It is just past six in the evening and we are on a motorboat heading up the Coringa creek. The mangroves are a tangle of trees, dominated by Avicennia marina and Avicennia officinalis. As we enter the Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary, our two field assistants lead us to the place where they had last glimpsed a fishing cat. We climb up the river bank, which is littered with the pneumatophores of Avicennia trees and spiny leaves of Acanthus ilicifolius. And there, at the very first spot, we find the spoor of a fishing cat! Delicate pugmarks in the porous ground and relatively fresh scat provide clear evidence of the presence of this small feline.

We return to our boat and decide to keep vigil through the night in the hope of spotting the animal. The mystical silence of the full moon night is abruptly broken by the roar of a motorboat with four fishermen. They work swiftly to place a kilometre long fishing net along the bank, to trap fish as the tide recedes. After placing their net, they enquire about our presence and then freely share their traditional knowledge on fishing cats. They speak of how it will sit in absolute silence for hours on the banks before starting to fish.

As the night deepens, the fishermen slowly drift off to sleep, leaving us alone with our thoughts.

THE CORINGA MANGROVES – REALM OF THE FISHING CAT

By Giridhar Malla and K. Sivakumar

As the sun sets upon the dense mangrove forests that fringe the Godavari River, India’s most elusive and secretive small cat awakens.
India’s second largest mangrove ecosystem, the Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary lies in the deltaic branches of the Gouthami and Godavari rivers in Andhra Pradesh. Though remote, these mangrove forests face pressure from local communities that depend heavily on them for their daily needs.

More worrying is the increasing industrialisation of the Godavari delta moving our boat slowly towards the cat. We stopped a safe distance of about 200 m. and positioned our camera and tripod.

Despite the undulating rhythm of the boat as it bobbed over the water, we managed to take some shots of the animal. To our surprise, the cat was not one bit concerned or scared. Pulling out our field books, we jotted down its description.

“The cat was slender and covered with thick fur on its neck and underparts. There were two characteristic black stripes on either side of the cheeks and on the neck. There was one white spot on the back of each ear, similar to tigers, leopards and other cats. The entire body was covered with black spots similar to that of a leopard and the tail was small, only half the length of the body. Sex determination was difficult as it was pressed against the mud bank, waiting for fish to venture close.”

Though it was just our first encounter with this diminutive cat, we were given a decent insight into its behaviour and habits. After an hour of waiting for prey, the disappointed fishing cat walked along the bank and settled down at a different location. It closed its eyes, though its ears were perked and vigilant. Almost 20 minutes passed before we saw it suddenly awaken, fully alert. It cautiously approached the water in search of fish, but again without kick it returned to its original spot.

The second time, the cat got distracted by my dismay it was on account of my camera shutter! But just then it caught a movement in the water. The cat froze, eyes fixed on its prey. Then in a flash, it pounced swiftly into the water and in a fraction of a second it emerged with a catfish in its mouth. The fish was devoured within 10 minutes, after which the feline returned to the safety of the mangroves, leaving the remains of its meal on the bank.

To say we were impressed by hunting prowess would be a gross understatement!

CHALLENGES TO SURVIVAL

Fishing cats are similar to large carnivores in their physical characteristics. Even their gait resembles that of tigers. In the course of our study we came across more fishing cats in the area, and could see that males have

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Listed as endangered by the IUCN Red List, fishing cats are strongly associated with wetlands and are strong swimmers. Fishing cats have a notably short tail and females are distinctly smaller than males. Their olive grey fur has black stripes and rows of black spots. Their hunting technique includes both diving after their prey as well as ‘scooping’ them off the water surface. This beautiful cat reaches maturity before it is one year old and has a life span of about 12 years. A one-year study of ‘cat scats’ in the Keoladeo National Park confirmed that the cats were aptly named because fish comprised 76 per cent of their diet followed by birds (27 per cent), insects (13 per cent) and small rodents (nine percent) (Haque and Vijayan, 1993).

Fishing cat populations reveal a declining trend and the species must be considered as fast vanishing across its range. Habitat degradation, dwindling fish stocks, accidental snaring and poaching for the skin trade all combine to take a toll of the species.
broader heads, are more aggressive and decidedly stouter. Females on the other hand have slender heads and are slim in build. Our observations also suggest that fishing cats are mainly adapted to hunting during the low tide hours, when fish are probably easier to catch.

The pugmarks of fishing cats can be seen all over the interior parts of Coringa, though sightings are rare. Our study on the ecology of fishing cats in Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary is ongoing as a part of Giridhar’s doctorate work and we have already obtained some interesting camera trap images. Clearly there are several challenges being faced by this elusive cat, including the anticipated impact of climate change and the disturbed river flows thanks to hydroelectric projects on the Godavari. Earlier, the sanctuary had a viable population of fishing cats but this population has been showing a downward trend. A recent census by the Forest Department in 2012 estimated just about 70 individuals. A contributing factor to this declining population is the fact that the diversity and availability of their prey base, has dropped on account of unsustainable fishing practices and contamination by industrial and domestic effluents.

The mangroves of Coringa are also home to another fish-dependent mammal – the smooth-coated otter, which, like the fishing cat, faces a bleak future because of the proliferation of commercial aquaculture ponds bordering the sanctuary. Mangroves require a high discharge of silt and clay for their survival, and the future of this unique ecosystem is decidedly under threat from the construction of the upstream Indira-Sagar Multipurpose or Polavaram dam across the Godavari river. Illegal mining in the Eastern Ghats (see Sanctuary Vol. XXXIII No.6, December 2013) only makes matters worse. When this mega dam is completed, we can expect drastic reductions in the discharge of silt in the downstream reaches of the river. This may lead to the destruction of not only the mangrove forests of the mighty Godavari river but might also cause the local extinction of the already threatened fishing cat and smooth-coated otter. It is in this context, that this special project was launched to highlight the value of the biodiversity of the Godavari estuarine area. Hopefully, this threatened small cat will give decision makers pause to think of the consequences of their plans, which would not only damage India’s second largest swatch of mangroves, and cause huge losses to the fishing community, but also impair our ability to deal with the worst impacts of climate change.

Apart from fishing cats, otters, crocodiles and jackals, Coringa also hosts as many as 120 species of birds.