

Human-Jungle cat interaction in rural West Bengal



Jungle Cat in shrubbery. © Tanima Choudhury.

The Jungle Cat *Felis chaus* is listed as 'Least Concern' (LC) on the IUCN Red List (Gray et al. 2016). It is listed under the CITES Appendix II and the Schedule II Part I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972 of India. In Turkey, Jungle Cats hunt water birds mainly during the winter (Ogurlu et al. 2010).

In India, despite the laws protecting them, Jungle Cats have been known to come into conflict with the local villagers when they enter villages to raid their poultry sheds (Tikader 1983). In West Bengal, tribal people in areas like Junglemahal still perform centuries-old hunting festival called 'Shikar Utsav' where animals are hunted using traditional weapons like spear. In 2021 as many as 200 animals including the protected

jungle cats were hunted during the 'Shikar Utsav' performed from January to June (Nibedita 2021). In 2010–2011, 27 Fishing Cats and 10 Jungle Cats were reported dead in West Bengal and 38 Fishing Cats were reported dead in Bangladesh from 2010 to 2013 (Mukherjee et al. 2012; Chowdhury et al. 2015). The main cause for these killings was because the local villagers believed them to be a threat to their livestock and poultry. The small wild cats were snared and then starved or beaten to death. Their remains were then hung for display (Chowdhury et al. 2015).

One of the major obstacles to wildlife management is the human-wildlife negative interaction. This mainly occurs as a result



Jungle Cat attempting to steal ducks from wooden and metallic netted poultry shed. © Tanima Choudhury.

of the encroachment of the ever-expanding human population into the territories of these wild animals and subsequent competition for the limited resources between the two parties. In most cases, the animals are killed by mobs of local people in these conflicts before the forest officials can come and try to mitigate the problem. In November 2016, a Leopard which had entered Mandawar Village, Gurgaon, Haryana was beaten to death by a mob of 1,500 people.

The present study was done in Belun Village (23.0362° N, 88.2486° E), Ketugram, Purba Bardhaman District, West Bengal, India to determine the actual impact of the poultry hunting behaviour of the Jungle Cats. Toguad hunting, trail camera (HC-550A) and Qnotici Digital trail camera (PR-300C)

were used for the study. The villagers kept the birds in wooden sheds, concrete sheds, tin sheds, mud sheds, and metallic netted sheds. All sheds were self-made.

The average number of poultry lost per month was studied for four months of June–September 2021. Two houses were selected for the study. One house had three wooden sheds each of which were able to house 10–11 poultry. The other house had a metallic netted shed and could house 20 poultry. Both houses were located near paddy fields. The wooden and netted sheds were on an average $104.14 \pm 7.18 \times 63.5 \pm 3.2 \times 38.75 \pm 9.89 \text{ cm}^3$ and $81 \times 82 \times 86 \text{ cm}^3$ in dimensions, respectively. According to the survey done on the monthly incomes of the poultry owning households, the relatively

wealthier households opted for the concrete sheds, netted sheds, tin sheds as they were easier to make and could house more birds though the building materials were more costly than those of the mud sheds and wooden sheds. The netted sheds lost 8.5 ± 0.7 birds and the wooden sheds lost 3.3 ± 3.5 birds per month. In both cases attempts were made on sheds during 35% of days per month. The netted sheds lost more birds as after sometime in India's humid climate the net rusted away and created openings for the Jungle Cats to capture the birds. Improving the quality of sheds could help to reduce the number of birds lost, thereby helping to reduce the conflict between the villagers and the Jungle Cats in the rural villages.

Studies done in Kanha National Park in 2011–2012 revealed that large carnivores like Tigers were responsible for 71% of the total livestock killed there. The forest officials accepted 95% of the kills for compensation, so retaliatory actions against the carnivores was not undertaken by the villagers (Miller et al. 2016). In villages like Belun which are not near protected forest, no compensation is given to the villagers for their loss of poultry, increasing the chances for retaliatory action by the villagers against the wild cats.

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