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The rusty-spotted cat is the world’s smallest cat species weighing around 1.1–1.6 kg when fully adult (Prater 2005). It has a relatively restricted global distribution and is endemic to India, Sri Lanka and Nepal (Mukherjee et al. 2016). The rusty-spotted cat is listed as Near Threatened in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Mukherjee et al 2016) and is legally protected under Schedule-I of the Indian Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972. Little is known of its ecology or local abundance (Nowell & Jackson 1996, Sunquist & Sunquist 1996). The rusty-spotted cat is listed as Near Threatened (Mukherjee et al. 2016). Its main diet constitutes of rodents, small birds and possibly small insects, lizards and frogs (Philips 1984, De Alwis 1973).

Results and Discussion

Here, we report a first photographic record of the rusty-spotted cat in Thitabi, in the reserved forests of Tokawade Range, Thane Forest Division, Maharashtra (Fig. 1). To our knowledge, this is the first photographic record of the species from the Thane Forest Division. A total of 6 camera traps, at the spacing of 800–1,000 m from each other, were installed from 28 May to 18 June 2018 across an area of 16 km². The rusty-spotted cat was recorded on 14 June 2018 at a site located at 19°20'40.0''N / 73°46'89.1'' E (Fig. 1, 2). No further captures of the species were recorded during the survey as its nocturnal and partially arboreal behavior makes the species hard to detect (Jayaratne et al. 2015).

Previously, the species has been recorded in Amboli, a part of the Western Ghats, Maharashtra (Lele & Chunekar 2013). The study area connects the forests of Harishchandragarh-Kalsubai Wildlife Sanctuary and some parts of the Western Ghats. Thus, the study area may also act as corridor for the wildlife in the area. The study area faces high anthropogenic pressures such as increasing agriculture, grazing and hunting. Due to its irregular distribution in India and its occurrence outside protected forest area, habitat loss and spread of cultivation fields and deforestation are believed to be major threats to the species (Nowell & Jackson 1996). Increasing network of roads is also one of the major threats to the species as reports of rusty-spotted cats killed in road accidents have been documented (Tehsin 1994, Digveerendrasinh 1995, Dubey 1999). The possibility of hybridisation of rusty-spotted cat with a domestic cat has also been suggested as a concern (Kittle & Watson 2004). Although we present only one confirmation of the presence of rusty-spotted cat, it still provides crucial information on the occurrence of the species in the Thane Forest Division. However, it requires further study on its distribution across its range in Maharashtra. This record further shows the occurrence of a Near Threatened species like rusty-spotted cat in fragmented landscapes which often do not fall under protected forest areas.

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References


The rusty-spotted cat Prionailurus rubiginosus is the smallest felid in the world and is found only in Sri Lanka, India and Nepal. The first record of rusty-spotted cat in Nepal dates back to 2016 from the protected areas of western Terai. Very little is known about this elusive cat all over its distribution range owing to very few targeted studies. Here we present the opportunistic road kill record of a rusty-spotted cat near Arjuni Phanta in Shuklaphanta National Park, Nepal.

The rusty-spotted cat is the smallest cat weighing 1.5 to 1.6 kg for males and 1.1 kg for females when adult (Philips 1935). At birth they weigh nearly the same as a chicken’s egg. Despite of its small size the cat is known to be an excellent hunter and feeds on rodents and birds; the cats are frequently seen after heavy rain when they come to feed on frogs (Philips 1935). The cat is found in moist and dry deciduous forest as well as in scrub and grassland. Rusty-spotted cats prefer dense vegetation (Nayak et al. 2017). Previously, the known distribution of the rusty-spotted cat was restricted to Sri Lanka and India, but recently Lamichhane et al. (2016) claimed the first records of the cat’s presence in Nepal from the protected areas of the western terai, Shuklaphanta National Park and Bardia National Park. However, a long coat made from the fur of rusty-spotted cats had already been recorded for sale in Kathmandu (Van Gruisen & Sinclair 1992) in the 1990s, but the claim of Lamichhane et al. (2016) could still be true because nothing is known about the origin of the fur. Rusty-spotted cats inhabit moist and dry deciduous forests, including montane habitat, in Sri Lanka. They are mostly recorded in the southern part of India but occasionally also in the north as far as Kashmir including the Terai Arc landscape of Nepal and India (Mukherjee et al. 2016, Lamichhane et al. 2016). Deforestation and spread of cultivation are considered to be the major threats to the cat in India and Sri Lanka (Patel 2011). In addition, rusty-spotted cats have been known to be hunted for the fur trade, as livestock pests and occasionally for consumption (Van Gruisen & Sinclair 1992). In Nepal, they are recorded only from protected areas and hence the threats are largely unknown (Lamichhane et al. 2016). Here we present the record of a road kill of a rusty-spotted cat near Arjuni phanta (phanta = grassland) of Shuklaphanta National Park.

Road-kill record of a rusty-spotted cat in Shuklaphanta National Park, Nepal

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