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continued on the back inside cover

Cover: Himalayan Gray Langur *Semnopithecus ajax* (adult female) © Rupali Thakur.



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NOTE

New distribution record of Black Softshell Turtle *Nilssonina nigricans* (Anderson, 1875) from Manas National Park, Assam, India

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Nilssonina is a genus of softshell turtles under the family *Trochelydidae* distributed widely in southern Asia including Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Myanmar (Rhodin et al. 2021). The Black Softshell Turtle *Nilssonina nigricans* is listed as 'Critically Endangered' and the population is decreasing as per the latest IUCN Red List (Praschag et al. 2021). Back in 2002, the IUCN Red List categorized the *N. nigricans* as 'Extinct in the wild' (IUCN 3.1) - only surviving in restricted temple ponds in Bangladesh and Assam (IUCN Red List 2002). But gradually, individuals started getting reported from the Brahmaputra River Basin in India as well, Meghna River Basin in Bangladesh (Praschag et al. 2021), and Koach Behar of West Bengal (Yasmin et al. 2021). It is also known to be distributed in some isolated sub-populations in several temple ponds of Assam and Tripura (Praschag & Gamel 2002; Ahmed & Das 2010). The presence of *N. nigricans* has been reported from Kaziranga National Park, Nameri Tiger Reserve, and Pakke Tiger Reserve, and may also be distributed in Assam's Kaziranga-Orang Riverine Landscape (KORL) (Ahmed & Das 2010). Little is known about its distribution and much work needs to be done concerning its habitat and ecology. This diurnal large softshell turtle inhabits large rivers and wetlands but

its diet in the wild is still unknown, while in the temple ponds, its diet consists of different types of fruit, animal viscera and other substances like puffed rice and bananas (Ahmed et al. 2009).

This species is also observed in wildlife trade as documented from the Brahmaputra River basin (Baruah & Sharma 2010). The targeted exploitation pressure on this species is also known for human consumption but with a small range (Praschag et al. 2021). However, *N. nigricans* is facing extensive local exploitation including sustained and targeted egg collection for local consumption (Ahmed & Das 2010).

During a field visit to the Manas National Park, we came across a large softshell turtle in a stream (Durabeel Nala of Rupahi River) located in the transitional area between woodland and grassland (26.72°N & 91.075°E) (Figure 1). It was sighted at around 1000 h on 02 May 2021. The turtle was identified as a Black Softshell Turtle *N. nigricans* using description and taxonomic keys (Praschag & Gamel 2002; Ahmed et al. 2009). In addition to the characters observed on several live specimens along with the one presented with photographs here: a. High dome carapace grey in colour (Image 2); b. Mid-dorsal carapace concave; c. Distinct groove between the bony carapace and the

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Aaranyak

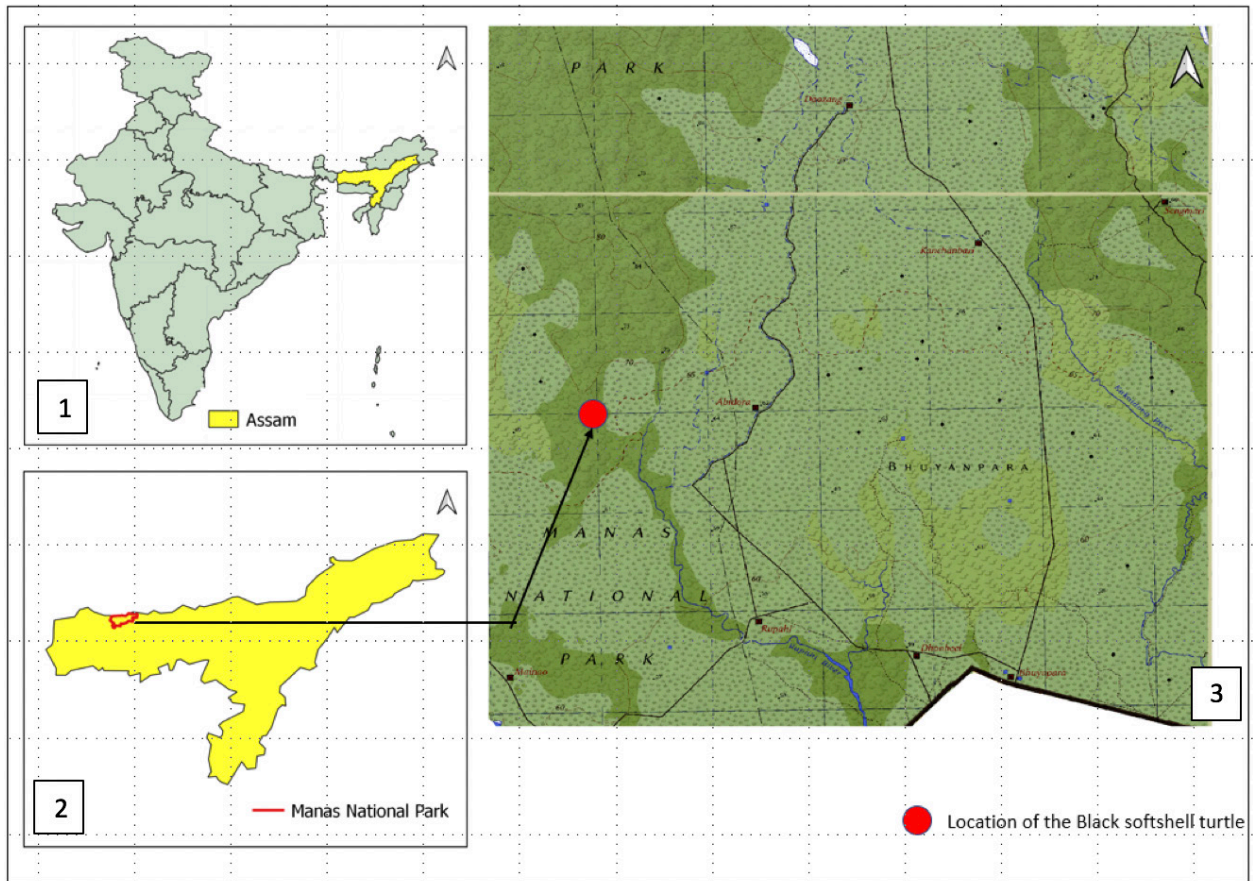


Figure 1. Location of the area where the *Nilssonina nigricans* was sighted in Manas National Park, Assam.



Image 1. Lateral profile of the *Nilssonina nigricans* observed in the Manas National Park, Assam, India. © Gayatri Dutta.



Image 2. The dorsal view of the *Nilssonina nigricans* in a muddy stream from the Manas National Park, Assam, India. © Gayatri Dutta.

cartilaginous flaps; d. a visibly sharp fall of carapace dome to the posterior (in lateral view (Image 1)); and e. Thick and muscular nuchal fold on carapace.

This is the first confirmed distribution record of the *N. nigricans* with an adult individual from the Manas National Park, Assam. Earlier, Ahmed & Das (2010) observed small (app. 4 cm carapace width) young ones in streams originating inside Manas NP which were believed to be juvenile *N. nigricans*. This observation confirms that the species is also found in protected areas other than the PAs mentioned above, increasing its population coverage to more PAs. This also signifies that the species uses more tributaries of the Brahmaputra river to inhabit in addition to the Jia Bhoroli river, that flows by the Nmaeri TR and Pakke TR on the north bank of the Brahmaputra. This occurrence is reported from a stream of the Pahumara River, a tributary of Beki River that drains into the Brahmaputra River in western Assam.

The Manas National Park (26.6594° N, 91.0011° E) is located in the Bodoland Territorial Region (BTR) of Assam in the districts of Baksa and Chirang and spread over an area of 500 km² (Das et al. 2014). It is located in the sub-Himalayan landscape of northeastern India, contiguous with the Royal Manas National Park, Bhutan, and forms the core of the Indo-Bhutan Transboundary Manas Conservation Area (TraMCA) that covers app. 6,500 km² area (Borah et al. 2013). It falls under the

Key Conservation Area- Jigme Dorji-Manas-Bumdeling conservation landscape in the eastern Himalayan ecoregion (Wikramanayake et al. 2001). In and around Manas National Park, the turtles and their habitats are threatened by loss of habitats due to extensive siltation of riverbed (landslide and mining in Bhutan hills), overfishing, and catching of turtles for meat consumption. The population of this species might be affected given the above threats over the last two-to-three decades. Systematic efforts are needed to study and monitor this species to understand the ecology, food habit, and conservation threats associated.

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Communications

The killing of Fishing Cat *Prionailurus viverrinus* (Bennett, 1833) (Mammalia: Carnivora: Felidae) in Hakaluki Haor, Bangladesh
– Meherun Niger Sultana, Ai Suzuki, Shinya Numata, M. Abdul Aziz & Anwar Palash, Pp. 21903–21917

Feeding ecology of the endangered Himalayan Gray Langur *Semnopithecus ajax* in Chamba, Himachal Pradesh, India
– Rupali Thakur, Kranti Yardi & P. Vishal Ahuja, Pp. 21918–21927

Kleptoparasitic interaction between Snow Leopard *Panthera uncia* and Red Fox *Vulpes vulpes* suggested by circumstantial evidence in Pin Valley National Park, India
– Vipin, Tirupathi Rao Golla, Vinita Sharma, Bheemavarapu Kesav Kumar & Ajay Gaur, Pp. 21928–21935

A comparison of the breeding biology of White-throated Kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis* Linnaeus, 1758 in plains and hilly areas of Bangladesh
– Habibon Naher, Noor Jahan Sarker & Shawkat Imam Khan, Pp. 21936–21945

An updated checklist of reptiles from Dampa Tiger Reserve, Mizoram, India, with sixteen new distribution records
– Malsawmdawngliana, Bitupan Boruah, Naitik G. Patel, Samuel Lalronunga, Isaac Zosangliana, K. Lalhmangaiha & Abhijit Das, Pp. 21946–21960

First report of marine sponge *Chelonaplysilla delicata* (Demospongiae: Darwinellidae) from the Andaman Sea/Indian Ocean with baseline information of epifauna on a mesophotic shipwreck
– Rocktim Ramen Das, Titus Immanuel, Raj Kiran Lakra, Karan Baath & Ganesh Thiruchitrambalam, Pp. 21961–21967

Intertidal Ophiuroidea from the Saurashtra coastline, Gujarat, India
– Hitisha Baroliya, Bhavna Solanki & Rahul Kundu, Pp. 21968–21975

Environmental factors affecting water mites (Acari: Hydrachnidia) assemblage in streams, Mangde Chhu basin, central Bhutan
– Mer Man Gurung, Cheten Dorji, Dhan B. Gurung & Harry Smit, Pp. 21976–21991

An overview of genus *Pteris* L. in northeastern India and new report of *Pteris amoena* Blume from Arunachal Pradesh, India
– Ashish K. Soni, Vineet K. Rawat, Abhinav Kumar & A. Benniamin, Pp. 21992–22000

Nectar robbing by bees on the flowers of *Volkameria inermis* (Lamiaceae) in Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary, Andhra Pradesh, India
– P. Suvarna Raju, A.J. Solomon Raju, C. Venkateswara Reddy & G. Nagaraju, Pp. 22001–22007

Contribution to the moss flora of northern Sikkim, India
– Himani Yadav, Anshul Dhyani & Prem Lal Uniyal, Pp. 22008–22015

Short Communications

Firefly survey: adopting citizen science approach to record the status of flashing beetles
– Nidhi Rana, Rajesh Rayal & V.P. Uniyal, Pp. 22016–22020

First report of *Gymnopilus ochraceus* Høil. 1998 (Agaricomycetes: Agaricales: Hymenogastraceae) from India and determination of bioactive components
– Anjali Rajendra Patil & Sushant Ishwar Bornak, Pp. 22021–22025

Notes

A coastal population of Honey Badger *Mellivora capensis* at Chilika Lagoon in the Indian east coast
– Tiasa Adhya & Partha Dey, Pp. 22026–22028

New distribution record of Black Softshell Turtle *Nilssonina nigricans* (Anderson, 1875) from Manas National Park, Assam, India
– Gayatri Dutta, Ivy Farheen Hussain, Pranab Jyoti Nath & M. Firoz Ahmed, Pp. 22029–22031

First report of melanism in Indian Flapshell Turtle *Lissemys punctata* (Bonnaterre, 1789) from a turtle trading market of West Bengal, India
– Ardhendu Das Mahapatra, Anweshan Patra & Sudipta Kumar Ghorai, Pp. 22032–22035

The Fawcett's Pierrot *Niphanda asialis* (Insecta: Lepidoptera: Lycaenidae) in Bandarban: an addition to the butterfly fauna of Bangladesh
– Akash Mojumdar & Rajib Dey, Pp. 22036–22038

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