



Observations on cats and crows attacking free-ranging snakes near homesteads in Chennai

Pet and feral animals, such as dogs *Canis familiaris*, cats *Felis catus* and crows (*Corvus* spp.) appear to be under-documented threats to urban wildlife (Legge et al. 2020; Benmazouz et al. 2021). Domestic animals, both pets and feral ones, are skilled hunters by instinct and often prey on a wide variety of animals, including birds, small mammals, reptiles, and insects (Twardek et al. 2017). Such animals could become harmful to urban wildlife as they often lack natural controls like predators or disease, leading to overpopulation and resource competition (Jarvis 2020). This short communication records observations on housecats preying and common crows *C. splendens* attacking free-ranging snakes, observed in human settlements nestled within a green patch in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Case 1, Slender Wolf Snake *Lycodon fasciolatus*: On 17 July 2019 at 2103 h, in railway quarters at Ayanavaram (13.101° N, 80.229° E), an adult house cat was found mauling a Slender Wolf Snake. The snake was about 50 cm long, suggesting it to be an adult. The cat was seen mauling the wolf snake on its body and tail

region. There were bruises all over the body of the snake as well as rip marks on the tail region. When the cat saw human movement in the area, it left the snake. The house cat had hunted the snake in the night and it had left it in the backyard in a place where there is a tank with a water source. The cat had repeatedly bit the snake's body (forebody and midbody) and the tail region of the snake.

Case 2, Rat Snake *Ptyas mucosa*: On 17 December 2020 at 1020 h in the same locality as above, two kittens were seen biting and attacking a baby rat snake. The snake was 50 cm long, indicating it to be a young one. Near a playground with many people, suddenly we saw the two kittens keenly looking at the fence. Within a minute, they lunged at the fence base, bit and pulled out a baby rat snake bringing it to the middle of the garden. They then bit, chewed the snake, severing it into pieces, in the midst of the on-lookers. Then, both the cats started to feed on the baby rat snake, taking turns, consuming bits and pieces of it.



Figure 1. (clockwise from top left): (a) dead wolf snake (*Lycodon fasciolatus*) bitten and killed by a cat, (b) dead rat snake (*Ptys mucosa*) being chewed on by a kitten, (c) injured, live trinket snake (*Coelognathus helena*) arched up in defence against crows. Photos: (a, b): Faustina Roberts, (c) S.R. Ganesh

Case 3, Trinket Snake *Coelognathus helena*: On 12 May 2023 at 0800 h, in Perambur Carriage Works (13.107°N, 80.235°E), a cauldron of Common Crows ($n = 3$) and Mynas *Acridotheris tristis* ($n = 8$) were seen surrounding and attacking a Trinket Snake. The snake was about 100 cm long suggesting it to be an adult. The snake and the surrounding birds were all seen just next to the railway line track and the adjacent vegetation belts, bordering the buildings further behind. The trinket snake reared up, puffing itself and arching its forebody and lunged at the birds. The birds pecked the snake with their beaks in its trunk and tail. There appeared to be bruises on the mid body and the tail of the trinket snake. Then owing to an approaching train both the birds and the snake rushed away.

The Ayanavaram Railway Quarters where cases 1 and 2 were noted, is about one km southwest of Perambur Carriage Works Railway Station where case 3 was noted. Both the places nestle in the joint office complex, a well-vegetated green belt within the otherwise built-up part of the city. The region falling under Anna Nagar Zone of Greater Chennai Corporation has 20.58% green cover extending to 5.28 km². This green patch seems to harbour a few snake species as evidenced by our observations.

However, as can be expected, snakes, though managing to somehow persist here, face threats in terms of pets and anthropophilic animals like cats and crows that are not otherwise a natural part of the ecosystem, but are present due to human interference. Presence of Trinket Snake



Coelognathus helena within Perambur though noted before was a specimen in the Madras Government Museum, which in all probabilities is an historical specimen (Ganesh & Asokan 2010). Its continued presence in the heart of the city even now is quite noteworthy in itself. It appeared that the cats easily attacked, bit, killed and probably consumed these snakes.

All the three snake species involved in the cases reported are non-venomous (Whitaker & Captain 2004). Thus, they pose no serious retaliation threat for the adult cat and even the kittens or the birds. Also, the Slender Wolf Snake *Lycodon fasciolatus* and the Rat Snake *Ptyas mucosa* are nocturnal and diurnal, respectively, indicating that observation timings when the cats were hunting the snakes coincide with their active time periods. While cats were seen preying on the snakes, the crows were seen confronting and harassing the trinket snake, with no feeding cues. Within Indian cities, the impact of housecat proliferation and range expansion on small wildlife and herpetofauna in particular should be investigated in greater detail (Biswas et al. 2024). While these feral and pet animals kill and eat pest organisms near households, they also hunt and feed on wildlife, depleting their populations too (Biswas et al. 2024).

Literature mentions of both wild and anthropophilic bird species as being involved in confrontations with free-ranging snakes in India. These reports include babblers *Argya striata* confrontations with Striped Keelback *Amphiesma stolatum* and Trinket Snakes (Johnsingh et al. 1982; Devasahayam

& Devasahayam 1991; Raina & Pampaniya 2022). As for the crows, in the nearby island of Sri Lanka, they have been reported (Karunarathna & Amarasinghe 2008; Chandrasiri et al. 2017) to be predators of some Dragon Lizards *Ceratophora*, *Cophotis*, *Calotes nigrilabris* that are montane, wet-zone endemic specialists. While Home et al. (2018) elaborated on the same issue with domestic dogs, similar studies on cats in India are still wanting and are avenues for fresh research.

We have sighted even venomous snakes such as the Spectacled Cobra *Naja naja* in the same place, but these were the snakes confronted by feral/pet animals, as far as we have observed. Better restraint by owners (in case of pets) and shooing away the animals involved (in case of ferals) before physical contact or damage to any, may diffuse such situations. It is hoped that our observations add up to this nascent area of research in India.

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