeding, the availability of both seasonal and perennial water sources can affect their distribution (Habib et al. 2025).

Elevation

< 2000m

Food habits:

Generalist diet, consume a variety of prey including murid rodents, birds, and fish (Mukherjee et al., 2016). Its primary diet consists of fish, amphibians, and crustaceans; however, it also feeds on insects, birds, rodents, and reptiles.

Identification:

- Olive-grey coat with distinct stripes and spots
- A stocky, muscular body
- Short tail with five to six black rings and a black tip
- Short, webbed legs
- Short round ears with black backs and white spots

Reproduction:

Breeding season varies; 2–3 kittens per litter; gestation ~63 days. Dens in reed beds, river banks, or hollow logs near wetlands.

Behaviour:

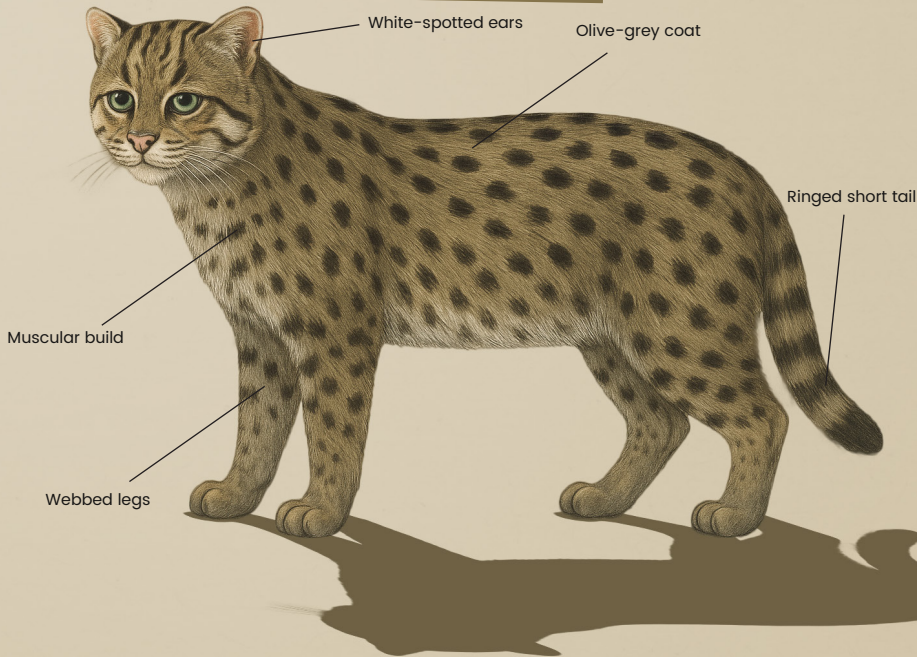
Fishing cats are solitary animals and are predominantly active during the night – primarily nocturnal and crepuscular (Mukherjee, 1998; Sunquist & Sunquist, 2002; Lynam et al., 2013). Bold and aggressive for its size. Produces loud “rasping” calls, growls, and guttural laughter.

Threats:

Habitat loss, degradation, and fragmentation from urbanisation, agriculture, and aquaculture threaten the species. Wetland destruction, pollution, hunting, road kills, and accidental captures further drive population decline (Mishra et al., 2021).



Distribution of fishing cat in Arunachal Pradesh according to IUCN
Mukherjee, S. et al. 2024. *Prionailurus viverrinus*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2025-1



Asiatic golden cat

Catopuma temminckii

Nyolii (Nyishi)



WLPA – Schedule I, IUCN – Vulnerable, CITES – Appendix I

Habitat type

- Evergreen broadleaf forests, dry deciduous forests, coniferous forests, and shrub lands

The species' habitats include coniferous forests, dry deciduous forests, shrub lands, and evergreen broadleaf forests (McCarthy et al., 2015; Duan et al., 2024). With individuals documented from ~4300 m above sea level, their distribution exhibits an altitudinal gradient that ranges from tropical semi-evergreen forests (~160 m above sea level) to temperate forests (>3000 m above sea level) (Lyngdoh et al., 2011; Dhendhup et al., 2016).

Elevation

Upto 4300m

Food habits:

The golden cat is a generalist predator. A diverse range of vertebrates, primarily hares, rodents, birds, lizards, and occasionally small ungulates like barking deer, are part of their diet (Kamler et al., 2020; Xiong et al., 2017). They hunt both on ground and in trees.

Identification:

- Reddish-golden brown unpatterned coat
- White stripes with black borders on the face
- Black-tipped tail

Behaviour:

The Asiatic golden cat, the largest of the Asian small cats, is highly polymorphic, with at least six known morphs (Nijhawan et al., 2019). Primarily solitary, it occasionally forms pairs (Vernes et al., 2015; Jhala et al., 2021).

Reproduction:

Breeds year-round in captivity; wild breeding seasonal. Gestation ~78–80 days; 1–3 kittens. Dens in caves, rock crevices, or hollow trees.

Threats:

Illegal pet trade, habitat fragmentation, and hunting for meat and pelt are the main threats to the species (Habib et al. 2025). The golden cat remains one of the least studied feline species in the Indian subcontinent due to its extremely rare occurrence.



Distribution of Asiatic golden cat in Arunachal Pradesh according to IUCN 2024. *Catopuma temminckii*.
The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2025-1



Clouded leopard

Neofelis nebulosa

Gungta (Sherdukpen)

Phaskong (Monpa), So-Kung (Nyishi)

VU



WLPA – Schedule I, IUCN – Vulnerable, CITES – Appendix I

Note

Habitat type

- Evergreen tropical forests
- Tropical deciduous forests
- Secondary forests
- Closed canopy forests

The clouded leopard (*Neofelis nebulosa*) is the closest relative of the large cat lineage, including tigers, lions, and leopards (Kitchener et al., 2017).

It shares traits with big cats, such as a strong skull and long canines (Christiansen, 2006), but diverged about 6.4 million years ago (O'Brien & Johnson, 2007). Its ossified hyoid bone prevents roaring, categorising it as a small cat (Hemmer, 1978; Weissengruber et al., 2002).

Clouded leopards inhabit a wide range of habitats, including rainforests, mangroves, deciduous forests, and secondary forests (Mukherjee, 1998; Menon, 2023). Found up to 3,720 m but mainly below 3,000 m, they are semi-arboreal and depend on closed-canopy forests, making them vulnerable (Sathyakumar et al., 2011; Grassman et al., 2005).

Elevation

Upto 3700m

Food habits:

Clouded leopards prey on arboreal and ground mammals, including monkeys, squirrels, deer, porcupines, and birds (Grey et al., 2021). They are ambush hunters, often dropping on prey from trees.

Identification:

- Stout body with long tail
- Cloud-like rosettes with dark edges and pale centres give the clouded leopard its name.
- Dark head spots, black ears, and facial stripes extending to the neck and shoulders.

Behaviour:

Clouded leopards are expert climbers, able to descend head-first or hang upside down using their broad paws, long tails, and rotating ankles. They vocalise with meows, growls, hisses, and chuffs, and are mostly nocturnal or crepuscular (Grassman et al., 2005; Austin et al., 2007; Jhala et al., 2021).

Reproduction:

Breeds year-round and seasonally; gestation ~85–95 days; 1–3 kittens. Cubs often born in secluded tree cavities or rocky crevices.

Threats:

Clouded leopards face threats from hunting, illegal trade of pelts and live animals, and rapid habitat loss (Habib et al., 2025). The mainland subspecies has lost about 64% of its range, with ongoing fragmentation heightening its extinction risk (Wolf & Ripple, 2017).



Distribution of clouded leopard in Arunachal Pradesh according to IUCN 2021. *Neofelis nebulosa*.
 The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2025-1



Pallas's cat or manul

LC

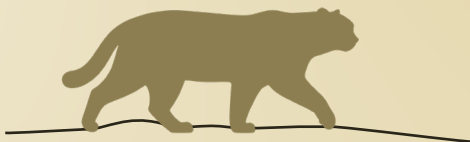
Otocolobus manul

WLPA – Schedule I, IUCN – Least Concern, CITES – Appendix II

Habitat type

- Cold arid steppe
- Montane grasslands
- Rocky outcrops

Pallas's cat, an indicator species for mountain steppes (Lanz et al., 2019), inhabits high-altitude, cold, and rocky regions like alpine deserts, shrub steppes, and montane grasslands. It favours rocky terrains for denning and avoids deep snow but adapts well to cold, arid environments.



Elevation

Upto 5600m

Food habits:

They are prey specialists and their diet includes pikas, voles, insects and small birds. They are ambush predators and rarely scavenge.

Identification:

- Stocky
- Fluffy with dense fur, appears larger
- Grey fur in winter, may have reddish fur in summer
- Rounded flat face with short muzzle
- Black facial stripes with white cheek tufts
- Low-set rounded ears
- Long bushy tail with black bands
- Perpetually 'grouchy' expression

Behaviour:

Pallas's cats are solitary and crepuscular, vocalising with growls, yelps, and high-pitched calls during mating. Their dense fur, flat face, and low ears aid concealment, while short legs suit ambush hunting. Despite their size, they have large home ranges—males up to 207 km²—and may share territories with females. They shift ranges seasonally to avoid predators like eagles, foxes, and wolves.

Reproduction:

Breeds year-round; gestation 66–75 days; litter size 2–6 kittens (sometimes 8); dens in rock crevices, marmot burrows, or caves.

Threats:

Pallas's cats are threatened by habitat loss, fragmentation, and rising feral dog populations (Ross et al., 2010, 2020). As habitat and prey specialists, they're sensitive to land-use and climate changes. Feral dogs compete for prey, while infrastructure, tourism, and waste further degrade their high-altitude habitats, intensifying survival risks (Banerjee et al., 2019; Ross et al., 2019).

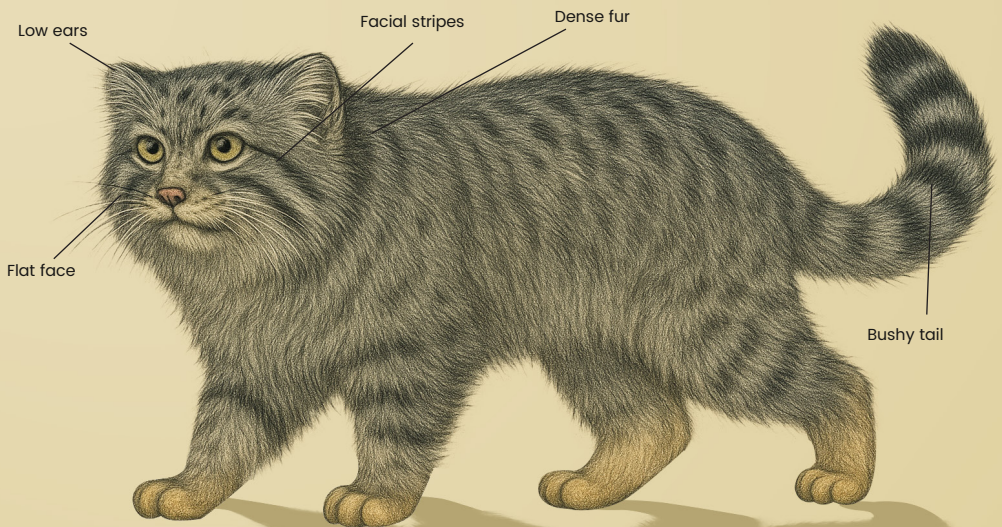


Distribution of Pallas's cat in Arunachal Pradesh according to IUCN 2021. *Neofelis nebulosa*.
The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2025-1



Note

With regards to North East India, there have been occasional sightings of Pallas's cat from Sikkim (Chanchani, 2008; Menon, 2014; Prater & Society, 1990). In 2025, Pallas's cat was documented in Arunachal Pradesh for the first time through camera traps in joint survey by WWF-India and State Forest Department. This finding extends the known distribution of the Pallas's cat into the eastern Himalayas beyond previously known locations in Sikkim.



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