

**NORTHEAST INDIA  
MARCH 2022**

**ASIAN GOLDEN CAT**



I have been waiting for the India border to open for the last two years to visit Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary in what seems to be the only place where Golden cats are seen by mammal watchers. Having made several trips to the mid-hills of Eastern and Central Nepal , in my view, Eaglenest is probably the best location in Asia to seem this elusive and endangered cat. My intention was always to target Eaglenest with a couple of additional trips and this was really a recce rather than a dedicated “cat trip”. I also included a few extra days to visit Kaziranga National Park and the Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary as it was my first time in Assam. I am pleased to say that my two year no-new-cat-tick drought is over and although I was incredibly lucky, it seems that Eaglenest is also a reliable place for Marbled cat. A return visit is definitely on the cards.

Eaglenest Wildlife Sanctuary has been a destination for birders for many years especially during spring migration in April and May. The park closes for the monsoon (May to September) and from talking with the local guides either

October/November or Feb/March seems to be the best time for mammal trips avoiding the possible heavy snowfall months of December/January. The 50 km track that runs through the park is blocked at its southerly end which is the key to the cat sightings as there is no through-traffic. Starting at the park entrance at Lama Camp (2300m) the road winds its way through the park to the Eaglenest pass at 2800m before descending to Bompu camp at 2000m where we spent 3 nights. The forest hasn't been logged and although there is a stark reminder of the impact of fire in this fragile ecosystem (a burn 40 years ago shows no sign of recovery), this is one of those places where there is no Wi-Fi, traffic or livestock and nature can flourish.

We spent early mornings, late afternoons and early evenings driving along the track either down the hill from Bompu to a small research base at Kellong (800m) or up towards the pass as far as a small watchtower at Chaku (2450m) before turning around and heading back down on what is regarded as the section of road that is the most productive in terms of Golden cat sightings.

Chaku watchtower



On the first morning drive into the park heading to Bompou camp, we had our first (and only) sighting of a troop of Arunachal macaques as they climbed the wooded slopes above the road. Later that day we also saw a small troop of Capped langur as we walked the road near the research house at Kellong. These were two of my three primate targets of the trip.

Arunachal macaque



The Himalayan forests above 2000m can be quiet, very quiet with only one or two animals in an evening. The magic of the place lies in the rarity of the species that could step out onto the track around the next corner. On the “golden” evening, we drove up the mountain in the late afternoon before driving slowly back at dusk. There are parts of the road where the steep sided road offers little scanning potential but at the same time, the road offers any transient mammal a quick “A to B” path rather than the steep hillside. At around 7.30 pm, our local guide, Dombe, spotted eyeshine at the base of a clump of bamboo about 15 m off the track on a steep slope. We got out of the car and I managed to get a photo of a sliver of red/brown fur. Two possibilities – barking deer or Golden cat. I thought the former but as I fuffed with my light/camera/bins I failed to get in position to

get a line of sight where I could clearly see any diagnostic features. Both Ravi and Dombe declared that they had seen “pointed ears and the face of a cat”. I didn’t want to believe it. Twenty minutes passed and the animal moved and slowly withdrew from sight. I had seen eyeshine and the red fur but did it count? It was a confirmed cat I just hadn’t seen enough to tell what it was. But did it count? My head and gut said “no” and my demons told me that in no uncertain terms that I had “fxxxxxg blown it”.

Slither of Golden cat?



In a state of crushing disbelief I got back in the car and we headed back down the hill. Ravi was on a muted high trying to manage the unfolding worst-case scenario when the guide spots, but the client misses, the trophy tick. I knew I wasn’t going to sleep as I replayed the scene over and over again. Same conclusion. I blew it.

We turned a corner and Dombe called out “barking deer” at the passenger side of the car. I saw a blur of red fur in the roadside vegetation and then it happened. Out stepped an ASIAN GOLDEN CAT!!!! One meter in front of me! When does that ever happen? A second chance of a rare and elusive animal! It was a stunning looking cat and much bigger than I had imagined. It trotted out in front of the car and looked back flashing its white cheek stripes and showing its magnificent GOLDEN fur before quickly moving down the track. The car was still moving and the track was pretty uneven so my first couple of photo’s didn’t come out. We stopped and I took my final photo (see start of the report) with its upturned tail flashing white. Ravi managed the shot below. The GOLDEN ONE then jumped up the steep embankment and was gone. Unabashed celebrations began. There is a CAT GOD!!

Asian Golden cat (@ Ravi Kailas



The “golden” section of track the following day



After the encounter and over the next few days I found it hard to refocus. We continued to mammal watch for the rest of the trip but my thoughts were somewhere else as I know replayed the moment, when, a GOLDEN CAT stepped out of the forest and onto the road.

Other mammals in Eaglenest:

Diurnal species included **Arunachal macaque, Assamese macaque (outside the park), Hoary-bellied squirrel, Brown goral, Himalayan striped squirrel, Orange-bellied Himalayan squirrel and Pallas's squirrel.**

Nocturnal species included **Bhutan flying squirrel, Himalayan palm civet, Red muntjac and gaur.**

The next leg of the trip were the lowlands of Assam. We headed to Kaziranga National Park which is truly the Serengeti of Asia with Greater One-horned rhino's visible from the main highway that runs along the edge of the park. A stunning assemblage of large mammals that are a credit to the conservation efforts of the

Assamese and Indian government. Mammals included **Wild water buffalo, Asian elephant, Greater one-horned rhino, Hog deer, Sambar deer, Eastern swamp deer and Rhesus macaque.**

Later that day we then drove to the Hollongapar Gibbon Sanctuary. We spent the following morning observing primates in this little oasis for the primates of Northeast India. The gibbons are easy to see and semi-habituated.

Mammals seen included **Western Hoolock gibbon, Rhesus macaque, Stump-tailed macaque, Pig-tailed macaque, Capped langur and Malayan giant squirrel.**

### **STUFF I MISSED:**

It seems churlish to talk about what I didn't see given that I had seen one of my top three most wanted Asian cats. That said **Marbled cat** had been seen during the day on the road below Bompou and there are occasional sightings at night. **Particolored flying squirrel** and **Spotted giant flying squirrel** have been reported in the past but despite a couple of night drives outside the park we only spotted **Bhutan flying squirrel.**

### **CONTACT DETAILS:**

Ravi Kailas (Ficus tours owner) organized and guided the trip. Ravi worked hard in the field and was always in good cheer. He arranged the hard to secure permits to enter Arunachal Pradesh which was touch and go with permission only coming through the day before the trip started (and after I had already arrived in Delhi). I knew the risk that it might not come through but I took the gamble and it paid off! The local guide in Bompou – Dombe Pradhan – was exceptional in his spotting with both sightings of the Golden cat credited to him.

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### **ITINERARY**

Day 1 – Arrival and drive to Tenga on the edge of Eaglenest. Night drive up to Lama camp on the park boundary.

Day 2-4 - Early morning and evening drive in Eaglenest. Overnight in Bompou camp.

Day 5 - Drive to Mandala Top on the far side of Eaglenest. Although Golden cat had been sighted in this region I would not recommend this addition and focus on Eaglenest. Night drive around the roads outside the park

Day 6 - Drive to Kaziranga NP with visit to the central zone and then on to Hollongappar Gibbon Sanctuary.

Day 7 - Hollongappar and departure.

### MAMMAL LIST

1	Golden cat <i>Catopuma temminckii</i>	The only mammal seen during the “golden” evening drive. But no complaints!
2	Arunachal macaque <i>M. munzala</i>	One troop seen during the first morning near the Eaglenest pass
3	Stump-tailed macaque <i>Macaca arctoides</i>	One troop seen in the gibbon sanctuary
4	Assamese macaque <i>Macaca assamensis</i>	Two troops seen on the way to Eaglenest
5	Northern pig-tailed macaque <i>Macaca leonina</i>	Seen in the gibbon sanctuary
6	Rhesus macaque <i>Macaca mulatta</i>	Seen in the gibbon sanctuary
7	Capped langur <i>Trachypithecus pileatus</i>	Seen both in the lower altitude area of Eaglenest and the gibbon sanctuary
8	Western hoolock gibbon <i>H.hoolock</i>	One family group seen in the gibbon sanctuary
9	Black giant squirrel <i>R. bicolor</i>	A pair seen in the gibbon sanctuary
10	Pallas’s squirrel <i>Callosciurus erythraeus</i>	Lower slopes of Eaglenest



11	Orange-bellied squirrel <i>Dremomys lokriah</i>	Himalayan	A couple of animals seen at Eaglenest
12	Hoary-bellied squirrel <i>Callosciurus pygerythrus</i>	Himalayan	A couple of animals seen at Eaglenest
13	Himalayan striped squirrel <i>Tamiops maclellandii</i>		Seen on the lower slopes of Eaglenest
14	Bhutan giant flying squirrel <i>Petaurista nobilis</i>		Frequently seen during night drives outside Eaglenest
15	Gaur <i>B. gaurus</i>		One large male seen on the track in Eaglenest at dusk
16	Himalayan brown goral <i>Naemorhedus goral</i>		Two or three animals seen on rocky outcrops in Eaglenest
17	Northern red muntjac <i>M.vaginalis</i>		Seen a number of times in Eaglenest
18	Wild water buffalo <i>Bubalus arnee</i>		Common in Kazirangha
19	Sambar deer <i>Rusa unicolor</i>		Common in Kazirangha
20	Hog deer <i>Axis porcinus</i>		Common in Kazirangha
21	Barasingha <i>Rucervus duvaucelii ranjitsinhi</i>		Common in Kazirangha
22	Greater one-horned rhino <i>Rhinoceros unicornis</i>		Common in Kazirangha (which is an extraordinary conservation achievement)
23	Asian elephant <i>Elephas maximus</i>		Common in Kazirangha
24	Wild boar <i>Sus scrofa</i>		Common in Kazirangha
25	Masked palm civet		One animal seen at Eaglenest

Paguma larvata	
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Bhutan giant flying squirrel



Masked palm civet



Western Hoolock gibbon (third and final primate target)

