

A Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* sighting at Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary, north-eastern Thailand

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<http://www.smallcarnivoreconservation.org>
ISSN 1019-5041

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Abstract.

Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* is a rarely recorded small carnivore species. On 22 March 2016 a Yellow-bellied Weasel was directly observed in Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary in north-eastern Thailand. This is outside of the species' known distribution in Thailand. The weasel was observed and photographed from a hide that had been set up for bird photography.

Keywords: weasel, evergreen forest, photography hide

The Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* occurs in a wide range across the Himalayas, southern China and mainland South-east Asia. A number of recent records have extended its known range considerably, with the first records for Thailand and Cambodia coming only in 2000 and 2013 respectively (Supparatvikorn *et al.* 2012, Phan *et al.* 2014). These late discoveries are assumed to represent earlier overlooking of the species rather than a genuine expansion of the species's range, or of its rarity (Supparatvikorn *et al.* 2012, Chutipong *et al.* 2014, Phan *et al.* 2014).

Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary is in north-eastern Thailand between 16°05' and 16°35'N and 101°20' and 101°55'E. The sanctuary ranges in altitude from 250 to 1310 m asl and has a total area of 1,573 km². The main habitat types at the wildlife sanctuary are mixed deciduous forest with smaller areas of semi-evergreen forest below 800 m asl and hill evergreen forest at higher elevations (BirdLife International 2016). The dry season occurs during November to March, and the wet season occurs during April to October (Prasanai *et al.* 2012).

On 22 March 2016 at approximately 08h00, I attended a permanent photography hide set up and maintained by the Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary, primarily for bird watching. The hide is located at 16°23'13"N 101°34'02"E at an elevation of approximately 880 m asl, and is approximately 600 m asl from the sanctuary's headquarters, which is located in the centre of the sanctuary. The hide is set amid near-intact evergreen forest and is open for public use. The hide has a piped water supply that has been used to create a small, approximately 2 m², artificial waterhole at the base of a tree to attract birds and other wildlife.

At 10h40 I heard rustling of ground-cover to the left of the hide and a single Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* came into view and moved cautiously towards the waterhole. The Yellow-bellied Weasel remained at the waterhole for almost a minute and during this time I was able to take a total of nine photographs of the single animal (Figure 1). The animal left the site after it seemed to become aware of my presence in the hide, apparently alerted by the noise of my camera's shutter. I remained in the hide until 17h10 but the animal did not reappear. Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary is outside the known range for the Yellow-bellied Weasel in Thailand, where it was previously known from only the northern highlands and western mountains (see Chutipong *et al.* 2014). The habitat the Yellow-bellied Weasel was recorded in, is consistent with records from other sites in Thailand (Chutipong *et al.* 2014), as well as other range countries, such as Cambodia (Phan *et al.* 2014) and Vietnam (Robertson 2007).



Figure 1. Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* photographed with a hand-held camera at Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary, Thailand, on 22 March 2016 (J. Cheah). The somewhat similar-looking Stripe-backed Weasel *M. strigidorsa* can be excluded by the broad pale belly patch (right image) and lack of mid-dorsal pale stripe (left image).

Phu Khieo Wildlife Sanctuary is one of the most intensively surveyed areas in Thailand for forest mammals (see Chutipong *et al.* 2014). This Yellow-bellied Weasel record is a good example of how easy it is to overlook this, and other, weasel species through conventional mammal survey techniques, such as camera-trapping. At the same photography hide, in the same month as this sighting, a Stripe-backed weasel *Mustela strigidorsa* was observed and photographed (Khao Yai News 2016); wildlife enthusiasts and photographers could play an important role in documenting weasel sightings in South-east Asia.

Weasel species are difficult to distinguish between in the field and any records should preferably be validated with photographs; Stripe-backed Weasel and Yellow-bellied Weasel co-occur at a number of sites in mainland South-east Asia and are very similar

looking species. For some guidance on species identification, see descriptions and photographs given in Streicher *et al.* (2010) for Stripe-backed Weasel and Supparatvikorn *et al.* (2012) for Yellow-bellied Weasel. Though neither of these species are likely to be threatened in Thailand or in the region, proper documentation of incidental records and subsequent publication, would greatly improve understanding of weasel distribution and conservation status in mainland South-east Asia, and could be done with relative ease. The publication of records, such as the Yellow-bellied Weasel observation documented in this paper, are strongly encouraged.

Acknowledgements

I thank W. Duckworth, P. Thompson and D. Willcox for assistance in preparing and reviewing this sighting report. Wanlop Chutipong and an anonymous reviewer greatly improved the quality of this paper.

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