

## Observations of Siberian Weasel *Mustela sibirica* in Api-Nampa Conservation Area, Darchula district and Humla district, Nepal

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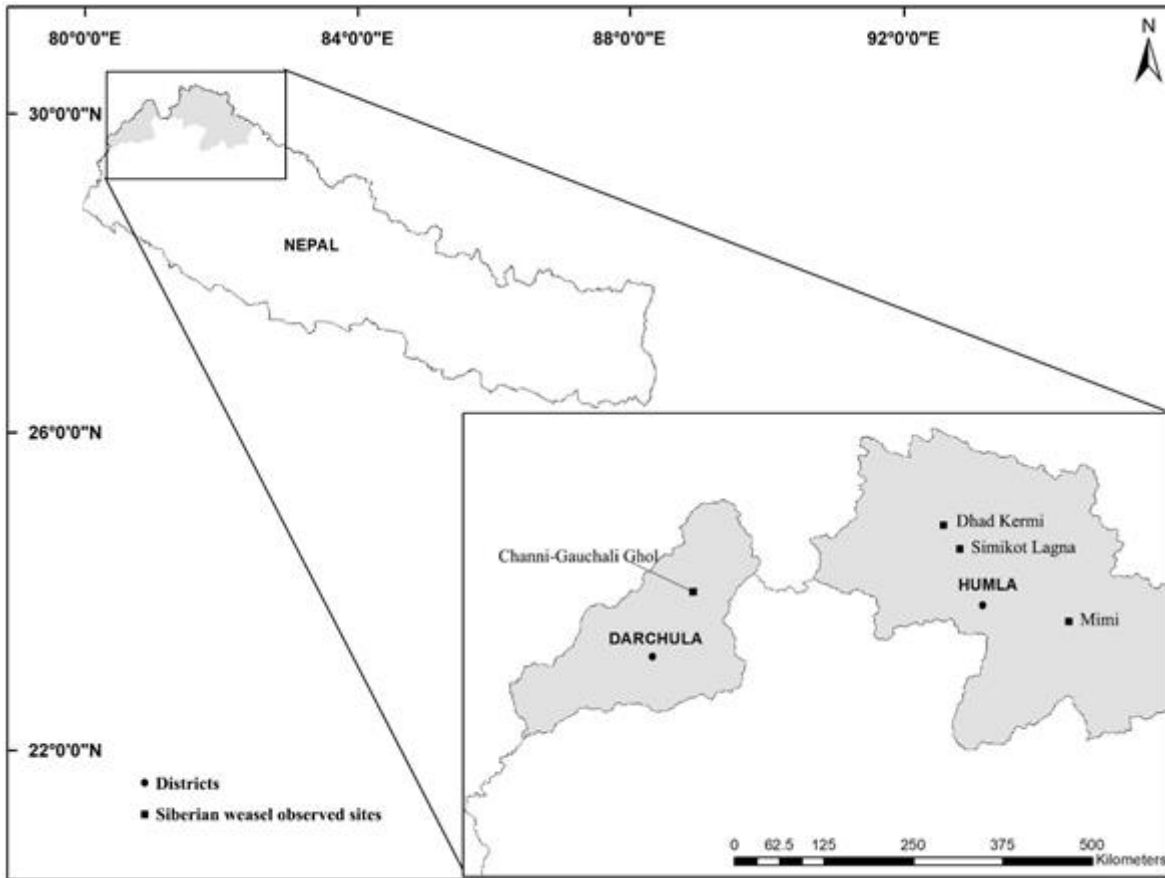
### Abstract.

Siberian Weasel *Mustela sibirica* is categorized as Least Concern in The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. It is one of the largest weasels found in Nepal. Its known distribution in Nepal is within the Himalayan region of the country. This paper documents four observations of the species made in Humla district (three observations) and Api-Nampa Conservation Area, Darchula district (one observation) in the Nepalese Himalayas.

*Keywords:* Darchula, Himalaya, Humla, Nepal

Six species of *Mustela* have been reported to occur in Nepal, comprising Mountain Weasel *Mustela altaica*, Stoat *M. erminea*, Yellow-bellied Weasel *M. kathiah*, Stripe-backed Weasel *M. strigidorsa*, Siberian Weasel *M. sibirica* and Steppe Polecat *M. eversmanii* (Baral & Shah 2008, Ghimirey & Acharya 2012, Chetri *et al.* 2014, Thapa 2014). However, Stripe-backed Weasel and Stoat are not confirmed to exist in Nepal: see Abramov *et al.* (2008) and Mitchell (1975) respectively. Abramov *et al.* (2016) and Thapa (2014) corroborate Mitchell (1975) regarding the status of Stoat in Nepal.

All available literature supports the presence of Siberian Weasel in Nepal. However, there have been very few publications documenting its occurrence in the higher Himalayan region of the country. The species is categorized as Least Concern both globally (Abramov *et al.* 2016) and in Nepal (Jnawali *et al.* 2011) because of its wide distribution, presumed large population and absence of any known major threats. However, Ghimirey *et al.* (2014) made a case for Data Deficient at the national level considering how little information there is on this species in Nepal. Previous records of the species in Nepal are given and discussed in Ghimirey & Acharya (2012) and Ghimirey *et al.* (2014). A recent taxonomic research has concluded that the Siberian Weasel found in the western Himalayas (*i.e.*, Kashmir and Sikkim) in India and Nepal could be a different species (Abramov *et al.* 2018).



**Figure 1.** Siberian Weasel *Mustela sibirica* records in Humla and Darchula districts between 2013 and 2015.

## Observations

### *Mimi, Chankheli Rural Municipality, Humla district*

This is the first known observation of Siberian Weasel in Humla district. An adult Siberian Weasel was observed on 20 September 2013 at around 10h00 near Mimi village (Figure 1). The site is located at 29°44'N and 82°04'E and the altitude is between 2100 and 2200 m asl. The day was sunny and the weasel came to within 25 m whilst AP was sitting on the balcony of a house overlooking a small garden. After raising its head for few seconds, it ran away from the garden. The whitish patch around its muzzle was clearly visible. The Mimi village is surrounded by low-lying thickets uphill and agriculture downhill.

### *Dhad Kermi*

The second observation for Humla district was made near the village of Dhad Kermi on the way to Hilsa (a village) by KY on 22 April 2014. The location is near Karnali River, the longest river in Nepal. The place is located at 30°03'N and 81°44'E and is located at an altitude of about 2590 m asl, recorded using a GPS Garmin unit (Figure 1). The weasel was

sighted at 11h14 and the weather was sunny with intermittent cloud cover. The location is around 850 m from Dhad Kermi, the nearest human habitation.

The weasel was sighted in an open rocky field above the main foot trail (Figure 2). The reddish-brown body was seen well because of the clear daylight. On sensing the observers, it hid quickly in a rocky crevasse and stayed there for approximately two minutes. The front view of the weasel was visible when looking through the narrow crevasse. It was thought to have escaped when presumably the same animal was seen within a minute and on top of a rock that was 15 m away. After 10–15 seconds, a Siberian Weasel, possibly the same animal, was observed on a rock after maintaining a distance (approximately 200 m) from the observers for around 4 to 5 minutes.



**Figure 2.** Siberian Weasel *Mustela sibirica* running away after noticing the observers at Dhad Kermi on 22 April 2014. (Photo: Kaushal Yadav).

### *Simikot Lagna*

The third observation was made on 23 April 2014 by KY near a mountain pass (locally known as a *lagna*) called Simikot Lagna. The location is very near to Simikot, the headquarters of Humla district (Figure 1). The site is located at 29°58'N and 81°48'E and is at an altitude of 3246 m asl as recorded by a GPS Garmin unit. The location was around 600

m from the nearest human settlement. The time at the sighting was 13h49 and the day was overcast during the sighting.

The weasel was sighted on a large rock boulder between the foot trail and a harvested barley field (Figure 3). The weasel was then seen running on the stone wall that bordered the field. The observation lasted no longer than two minutes as it was being chased by a mule herder. The mule herder later stated that the species, locally known as *nyaul*, would serve as medicine for muscle pain. Apparently, the preparation for this is that the weasel meat should be first roasted and then consumed.



**Figure 3.** Siberian Weasel *Mustela sibirica* sighted during midday on 23 April 2014 at Simikot Lagna (Photo: Kaushal Yadav).

#### *Api-Nampa Conservation Area, Darchula district*

An observation in Api-Nampa conservation area (ANCA) was made on 24 July 2015 by SG. The time of observation was 15h15. The day was cloudy during observation soon followed by rain. The location was Channi-Gauchhali Ghol located in upper Chamelia Valley inside ANCA, Darchula district (Figure 1). The place of observation falls at 29°59'N and 80°56'E and recorded by GPS unit at an altitude of 4300 m asl. The sighting was made on big boulders of rock with several gaps between them (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Siberian Weasel *Mustela sibirica* giving a curious look to the observers in Channi-Gauchhali Ghol, ANCA, Darchula during afternoon of on 24 July 2015 (Photo: Suresh Ghimire).

Siberian Weasel is known as *Nyaul* in Humla district and is believed to have medicinal value; the brief encounter and conversation with a mule herder supports this. The name *Nyaul* for this species was further confirmed by our local guides who explained us the process of preparing medicine from this species. The cooked flesh of the species is eaten for the treatment of lower back pain (Devraj Shahi & Prem Shahi pers. comm. 2014). This species is mostly seen during the barley harvest season near agricultural land and sometimes sighted nearby water bodies too (Devraj Shahi & Prem Shahi pers. comm. 2014). These local guides allegedly saw this species on the bank of Karnali River in mid-March 2014.

There have been recent records of Siberian Weasel from Manaslu Conservation Area (Katuwal *et al.* 2013) and also from outside Rara NP in Mugu district (Ghimirey *et al.* 2014). Earlier, Baral & Shah (2008) have mentioned the distribution of this species from the Himalaya region along Nepal. Jnawali *et al.* (2011) reported its occurrence from Rara National Park which was at that time the westernmost record of this species. The new observations presented here have extended the westernmost record to Api-Nampa Conservation Area of Darchula district, as well as verifiable records of this species from Humla district.

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