

Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* records from Mizoram, India

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Abstract

This note presents two records of Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* from Mizoram, North-east India. These appear to be the only confirmed recent reports of this mustelid in the state.

Key words: Yellow-bellied Weasel, Mustelidae, Saiha, North-east India

Mizoram India atanga Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* hmuhchhuah chhinchhiahna

Chanchin Tlangpui

He thuziak tawi hian India hmarchhak a awm, Mizoram atanga hmuhchhuah Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* chhinchhiahna pahnih chungchang a sawi a ni. Hei hi, he state-a hetiang mustelid chungchang sawina nemnggeh neih hnaivai awmchhun niin a lang.

Thumal Pawimawh: Yellow-bellied Weasel, Mustelidae, Saiha, North-east India

Introduction

The Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* has a relatively wide Asian range, occurring from northern India east through the Himalaya, much of southern China and northern South-east Asia (Corbet & Hill 1992). A hill-dwelling species, it is found between 1,000 m and 2,000 m elevation; in winter it may come down to lower than 1,000 m (Choudhury 1997, 1999). Very little is known about its biology and ecology (Hussain 1999). Small mustelids investigated to date show high habitat plasticity, but the habitat requirements of tropical *Mustela* populations remain effectively unknown, and it may be rash to extrapolate conservation needs from those of primarily Holarctic species (Abramov *et al.* in press). Apparently no *Mustela* species has ever been studied in South-east Asia and Yellow-bellied Weasel's habitat use remains little known in that region (Duckworth & Robichaud 2005). Hence, this note places on record its occurrence in an area far from other recent detailed records.

North-eastern India, comprising the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Tripura, forms part of a rich biogeographic unit and is among the biodiversity "hotspots" of the world (Choudhury 1999, Myers *et al.* 2000). The Yellow-bellied Weasel is known by very few records in north-eastern India historically: Sangrachu and Mokokchaung in the Naga Hills were the only localities known to Pocock (1941). It has been recorded from Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Assam and Manipur (Choudhury 1999), and there is one historical specimen from Mizoram: a skin and skull of a female collected in the Lushai Hills, Sangao, on 16 February 1953 by W N Koelz, and held in the Field Museum, Chicago, USA; specimen n° 75807 (Choudhury 2001; L. R. Heaney *in litt.* 2008). Elsewhere in north-east India, a fresh skin was seen with a local in Sape village, Sarli circle in Lower Subansiri district, Arunachal Pradesh (Kumar 1999), and a killed specimen was on sale at Kohima market, Nagaland, as food in 1997 (Choudhury 2000); its current status in Assam is unclear (Choudhury 1997). Beyond Indian political boundaries too, to the east of Mizoram, it has been recently recorded in Laos, Thailand, and Myanmar (e.g. Duck-

worth & Robichaud 2005, Than Zaw *et al.* 2008).

Mizoram (21°57'–24°30'N, 92°15'–93°29'E) is located in the extreme southern part of north-eastern India, and has a geographical area of 21,081 km² (0.6% of India's geographical area). Mizoram has three major forest types, Tropical Wet Evergreen, Tropical Moist Deciduous and Subtropical Pine Forests, and is rich in wild flora and fauna, both in variety and abundance. A perusal of secondary literature and consultations with biologists, forest department personnel and others in the state familiar with its conservation values revealed that while in general the biological and conservation values were relatively poorly researched throughout the state, south Mizoram was particularly in the proverbial rain shadow of conservation attention. A total of 42 species of mammals were recorded from recent wildlife surveys. Of these, 34 species were detected directly during the survey, while the other eight were recorded through interviews with hunters and examination of trophies, animal remains and pets (Datta-Roy *et al.* 2007). The survey does not mention the Yellow-bellied Weasel.

We work towards designing and implementing a conservation education and awareness programme in Saiha region in South Mizoram in partnership with the forest department of Mara Autonomous District Council.

Records

We saw a freshly dead Yellow-bellied Weasel at Tuipang (22° 31'33" N, 93° 02'40" E; the headquarters of Tuipang block in Saiha district; about 1,250–1,300 m asl) on 17 June 2008. The weasel had been caught in a trap set in the *jhum* (shifting cultivation) fields earlier during the day and was dead before we saw it. These non-baited traps, known as 'mangkhwng', are made using small logs and placed on the edge of crop fields. This particular trap that caught the weasel was about 2.0–2.5 km from the town in a mosaic of old, new, and current shifting cultivation plots with some village supply and safety reserves. The animal was recognised by the people and is locally referred to as 'sarivaithun' or 'zuhri'. It is an aggressive animal and stays in tree holes (Pu P. Sangkhuma verbally July 2008). It eats rats and is not eaten by the local com-

munity on account of its pungent smell, so is instead thrown away (Pu Lambu and Pu J. Biakmawia verbally June 2008). It is therefore a by-catch in the traps primarily set for catching squirrels, rats, and civets. These traps are laid for procuring meat and at the same time get rid of crop pests. We were able to take close photographs of the weasel body, which was wet with rain (Fig. 1). The specimen however remained unsexed.

In Aizawl (capital of Mizoram) we saw a preserved specimen of the Yellow-bellied Weasel at the Mizoram State Museum on 18 July 2008. This stuffed specimen (serial number 419) was referred to as 'sarivaithun'. With permission from the museum curator we were able to take photographs of the specimen. According to the museum authorities the specimen was taken from 'Chite lui' (23° 45'N, 92° 43'E), a river (*lui* in Mizo) near Aizawl city, in August 1993.



Fig. 1. Recently trapped Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah*, Tuipang, Mizoram, 17 June 2008.

Concluding remarks

The Yellow-bellied Weasels in the trap and the museum, and the awareness of the locals pertaining to the species, including local names, confirm the presence of this mustelid as resident in the state.

Hunting is culturally sanctioned and widely practiced in Saiha region. It impacts wildlife including weasels in a negative fashion. Select myths and beliefs that exist in the local society exacerbate the pressure on wildlife. We therefore believe that regular communications focusing on natural values occurring in region are pertinent towards wildlife conservation in these remote forested lands. These communications need to be sensitive to local cultural values and mores and undertaken with students in schools and also locally relevant institutions like youth associations and village council members that form an integral part of these societies.

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