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Cover: Golden-headed Lion Tamarin *Leontopithecus chrysomelas*. Watercolor and acrylics by P. Kritika.

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NOTE

First record with photographic evidence of Dhole *Cuon alpinus* (Pallas, 1811) from Panshet, Pune, Maharashtra, India

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The Dhole *Cuon alpinus* (Pallas, 1811), also known as the Asiatic Wild Dog or Whistling Dog, is an endangered canid distributed across Asia (Kamler et al. 2015). Dholes are widely distributed across the continent but are primarily restricted to protected areas (Sillero-Zubiri et al. 2004; Kamler et al. 2015). The global population of dholes is estimated at 4,500–10,500 individuals, with fewer than 2,215 mature animals (Kamler et al. 2015). India is considered a stronghold for the species, and the Western Ghats may support the largest meta-population worldwide (Srivathsa et al. 2014, 2019; Kamler et al. 2015). As a social top predator, the Dhole plays a crucial role in regulating prey populations, particularly in ecosystems with reduced tiger and leopard densities (Johnsingh 1992; Acharya 2007). Dholes are habitat generalists, utilising a mosaic of evergreen, deciduous, and mixed forests, as well as grasslands, with open or deciduous areas preferred for hunting, and closed or mixed forests used for denning (Kamler et al. 2015, 2020). Prey selection, human disturbance, habitat fragmentation, and competition with domestic dogs influence their distribution and connectivity. Dholes are primarily crepuscular (Ghaskadbi et al. 2016, 2022), and existing ethograms provide key insights into their activity patterns and behavioural ecology, which are critical for conservation planning.

Given the ecological significance of Dholes, documenting new occurrences is important for understanding their distribution and informing conservation strategies. While the species has been reported from various parts of the Western Ghats, photographic evidence from Pune District has not been recorded previously. Here, we present the first photographic record of the Dhole from Panshet, Pune, Maharashtra, India. This record strengthens evidence of landscape-level connectivity of *Cuon alpinus* across the northern Western Ghats and provides information for future conservation studies in fragmented landscapes.

On 6 September 2025, a single Dhole was opportunistically sighted crossing a forest trail around 1400 h and was photographed (Image 1) near Panshet (18.437° N, 73.580° E), Pune, Maharashtra. Panshet is located near the Western Ghats in Maharashtra, India. The Panshet Dam catchment lies in the Sahyadri range of northern Western Ghats, a region representing one of the most fragile ecosystems (Karandikar et al. 2015).

The individual was identified by its characteristic reddish coat, bushy dark tail, and typical posture. The record was verified by experts Pallavi Ghaskadbi (pers. comm.) and forest officials Mangesh Tate (pers. comm.).

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This represents the first photographic evidence of the Dhole in Panshet, a region outside of any notified protected area in the northern Western Ghats.

Dholes are known to prefer forested landscapes with adequate prey availability (Srivathsa et al. 2014; Punjabi et al. 2017; Pattekar et al. 2024). However, this report documents their occurrence in fragmented patches that include altered habitats, including human-modified and fragmented landscapes.

Recent Dhole sightings across multiple regions reveal both rediscoveries and new distribution records for this endangered canid (Kazi et al. 2021). However, information from the northern Western Ghats remains scarce. The southern Western Ghats have received more

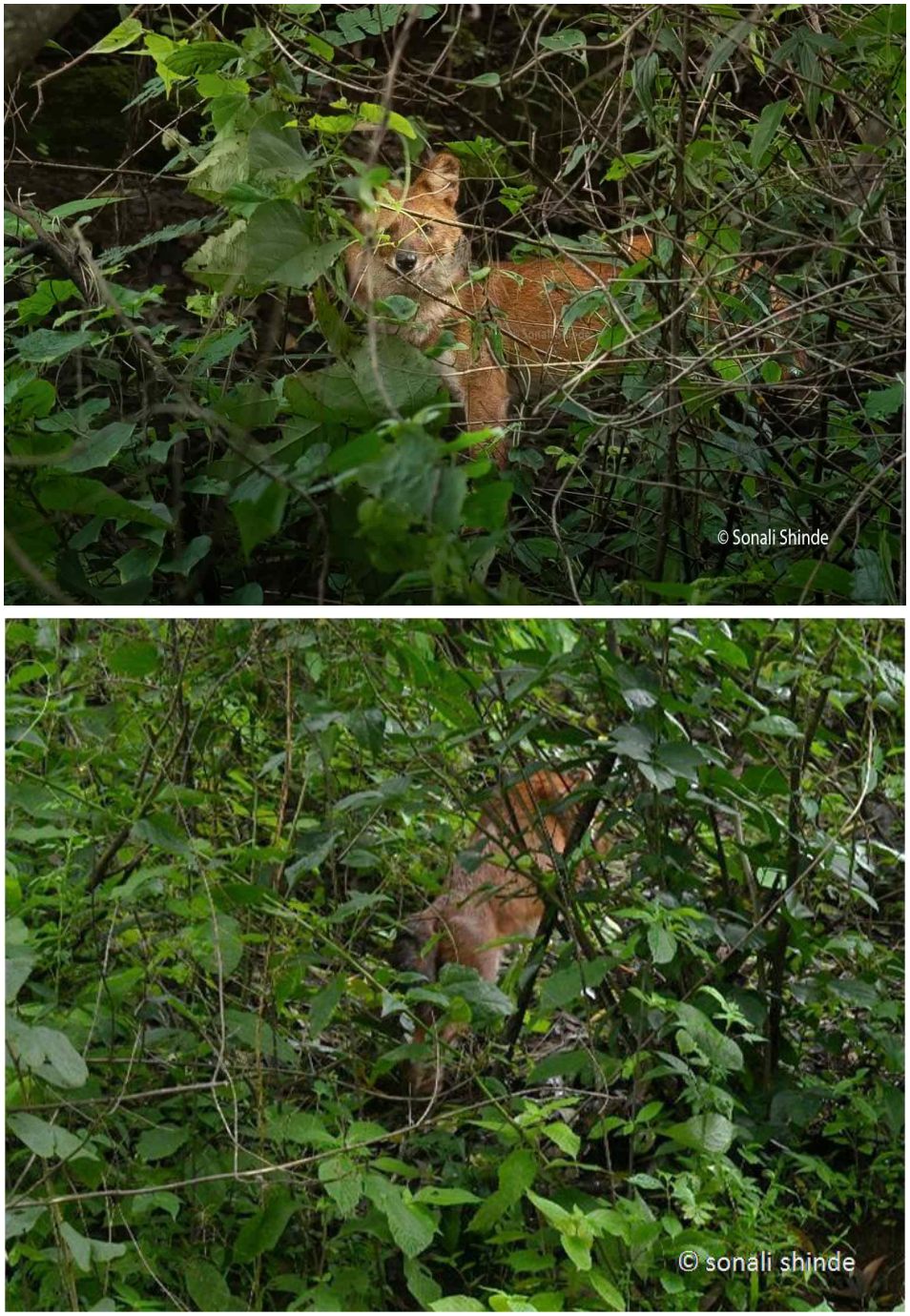

Image 1 (up and down). Photographic record of Dhole *Cuon alpinus*, captured from both front and back views, taken using a Nikon Z50 on 6 September 2025 at approximately 1400 h.

conservation attention. Studies have highlighted Dhole distribution in the northern Western Ghats (Punjabi et al. 2017), including estimates of approximately nine Dholes per 100 km² in areas such as Radhanagari Wildlife Sanctuary (Punjabi et al. 2022). This sighting complements recent reports of Dholes from Bhimashankar Wildlife Sanctuary and Phansad Wildlife Sanctuary (Pardeshi et al. 2020). These records suggest ongoing presence of Dholes in the landscape, although their population status and viability need further investigation. The occurrence in fragmented, human-modified landscapes suggests the potential role of non-protected habitats as corridors or refuges.

Dholes are currently listed as Endangered on the IUCN Red List under criteria C2a(i), however, despite its Endangered status, India supports the largest remaining population of dholes (Kamler et al 2015). Recent communications with field researchers, forest officers, and enthusiasts suggest mixed observations. While some regard sightings as rare, even if the occurrence increases based on the traits of a species. Although camera-trap and systematic surveys have confirmed Dhole presence in regions where they were absent for decades, the contrasting perspectives highlight the need for further research. We recommend employing camera trapping and prey-base assessments to evaluate the current status of Dholes in Pune District and adjoining landscapes. Conservation planning should also account for catchment forests and fragmented habitats, which provide functional connectivity. This region is significant for large predators, which adds further weight to the importance of this record. This sighting is particularly noteworthy as tigers and Dholes are known to coexist where prey densities are sufficient, suggesting that these species do not necessarily compete. Karanth et al. (2017) highlight that with effective prey management; multiple large carnivores can share landscapes sustainably. In this context, the Dhole's role as a top predator, especially in ecosystems with reduced tiger and leopard densities (Johnsingh 1992), underscores the importance of maintaining adequate prey populations for their persistence. Documenting such populations is therefore critical for regional conservation management and may also inform reassessment of the species' IUCN Red List status.

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