

Mountain Weasel *Mustela altaica* records in Ladakh, Jammu and Kashmir state, India

Tomer BEN-YEHUDA¹

¹. Mammal Watching Around the World. 14355 Rainy Lake Dr. Chesterfield MO USA 63017

Correspondence:

Tomer Ben-Yehuda
 tomer.ben-yehuda@hotmail.com

Associate editor:

Daniel Willcox

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

Abstract.

Distribution maps for Mountain Weasel *Mustela altaica* do not include Ladakh in the north Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir. However, it is common knowledge that this species occurs there and that it is observed on a weekly basis by nature guides and ecotourists. This is an account of my sightings with exact coordinates and altitudes where this species has been observed, along with referenced reports of colleagues who have seen the species in the area. Based on this information, the distribution maps for this species should be corrected to include the locations specified; this information was used to update the 2016 account of this species in The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.

Keywords: Hemis National Park, *Mustela altaica*, Ladakh, Northern India, Altai Weasel, Mountain Weasel

Mountain Weasel *Mustela altaica*, also known as the Altai Weasel, is found throughout central Asia and in the Himalayan mountain range. According to the previous distribution map (Abramov 2016) this weasel is very localized in India (Figure 1) and was thought to be restricted to a small area near the tri-point junction with Tibet (China) and Nepal. It was not recognized to occur within 420 km of Hemis National Park or the city of Leh. Lariviere & Jennings (2009) did not include Ladakh in their distribution map for this species.

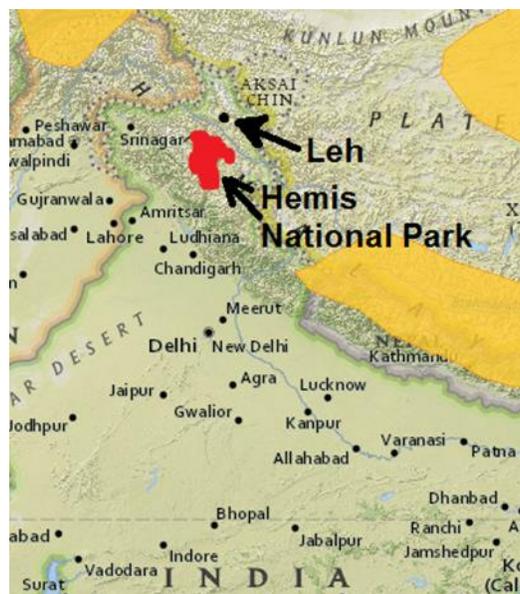


Figure 1. The IUCN Red List distribution map of Mountain Weasel *Mustela altaica* in Northern India from 2014 (its previous assessment). Areas highlighted in yellow represent the species distribution.

However, common knowledge backed up by photographic evidence confirms that this species does occur in Leh, Hemis National Park and the vicinity. All geographic coordinates and altitudes in the following paragraphs are taken from Google Earth (Google Earth, 2014)

Mountain Weasel is often recorded from the Indus river valley, around the city of Leh, at elevations of around 3,500 m asl. The species has been seen near the Thikse Monastery (3,600 m), around tributaries of the Indus River, and in other areas surrounding Leh. Along with the enigmatic Snow Leopard *Panthera uncia*, this species is one of several animals that people come to this area to observe and photograph.



Figure 1. (A) Mountain Weasel *M. altaica* at Rumbak Village camp, Hemis National Park, Jammu and Kashmir state, India, October 9, 2014 and (B) back and tail coloration of a Mountain Weasel *M. altaica* at Rumbak Village Camp, Hemis National Park, India, 9 October 2014.

In October 2014, I joined an expedition led by Phunchok Tsering at Exotic Travel in Ladakh (www.exotickladdakh.com) into the Himalayas of Ladakh, and specifically, Hemis National Park. The expedition was focused on finding Snow Leopards, but there was some emphasis on Mountain Weasel and other species.

While on the excursion, we encountered Mountain Weasels three times in the park and another time whilst driving back to Leh. Our first encounter with the species was at our camp – Rumbak Village Camp (34°03'25"N, 77°25'29"E at an altitude of about 3,900 m). The guides found the weasel in the rocks near the dining tent (see Figure 2). The animal was identified as Mountain Weasel based on the following: longer tail and larger size than Least Weasel *M. nivalis*; lack of black tip and relatively low contrast between upperparts and underparts, unlike the Stoat *M. ermineae*; lighter underparts and lack of black mask, as opposed to Siberian Weasel *M. sibirica*; white feet and lighter overall coloration than in Yellow-bellied Weasel *M. kathiah* (Dinets & Rotshild 2005, Lariviere & Jennings 2009).

When we first saw the weasel, it rested on the rocks, but as more people came to view and photograph it, it darted in and out of natural piles of rocks and old stone walls. It ran and hopped from one rocky area to another with great speed and agility. The encounter lasted about 10-15 minutes after which it ran up the dry riverbed and into some bushes. Throughout the rest of our nine-night excursion to Hemis National Park, we encountered two more individuals, at the following localities: once near the ‘lower’ Kandala Camp (34°02'48"N, 77°23'28"E at an altitude of about 4,400 m), and only an hour later near the ‘higher’ Kandala Camp (34°02'44"N, 77°22'41"E which is at about 4,500 m). During my stay in Hemis, another observation was made by a separate tour group in the nearby Rumbak Village (34°03'16"N, 77°25'5"E, at 4,505 m). A final observation was made by our driver on the way back to Leh; although it was unconfirmed, the guides are very familiar with this species and are expert identifiers.

Altogether, there were a total of five observations of *M. altaica* in 10 days; three of these were direct observations. This suggests that this animal is not only present in the area but also relatively common. Based on this information and other reports, the distribution range for *M. altaica* should be expanded to include Ladakh. Several other reports with photographic evidence of this species in Ladakh are found on the India page of the mammal watching website, www.mammalwatching.com. This information was used to update the 2016 assessment of this species in The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species; other distribution maps also need to be corrected.

The information presented here is an excellent example of how records and information gathered by naturalists and mammal watchers can be used to improve understanding of a species’ distribution and therefore its conservation status.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Phunchok Tsering from Exotic Travel in Ladakh for organizing this excursion and using a team of skilled professionals to find us the Mountain Weasel along with Snow Leopards, Wolves, and many other interesting species. I would also like to thank biologist Vladimir Dinets for referring me to the Small Carnivore Conservation journal so that I can share this information in a relevant forum. Finally, I would like to thank the other participants in my group who took part in finding, observing and documenting this species and other species we encountered on the excursion: Jon Hall, Charles Foley, Jason Woolgar, James Woolgar, Morten Joergensen and Kate Goldberg. Peter Zahler and Alexei Abramov provided comments that greatly improved this manuscript.

References

- Abramov AV. 2016. *Mustela altaica*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2016: e.T41653A45213647. Downloaded on 31 July 2018.
- Dinets V & Rotshild EV. 1995. *Mammals of Russia*. ABF, Moscow, Russia.
- Google Earth (Version 7.1.2.2041) [Software]. Ladakh, J&K, India: Google Inc. (2014).
- Lariviere S & Jennings AP. 2009. Family Mustelidae (weasels and relatives). Pp. 564-567 in: Wilson, D. E. & Mittermeier, R. A. (eds.). *Handbook of the Mammals of the World. Vol. 1. Carnivores*. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona