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Feeding behaviour of fishing cat in the Godavari mangroves, India

We observed a rare feeding behaviour of a fishing cat *Prionailurus viverrinus* on a dog-faced water snake *Cerberus rynchops* and pond heron *Ardeola grayii* in the mangroves of the Godavari delta in India. Since fishing cats are threatened due to various levels of anthropogenic pressure, these observations giving insight into their behaviour highlight the need to study these elusive cats.

Fishing cat is one of the highly threatened small cat species which inhabits wetlands and marshy areas across its range. Presently the fishing cat is categorised as Vulnerable by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species (Mukherjee et al. 2016), but little is known about its behaviour and ecology. Therefore, since 2013 we have been studying this elusive species in the mangrove forests of the Godavari delta at the south-east coast of India.

The Godavari River is the second longest river in India flowing into the Bay of Bengal in Andhra Pradesh; at its confluence with the sea a large contiguous stretch of mangroves is formed. The total area of the Godavari mangroves is 316 km², of which 235.7 km² is notified as Coringa Wildlife Sanctuary (Ravishankar et al. 2004). In this paper, we present some interesting observations recorded during our field surveys on feeding habits of fishing cats in the Godavari mangroves.

In May 2014, we came across a solitary male fishing cat foraging on the creeks during low tide at around 11:30 h. After a few minutes waiting at the bank for fishes in the creek, the cat started walking again. Suddenly the cat spotted a basking dog-faced water snake on the bank; with a sudden strike it attacked the snake to kill it and started consuming it (Fig. 1). When hunting for fishes in the creeks or for catching prey fishing cats can remain in a steady position for several hours without making any movement, only moving their ears occasionally to capture the surrounding sounds. We observed this kind of behaviour on several occasions during our surveys. This kind of behaviour was also explained by local fishermen who hunt in the creeks, they call this behaviour "Matumeeda unna pilli", which in their local language Telugu means "ambush by the cat in silence". Such observations have been filmed several times.

On 17 January 2017, we observed a solitary male fishing cat hunting a pond heron in the sanctuary area. Within a matter of few seconds the cat emerged out of the mangrove



Fig. 1. Fishing cat seen feeding on dog-faced water snake in mangroves of Godavari Delta, India (Photo G. Malla).



Fig. 2. Fishing cat seen hunting Pond Heron in the mangroves of Godavari Delta, India (Photo G. Malla).

thickets, pounced on the bird, grabbed it by the neck and went back into the forest (Fig. 2). Both observations were made during the low tide when the water was receding. These observations also matched with the two years of camera trapping data that suggest fishing cats being more active during low tide times in the Godavari Delta.

Though fishing cats mostly prey on fish, they also feed on small birds, rodents, reptiles, insects, frogs, molluscs and crustaceans (Haque & Vijayan 1993, Sunquist & Sunquist 2002). They are also known to scavenge on carcasses and prey on poultry (Sunquist & Sunquist 2002, Cutter & Cutter 2009). However, such direct observations of fishing cats hunting and feeding on different prey like dog-faced water snake and pond heron are very rarely reported. Therefore, these observations can give an insight into the feeding ecology and behaviour of this threatened species.

One of the major threats to fishing cat populations in India is wetland degradation (Mukherjee et al. 2016) and about 50% of the Asian wetlands are in moderate to high degree of threat (Scott & Poole 1989). The rapid changes in the Godavari mangroves due to encroachment of aquaculture ponds, shipping industries, and oil refineries are the immediate threats to the fishing cat

population in the delta. These mangroves are of global importance and with proper management we can ensure the survival of not only fishing cats, but also other threatened fauna such as the vulnerable smooth-coated otter *Lutrogale perspicillata* (Subba Rao 2013).

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