CATnews is the newsletter of the Cat Specialist Group, a component of the Species Survival Commission SSC of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It is published twice a year, and is available to members and the Friends of the Cat Group.

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CATnews is produced with financial assistance from the Friends of the Cat Group.

Design: barbara surber, werk’design gmbh
Layout: Tabea Lanz und Christine Breitenmoser
Print: Stämpfli Publikationen AG, Bern, Switzerland

ISSN 1027-2992 © IUCN/SSC Cat Specialist Group

The designation of the geographical entities in this publication, and the representation of the material, do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the IUCN concerning the legal status of any country, territory, or area, or its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.
New record of Asiatic wildcat from Central Indian landscape

We report here a new record of the Asiatic wildcat *Felis lybica ornata* from moist-deciduous forests of Central India. The subspecies was captured in a camera trap survey undertaken to study the dispersal patterns of tiger *Panthera tigris* in a corridor between the Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve BTR and Sanjay-Dubri Tiger Reserve SDTR in eastern Madhya Pradesh. To our knowledge, this is the first record of the Asiatic wildcat from the study area.

The Asiatic wildcat or Indian Desert cat was previously recognised as one of the five subspecies of the globally widespread wildcat *Felis silvestris* (Yamaguchi et al. 2015). The revised taxonomy of the felidae now recognises the steppe and bush cats of Africa and Asia as separate species *Felis lybica* and the Asiatic wildcat *Felis lybica ornata* as a subspecies (Kitchener et al. 2017).

The Asiatic wildcat is distributed in Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Russia, Mongolia, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, the western plains of India and throughout north-western China and possibly Kyrgyzstan and Georgia (Yamaguchi et al. 2015, Ghoddousi et al. in prep.). In India, the wildcat is distributed in Rajasthan, Gujarat, and parts of Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra (Menon 2014, Yamaguchi et al. 2015). Mukherjee (1998) mentions reports of Asiatic wildcat from Central India in Pench Tiger Reserve, Pande et al. (2013) reported the subspecies in Nauradehi Wildlife Sanctuary and Ramesh et al. (2013) in Panna Tiger Reserve. More recently, the Asiatic wildcat was reported from eastern Madhya Pradesh in BTR (Rather et al. 2017).

In this study, we report the occurrence of Asiatic wildcat in the corridor joining BTR and SDTR (Fig.1). The corridor spreads over an area of more than 2,000 km² and is administered as the North and South Shahdol Forest Divisions. *Sal Shorea robusta* is the dominant form of vegetation and occurs in association with *Diospyros melanoxylon*, *Buchanania cochinchinensis*, *Lagerstromia parviflora* and *Butea monosperma*. The corridor is fragmented by agricultural fields and faces high anthropogenic pressure. The study was aimed to monitor the dispersal of tiger between the two reserves through the corridor by large scale camera trapping carried out for over a year. The Asiatic wildcat was first captured in Godawal range of North Shahdol Forest Division on 9 March 2018 at a site located at 23°58’1.776” N / 81°20’39.156” E (Fig. 2). The subsequent camera trapping showed the presence of the species throughout the corridor from BTR to the SDTR. The species occurred in all major habitat types including dense sal forests, sal mix forests, scrublands and near human habitations.

This record provides crucial information regarding the distribution of the Asiatic wildcat in India. The species seems not to be restricted to the arid and semi-arid parts of the country, but to also occur more often than previously thought, in moist deciduous forest. The domestic cat *Felis catus* occurs throughout the range of the Asiatic wildcat in India and looks very similar in appearance to it. This record thus needs to be supported by further genetic data. Supportive genomics are, however, outside the scope of this short communication and will be reported in a future publication.

**Fig. 1.** Location of the study area and camera trap captures of Asiatic wildcat, The Corbett Foundation, Bandhavgarh.
and behavioural studies on co-occurring populations of domestic cats and wildcats.

Acknowledgements
We are thankful to the Jet Privilege Pvt. Ltd. (JPPL) for funding the study. Our due thanks to the Madhya Pradesh, Forest Department for providing necessary permissions to carry out the study.

References

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Possible records of the Asiatic wildcat in Nepal

An individual of cat species having phenotypic appearance of an Asiatic wildcat *Felis lybica ornata* was photographed in Tanahun district during a bird survey on 3 March 2019 at 14:30 h. The typical features of the Asiatic wildcat were clearly visible, i.e. a spotted coat, horizontal bands on upper part of the leg, medium tail with rings towards the tip and relatively large head. The nearest known population of this felid was reported from Madhya Pradesh in central India, nearly 500 km away. Other records of the suspected species, including photographs, were also obtained in 2013 and 2015 near Kathmandu and in the north-western part of the country, close to the Ngari region of Western Tibet. Our records provide important evidence for the possible occurrence of the Asiatic wildcat in Nepal, and form the basis for a more detailed survey to assess its national status and distribution.

The Asiatic wildcat was previously thought to be a subspecies of *Felis silvestris*. However a recent taxonomic study has revealed that wildcats in Africa and Asia are now recognised as *Felis lybica* (Kitchener et al. 2017), with Asiatic wildcats classified as a subspecies, *Felis lybica ornata*. Twelve species of cat occur in Nepal based on current knowledge. Two species, i.e. Pallas’ cat *Otocolobus manul* and rusty-spotted cat *Prionailurus rubiginosus* are the latest additions to the list of felid species occurring in the country (Shrestha et al. 2014, Lamichhane et al. 2016). These records suggest that there is still a possibility of discovering medium-sized mammals in areas that have been less frequently visited by biologists.

Nepal has no historical records of Asiatic wildcat. However there have been some long unconfirmed reports of the species existing in the country. Also, pelts of this species were commonly seen in the illegal market of wildlife furs in Kathmandu during the 1980s and 1990s. A fur market survey in 1988 revealed the presence of the Asiatic wildcat without providing any details on the number of items (Barnes 1989). WWF India (1992) also reported availability of the species’ pelt during a fur trade market survey in Kathmandu. The market reported a total of 30 long coats and 44 short jackets made from different cat pelts, including Asiatic wild cat, but no mention was made about the origin of the products. There is a possibility that the tanned pelts made their way to Nepal via India where the species is known to occur (Prater 1971), but there is also a faint possibility that some raw pelts might be from Nepal, which unfortunately cannot be confirmed now. Further investigation could have provided more information on the origin of those pelts and perhaps provided a clearer picture of the species’ existence in Nepal. There were no follow-up studies to record the presence of Asiatic wildcat pelts in the illegal wildlife market in Kathmandu. Also there have been no reports of the species from anywhere inside the country from that time. Here we present photographic and observation records of possible Asiatic wildcats from five different localities in Nepal.

Possible Asiatic wildcat records in Nepal

With no confirmed records of the species in the country many sightings of the species may have been ignored previously. However, a recent photograph of a living cat can be identified morphologically as an Asiatic wild cat, therefore we present here together with this observation additionally some records of similar looking specimens till date. Fig. 1 provides all known sighting locations of these observations in Nepal.