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Cover: Nile Crocodile *Crocodylus niloticus* regulating body temperature on a warm day. Digital art on Procreate by © Aakanksha Komanduri.

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COMMUNICATION

First photographic record of the Himalayan Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens* (Mammalia: Carnivora: Ailuridae) in Yordi Rabe Supse Wildlife Sanctuary, Arunachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract: The Himalayan Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens*, an endangered species of the eastern Himalaya, is threatened by habitat loss, fragmentation, and limited ecological data across parts of its range. In Arunachal Pradesh, despite extensive suitable habitat, confirmed records from several protected areas remain scarce. Here we present the first confirmed photographic evidence of the Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens* from the Yordi Rabe Supse Wildlife Sanctuary (YRSWS) using camera traps. The species was recorded at elevations of 2,409 m and 2,848 m in high altitude temperate forest habitats characterized by dense multi-layered vegetation with a moist understory, providing important field-based confirmation of the species' presence in a previously undocumented area. These records highlight the conservation significance of YRSWS and emphasize the need for further systematic monitoring and strengthened protection of its habitats in central Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Biodiversity documentation, camera trapping, Eastern Himalaya, forest connectivity, mammalian conservation, protected area, range extension, species occurrence, temperate forest, wildlife monitoring.

सारांश: रेड पांडा *Ailurus fulgens*, जो पूर्वी हिमालय का एक संकटग्रस्त प्रजाति है, आवास क्षरण, खंडन तथा इसके वितरण क्षेत्र के कई हिस्सों में सीमित पारिस्थितिकीय आंकड़ों के कारण गंभीर खतरे में है। अरुणाचल प्रदेश में, व्यापक रूप से उपयुक्त आवास होने के बावजूद, कई संरक्षित क्षेत्रों से इसके पुष्ट अभिलेख अभी भी दुर्लभ हैं। यहाँ हम योरडी राबे सुपसे वन्यजीव अभयारण्य (YRS WLS) से कैमरा ट्रैप के माध्यम से रेड पांडा *Ailurus fulgens* का प्रथम पुष्ट फोटोग्राफिक साक्ष्य प्रस्तुत करते हैं। यह प्रजाति 2,409 मीटर तथा 2,848 मीटर की ऊँचाई पर निम्न समशीतोष्ण वनों में दर्ज की गई, जो घनी बहु-स्तरीय वनस्पति तथा आर्द्र अधस्तलीय परत से युक्त हैं। यह अध्ययन एक पूर्व में अप्रमाणित क्षेत्र में इस प्रजाति की उपस्थिति का महत्वपूर्ण क्षेत्र-आधारित प्रमाण प्रदान करता है। ये अभिलेख YRS WLS के संरक्षणात्मक महत्व को रेखांकित करते हैं तथा मध्य अरुणाचल प्रदेश में इसके आवासों की सुदृढ़ सुरक्षा और व्यवस्थित निगरानी की आवश्यकता पर बल देते हैं।

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Author contribution: YM conceived the study, conducted field surveys, deployed and monitored camera traps, analysed the data, and prepared the first draft of the manuscript. SDG contributed to study design, data interpretation, manuscript review, and overall supervision. SL contributed to study conceptualization, data interpretation, manuscript review, and provided critical inputs that improved the final version of the manuscript. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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INTRODUCTION

The Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens*, an elusive species found in the eastern Himalaya and southwestern China, is currently listed as 'Endangered' on the IUCN Red List due to a continued decline in its habitat quality, population size and geographic range (Glatston et al. 2015). It primarily inhabits temperate forests with dense bamboo at elevations ranging between 2,200–4,800 m. Red Pandas feed primarily on bamboo (Choudhury 2001). Traditionally, Red Pandas have been classified into two subspecies, *Ailurus fulgens fulgens* and *Ailurus fulgens styani*, which differ subtly in morphology (e.g., pelage colouration and skull characteristics) and geographic range. However, recent genomic evidence suggests that the two subspecies may actually be two distinct phylogenetic species: the Himalayan Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens* and the Chinese Red Panda *Ailurus styani* (Hu et al. 2020; Dalui et al. 2025). Further, genetic evidence suggests that the Siang River in Arunachal Pradesh separates both the species, with *Ailurus fulgens* occurring west of the river and *Ailurus styani* occurring to the east (Joshi et al. 2021). This highlights the importance of implementing conservation strategies that are both region-specific and transboundary in nature.

In India, the Himalayan Red Panda is primarily distributed across Sikkim, northern West Bengal (including Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts) and Arunachal Pradesh (Bhutia et al. 2023). Of these, Arunachal Pradesh is ecologically important, accounting for over 90% of the species' estimated 12,500 km² potential habitat in India (Ghose & Dutta 2010). Yet, the species' actual area of occupancy within the country is likely much lower due to fragmentation and patchy distribution (Choudhury 2001). Despite its rich biodiversity, Arunachal Pradesh remains under-explored, with confirmed records of red panda presence still limited.

Within Arunachal Pradesh, photographic evidence has confirmed the presence of red pandas in select locations including Karle Village, Shi-Yomi and Dirang in West Kameng District (Megha et al. 2021). More recently, sightings have also been confirmed in Namdapha National Park (Yomcha et al. 2025). However, many lesser-known sanctuaries in the central part of the state lack records, indicating the need for comprehensive field surveys.

Yordi Rabe Supse Wildlife Sanctuary (YRSWS) spans the West Siang and Siang districts. Notified in 2007, the Sanctuary remains unexplored due to its challenging terrain, limited access and lack of ecological assessments. While reports suggest the presence of several rare species, including the Tiger *Panthera tigris*, the scientific literature on the sanctuary is sparse (Ete 2014). Since YRSWS lies on the western side of the Siang River, it falls within the predicted range of the Himalayan Red Panda *Ailurus fulgens*—a species characterised by lighter fur and more prominent tail rings compared to *Ailurus styani* (Hu et al. 2020). However, despite this expected distribution, no prior direct or photographic evidence has confirmed its occurrence in this protected area. The present study, therefore, provides the first photographic documentation of the species from this under-explored and scientifically unreported landscape, highlighting the requirement for systematic surveys and targeted conservation efforts in Arunachal Pradesh.

Study Area

The Yordi Rabe Supse Wildlife Sanctuary, located in the West Siang and Siang districts of Arunachal Pradesh (Image 1), is one of the most remote and unexplored protected areas in the state. The name Yordi Rabe translates locally to "a distant and faraway hill," while Supse refers to one of the highest mountain peaks within the sanctuary. The landscape is dominated by steep slopes, rugged hills and gorges, with elevations ranging 771–3,929 m, as derived from the ALOS PALSAR RTC DEM (Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency 2015).

The sanctuary spans a total area of 397 km², located between 94.367°–94.583° E and 28.133°–28.417° N (Ete 2014). It has also been recognised as an Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA) under criterion A1 (2004) with the IBA code: IN-AR-27, as designated by BirdLife International (2025).

Despite its ecological significance, YRSWS remains poorly documented, with no scientific research having been conducted to date. The region encompasses a diverse range of forest types – tropical and semi-evergreen forests, subtropical broad-leaved forests, and sub-temperate broad-leaved forests (MoEFCC 2016). This creates a rich mosaic of habitats—from temperate forests and bamboo thickets to patches of subalpine zones—providing a complex ecological environment.

Four major rivers, namely Yogong, Shichuk, Sikka, and Tagurshit flow through the Sanctuary. The Yogong and Shichuk rivers flow into the Hirik, a tributary of the Yomgo/Siyom River, while the Sikka and Tagurshit join the Subansiri River (Ete 2014).

The combination of dense canopy, moist undergrowth, and river systems contributes to the high habitat complexity and ecological integrity of the sanctuary.

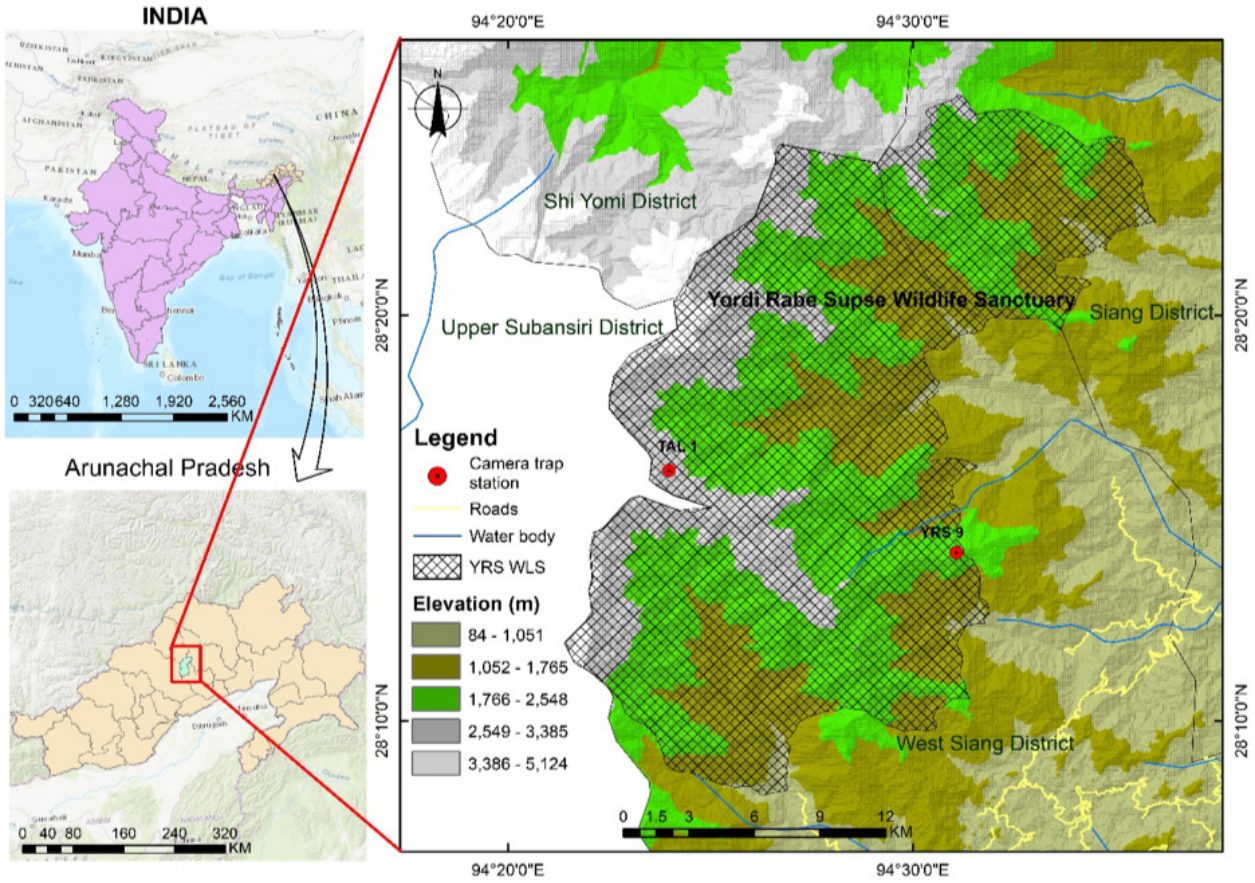

Image 1. Yordi Rabe Supse Wildlife Sanctuary and camera trap station.

METHODS

As part of a systematic ecological study on Mishmi Takin conducted in December 2024, we installed motion-triggered camera traps at various suitable locations within the sanctuary. These cameras were kept running continuously, day and night, until their batteries were fully drained.

We used two models of Browning Trail cameras. The first unit (TAL 1) was a 20-megapixel Dark OPS MAX HD PLUS, set in photo mode with a 1-second picture delay. It had a motion detection range of ~24 m (80 ft), with a fast trigger speed and a long-range IR flash. The second unit (YRS 9) was a 24-megapixel Dark OPS PRO X 1080, set in both photo and video mode. It was programmed to record 30-second videos with a 1-second capture delay, and both night exposure and motion detection were set to ~27 m (90 ft) long range.

Each camera was mounted around 1 m above the ground, which is close to the shoulder height of adult takins (~1.5 m). We placed the cameras approximately 4 m from animal trails, as recommended for large-bodied mammals, to capture full-body images without distortion or overexposure (O'Connell et al. 2011; Rovero et al. 2013). Cameras were installed either facing straight across the trail or at a 20–30 ° angle to help reduce motion blur and improve detection accuracy. No bait or attractants were used at any of the camera trap stations to avoid altering animal movement patterns. TAL 1 was installed on 12 December 2024 and remained active for 132 days, while YRS 9 operated from 08 September 2024 to 06 May 2025 (241 days).

We identified the species captured by comparing visible morphological features from the camera trap images with standard descriptions (Hu et al. 2020). We also considered elevation and the known distribution of species to further confirm the identification.

RESULTS

The Himalayan Red Panda was recorded from two separate camera trap stations, roughly 12 km apart in aerial distance. These detections confirm the presence

Image 2. Camera trap image of Ailurus fulgens recorded at 2,848 m elevation, Liromoba range on the western side of the Yordi Rabe Supse Wildlife Sanctuary.

of the species in two different forest ranges within the YRSWS.

The first record came from camera unit TAL 1,where a single Himalayan Red Panda was photographed on 14 December 2024 at 09.20 h (Image 2), just two days after installation. The animal was photographed at an elevation of 2,848 m in a dense, moss-covered temperate forest within the Liromoba range on the western side of the sanctuary. The undergrowth consisted of ferns, leaf litter and small bamboo patches, indicating an undisturbed habitat. Light snowfall was occasionally observed, including on 07 March 2025, which left a patchy snow cover. No signs of human activity were recorded throughout the deployment period. The species detection occurred in broad daylight hours under cold environment conditions.

The second detection came from camera unit YRS 9 on 31 October 2024, at 1050 h (Image 3), shortly after a rain event; there was still slow dripping water in the area. The animal was photographed at an elevation of 2,409 m on a mountain ridge slope with tree roots and nearby rock cliffs, within a temperate rainforest. This unit was programmed to capture both photos and videos. The animal was recorded in both formats once. This site also experienced minimal disturbance, with only two visits by the field guide during the whole period.

The individuals photographed at both sites exhibited characteristic light reddish-brown fur and distinct tail rings, unique to the species. These elevation ranges (2,409–2,848 m) match previous photographic evidence from Karle Village, Shi-Yomi District and other parts of central and western Arunachal Pradesh (Megha et al. 2021), suggesting a broader, but fragmented distribution of the species across these higher temperate forest zones.

DISCUSSION

Based on morphological characteristics visible in the camera trap images—the lighter, reddish-brown fur and distinct tail rings—the individuals closely resemble the Himalayan Red Panda. These traits are consistent with features that distinguish it from the Chinese Red Panda, which typically has darker fur and fainter tail rings (Hu et al. 2020). However, such identification based solely on external morphology may be prone to error and, therefore, requires confirmation through genetic analysis for accurate subspecies delineation.

Since the sanctuary is located west of the Siang River, it falls within the expected range of the Himalayan Red Panda. Genetic studies indicate that the Siang River serves as a barrier between the two distinct species (Joshi et al. 2021). Photographic records provide

Image 3. Camera trap image of *Ailurus fulgens* recorded at 2,409 m elevation, Darak Range on the eastern side of the Yordi Rabe Supse Wildlife Sanctuary.

evidence from a remote, under-surveyed protected area in Arunachal Pradesh, offering vital support for species distribution models that often overestimate actual occupancy. Recent studies, such as those by Megha et al. (2021), have helped fill the gap by confirming the presence of red pandas in previously unconfirmed areas and highlighting the importance of intact temperate forests with bamboo cover and minimal human impact. Within this wider conservation framework, our records from YRSWS fill an important spatial gap in the species' known distribution. The occurrence of red panda in this landscape suggests habitat continuity and indicates that YRSWS may act as a corridor linking populations in western Arunachal Pradesh (Tawang, West Kameng, Shi-Yomi) with those in central regions such as Mouling National Park.

However, infrastructure projects, including roads and hydropower, pose growing threats by fragmenting forest habitats and creating barriers to movement (Srivastava & Dutta 2010). For example, the third package of the Taliha–Tato stretch of NH-913 (Frontier Highway), covering km 87.13 to km 121.541, has been approved by the MoRTH (2024), highlighting the increasing developmental pressure in northern part of YRSWS. Such linear infrastructures may disrupt forest connectivity between the sanctuary and adjoining high-elevation forests extending towards southern Tibet, potentially affecting wildlife movement and habitat continuity. Maintaining forest connectivity is crucial for reducing the risks of inbreeding and local extinction, a trend already observed in parts of the Khangchendzonga landscape (Ghose & Dutta 2010). Other recent field efforts have reported red pandas in non-protected and community-managed landscapes, such as Karle Village and Shi-Yomi (Megha et al. 2021), highlighting the complementary role of local leadership. The conservation project led by Rimung Tasso in Mouling National Park and Monigong demonstrates how grassroots level action can protect Red Panda habitats. The Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoo's breeding and biobanking program, and its contribution to successful Red Panda releases in Singalila National Park highlight the importance of integrating ex situ conservation with habitat-based recovery (MoEFCC 2024). Together, these efforts illustrate the value of strengthening local conservation models and expanding systematic surveys in lesser-known sanctuaries, such as Yordi Rabe Supse. The two detections in this study, despite being only 12 km apart, provide baseline evidence of Himalayan Red Panda presence across distinct forest ranges and emphasise the need for ongoing monitoring in Arunachal's fragile mountain ecosystems.

CONCLUSION

The first photographic record of the Himalayan Red Panda in Yordi Rabe Supse Wildlife Sanctuary adds significant new information on the species' distribution in Arunachal Pradesh. This record, from one of the region's most remote and under-surveyed protected areas, highlights the vital role of intact high-altitude temperate forests as refuges for this endangered species. The finding supports existing evidence that much of Arunachal's mountain habitats remain unexplored yet ecologically important. Strengthening systematic surveys and expanding community-led conservation models, which have already shown promise in other parts of the state, will be critical to securing the long-term survival of the red panda in India's eastern Himalaya. Future research should prioritise landscape-level monitoring, participatory habitat management, and the integration of camera trapping with genetic validation to better understand population connectivity across central Arunachal Pradesh.

Ethical Standards

All fieldwork was carried out with prior approval from the Department of Environment and Forests, Government of Arunachal Pradesh (Permit No. CWL/Gen/996/2023/Pt-II/191-93). The study employed non-invasive camera trap methods and did not involve any direct handling of wildlife. The authors affirm that all relevant institutional and national ethical guidelines for wildlife research were followed.

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