

SHORT NOTE

NOTES ON THE OCCURRENCE OF THE EURASIAN OTTER (*Lutra lutra* L.) IN THE FOREST OF BALAGHAT, MADHYA PRADESH, INDIA

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Abstract: Eurasian otter presence was recorded in Balaghat forest range of Madhya Pradesh while conducting camera trapping study for large carnivores. The species shows a wide spread distribution from Europe, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Northern Africa, South East Asia. Though Eurasian otters have been recorded from Northern and Southern India, this is the first ever photo capture of Eurasian otter from Balaghat Forest Circle of Madhya Pradesh state in Central India.

Keywords: Eurasian otter, ecosystem, distribution, central India

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Otters play an important role in the aquatic ecosystem as top carnivores and thus influence the function of the ecosystem. Often considered as an indicator species of the fresh water ecosystem or fluvial ecosystem, they provide indication of the overall health of the aquatic ecosystem. Globally, the Eurasian otter is distributed starting from Europe, south-east Asia, India, Nepal, Russia, China, Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan and also some parts of Africa (Roos et al., 2015).

In India, the Eurasian otter is distributed from the foothills of Himalayas (Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh) to Sikkim and Assam in northeast of India (Prater, 1948; Hussain, 1999). The species is also recorded from Southern India. Though otter presence in Balaghat dates back to 1907 (Low, 1907) as mentioned in the district gazetteer, it remained un-noticed to the scientific community.

Though Eurasian otter is found in variety of habitat such as lakes, rivers, streams, rivers, swamps, coastal area and estuaries their distribution in India was recorded only in the above mentioned area. Also very little is known about the status of their populations from the country. It is believed that there has been a rapid decline due to loss of habitat and poaching for meat, pelt and pet (Hussain, 2002; Mohapatra et al., 2014). In this article we report presence of Eurasian otter from Balaghat forest

circle of Madhya Pradesh state of India, which is also the first photographic evidence from the area.


The Balaghat Forest Circle is one of the intact and contiguous forest patches in Central Indian Landscape and important part of Kanha-Pench tiger conservation unit. The forest of Balaghat circle is connected to three protected areas namely Kanha, Pench, Navegaon-Nagzira tiger reserve and facilitate dispersal of tigers. Hence the area is very much important in terms of landscape level conservation. However the conservation focus of the landscape has been around some of the charismatic species such as tiger (*Panthera tigris*). But the landscape supports a wide array of faunal and floral diversity. Though the faunal assemblage of protected areas are well understood, very little is known about other wildlife beyond the protected areas, in forests such as Balaghat. Otters historically have been recorded in the large river of the landscape such as Narmada and from Kanha Tiger Reserve (personal communication with Forest Officers). However, presence of otters beyond the protected area is little understood or documented. During our recent camera trapping study for large carnivore in Balaghat, we photo captured otters in several areas of the Balaghat forest circle (Fig. 1).

Following the photo capture of the otter from the forest of Balaghat, we tried to collect information about their presence from local community. The local fishermen confirmed the presence of otter in the Dhutti dam of river Wainganga. The second author had direct sighting of otters (one occasion) after subsequent visit to the dam. (Fig. 2). Also further camera trapping from the dam site resulted into successful photo capture of the otter (Table 1). Though Balaghat forests support good number of wildlife populations, this is the first ever photographic record of Eurasian otter from this forest as well the occurrence is reported for the first time.

The Eurasian otter has been listed in Appendix I of CITES and Near threatened as per IUCN Red List, due to decline in population. In many areas the information on distribution as well population status is lacking.

The recent ongoing survey in Balaghat presently only covers approximately 820 sq. km. The forest type varies from Sal dominated forest to miscellaneous forest, and numerous annual and perennial streams crossing over the area. A large chunk of the study area is still remote and the anthropogenic pressure is comparatively less. The presence of otters in the Balaghat forest requires more extensive studies in terms of population and habitat use. As a territorial forest division area with relatively lesser protection regime compared to the protected areas in central India, Balaghat would require more intensive policy based actions, research on factors affecting its survival and awareness campaigns among communities for the long term survival of the species.

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Serial No	Photos	Date of Photo capture	Distance from water (in meters)	Elevation (in meters)
1		5th December 2015	520	546
2		6th January 2016	553	579
3		7th & 8th May of 2016	0	314

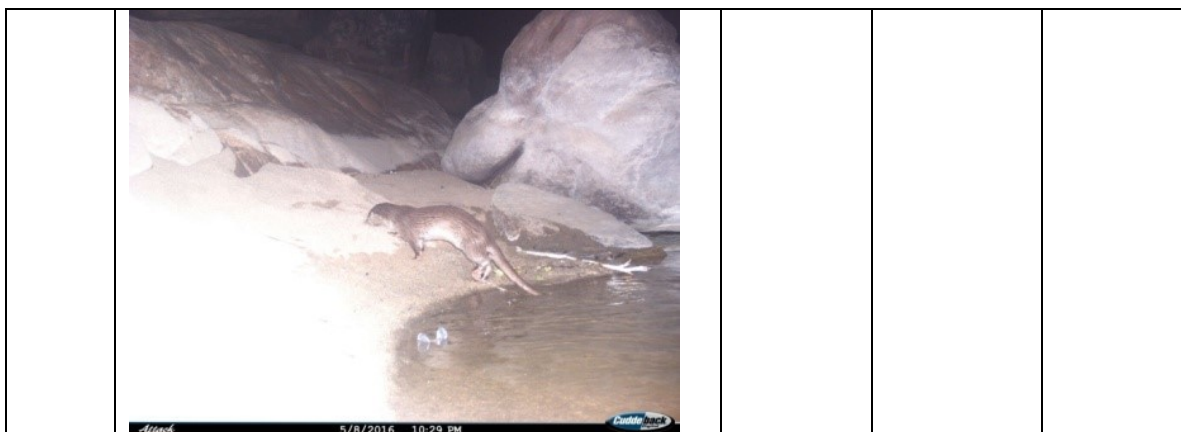


Figure 1: Camera trap photographs of Eurasian otter from Balaghat forest

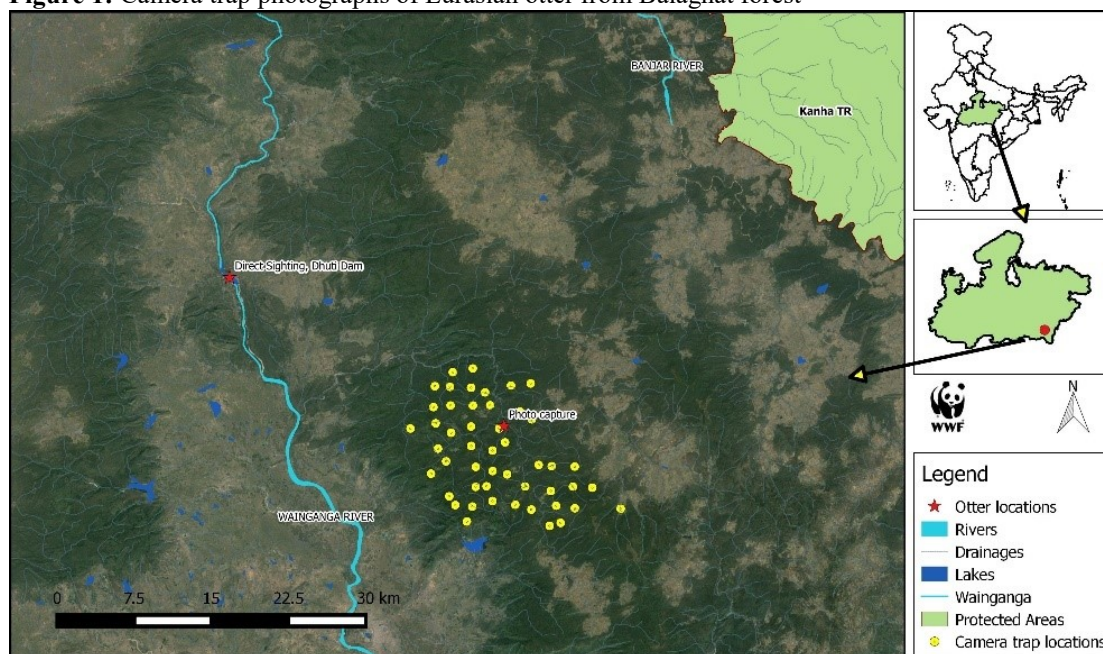


Figure 2. Map showing Eurasian otter photo capture and direct sighting location from Balaghat, Madhya Pradesh, India

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RÉSUMÉ

INDICES SUR LA PRÉSENCE DE LA LOUTRE EURASIENNE (*Lutra lutra* L.) DANS LA FORÊT DE BALAGHAT, MADHYA PRADESH, INDE

La présence de loutres eurasiennes a été observée dans la forêt de Balaghat dans l'état du Madhya Pradesh lors d'une étude menée sur les grands carnivores par utilisation de pièges photographiques. L'espèce montre une large distribution allant de l'Europe à l'Asie du sud-est en passant par le Népal, le Sri Lanka, et Afrique du nord.

Bien que les loutres eurasiennes aient été observées du Nord au Sud de l'Inde, ce sont les toutes premières photos d'elles dans la forêt de Balaghat dans l'état du Madhya Pradesh en Inde Centrale.

RESUMEN

NOTAS SOBRE LA OCURRENCIA DE LA NUTRIA EUROASIÁTICA (*Lutra lutra* L.) EN EL BOSQUE DE BALAGHAT, MADHYA PRADESH, INDIA

Registramos la presencia de la nutria en la zona del bosque de Balaghat, en Madhya Pradesh, mientras conducíamos un estudio de carnívoros con cámaras-trampa. La especie exhibe una amplia distribución en Europa, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Norte de Africa y el Sudeste de Asia. Aunque se han registrado nutrias euroasiáticas en el Norte y el Sur de la India, esta es la primera captura fotográfica de la especie en el Anillo Forestal Balaghat, estado de Madhya Pradesh, India Central.