

Two sighting records of Stripe-backed Weasel *Mustela strigidorsa* in Yunnan Province, China

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Abstract

The Stripe-backed Weasel *Mustela strigidorsa* is listed as Endangered on the China Species Red List. We document two sighting records from Yunnan province in southern China. The first record was of one animal observed on a paved road in the township of Tongbiguan, Yingjiang County, western Yunnan, at 15h20 on 9 February 2018. The second observation was of three animals travelling together in Mengla County, Xishuangbanna Prefecture, southern Yunnan, on 27 July 2018 at 15h09. Photographs were obtained at both events. The Yingjiang record is from a village and the Xishuangbanna record is from a forest park with hundreds of visitors on busy days. In view of the species's tolerance of heavily degraded landscapes and human disturbance, the Stripe-backed Weasel is likely to have been overlooked in China. Its national conservation status warrants a reassessment.

Keywords: Dehong Prefecture, Yingjiang County, Tongbiguan Township, Xishuangbanna Prefecture, Mengla County

云南省两个纹鼬记录

摘要

纹鼬(*Mustela strigidorsa*)被2016年出版的《中国脊椎动物红色名录》列为濒危物种,对其在中国的分布现状和生态习性所知甚少。我们收集了云南省热带地区的两个近年确切记录,现将相关信息简单报道:2018年2月9日15h20,在德宏自治州盈江县铜壁乡三合村的乡道上拍摄到一只纹鼬;该地点以农田村寨为主,夹杂有斑块状的次生林-竹林。2018年7月27日15h09,在西双版纳自治州勐腊县望天树景区内观察到3只纹鼬,并拍摄到亚成体。根据纹鼬对破碎化生境和人为干扰的适应能力,我们相信其在中国尚有一定数量,实际保育状况有待进一步摸清。

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The Stripe-backed Weasel *Mustela strigidorsa* is an Indomalayan mustelid occurring in the foothills of the eastern Himalayas in north-east India, across much of Myanmar and south-western China, as well as Vietnam, Lao PDR, Thailand (Abramov *et al.* 2008) and, as recently documented, far-northern Cambodia (McCann & Pawlowski 2018). It was thought to be rare until increased survey effort of the region greatly improved our knowledge of the distribution of this and other tropical Asian mustelid species (Duckworth & Robichaud 2005, Abramov *et al.* 2008, Streicher *et al.* 2010). In China, however, there have been few recent publications documenting its occurrence, except for an observation record in some old-growth moist broadleaf evergreen forest in Gaoligongshan National Nature Reserve, Tengchong County, western Yunnan (Chan & Zhao 2014). Perhaps because of the lack of recent records, it is listed as Endangered in the latest China Species Red List (Jiang *et al.* 2016).

In an attempt to clarify the species's status in China, we collected two verifiable recent records of Stripe-backed Weasel from the tropical regions in Yunnan Province. On 9 February 2018 at 15h20, a weasel was observed on a paved road in the village of Sanhe in Tongbiguan Township, Yingjiang County, Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan province (24°36'56"N, 97°39'19"E, 1355 m asl). It ran into the courtyard of a house when the observer approached to 20 m and later came out and disappeared into roadside bamboo clumps (Figs. 1, 2). The surrounding landscape is a mosaic of villages and farmland, with patches of secondary broadleaf–bamboo forest (Fig. 3). Local villagers reported that the species is common in the area and that it preys on domestic chickens, as has been reported by villagers in Lao PDR (Streicher *et al.* 2010).



Fig. 1. Stripe-backed Weasel *Mustela strigidorsa* on a road in the village of Sanhe, Tongbiguan Township, Yingjiang County, Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China, 9 February 2018.



Fig. 2. The same Stripe-backed Weasel *Mustela strigidorsa* as in Fig. 1, its whitish back stripe clearly visible, village of Sanhe, Tongbiguan Township, Yingjiang County, Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China, 9 February 2018.



Fig. 3. Satellite image of the village of Sanhe, Tongbiguan Township, Yingjiang County, Dehong Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China. The red square indicates the site of the Stripe-backed Weasel *Mustela strigidorsa* observation.

On 27 July 2018 at 15h09, a bird photographer saw three weasels travelling together in a forest park in Mengla County, Xishuangbanna Prefecture, Yunnan Province (21°37'23"N, 101°35'13"E, 716 m asl). The animals apparently comprised a family group and included an obviously smaller individual. The two fully grown individuals crossed the concrete footpath by the ticketing office a group of visitors approached. The subadult was startled and backtracked into roadside bushes before eventually joining the two leading animals across the path (Figs. 4, 5). The forest park is famous for its mature stand of *Parashorea chinensis* trees, and although the forest is criss-crossed by numerous concrete roads and footpaths, the original primary vegetation is largely retained.



Fig. 4. Stripe-backed Weasel *Mustela strigidorsa* showing its whitish back stripe, Mengla County, Xishuangbanna Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China, 27 July 2018.

The weasels photographed during both observations had inconspicuous ears positioned to the side of the head, black eyes, a chestnut brown dorsum, buff chin down to upper breast and a narrow whitish dorsal stripe; these are diagnostic characteristics of the Stripe-backed Weasel (Streicher *et al.* 2010).



Fig. 5. The same Stripe-backed Weasel *Mustela strigidorsa* as in Fig. 4, by the ticketing office of the forest park, Mengla County, Xishuangbanna Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China, 27 July 2018.

Yingjiang Tongbiguan Township is about 9 km from the international border with the state of Kachin in Myanmar; Kachin State has “one of the most impressive series of records” for Stripe-backed Weasel (Abramov *et al.* 2008: 253). Mengla County, Xishuangbanna, is within 20 km of the international border with the province of Phongsaly in Laos; the species is known from Phongsaly Province and specimens have also been collected in Mengla County itself (Abramov *et al.* 2008).

Some species previously considered rare are now found to be widespread, ecologically tolerant, and much overlooked by usual survey techniques (e.g. Willcox *et al.* 2012). The Striped-backed Weasel appears to be an example of this: the Yingjiang record is from the environs of a village and the Xishuangbanna record is from a forest park with over 300,000 visitors annually. In view of the species’s tolerance of heavily degraded landscapes and human disturbance, it is likely to have been overlooked in China. A re-assessment of its conservation status in China is warranted.

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