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Srivari Illam, No. 61, Karthik Nagar, 10th Street, Saravanampatti, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu 641035, India  
Registered Office: 3A2 Varadarajulu Nagar, FCI Road, Ganapathy, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu 641006, India  
Ph: +91 9385339863 | [www.threatenedtaxa.org](http://www.threatenedtaxa.org)  
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continued on the back inside cover

Cover: A Southern Rockhopper Penguin *Eudyptes chrysocome* stands on Tussock Grass on Westpoint Island. Painted in poster colors, this artwork is a reproduction of a photograph by Phillip Colla. Thanks to the photographer for the original image. © Pooja Patil.



of northern West Bengal, and of the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and Mizoram (Choudhury 1996; Lyngdoh et al. 2011; Sethy et al. 2017; Chatterjee et al. 2019; Joshi et al. 2019; Mukherjee et al. 2019; Bal et al. 2022). A camera trap record at 2,690 m in Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary represents the upper elevation limit of the Marbled Cat known in India to date (Mukherjee et al. 2016). Camera trap records of the Marbled Cat in Assam are limited to lower elevations in Manas and Nameri Tiger Reserves (Jhala et al. 2020).

Here, we present camera trap records of the Marbled Cat in Kakoi Reserve Forest, Assam. These records provide further evidence for its occurrence in Assam, highlighting the value of systematic camera trapping in small and under-surveyed reserve forests.

### Study Area

Lakhimpur District in northeastern Assam shares a common boundary with the Brahmaputra River and Majuli District in the south, Dhemaji District in the east, and Sonitpur District in the west. It covers approximately 2,277 km<sup>2</sup>, and has nearly 196.5 km<sup>2</sup> forested area (Chetia et al. 2025).

Kakoi Reserve Forest spreads over 49.8 km<sup>2</sup> to the north-west of Lakhimpur District, bordering Arunachal Pradesh to the north (Figure 1) (Saikia & Saikia 2020). In the south-west, it is bounded by Boginadi River and in the north-east by Ranganadi River (Chetia et al. 2024). It was declared in 1919 (Saikia & Saikia 2020) and is under the jurisdiction of the Lakhimpur Forest Range today (Chetia et al. 2024). In 2017, it had a forest cover of 45.5 km<sup>2</sup>, equivalent to 91.4% of the reserve's total size (Saikia & Saikia 2020).

The region's habitat consists of semi-evergreen and moist deciduous forests with some wetlands. Key tree species include *Mesua ferrea*, *Bombax ceiba*, *Shorea robusta*, *Dillenia indica*, *Kayea assamica* endemic to Lakhimpur, and various bamboo species (Chetia et al. 2025).

Kakoi Reserve Forest experiences a tropical climate characterized by substantial rainfall and a short dry period (Chetia et al. 2025). The average annual rainfall is approximately 3,200 mm (Fick & Hijmans 2017). Rainfall is generally lower during January–March than during April–July (Chetia et al. 2025). Rainfall occurs on about 125 days annually, with July being the wettest

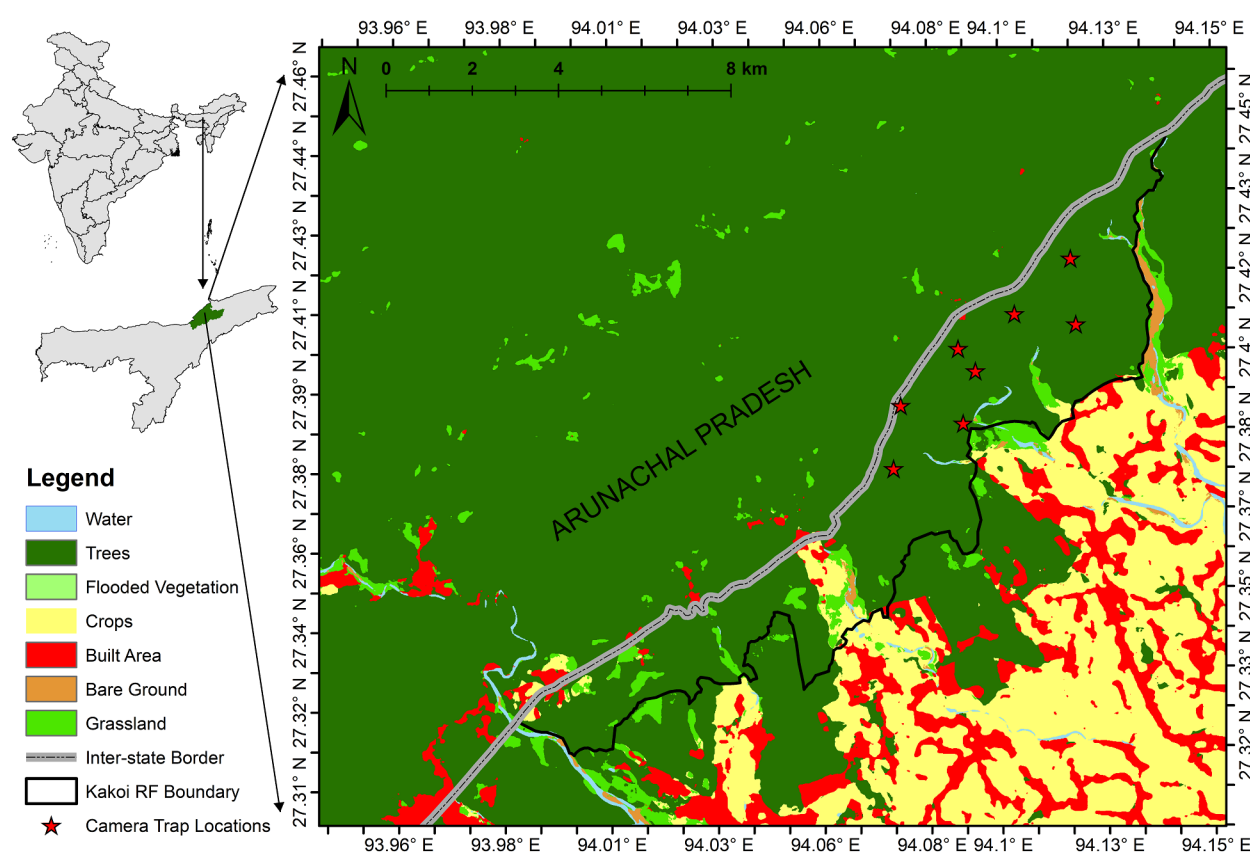


Figure 1. Location and land cover of Kakoi Reserve Forest, Assam, India.

month (Directorate of Economics and Statistics Assam 2014). The average annual temperature is 23.8°C, with seasonal variation from 10°C in winter to 35°C in summer (Buragohain et al. 2023). Relative humidity ranges 74–89 %, with an average of 81% (Buragohain et al. 2023).

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

As part of an ongoing biodiversity monitoring project in Kakoi Reserve Forest, eight passive infrared Browning Strike Force Pro DCL camera traps were deployed to document small mammalian fauna over a 28-day period from 10 July to 6 August 2024. The camera traps were placed opportunistically along animal trails and natural paths approximately 30–50 cm above ground level, depending on the slope, without bait.

Locations were selected based on indirect signs of animal presence, such as tracks, and scat. The camera traps were configured for high sensitivity, with a delay of one second between photographs. They were spaced 1.5–2 km apart and remained active for 24 hours a day throughout the survey period, totalling 224 camera trap days. Each camera location was geo-referenced using a handheld Garmin GPS etrex10 GPS device set to WGS 84 geodetic datum.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 local people residing near Kakoi Reserve Forest. The respondents are primarily farmers and herders who

frequently use the forest for grazing their livestock, firewood collection, and other subsistence activities. They were shown a field guide image of the Marbled Cat displayed in Menon (2014) and asked whether, when, and where they had sighted a similar animal. This method aimed to assess local awareness of the species' presence in the area.

## RESULTS

Two photographs of the Marbled Cat were recorded in two camera trap locations (Images 1 and 2) on different days within the reserve forest. The first photograph was taken at 18:34 h on 13 July 2024 at an elevation of 160 m at the coordinates 27.384° N, 94.091° E. The second image was recorded at 17:47 h on 16 July 2024 at an elevation of 201 m at 27.395° N, 94.094° E. The two locations were approximately 1.5 km apart, within 200–300 m of a perennial stream, and about 50–600 m away from the forest edge. The surrounding habitat at these locations had 60–70 % canopy cover and the dominant tree species were *Canarium bengalense*, *Mesua ferrea*, and *Dillenia indica*.

Our camera traps also recorded the Leopard Cat *Prionailurus bengalensis*, Malayan Porcupine *Hystrix brachyura*, and Wild Boar *Sus scrofa*.

All our interview respondents were aware of the Marbled Cat's presence in Kakoi Reserve Forest.



Image 1. Marbled Cat recorded on 13 July 2024 in Kakoi Reserve Forest, Assam, India. © Hiranmoy Chetia.





Image 2. Marbled Cat recorded on 16 July 2024 in Kakoi Reserve Forest, Assam, India. © Hiranmoy Chetia.

They identified it as “Godhafutuki” and “Godhafutuki mekuri.” Thirteen respondents said they had never harmed or killed a Marbled Cat. Five others mentioned that when Marbled Cats came near their poultry coops, they sometimes used catapults to scare them away, but made it clear they never intended to kill them. They also emphasized that they neither eat wild cat meat nor sell any parts of wild animals.

## DISCUSSION

Our records of the Marbled Cat represent the first evidence for its presence in Kakoi Reserve Forest. It is not possible to determine whether the two photographs show one or different individuals, as the cat in Image 2 is slightly motion-blurred. The nearest sites where the Marbled Cat was reported earlier are Talle Valley Wildlife Sanctuary in Arunachal Pradesh (Selvan et al. 2013) and Subansiri Reserve Forest of Dhemaji District (Choudhury 1996). These sites are about 20–30 km away from our study area.

The forest cover in Kakoi Reserve Forest is well above the minimum forest cover observed in the southeastern Asian range and preferred habitat of the Marbled Cat (Hendry et al. 2023). Our records corroborate findings in Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary indicating that the Marbled Cat is associated with dense forest and a high canopy cover of around 70% (Mukherjee et al. 2016). Reserve

Forests adjacent to our study area also exhibit high proportions of densely forested areas (Saikia & Saikia 2020). We therefore think it likely that the Marbled Cat is present along a broader section of the lower Himalayan foothills in the Lakhimpur Forest Range and the borderlands with Arunachal Pradesh.

The local name “Godhafutuki” for the Marbled Cat is also a common name for the Clouded Leopard *Neofelis nebulosus* in Assamese (Choudhury 2013), which indicates that local people use one name for similar looking species. Some informants correctly identified the Clouded Leopard and provided insights into the size difference between the two species.

Our respondents indicated that poaching, ritualistic hunting, and retaliatory killing do not currently pose a significant threat to the Marbled Cat in Kakoi Reserve Forest and surroundings. Tribal hunters in Assam reportedly have hunted Marbled Cats near Subansiri and Dhansiri Reserve Forests (Choudhury 1996). In Arunachal Pradesh, Marbled Cat skins have been recorded with local hunters in West Kameng District, Dihang-Dibang Biosphere Reserve, Pakke Tiger Reserve, and Ziro Valley (Mishra et al. 2006; Choudhury 2010; Lyngdoh et al. 2011; Selvan et al. 2013).

In view of the scarce knowledge about the Marbled Cat in Assam, we highly recommend further surveys to better understand its distribution, habitat use, and the

threats it faces in this region. Convincing local people to protect rather than hunt the Marbled Cat is essential for its conservation.

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Dr. John D.L. Caleb, Zoological Survey of India, Kolkata, West Bengal, India  
Dr. Priyadarsanan Dharma Rajan, Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Royal Enclave, Bangalore, Karnataka, India

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Dr. Heok Hee Ng, National University of Singapore, Science Drive, Singapore  
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Dr. Akhilesh K.V., ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, Mumbai Research Centre, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India  
Dr. J.A. Johnson, Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, Uttarakhand, India  
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Amphibians

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Reptiles

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Dr. Himansu Sekhar Das, Terrestrial & Marine Biodiversity, Abu Dhabi, UAE

Birds

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Dr. Grant Connette, Smithsonian Institution, Royal, VA, USA  
Dr. P.A. Azeez, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

Mammals

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Dr. David Mallon, Zoological Society of London, UK  
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Dr. Angie Appel, Wild Cat Network, Germany  
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Dr. Ian Redmond, UNEP Convention on Migratory Species, Lansdown, UK  
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Dr. Paul Racey, University of Exeter, Devon, UK  
Dr. Honnavalli N. Kumara, SAGON, Anaikatty P.O., Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India  
Dr. Nishith Dharaiya, HNG University, Patan, Gujarat, India  
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Dr. S.S. Talmale, Zoological Survey of India, Pune, Maharashtra, India  
Prof. Karan Bahadur Shah, Budhanilakantha Municipality, Kathmandu, Nepal  
Dr. Susan Cheyne, Borneo Nature Foundation International, Palangkaraja, Indonesia  
Dr. Hemanta Kafley, Wildlife Sciences, Tarleton State University, Texas, USA

Other Disciplines

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Dr. Mandar S. Paingankar, University of Pune, Pune, Maharashtra, India (Molecular)  
Dr. Jack Tordoff, Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, Arlington, USA (Communities)  
Dr. Ulrike Streicher, University of Oregon, Eugene, USA (Veterinary)  
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Dr. Rayanna Hellem Santos Bezerra, Universidade Federal de Sergipe, São Cristóvão, Brazil  
Dr. Jamie R. Wood, Landcare Research, Canterbury, New Zealand  
Dr. Wendy Collinson-Jonker, Endangered Wildlife Trust, Gauteng, South Africa  
Dr. Rajeshkumar G. Jani, Anand Agricultural University, Anand, Gujarat, India  
Dr. O.N. Tiwari, Senior Scientist, ICAR-Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI), New Delhi, India  
Dr. L.D. Singla, Guru Angad Dev Veterinary and Animal Sciences University, Ludhiana, India  
Dr. Rupika S. Rajakaruna, University of Peradeniya, Peradeniya, Sri Lanka  
Dr. Bahar Baviskar, Wild-CER, Nagpur, Maharashtra 440013, India

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Tamil Nadu 641006, India  
ravi@threatenedtaxa.org & ravi@zooreach.org

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## Articles

### Two new species of bush frogs (Anura: Rhacophoridae: Raorchestes) from Meghalaya, northeastern India

– Holiness Warjri, Jayaditya Purkayastha, Hmar Tlawmte Lalremsanga & Madhurima Das, Pp. 27171–27194

### Cataloguing biodiversity of freshwater communities in two lakes of Gadchiroli area of central India using environmental DNA analysis

– Maheshkumar Seelamwar, Pankaj Chavan & Mandar S. Paingankar, Pp. 27195–27206

### Additions to the Agaricales of Kolhapur District, Maharashtra, India

– Anjali Rajendra Patil & Sushant Ishwar Bornak, Pp. 27207–27225

## Communications

### First camera-trap records of Dhole *Cuon alpinus* (Pallas, 1811) (Mammalia: Canidae) and Spotted Linsang *Prionodon pardicolor* (Hodgson, 1841) (Mammalia: Carnivora: Prionodontidae) in Makalu Barun National Park, Nepal

– Hari Basnet, Nawang Sing Gurung, Shyam Kumar Shah, Dukpa Thikepa Bhote, Khagendra Sangam, Naomi Bates & Daniel Carl Taylor, Pp. 27226–27232

### Redescription of a leaf-footed bug *Homoeocerus glossatus* Ahmad & Perveen (Heteroptera: Coreidae) from Dhule, Maharashtra, India

– Digvijay R. Jadhav, Archana A. Sharbidre & Hemant V. Ghatge, Pp. 27233–27241

### Diet composition of three syntopic, ecologically divergent frogs (Euphlyctis, Minervarya, Polypedates) from paddy fields of Kohima, Nagaland, India

– Thejavitso Chase & Santa Kalita, Pp. 27242–27248

## Review

### A checklist of avifauna of Telengana, India

– Chelmala Srinivasulu & Sriram Reddy, Pp. 27249–27282

## Short Communications

### First photographic evidence of Marbled Cat *Pardofelis marmorata* (Martin, 1836) (Mammalia: Carnivora: Felidae) in Kakoi Reserve Forest, Assam, India

– Hiranmoy Chetia, Abhijit Konwar & Anshuman Gogoi, Pp. 27283–27287

### A new species of millipede of the genus *Xiphidiogonus* Carl, 1932 (Paradoxosomatidae: Polydrepnini) from Satara District, Maharashtra State, India

– S.B. Mane, M.D. Aswathy, P.P. Badade & V.Y. Deshpande, Pp. 27288–27294

### *Mucuna interrupta* Gagnep. (Magnoliopsida: Fabaceae): a new plant record for Nagaland, India

– Vieneite-o Koza, Gyati Yam & Joynath Pegu, Pp. 27295–27299

## Notes

### Sighting of Royle's Pika *Ochotona roylei* Ogilby, 1839 (Mammalia: Lagomorpha: Ochotonidae) in Kishtwar District, Jammu & Kashmir, India

– Umar Mushtaq & Kaleem Ahmed, Pp. 27300–27302

### First record of an Amber Snail *Succinea daucina* Pfeiffer, 1855 (Gastropoda: Succineidae) from Bihar, India

– Dipty Kumari, Dilip Kumar Paul, Sheikh Sajan & Tamal Mondal, Pp. 27303–27307

### First record of the ladybird beetle *Novius pumilus* (Weise, 1892) (Coleoptera: Coccinellidae: Noviini) from West Bengal, India, with notes on its ecology

– Tamoghno Majumder & Kusal Roy, Pp. 27308–27311

### *Boesenbergia tiliifolia* (Baker) Kuntze (Zingiberaceae) - a new record for Maharashtra, India

– Vijay A. Paithane, Anil S. Bhuktar & Sanjay J. Sawant, Pp. 27312–27315

### *Acrospelion alpestre* (Aveneae: Poaceae) in India: a new generic record from northwestern Himalaya

– Kuntal Saha, Manoj Chandran, Ranjana Negi & Saurabh Guleri, Pp. 27316–27320

## Response

### Lesser Noddy *Anous tenuirostris* breeding in the Adam's Bridge Islands, India – a rectification

– Moditha Hiranya Kodikara Arachchi, Pp. 27321–27322

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