

Conservation News

Camera-trap survey confirms the melanistic leopard cat *Prionailurus bengalensis* in the Sundarban Biosphere Reserve

The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove delta, is home not only to the Royal Bengal tiger *Panthera tigris tigris* but also to other felids. Every year, camera traps are installed throughout the Indian Sundarbans to estimate the tiger population following the standard protocol of the National Tiger Conservation Authority. In the most recent survey, infrared and visible range cameras were installed during November 2024–January 2025, the period that offers the best conditions for fieldwork because of the comparatively lower tidal range at this time. Felids such as the leopard cat *Prionailurus bengalensis*, fishing cat *Prionailurus viverrinus* and jungle cat *Felis chaus* were also captured by the cameras. Here we report the discovery of the rare melanistic morph of the leopard cat from the Indian Sundarbans (the non-melanistic form of the leopard cat has been recorded from both the Indian and Bangladeshi Sundarbans).

Although the leopard cat is threatened by habitat loss, its adaptability helps it persist and it is categorized as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List. It is protected under Schedule 1 of the Indian Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972. In analysis of the camera-trap data, images of melanistic leopard cats were recorded from six locations in the Dhulibhasani, Herobhanga and Ajmalmari compartments of the Raidighi Range in 24 Parganas (South) division. Herobhanga is 250 m from the inhabited mainland, Ajmalmari 8 km and Dhulibhasani 11 km, suggesting a wide distribution of the melanistic form. The times of the photographs (19.00–3.00) indicate nocturnal activity, aligning with the known behavior of leopard cats, which are typically solitary, nocturnal hunters. This



Melanistic leopard cat captured by camera trap in the Indian Sundarbans.

is the first photographic documentation of melanistic leopard cats in the Sundarban Biosphere Reserve, and we hope further research will enrich knowledge of their ecology, range and behavioural patterns in the Sundarbans.

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