

India Fishing Cats

14th- 19th March

Report by Paul McDougall

Tour participants Paul McDougall (photographic Guide) with 5 Touch the Wild clients

Summary

The name Baghrol Basa– Baghrol means Fishing cat (*Prionailurus viverrinus*) in Bengali language and Basa meaning nest or house. Our home for the 5 nights is Baghrol Basa homestay which is a Research and Conservation project dedicated to the Fishing Cats which is funded by sustainable Fishing C tourism. These cats are specially adapted to a life in the watery, swampy environment.

Fishing cats are one of the least understood wildcats and very little is known about the habits and the behaviour of the fishing cats. Wetlands in India where the fishing cats live are densely populated and millions of people depend on these areas for their livelihoods.

Fish and prawn farms, agriculture, fishing and human settlements are common in these areas. It is quite remarkable that the fishing cat continues to live in these areas in spite of all the human activities.

There is a high density of fishing cats around the Bhagrol Basa homestay. This provides a unique opportunity to collect information that helps to develop an understanding on ways to secure the future of the fishing cat in similar human-dominated landscapes of India.

Along with the trust W.A.T.E.R. (Wildlife Awareness Trust for Environment and Research), I started to bring groups of people to support and help with addressing both the behavioural study of the cat and the human-dimension aspects. The Fishing Cat Project is relatively new but is one that I am passionate about supporting through bringing groups of guests and photographers. Although my participation is limited, the revenue generated by these photography tours ensures that a substantial donation goes towards the project every year.

Observing wildlife: In the swamps that too in human dominated landscapes is tricky and we perfected a unique safari model. Our wildlife activities are conducted at nighttime, from dusk and end at dawn. The guests rest during the day and enjoy the comforts of the property and experience local culture. At night, we use a ToTo- a battery-operated vehicle. The safari is a unique opportunity to observe the fishing cat and other animals at a close distance. In these swamps, the fishing cat is the top predator and the local people rightly call it the Tiger that eats Fish- MECHOBAGHA.

In addition to Fishing cats, the surrounding areas are also home to the Jungle cats, Golden Jackals (many Melanistic or Black Jackals are also recorded and frequently seen), water monitor lizards, Golden monitor lizards, Asian palm civets, Small Indian civets and several species of rodents.

We enjoyed exclusive occupancy at Baghrol Basa, which is an authentic and local homestay experience with modern amenities. This was home to all of us, and around 15 Local people who made the Homestay themselves. These people monitor the surrounding habitat for Fishing Cat conservation and research. These guys are unbelievably passionate about finding the cats and showing us these beautiful animals. They know where to look and how to position us to observe

and take photographs and have a 100% success rate. Unlike in resorts & lodges, guests are taking part in the Research & Conservation of the wild Fishing Cats.

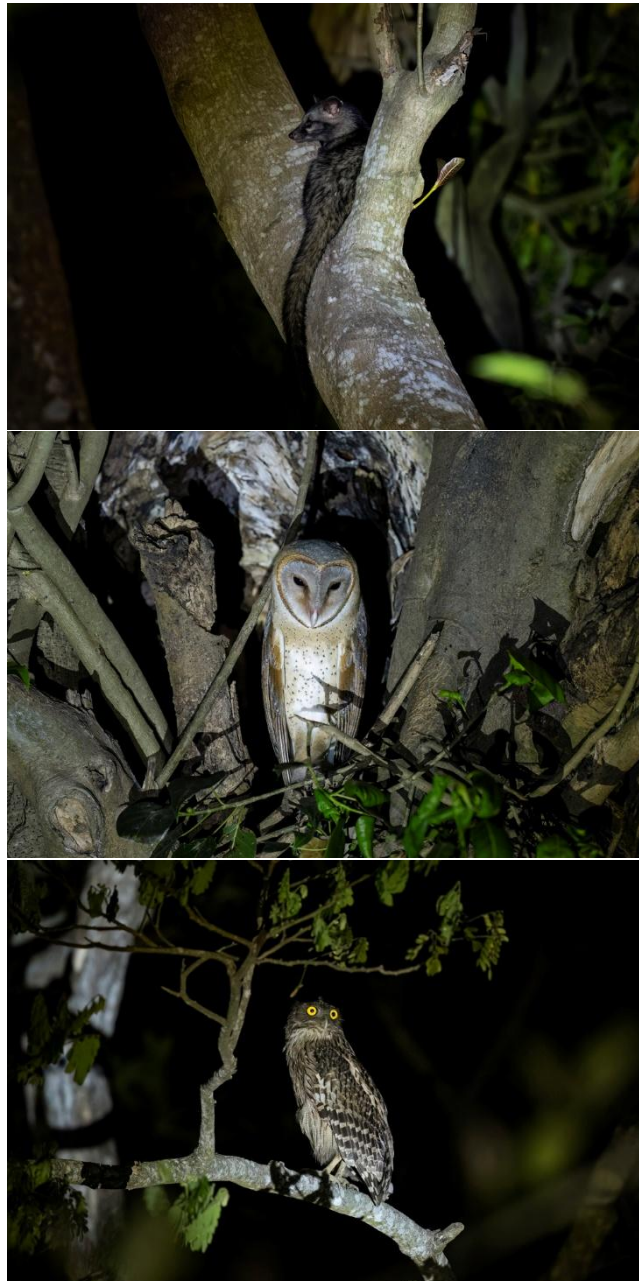
Our 5 nights here were extremely successful with several cat sightings and numerous photographic opportunities. Very few people have seen or photographed a Fishing Cat in the Wild and after this week there were 5 more people added to that list



Day 1 Saturday 14th March

3 of the guests were arriving in the morning flying from the UK. Unfortunately their flight was delayed and so they missed their Delhi – Kolkata connecting flight. They rebooked on the next available flight and arrived in the afternoon. 2 of the group and myself flew from Bagdogra after crossing the border from Nepal into India. Our flight was slightly delayed and we arrived into Kolkata at around 4pm. The journey from the airport is usually an hour and a half but due to a religious celebration the traffic was really bad so it took us 3 hours. This meant that we missed our first Fishing Cat Safari. We could have delayed it but everyone was very tired after a full day of travelling and so rested. The other 3 guests went on the safari. They saw Golden Jackal but no cats. They returned at 9pm and we all had dinner together. We did introductions so everyone knew each other and then we rested until 11pm. That was the time for our second safari. We all got in the vehicles - we use a ToTo- a battery-operated vehicle, which is very quiet. We had 2 people in each vehicle with the plan being that people would rotate and so everyone would spend some time with me on each drive. The guides use a low powered spotlight to find the cats and other wildlife and if something is found we all stop and get out of the vehicles. When everyone is ready, they use a more powerful spotlight to light the subject so that images can be taken, then the bright spotlight is turned off and after a few minutes is used again. This causes minimum disturbance to the cats and other animals and usually means that they don't move away. There is something very surreal driving through the empty village streets looking for cats, there were still a few people around enjoying the festivities and the music was still playing from very loud randomly placed speakers. But overall it is quiet and an amazing and unique experience. Soon after leaving our homestay the last vehicle in the convoy stopped and signalled for us to all come back, they had seen something. Could this be our first cat! We returned and all got out of our vehicles. The guides were indicating that what they had seen was in a tree so definitely not a fishing cat. When everyone was ready they lit up the tree and sat there looking at us was a beautiful Asian Palm Civet. I had seen them before but never photographed them and I could not believe that this incredibly elusive animal was sat in a tree a few metres from us very relaxed. We all took some images of the civet and then left it to move

away through the trees in search of food. Wow what a first sighting. Brilliant. We continued our drive and found a Brown Fishing Owl sat in a tree, another good find that the group were able to photograph. Later on whilst driving through one of the village squares we heard a loud screeching noise. We looked up in the old gnarled tree in the centre of the square and there was a barn owl making a lot of noise, It was very close and so we were all able to take some images of that and then we left the owl to it and returned to our homestay. On the way back the guys caught a glimpse of a cat but by the time we stopped and got the lights on to where it was it had disappeared. We got back at around 2am and everyone was very tired and went to bed for some well deserved rest. A great start to our night safaris.





Day 2 Sunday 15th March

Due to the long day before we had a late breakfast at 9:30am. The group decided that they would be happy to all relax and just spend some time getting used to the 30 degrees heat and catching up on some sleep. I went through camera settings with one of the group who was the only person who had not been on any previous workshops or tours with me. After an hour she was very comfortable with the set up and changing settings, so went off to practice, I then spent some time with one of the other group members reviewing her Red Panda images and going over camera settings again in more detail and also looking at light etc.

At 12:30pm just before lunch we were all asked if we wanted to photograph a Monocled Cobra. Baghrol Basa has a resident snake expert and they take part in snake rescues locally in the villages, this saves the snakes being injured or killed by fearful local people. When the snakes are caught they are brought to Baghrol Basa and are checked for any signs of injury, bathed and given water to drink, finally they are fed and released back in to the wild in an area away from people. This Monocled Cobra was quite a large snake and had been hit by sticks when found in the village, it was in need of care and attention, but was making a great recovery. The whole experience was amazing with the snake put on the grass, it curled up and developed a defensive posture with its hood out, so we were all able to get some great images in a safe and controlled environment. It was a little surreal laying on the grass a few metres away from one of the most venomous snakes in India, but the snake did not show any signs of aggression and soon relaxed and put its hood down and just curled up. After a few minutes the snake was put away and we then went and had lunch whilst the snake went for a bath and some water.



After lunch we went for a short drive in the To-To's to the river via the local farm land. We were looking for Jungle Cats and any interesting birds. We saw a few cormorants, storks and some other local birds and then returned to Baghrol Basa.



We set off for our early evening safari at 7pm. The village was still quite busy with people enjoying the festivities. We headed out of the village centres towards the quieter areas but unfortunately this drive was a blank with no cats or anything else of interest.

We returned for a delicious dinner and then went to our rooms to relax and get ready for the late evening drive.

We set off at 11pm for the evening drive. Some of the group were starting to get disheartened that we hadn't seen a cat yet, but I reassured them that the cats would come and we would see at some point. After only 15 minutes the lead vehicle stopped. They had found a cat and it was less than 10 metres away across a pool. Brilliant this meant that everyone could now see and hopefully photograph, once everyone was in position the guys put the spotlights on and there he was sat across the water from us with a lovely reflection. What a fantastic first sighting. For the next 15 minutes everyone watched in silence and took some images. I took a few images and then checked the groups images to make sure everyone had the right settings and were getting some images. Everyone succeeded. We left the cat to walk back in to the bushes and continued our drive. In one particular area there are lots of pools of water so we usually park up and the guides walk off with their lights to search the pools. One of the guides signalled that we should come quickly so we did and there sure enough was another cat, this one was a little far away so the images were not that great. The guides said that we should move to the next pool as the cat would come out there, so we made our way in silence along the road, we disturbed a group of wild boar who leapt in to the water making everyone jump. We then stood by the pool and waited. After no more than a few minutes the Fishing Cat appeared. This one was only around 5 metres away from us and was sat in the water hyacinth and hunting for fish and frogs. WOW!! The cat was completely relaxed and sat for a while before stalking through the water hyacinth. Everyone got some superb images and this was one of the best fishing cat encounters that I have ever had. It was a brilliant experience. The cat then moved off to another pool and we left it and returned to the vehicles. Everyone was now very happy and excited. 2 amazing cat sightings in a matter of hours. Brilliant. On the way back we stopped to look at a Golden Jackal and got back around 1:30am. Tired but very happy everyone retired to their rooms to sleep.





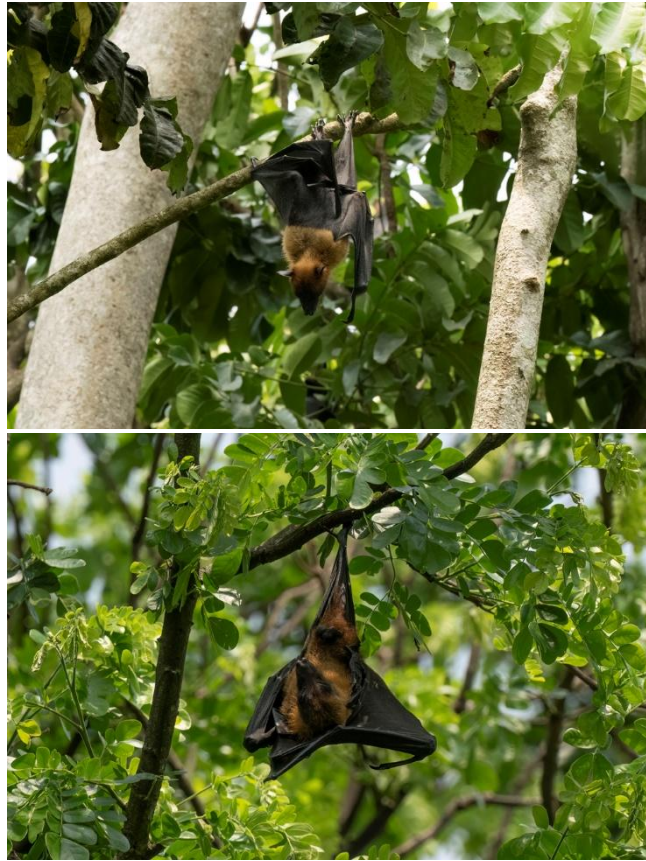


Day 4 Monday 16th March

After a 9:30am breakfast we left shortly after in the vehicles to go and visit the local flying fox bat colony. This is always a highlight for the group, and the location gives you an incredible opportunity to photograph these huge bats hanging in the trees, it also gives you the chance to get flying shots of the bats hunting for insects and moving position. We have a self-imposed maximum one hour with the bats to minimise any disturbance. So, after the hour was up we left them, during that hour everyone got some lovely images. I helped position everyone in the best location for the direction of the light and advised on settings. The whole group loved the experience of the bats and were surprised at how big they were and how fox like they appear.

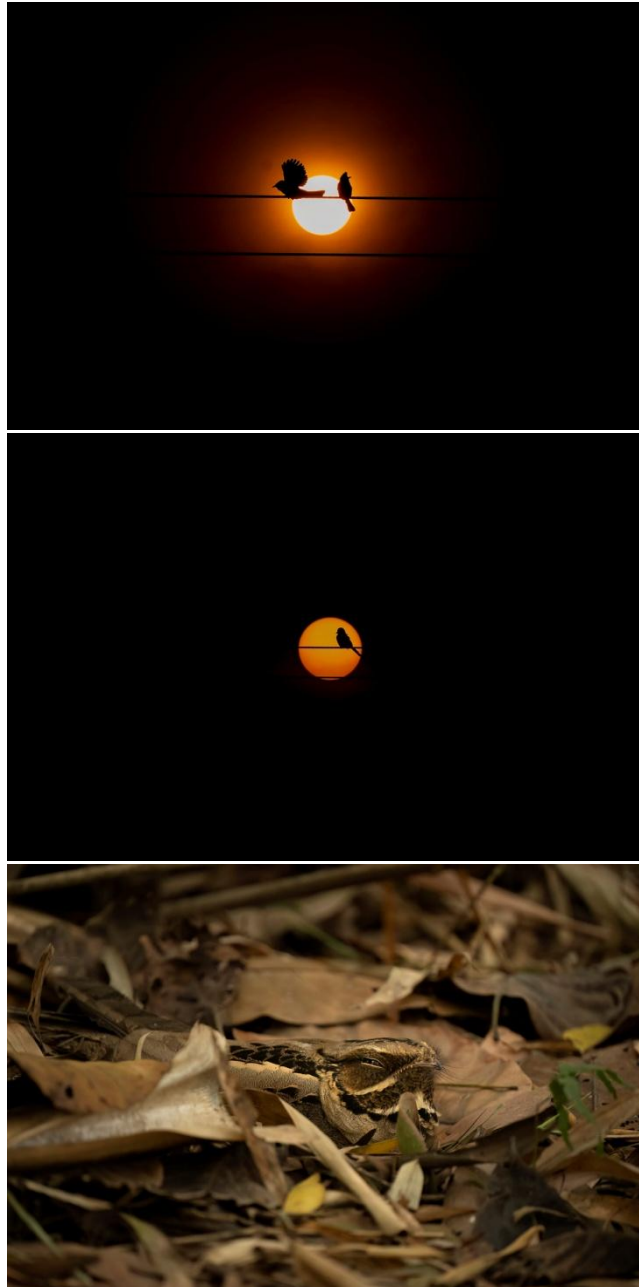






We returned to Baghrol Basa and relaxed a little before lunch, after lunch we reviewed images and 3 of the group spent some time trying to book a new flight home as due to the Middle East conflict their flight had been cancelled. At 3:30pm we went for a walk locally looking for birds, we saw an owlet, rollers, shrikes, babblers, storks and several other birds. As the sun set we tried to do some silhouettes of the birds sat on the wires with the setting sun in the background. This was eventually achieved. We then walked back and, on the way, stopped at where a nightjar was nesting, eventually all the group saw the incredibly well camouflaged bird and got a few images.





We went back to our rooms to recharge batteries and get ready for the early evening safari.

We left at 7pm and no more than 5 minutes in to the drive saw our first cat. This one was a little further away but the high powered spotlight had no problems in picking the cat out and enabling everyone the opportunity to photograph it, I encouraged everyone to photograph this cat wider to show the environment as much as possible as we had previously had close up opportunities with the cats. Everyone did this and added some different images to their portfolio. We continued on our drive and went to see if we could find the barn owl again. It was in the same tree as before but this time as it was earlier, there were quite a few people around. The owl was again calling loudly and everyone was interested in the owl. We took a few images and I did a few zoom bursts which I was pleased with of it sat in the tree. We continued our drive and stopped at the place we had seen the second cat the previous later night safari. The guides found another cat but by the time we all got in position it disappeared. It then started to spot with rain so we walked back to the vehicles. Within seconds of sitting in the vehicles, huge gusts

of wind came in and the rain came down very heavily. This was not just a small shower this was the start of a heavy storm. The guides put the covers down on the sides of the vehicles and we started to head back, as we were driving back the wind and rain got worse and worse. There was thunder rumbling overhead and flashes of lightning lighting up the sky. Sensibly the guides decided to stop and shelter in a temple, but one of the vehicles had continued back. We stood in the outside part of the temple and the rain started to come in horizontally getting heavier and heavier. There were several local people sheltering too and we all retreated further and further in to cover, but the rain was relentless and kept coming. We moved right in to the temple and sat on the steps. Within minutes the floor started flooding and the water rose to the first level of the steps. The wind was getting stronger and stronger and it really was a spectacular storm. After half an hour of sheltering things started to return to an eerie quiet calm, so we negotiated the flooded temple floor caused by a blocked drain and went back to the vehicles. We started to return back, after 10 minutes there was a build up of vehicles and a huge tree had come down across the road, people were busy cutting it up to clear the road, our guides went to help and we sat in the vehicles just wondering how bad this storm was. After a short wait we continued on our way but within a few minutes there was another tree down in the road, there we encountered our other vehicle who had been sheltering in a different temple. We all stood and discussed the storm, it wasn't until the drive back that we all realised how bad it had been, it started to rain heavily again, and we realised that this tree would not be removed for a while, we were less than 1km from our accommodation so we offered to walk back, the guides ran off to camp and came back with umbrellas which was an amazing gesture and we started our walk back, there were another 2 trees down between where we stopped and the homestay. Just how bad had this storm been – it was crazy the damage and destruction in just half hour. We arrived back at 10pm and had dinner straight away, the guides all went back out to start helping with the clear up of the road. I decided that it was not safe or advisable to do the later drive due to the roads and the fact that it was still raining so we all went to our rooms and slept earlier.



Day 5 Tuesday 17th March

We had our usual 9am breakfast and after the adventure and storm the night before decided to have a relaxing day in the homestay grounds, some people decided to just relax, one of the group had to sort out her flight as her return flight had also been cancelled due to the conflict in the Middle East. I did some bits of photography and tuition with some of the group and then spent the rest of the day catching up on my own admin and work. In the afternoon my friend and owner of Bagrol Basa and Habres Nest (Red Pandas) arrived with his family. Shantanu was due to join me for the next tour on this trip for Tigers and his experience with the Fishing Cats would also be invaluable for the next 2 nights. I caught up with Shantanu and whilst talking about last night's storm Shantanu advised that actually it wasn't a storm, we were actually on the edge of a tornado that had hit India that night. So we were incredibly lucky. At 3:30pm we went for a walk. We again saw many of the common birds and the group wanted to have another go at doing silhouettes of the birds on the wires against the setting sun, so we set up for this and managed to get several different species which was nice. The rest of the afternoon was spent relaxing.





At 6:30pm we were having coffee and tea before the evening safari when we got word that a cat had been seen on the Baghrol Basa land, no more than a couple of minutes walk away so we set off on foot to see if we could see the cat. When we arrived at the pool the guides quickly located the cat and we all got in to position. The cat was not far away from us on the opposite side of the pool, so we were all able to photograph it. After a while the cat moved to a different pool and we left it and went back to our tea and coffee. We left at 7:30pm for the early evening safari. We had already had a brilliant cat sighting so close to the camp that everyone was very happy. It was a relatively quiet first safari with a couple of owls and a stunning close Golden Jackal which all of the group were pleased to see so close.



We returned to the homestay for dinner. Tonight Shantanu's family joined us and it was lovely seeing my guests interact with them and ask questions about Indian life and culture. It was a lovely meal and enjoyed by everyone.

At 11:00pm we left for the late safari. I had high expectations for this safari after last night's storms I thought that the cats would be more active, but after an hour of searching we had seen very little. The guides caught a glimpse of a cat but it disappeared very quickly. Tonight I was in the back car and as we were driving along our guide caught a glimpse of what he thought was a palm civet sat in a tree, but after lighting it again we realised that it was a Fishing Cat, very unusual behaviour. It was also strange as a group of people were sat on the steps less than 10m from it playing cards, eating and drinking. Unfortunately we didn't have the bright spot light with us so we were unable to take any images, the other vehicles returned to us but by that time the cat had come down the tree and disappeared. We continued on our drive. Then the guides

stopped and had spotted a cat at a distance along a larger body of water. It was really too far even for the brighter spotlight but we did try to get a few images. As the cat walked from right to left we realised that we could probably get closer to it so we changed position and waited. At this point we saw a second cat following the first. At the last minute one of the cats changed direction and went away from the water but the other kept coming and walked past where we were. It was still a little too far but I tried to do a few panning shots of it as it walked past.

Everyone managed a few images and it was great to see 2 more cats.

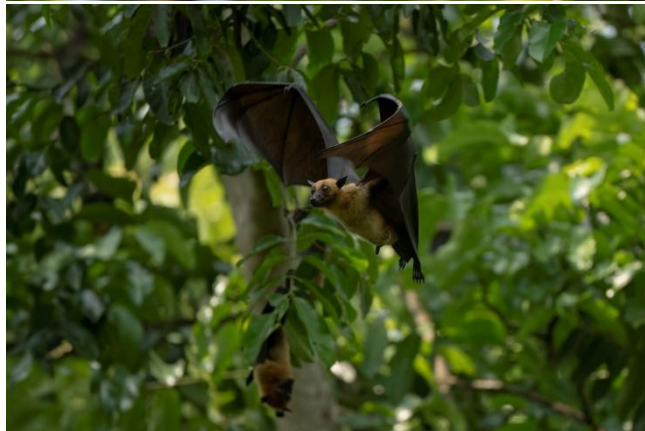
We returned to the homestay and slept. Tomorrow was our last here and time had flown by.



Day 6 Wednesday 18th March

We again had breakfast at 9:30am and then as the group loved the bats so much on the previous visit we did a return visit. The light was even better when we reached the Flying Foxes and wasn't as harsh. Again everyone got some more images and I encouraged everyone to try and get some different images from their previous visit. The hour went by very quickly and we returned to the homestay. The group had collectively decided that they just wanted the day to relax and pack. 5 of us had to leave at 3am for the airport. One to return home and me and the others to start our journey for the next trip for Tigers in Satpura.







Just before lunch we were informed that 2 more snakes had been rescued and did we want to come and see them. One was a baby monacled cobra that was very feisty and the other was a very relaxed Russels Viper. Another very venomous snake. We again got some images of the snakes before they were given a bath and some water to drink. These had not been attacked and had just been rescued so would be released tonight.



The rest of the afternoon was spent packing and relaxing.

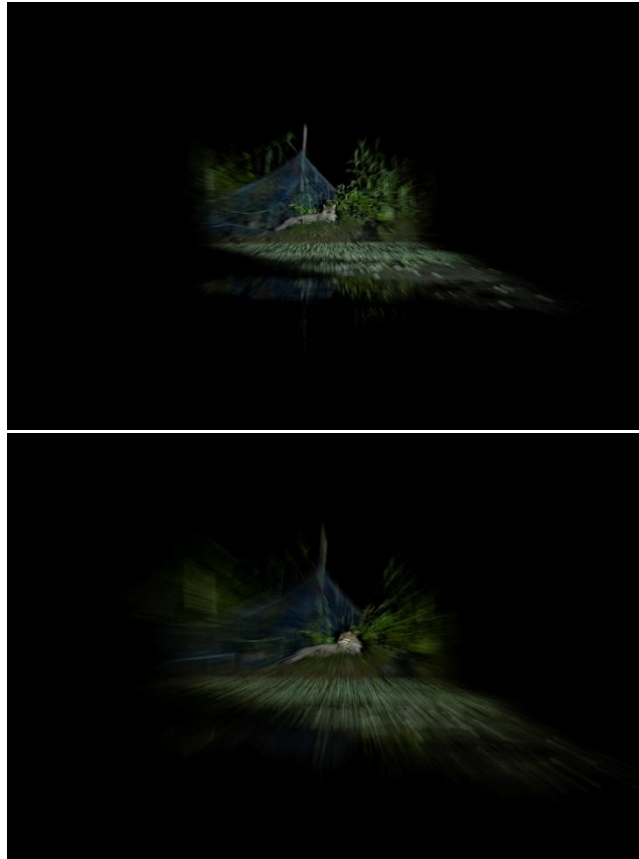
We left for our last early evening safari at 7pm. This drive was one of the quietest that we had. We did get one cat that was quite close but most people were unable to photograph it as it disappeared quite quickly. So we returned for Dinner.



After dinner we went out on our last late safari. This drive was also a quiet one. That was until around half way in. When the guides spotted a huge cat the other side of the water. It lay in the open in front of a blue fishing net for ages. A lot of the group were put off by the blue net but I encouraged them to photograph the cat as part of the story of the cats in this area is their relationship with people that live in the villages. This image would help to tell this story in a simple way. We watched the cat for quite some time before it got up and walked away to another pond. What a great sighting and a brilliant way to finish the trip. We returned back to the

homestay said goodbye to one of the group members who was staying on in Kolkata to do some street photography and then went to our rooms for a couple of hours before it was time for us to leave for the airport.





Overall the trip was a huge success with everyone able to get some images of this rare and elusive cat. The whole group took on board the advice given to them regarding settings and technique for photographing in low light and were rewarded with some lovely members. In total we had 14 cat sightings with 8 of them providing photographic sightings and 4 of those being right up there with the best I have ever had. This trip is a completely unique experience and I don't believe that there is anything like it in the world and the more and more time I spend photographing these cats the more I feel privileged to spend time with them. I really hope that this tour for one of India's lesser-known cats can increase awareness and help in the conservation effort and I hope that my images will inspire people to take part in this trip for one of the rarest cats in the world.





