Recent records of the Dhole in India and emerging conservation challenges: evidence from the northern Western Ghats and central Indian landscapes

The Dhole *Cuon alpinus* Pallas, 1811 is a highly social, pack-living canid and social carnivore distributed across southern and southeastern Asia. India represents one of the most important global strongholds for the species, historically supporting extensive populations across diverse habitats ranging from dry deciduous forests to tropical rainforests and montane ecosystems (Johnsingh 1982; Durbin et al. 2004). Despite its ecological importance as a cooperative hunter capable of regulating ungulate populations, the Dhole has received disproportionately less conservation attention compared to sympatric large carnivores such as tigers and leopards (Kamler et al. 2015).

Currently, the Dhole is classified as 'Endangered' by the IUCN Red List under criteria C2a(i) (Kamler et al. 2015). The species has suffered a significant global range reduction, disappearing from approximately 82% of its historical distribution (Srivathsa et al. 2020).

Within India, while the country supports the largest remaining population, the species has experienced a drastic decline over the last century, losing approximately 60% of its original habitat (Modi et al. 2021; Ghaskadbi et al. 2022). This severe contraction is primarily attributed to habitat fragmentation, prey depletion, disease transmission from domestic

dogs, and historical persecution (Kamler et al. 2015; Woodroffe et al. 2012). Historically, Dholes were widely distributed across peninsular India, the Himalayan foothills, and the northeastern states (Pocock 1941).

Early naturalists described them as common throughout central and southern forests (Prater 1971). However, they were long considered "vermin" and were bounty-hunted to the verge of extinction before receiving legal protection in 1972 (Srivathsa et al. 2019, 2020). Large-scale deforestation during the colonial and post-independence periods, combined with targeted extermination campaigns, resulted in the isolation of remnant populations into three key landscapes: the Western Ghats, Central India, and the Northeast (Johnsingh 1982; Ghaskadbi et al. 2022; Srivathsa et al. 2019).

Today, these fragmented populations are increasingly structured as metapopulations, where local extinction within protected reserves is ideally offset by colonization from neighboring sites (Srivathsa et al. 2019). However, this stability is threatened by rapid economic growth and infrastructure development, which have severed landscape connectivity (Modi et al. 2021). Furthermore, since only about 5% of India's land area is formally protected, source populations remain vulnerable to the pressures of expanding human and livestock populations (Srivathsa et al. 2020).

In this context, recent years have witnessed a growing number of new and rediscovered locality records of Dholes across India, particularly from landscapes outside core protected areas. Such records are vital for reassessing current distribution dynamics and identifying previously overlooked corridors. This paper aims to (i) compile recent verified records of Dholes in India, with an emphasis on Maharashtra and western India, and (ii) examine emerging conservation challenges associated with these occurrences.

Materials and Methods

This study is based on a multi-source compilation of recent information on the occurrence of the Dhole in India. Peer-reviewed scientific literature published between 2019 and 2022 was reviewed to obtain background information on Dhole distribution, genetics, occupancy, and feeding ecology. Recent records (2023–2026) were compiled from verified photographic evidence, camera-trap records, and opportunistic field observations from western and central India. Media reports were included only when supported by photographic documentation and expert verification. Species identification was confirmed using key morphological characteristics such as pelage coloration, body proportions, and tail morphology, and, where available, corroborated using GPS metadata associated with photographic records. Opportunistic sightings and local ecological knowledge were clearly distinguished from systematic survey data and were used only to support inferences on historical presence and recent trends in Dhole occurrence.

Recent records of Dholes in India

In September 2025, a Dhole was photographed in the Panshet region of Pune District, Maharashtra, marking the first confirmed

photographic record of the species from this area (Mistry 2025; Shinde & Sonawane 2026).

The individual was observed in a fragmented forest landscape outside any major protected area. Experts confirmed the identification based on morphological features such as pelage coloration, body proportions, and tail morphology. This record is significant as it highlights the continued presence of Dholes in the northern Western Ghats and suggests the possible use of forest corridors connecting the Bhimashankar landscape with adjoining hill ranges.

In September 2024, a pack of approximately 10 Dholes were photographed near Dongroli village in Mangaon Taluka, Raigad district, Maharashtra (Mid-Day 2024; Reflections Live 2024). This record represents one of the few recent photographic documentations of Dholes from the coastal northern Western Ghats landscape of Maharashtra. Earlier, Pardeshi et al. (2020) reported the species from Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary, indicating its persistence in this region. Local residents reported occasional livestock depredation, particularly on goats, indicating potential negative interaction situations. The presence of a sizeable pack suggests either seasonal movement through adjoining forest patches or a previously undocumented resident population utilizing forest fragments and agro-forestry mosaics in the region.

Recent sightings from central Indian landscapes such as Bandhavgarh Tiger Reserve and Ratapani Wildlife Sanctuary indicate the continued persistence or recolonization of Dholes in these regions (Ground Report 2025; Free Press Journal 2026). These observations are consistent with earlier ecological studies suggesting that central India supports suitable prey densities and habitat structure for sustaining Dhole packs (Ghaskadbi et al. 2022). After being last reported in 2023, the presence of Dholes were officially reconfirmed in May 2025 during a Phase-IV tiger population assessment. The survey documented two separate Dhole packs comprising more than 20 individuals, with pups previously recorded from the Manpur forest range, indicating active breeding and pack stability within the landscape.

In January 2026, the Dhole was recorded for the first time in Ratapani Tiger Reserve through camera-trap documentation (Forest Department officials, pers. comm., 24 January 2026). This record represents the sixth rare carnivore species documented from the reserve in 2026, suggesting improving habitat quality and corridor connectivity between the Amarkantak and Betul landscapes.

Camera-trap and photographic records from Uttarakhand, Gujarat, and parts of the Eastern Ghats have further expanded the known contemporary range of Dholes, underscoring the species' ability to persist in marginal and fragmented habitats when minimal prey and connectivity are available (Jhala et al. 2019).

Additional record from Dongroli, Mangaon Taluk, Raigad District, Maharashtra

An additional opportunistic sighting of the Dhole was recorded from Dongroli Village, Mangaon Taluk, Raigad District, Maharashtra

(18.2020°N, 73.2238° E). This observation represents the second confirmed record of the species from this landscape. During the sighting, a pack consisting of five individuals was observed moving through a forest–agricultural mosaic, indicating active use of fragmented habitats outside formally protected areas.

Informal interactions and discussions with elderly residents from nearby villages revealed that Dholes were regularly observed in this region in the past. According to local ecological knowledge, sightings have become infrequent in recent years. The respondents attributed this apparent decline to increased human interference**,** commercial and infrastructural development, habitat modification, and escalating anthropogenic pressure in and around forest patches.

Although these accounts are anecdotal, when combined with direct field observations, they provide valuable supplementary evidence of the historical persistence and recent decline of Dhole presence in the coastal Western Ghats landscape of Raigad district. Such opportunistic records and local knowledge can play an important role in identifying previously overlooked habitats and movement corridors, especially for elusive and wide-ranging carnivores like the Dhole.

Discussion

Dholes are obligate carnivores that rely heavily on medium- to large-sized ungulates such as Chital *Axis axis*, Sambar *Rusa unicolor*, and Wild Pig *Sus scrofa*, making prey availability a fundamental determinant of their persistence within a landscape (Johnsingh 1983). Recent dietary studies employing scat analysis and molecular identification techniques in central India further confirm that an adequate prey base is the most critical ecological factor influencing Dhole survival, pack stability, and reproduction (Ghaskadbi et al. 2022).

Studies from southeastern Asia also demonstrate variation in diet and prey selection across evergreen and deciduous forests, indicating ecological flexibility in response to differing prey assemblages (Kamler et al. 2020). Consequently, landscapes experiencing prey depletion due to overgrazing, hunting, or habitat degradation are unlikely to support viable Dhole populations over the long term.

The occurrence of Dholes in human-dominated and fragmented landscapes, as documented in Maharashtra through recent and opportunistic sightings, indicates a certain degree of ecological flexibility and adaptability. However, such persistence is likely transient in the absence of functional habitat connectivity and sufficient prey availability. Fragmentation caused by linear infrastructure, mining, agricultural expansion, and urbanization has resulted in the isolation of forest patches, thereby restricting movement, dispersal, and genetic exchange among Dhole populations. This is particularly evident in western India, where the absence of legally protected corridors poses a significant long-term threat to population viability.

Human-wildlife negative interaction further compounds conservation challenges for Dholes. Livestock depredation incidents, such as those reported from the Raigad District, can foster

negative perceptions among local communities and may lead to retaliatory killings, especially in regions where compensation mechanisms are weak or absent. Such negative interactions are often exacerbated by prey scarcity and increasing overlap between wildlife habitats and human activities. In addition, interaction with domestic and feral dogs exposes Dholes to infectious diseases such as canine distemper and rabies, which have been identified as major causes of population decline in wild carnivores globally (Murray et al. 1999; Woodroffe et al. 2012).

Despite their ecological importance, Dholes remain comparatively under-represented in conservation research, policy frameworks, and funding priorities when compared to other large carnivores such as tigers and leopards.

The lack of systematic population monitoring limited long-term ecological studies, and insufficient integration of Dhole conservation into broader landscape management plans reflect a significant research and policy gap. This neglect is particularly concerning given the species' sensitivity to habitat fragmentation and prey depletion.

The findings of this study underscore the need for landscape-level conservation approaches that extend beyond protected areas. Expanded use of camera traps, genetic tools, and opportunistic records can improve detection and monitoring of Dhole populations in fragmented and human-modified landscapes. Identification and protection of ecological corridors, particularly in the Western Ghats and central Indian landscapes, are essential to facilitate movement and gene flow. Equally important is the implementation of community awareness programs and negative interaction mitigation strategies in newly documented areas to promote coexistence. Finally, the integration of Dhole-specific conservation action plans into state and national wildlife policies is crucial to ensure long-term persistence of this endangered canid in India.

Conclusion

Recent records from Maharashtra and other parts of India demonstrate that Dholes continue to persist in fragmented and human-dominated landscapes. However, such persistence should not be misinterpreted as recovery. Without targeted conservation actions addressing habitat connectivity, prey availability, and human wildlife negative interaction, these remnant populations remain highly vulnerable. Updated distribution records, such as those compiled in this study, provide a critical foundation for informed conservation planning and policy intervention.

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