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# news





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# Sighting and first photograph of Asiatic golden cat in western Arunachal Pradesh

**Asiatic golden cat *Catopuma temmincki* is an enigmatic and elusive forest predator. In Asia, little is known about the status of the Asiatic golden cat and it is rarely seen in the wild. We present the first photographic evidence of an Asiatic golden cat in Assam valley semi-tropical evergreen forests of Pakke Tiger Reserve, Arunachal Pradesh.**

The Asiatic golden cat, also known as Temminck's cat, is a medium sized felid, which ranges throughout Southeast Asia, from Nepal and parts of China to peninsular Malaysia and Sumatra. It ranges from the lowlands to altitudes of 3000 m (Baral & Shah 2008; Wang 2007). Little is known about the status of the Asiatic golden cat and it is rarely seen in the wild (Jutzeler et al. 2010). However, there has been a recent increase in records from camera trapping studies (J. Sanderson pers. comm. in Jutzeler et al. 2010) such as from Bhutan (Wang 2007) and Nepal (Ghimirey & Pal 2009). Some studies have found more records of Asiatic golden cats than of some other sympatric small felids, suggesting it may be more common than previously thought (IUCN 2010).

The Asiatic golden cat is rather heavily built with a uniform but highly polymorphic pelage ranging from black to golden red that may also be marked with spots and stripes in a pattern similar to that of the leopard cat (Sunquist & Sunquist 2002). The body size of the Asiatic golden cat is similar to that of the clouded leopard (Grassman et al. 2005). It appears to show no significant preference for particular habitats (Grassman et al. 2005) and is known to occur in forested habitats, including dry deciduous forest, evergreen forest, and tropical rainforest (Nowell & Jackson 1996), as well as in more open habitats such as shrub and grasslands (Choudhury 2007). Some studies have suggested it may be less common in montane forest: in Sumatra's Kerinci Seblat National Park, all records for this species were from lowland forest with none from montane forest, unlike the clouded leopard and marbled cat (Holden 2001).

In India, it is found only in northeast India where it occurs mainly in forested hills and foothills of Lesser Himalayas (Choudhury 2007). Recent records within the country include Namdapha National Park, Arunachal Pradesh (Datta et al. 2008) and Jeypore-De-

hing lowland rain forest (National Geographic News 2010), and Manas National Park in Assam (Choudhury 2007).

The Asiatic golden cat is listed under Schedule I of the Indian Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 and Appendix I of CITES. According to a 2008 IUCN assessment (Sanderson et al. 2008), the Asiatic golden cat has been listed as Near Threatened species because it comes close to qualifying as Vulnerable under Criterion C. The species is fully protected over most of its range by national legislation. Hunting of golden cat is prohibited in Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, India, Indonesia, Peninsular Malaysia, Myanmar, Nepal, Thailand and Viet Nam and is regulated in Lao PDR (Nowell & Jackson 1996).

## Study area

Pakke Tiger Reserve (PTR), 92°36' – 93°09' E and 26°54' – 27°16' N, is situated in the East and West Kameng Districts of Arunachal Pradesh at the foothills of the Lesser Himalayas. PTR is spread over 862 km<sup>2</sup> and is contiguous with Nameri National Park (200 km<sup>2</sup>). The terrain is undulating and altitude ranges from 150 m to 2300 m. The general vegetation type of the Pakke (and consequently of PTR) is classified as Assam Valley tropical semi-evergreen forest (Champion & Seth 1968; Borah et al. 2010), dominated by species of Euphorbiaceae, Lauraceae, Meliaceae, Anacardiaceae and Annonaceae, and made up of tracts of tropical evergreen, tropical semi-evergreen and secondary moist bamboo. The intensive study area is PTR. There are more than 50 villages surrounding PTR, nearest being approximately 35 km away from the nearest boundary.

## Results and discussion

The Asiatic golden cat reported here was sighted for a few seconds in Pakke Tiger Reserve in western Arunachal Pradesh at around 8:59 am on 5-12-2010 (at 92.77662° E,

27.05801° N, 157.3 m). It was seen crossing the Nameri River (see cover picture of this issue), moving from the southeast towards the northeast. The vegetation around the sighting area included trees such as *Dillenia indica*, *Terminalia bellerica*, *Castanopsis* sp., *Duabanga* sp. and *Canarium* sp. The terrain was undulating to hilly. A total effort of 490 km during a period of October to December 2010 was spent walking trails and streams before the sighting was made. According to a study conducted by Misra (2006) in Tawang and West Kameng Districts in Arunachal Pradesh, no Asiatic golden cat was found in this region. The other record of golden cat in Arunachal Pradesh is from the moist evergreen habitat of Namdapha National Park below 2000 m in Changlang District (Datta et al. 2008), in the eastern part of the state, approximately 360 km north-east (aerial distance) of PTR (from the point of golden cat sighting). The other records of the species in Assam are at an approximate (aerial) distance of 115 km south-west of PTR (Manas National Park) and 265 km north-east of PTR (Jeypore-Dehing rainforest).

The Asiatic golden cat is threatened primarily by habitat loss due to deforestation, but is also threatened by indiscriminate snaring (Holden 2001). Northeast India still has 64% of its total geographical area under forest cover, which, however, is rapidly declining across the entire region (Ramakantha et al. undated). Additionally, the vast majority of the region's indigenous inhabitants are meat-eaters and almost all communities have expert hunters and trappers (Ramakantha et al. undated). Hunting is regarded as a serious threat to wildlife in Arunachal Pradesh (Aiyadurai 2007). A study on wildlife hunting in 4 districts of Arunachal Pradesh including East Kameng and Tawang Districts (Aiyadurai 2007) reported a total of 33 mammal species being hunted, including the golden cat. According to this study, the golden cat was hunted primarily for its skin.

Golden cat are also reported to have killed livestock, including poultry, but also larger animals such as sheep, goats, buffalo calves and other ungulates (Sunquist & Sunquist 2002). Asiatic golden cat is also threatened by declining ungulate abundance in many parts of Southeast Asia (IUCN 2010).

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