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SHORT COMMUNICATION

A FIRST PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD OF A YELLOW-BELLIED WEASEL MUSTELA KATHIAH HODGSON, 1835 (MAMMALIA: CARNIVORA: MUSTELIDAE) FROM WESTERN NEPAL

Badri Baral, Anju Pokharel, Dipak Raj Basnet, Ganesh Bahadur Magar & Karan Bahadur Shah

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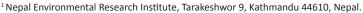




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A FIRST PHOTOGRAPHIC RECORD OF A YELLOW-BELLIED WEASEL MUSTELA KATHIAH HODGSON, 1835 (MAMMALIA: CARNIVORA: MUSTELIDAE) FROM WESTERN NEPAL

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Abstract: One live and another dead Yellow-bellied Weasel were spotted at an altitude of 2,190m and 3,078m, respectively, in Lamsung, Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality, Myagdi and Barekot Rural Municipality, Jajarkot on 1 May 2016 and 16 June 2016 in the afternoon. This is probably the first record of the species with photographs in Myagdi District of Gandaki Province, and in Jajarkot District of Karnali Province, western Nepal.

Keywords: Carnivore, Gandaki Province, habitat, Jajarkot, Karnali Province, Myagdi, traditional transhumance.

Five species of the genus *Mustela* belonging to the family Mustelidae, namely Stoat (Ermine in North America) *M. erminea*, Siberian Weasel *M. sibirica*, Yellow-bellied Weasel *M. kathiah*, Mountain Weasel *M.*

altaica, and Stripe-backed Weasel *M. strigidorsa* have been recorded from Nepal (Baral & Shah 2008). The Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* is found along parts of the Indian Himalaya through Nepal, Bhutan, northeastern India, southern China east to Hong Kong, and southeastern Asia in northern & central Myanmar, northern & central Thailand, Lao PDR & Viet Nam, with one series of records in the Cardamom Mountains of Cambodia (Pocock 1941; Corbet & Hill 1992; Duckworth & Robichaud 2005; Than et al. 2008; Pei et al. 2010; Ghimirey & Acharya 2012; Supparatvikorn et al. 2012; Abramov et al. 2013; Appel et al. 2013; Choudhury 2013; Phan et al. 2014).

The Yellow-bellied Weasel (Y-bW) is primarily

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associated with hill evergreen forest at elevations above 1,000m (Willcox et al. 2016) but in winter it may come down lower than 1,000m. It is evidently diurnal, probably mostly ground-dwelling but an occasional climber, and is assumed to be largely carnivorous (Wan 2014; Willcox et al. 2016) as it mostly feeds on birds, mice, rats, voles, and other small mammals.

Even if the Y-bW is known throughout Asia; only little information is known due to its inaccessible habitat. Intensive research activities focusing on small carnivores are often neglected in Nepal. Among carnivores, scientific studies on weasels are very limited. Only sketchy information is available on the abundance and distribution of these species from the country. There is dearth of distribution data and conservation efforts for Y-bW in Nepal.

There are few evidences of the Y-bW's occurrence in Nepal and it lacks scientific studies primarily focusing on this species. This paper attempts to discuss on the first record of the Y-bW from Myagdi District of Gandaki Province and Jajarkot District of Karnali Province in western Nepal.

SURVEY AREA AND METHODS

Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality (RM) lies in Myagdi District of Gandaki Province, Nepal. The total population of Dhaulagiri RM is 14,104 (Central Bureau of Statistics 2011) that resides in an area of 1,037km². Barekot RM is located in Jajarkot District of Karnali Province, Nepal covering an area of 577.7km² with a total population of 18,083 (Central Bureau of Statistics 2011). Both rural municipalities act as a refuge for different mammal species such as the Himalayan Black Bear *Ursus thibetanus*, Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens*, Musk Deer *Moschus* spp., Northern Red Deer *Muntiacus vaginalis*, Himalayan Tahr *Hemitragus jemlahicus*, Common Goral *Naemorhedus goral*, Himalayan Serow *Capricornis thar*, and Blue Sheep *Pseudois nayaur* (District Development Committee 2011; Baral et al. 2014).

An opportunistic survey was done for the confirmation of the presence of weasel species. The field study focusing on Red Panda was conducted for a total of 40 days (20 days each in Myagdi and Jajarkot from 15 April to 4 May 2016 and 28 May to 16 June 2016, respectively). The Y-bW was observed in two different locations (Figure 1). When the species was

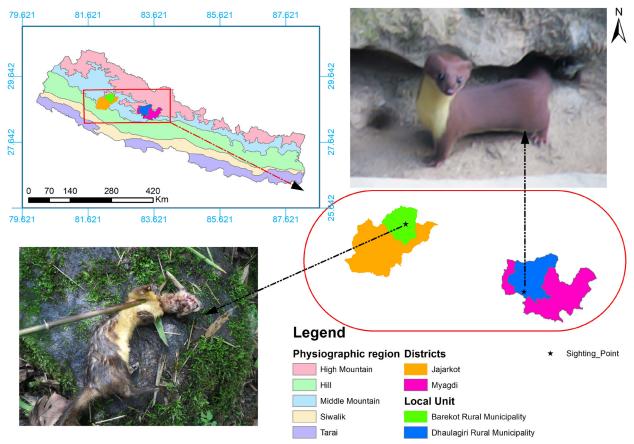


Image 1. Locations of Yellow-bellied Weasel spotting.



Image 1. Mustela kathiah at Lamsung, Dhaulagiri Rural Municipality, Myagdi.

observed, a Canon PowerShot SX170IS camera was used to capture the photograph of the species and Garmin etrex 10(model) GPS was used to mark the location where the species was observed. Also measurements were taken where possible.

OBSERVATION

On 1 May 2016 in the afternoon, a live Y-bW was spotted at 28.518°N & 83.285°E at an altitude of 2,190m (Image 1). The Y-bW came out of a hole beneath a rock boulder in Lamsung Village of Dhaulagiri RM. The foot pads were well developed and exposed. The soles of the hind feet were bald. The habitat was beneath the rock boulder in the midst of Lamsung Village of Dhaulagiri RM. The nearby forest was dominated by *Quercus* sp., *Juglans regia*, and *Rhododendron arboretum*.

On 16 June 2016 in the afternoon, a dead Y-bW was spotted at 28.995°N and 82.316°E at an altitude of 3,078m (Image 2). A venomous Himalayan Pit Viper Gloydius himalayanus (Günther 1864) was found on the other side of the boulder where the dead weasel was observed. The Y-bW was found beneath the rock boulder which was kept on the boulder for the photographs. The weasel was drenched in rain. There was a severe wound on its neck, perhaps from a fight. The foot pads were well developed and exposed. The soles of the hind feet were bald. The head and body length was 250mm, and its tail length was about 130mm. The weasel weighed 1.5kg. The habitat was dominated by Tsuga dumosa, Abies spectabilis, and Rhododendron arboreum with the understory of Thamnocalamus spthiflorus, Drepanostachyum falcatum, and Yushania sp.. People from the nearest village, Nayakwada frequently visit the habitat to fetch Thamnocalamus spthiflorus,





Image 2. Dead *Mustela kathiah* at Dhottachaur Community Forest, Barekot RM, Jajarkot.

Drepanostachyum falcatum, and Yushania sp. for their household requirements. Hunting of wildlife has been an inseparable part of the local inhabitants. The area is notorious for illegal and communal hunting and it occurs throughout the year with a peak during the Dashain festival and post monsoon season which has threatened the weasels' habitat. Traditional transhumance practice of livestock management is common in the region which further affects the weasel habitat in the region.

DISCUSSION

This paper provides a documentation of an incidental record of *Mustela kathiah*. Based on ground truthing, the Y-bW occupancy has now been confirmed from Lamsung of Dhaulagiri RM, Myagdi and Dhottachaur Community forest of Barekot RM of Jajarkot and is within the previously recorded elevational range (see Baral & Shah 2008). The Y-bW was recorded first in the Makalu–Barun National Park in eastern Nepal during a field survey in 2009–2010 (Ghimire & Acharya 2012).

There is also a report of the Y-bW within and between the protected areas of Annapurna Conservation Area, Sagarmatha National Park, Makalu Barun National Park (Jnawali et al. 2011), from Illam & Dallu, Pharping, Kathmandu (Katuwal et al. 2018), and from Hugu-Kori forests in Annapurna Conservation Area (Yadav Ghimire pers comm. 2018; Baral et al. 2019).

The Y-bW is categorized as Least Concern globally by The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Willcox et al. 2016) and as Data Deficient nationally under Red List criteria (Jnawali et al. 2011). The Y-bW was camera-trapped once each, in 1,184 trap-nights (Ghimire & Acharya 2012). The Y-bW has a small build and skulking behavior that makes it difficult to record it by a typical survey method and camera trap of low density (Than et al. 2008; Ghimire & Acharya 2012; Supparatvikorn et al. 2012; Willcox et al. 2016). This might have created a hindrance for an assessment of its population status.

In Nepal, the Y-bWs are commonly used to eradicate rodents and are trained to attack larger animals such as geese, goats, and sheep for sport (Sterndale 1982; Hussain 1999; Jha 1999). Local residents in the nearest villages of Jajarkot and villagers of Myagdi, however, were unaware of the existence of this species and thereby we did not find any anecdotal report on the use of weasels for any purpose. Also, villagers of both localities were unaware of the ecological significance of the species. School students in Lamsung of Myagdi were, however, reported to kill this weasel to show their bravery. School outreach and community awareness activities are recommended to conserve this small carnivore.

This study would enhance the understanding of the Y-bW's distribution and conservation status in Nepal as very less information is available on the abundance and distribution of these species from the country. This paper attempts the documentation of the first record of the Y-bW from Myagdi and Jajarkot in western Nepal emphasizing that more intensive research is needed to improve understanding of the species' characteristics, habitat and ecology.

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