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continued on the back inside cover

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

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NOTE

First record of Indian Fox *Vulpes bengalensis* in Dang, Gujarat, India

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The Indian Fox *Vulpes bengalensis* is a small carnivore weighing between 1.8–3 kg, endemic to the Indian subcontinent (Johnsingh 1978). The Indian Fox is distributed from the foothills of the Himalaya down to the southern extremity of the Indian peninsula. Indian Foxes show a strong preference for dry, open areas characterized by sparse tree and shrub coverage and grasslands (Pocock 1936; Prater 1971; Johnsingh & Jhala 2004). They are frequently observed in fields and near human settlements, indicating their high adaptability to human presence (Johnsingh 1978; Manakadan & Rahmani 2000; Vanak 2003; Johnsingh & Jhala 2004).

The Indian Fox is omnivorous, and their diet consists of mammals, reptiles, birds, insects, and fruits (Johnsingh 1978; Manakadan & Rahmani 2000; Vanak 2003; Jhala et al. 2009). Their breeding season spans from December to January, with litters ranging between 2–4 offsprings after a gestation period of 50–53 days (Sheldon 2013). The dens of Indian Foxes consist of a network of interconnected tunnels and a few blind passages (Johnsingh 1978). These dens cover an area of approximately 10 x 8 m, typically featuring 2–7 openings (Manakadan & Rahmani 2000).

The Indian Fox population has faced habitat degradation due to conversion of wastelands and grasslands into agricultural fields, leading to a significant decline in their population and distribution. The primary threats to Indian Foxes are human-induced, such as killings by humans, habitat destruction, and disease transmission from free-ranging and feral dogs (Jhala et al. 2022). One of the critical concerns in conserving Indian Foxes is the lack of comprehensive information on their exact population distribution (Manakadan & Rahmani 2000).

The present work aims to contribute to the knowledge base on Indian Fox distribution by documenting its presence in the Dang District of Gujarat, an area where it had not been reported previously. During our camera trapping survey for leopards in the village Lavchali, located in the Dang District, on 21 November 2023, at 1124 h, we captured an image of an Indian fox *Vulpes bengalensis* at coordinates 20.842^0 N, 73.740^0 E (Figure 1; Image 1). The vegetation around the camera trap locations consisted of a mix of grasses and scattered shrubs, along with some saplings of *Tectona grandis* around den. The broader landscape surrounding the den sites was primarily agricultural, particularly paddy fields, interspersed with small open patches. Camera trap recorded video during both day and night, documening the routine den-site behaviour of *V. bengalensis*. In the daytime sequence,

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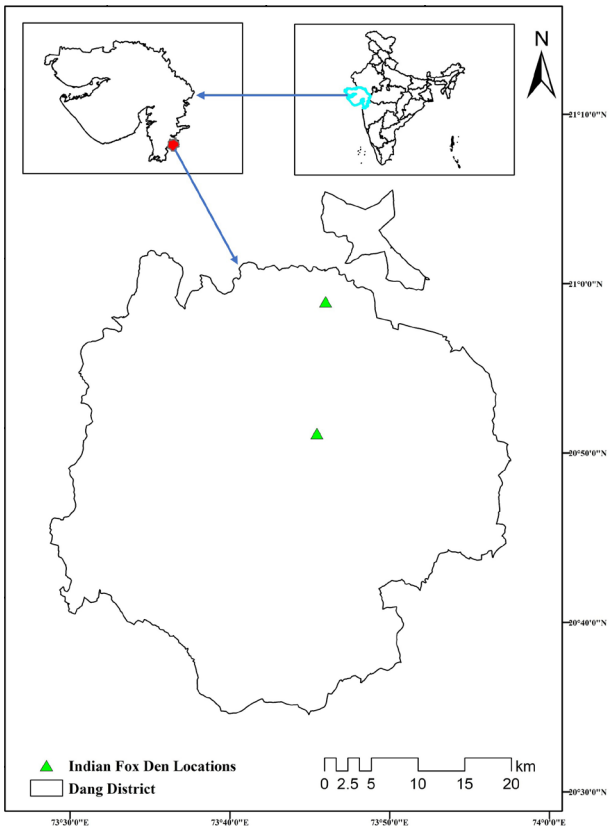

Figure 1. Map of Dang District along with locations of Indian Fox den.

the fox approached the den from outside and engaged in den-inspection behaviour, repeatedly lowering its head into the opening, likely assessing the den's condition or occupancy. The individual then displayed vigilance, scanning its surroundings before briefly directing its attention toward the camera trap, suggesting curiosity toward the novel object. Night-time images similarly showed investigatory behaviour, with the fox closely approaching and inspecting the camera trap, along with routine movement around the den entrance. No social interactions or den-maintenance activities were observed in any of the videos. This incidental recording prompted further exploration of the area, leading to the discovery of a den of eight interconnected chambers.

To gain deeper insights into the occupancy and behaviour of the species, we strategically placed an infrared camera trap at the den entrance. Over subsequent monitoring, the footage confirmed the presence of at least four individual Indian Foxes using the site. Further, we engaged with local villagers, showing them the photographs of the Indian Fox. The villagers expressed their familiarity with the species, referring to it by its local name 'Kiklla'. Their insights proved invaluable, as they directed us to another den site approximately 15 km away from the first location. This second den, situated at coordinates 20.972^0 N, 73.743^0 E, featured six distinct openings.

Upon visiting this second site, we observed the presence of free-ranging domestic dogs in the vicinity, which could pose a potential threat to the fox population (Image 2). Additionally, some of the den openings appeared to have been deliberately sealed with stones, presumably by villagers. This suggests a possible human-fox negative interaction or an effort to manage the presence of the species in the area.

Our findings highlight the importance of incorporating

Image 1. Image of Indian Fox *Vulpes bengalensis*.

Image 2. Image of free-ranging domestic dogs outside Indian Fox den.

local ecological knowledge into conservation efforts and shed light on potential threats faced by Indian fox populations due to human activities and interactions with free ranging or feral dogs. Further research and conservation initiatives could help mitigate these challenges and ensure the protection of Indian Fox in this region. Although the Indian Fox is considered a commonly occurring species in many parts of Gujarat, distribution records remain patchy, particularly for the eastern and southern districts. Most published studies focus on Kutch, Saurashtra, and northern Gujarat, leaving a clear knowledge gap regarding its occurrence in central and southern regions. Previous records in the state come from districts such as Kutch, Bhavnagar, Rajkot, Sabarkantha, Mehsana, and Banaskantha—areas largely situated in the west, north, and south-west—but no prior records exist from the Dang District is in southern Gujarat (Chandrima & Jhala 2009; Gajera & Dharaiya 2011; Desai & Dharaiya 2023). Our record from Dang helps bridge this gap and highlights the need for systematic surveys in under-studied landscapes to better understand the species' distribution and habitat associations. The landscape of Dang District consists of hilly to undulating terrain, unlike the preferred habitat of the fox, which normally prefers open habitat patches in relatively flat areas. Therefore, an urgent survey is required to ascertain the status of Indian Foxes and identify habitat patches in Dang, allowing for appropriate conservation measures. Across their range, foxes occasionally prey on small domestic animals such as poultry, which can lead to negative perceptions among villagers and may result in retaliatory behaviour. However, during the present study, we did not document any such incidents. Nonetheless, systematic investigations are required to draw stronger conclusions regarding the extent and nature of human-fox interactions in this region. The present study is significant in augmenting our understanding of the Indian Fox's distribution within its existing range, particularly in Gujarat.

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