

Caught red-pawed: field observation from Chamba

At the Himalayan Restoration Project native sapling nursery in Chamba, the field staff do a lot of different chores, from watering the saplings, deweeding, preparing soil beds, to sowing seeds. But our team was unaware of another worker who had recently started night shifts in the nursery.

There is a small storage room in the nursery which is used to keep hardware, tools, pipes and leftover seeds. Last year, when we were sowing the seeds of *Grevia optiva* in the nursery, we observed that the seeds kept disappearing from the storeroom. Apparently, some rodents made their way into the storeroom and nibbled our precious seeds. Our nursery helper, Shanti, claimed to have sighted a very fat rat in the storage, which, according to her, mocked her every time the store was opened.

Frustrated from that, she got a local rat trap from her home and set it up in the nursery. A piece of chapati was used as bait to lure the rodents. She planned to catch the culprit and release it very far from the nursery so that the seeds would not be damaged. When we came to know about her idea, we were reluctant at first, but we were also eager to see the rodent.



Every day, we used to be excited to visit the nursery in hopes of catching the culprit, but to our disappointment, we would always find the trap closed, with neither any animal nor bait. It became quite a mystery to us what could have been wrong. The missing bait confirmed an animal presence, while the empty trap indicated a successful escape. This same pattern kept happening for a week or so until one day, another creature was caught red pawed in action.

It was a monsoon morning in early July last year, heavy rain from the previous night had stopped, and the gloomy clouds had cleared. Sushanth, who was volunteering and helping us in the field from the Zooreach Coimbatore office, and I went to the nursery to check on the saplings just when we heard loud squeaks coming from under a bed of root trainers. In the grass was a small creature dragging and rolling the rat trap.

The squeaks were the cries of help from the poor little rat trapped inside the trap. Little did

the rat know it was about to become breakfast for the little weasel.

We documented the entire incident. The weasel became cautious of the clicking sounds of the camera, but it prioritised its breakfast over safety. The weasel continued to try to open the rat trap by rolling it multiple times until it reached the edge of a terrace. Unfortunately, we made the mistake of moving from our position to take better shots. The poor fellow got super scared to see us hovering over it with a camera, or maybe it might have got camera-conscious and therefore ran to hide in one of the crevices on the nursery terrace wall.

We discussed the incident with Dr Sanjay Molur, who identified it as a Siberian Weasel. It is a small mammal known to dwell in burrows along the rocky slopes in Khajjiar-Kalatop Wildlife Sanctuary. According to the IUCN Red List, the Siberian Weasel is categorised as ‘Least Concern’ due to its wide range of distribution across 10 Asian countries, including India, Bhutan, China, Korea, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan, Russia, and Taiwan (Abramov et al. 2024). It is distributed in montane ecosystems at elevations ranging up to 4,875 m along the Himalayan belt. There are 11 subspecies of Siberian Weasel, and the subspecies that occurs in Kashmir and the western Himalaya is *Mustela sibirica hodgsoni* (Gray 1843). Being carnivorous, they are reported to have a diet mostly of rodents, voles, pikas, amphibians, fish, and lizards; hence, they play an important role in the ecosystem.

After the weasel went away, we released the poor rat that was caught and just had its life spared. We waited for a few minutes, and surprisingly, the weasel came back to the place where it had last left the trap and started looking around. Disappointed to find no trace

of the trap or the rat, it disappeared into the bushes.

We shared the incident with the nursery helpers, who immediately recognised the weasel or “Bhaknoli” as they call it in Chambiyali- the local dialect. Shanti also mentioned that she used to see weasels very often in her childhood, but rarely finds them now. They are shy animals and are difficult to spot, she added. The mystery of the vacant traps was finally solved as we realised that the weasel was the one getting free meals from the rat traps, and we decided not to put those traps back again because, unintentionally, we were messing up the ecosystem balance by making the weasel habituated to easy food.

Small mammals like the Siberian Weasel are very important for the ecosystem, as not only do they keep the rodent population in check, but they are also indicators of a healthy habitat. Based on this incident, we decided to feature the species in the wildlife stickers created for HRP outreach activities. Through this small effort, our team hopes to remind local communities that the smallest creatures matter equally to the landscape.

References

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