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Wildlife on camera rivals Asia rainforest

A STAFF REPORTER

Guwahati, May 11: A two-year study of the carnivores in the wilds of Upper Assam has revealed a hotbed of bio-diversity that can rival the best tropical rainforest sites in South and Southeast Asia.

Kashmira Kakati, a wildlife biologist, conducted the study from 2007-09. It involved camera trapping of the carnivores in the forest landscape comprising the Dehing-Patkai wildlife sanctuary, Upper Dehing East and West block reserve forests, Jeypore reserve forest and Dilli reserve forest spread across the three districts of Tinsukia, Dibrugarh and Sivasagar and covering an area of 575 square km.

"Photographs taken by remote infra-red sensor cameras have revealed the presence of 19 species of carnivores — a number comparable to some of the best rainforest areas across South and Southeast Asia.

The endangered species recorded include the tiger, wild dog, fishing cat while the threatened or near-threatened species include the clouded leopard, marbled cat, Malayan sun bear, large Indian civet and hog badger," Kakati said today.

The survey was supported by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund (CEPF), Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), the UK-based Rufford Foundation and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)-India program.

Kakati said it is important to note that this lowland evergreen forest type is itself endangered, having disappeared across vast areas of its former range, and this landscape is among the last and largest remaining areas of the Assam Valley wet evergreen forest left in South Asia.

She said this is also the first time that pictures of Malayan sun bear, marbled cat, Asiatic golden cat and binturong, also know as bearcat, have been obtained in the wild in Assam with aid of camera trapping.

"Eight of the nine cat species reported from the Northeast India (excluding the high-altitude snow leopard) have been recorded here making the site with the maximum number of wild cat species. It has been confirmed with photographs from one contiguous forest area anywhere in Asia, surpassing well-known rainforest sites like Taman Negara in Peninsular Malaysia, Cat Tien in Vietnam, Khao-Yai of Thailand and Namdapha National Park, India," Kakati said.

She said the presence of tiger here assumes all the more importance because it is feared that the tiger on the decline in the Namdapha National Park of Arunachal Pradesh further east, with no photographs having been obtained in recent camera-trapping efforts there.

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The wildlife biologist said though diversity is still present here, despite years of logging and disturbance, one must tread with caution.

“The numbers of these animals are extremely low, and sambar, the favoured prey species of large predators like tiger and wild dog, was rarely photographed except one or two in the relatively safe confines of the Digboi Oil Field (part of the Upper Dehing East reserve forest). Gaur (commonly known as the Indian bison) also favoured tiger prey is formerly reported from this area. But this species was not encountered during the survey at all, indicating that they might have disappeared locally,” she said.

She also said poaching, especially of prey species like deer, pig and porcupine are a threat to the wildlife of the entire landscape. Apart from this pollution of the forest and its water sources by garbage dumping and untreated industrial wastes have remained a persistent danger to the wildlife of the area. The impacts of these have never been assessed.



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