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news





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Editors: Christine & Urs Breitenmoser
Co-chairs IUCN/SSC
Cat Specialist Group
KORA, Thunstrasse 31, 3074 Muri,
Switzerland
Tel ++41(31) 951 90 20
Fax ++41(31) 951 90 40
<urs.breitenmoser@ivv.unibe.ch>
<ch.breitenmoser@kora.ch>

Contributing Editor: Peter Jackson
29 Lake Close, London SW19 7EG
United Kingdom
Tel/Fax: ++44 (20) 89 47 01 59
<peterfr.jackson@virgin.net>

Associate Editors: Keith Richmond
Brian Bertram

Cover Photo: Borneo bay cat, Malaysian Borneo
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www.borneanwildcat.blogspot.com

Melanistic marbled cat from Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park, Sumatra, Indonesia

In recent decades there have been an increasing number of camera trap studies occurring throughout Southeast Asia. Although not the target species, photographs of marbled cats are occasionally recorded and may give insight to some aspects of the species' ecology. Here we report on a series of camera trap photographs that were recorded of a melanistic marbled cat *Pardofelis marmorata* in Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park (BBSNP), in southeastern Sumatra. These photos constitute the first documented indication of melanism in marbled cats.

The marbled cat remains one of the most rare and illusive felids, with relatively little documentation of their ecology and life history (Nowell & Jackson 1996, Sunquist & Sunquist 2002). To date, there have been no successful studies focused solely on this species and the majority of information on the marbled cat has come from historical accounts or anecdotal observations (Hose 1893, Holden 2001, Grassman & Tewes 2002, Grassman et al. 2005, Azlan & Sharma 2006, Morino 2009). From 1998-2006, intensive camera trapping was conducted in the 3,568 km² Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park BBSNP in southeastern Sumatra to assess the po-

pulation density of Sumatran tigers *Panthera tigris sumatrae* in the park (Wibisono 2006). On 29 June 2001, a trap camera set in the Liwa region of BBSNP (104°8'52.969"E/5°6'41.990"S, 1089 m asl) recorded a series of photographs of a pair of marbled cats, one exhibiting melanism (Fig. 1). The camera was unbaited and had been placed on an animal trail that followed a sharp ridgeline in a relatively remote region of the park. The habitat in the area is characterized by rugged topographical features, altitudes above 1,000 m, and primary evergreen forest. The series began at 07:41 with a head-on photograph of a single, normally pigmented marbled cat. Five

more photographs were taken of this individual in various positions in front of the camera over the next fourteen minutes. At 07:56, a melanistic individual appeared, apparently walking along the trail behind the normally pigmented individual. Over four hours later, at 12:21, a photograph of what we assume to be the same two individuals moving in the opposite direction along the trail was taken. This time, both the normally pigmented and melanistic marbled cat appeared together in the frame (Fig. 2). The felids proceeded to interact in front of the cameras for fourteen minutes by rolling on the ground and moving back and forth along the trail. The final picture of the pair was taken at 12:35.

A total of 45 marbled cat photographs were obtained in BBSNP over the duration of the study. The series of photos described above were the only record of a melanistic individual. The particular camera at which the melanistic individual was recorded was deployed for a total of 32 trap-nights, but there were no additional marbled cat photos recorded at this camera on subsequent trap nights. Several additional camera trapping sessions were carried out in this region of the park during ensuing years, and while photographs of marbled cats were recorded, no further photographs of melanistic individuals were observed.

This is the first documented record of a melanistic marbled cat, although melanism has been reported in numerous other felid species (e.g. Eizirik et al. 2003 for multiple felid species, Dinets & Polechla Jr. 2005 for jaguar, Ghimirey & Pal 2009 for Asiatic golden cat). The quality of the photographs is poor but the melanistic individual seems to be very dark in color with some darker spots faintly visible along the legs and tail. The eyes appear to be a similar golden color to the normally pigmented individual. Both individuals are of similar size and appear to be adults in good health. Marbled cats are not commonly photographed together, but Grassman & Tewes (2002) reported a sighting of two individuals interacting at a salt lick, and several camera trap photographs of pairs have also recently

been recorded in Southeast Asia (e.g. J. Ross and A. Hearn, pers. comm.). In this case, we believe the pair may be a mating pair owing to their similar size and the character of their interaction in front of the camera. However, the possibility of littermates travelling together cannot be excluded.

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¹ Wildlife Conservation Society-Indonesia Program, West Java, Indonesia

² University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Massachusetts, USA
<jennifer MCCart@gmail.com>



Fig. 1. Melanistic marbled cat pictured on 29 June 2001 at Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park (Photo Wildlife Conservation Society-Indonesia Program).



Fig. 2. Melanistic and normally pigmented marbled cat pictured on 29 June 2001 at Bukit Barisan Selatan National Park (Photo WCS-Indonesia Program).