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Cover: Nilgiri Large Burrowing Spider *Haploclostus nilgirinus*. Acrylic on canvas. © Aakanksha Komanduri.



pockets have been proposed to be probable habitat of the Leopard Cat (Ghimirey et al. 2023). Considering its vital role in its habitat, it is imperative to ascertain its presence in central India and other parts of the country to make efforts for its conservation at the landscape level.

We report the first photographic record of a Leopard Cat in Pench Tiger Reserve, Maharashtra, as well as central India.

### Study area

The study was carried out in Pench Tiger Reserve located in Nagpur District of Maharashtra (Figure 1) and juxtaposed to the southern part of Pench Tiger Reserve in Madhya Pradesh. It comprises Pench National Park, Mansingh Deo Wildlife Sanctuary and Paoni & Nagalwadi Ranges (Dudipala et al. 2023). These ranges have been divided into beats and further into compartments for administrative purposes. The area of the Pench Tiger Reserve is over 740 km<sup>2</sup> including a core area of 483.96 km<sup>2</sup> and a buffer zone of 257.26 km<sup>2</sup>. Human activities are restricted in the core area; most of the villages are located in the buffer zone, where most of the activities related to livelihood generation are allowed, such as collection of non-timber forest products, and other activities like developmental works are regulated (Shukla et al. 2025).

The northern part of Pench Tiger Reserve is hilly while the southern part is relatively plain, with an elevation gradient of 284–591 m. It is connected with Melghat Tiger Reserve to the east, Bor Tiger Reserve to the west, Navegaon-Nagzira Tiger Reserve to the southeast, Kanha Tiger Reserve to the north-east, and Pench Tiger Reserve to the north through corridors consisting of forest and non-forest areas (Jhala et al. 2020).

The major forest type in Pench Tiger Reserve is southern tropical dry deciduous forests dominated by Teak *Tectona grandis* along with *Terminalia tomentosa*, *Sterculia urens*, *Lagerstroemia parviflora*, *Anogeissus latifolia*, *Pterocarpus marsupium*, *Bombax ceiba*, *Aegle marmelos*, *Boswellia serrata*, and *Chloroxylon swietenia* as associated tree species (Champion & Seth 1968). The area has dry weather for most of the year and receives 1,000–1,200 mm annual rainfall during the monsoon season of June to September (Shukla et al. 2025). Summer season is hot from March to June with a maximum temperature of 45°C in May (Shukla et al. 2025). November to January is the period of winter season with average minimum temperature of 12°C (Dudipala et al. 2023).

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

We used Cuddeback C1, Cuddeback Colour Professional, and Bolyguard camera traps during the survey, which were set to taking one photograph per trigger. Each camera trap was assigned a unique identification number, and their memory cards were cleaned and double-checked to prevent data contamination.

We divided the survey area into 296 grid cells of 2 km<sup>2</sup> each and deployed 592 camera traps as pairs in a radius of 500 m from the centres of the cells at a height of 40–60 cm above ground. Camera traps were active for 24 hours during 31 days from 3 February to 3 March 2024. We determined the location of each camera trap using a Garmin etrex10 GPS device, which was set to the default geodetic datum WGS 84.

### RESULTS

A solitary Leopard Cat was recorded on 7 February 2024 at 02.05 hours at 21.568 °N, 79.144 °E (Image 1) inside a seasonal stream, which was predominantly dry except for a few small pools of stagnant water and some boulders along the bed. The stream had a low incline on the sides and loose gravel soil underneath dry leaf litter. The terrain was undulating with rocky outcrops. The vegetation was sparse near the village but denser towards the forest. The canopy cover was about 40%, dominated by Teak. The presence of pellets and hoof marks of herbivores was observed across the compartment. The camera trap location was 2 km away from Narhar village located in the Nagalwadi range of Parshioni taluka of Nagpur District.

### DISCUSSION

Our record of the Leopard Cat is the first in Pench Tiger Reserve and in the Deccan Plateau of central India. In Pench Tiger Reserve, it was not recorded during past camera trap surveys despite an effort of 15,291 camera trap days in 421 locations in 2018 alone (Jhala et al. 2020). The lack of previous records of the Leopard Cat in central India may be due to its lower population density in this region than estimated in temperate Himalayan habitats (Bashir et al. 2013), wet semi-evergreen and moist deciduous forests in southwestern India (Srivathsa et al. 2015), and evergreen forests in Thailand and Cambodia (Petersen et al. 2019; Pin et al. 2022). Dry deciduous forests are likely to represent suboptimal habitat for the Leopard Cat (Pin et al. 2022), thus restraining detection probability.

The location of this record is close to the possible Leopard Cat harbouring area in central India as per



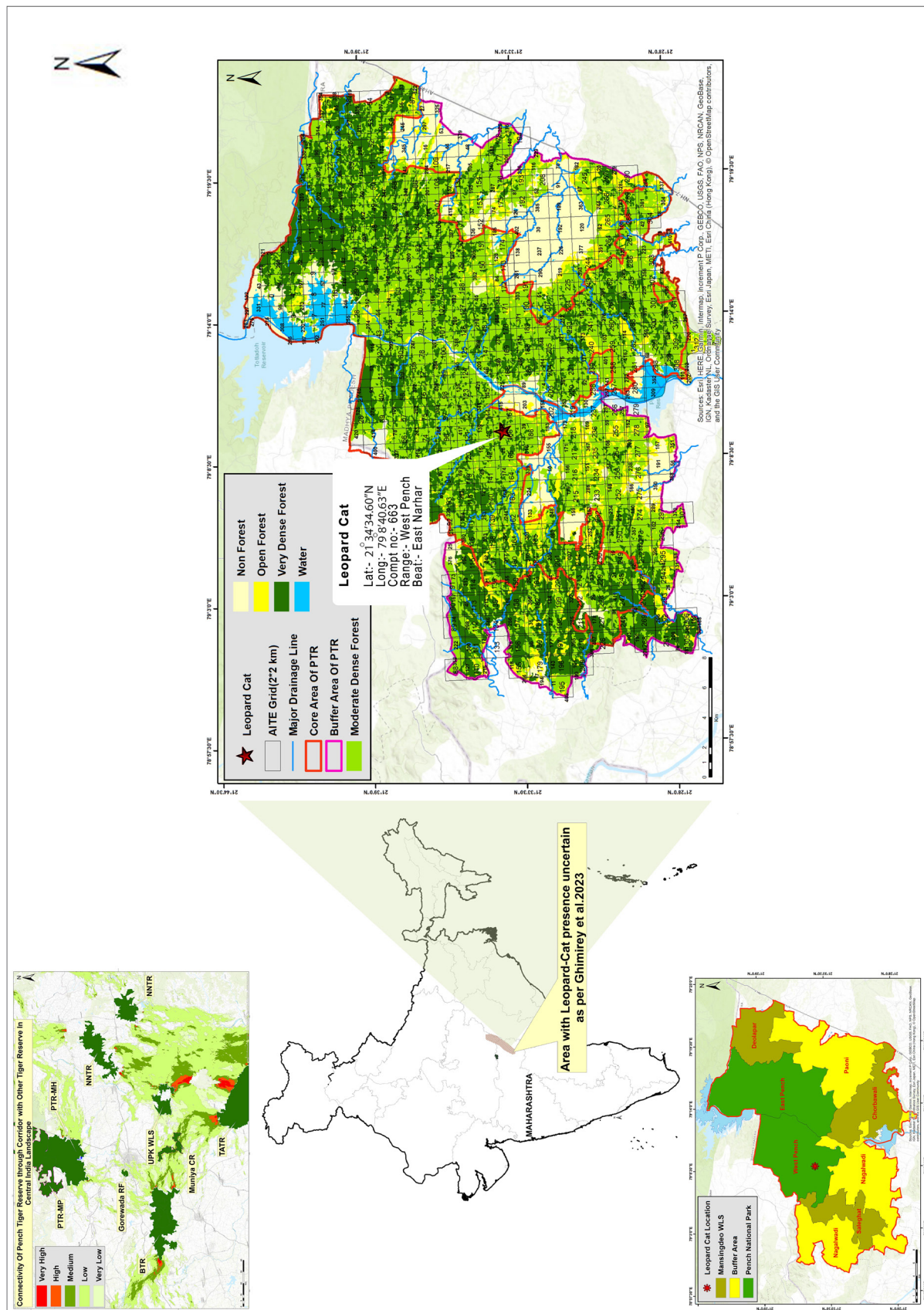


Figure 1. Map of the Pench Tiger Reserve, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India showing study area.



Image 1. Camera trap Photograph of Leopard Cat *Prionailurus bengalensis* from Pench Tiger Reserve on 7 February 2024. © All authors.

Ghimirey et al. (2023). In view of temperatures reaching 45°C in May (Shukla et al. 2025), this record refutes the notion that 38 °C may be the upper threshold for the presence of the Leopard Cat (Mukherjee et al. 2010). As shown by Petersen & Savini (2023), species distribution models based only on climatic data are questionable, but modelling approaches should also include forest cover and canopy height to improve their predictive accuracy. Reporting the presence of the Leopard Cat in this landscape of central India is important from the conservation point of view. Extensive studies are required to determine its distribution, habitat preferences and population dynamics for devising a conservation strategy for maintaining a long-term sustainable population.

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