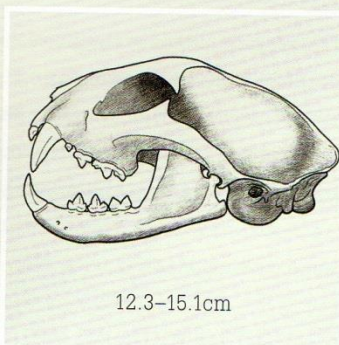
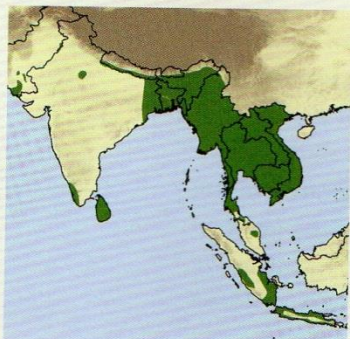


# wild cats of the world

Luke Hunter  
Illustrated by Priscilla Barrett

BLOOMSBURY





**IUCN RED LIST (2008):**

Endangered

**Head-body length** ♀ 57–74.3cm,

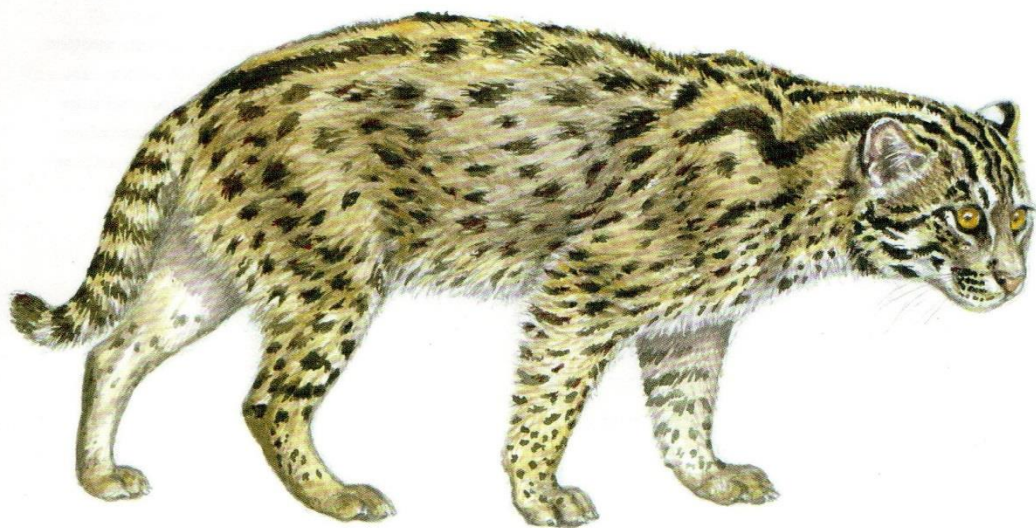
♂ 66–115cm

**Tail** 24–40cm

**Weight** ♀ 5.1–6.8kg, ♂ 8.5–16.0kg

# Fishing Cat

*Prionailurus viverrinus* (Bennett, 1833)



## Taxonomy and phylogeny

The Fishing Cat is classified in the *Prionailurus* lineage where its closest relatives are the Leopard Cat and, more distantly, the Flat-headed Cat. Two subspecies are recognised, one from Java and one from the rest of the range, i.e. mainland Asia and Sri Lanka. These are based on archaic descriptions without strong evidence and Javan individuals cannot be distinguished morphologically from mainland animals. Recent but limited genetic data indicate a weak difference between populations on either side of the Kra Isthmus but sampling was insufficient to make a clear distinction.

## Description

The Fishing Cat is by far the largest of the *Prionailurus* cats, with a muscular, robust body, stocky legs and a relatively short, well-muscled tail. The head is blocky and powerfully built, with small, rounded ears that are black-backed with a white central spot. Fishing Cat feet are partially webbed and the large claws protrude partially from the claw sheaths; although the claws may appear extended, they are fully protractile. The body fur is typically olive-grey, sometimes with a slate-grey or russet tinge, fading to pale underparts. The body is covered in dark brown to black spots that typically coalesce



into long blotches or stripes on the nape, shoulders and back. Albinism is recorded from the Hail Haor Wetland, north-eastern Bangladesh.

**Similar species** The Fishing Cat is likely to be confused only with dark forms of the closely related Leopard Cat but the latter is considerably smaller and more gracile; very young kittens of both species can be indistinguishable.

### Distribution and habitat

The Fishing Cat has a relatively wide but extremely fragmented distribution across South and South-east Asia. The main strongholds are the *terai* lowlands across southern Nepal and northern India, north-eastern and eastern India, north-eastern Bangladesh and the island of Sri Lanka where it appears to be widely distributed. It is thought to be recently extinct in many areas of former occurrence, including

the Indus Valley, Pakistan, western India and possibly north-western India where its presence in the former stronghold, Keoladeo Ghana National Park, Rajasthan, is now uncertain. In South-east Asia, the distribution is extremely patchy and reduced, with known populations restricted to a few sites each in Thailand and Java, Indonesia, and very few recent records from Cambodia, Laos, Burma and Vietnam. Reports from Peninsular Malaysia, Sumatra, Taiwan and south-western China are erroneous or equivocal.

Fishing Cats are strongly associated with wetland habitats including marshes, reedbeds, dense *terai* grasslands (Nepal), riverine woodlands, coastal wetlands and mangroves. They occur in evergreen and dry forest closely associated with well-watered areas such as marshland, oxbow lakes and slow-moving rivers. They are sometimes found

There are very few observations of Fishing Cats hunting in the wild. Much of their behaviour is inferred from captives in naturalistic enclosures with opportunities to forage, such as this individual in Singapore Zoo (C)





**Right:** The Fishing Cat's front feet have loosely knit bones, partial webbing and protruding claws, all of which aids in handling slippery, aquatic prey.

in anthropogenic habitats including aquaculture ponds, rice paddies and along canals near major cities (for example, Kolkata, India, and Colombo, Sri Lanka) but they cannot tolerate extreme wetland modification that is typical for the region. Fishing Cats usually occur from sea level to 1,000m; there is one record from 1,525m in the Indian Himalayan foothills.

### Feeding ecology

**Opposite:** Head-rubbing is an affectionate greeting gesture used by all felid species to reinforce social bonds, such as those between this mother Fishing Cat and her kitten (C).

The Fishing Cat has a diet dominated by aquatic prey, particularly fish as well as crustaceans, molluscs, amphibians, water-associated reptiles, including Bengal Monitors and snakes, and semi-aquatic rodents and those living in wetland habitats. Small rodents occurred in 70 per cent of scats of Fishing Cats collected in Keoladeo Ghana National Park, India. While the Fishing Cat's forefeet are somewhat adapted for catching slippery prey, it otherwise has few adaptations for a specialised diet; its dentition is robust and typical of a more generalised felid diet. Larger mammals recorded as occasional prey include hares, Small Indian Civets and Chital neonates. Birds, particularly ducks, coots



and shorebirds, are also taken, including apparently from the water. Insects are common in scats but are unlikely to contribute much to energetic requirements. They sometimes kill poultry. They are often blamed for killing juvenile goats and very young calves, and yet while the Fishing Cat is sufficiently powerful to kill small stock, there are very few reports with unequivocal evidence. Reports of them killing human infants are unsubstantiated and extremely unlikely.

The Fishing Cat is a very capable swimmer that appears to hunt mainly by a sit-and-wait technique at the water's edge to locate prey. They readily enter the water in pursuit of prey, actively hunting in the shallows and fully submerging themselves while swimming after fish. Foraging is thought to be nocturnal, based on camera-trap records and telemetry data, but these are very few and are biased towards areas with high human activity where cats are more likely to avoid diurnalism. Fishing Cats are known to scavenge from dead livestock, which is likely to have fuelled their reputation as stock killers, as well as from the kills of larger carnivores including Tigers.

### Social and spatial behaviour

The Fishing Cat is very poorly known. The species has been radio-collared only in one small study in Nepal and during a larger, ongoing study in Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park, Thailand, which is likely to produce some more comprehensive data – 17 cats

**Right:** An adult male Fishing Cat patrolling a sandy beach, Khao Sam Roi Yot National Park on the east coast of Thailand. Fishing Cats occupy a wide range of fresh- and salt-water wetland habitats.





have been collared (by October 2014) but the information is yet to be published. Limited available information indicates a typical small felid solitary socio-spatial system with small female ranges overlapped by larger male ranges. Range sizes from limited monitoring in *terai* grasslands are 4–6km<sup>2</sup> (two females) and 22km<sup>2</sup> (one male; Chitwan National Park, Nepal). There are no rigorous density estimates.

## Reproduction and demography

This is poorly known from the wild. In captivity, gestation lasts 63–70 days and litter size is usually one to three kittens (exceptionally, four); the mean from 13 captive litters was 2.6 kittens. There is little evidence for seasonal breeding, although this is often assumed; even with very few records, kittens have been recorded from the wild in January–June, suggesting either weak seasonality or merely limits in sampling. Sexual maturity in one captive female was 15 months.

**Mortality** There are no records of natural mortality; given their habitat preferences, large crocodiles and pythons are potentially major predators. Humans and domestic dogs are the main cause of mortality where monitored.

**Lifespan** Unknown from the wild and up to 12 years in captivity.




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## STATUS AND THREATS

Until recently, Fishing Cats were considered widespread and relatively common, but extremely rapid conversion of wetlands, floodplains and mangroves for human settlement and agriculture throughout tropical Asia has prompted a severe decline in most of the range. The relatively recent introduction of aquaculture and prawn farms into mangrove and coastal habitats is a particularly pervasive threat. Suitable remaining wetland habitat is further threatened by overfishing and pollution, which is exacerbated by human persecution of Fishing Cats. They are killed mainly as perceived poultry or livestock predators, by fishermen who believe they take fish from nets, as bycatch in snares set for other species or, rarely, as food in some areas. Given the high human densities associated with most wetland habitat in their range, there are very few places where direct and indirect anthropogenic threats are not prevalent. The Fishing Cat's strongest conservation prospects probably lie in the lowlands south of the Himalayas where it mostly occurs in protected areas, in Sri Lanka, perhaps in the Sundarbans (Bangladesh and West Bengal, India) and perhaps in a handful of coastal sites in Thailand. Its prospects are poor in most of South-east Asia where it is likely endangered or extirpated. The isolated Javan population is probably Critically Endangered.

Cites Appendix II. Red List: Endangered. Population trend: Decreasing.

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