

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF

THE **Wild Cats**

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smaller, 'washed-out' version of the leopard cat. Its greyish fur is marked with reddish spots.

The Indian race (*rubiginosa*) is found in relatively open country, including dry grassland and scrub. But the more brightly coloured Sri Lankan subspecies (*phillipsi*) is found in tropical forests.

FISHING CAT *Felis viverrina* Bennett, 1833

When Bennett (1833) first described the fishing cat scientifically, he thought that it looked similar to a civet, and hence, he dubbed it *viverrina*. This medium-sized, powerful cat is found throughout southern Asia including southern China, southeastern Asia and parts of Indonesia, but it is definitely a cat, not a civet. It has a robust build and a short tail. Its fur is greyish brown with dark round spots and its face is marked with white stripes running along its cheeks, and from its eyes to the crown of its head. The ears are dark with a central white spot.

It has often been stated that the fishing cat has webbed feet and that its claws do not retract completely (e.g. Roberts, 1977; Guggisberg, 1975). However, I have recently examined a live female fishing cat's paws in the flesh and have found that the webbing is no more than found, for example, in a bobcat (Figure 3.3).

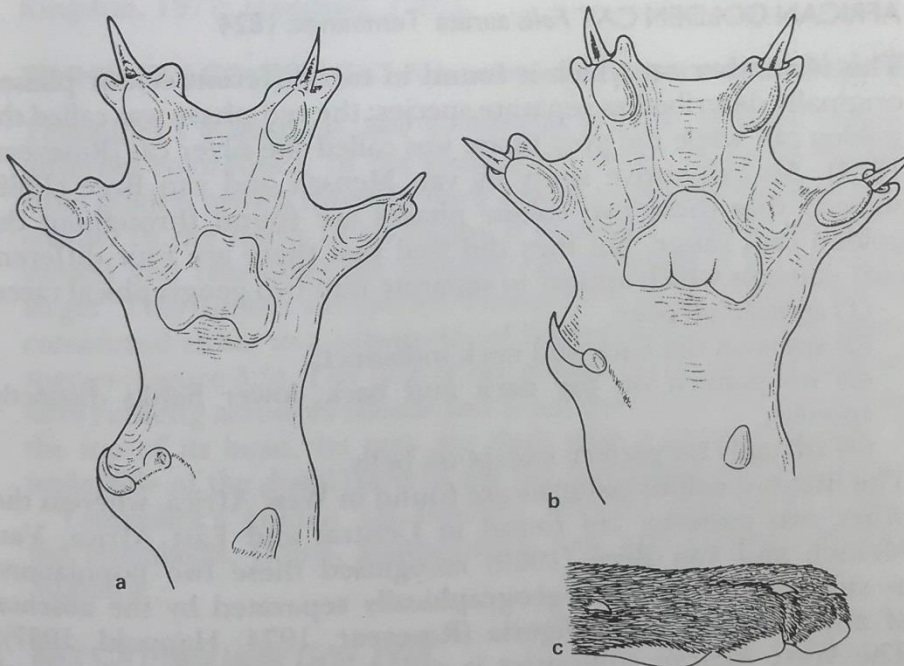


Figure 3.3 The undersides of the forepaws of cats with digits and claws extended to show the degree of webbing: (a) bobcat, (b) fishing cat. (c) Retracted claws of a fishing cat, showing that the cutaneous sheaths are not long enough to cover the claws (after Pocock, 1917) (S.A.)

In addition, I agree with Pocock (1917) that its claws do fully retract, but the cutaneous sheaths do not fully cover the claws. This condition has been found in other cats, including the flat-headed cat and Geoffroy's cat.

Fishing cats are found in a variety of watery habitats including mangrove swamps, marshy thickets and reed beds up to an altitude of 1,500 metres. As its name suggests, the fishing cat frequently enters water and hunts fish or frog prey, and even molluscs.

FLAT-HEADED CAT *Felis planiceps* Vigors and Horsfield, 1827

This is surely the oddest cat in the world. About the size of a domestic cat, its skull is strangely flattened. It has a long body, but short legs and tail. Its thick fur is reddish brown to dark brown. Its underparts are white spotted with brown. There are white streaks on its head. The tail is yellowish underneath. Its flat head and long muzzle are thought to be adaptations to fishing. Its curious characters have led Muul and Lim (1970) to suggest that it is the ecological equivalent of a semi-aquatic mustelid.

The flat-headed cat is found in Malaya, Borneo and Sumatra up to 700 metres altitude. It is found close to water in tropical forest, where it hunts fish and frogs. In fact, the flat-headed cat is probably more deserving of the name fishing cat than *Felis viverrina*.

AFRICAN GOLDEN CAT *Felis aurata* Temminck, 1824

This is another cat which is found in two different colour phases, originally described as separate species; the red phase was called the golden cat, while the grey phase was called the silver cat (Rosevear, 1974). An exhaustive study by van Mensch and van Bree (1969) showed that these two colour phases are found throughout the golden cat's range, but they did find that there are four different coat patterns which appear to separate into two geographical races:

- (1) spotted all over;
- (2) spots on the back and neck indistinct;
- (3) no pattern on the neck and back; lower flanks distinctly spotted;
- (4) virtually no pattern except on belly.

The first two colour patterns are found in West Africa, whereas the other two patterns are found in Central and East Africa. Van Mensch and van Bree (1969) recognised these two populations as subspecies which are geographically separated by the absence of any golden cats in Nigeria (Rosevear, 1974; Happold, 1987). The West African subspecies is called *celidogaster*, the unspotted sub-species from Central and East Africa is known as *aurata* (Figure 3.4).

The African golden cat is usually found in high rain forest, but it appears to be occasionally encountered in Guinea woodland as long