

Project Update June 2009

The sub-tropical Jeypore-Upper Dehing-Dirok-Dilli forests of Upper Assam are among the last remaining tracts (578 km²) of the Assam Valley Wet Evergreen forests. These lowland forests are an important refuge for the highly endangered hoolock gibbon, white-winged wood duck and the globally critically endangered dipterocarp *Vatica lanceaefolia*. It also has a population of about 250 Asian elephants – India's easternmost viable population of this species. The forests have an exploitation history spanning over a century by the timber, tea, oil and coal mining industries, and suffer high levels of disturbance from illegal felling, firewood and minor forest produce collection and poaching. Only 111 km² of this landscape is protected as the Dehing-Patkai Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS). Other wildlife was poorly documented and in spite of its importance as a watershed and wildlife habitat, the forests have remained in the periphery of conservation focus. I conducted a two-year camera-trapping survey of the forest carnivores here, with the objective of using photographic evidence of this elusive group, to highlight the need for conserving this threatened landscape.

Results of two years of camera-trapping here have revealed the presence of 19 species of carnivores. This landscape is now possibly the only site in Asia where 8 cats have been confirmed to occur sympatrically. This is now the eastern-most photographic record of the tiger in India. The other carnivores recorded are the leopard, clouded leopard, fishing cat, Asiatic golden cat, marbled cat, leopard cat, jungle cat, wild dog, Malayan sun bear, hog badger, otter, yellow-throated marten, binturong, large Indian civet, small Indian civet, common palm civet, crab-eating mongoose and small Indian mongoose. A total of 43 species of mammals have been recorded so far. We have obtained the first camera-trap photos of wild Malayan sun bear, clouded leopard, marbled cat, Asiatic golden cat and binturong in Assam. We also obtained rare remote video footage of the elusive marbled cat for the first time in India.

The findings of this survey are being used to argue against a national highway bypass through the forest, to oppose a move to denitrify the Buridehing River from the Dehing Patkai WLS limits and to formulate a proposal to include more of this fantastic landscape within the Indian protected area network. Findings have been communicated to the state forest department and the district administration – which are the main implementing agencies for conservation activities; and widely disseminated through the local print and television media. As part of the project's outreach, I also made illustrated presentations to the local stakeholder industries including the Assam Branch of the Indian Tea Association (Zone 1) and Oil India Ltd., as well as to the students and teachers of 10 local schools, colleges and university departments.

The most immediate threat to the carnivores is poaching of prey such as deer, wild pig and porcupine, mainly for food. Capture rates of favoured tiger prey - the large sambar deer was especially low and gaur was not encountered at all. There are also occasional reports of elephant and big cat poaching for ivory and body parts. Forest streams are extensively poisoned with pesticides such as Endosulfan (a legal tea plantation pesticide), impacting the entire aquatic ecosystem and posing a health hazard to human consumers as well. The long term threat is from unplanned development of roads, industrial installations and residences

which are severely fragmenting the habitat and blocking critical wildlife corridors in the landscape. An important step in the conservation of this landscape would be to establish a 4.5 km long forest corridor to reconnect the now isolated Upper Dehing East (129 km²) to the rest of the landscape.



Binturong, Marbled cat, Large Indian civet & a Clouded leopard.