

Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* preying on a rat *Niviventer* in Darjeeling, India

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Abstract

A Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* was observed catching and killing a rat *Niviventer* inside a house in Darjeeling, India, at an elevation of 1600 m asl. Photographs and details of the observation are provided. The diet of Yellow-bellied Weasel is poorly known and this report adds to the limited literature on the species.

Keywords: Mustelidae, small mammal, small carnivore, diet, predation

At 10h05 on 23 July 2022, on a clear, sunny day in a rural village of Takdah cantonment in Darjeeling, India (27°2'22"N, 88°21'27"E, WGS 84; 1600 m asl), I observed two adult Yellow-bellied Weasels *Mustela kathiah* inside a house (Fig. 1). The household was ethnically Nepali and weasels entering a house is considered auspicious in Nepali culture, so the animals were not disturbed.

One of the Weasels swiftly moved behind an almirah (cupboard) while the other Weasel paced from one corner of the almirah to the other. I heard the squeaking vocalisations of a rat and sounds of struggle coming from where the first Weasel had gone. This lasted about 5 minutes, following which the Weasel emerged from behind the almirah with a rat in its mouth. The rat was identified to be a species in the genus *Niviventer*. Long, slender and flat crania and slightly or prominently tufted tail-tips

distinguish the genus *Niviventer* from other murid rodents (Musser 1981). The rat was held by its throat and showed no sign of struggle, suggesting it was dead. The two Weasels tried to escape from the room through the window. The individual without the rat escaped at its first attempt and was not seen again. The Weasel carrying the rat seemed to struggle to jump up to the window with the prey in its mouth; it dropped the rat and left the room. After about 5 minutes, at 10h16, the Weasel re-entered the room, picked up the dead rat by its throat and again attempted to exit through the window. This time the Weasel was successful. Once outside, the Weasel dragged the rat towards the woodshed, making further observation impossible. The Weasel showed no interest in consuming its prey on the spot and the two Weasels did not display any signs of aggression towards each other. This may indi-



Fig. 1. The Yellow-bellied Weasel *Mustela kathiah* (a) inside the house after killing a *Niviventer* rat, (b) exiting through the window, (c-e) dragging its prey through the verandah toward the woodshed, in Darjeeling, India, on 23 July 2022. (Photos: Aditya Pradhan.)



cate that the prey would be shared between the two Weasels.

One of the lesser known small carnivores belonging to the family Mustelidae, the Yellow-bellied Weasel is distributed across much of South and South-east Asia, up to 4000 m asl (Willcox et al. 2016). Its natural history has never been studied and the basis for its characterisation as nocturnal, solitary and territorial (e.g. Nowak 1997) is thin. Many recent daytime records indicate that it is certainly not strictly nocturnal (Supparatvikorn et al. 2012, Rai 2013).

Because of the incidental nature of most observations of the species, it is difficult to speculate whether hunting in duos is normal or unusual behaviour for the species. However, it is clear from other similar observations that it is quite normal for this species to kill in one place and then carry the prey elsewhere (e.g. Rai 2013). Although hunting may take place in undergrowth, Yellow-bellied Weasels encumbered by prey seem to travel preferentially along open routes, such as human footpaths and vehicle tracks. If this is the case, prey-carrying may be disproportionately seen and photographed, so how common it is for Weasels to transport their prey, as opposed to consuming it where the kill has taken place, is not known.

This species of weasel is known to feed predominantly on rodents, a characteristic recognised by the Nepalese community, which historically domesticated and trained it to eradicate rodents in their homes (Sterndale 1884; Pillai & Biswas 1971). The practice of training and domesticating Yellow-bellied Weasels has not been reported from Nepal (Baral et al. 2019) or Darjeeling, India (where people of Nepali origin reside) in recent times. Nonetheless, weasels entering a house is still considered auspicious in Nepali culture.

Very little is known about the diet of the Yellow-bellied Weasel, and this natural history note adds to the limited literature on their foraging behaviour and, more specifically, their hunting of prey within human habitations.

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